

Since we are possibly about to go to war, I thought I would start with the prophet of total war, General William Tecumseh Sherman. Sherman hated politicians, war profiteers and sentimentalists, but above all he hated journalists. He thought they were pests, worse than spies, and had the impudence of the devil. He was the only general in the Union Army who took an 1867 military order seriously. This order made a reporter subject to the death penalty if he reported something that a court martial board determined would give advantage to the enemy. On at least three occasions he threatened to hang journalists; he actually court-martialed one, and he banished numerous journalists from his army.

He ultimately despaired of ever winning this battle. He became convinced, as he said, that even if he could kill all reporters, there would still be news from hell before breakfast the next day.

In our business we would say that General Sherman had a negative transference to journalists. It is a great compliment to journalists that they managed to maintain their technical neutrality even in the face of the General's negative transference and kept reporting daily events from the underworld. There are parallels here with the tasks of psychoanalytic clinicians. We also attempt to stay in a position of technical neutrality and report daily on the events of the underworld, meaning the unconscious.

Let us start with a definition of psychoanalysis: *A psychological theory of human development and behavior, a method of research, and a system of psychotherapy originated by Sigmund Freud, in which emotions and behavior are traced to the influence of repressed instinctual drives and defences against them in the unconscious. Psychoanalytic treatment seeks to eliminate or diminish the undesirable effects of unconscious conflicts by making the patient aware of their existence, origin, and inappropriate expression in current emotions and behavior.*

Psychoanalysis can also be called a theory of unconscious mental life; a theory of human development; and an explanation for the way the mind is structured and functions. Let us move to the psychoanalytic process. The analyst asks the patient to suspend his usual method of communicating, to report his thoughts and feelings as they occur to him, without the usual organizing and editing. The only criteria for relevance is that the person thought it, felt it, and put it into words for the analyst or therapist.

What does the analyst or therapist do? Basically four things:

1. *Consistent adherence to a position of technical neutrality.*
2. *Consistent use of clarification, confrontation, and interpretation as the tools of the therapist.*
3. *Facilitation of the development of a full-fledged transference.*
4. *Resolution of the transference solely by interpretation.*

Technical Neutrality

Technical neutrality is a position of equidistance from the emotional forces in conflict in the patient. Neutrality does not signify indifference. It expresses a concerned, objective, evenhanded interest without a personal investment in any one aspect of the individual's behavior or interactions.

How this translates into practice is that if a patient comes to you and says he is having trouble communicating with his wife, you do not offer him couples therapy. If he asks for advice, you do not give it. For example, I had a patient who was shoplifting. I did not behave like the law or his superego and say, don't do that. I stay essentially involved but not actually enmeshed in the conflict. I try to understand why he shoplifted, what purpose it serves in his life. As it turned out, this was an attempt to get me angry and to make me punish him. It seems to me that an understanding of the position of technical neutrality would be helpful to journalists.

I believe that the issue of technical neutrality is basically the issue that Janet Malcolm wrote about in a book that was very controversial among journalists.¹ For those not familiar with it, she examined the Joe McGinniss-Jeff McDonald trial. McGinniss wrote the book *Fatal Vision* about Jeffrey McDonald, the Green Beret physician who was convicted of murdering his pregnant wife and two children. McDonald hired McGinniss to write his story. McGinniss claimed that he initially believed in McDonald's innocence, but very quickly became convinced of McDonald's guilt. In spite of this change of heart he continued to work with McDonald, saying that he was on his side and believed in his innocence, right up until the publication of the book. After publication of the book, McDonald sued McGinniss. A very interesting trial ensued that centered around the issue of the purported right of journalists to lie to their subjects. The trial saw the testimony of such writers as William Buckley and Joseph Wambaugh in support of McGinniss.

The real issue was not McGinniss lying to McDonald. The real issue was that McGinniss had lost his position of technical neutrality. Part of his contract with McDonald allowed his involvement with the defense team before trial. He sat in on pre-trial conferences, he lived in McDonald's apartment, and he was present during privileged lawyer-client conversations; in short, he got involved in the conflict. He lost his position of technical neutrality, and that is how he got into a situation where the only thing that could rescue him was to lie.

In studying this, Janet Malcolm came to these conclusions:

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. The journalist must do his work in a kind of deliberately induced state of moral anarchy. (p.3)

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