

Psychoanalysis, Dance and Paradigm Deadlock

Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, Ph.D., California, USA

I'd like to start by suggesting that as Network members, we share an exceedingly interesting problem. The fact that we share it is very old news, so that's not what I'm discussing here. But the fact that it's interesting - that may be slightly less old news, so I hope to convey to you just how very interesting I myself find our collective problem to be. Given our not inconsiderable summed capacity for curiosity, it's my guess that if we manage conjointly to find new interest in a problem, we'll shortly be racing down some interesting new paths to possible solutions.

So: the problem. It's a problem about why the sorts of ideas which run freely and energetically around channels like the Network tend to hit a dead stop when they encounter the minds of many of our more mainstream scientist friends. Certainly - that's old news. My guess is you're all as tired of arguments with those same friends as I am. The arguments are: first, boring; second, unlikely to convince anyone of anything; and third, they have a peculiarly draining quality which leads me to feel with Bartelby the Scrivener that, invited to engage, I Prefer Not.

So much for the old news. Now for what may be interesting. To get to that, I need to back up and tell you I'm a psychoanalyst. Worse, let me admit to being an old-fashioned, Freudian-trained psychoanalyst who hasn't seen fit to recant. I haven't recanted because, once the mountains of chaff have been lifted from what's accumulated as the body of psychoanalytic knowledge, there remain a few key truths which function - I find - as remarkably powerful tools for understanding a number of things about people. Especially relevant for us and our collective problem: *psychoanalytic thinking nourishes an ineluctable fascination with why people resist things in ways directly counter to their own interests*. People resist all kinds of things as if their lives depended on it - ideas, feelings, and experiences. But the irony is this. It's often precisely the things they most vigorously resist which stand a chance at turning them into happier people. It's the patent self-destructiveness of the resistance which is so impressive.

Analysts see this daily and repeatedly, patient by patient and hour by hour. We see it in brilliantly creative artists who resist putting brush to canvas, in deeply loving husbands who resist telling wives they love them, in natural leaders who resist the lead by playing perpetual second fiddle. At our best, psychoanalysts are out to help people become as fascinated by what on earth they're doing as analysts themselves are. In fact, I would say that's one way of describing a psychoanalyst's job. We try to harness our own fascination in the service of stimulating a parallel fascination in the people we're trying to help. Particularly, we try to nourish fascination with all the ways people manage to resist things, including things that might turn their lives into happier lives.

Here's why nourishing that fascination proves useful. When people start to be fascinated by something, they tend to entertain all kinds of questions about it. And when new questions are out and on the table, they stimulate new ways of thinking. Often those new ways of thinking significantly re-cast treasured convictions and long-held positions in life. Old solutions to life may suddenly show up as outmoded or rooted in illusion or grounded in pathogenic fantasies which people are ready to abandon. When that happens, people have a shot - quite literally - at re-inventing themselves.

Now the interesting thing for our purposes is not just that psychoanalysis aims for that. Most people - certainly most of our skeptical scientist friends - have no interest in submitting themselves to a psychoanalytic couch. And unless they're struggling with much more than the skepticism to which they've been thoroughly educated, the couch is probably not where they belong. On the other hand, what I do think may be relevant for our purposes is the fact that one of the things psychoanalysis has done best is to develop a clinical theory about how people actually get to the point of being able to re-invent themselves - especially in relation to things they've spent their lives resisting. Clinical psychoanalytic theory has some very specific things to say about that. Argument doesn't work, nor does persuasion, nor does wishing the resistance would go away, nor does pretending it isn't there. What works is respect for the resistance. What works is a certain kind of dance with it. For me the clinical theory that matters is the clinical theory that describes that dance and how to do it.

Now there are a number of things about a dance - a *good* dance. One is, it's fun. The more intricate, the more fun - if, that is, you've caught on to the step as well as to your partner. But you do have to catch on to both. In addition, it's rarely useful to hate either the step or your partner. Nor to be bored by them. Nor view them with contempt. Those things distract from the fun. More important, they distract from giving yourself over to heartfelt mutual engagement with the other. And when that's missing, you end up a dull couple. Neither of you delights in the surprising places to which you take the other, nor in the even more surprising places from which you manage to rescue the other.

I think there are some useful principles here that might inform us as we think about how we might approach our collective problem.

Professor Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, Ph.D. is an Associate Clinical Professor in the Psychology Department, University of California at Berkeley, and in the Psychiatry Department at the University of California Medical Center, San Francisco.

See enclosed details of Lisby Mayer's seminar in London on 10th July