On Stories, and Theories: In Appreciation of Miss Freud
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Reading always causes one’s mind to flood with ideas, memories, and reflections. In truth, it may be that good writing is intended to do just this. It causes the reader to look up from the pages and reflect on various matters, or perhaps it demands that the reader keep on, despite the tremors of thoughts that now cascade throughout the mind. The novelist V.S. Naipul once remarked that the function of the novel is to enlighten and evoke. Old friend, Bert Cohler’s essay. “Desire, Teaching, and Learning” in these pages, (Fall, 2006, volume 3, issue 2), did indeed enlighten me, and evoke all sorts of memories, and feelings.

It was on the stage of the Francis Parker Auditorium, twelve years ago, that a group of people convened to explore the ways in which psychoanalytic theory informs education, and quite possibly, visa versa. The conference borrowed Freud’s enticing notion of the school romance and so it was appropriate that Cohler reminded us that a teacher never knows what has transpired in the life of a student since the last time they met. Was last evening the scene of a child learning of a parent’s illness? The loss of a job? The dissolution of his or her parents’ marriage? Has the child learned that the family will be moving, an experience that deeply disturbs most children and, for reasons known and unknown, young girls especially? Some teachers, of course, recognize that the child on Tuesday morning is clearly not the same one who entered their classroom twenty four hours earlier. Other teachers take little or no note. Or perhaps the child is clever, or secretive, hence not a trace of unhappiness or anxiety is there to be discovered. Cohler’s observation was indeed especially telling.

Often in the past, I have imagined that this sort of plain, almost naive observation is only made by those skilled at reading pieces of behavior not visible to the “naked” or untrained eye. Cohler’s essay put me in mind of the classes I took a thousand years ago at the University of Chicago with his own mentor, the late Bruno Bettelheim. Apart from running the Schenkman School, Bettelheim taught several classes for graduate students. It turned out that as a teacher he presented a panoply of contrasts. He was as soft and easy a grader, I discovered, as he was a tyrannical pedagogue. He had no compunctions about humiliating students who literally scrunched down in their, that is our seats, for fear that the master might call upon us. I felt he could be brutal. Predictably, the course, whatever its title, was predicated on psychoanalytic theory, hence only naturally we did our best to be good students and reflect back at him any psychoanalytic concept or proposition we could conjure when asked any question.

On one occasion, and this is the connection I make to Cohler’s simple observation about what may have occurred in the lives of students when they are away from school, he showed us a film. In one scene a social worker is speaking with a small child. “What is it zat you see?” Dr. Bettelheim asked us, and we obliged in the manner we always assumed he desired. “We see transference occurring,” one courageous young person proffered. “Ach, you don’t see transference!” Bettelheim shot back, his Viennese accent somehow
becoming even more pronounced. Another courageous soul: “We see the differential in power relations between the two participants.” Another “Ach!” echoed in the old auditorium. “You don’t see power!” By this point, we are so low in our chairs he can barely see, we are all hoping, the tops of our heads. “Oedipal themes?” a tiny voice comes from somewhere. The response earns nothing more than the now familiar “Ach!”

“What you see,” the master teaches, “is zat ze woman kneels down so zat she is at ze eye level of ze child so ze child doesn’t feel overwhelmed. Zat is all you see.” No more “Ach’s” directed at us that one afternoon. And just that simply a point is made that I have a carried for forty years. Right there before our eyes is all that needs to be purveyed. But our eyes, bathed, dare I say drenched in theory and ideology, fail us because, just as Kant instructed, there is little perception without conception. Our conceptions have ruled the day, and we have forfeited the simple, pure, unalloyed truths that, well, a little child might well have seen.

Cohler writes of Anna Freud who was a teacher of mine for the two years I spent as a guest in the Hampstead Clinic where she served as director. It is interesting that her father wished her to become a school teacher. In fact, Cohler tells us that the senior Freud never wanted his daughters to attend college. If Bettelheim predicated his work with us in Chicago on psychoanalytic theory, Miss Freud’s clinic ran everything according to chapter and verse of her father’s sacred scripture. A friend who studied with me once remarked that the Catholic Church was permissive in the face of the dogmatism revealed in the Hampstead Clinic, a dogmatism that never once was in evidence when Miss Freud commented on the children in her “well baby clinic” situated directly across Maresfield Gardens. Here, in observing children in what was essentially a child care clinic—strange that many of us still call it day care—Miss Freud acted as if she were the grandmother to all the children. She spoke of their beauty, their charm, their lovely ways. Arch dogmatism on one side of the street, fawning grand motherliness on the other. Let us hold in mind that during the German bombardment of London, Anna Freud chose to remain huddled in the deep tube stations of North London in order to comfort children and their families. Although she had a ready-made sanctuary in Ireland with her colleague Dorothy Burlingame, she chose to remain with the children of London. There, as the bombs exploded, Miss Freud spoke with children, hearing again and again the detailed memories and images of fathers now at war, many of whom in fact the children had never seen.

