

On and Off the Couch: Memoir of a Psychoanalyst

By Beverly Kolsky; IPBooks, 2022; 208 pages

Reviewed by Eve Blake, LCSW

Part memoir, part depiction of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, part explication of individual cases, Beverly Kolsky's *On and Off the Couch: Memoir of a Psychoanalyst* is organized in two parts: her pre-analytic life in part one, the intersection of her own experiences with her analytic ones in the second. It is in the second half of the book where it gathers steam, where she shares her work with several clients.

Kolsky's part 1 details her early history: the loss of her father when she was four, her difficult relationship with her mother, the bullying treatment received from her stepsisters after her mother's second husband died suddenly, her close and cherished relationship with her brother. Some of the most vivid sections in this part of the book explore her self-described life-altering experiences in her two analyses: her first, a nine-year analysis in England, where she worked as a psychotherapist, with a clinician who had an object relations theoretical background, and the second in the US, with a practitioner identified as a self-psychologist.

Such was the influence of her second analysis that Kolsky herself subsequently received her training in psychoanalysis at the New York Institute for Psychoanalytic Self Psychology. All told, she amassed more than forty years' experience as a social worker and psychoanalyst. She has numerous stories to tell about her personal journey and how it led to her development as a psychoanalyst.

She writes movingly of her first analysis: "Whether it was anger or despair or the shock of discovery or simply ranting because at last I had someone to listen to me, I wanted to go on feeling my emotions into infinity. When I cried, I never thought that I'd stop." And she says of her analyst: "Her knowing silence, combined with her unwavering presence, was kindness at its most profound." Kolsky shares a lovely description of the slowness of change in therapy: "Just as one cannot feel one's feet

growing until the old pair of shoes no longer fits and causes pain, so does the process of analysis develop so slowly that one does not realize its growth until the old behavior does not work anymore. . . . But when we do arrive at a new place, we tire of what we have known and like an old toy it is dropped in a corner of the room."

While her first analysis was characterized as "cradling," her second was a "more ascetic one." What she learned is that despite her resistance, particularly in forging an open relationship with a new analyst, she gained a good deal more self-understanding than she thought possible. She was, as she states, "liberated" from patterns that had seemed entrenched.

She shares how much she gained from her work in analysis, writing, "I have moved from being a silent observer of life while living on the fringe, to becoming a person both engaged with its beauty and its ugliness." And, as she observes, "In times like these where one's very existence is threatened by viruses that can kill and lies that are told as truths, it is essential that people know their own truth."

While living in London, Kolsky found work with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. She had been sent to make a preliminary home assessment of a seventy-year-old French count who, it was feared, was not turning off the gas on his stove. After forging a trusting working relationship with him, her duty became a challenge to her empathic connection with him: to protect him and other tenants in the building, she needed to facilitate his forced removal from his home to a hospital for assessment and potential placement in an elder-care facility. It was a wrenching experience for Kolsky, who recounts the unfolding events with considerable empathy. "I could feel myself break into small fragments that I knew I must piece together if I was to do my job," she writes. His final words to her—"I should never have let you into my home"—

penetrated deeply. He did not fare well in the forced move. For those of us whose work has entailed making such a difficult decision, this case accurately depicts the often cross-purposes of social service agency needs with psychoanalytic values and goals.

In part 2, she offers insight into her work with several patients. I was left wanting more from her depiction of a nineteen-year treatment of a chronically depressed patient. Although the patient begins to come to life in Kolsky's telling, the treatment is explained in a scant two and a half pages. We are left to imagine what transpired over those years, the nature of their analytic relationship, the texture of the patient's working through early trauma.

A more deeply felt picture emerges in her telling of her work with 'Claire,' another long-term patient she had written about in detail in "Empathy and Secrecy: Discovering Suicide as a Form of Addiction." In this 2015 journal article, she focuses on the concept of suicide addiction, a secret obsession with the thought of ending one's life.

Kolsky is candid about her dread prior to each session with Claire, a sense of uselessness against her patient's walled-in inner life. She attributes her self-psychological approach of empathic attunement to Claire's increased access into her hidden thoughts of suicide and the adrenalin rush she received from having those thoughts. Kolsky is forthright about her decision to make herself available to her patient outside the treatment space while her family and friends grew impatient with her. "Many times her frequent phone calls and my anxiety that she would kill herself took a toll on my family life," Kolsky writes. "I could not walk away once I knew what was there. Was this a rational decision? No. But for me there could be no other one. Claire's attempts at suicide and her addiction to suicidal thoughts went on for years." While Kolsky states that in her book she could not go more deeply into the ways they worked together toward a positive outcome, this omission triggers a wish for increased clinical detail. Inclusion of more clinical

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Wendy Winograd, DSW, BCD-P, LCSW • Book & Film Review Editor •
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aspects of their work together can be found in the journal article.

The sensitivity of Kolsky's work can be discerned in her discussion of Sara, a fifteen-year-old girl who stayed in treatment for six years, although it is unclear if she remained in treatment past that time. With Sara, Kolsky would verbalize what she observed about her at-first silent patient. She would offer "You are anxious today" and accept her patient's slight nod. Over time, Kolsky tuned in to her own physical feelings, such as noticing her throat constrict or the feeling of a heavy weight on her chest. Kolsky named her sensations and feelings, which her patient then connected to specifics of early trauma. In her immersive way, Kolsky helped her patient access her inner world. Sara, Kolsky informs us, eventually went off to college, deciding to become a psychotherapist.

I have skipped over the specifics of Kolsky's part 1 memoir. Her journey is a dramatic one, and there is too much detail to cover here. In this part, however, Kolsky is forthright in her depiction of


the family dynamics that contributed to her self-destructive patterns and shares the betrayals and missteps she made before establishing a healthy, loving relationship.

It is clear that Kolsky has had a rich clinical career and that she has much to say about her self-psychological approach to treatment. It sounds as if her experiences could easily comprise a new book. If such a book is on the horizon, we can all look forward to it.


Eve Blake, LCSW, is a psychoanalyst in private practice in Los Angeles, working with patients both in California and New York. She is a graduate of the Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Study Center, where she teaches and supervises, and is co-chair of the AAPCSW Curriculum Committee and on the Executive Committee.

Reference

Kolsky, B. (2015). Empathy and secrecy: Discovering suicide as a form of addiction. *MindConsiliums*, 15(10), 1-10.



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