

I am happy to share the presentation I gave at NPAP on Friday, January 10, 2020, along with my co-presenter Lee Jenkins. The joint presentation was on “The Representation and Self-Experience of the Body in Literature and Psychoanalysis”. Lee and I are both psychoanalysts and published fiction writers. We met in our first year of psychoanalytic education at our institute, in the 1970’s, and felt a strong affinity.

Together, we crafted a statement about our presentations, beginning with affirming that our fiction “addresses the importance of bodily experience, the psychological, social and body realities of gender, race and age. They will explore ways in which narrative in fiction and in clinical work enhances the depth of our understanding of how people define themselves and their relationships, and illustrates the relationship of fiction and psychoanalysis, by reading excerpts from their published fiction.”

And so we did.

I can share only my presentation here.

My focus in both writing fiction and in doing psychoanalysis is “channeling the voices”. We channel voices that are asking to be heard. We hear unconscious process in session, both our analysands and our own, and, in writing fiction, we are attuned to our own unconscious, and the voices of fictional characters demanding to manifest through our fiction writing. My collection of short fiction, published by International Psychoanalytic Books, is titled *Necessary Voices*. These voices demanding to be heard indeed must be heard.

How do we channel these voices in session and in fiction writing? We listen....

I began my presentation by reading quotations that resonate with me, and which I believe resonate with my theme, even if only obliquely.

Here they are:

“The Wound is the place where Light enters you”, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi, 1207-1273 BCE Persian Sufi poet.

“Ring the bells that still can ring./ Forget your perfect offering./ There is a crack, a crack, in everything./ That’s how the light gets in.” Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”.

After reading the Rumi and Leonard Cohen quotes, I commented that they must be one soul.

Then I quoted further.

“Truth is what happens to an idea” – William James.

Michael Eigen sent a post to the NPAP listserv, responding to a post I sent, and I quoted what he said: “Your post reminds me of one of the many ripples of Spinoza’s words and thoughts (there’s such a thing as thought-words, words filled with, pregnant with thought-feeling). When speaking of the human body he said it was made up of many bodies. Will leave that as a koan (for now)?”

I cited a video of Adam Phillips I saw, where he spoke about reading as preparation for learning how to listen, saying that he came to psychoanalysis as a reader, starting with Freud and Winnicott, a “cultural conversation”.

I remember Phillips saying that you read books, but you talk to people, and that supervision should consist of talking to someone you enjoy talking to, rather than “rules”.

I also cited an article I wrote – yup, writers can do that! – “Everything is Fiction”, *OtherWise*, Issue Three, Winter 2015, in which I began by claiming, “I am about to state the obvious. Everything is fiction. Fiction begins with words. As soon as we acquire the rudiments of language, we begin to translate our experience into words, from our own perspective”. And, I continue, “Meet the Child Scientist. Who is the Child Scientist? Every child”.

Further, I cited the “poet’s sacred obligation to be The One Who Remembers”, from “The Dead Poets Society ventures into radioactive analytic space”, by Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Psychoanalytic Review*, Volume 90, Issue 3, mentioning that Kavanaugh uses the phrase “Mind Poet” to describe “The One Who Remembers”. Clearly, psychoanalysts today share that calling with poets. How do we convey that otherwise unvoiced psychic reality?

The answer is narrative, narrative as poetic and psychoanalytic sensibility.

I want to express my gratitude to Arnold Richards, who chose to publish my two books of fiction, and Arlene Kramer Richards, who was the reader for International Psychoanalytic Books, who recommended the books to him.

In my presentation, I addressed human experience through the lens of race, gender, age — and memory. I did so by reading excerpts from my fiction.

I read an excerpt, pp. 82-83, from “Street Songs”, a story in *Necessary Voices*, in which the main character is Lightnin’, a black man in his 70’s, whose driving motivation is to maintain his sense of dignity. He is a former jazz pianist, living with his apartment full of what other people see as junk, but which he sees as his life. The “junk” includes the entrails of what once was his piano.

Lightnin’ listens over and over to the speeches of the Reverend Martin Luther King on a battery-run tinny phonograph, and hums along, creating a musical background for himself. He also plays those speeches outdoors, affirming his right to live with dignity. He winds up in an altercation with people who live across the street from where he lives, white people, an altercation that indeed is about race. The story is based on what I saw and heard on the block where I lived, yes, “that block”. I could see it playing out by looking out my front-facing window, or by being on the street itself. The story escalates tragically into violence. I made that element up. Why? Because I heard it in the voices I was channeling, which were sometimes louder than the voices I was remembering.

