

Letter Two, Take II

Athens, GA and Cambridge, MA, November 17, 2023

Dear Friends,

We initially wrote to you as colleagues, but after reading your letters, we would like to think we can call you friends. You shared so much with us, trusted us with your personal stories, fears, disappointments, rage (strange that rage cannot be plural—maybe because rage taps into something collective and shared when we feel it^[1]), and your hopes.

While we were receiving and awaiting letters, on October 7, 2023, Hamas attacked, killed, and took scores of hostages in Israel, including infants, children, and elderly people. Hundreds of young people who had been enjoying an outdoor concert that day were murdered. The details of the horrors that so many families in Israel faced that day shocked the world. Thereafter, the Israeli government deployed its military response, actions that have devastated the Gaza territory and its people, who were already under siege and living in terrible conditions. Estimates of civilian deaths in Gaza are 10,000 and counting and include whole families killed and thousands of children mangled by the ammunitions of war.

We are striving to hold both Palestinian and Israeli pain in this moment, to be true to ourselves, as psychoanalysts and human beings, in seeing and representing the human amidst the pull to dehumanize and its annihilatory consequences. We see annihilation all around, in the current reality, in the ghosts of the past. As we feel pulled to speak truth to the leaders, we have also found ourselves opting to work quietly in our communities, hoping to circumvent the rage and fear that threatens to annihilate our connections with one another. In the communities we live in, a stance of active listening has felt like a path forward and one that psychoanalysts are skilled to embody and practice, hopefully, in a way that generates and opens new possibilities amidst the darkness of war.

We had already started to notice the personal tone of people's responses to us for this project, but as the Palestine/Israel issue welled up again, and there had, in fact, been negative consequences for many who spoke about these issues, it became clear that some of our letter writers needed to know that their letters would not be published. Thus, we were reminded that we, too, face real limits to what can be said out loud in our institutes and our communities. Our letter exchange, like Fenichel's, suddenly became secret.

One of our letter writers spoke profoundly about the connection between confidentiality and communication and the significance of confidentiality to psychoanalysis and community psychoanalysis:

In an era that emphasizes transparency, confidentiality is more vital than ever in preserving the authentic developmental opportunity that analysis promises. [...] The importance of privacy in this process of trust-building cannot be overemphasized. It is an essential element. And I worry about the many ways in which confidentiality is under

assault these days. It seems particularly under siege in community psychoanalysis. Social media is the oxymoronic enemy of relational integrity.”

And yet, the writer states, “It is also true that privacy can lead to isolation. One can choose never to say something. So, here is the second irony. Growth requires the risk of speaking (writing in this case).” And another letter writer, who wrote directly to Otto Fenichel, spoke to the power of that communication: “I hear you were an avid letter writer like myself. So, your idea to write, copy and distribute a series of secret letters, the “Rundbriefe,” to your friends across the world for almost twelve years, was a form of resistance—a way to avoid a ‘social death.’”

In your communications to us, you, the letter writers of this Take II project, opened up about your life stories, your journeys to and alongside psychoanalysis, and the development of your individual, political, and psychoanalytic identities. In your letters, you shared your despair about our current situation in the world:

Gravely ironic (nightmarishly fractal?) that we engage this Rundbriefe exercise as we are surrounded and flooded with the horrors striking Israelis and Palestinians, Ukrainians, American Democracy, and our collective dream of future.

I am sad to report that today our world is in a quite similar state, or even worse than the one you faced when you fled Europe—except this time there is no place to escape, no place in the world that feels safe. In fact life on this planet is in peril. What ways do we have to strengthen our resistance, to feel less helpless, when we are facing such enormous, unimaginable threats?

