

REMINISCENCES OF MEL MANDEL, M.D.

By David James Fisher, Ph.D.

Mel mentored me during the labyrinth of psychoanalytic training at LAPSI from the late 1970's through my graduation in 1988. I will always be grateful to him. In those days, the institute was not a warm and welcoming ambiance. It was a mean-spirited place organizationally, pervaded by a paranoid atmosphere. Candidates experienced layers of anxiety, exacerbated by endless scrutiny, the creation of obstacles for progress, and the absence of affirmation when you were doing good-enough work in seminars and supervision. One rarely knew how one was perceived by senior members and training analysts. My background intensified this dynamic because I was a research candidate coming from a non-medical discipline. I was only the second Research Psychoanalyst accepted for training by LAPSI and there were no clear procedures about my education. Into that void stepped Mel. He guided, confided, and strategized with me, often disclosing important bits of information that clarified things, helping me not to take certain decisions overly personally.

His mentorship helped me to get through the educational process, even to thrive. He facilitated my subsequent involvement with the institute in terms of serving on committees, faculty, and the institute Bulletin, encouraging me to get engaged with the social and educational world of the institute, just as his devotion to LAPSI was a significant part of his professional identity.

His mentorship continued till the end of his life, long after he had served as supervisor for my third analytic control case. He never stopped teaching me and I learned a ton from him.

I found Mel to be fiercely independent of psychoanalytic schools or ideology. He was immune to the cult of personality. He was neither a follower of Greenson or Rangel, nor a Kleinian or Self-Psychologist. Yet he had good relationships with all of these individuals and factions, serving as a mediator and peacemaker, particularly when issues heated up, splits seemed likely, and hostile feelings prevailed. Mel consistently worked as a force for unity and unification.

Mel was simultaneously caring and tough, flexible and stubborn, sensitive toward others and self-centered. If he could be opinionated and loquacious, he was curious and open to learning throughout his long life. He loved to talk history and politics with me. And he had many stories to tell, often with fascinating detail and spicy character portraits.

I first met Mel at a party at Peter Loewenberg's home in 1977. It was my first psychoanalytic party and I had no idea about what to expect. Mel was talking in an animated way with Sam Eisenstein, a dean and key player at the Southern California Institute. They were discussing the need for a truce and eventual merger of the two analytic institutes, arguing that there was no reason to perpetuate the animosity emanating from the split of 1950. Politically, Mel was a progressive voice, working for democracy and inclusion on the local level; in addition, he was a tireless spokesman for reform, unafraid to be in the trenches trying to modernize and democratize the American Psychoanalytic Association. Because of his respect for

the transparency of the educational process, he advocated that analytic education not be politicized, not turned into a site for the dissemination of dogmatic theories or religious-like analytic cults.

I liked Mel from my first encounter with him. To me, he looked like Gene Kelly. Like my father, he was a Jew from Brooklyn and a physician. He was plain spoken and intolerant of bullshit, but he possessed a kind and sensitive soul. He often surprised me with his openness to other points of view. He was athletic and into sports. He loved the Dodgers. He was easy to identify with.

Before beginning analytic seminars in 1980, Mel invited me to participate in the interview module he led for fourth year psychiatric residents at the Brentwood VA. I did my first clinical interview there, under his watchful and supportive eye. He had me participate in the Dynamics Seminar he taught at the UCLA NPI for advanced residents, most of who were uninterested in or hostile to analytic theory and practice. That seminar introduced me to leading contributors at LAPSI, including Bob Stoller, Mort Shane, Bob Rodman, and Jerry Aronson. Many of them became my teachers and subsequently colleagues and friends.

Mel supervised my third analytic control case. When questions were raised about the patient's analyzability, I began supervision with Mel. We both agreed that it would be a difficult treatment, but that the patient was analyzable and that analysis was the preferred treatment modality. I wrote up the case and appeared for an interview, justifying the appropriateness of analysis before the Candidate's Evaluation Committee (note: not Progression Committee). It was a difficult encounter. I felt the heat. It was the only time when a classical psychoanalyst and a

rigid Kleinian stopped locking horns with one another in order to join forces in questioning the rightness of the decision for me to begin analysis with this patient. Another outspoken member of the Committee insisted that the patient was psychotic, trying to block the beginning of the analysis. Mel worked behind the scenes, writing a strong letter urging the committee to grant permission for me to commence the analysis with his supervision. He told me confidentially that the vehement Committee member had recently experienced a psychotic breakdown and was known to posture that everyone was psychotic. Without Mel's explanation of the projections involved here, I would have been upset and mystified by the Committee's construction of obstacles to my analytic education. His assistance clarified my confusion, made even worse by the Committee's hypocritical rhetoric about wanting me to have a good experience.

