

EULOGY FOR JOSEPH NATTERSON, M.D. (1923-2023)

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By David James Fisher Ph.D.

Friendship is an extraordinary and precious thing. Joe and I were friends for forty-five years. We celebrated the same birthday, though I was a quarter of a century younger. We played tennis at Roxbury Park. We were suite mates at 9911 W. Pico Blvd. for fifteen years, sharing an office and a common waiting room. He referred patients to me and believed in my clinical acumen, helping me feel more confident about my therapeutic skills. He vehemently supported the presence of the Research Psychoanalysts in the analytic community; he respected our knowledge base, our interest in ideas, and our engagement with theory, critical inquiry, research, and publication. We traversed rites of passage together, sharing moments of joy and sorrow, including the weddings of his children, a fiftieth wedding anniversary party, and the death of my spouse; we consulted one another on health matters and had several doctors in common. We had many festive dinners together, ones marked by good cheer, gossip, shop talk, and deeper reflections on politics and culture. Once at the Campanile Restaurant, Joe and I drank two martinis; I still don't know how either of us managed to drive home safely that evening. Joe was also warm and welcoming to my fiancé Sherry Rodriguez, very much opening his heart to her and her family.

Joseph Natterson was born in 1923 in Wheeling, West Virginia, the only son and youngest child of Anna and Sam Natterson. He was raised and educated in West Virginia, including going to West Virginia University and its Medical School. Joe had four older sisters. West Virginia had a tiny Jewish population in the 1920's and 1930's; being Jewish was not an easy or comfortable

situation. Joe, however, has never deeply identified as a Jew and was without any semblance of Jewish ritual or observance. He was clearly aware of and opposed anti-Semitism. His parents were Marxists and members of the American Communist party. From them, Joe inherited a deep respect for workers, believing in the dignity of labor, supporting labor unions, while being intensely class conscious and aware of class conflict. He had a profound affection for the Soviet Union, including an admiration for Stalin. In recent years, and much to my chagrin, he uttered praise for Putin, despite the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces. On certain issues, Joe and I agreed to disagree without it interfering with our exchanges; some of our political differences reflected generational factors, him being a member of the Old Left and me closer to the New Left, where I was suspicious of ordinary Marxism and critical of the dogma and banalities of Soviet Communism.

But most importantly it was dialogue and mutual concerns that brought us into intimate contact. Joe had an amazing intellectual curiosity and an openness to learn. He would alert me to the latest article in *The Nation* magazine or *The London Review of Books*, telling me I had to read these pieces and discuss them with him. He would do the same for books. He put me onto major tomes by Frankfurt School writers and critical theorists like Jurgen Habermas and Axel Honneth; he urged me to read Hans-Georg Gadamer. At our most intimate moments, Joe and I discussed our respective writings and clinical cases. As many of you know, he was a gifted and conscientious clinician with a busy and diverse practice. He was devoted to the liberation of his patients from paralyzing inhibitions, debilitating depression, negative self-images, and distorted self-esteem. Contemplating the clinical process in a career spanning seven decades, he emphasized the importance of the therapist's irreducible subjectivity, the significance of

recognition in facilitating change and growth in our patients, and the patient's intrinsic right to love and be loved despite early and present difficulties in expressing their desire for mutual love. I was instrumental in the publication of his last book, *The Loving Self*, feeling honored when he requested that I write a Preface to it.

When I encountered problems with my patients, I consulted with Joe for his wisdom and subtle understanding of clinical process. He was consistently generous, caring, affirming, and willing to be present and engaged. We both admired a small book by Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor called *On Kindness*. Joe felt that Adam and he were effectively describing the same phenomena and curative value of the loving self and the individual's potential for expressing kindness. When I arranged a lunch for his wife Idell and Joe when Adam visited Los Angeles, they both were enchanted with Adam's aliveness and receptivity to their work and perspectives. Joe was beaming after this lunch.

As a thinker and master clinicians over the decades, Joe evolved from a practitioner of classical psychoanalytic ego psychology to self psychology, to his own innovative version of intersubjectivity, to his final grounding in contemporary relational psychoanalysis. To the non-clinicians in the audience this means simply paying strict and sustained attention to the speech, emotions, and dimensions of self that emerged when two individuals meet regularly in a safe, comfortable, reliable setting, often for years; their task was a collaborative one, to co-construct meaning about the patient's inner world, to provide coherence about her present and past relationships. Joe engendered trust by his compassionate and empathic attitude; he was curious about personality and complexity, while being exquisitely attuned to micro-shifts in his patient's and his own feeling states. He insisted rightly that the therapist's interpretations

constituted a loving version of understanding, that interpretation was fundamental to the clinical endeavor, that interpretation could promote change, growth, and self-awareness.

Toward the end of his life, Joe held that the person of the therapist was itself curative in the therapeutic dyad. Joe's clinical stance of being attuned, intuitive, and sensitive also went with an explicit commitment not to be intrusive or judgmental. He also tolerated not knowing and uncertainty without getting anxious or self-critical.

As the author of papers and a book on love, Joe was brave and non-sentimental about the things and people he loved. He loved the elegant and classy Idell and they were married for sixty-seven years. He loved and was proud of his children, Amy, Paul, and Barbara, all of whom were distinguished in their own lives and careers. He loved learning. He loved to pun and was often puny, sometimes in ways that made me cringe, at other times amusing me. He loved art and often referred to masterpieces of art that moved him, like Picasso's "Guernica." He owned some beautiful paintings or lithographs by Picasso and Juan Miro.

Joe also loved the planet. And in the past decades, he was profoundly concerned about mother earth, about the planetary crisis and global warming, resulting from carbon emissions, over-population, and the greed and indifference of the ruling classes. He saw the crisis of the planet and ecological disaster as the most persistent existential threat to humanity, way more disastrous than nuclear holocaust. Joe loved rigorous intellectual and theoretical studies and was equipped with a fine and supple mind. He possessed a well-developed sense of humor, could let rip with a funny joke, one that was surprising, often packing a punch. Above, all, Joe loved the idea and practices of freedom, underscoring the potentially liberating aspects of psychoanalytically informed therapy for struggling and suffering individuals. He practiced and

advocated a socially informed psychoanalysis, one that supported forms of progressive politics that could emancipate society from socio-economic forms of inequality and cultures from asinine and ignorant approaches to racism, bias, and difference.

On my last visit to Joe several weeks ago, I observed sadly that he had become a faded version of the man I had known. He knew that he was not all right, wondering what had happened to his mind. He wanted to recover, hoping to return to work with his patients. Yet, he still had moments of lucidity. He predicted an event on the planetary level that would be emancipatory for humanity, but he was unclear what that event would be or how we could facilitate it. As I left, I asked him what I could do for him. He replied poignantly, “more contact and conversation.” That for me was the real Joe, suddenly and transiently reemerging from the fog of memory loss.

So let’s celebrate his life today, his desire for exchange and dialogue, his commitment to progressive change, and to individual and social emancipation from the crushing weight of illness, inhibition, oppression, and inequality..

I loved Joe. And I will dearly miss his smiling face and his caring telephone calls and our rich, contactful visits. I felt thoroughly loved by him.

I was proud to call Joe Natterson my friend.

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