

Response to Letter One

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One morning in September 2023, while listening to NPR and sipping my first coffee, I hear reports about:

The Good Friday Agreement's anniversary and the continuing internecine battles in Ireland;

The United Auto Worker's Strike;

The struggle of Dalits in India to be seen and valued as full human beings;

The Republican candidates for president squabbling during their debate;

The impending shutdown of the US Government.

Each of these events and issues have or have had serious repercussions on the human beings involved. They are examples of the human tendency to create "others," to project onto another group the parts of the self that are unacceptable and unwanted or are examples of the way human beings try to dominate each other, to assert their "rightness," and to hold onto power. Or both.

I am from the working class. My father belonged to a union and frequently was on strike as I was growing up. It was my

mother's work in a bank that kept us afloat financially at times. I borrowed all the money to attend medical school, and for me, becoming an analyst had to wait till I was more financially free which was much later in my career. I felt the weight of my working-class upbringing especially in BPSI's former home on Commonwealth Ave, in the heart of one of the most expensive neighborhoods in Boston. Did I belong here? Could this be a home for ME? No one deliberately made me feel unwelcome, although I doubt that many gave any thought to my unique experience. I felt so out of place. This was not the water I grew up swimming in, to borrow a metaphor, and just being there stirred up earlier times when I *was* excluded, *was* rejected. My inner reality was intersecting with outer reality, and I had to struggle to make sense of these feelings, reluctant to speak them aloud.

This is one of my particular ways of feeling "other," and I have heard that some of our trainees feel this way coming to our current home, up on the hill, again in an elegant neighborhood. In the Rundbriefe, Fenichel and colleagues addressed class in their criticism of capitalism as a cause of suffering. It has me thinking of the way psychoanalysis can feel so out of reach for many aspirants financially. Freud acknowledged this himself in his paper, *On Beginning the Treatment*, when he wrote, "...regret that analytic therapy is almost inaccessible to poor people, both for external and internal reasons. Little can be done to remedy this."

(Standard Edition, pgs. 132-33) He then went on to posit that one of the “internal reasons” was the poor person’s attachment to the secondary gain of illness. Freud revealed here his own classist notions of the poor man and unwittingly established this perspective as our field’s “truth.” Himanshu Agrawal, M.D, an immigrant from India and a candidate at the Minneapolis Psychiatric Institute thinks that the cost of psychoanalytic education and training is the “elephant in the room” and is a threat to our profession. As a member of the APsA Council on the Economics of Psychoanalysis and chair of the subcommittee on the cost of training, he is concerned that our profession will go extinct if we do not address this issue.

(American Psychiatric Association's Psychiatric News, Volume 58, Number 10, October 2023, pgs). This is a challenge for us, given that we do have to make a living and we each have different demands on us financially like paying off student loans or financing college educations. But we can put our heads together and think creatively about how to make our field more accessible financially.

BPSI also aspires to be an anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-agist institution, a community that feels welcoming to all. We have set a big goal for ourselves, and our current political climate does not make this any easier to accomplish. Like in Europe in the 1930’s, the US has leaders who know how to manipulate us, tell us lies we want to believe because they make us feel better about ourselves usually by

pointing out our superiority to another group. Or these messages are intended to scare us, make us feel threatened by another group, ready to fight for our own survival at the cost of another's. This is what happened in large measure in Nazi Germany during Fenchel's time. Hitler tapped into the humiliation the German people felt after the First World War and told them they were the superior race. We are in a similar dangerous place right now in our country. A psychiatrist and sociologist, Jonathan Metzler, wrote the book *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland* in 2019. In that book, he details how again and again white people in the states of Missouri, Tennessee and Kansas voted against their own self-interests if it made them feel "better than" someone else, usually a Person of Color. They believed that certain politicians could make their lives great again so they did what they were exhorted to do: vote for less gun control leading to greater risks for suicide and death by gun violence *in their own communities* or against the Affordable Care Act leading to lowered life expectancy. These were all lower and middle-class Americans, again indicative of how class affects one's inner reality, increasing a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness in the world and the concomitant wish to flee those feelings.

We also face the dangerous dissociations that can occur within the human psyche when there is mass adulation of a leader combined with the threat of violence against independent

thought. Robert Jay Lifton's book, *The Nazi Doctors*, compellingly describes the psychic "doubling" that Nazi doctors developed to contend with massive contradictions: the inner commitment to heal and relieve suffering and the outer demand to kill. These doctors continued to think of themselves as good people. They were able to create a vertical split within the self, shifting into the killer mode when in a certain context. We are all capable of this kind of psychological splitting when faced with a perceived threat to our existence. Fenichel and colleagues were outraged by the IPA's lack of response to the German Psychoanalytic Association's desire to join the newly-formed German Society for Psychotherapy, led by Goring's nephew, and their embrace of *Mein Kampf* as a scientific tome. But here, the German Association was terrified "it would have no chance of survival outside of it," and found a way to rationalize this choice. We would be remiss if we thought that something similar was not happening here in the US. Large groups of white voters, joined alarmingly by Latinx voters, are convinced that their existence is threatened by migrants, Northeast intellectual elitists, LGBTQI persons, and feminists to name a few. As analysts, we understand better than most how this happens, and our challenge here is how we can help move things in a better direction.

We start with ourselves. BPSI has made one of its goals to become an inclusive culture. How are we going to accomplish that? The forces I describe above are all about distancing ourselves from one another and even from ourselves, to make

us feel threatened by each other, to see only the perceived differences and not the shared humanity within. Are we going to go along with this?

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? It is not an easy one. We each have to tolerate being vulnerable and more comfortable acknowledging our differences, talking to each other about them and getting to know each other as our authentic selves. We need to deal with our own feelings of shame or embarrassment when we find within ourselves a pocket of prejudice, a snarky thought, a racist trope because they are indeed within us. We need to trust that we have good intentions and that we may have different ways of learning, in fact, may need to have a variety of ways to learn available to us, to allow us to connect with ourselves and each other. We start “small,” we embrace change, and we trust the process.