She was quite the Grande dame, quite the teacher, just as long as one honored the agreement that nothing from the scripture would be altered, nor even challenged. A child would be presented at a case conference, and no matter what the presenting problem might have been, the interpretation derived from scripture, and the treatment plan—Quell Surprise!—was four days a week psychoanalysis. One such case will never leave me; it lingers as a reminder of what is likely to happen if a child, that would be me, who spent fourteen years at the Francis W. Parker School in Chicago, pre-kindergarten through high school, where he was given the gift, genuinely, of free speech, and free thought.

A case is presented of a girl who has been acting up in a variety of ways, or perhaps she has demonstrated signs of depression; I cannot remember the details, and for this one
case the symptoms are irrelevant. Suffice to say, the child was having some problems and, surprise of surprises, four days a week psychoanalysis had been prescribed. But the father has revealed some reluctance, an indication, no doubt, of unconscious denial of the child’s problems as well as resistance to the proposed treatment. It is perfectly clear to everyone in the room except the kid from Chicago who presumes to raise an utterly sacrilegious, even treasonous matter. The father of the child, the Chicago kid, commences, is a London taxi driver who lives in a community forty minutes away. To transport his daughter to therapy four days a week means three hundred and twenty minutes of commuting plus two hundred minutes of waiting when he cannot earn a living. That represents more than one day a week of sitting idle. I trust the reader recognizes the glorious juxtaposition of mathematics and Marxism made possible only by a constructivist education. Might it not be possible that the father’s reluctance is motivated not so much by unconscious resistance, as much as by economic matters of which the man is totally conscious! Point! Set! Match! Or so I thought.

When I finished, hundreds of pairs of eyes were upon me. People were straining in what has to be considered advanced yoga positions just to see what this obstreperous Yank looked like. And in all of these eyes lay one question: Who let this guy in here? The look was there in Miss Freud’s eyes as well. I never again commented on a single case study. I never even spoke again, which surely goes against the purpose of my entire early education, and, fortunately, no one ever said anything to me about my, well, infelicitous utterance.

But I wasn’t the only one to go silent at the Hampstead Clinic, for there was one, and only one occasion, when Miss Freud too, became conspicuously mute. And while Marx wasn’t behind her inaction, in this one extraordinary instance, Theodore Herzl might have been.

The instance in question involved a young girl of Middle Eastern descent who was presented to the clinic staff. The formidable ritual continued, as always, with the social worker’s report and then the chairman of the clinic asking for reactions. Every predictable psychoanalytic proposition is put forth—by now, these clinic discussions had become a bit of a parody—or is it “parroty?” Everyone speaks, everyone utters the same sorts of things they have uttered for years; no one dares question anything. Sometimes, even Freud allowed, a taxi cab is just a taxi cab. Only on this occasion, Miss Freud remains perfectly silent, and this is unusual. Indeed her silence quickly becomes the unstated theme of the discussion, the elephant in the conference room, until, like a child no longer able to keep from opening the largest Christmas present under the tree, the chairman politely inquires, “Miss Freud, have you no comment?” Pausing ever so slightly, Anna Freud utters these words, which I recount verbatim: “I didn’t realize we were treating Arabs.”

And that’s the point, that’s what I got out of reading Cohler’s reflections, “Desire, Teaching and Learning.” Is it possible that what we see and hear and encounter as teachers is only partially what is really out there in our classrooms and in the heads of our students, and primarily what our own interior makes of these classrooms and young
people? Robert Kegan is right: Human being are distinctive not only in their capacity but in their constant and eternal drive to make meaning of events. We make these meanings, and draw all sorts of patterns, moreover, from theories and ideologies that we hold dear, or for the moment, anyway, strike us as the right and proper organizing principles for discerning reality. And then, when these theories and ideologies have worked their organizing and interpretive magic, we call the events experiences and deposit them in the lock boxes of our memory. Or perhaps we find them so insidious, so egregious, so criminal, we imprison them in chambers of the brain that actually make it impossible to speak of them. Neurological research by Basil van der Kolk and others indicates just this.

