

A MANIFESTO FOR PSYCHOANALYTIC EDUCATION WITH SIXTEEN SUGGESTIONS:

Remarks upon receiving the award for Distinguished Psychoanalytic Educator,
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By David James Fisher, Ph.D.

I want to thank The International Forum for Psychoanalytic Education for selecting me for this honor. It is unexpected and surprising. I especially want to express my appreciation to Tina Griffin and Larry Green for being facilitators.

Teaching has always been an important part of my professional identity and sense of self. It is one of the vocations that I love, along with psychoanalysis, writing, reading, sports, music, art, movies, and assorted other activities. I have been teaching for 53 years since 1968, where I served as a teaching assistant in my senior year of college at the University of Wisconsin. Because of my opposition to the War in Viet Nam, I entered a masters degree program at New York University. Receiving the MA in Education in less than one year, I taught in an inner city intermediate school in South Brooklyn, predominantly instructing a Hispanic and black population. Pedagogy bored me; it seemed mostly irrelevant to the creative dynamic that existed between interesting teachers and interested students, a relationship that promoted an intermediate space of playfulness and curiosity, privileging questioning and learning.

I received a doctorate in European cultural and intellectual history in 1973, then returned to Paris, France to participate for two years in a post-doctoral seminar on the "Geography of Marxism," directed by Professor Georges Haupt. I returned to America in 1975 and began teaching at various universities courses in European cultural history, French history, and critical theory. I mostly taught upper level undergraduates and graduate students.

I was drawn to psychoanalysis for a variety of powerful emotional and intellectual reasons. When I first read Freud, I felt he was describing my family and my own dynamics. I found reading him endlessly exciting, evocative, and disturbing, disturbing precisely in the sense that I desired to emulate his honesty, his awareness of complexity, his capacity to illuminate personality issues, and to investigate the forbidden issues of sexuality and aggression. I was captivated by Freud's literary and theoretical brilliance, how he wrote with utter candor, understanding how unconscious process subjectively affected him and others. I was first exposed to psychoanalytic thinking in my courses with Professor George L. Mosse at the University of Wisconsin; he assigned classical texts by Freud and Jung, though he presented a critical and debunking view of them.

I was fortunate to work closely, as an undergraduate and graduate student, with Mosse and Harvey Goldberg, two charismatic and entertaining lecturers. As a young man, I mistakenly associated inspiring teaching with lecturing, theatrical verbal performance with high level learning. Following the thrust of Mosse and Goldberg's lectures, I learned about the history of the right and left, of social and mass movements and the role of ideology in history, with an explicit grasp of how this would help clarify current trends in our own society and political universe. This was invaluable. I longed for a subversive history that was oriented to understand and radically transform the contemporary world. I became fascinated by the intersection of politics and cultural life.

My dissertation was on Romain Rolland and his version of being a responsible, but committed intellectual in the period between the wars. Protest, dissent, opposition to the status quo, deep questioning of authority, contestation of established norms and values

became central to my project, as it was to Rolland and the circles of writers and artists clustered around him. I developed a style of thinking against the establishment, one of rebelliousness, of speaking out and questioning, especially on issues of social injustice and the unmasking of contradictions.

Demystification became my watchword. It is not surprising that when I taught seminars at a classically oriented psychoanalytic institute, I advocated for a contemporary point of view; and conversely, that I defended certain classical or traditional perspectives at the contemporary psychoanalytic institute where I taught. This neither made me popular, nor did it work to recruit disciples. I opposed discipleship, thinking of it as infantile and intellectually immature; I much preferred honesty and independence, particularly of the kind that opposed “political correctness” or the consensus viewpoint in a small or large group.

Prior to leaving for Paris as an advanced graduate student, I organized (with my dear friend Richard Levine) a graduate seminar at Wisconsin. We studied with a practicing psychoanalyst in order to read systemically the writings of Freud. At that time there was only one analyst in Madison, Joseph Kepecs, who had graduated from the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute. Joe was the first analyst I ever met; he was so different from Mosse and Goldberg. He was calm, laid back, undaunted by criticism, confident in his knowledge of Freudian and post-Freudian theory and, not least, clinically grounded. We read Freud chronologically from his early to late writings. Joe guided us through the intricacies of Freud’s metapsychological and clinical writings.

