

Psychotherapy as a Response to Cultural Illiteracy¹

Michael P. Sipiora, Ph.D.
Pacifica Graduate Institute

I don't think psychotherapy can heal world, and I do not believe it is the optimum vehicle for initiating social change. But I make my living in the consulting room and related teaching in the classroom. Of course, it is something I do with care and concern for the people who request my services. However, what is most pressing today is the state of the world.

What I do think is that we, me and the people who come to see me, are in trouble; all of us are in trouble, our country, the whole planet. Call it neoliberalism, global consumer culture, late stage corporate capitalism, American Empire.... We live in a time of an unparalleled undermining of our democracy, economic oppression of a growing majority of the population, increasing discrimination and violence practiced against "others," and impending ecological catastrophe. A tyranny of spectacle, sensationalism, and celebrity has eroded our communal sensibilities in what social critics, such as Chris Hedges (2009) and Henry Giroux (2016), refer to as an insidious "cultural illiteracy." As Giroux observes: "Under such circumstances, there is little room for thinking critically and acting collectively in ways that are imaginative and courageous." Without these, without the collective exercise of imagination and courage, I fear the worst.

¹ Presented as part of the symposium "The Inescapable, Ever-Evolving Dynamic Of the Social and the Psychological," 2016 Convention of the American Psychological Association, Division 24, Denver, CO.

My hope is that the consulting room might offer “a little room” amidst our society’s rampant cultural illiteracy in which critical thinking and imaginative engagement might be fostered. The therapy room as a “cell of revolution,” as James Hillman called it (1992). But to do so we assuredly need more than a STEM discipline; we need a literate psychology.

A literate psychology, that is a psychology informed by the humanities, while necessarily conversant with natural scientific empirical approaches in the discipline, offers value informed perspectives that are of critical importance in confronting the illusions propagated by contemporary consumer society. As an antidote to spectacle, we need an appreciation of moral substance; to deliver ourselves from sensationalism, we need the capacity for reflection; and as an alternative to celebrity, we need to enhance citizenship. A literate psychology is directed toward these needs by offering fluency in qualitative narrative, critical thinking including cultural critique, value articulation, and historical perspective. These fluencies are brought to bear on the practice of psychotherapy first in terms of assisting clients in understanding and narrating their distress. Second in critically differentiating their lives in relation to what is disclosed in that distress, so that clients can respond with appropriate personal change and social involvement.

A literate psychotherapy begins in clients’ experience of themselves as relational beings. Therapy can help dispel—instead of perpetuate—client’s illusions of self-contained individualism and the tyranny of neurotic “should,” to use Karen Horney’s (1937) term, which permeate consumer culture and drive people into the consulting room. This means calling into question the “fables of acquiescence,”

identified by labor historian Stephen Fraser (2015), that keep us all in line. Propagated by contemporary neoliberal capitalism, these ideological conceits—“emancipation through consumption; freedom through the ‘free agency’ of work; and freedom through the heroism of risk”—are unconscious in the sense, as Hillman (1995) notes, of “what is least conscious because it is the most usual, most familiar, most everyday.” Insofar as we aspire to and act upon them, these fables reproduce the commoditization, commercialization, and monetization of everything from our loves to our labor, what we desire and what we work for. In this reflection and reproduction of value lies the repressive dynamic of a collective neoliberal ideology that keeps in place what Giroux (2016) aptly identifies as “the atomized neoliberal subject who is taught to believe in a form of possessive individualism that disdains matters of compassion, solidarity, and the type of sociality crucial to a democratic society. “

The sociality crucial to a democratic society, the compassion and solidarity that comes of a communal sensibility, is inherently conditional on citizens who experience themselves as relational beings. That is, as individuals whose identity, whose sense of who and what they are, resides in meaningful connection with others and engagement in the world. It is conditional as well on citizens critically evaluating their civic engagements and thoughtfully reflecting on their social connections within the context of life in community with its shared freedoms and responsibilities.

When the fables fail and the “disease of individualism” (Hillman, 2006), becomes symptomatic, that’s when people come into the consulting room. A literate

psychotherapy embraces the humanities as offering a poetic frame of mind, a historical point of view, a reflective perspective, and an imaginative backdrop for individuals to value and evaluate life in community. It offers a deeply human perspective in working with clients to see who they are in and through their worldly relatedness; owning what they care about and accepting their responsibilities, distinguishing those things that affect them from those that are about them; attending to and appraising their lives in terms of the values and concerns that grant them a sense of themselves that has a genuine depth beyond the functional and a vital significance beyond the egotistical.

I agree with Hillman (2006) that part of a successful therapy includes clients seeing some trail of necessity in their lives, some hint of beauty, and some sense of justice. And to do so requires imagination and courage. That is no small order in the face of the demagoguery that corrodes our politics, the inequities that dominate our economy, and oppression that plagues our society. But psychotherapy can offer at least a “little room” to develop the capacity to think critically about what sustains a human existence, a “little room” to cultivate the impulse to act collectively that underlies citizenship. Without these, without a sense of the common good, there is sore little beauty, scarce justice, and scant necessity in our lives.

References

- Fraser, S. (2015). *The age of acquiescence: The life and death of American resistance to organized wealth and power*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Giroux, H. (2016). Donald Trump and the Plague of Atomization in a Neoliberal Age.

http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/donald_trump_and_the_plague_of_atomization_in_a_neoliberal_age_20160810/

Hedges, C. (2009). *Empire of illusion: The end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle*. New York: Nation Books.

Hillman, J. (1995). *Kinds of power: A guide to its intelligent uses*. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Hillman, J. (2006). *City & soul*, Uniform Edition, Vol. 2. Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, Inc.

Hillman, J., Ventura, M. (1992). *We have had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world has gotten worse*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Horney, K. (1937). *The neurotic personality of our time*. New York: Norton.