So there comes a time when what we might call our perceptions of reality don’t jibe all that well with the ways we have been trained to make sense of reality. After all, psychoanalysis teaches us the importance of autonomy, but have we not come to realize that a certain amount of dependence is not pathological, but in fact required if people and nations are to live in peace? Have we not learned that Bettelheim’s conception of the “refrigerator mother” being the cause of a child’s autism is now not only an outdated notion, but an egregious one at that? One generation is obliged to take something from a teacher as ultimate truth, while the next generation learns that a teacher proffering this same “truth” must be reported to authorities. Of course a generation steeped in psychoanalytic reasoning would believe that young men and women protesting a war in Asia are doing little more than working out their Oedipal fantasies and ensuing terror. Bettelheim himself staked this claim. And perhaps the succeeding generation is accused of being inhibited by Oedipal fears that keep them from protesting a war in the Middle East.

For me, the great danger is that theory and ideology may just work as deeply rooted censors distorting the thoughts and feelings behind the stories of others. And stories, I have come to learn, are just about all we offer to others. As we are our relationships, so too, are we our stories. As Evelyne Ender writes in her brilliant Architexts of Memory, “the diary writes itself.” Look not to the remembrance, Ender instructs, but to the “rememberer.” In this regard, Freud himself is barely understood by those who cite him but fail to read him. In fact, Freud did allow his patients to tell their stories, report their dreams, and even analyze these same dreams by free associating. Where the master got in trouble, in the famous instance of changing his interpretations of childhood sexual abuse, is when he listened to himself and not the women pouring out the most important stories they ever dared tell.

Similar cases occur everyday in medical and psychotherapy offices, and classrooms. The theory, the ideology, the curriculum, human intentionality rule the day, stories go unheeded, innocent people go unnoticed; what Dewey called the uncommon stories of common people, are barely heard. After reporting a severe pain, a patient is told by a doctor that he shouldn’t be having that pain. A child is deemed an over-achiever, which means, one is left to deduce, the child is doing better than he can do, whatever that means. Well, what it means is that no one has expressed an apology for underestimating that child. Or how about the child with a learning problem told that at least she never has worry about becoming a doctor or a lawyer? It happened. And in one particular instance
the child, a seventh grader, had the grit and the genius to admonish that teacher: “You must never say such a thing to a child, it hurts them. Besides, there is no way you can predict that!” Apparently, if we are the stories we tell, we constantly run the risk of appearing to be the stories others tell about us. The great Erik Erikson taught us the lesson: Don’t predict; our theories and findings do not yet make it possible. Some of us, alas, must make peace with the fact that we are not scientists, merely humanists, hopefully artists, surely story tellers.

In some sense, I was a child whose story was not heard, not because malignant parents ignored it, but because the story was immediately swaddled in the theories of human behavior extant at the time. I loved school. I would rather have been at school than anywhere else in the world that I knew about. But I struggled in every class. Only naturally, my parents were concerned, and not merely for narcissistic reasons. They were genuinely troubled, and hence they did at once what the theories and ideologies directed them to do. and Lev Vygotsky and the late Clifford Geertz are right to remind us that culture and society are prominent teachers of the brain, as important as any deep structure allegedly born in that brain. We are what we have learned, the philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote. And so my parents sent me to psychiatrists, one after the other, one practically, for each stage of my development, hoping desperately to find the key that might unlock my oral stage problems, my anal stage problems, my phallic stage problems, my Oedipal stage problems, my latency stage problems. Alas, I might have been spared by the fact that Erikson’s eight stages of human development weren’t publicized until I reached middle school.

In this one instance, the culture was not yet prepared to hear my story which contemporary teachers would now diagnose in a Chicago heart beat: I am dyslexic. Verbal sure, interpretive skills in tact, of course, clever use of language, absolutely, able to read and remember what I was reading, not on your life! But my teachers, many of them steeped in psychoanalysis themselves–Bettelheim himself was the school’s guidance counselor in my early years–retreated from theory and turned instead to becoming didactic engineers. The boy had a problem, so work with him on the problem and leave the etiology to others. Strange, how dogmatism often masquerades as sophistication and the ability to possess almost supernatural powers. There were jokes in those days about analysts being able to read your mind. I have never heard a joke about teachers being able, not so simply, to hear the stories of their pupils.