I was blown away by how Kepecs taught the seminar. Although we had assigned readings, he came in with a smile and would say casually, so what do you want to discuss today? I now

realize that the way I have been teaching analytic seminars at various institutes for 33 years is deeply indebted to Kepecs' tone and method. Opening the seminar up to dialogue, inviting associations, providing himself as a self-contained, reliable, and thoughtful presence, proved to be just as rigorous as more organized approaches to the texts and issues; plus, it was more fun.

We were so enthusiastic about learning about psychoanalysis with Kepecs that the seminar continued through the summer, where we studied seminal works by Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, R.D. Laing, Phillip Slater, and Franz Fanon. I was searching for an emancipatory form of psychoanalysis, something that ran against the prevailing norms of bourgeois respectability, middle class conformism, fostering thinking against the current. This was the tail end of the 1960's and we were still enmeshed in the disastrous War in Viet Nam. Psychoanalytic humanism promised liberation from many of the external and inner constraints, both social conventions and individual repressions, we struggled against.

While I was doing archival research in Paris on Romain Rolland in the Archives Romain Rolland on Boulevard du Montparnasse, I discovered some unpublished letters between Freud and Romain Rolland, a Nobel Prize winning novelist with a vast public resonance. Although the correspondence was substantive and serious, these letters were incredibly intimate. I wrote an essay on their relationship and debates, some of which were private, others which spilled over into published texts such as Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In writing this essay, I had the audacity (some would saychutzpah) to psychoanalyze Freud based on my interpretation of their friendship and disagreements. I published this piece at age 29 without an exposure to clinical perspectives and without ever having been a patient. Unsurprisingly, the issues I uncovered in my analysis of Freud became some of the key issues in my personal analysis with

Rudolf Ekstein that I undertook from 1979-1989 as part of my training at the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Institute and Society.

Freud and Rolland debated the origins and meaning of the “oceanic feeling,” a term Rolland coined to describe the emotions of unity or connection that he experienced in developing an idealist form of knowing about people, himself, and the world. I realized subsequently that I was drawn into psychoanalysis precisely because the oceanic feeling was an affect. As a young man acculturated into American political culture, I had disavowed affective experience in my life. In my training in European cultural history, feelings were bracketed out. We were taught to keep subjectivity and emotion out of the process of doing history. Psychoanalytic humanism became for me a project to confront my own vulnerabilities, blind spots, and gaps in my formal and familial education. That project continues to this day. Incidentally, the essay on Freud and Rolland helped me to be accepted into psychoanalytic training at L.A.P.S.I. and also introduced me to a sector of French psychoanalysis, when the piece was translated into French.

Here is a manifesto of sixteen suggestions for a radical method of psychoanalytic education, which may be helpful to my fellow teachers. It may also be pertinent for those of us who write. Think of them as proposals, provocations, food for thought, as catalytic agents:

- 1) Never be boring. Keep your audience in mind.
- 2) Respect the process in a seminar, be aware of the relationship between instructor and student, writer and reader, but don't fetishize process.
- 3) Substance and scholarship matter, bring them into the classroom without being pedantic or overly scholastic. Avoid monologues. Emphasize dialogue and be non-defensive about criticism.

4) Psychoanalytic education is not a user's guide, or how to manual, on how to do therapy. There is no one technique that encompasses the varieties of psychopathology that we experience in our clinical practice. We need a vast armamentarium of approaches, flexibility and elasticity in our attitude and methods. Good-enough clinical work presupposes the uniqueness and complexity of each patient, each transference-countertransference matrix, and consciousness of the specificity of each encounter in the analytic dyad.

5) Because content matters, beware of the dangers of intellectualizing, but never be anti-Intellectual.

6) Try to fuse process and content, keeping in mind the relational components of an educational milieu, factoring in your students' readiness to learn and your own resistances to teaching.

7) Never forget that psychoanalysis is a humanism in that it inherits, updates, and surpasses a fundamental respect for human suffering, a respect for the integrity and wonders of the personality, a reverence for the rich, beautiful, and often ineffable domain of the inner world. Permit yourself to be selectively irreverent.

