

Commentary on "Mortal Gifts: A Two-Part Essay on the Therapist's Mortality" by Ellen Pinsky

Ann-Louise S. Silver

Any really useful paper pulls the reader into dialogue and thus becomes a classic. Quoting Judah Golden,

A work becomes a classic the minute I discover that my many moods, my perceptions, my spontaneous terms of reference, my recurring images are startlingly anticipated and given precise formulation by (and in) that work. It sharpens my eyesight, it cleans my mind of the fuzziness produced by my own lack of talent and laziness, it teaches me the words that I need for soliloquy and conversation. . . . Whoever correctly discovers and uses the right words reveals the world and my life to me, and ever after governs me. He teaches me also to recognize and speak the truth. (Goldin, in Agnon, p. vii)

The topic of disaster and death leads to thoughts on spirituality and religion. I am responding from my Jewish perspective, relating the issue of termination in analysis to the holy day of Yom Kippur. Freud considered himself a Godless Jew. I wonder if his avoidance of his religious traditions dovetails with his avoidance of discussing with colleagues or patients the technical issues raised by his cancer. His quest for privacy reinforced his followers' silences regarding their own thoughts and feelings about terminations and deaths. Perhaps, too, the rise of Nazi fascism reinforced such silences, as intellectual communities and Jewish communities were forced into a death grip of accommodation.

How can we decide under which circumstances "healthy denial" becomes pathology? In the two months following September 11, 2001, as we each dealt with our horror and panic, an amazing thing happened in the mental health clinics in Washington, and perhaps in the rest of the country. While one would assume a surge of new business, people coming to low-fee clinics or to private practices, seeking help with their anxieties and griefs, the opposite occurred. Clinics received cancellation rather than new appointment calls. Therapists continued working with their established patients but no new referrals came their way. And conferences scheduled for October and November saw few new registrations. Instead, people called requesting refunds. We all withdrew, too

frightened to speak. We became part of “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” as events shattered our sense of security. We lost our illusion that our Disney-esque castle is protected by the two grand moats of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Our national shock of terror resonates with any individual’s shock on hearing that he or she is suffering a potentially fatal illness, and is suddenly at war with enemy forces attacking within one’s personal borders. While people already engaged in psychotherapy stay with it once such dreaded illness is diagnosed, it is rather rare for someone so diagnosed to rush into a new treatment relationship. This holds true whether one is a lay-person or a mental health professional. I think that analysts tend not to disclose their newly diagnosed illnesses to their patients largely *because* of their need to keep things unchanged, to maintain their own equilibrium. Is an apology in order when it turns out that the analyst cannot continue working? And if the analyst dies of that illness, still “carrying a treatment load” and “sparing” the patient the grim reality, wouldn’t the patients’ outrage be supportable? How can the analysts who are stepping into the breach encourage or even permit such discussion if they have not themselves thought through these issues for themselves?

Magical ideas of guilt usually are part of one’s reaction to terrifying news. This illness I now have probably came about because I did or didn’t do something. I’ve gotten what I deserved. I wasn’t living right. Following the World Trade Center disaster, a few people forcefully said we must look at what we have done to be so hated. I felt outraged. I agreed in principle, but felt it was wrong as an initial response. Is this “not now” response of mine part of analysts’ silence regarding abrupt terminations and even endings in general? Is there ever a right time?

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, marks the end of the prior year, and the time when the Book of Life is closed for the coming year. During the preceding Days of Awe, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, one has a last opportunity to reverse one’s fate, by apologizing and making amends to the individuals one has wronged. This is called Teshuvah, “turning” or repentance. It isn’t enough to pray for forgiveness to an unseen God. One must disclose one’s wrong to the particular human one has harmed, and must do something to set things right again. How often do Jews actually follow through on this? What would psychoanalysis be like if Freud had mandated this at the close of each treatment? What if, when we know we will have to stop our work in the foreseeable future, we would follow Ferenczi and Rank’s recommendations from 1924 in *The Development of Psychoanalysis*? We would set an irrevocable termination date and then work actively, vocally, reviewing what had been learned and experienced in the analysis. We would

say why we set that particular termination date. Ferenczi’s and Rank’s colleagues’ response to this monograph was startlingly rageful and rejecting. The group had learned of Freud’s cancer just months before, at first as a secret Freud himself did not yet know.

Once on the New Moon of Elul, (on Rosh ha-Shanah, when the shofar or ram’s horn is sounded, announcing the start of the Days of Awe) the zaddik Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berditchev [18th century] was standing at his window. A Gentile cobbler passed by and asked him ‘And have you nothing to mend?’ At once the zaddik sat himself down on the ground, and weeping bitterly cried, ‘Woe is me, and alas my soul, for the Day of Judgment is almost here, and I have still not mended myself! [Zikhron al-Rishonim] (Agnon, S. Y., p. 26)¹

I believe that Pinsky’s paper urges us to institute a “Day of Atonement” in psychoanalytic theory and practice. It calls on us to rededicate ourselves to a basic tenet of psychoanalysis, the motto of the university at which Freud yearned to be a professor, “and the truth shall make you free” (The Gospel According to St. John, 8:32). The truth is, nobody gets out of this life alive, and sometimes we see it coming. Perhaps we have a moral obligation to sound a warning and enter into real discourse with all those who are close to us.

References

- Agnon, S. Y. (1948), *Days of Awe: Being a Treasury of Traditions, Legends and Learned Commentaries Concerning Rosh Ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur and the Days Between Culled from Three Hundred Volumes Ancient and New*, Introduction by Judah Goldin, Schocken Books, New York.
- Ferenczi, S., and Rank, O. (1925), *The Development of Psychoanalysis*, Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co., New York and Washington.
- Hornstein, G. (2000), *To Redeem One Person Is to Redeem the World: The Life of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann*, The Free Press, New York.

4966 Reedy Brook Lane
Columbia, MD 21044-1514
asilver@psychoanalysis.net

¹Agnon, Israel’s first Nobel laureate in literature, was Frieda Fromm-Reichmann’s cousin by marriage, Fromm-Reichmann among the Academy’s founders (Hornstein, p. 63).