I am sure all those psychiatrists helped me in some manner or other. I often muse that if I could have entreated them to sign a document verifying all the hours I spent in their chairs and on their couches, a university somewhere might have granted me at least a Masters Degree in something, which would have been stunning because it would have meant a degree obtained without having to read one word! But the recollections of those years, many of them painful as so many secrets were kept from so many people so very important to me, only remind me of how well those teachers listened to the words spoken, not to mention the words unread, and saw precisely what was there before them, just as Bettelheim instructed us to do in his albeit terrifying classroom. For sometimes, a story is so powerful, so deeply rooted in the essence of what makes us human, all of the
theory and ideology for an instant dissolve, and the music and lyrics of a child’s world explodes into our own interiors, putting us, in that moment, in a relationship with that child and, simultaneously, with ourselves that practically stuns us. At very least we feel what it feels like to be moved, an apt expression.

I lied above when I said that, after reminding the crowd at the Anna Freud Clinic of the putative realities of a taxi driver’s life and finances, I never spoke again. In fact, I did speak, one more time.

It was customary in the clinic for visitors to give a talk on any topic they believed would be of interest to the clinicians. I chose to speak about the work I was concluding on children in jail. In the main the talk was little more than reporting verbatim the words of incarcerated children in America. I thought the talk went well enough, not great, what my mother would have labeled “not so aye-aye-aye.” At the conclusion, no one applauded and I was at once put in mind of the short story, “A Perfect Tribute,” read in the tenth grade under the tutelage of our teacher Damon Barnes. Hey, they went silent for Lincoln, they could go silent for me. The narcissistic response was protection, of course, because I was paralyzed with fear that once again I had violated the rules of the clinic, namely, to avoid the purpose and truth of Freudian theory. The problem with these people, I remember thinking, is that as sensitive and knowledgeable as they may be, the organizing root of their knowledge, psychoanalytic theory, has not only blinded them to a vast world of human experience, it had done something even worse: It had mutilated their feelings. They had actually learned, and willingly so, to silence a fundamental piece of what it means to be human, what it means to be sentient. And for this, I thought, Freud owed them all a monstrous apology.

But I was totally wrong in my interpretation of that ominous silence. For in this instance it was I who failed to hear, or even imagine the stories told by these clinicians, stories that served, apparently, to give meaning to what they had just heard. It was my story that defined them, not theirs. I hadn’t given them ample time to tell their stories. Not one of the people who spoke with me, and most all did, lining up like small children for recess, raised a single issue relating to psychoanalytic theory and doctrine. They said only one thing, and asked only one question. Person after person after person arrived with but one matter, and one inquiry. “Your talk made me return to the death camps. Does this really still go on?” And finally, Miss Freud. For the first and only time I shook the hand of my treasured teacher. For the first and only time I felt she really noticed me, and how important is it for a child to be recognized by his teacher! She not only shook my hand, she held it, and I noticed that she was shaking, and she was weeping. The stories of incarcerated children had opened her heart, which allowed me to imagine that I might be part of that opening. No theory being advanced, no interpretation being debated, no policy being devised, nothing more than what we still call a “heart to heart.”

Cohler is right when he claims that “desire may interfere with learning unless it is made explicit and discussed. . .” William James and others have warned us about that desire business. Hegel too, worried that desire may lead to the unremitting need to consume, which in turn damages the self’s ability to labor on, and understand or embrace itself, not
to mention the self or self consciousness of another. Surely the self desires recognition; the story-teller craves an audience. Granted, in every first night audience there are critics, interpreters of language and meaning, literature, music, dance, and painting.

My suspicion, however, is that the story-teller, the patient in the examining room, the child in the classroom can tolerate the critics, appreciate their role and the value of the theories, ideologies, and curricula they purvey and safe-keep. All we ask, we story-tellers, is that those meant to care for us will hear us, and attend to us, and thus safe-keep our stories. Let them, we say, work on their theories, dismiss those constructions they feel to be no longer valid, no longer esthetically pleasing. But let them not fail to hear us, and care for us, we request plaintively, as in some instances our very lives may be at stake. For it is our lives we children put in your hands when we ask you to care for us, or unwittingly assume that is what you teachers, scholars, physicians, counselors are meant to do. We want you informed, knowledgeable, but always with just a little piece of your heart that on occasion you will hold open only for us.

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