8) Psychoanalysis needs to be aware historically and critically of the limits of rationality and humanism without embracing irrationality. We must rid from our method the antiquated and non-examined prejudices against thought implicated in the hegemonic web of colonialism, racism, classism, sexism, and the outright denigration of others who are different from us.

9) Remember that psychoanalysis was and continues to be a subversive method. Know the history of psychoanalysis, but try to modernize this subversiveness, making it compelling to a contemporary audience. Truly subversive methods mean resisting the temptations of

intellectual and clinical superiority, of behaving in dogmatic or parochial ways, and of closing one's mind to innovations which may disturb our complacency and critiques that unmask our privileges.

10) Theory needs to be reinvented. To study and transmit theory, we must understand its relationship to practice, to how our students experience theory in the here and now. The dialectic of theory and practice searches for better clinical outcomes, trying to explain clinical impasses and transform clinical failures. Theory removed from practice can become rigid, reified, even sacralized. Theory can be transformed into ideology; it can distort and misinform. Theory can help contain the teacher's and student's anxieties about not knowing and uncertainty. Let's recast what Charcot said to the young Freud in the middle 1880's: "Theory is good, but it does not prevent facts from existing." Or, translating it more poetically, "Theory is ok, but it does not prevent one from existing."

11) Psychoanalytic education encourages critical thinking and critical analysis, not discipleship or blind obedience to a mainstream norm. Avoid idealization and devaluation of our founders, or local gurus, recognizing that idealization is always infantile and that devaluation always resentful and hostile. Respect and contextualize our pioneers, treating them with empathy and understanding of why they made their choices.

12) Critical thinking turns on a balanced blend of suspicion and trust in what one reads in the literature, hears from our patients, and identifies with our own analysts, supervisors, and teachers. Keep in mind the transferences based on identification and counter-identification. Maintaining the tension of skepticism and trust will help to keep the discipline alive, promoting research, experimentation, and improvisation in our teaching (and our clinical practice).

13) Suspicion and trust must be a key component of our interpretations, including skepticism about the correctness or brilliance of our own point of view. This healthy suspicion works against definitiveness and arrogance. It is mindful of complexity, contradiction, and aspects of not knowing. Everything in psychic life is overdetermined. We need to be vigilant against reductionism, over-simplification, and cliched formulations. Learning opportunities in seminars are also multiply determined. Experienced instructors need to know, in the words of the Beatles, when to intervene and when just to let it be.

14) Critical thinking positions itself against slogans and facile assertions in our field, remembering the significance of play, paradox, and areas of incomprehension in the educational and clinical context.

15) Promoting critical thinking goes hand in hand with facilitating free association in our patients, students, and ourselves. Free associating in an ambiance where people gather to associate freely opens up pathways to generative, enlivened, and creative possibilities of learning.

16). We live in a world where cruelty, insensitivity, and unkindness appear ascendent, even triumphant. Within the context of a regression into barbarism, psychoanalytic education must retain its fundamentally caring, provisional, and nurturing dimension. This constitutes not only a personal but a political antidote to the political culture of right-wing authoritarianism and violent populism so prevalent in our body politic. We ought to also be vigilant to these tendencies among members of the left. In struggling against barbarism, psychoanalysis ought to resist its own tendencies toward aggressiveness, devaluation, and dismissal, including of our

own colleagues. An anti-authoritarian psychoanalysis is truly democratic without being contemptuous of others or itself.

I would like to thank IFPE for presenting me with this award as a Distinguished Psychoanalytic Educator. It is an organization with an expansive and inclusive viewpoint that organizes events which make participants feel safe, comfortable, valued, seen, and heard. It is similar in spirit to the University of California Interdisciplinary NCP Psychoanalytic Consortium, which I have been a member of for over thirty years. Both promote vigorous exchange, openness, experimentation, communication, and engaged dialogue. Both encourage innovative and improvisational presentations. We must enthusiastically endorse this approach. It can only do well for our field and our cause.

Recognition is of course better than misrecognition. Being honored is way better than being ignored. So, I receive this lovely honor in the spirit of gratitude and mutual appreciation. I do not feel that I have exhausted my conceptual ideas or that I do not have anything more to contribute as teacher and writer. Hopefully, the late works of Fisher will rejuvenate, reinvent, and extend the subversive intent of my previous educational ventures.

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