You, the letter writers of this Take II project, also shared your frustrations and disappointments with psychoanalysis and/or psychoanalysts, and these disappointments spanned the generations of letter writers, including the observation that many previously politically engaged colleagues gradually transferred all their political cathexis to psychoanalytic politics. Letter writers expressed their frustration with the disavowal of the political that is surely already in psychoanalysis, including in which people get to speak and present, and which people are excluded and silenced. Silencing is also present in the way we listen to our patients and interpret intrapsychic conflict and maladaptive anger rather than empowering them to fight oppression, in the ways we encourage a highly individualistic society where the goal is to ‘work, play and love.’ “Is that really the goal?” a letter writer pointedly posited. “The image that won’t go away is of a straitjacket,” writes another. Another expressed alarm around the current backlash against DEI efforts in institutes, including in psychoanalytic conferences and talks that identify themselves as “explicitly ‘anti-woke,’ and that seem to equate what they call ‘left-wing authoritarianisms’ with the incredibly dangerous right-wing authoritarianisms that people with actual power are inflicting on everyone, but especially on historically oppressed groups.”

The disappointment is, of course, so profound because it feels like a betrayal of some of the very principles that drew us to psychoanalysis in the first place. One letter writer said, “Psychoanalysis provides a foundation to explore every aspect of human existence, what it

means to have a mind, and what it means to know other minds who interact with ours.” “I left my ... family and became my self on my analyst’s couch in Boston,” highlighted another letter writer. In this context, another writer added more thoughts about the disappointment of psychoanalysis’s constant missing encounter with the social:

For a profession that aims to understand human nature, we fail miserably at studying and understanding human aggression and the continual violence that we do to one another. We ignore or sideline research, the very “scientific” profession we claim to be. We put our heads in the proverbial sand and avoid global threats to the very existence of thousands of living species.... plants, animals, and ourselves!

And yet, alongside all the disappointment and rage, you also shared your hopes, dreams, and ideas about how we might proceed. The themes were powerful.

Many spoke of the tensions inherent in building something—how easy it is to recreate a new version of dogma and rigidity: “The conflicts between frame (rules) and substance (non-judgmental dialogue) are eternal...,” one letter writer noted. Another expressed, “I have seen institutions that try to have few rules in hopes of being less hierarchical and end up nonetheless with hierarchies, this time based in charisma rather than rules.” Other letter writers shared ideas from theories not fully recognized by psychoanalysis that could be helpful to the field. A writer noted that Dynamic Systems theory teaches “that a complex dynamic system is flexible and increases in cohesiveness with increased complexity. However, a system can also collapse into rigidity if it is self-limiting rather than self-organizing.” To survive, the letter writer noted, psychoanalysis is now challenged to shift from the microscopic lens it first took to see the previously unseen to engage with a telescopic lens. Another writer, in speaking to the hope that psychoanalysis will allow itself to be “strengthened by interdisciplinary dialogue” noted the challenge that “welcoming in new knowledge from diverse fields outside of psychoanalysis will require the field to re-examine its current power structures and to allow room for reorganization.” The writer cited Ann Pellegrini & Avgi Saketopoulou on this issue, who state:

We are not interested in how ideas from other domains get ‘used’ in psychoanalytic thought, but in the perturbations such contact brings to the psychoanalytic edifice itself, in what can help dis-integrate. Weathering these disturbances so that we may theorize again, and theorize better. (Pellegrini & Saketopoulou 2023, p. xvii)

Another writer spoke to this effort of bringing new ideas into psychoanalysis as requiring personal, individual change, within community. She described that “Psychoanalysis offers the opportunity to transform—to unite the factions/fractions WITHIN the self. This is where we start. If we do this work with ourselves, we make it possible to do the work with each other. The inner/the outer. Can we support each other in that journey?”

One writer reminded us that fractals are “self-similar” not “self-replicating,” calling on Loewald’s concept of “creative repetition,” in a way that may be helpful as we think about how to avoid some of the limiting patterns that abound.

Writers wrestled with the struggles within Fenichel's group of letter writers, including struggles around working within current institutions, or deciding to leave them completely, and discovering new ways of coming together, perhaps based on "solidarity economy" models. "The issue of when/how does change come from within and when/how from without," asks one writer. Another emphasized, "I think we have to imagine new structures as well as new theories, and if that's what boycotting current institutions requires, so be it."