When our analysands tell us stories about their lives, drawn from the week of the present, and memories from childhood, and other memories, what else do we hear besides the overt story line? Oh, emotions, feelings. Yes. And what else? Aren’t feelings enough? Feelings are very important. And yet, there may be more. We listen. And other voices emerge. Paula Heimann’s voices, the voices she wondered about when she said, “Who is speaking?”, in “On Countertransference”, 1950, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Volume 31, page 81.

From the same book of my collected fiction, I read an excerpt from “Miriam 1960”, which addressed race and ethnicity in a pre-Roe vs. Wade city hospital ward, in which women’s bodies are abused because they are helpless, and who had had botched illegal abortions. The story focuses on the experience of an unmarried pregnant white teenager, who is rushed to the emergency room bleeding to death. In the ward where she winds up, she is horribly mistreated, and, eventually, tortured by sadistic medical staff.

Warning for the squeamish and hyper-sensitive, for people like me: Here comes the TMI material, so, cover your eyes and skip to the next paragraph. Her uterus is infected and inflamed, and, when a speculum is inserted, she starts to scream. To punish her for screaming, and for daring to have had an abortion, and for being sexual to begin with, the attending physician walks out of the room, leaves her there screaming for 10 minutes, and eventually returns with a bevy of interns, whom he instructs to take a look at what an inflamed uterus looks like.

TMI! TMI! And yet, it really happened. Seriously. Every word in that story is true – although the names indeed have been changed. But traumatic memories are very vivid.

Okay, the promised “next paragraph”! Not as grim. But grim. The excerpt I read, pp. 26-27, described the ethnicities and races of the women in the ward, and the cruelty shown to an Hispanic woman – yes, brown-skinned in a NYC city hospital ward in 1960 – when she begins to hemorrhage from her nose, and then her mouth. The other women yell for help, and, when help arrives in the form of medical staff, it is worse than begrudging. Sadistic. Her head is yanked back by her hair being pulled, and she is yelled at for not understanding English. The theme is abuse of women, and, in this case, the abuse of a brown-skinned woman. Sexism. Racism.

I then read some excerpts from my novel, *Streets 1970*, which is about drug addicts on the Upper West Side in New York City, circa 1970. The comments on the back cover convey a lot: Brett Potter says, “Merle Molofsky gives the reader a provocative dose of Americana that is equal parts poetic, visionary, gritty, mythical”. Judith Logue says, “Merle is a gifted and highly intelligent storyteller who paints her stories in words so descriptive you feel as if you are looking at pictures, watching a movie or analyzing paintings. The contents and topics are classic with incredible depth”.

I offered an excerpt from Chapter Five, “Fatboy”, pp. 51-52, focusing on Fatboy’s sense of still being fat, still “Fatboy”, the fat kid, despite the miles and years away from that childhood identity. “Fatboy stood at the river’s edge between seven and nineteen, not sure which river it was. It could be the Mississippi, and he could be seven years old, a fat boy in St. Louis, in Missouri.... But it might be the Hudson, and he might be nineteen years old and no longer fat, but still Fatboy, and on Manhattan’s West Side....”

As fiction writers, and as psychoanalysts, we connect with people's sense of their own bodies, with their bodies often defining who they are.

Since the novel is about junkies, heroin addicts, I knew I had to read the "needle dreams" sequence, pp. 72-73, Chapter Six, "Three Street Koans", the bodily sense and fantasies that Douglas, the main character, has about the necessary needle. For those who don't "speak junkie", "spike" means needle. And, for those who don't speak non-junkie generic street, "the hawk is out", or "the hawk is flying", the hawk is windy cold weather. The passage begins, "Needle dreams shadowed and bare of color flicker through my nights. They are cold dreams, scavenger dreams. The hawk screams through city skies. In my dreams I am chased by spikes enormous as icebergs."

Douglas quarrels with a psychiatrist he imagines is listening, asking for a brain pill to kill his pain. And then:

"Douglas my boy the pontificator pontificates, all you do is jes eat the brains of a very old very hip junkie. You jes eat his brains and the dreams will stop.

"Jeez doc thanks a lot but where do I find a spoon?"

What I wanted to convey in my presentation is the deep connection a fiction writer has to have with fictional characters who are very alive, very real. That means channeling a character's memories, fantasies, desires, language, in a way that happens in years of an ongoing analysis, where truth emerges between the lines. Where does that truth emerge between the lines? In writing fiction? Or in analytic sessions? What lines in analytic sessions? The story lines that can be written, and often are, in clinical accounts in psychoanalytic literature.

We listen. We resonate. We become part of the story. We respond....

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