

Psychohistory News

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*ROOM won NAAP's 2018
Gradyva Award for New Media*

ROOM: A Sketchbook for Analytic Action by Ken Fuchsman

The 2016 election shook up a lot of people including, of course, psychoanalysts. The listserv at the Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR) was full of heated chatter about what had happened. In fact, there was so much on-line discussion that the president of the society called a community meeting so that analysts could share their growing concerns. The idea to create a “com-

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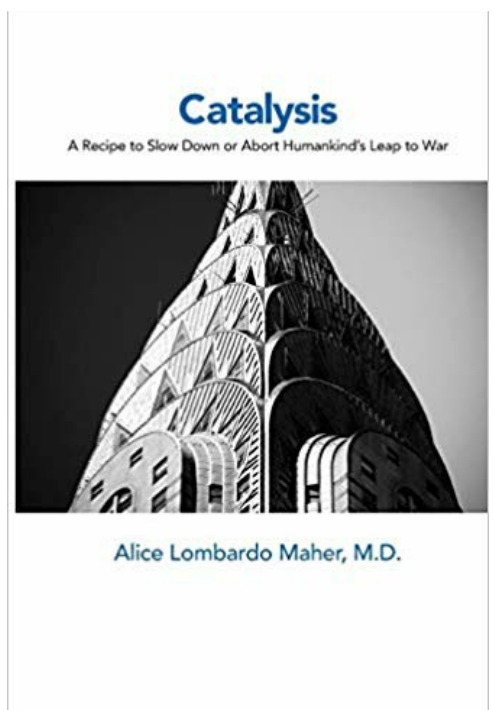
PSYCHOHISTORIAN INTERVIEW

Alice Lombardo Maher on her book *Catalysis*

Alice Lombardo Maher is a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst practicing in New York City. She has branched out from the practice of medicine and therapy and is the Founder and Director of Changing Our Consciousness, which is dedicated to creating effective dialogue across ideological lines and educating on emotional literacy. Dr. Maher

also co-created The Hot Stove Project to assist those who think outside of expected norms to achieve greater social integration. IP Books has recently published her book *Catalysis*, which promotes her vision and methods for personal and social transformation. She is interviewed here by Ken Fuchsman.

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ALICE MAHER

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KF: Your book is entitled *Catalysis: A Recipe to Slow Down or Abort Humankind's Leap to War*. What is catalysis?

ALM: In science, a catalyst is a substance that facilitates a chemical reaction. In psychoanalysis, the analyst facilitates internal conflict resolution between warring parts of the self. My goal is to enable human catalysts to emerge and facilitate conflict resolution on a larger scale. Put Democrats and Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians, religious people and atheists, in a room together with a catalyst, use my methodology, and you'll get somewhere.

KF: You write that you want to change our species' consciousness and have us consciously and deliberately take the next evolutionary leap. What do you mean by this and how do you envision this leap coming to fruition?

ALM: Vamik Volkan believes that we fight wars BECAUSE we're smart. Our brains evolved in such a way that we developed solid individual and group identities. Those can't be changed and challenge to them is experienced as threatening. As a result, we fight over abstract ideas like honor, glory, prestige, identity and core beliefs. We admonish each other to be empathic, but we're not wired to be able to wear the psychological shoes of the other except in superficial ways. If our species keeps going in this way, we risk self-destruction. I believe that we

need a new evolutionary leap in our brain wiring. That leap can be made consciously and deliberately, as a new language for communicating across human divides emerges.

What do I mean by "language"? We can bridge divides in science and technology because we've developed languages like computer science, physics, architecture and engineering. We need a similar educational curriculum to teach Human Understanding and Emotional Literacy - not as a social-emotional curriculum, but as a K-12-PhD literacy track.

KF: You have initiated a number of groups and activities, including some educational experiments. Tell us what they are and what results you have found.

ALM: All of my pilot projects have the goal of communication across massive human divides. For the past 5 years I developed an emotional literacy curriculum at Street Squash, an afterschool program in Harlem. In their senior year we partnered with students from Hunter High School and they wrote an e-book, *divides.org*, based on the work of Vamik Volkan. I'll be presenting to the parents and faculty at Hunter later this month. I hope to ally with them to develop another experimental curriculum. The young people understood what I was trying to do and made some magical things happen.

The Hot Stove Project is the mental health project that I co-created with Lois Oppenheim, PhD. Our first 20 minute docu-

mentary was called *How to Touch a Hot Stove*. We're almost done filming our second, full-length documentary funded by a grant from the NJ Arts Council, *Daniel, Debra, Leslie (and You?)*. It depicts remarkable people with severe psychiatric histories talking together about their shared experiences and different trajectories.

I've also hosted Facebook groups with friends from many different religious and political viewpoints. The original, very intense group was on my personal page. The Depth Perception Party was the second, public one. Recently I combined them in a new public page with the same title as my book.

KF: In the latter part of *Catalysis*, you discuss the roots of your ideas in your childhood experiences and a lengthy dialogue you had with a fellow psychoanalyst. Would you describe these experiences and how they led you to your innovative ideas?

ALM: That's a tough one, because it's so personal and so complicated. I had a powerful personal experience at the end of my analysis and analytic training, and I went to see Dr. X to discuss it. We developed a decade-long process that became an inside-out, creative, "catalytic" variant of analysis. We met five times per year free of charge, I wrote theoretical/philosophical love letters in between, and he sometimes responded. After a while I wanted to call what we were doing *Catalysis*, frame it as a new methodology and write about it. But he didn't see the process as

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sufficiently original or marketable. He thought he was just doing a favor for a friend. That led to a "war" - a psychologically violent battle that pulled in people from our community and had every element of armed conflict but the bloodshed. In the end, because I had developed my model and used it effectively in the final moments, it ended beautifully and we both won.