The question of hate came up in another letter, which included an invitation for psychoanalysis to take up the question of transforming it, hate, into consciousness. Maybe we need to face the hate, in ourselves, our theories, our institutions—really face it—to move forward. The letter writer explained that her father, who left a detailed diary of his experiences as the family fled Nazi-ridden Germany, had exiled hate from his psyche to survive. She agreed with Reich's contribution on the destructive drives' close relationship with the social and not only the biological. She noted:

Here I have to say that I resonate with Jany's translation of Wilhelm Reich who writes that "the 'unmanageable destructive drives' to which human suffering is attributed are not biological, but rather social." And sometimes I forget that the "provable" facts in our current political climate carry no clout with the proponents of "the big lie." I want to say that facts provide the necessary bricks to build an argument but affects are the mortar. So the question is, how do we, as psychoanalysts with "an unrelenting dedication to the social," provide for an educative experience in which negative affects such as Hate can be owned, and transformed and brought safely into consciousness.

The same letter writer shared how 30 years after her family fled Germany, in 1963, she boarded a bus to Jackson, Mississippi to protest the brutalities inflicted by policemen on school-aged Black children marching and singing "We shall overcome..." She expressed, "**I hated** what I saw. I thought then, and assumed until now, that my mission in Mississippi was prompted by the plight of these children as well as my own," but that it would take her another 20 years to realize that at least part of her journey to Mississippi that landed her in jail was motivated by a wish to "...work through [her] father's Hate and in some strange way, vindicate his suffering."

As we read these letters, it became clear that the connection to the social was tied to the deeply personal and unconscious of our letter writers. The social pushing through and from the unconscious was experienced for many as something that was initially "acted out" (so, suspiciously unconscious) and not well understood. They lived the experience of feeling moved by the social as something filled with a *strangeness*^[2] that both horrified and pushed them into action. For another letter writer, a near-nausea feeling overtook him as he read Letter One. Initially, he assumed his reaction was attributable to an imagined connection to the psychoanalytic warriors of the 1930s that he read about in Letter One, "...torn between fascism and Marxism, exile and death." He said that he felt that his "...American experience could not hold a candle to their hourly fears, and war zone traumas." However, after he let himself rest from Letter One for a day or two, he slowly remembered and described the following:

...the climate of the 1960's. The student shot and killed in an anti-war demonstration at Kent State, the student march on Washington DC to protest the war in Viet Nam, the extremities from the right (Birmingham police clubbing John Lewis), and the left (our little "Affinity groups" charged with meeting with groups from the Weathermen who had come to New Haven with the mission of blowing up buildings). I remember staying up all night on the streets outside the New Haven headquarters of the Black Panthers, our presence preventing a raid on their house.

If anyone ever thought that the social has no place in psychoanalysis in the United States, our letter writers reminded us, Jany and Paola, that all along, the social has been a crucial, though quieted part of the fabric of the minds of many psychoanalysts we have looked up to. These ideas about the social and community are hard to locate and sometimes nowhere to be found in our institutes. Yet when we invited people to write us a letter—that very personal act that letter writing can be—we experienced the opening of the social and community psychoanalysis faucet that had been almost closed, with a drip remaining that had been aching to burst. We hope to keep the faucet open, no matter how hard for some, no matter how painful it might feel to others. In fact, we, Jany and Paola, have come to believe that it is precisely because what we are living is so hard and so painful that psychoanalysis needs to continue to be decentered by everything that community and the social introduces.

Somehow, in our reading of the letters, the body came bursting through, in a way that reminded us of the way the fears and disappointments of the status quo often connected to concerns about planet Earth. Does engagement with the "body politic" involve (require) a reconnection to bodies: the bodies of the indigenous and enslaved people whose suffering haunts the streets we live on; the bodies of those who are killed in our communities through state-sponsored murder, intergenerationally transmitted violence, and society's neglect; the "body" of our Mother Earth; our own bodies?

One letter writer played in this way with our opening statement:

"We are writing to you to continue a conversation that was broken off a while ago—about psychoanalysis and its role in our fractured world [Paola and Jany]."

I am writing to you to continue a conversation that was broken off a moment ago—about psychoanalysis and its role in fracturing.

I am writing to psychoanalysis to converse—about mind broken off from body, and its role in continuing our fractured world.

Another letter writer that remarked on the body...

We work with our bodies and our hearts as much as with our heads. We treasure open-mindedness, curiosity, tolerance of differences in ourselves and our patients. We believe that this stance offers a sense of connection and hope in the midst of this harrowing fragmented reality we live in.