I will never forget my analytic supervision with Mel and its decisive impact on my analytic attitude. At the first session, he told me to put aside my notes and to focus on what the patient was feeling and what I felt in being with the patient during the hour. That intervention rocked my world. The term affect attunement had not yet entered our vocabulary, but Mel was practicing and teaching it. Immersing oneself in feelings was also a method of listening in the here and now. For me this was a gift from Mel, helping me to expand as a clinician—and mature as a human being. It was eye opening to learn how to privilege being in the moment and thinking with one's heart. Only a profoundly feeling person like Mel could have transmitted this invaluable piece of knowledge. Some might call it wisdom.

As a supervisor, Mel and I had excellent dialogues about working with my control case. He was open to me disclosing countertransferences, my own subjective reactions catalyzed by the treatment and the persistent forces of regression and transference, including a maternal transference. He never once told me to stop talking and to take this material to my training analyst. After several years, he urged me to continue the analysis alone without the protection and safety of supervision. Without realizing it, he was fostering my independence, my need to find my own analytic style and voice. This approach contrasted with another of my supervisors who could not bear the supervision to end and who continued the supervision for over ten years. Mel had a strong allegiance to the idea of self-reliance. I would call him an Emersonian with a relationalist point of view.

One anxious moment occurred during the supervision. We were to be observed by two members of the American's Site Visit Committee. Mel subsequently told me he was uneasy about the session before the Site visit, admitting he had transference to the American's perception of his skills. That admission helped me to realize how human Mel was, underscoring once again the power and scope of transferences to authority. By the way, we killed in that session.

Even after graduation, Mel continued to teach me. I visited his Rivas Canyon home and he proudly showed me his fruit and flower garden. He loved cultivating that garden, listening to music as he did so, often thinking about his cases. I once asked him what he was listening to. He said Brahms. I stupidly admitted I found this music corny and romantic, hopelessly sentimental. Mel countered that the music was saturated with emotion, proposing that I rethink my opposition to

Brahms. Listening to this music, he held, would open me up to my patients' inner worlds, to the music of their souls.

As an enthusiast about the Internet, advanced and adventuresome for a man of his generation, Mel said that social media could open one up to the world. In 2000, he guided me in setting up email. I was uptight about it, but he persevered, actually sending me my first email. When I received it, he quipped, "Well Jimmy, now you have lost your virginity."

I encountered Mel at another party at the Loewenbergs. It was a day or two after the O.J. Simpson verdicts. I was upset by the entire process of the trial, thinking that O.J. was clearly guilty, that there had been a travesty of justice by the spectacle of the trial, that the trial had unnecessarily polarized Los Angeles into two hostile camps, one white and another black. He listened, then added: "You have a big problem, Jimmy: you don't know how to think black." Thinking black was an old gift that Mel possessed. He had worked hard to build an electoral coalition between Westside Jews and South-Central blacks in the late 1960's and early 1970's to elect Los Angeles first African-American major, Tom Bradley.

Psychoanalysts are notoriously ignorant about or uninterested in their own history—and the larger history of psychoanalysis. Once again, Mel was the exception to the rule. When I attempted to bring Douglas Kirsner to lecture at LAPSI in June 2000, there was significant opposition from the Board of Directors to allow Kirsner to have a platform, reluctance to open debate about our so-called "dirty laundry." The Australian philosopher had already published *Unfree Associations: Inside Psychoanalytic Institutes*, which included a strong chapter on "Fear and

Loathing in Los Angeles.” In his typical fashion, Mel helped persuade the Board to allow Kirsner to speak, advocating for authentic free association. Mel of course had been one of his informants, serving on the panel when Kirsner lectured to an overflow audience.

From the early 2000’s on, we socialized with the Mandels, invited to dinner parties, were introduced to their friends, including sharing some Thanksgiving dinners with them. Mel’s wife Marian had a warm relationship with my wife Karen. Both Mel and Marian were kind during Karen’s long and fatal illness. They were present but not intrusive. They stopped by to say good-bye to her when she went into a coma. And Mel attended her memorial in this room.

The last time I saw Mel was at the NCP gathering for Mike Leavitt. We spoke of the election. He argued that Trump’s victory ought to be a wake-up call for liberals, a need to escape from their complacent bubbles and to get engaged in the political process. More poignantly, he mentioned that he had not been able to cry and express his feelings of loss after Marian’s death. Paradoxically, the man who most valued affective expression could not express his emotions. I mentioned that we could talk anytime, that I was available to him if he so desired. Yet, I did not want to impinge on his privacy and grieving process. Some of that grief was clearly about the loss of Marian; some of it may have been about the loss of his youth, vitality, and the realistic anticipation of the ultimate end of his life.

During the year before his death, Mel never returned my calls, email, or overtures I made. I assume that his advanced age, illnesses, confusion, and traumatic mourning contributed to his withdrawal. I speculate that he did not wish

to burden me with his depression, including, possibly, his loss of a desire to keep on living. Perhaps it was the impenetrability of his solitude that made contact impossible.

I already miss him and his outspokenness, his generosity, and his compassionate spirit. Most importantly, I miss his presence as my teacher and counselor.

David James Fisher, Ph.D.,
1800 Fairburn Avenue
Suite 203
Los Angeles, CA 90025
(310) 552-0868
djamesfisherphd@gmail.com

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