"Transformational moments" happen all the time in literature, theater, art, music and the consultation room. Using my methodology, they'll be able to happen in real life too. Heward Wilkinson, a psycho-therapist/philosopher in the UK, wrote a lovely discussion of my book referencing these moments.

KF: In the book, you describe what happened with you and Dr. X as a war, but I presume out of respect for your dialogue partner you omit details about what actually made it a war that as you say might have led to your killing each other. Would you hint at more of what made it potentially violent and thus could be a model for moving humankind away from war?

ALM: For a long time, our perspectives on what we were doing were very different. After a decade of writing and talking in secret, I wanted to emerge from hiding. But if we talked about it with others, our different spins could have ruined each others' careers - a fate much worse than death. For example, our colleagues might have assumed that he was acting out something personal (he kissed me goodbye at the end of our meetings in a friendly, parent-child kind of way), something that reflected a severe boundary violation tantamount to incest. Alternately, I could have come across a crazed patient with a psychotic transference. We came damn close to that kind of disaster, but neither of those things happened. We ended on a wonderful, movie-worthy note, and 15 years later he gave me permission to publish our story.

In the book, I use it as an example of the way that our identities and beliefs form the core of a self that will not be sacrificed. We will kill in its name. Those conflicts can't be gotten around with argument or empathy or redistribution of wealth or other political solutions. Those kinds of "wars" must be fought. In

my model, they can be fought effectively, without bloodshed, in a way that allows both sides to survive and creative solutions to emerge.

Young people who feel misunderstood, empty, hopeless and enraged will cut themselves. The physical pain relieves the more agonizing psychological state of not feeling alive and validated. I believe that the same phenomenon happens with large groups.

KF: Some may say that your ideas resemble the Christian Golden Rule in doing unto others as you would have them do to you. What do you see as the similarities and differences between your own innovations and that of the Biblical injunction.

ALM: I don't want people to do unto me what they would want done unto them, because we've very different people. If you give me a ticket to a beach and tell me to relax for a week, you'd be torturing me. If I had a "rule" it would be this: *Try to understand what others would want you to do unto them, then figure out an*

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appropriate and effective way to respond.

KF: You discuss the importance of using the educational system to promote emotional literacy and create productive dialogue across ideological boundaries. You expect then that educational experiences over time can lead to a change in humankind's consciousness. To me, your ideas resemble a good deal of what John Dewey hoped for in his educational endeavors in Chicago and in his 1916 classic *Democracy and Education*. The progressive education movement had successes and limitations. Are you familiar with Dewey's work and the history of progressive education in the U.S.? If so, what do you see as the way your proposals diverge from his? If not, you might find studying progressive education to be of value for what you hope to achieve.

ALM: I'm not familiar enough to comment on them, except to say that the idea of learning through active engagement seems a lot better than passive listening. I'm sure that's a simplistic misunderstanding, but it's a good-enough segue to my idea that emotional learning should be done using thought experiments that are experience-near but not personal enough to be boundary violating. Right now emotional education is either too intellectual (Psychology 101), too touchy-feely ("let's all be kind to each

other"), or too focused on mental health and pathology. I want to normalize human dynamics, teach students about different thinking styles and defenses and how to recognize and respond to them, present them as thought experiments and exercises in dialogue, and widen their repertoire of responses when someone triggers them with a disturbing comment. I'd love to learn more about Dewey's model and find points of intersection.

KF: In the book, you discuss the ways individual dialogues can change through seeking to understand the other's worlds and how education can lead towards the same end. How do you envision this being connected to the world of international relations and preventing war between nations? Some might claim that your proposed practices work better on the individual and educational levels and are less applicable to the complex world of jockeying between nations. How do you respond to that statement?

ALM: I don't deal with present-day issues on the world stage. My goal isn't to challenge Trump or his supporters, or people on the left who attack them in a way that can make the problem worse. If the people who are capable of seeing out of their left and right eyes at the same time can learn how to dialogue and fight elegant "wars" across ideological divides, those people will rise up as new leaders. I'm not working in the present day; I'm working for creative solutions and new leaders to emerge in the hopefully-near future.

Using my model, worthy leaders - people who can see out of their left and right "eyes" at the same time with one perspective dominant and leading - will rise up and be recognized. They will discover creative solutions to real-world problems.

KF: Are there ways your ideas could be applied to past conflicts such as preventing the American Civil War or the war against Hitler or are they applicable primarily to the next evolutionary leap and not the past?

ALM: Ha! I'd love to write a sci-fi screenplay about a group of colleagues transporting ourselves back in time with the hope of preventing the Civil War or Hitler's rise. Want to work on it with me?

KF: Since *Catalysis* has been published, what has been the response to the book so far? What have you gained and learned from these responses?

ALM: It's only been a few weeks, but I've been thrilled with the first few Amazon reviews and the ones on the back cover of the book, including one from Vamik Volkan. He tells me that he now references me in his presentations!!!

KF: Thank you, Alice.

ALM: Thank YOU, Ken. Your questions were wonderful.

Visit Alice Maher's website at <http://emotionalimprint.org/index.html>