And another letter writer added...

A community feels like a warm hug, a safe village, a peaceful atmosphere where creativity soars. It is a place where all living beings are treated with respect, dignity, and dedication.

Connected to this embodied sense that we began to experience in reading the deeply personal letters you sent us was a sense of an ethics we were speaking to—an ethics of community and care, perhaps a “love ethic,” following bell hooks: “A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well.” (hooks, *All About Love*, p. 87) “There can be no love without justice.” (hooks, *All About Love*, p. 19) You seemed to be calling out for this kind of ethics. A letter writer noted:

Is it really sustainable for us each to work, play and love in our little bubble, without any thought given to how our work, play and love affect other people, animals and the planet? What is meant by love anyway? Love our husbands and wives and children only? Our friends? What about strangers, what about our enemies, what about the planet?

Another writer added:

If there is an intergenerational transmission of trauma, might there be an intergenerational transmission of ethics? Are we as analysts tugged inside by our encounter with states of pain or distress? Are we activated to bring forth from ourselves something to offer to the state of the other? Not as a virtue but as our embeddedness in community and interdependence? And why does this spirit go missing?

There seemed to be something in the action we were taking, of writing to each other, that embodied that kind of care that the letter writers tried to convey. The writer who spoke to us early on about confidentiality came to the realization that he felt better about sharing his thoughts with us after he had expressed these issues, and seemed to be showing us as he wrote, how community is created. He expressed:

And something else just occurs to me. I can imagine your task in receiving all these letters and then putting them together in a summary. From that imagining comes empathy and permission. And from that comes a trustworthy community.”

So, we share this summary with you as a trustworthy community of friends who are asking similar questions and searching for similar answers. And we close by sharing with you the advice that one of the letter writers shared with us:

1) Don't do it alone—find good colleagues who complement your own and each other's strengths. Be sure to pick some older and some younger than yourself.

2) You won't get it perfectly right, but like in a good analysis, you can learn from your mistakes.

3) “Psychoanalysis” and “Politics” are verbs, not nouns. Both involve continuous change.

4) *Recognize your inevitable limitations. The current crisis in Israel, Palestine, and Gaza is not going to be solved by psychoanalysts.*

5) *None of the principles or activities I've chronicled above protect you psychically and physically from the awfulness of events. There is no wisdom or ideology that shields you from confrontation with painful realities.*

6) *If you need a mantra or two, try the following:*

Eleanor Roosevelt, "Better to light a candle than curse the darkness."

And, a wonderful message in a poem by the now deceased Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, about absolute certainty:

*"From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves
Dig up the world,
Like a mole, a plow..."*

Notice how grass grows only in the cracks of the sidewalk!

With much love and care,

Jany & Paola

Collective of Letter Writers: Roberta Apfel, Deborah Choate, Nicholas Domaney, Ann Epstein, Marina Kasdaglis, Lynne Layton, Mary McCarthy, Diana Moga, Lizbeth Moses, Hattie Myers, Randy Paulsen, Stuart Pizer, Barbara Pizer, Stephanie Seldin, Bennett Simon, and Derick Vergne.

[1] To the idea of one rage we all sometimes tune into: When one of us (Jany) was working on an inpatient unit, an Iranian psychiatrist once said to her: "I have worked in many different countries, and the voices my patients heard always said the same things—what if they're the same voices and you and I are just not listening carefully enough?"

[2] Here, we are connecting Laplanche's (1999) ideas about the decentered self, born into a Copernican world where our center first develops in relation to an 'other,' like the Earth

circling the Sun. Still, later in life, we turn to the 'Ptolemaic' (the sun orbiting the Earth). Now, the ego develops an illusion of being the center, and with it come assumptions of self-sufficiency and individuality, all to buffer from the original stress of the other's enigmatic messages. And then again, through life experiences or analysis, we might regain the knowledge of our Copernican condition that we are, in the end, decentered subjects that depend on the enigmatic otherness of the unconscious and the world. The social and the cultural also reside in this constitutional enigmatic otherness that can remain strange or experienced with strangeness when it appears.