

How I Came Together as a Person and as a Psychiatrist

What follows is a sketch of my facing up to personal turmoil and despair as an adolescent, how it worked out, and how I came together as a person and as a psychiatrist.

High School and College

My family of origin was emotionally cool. Caring was meted out responsibly, even punctiliously. The family's general aim was success, academic and financial. Emotional well-being was secondary. Words to express feelings were rarely spoken and unpleasant feelings were regarded as unfortunate byproducts of life, as nothing to dwell on. In my adolescence, this contributed to my bewilderment and turmoil. I struggled with oscillations between self-hatred and self-glorification, with how much of a male I really was, with the intense wish to have friends yet convinced that relationships required a falsity I couldn't endure. Conflicting storylines, entire identities, about who I was with their respective affects, styles, and values were triggered by one thing or another. Towards the end of high school, I drowned myself in the work of Dostoevsky and held Raskolnikov as my dark hero. I affected a corresponding darkness--a taciturn remove with matching belligerence, humorlessness, and style of dress and manner. I chose to attend a college where my darkness would fit. My political views took a sharp left.

I decided on a career in medicine. It was easiest, I figured, without the terrifying competitiveness of the alternatives. The subject was intrinsically interesting. Also, despite my show of cynicism, I cared about people. People, not persons. I greatly underestimated my primary motive, namely, that it was what my parents wanted. I worked feverishly to disregard the turmoil within me and the multiple conflicting narratives and identities. I worked to sustain my dark invented persona. I was in awful pain. I didn't know how to have friends though I desperately wanted them. Yet I was able to display a sultry charm to women who correctly saw in me someone who needed their care. I craved the admiration that each offered and that inevitably turned stale.

Medical School

This continued into medical school. My parade of young women, my motorcycle, my lefty politics, my cool style earned me the envy and disdain of my peers and belied the agonizing turbulence at my core. Then, two developments changed things.

In my last year of medical school, I heard that you could have free psychotherapy from one of the residents in a hospital associated with the school. I thought it was worth a try. The notion of psychiatry or psychotherapy had simply

never entered my mind. I had a low regard for psychiatry. Still, it was free. Why not?

Dr. B. proved to be a very quiet, professionally correct young man who determined that I was depressed and needed encouragement. He encouraged me even when encouragement was unnecessary, even unwise. He seemed to be reading out of a simple therapists' handbook in which the only techniques were to encourage and reassure. He was oblivious that I was being encouraged and reassured in the wrong direction.

The second development concerned my political interests. These were emboldened by Dr. B.'s encouragements and prompted my organizing an activist political group. I discovered in myself some capacity for leadership. I became so preoccupied with my activities that I became sleepless. I ate little. I became the gaunt, disheveled, and unshorn self-righteous preacher of some secular gospel. Remarkably, our efforts began to succeed. We were joined by a helpful man in neatly creased khakis who was believed by some to be an undercover FBI agent. Just in case, we recited the Pledge of Allegiance before meetings. I confronted the medical school administration about a highly sensitive matter that was already in the public arena.

Concerned that my political activities would reach the press and stain the school's name, the Dean lectured me and threatened that I might be expelled. That same week, Dr. B.'s supervisor, a well-respected professor of psychiatry, appeared at my next session and insisted that I enter a nearby mental hospital. Off I went, voluntarily, even happy to be relieved of the jam I had gotten into.

I was started on phenothiazines and did what I was told. I was an exemplary patient. I returned from passes on time, paid courtesies to the staff, and played well with others. I figured out how to act normally and planted a smile on my face.

Internship and Residency

With studied deliberation, I retreated from the heroic bearing that I had assumed for myself. Months later, I was in a reputable medical internship. Aside from the continuing inner turmoil, all was well.

One rainy afternoon, my motorcycle skidded off the road and I suffered a compound fracture of my left femur. The surgery was complicated and only partially successful. I was left with a limp that, over the years to follow, contributed to a progressive kyphoscoliosis that, coupled with equally progressive corpulence and hair loss, rendered my middle-age appearance a far cry from the dashing 25-year-old I had been.

During my early convalescence from surgery, I stayed with a girlfriend. As it happened, she was in psychoanalysis. I let her care for me and tend to me. I was woefully inconsiderate of any needs she had. One afternoon, I opened one of her books on psychoanalysis. Then another. I was fascinated. When I returned to my internship, I asked to be transferred to psychiatry pleading that my injury

had impaired my mobility. Soon after, I applied for a residency, signed up with the psychoanalytic institute, and entered intensive analysis.

Psychoanalysis and Later Years

Over the years and several hundred hours of analysis, I came together as a person and as a psychiatrist. The turbulence quieted. I discovered my values and learned to live by them and through them. I muted hypomanically-endowed enthusiasms, slowly retreated from the hollow promises of narcissistic pathology, and developed the capacity to intercept and analyze impulses towards lust, indignation, needless competitiveness, arrogance, greed and so forth.

I married (and remain so, and to the same woman), had children and, later, grandchildren. I wrote papers and earned a professorship. I became an instructor at the psychoanalytic institute, then a training analyst. The need for limitless admiration morphed into the simple pleasure of finding myself a respected psychiatrist and a well-regarded member of my community of friends and family. I experienced my work as a clinical psychiatrist as joyfully rewarding, as a privilege. In the broadest and most meaningful way that we think of love, I found love.

So, now, in the autumn of my life and finding myself forgetting names and misplacing things, I wonder what lies ahead, whether my coming together and staying together for so many years might now unravel--and for reasons very different from those that fractured the character of my early years.

I find a sweetness in this by W. B. Yeats:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth.