

Why Bother?

A Psychoanalytic Graduation Speech

Wendy Jacobson

Why bother to pursue analytic training? After all, it is quite a demanding endeavor and has become a rather unfashionable one, at that. My hope in sharing my answer to this question is to consider the enormous value of our accumulated body of knowledge, along with certain challenges we face.

First, some caveats. In preparing these remarks, I searched online for guidance. One Web site said graduation speeches should reflect upon “the best practices... given the unique demands of a particular era,” addressing: “Issues of Concern,” “Paths of Action,” “Tools for Change,” and “Keys to the Good Life.” More about these aspects in a moment.



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misery in his twilight years. As a political animal, he never found balance between work, love, and play. While acknowledging his bitter end might have been influenced by guilt

over mistakes such as Vietnam, she tactfully painted a larger portrait of his psychological limitations and the price he paid for them despite manifest worldly success. She cautioned her graduates against falling into such traps.

And the fact that we have not come up with better ways to present ourselves might speak to how, as a field, we have gone from the ferment, excitement, and, indeed, hubris of our younger years to a relative paralysis, isolation, and—yes—success neurosis of our more mature ones.

Another site had the top 50 graduation speeches of our time...I must tell you, the sampling here was tremendous. Here's a line from Jon Stewart's at his alma mater. He explained, "I came to William and Mary because as a Jewish person I wanted to explore the rich tapestry of Judaica that is Southern Virginia."

Browsing through the top 50, I was struck by the plethora of psychological themes. For example, at Dartmouth, presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin described LBJ's

Wendy Jacobson, M.D., is training and supervising analyst at the Emory University Psychoanalytic Institute, where she gave an expanded version of this talk. She is clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Emory University School of Medicine.

I could go on with more examples, but let me get to my main point—my “Issue of Concern.” As psychoanalysts, we have something of incredible power to offer, but we have failed to convey in modern terms its potential to influence the larger world. Rather in recent times we have been on the ropes, on the defensive, the subject of considerable derision and parody—dismissed, co-opted, beleaguered, and collectively rather broke. Not surprisingly, in this atmosphere, we have been grappling with fears of extinction, a position which slowly may be turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This would be tragic.

As I say this, I am not naïve to psychoanalysis' huge influence. No question we had a good beginning. We all know about the heyday. But a little success can be a dangerous thing and, relatively speaking, we have had a little success.

In a sense, we have failed the brilliant beginning we were given despite rich and myriad developments in our field because we have not sufficiently conveyed what we have to offer. We have done beautifully in developing our (for want of a better word) “product” but failed rather miserably in selling it. This, I believe, is the challenge we face, not only for our own sake but for the sake of the world. It is a high stakes game.

Think about it. For the most part, with the exception of a narrow band comprising mostly our patients, if the lay public knows anything about us at all, it is probably that we make the unconscious conscious, or do dream analysis, or help recover childhood memories, or understand one's Oedipus complex.

Forgive me, but who cares if we make the unconscious conscious or explore how the past influences the present if we do not bring it to life and make it meaningful? If we do not help people see how it can be worthwhile, what pitfalls it may help them to avoid or opportunities to realize?

Unfortunately, these dated descriptions of what we do amount to rather anemic pabulum in present day terms. And the fact that we have not come up with better ways to present ourselves might speak to how, as a field, we have gone from the ferment, excitement, and, indeed, hubris of our younger years to a relative paralysis, isolation, and—yes—success neurosis of our more mature ones. We have failed to make ourselves sufficiently relevant in the broader culture.

PATH OF ACTION

Let us think for a moment about how to describe our work, the patterns we study and elucidate. This, I suppose, is my “Path of Action,” to define in modern terms what we actually do and have to offer.

Ours is an exceedingly broad synthetic and integrative discipline. We do so much more than making the unconscious conscious or understanding dreams, slips, and how the past influences the present. Of course, these are some of the hallmark things we do, but, by themselves, these descriptors can seem frankly silly, useless, or irrelevant if not put in a fuller context.

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Take, for example, the troubled character patterns that are our daily bread and butter: the castrating hysteric, the covertly stubborn defiant obsessional, the orally hungry needy tormenting borderline, the self-defeating masochist, the disavowed or not so disavowed sadistic narcissist. These and a few others, with lots of interesting permutations and combinations, are the categories of people that make up the world. *This* is what we make conscious—the patterns that disable and limit people—the ones that give ulcers either to the individuals themselves or to recipients in their orbit.

We understand these patterns and with painstaking effort help the afflicted come to understand them in themselves and others. We help them respond strategically instead of reacting impulsively or holding back endlessly. We help people separate the wheat from the

not excessively, and rejoice to the utmost when warranted. We help people grow, change, integrate, modulate, decrease self-absorption, regard themselves accurately, take themselves seriously but not too seriously, free up emotional energy in the service of creativity and mastery—in short, become their best selves.

The reverberations go well beyond the individual, fostering richer and fuller family life, as well as functional and productive organizations, all with enormous ripple effect. Our work can help break the kinds of destructive cycles which, if left untreated, keep echoing through the generations.

Ideally we do our work in a context specific way, knowing why, in any given instance, we are being interpretive, confronting, gratifying, or the like. Hopefully we make these choices skillfully, having a rationale rather than arbitrarily adhering to a set of rules. This, along with the rest, constitutes the artful complexity of what we do.

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chaff, see the forest through the trees, find the leading edge, sort through competing priorities, and make rightful claims and necessary renunciations. We help them develop an ethical flexibility of mind and attitude, knowing when to be a stickler and when to give a wink and a nod, when to finesse a situation and when to play strictly by the rules, when to speak up and when to suck it up. We help people navigate power dynamics, make adaptive distinctions and discriminations, and pick their battles. A psychoanalytic “read” can “pull” for good outcomes and help avoid blunders or traps. We help tame our baser instincts and harness optimal aggression, assertion, competition, intimacy, and sexuality instead of ending up mired in destructive, cut-throat aggression, impotent rage, or dehumanizing sexuality. We help people be patient or impatient as circumstances dictate, suffer appropriately but

DOCTORS OF COMPLEXITY

In essence, then, we are doctors of the complexity of the mind. We contextualize, narrate, synthesize, and integrate. We “complexify,” then we simplify, boiling psychological matters down to their essence. We are doctors of the complexity of context specificity within the framework of broad psychoanalytic knowledge, including knowledge of the life cycle, human development, conflict, and compromise.

And it may just be that this very complexity is our major obstacle, not the inevitable resistances to the subversive and painful aspects of our work. Indeed, people desperately want and need the help we have to offer to escape their psychological traps and prisons. Let me return for a moment to those top graduation speeches mentioned earlier. On the subject of complexity, Bill

Gates spoke at Harvard about the challenges his foundation faces in tackling world poverty and its scourges. He remarked, “The barrier to change is not too little caring; it is too much complexity.”

Conveying the complexity of our endeavor in accessible ways may just represent our greatest challenge. We have a system of elegance and power, but can we find ways to break it down into meaningful and manageable pieces, and bring its value to life in new and exciting ways? We have the tools, the “Tools for Change.” The challenge is how to extend our reach. It is not implausible to say that much of the failure in the world is a failure of psychology, a failure to make our principles relevant and achievable as tools of enlightened self-interest.

By now some of you are probably thinking how this sounds like some foolish utopian dream. But indulge me a bit further. Think about the cumulative effect in psychological terms of “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” No matter what the starting point, small shifts can make a big difference.

Are there disappointments and inadequacies in our psychoanalytic knowledge? Sure. I am not suggesting we promise more than we can deliver. Obviously we cannot prevent all misery or catastrophe. We all know there are malignant carcinomas in our field as in any other, and how civilization sows the seeds for its discontents.

But, at its best, contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice may well be the best we’ve got for much of what ails us. Too many people need it, or some aspect of it, often in piecemeal or indirect ways. Thus far I believe we have failed to find the power of persuasion and imagination needed to make the utility and sophistication of what we do more widely understood and appreciated. In this sense, we have failed Freud’s legacy and the collective power of persuasion and provocative imagination of other greats in our field. But if we can meet the challenge of conveying broadly the value and integrity of what we have to offer, it might just provide “Keys to the Good Life.”

So, let us celebrate our glorious field and this fine rite of passage for our graduates...and ask again, “Why bother?” For me, at least, the answer is, to have a life worth living. 