

EXORCISING THE DEMONS

About a decade ago, the late Ethel Person and I sat down for a cup of coffee and discussed why we wrote. Ethel noted that she wrote to figure out what she thought. To me, this perspective rang true, but incomplete. I think we also write to find out what *others* think. Writing a publishable psychoanalytic paper requires one to read and study before writing. After perusing the literature, one hopes to arrive at some form of mastery over a particular aspect of human experience. While this approach certainly makes sense, I have come to the disappointing conclusion that the mastery one seeks is partial at best. Much of analytic data arrives in fragments from a session here and a session there. Writing brings some degree of coherence to the fragments. However, some of the most penetrating insights lead to further uncertainty. Hence the quest for mastery may be one reason I write, but it is an aspiration for mastery that often lies just beyond my reach.

Another motivation for my long interest in writing is related to the wish to be known and heard. Analysts spend much of their day in a state of reserve, biting their tongues, eschewing chattiness, and avoiding premature conclusions. Such restraint is mitigated to some extent through the act of writing, where one can elaborate on the complexities of psychoanalytic thinking and can express one's views more fully. Like many of my colleagues, I have a need to draw conclusions about human experience, and to share them with others in an effort to understand the staggering complexity of unconscious motivation and the painful truths connected to the self-defeating trends within all of us.

Warren Poland (one of my favorite psychoanalytic writers) launched this new feature on the motivations for writing—Why I Write—in the last issue of *JAPA*. In his wonderful contribution (Poland 2019), he emphasized the pleasure one derives from writing. I can relate to this pleasure of creation, but my emphasis here is on the darker forces at work when I write.

Former Editor, *JAPA Review of Books*.

Psychoanalysts endorse the notion of multiple determinants, many of which remain in hiding from us. Over time I have recognized the extent to which I am *driven* to write. I have become familiar with the internal demons that haunt me and to some extent take me over when I write. In contrast to Poland perhaps, if I were asked about the enjoyment of writing, I would need to respond in the spirit of Goethe, who was once asked what brought him happiness in his venerable old age. He responded that he really wasn't sure since he had experienced only about six weeks of happiness in his entire life. As I sit at my computer in the solitude of my study and try to compose a reasonable passage, I often find myself tormented by an imaginary audience of critical readers. What if my colleagues find what I have written to be boring drivel and decide to turn the page to the next article in the journal they are reading? What if readers detect the narcissistic motive of the analytic writer—to be seen, heard, and known as he or she labors in the obscurity of the consulting room? Daniel Menaker (2019), former editor-in-chief at Random House, wrote that one motive of all writers is to gain for themselves some admiration and attention from strangers, whom he describes as “anonymous stand-ins who we think in one way or another failed to adequately recognize our specialness” (p. 14).

I suspect that a major reason I write emerges from an unconscious or partially conscious desire to exorcise these demons that haunt me. A host of critics dance in my head in the cold darkness of the sleepless nights that writers endure as they struggle to articulate their views. The voices of derision and contempt are almost audible and difficult to ignore, eroding in part whatever confidence I may muster about what I have to say. Susan Sontag (2001) once noted that what one accumulates as a writer are mostly anxieties and uncertainties. Harry Stack Sullivan (1953, pp. 238–240) was candid about his struggles with critical internal objects when he tried to put pen to paper. An imaginary “reader” was always “supervising” and scoffing at what he had written. This internal demon rendered him unable to publish his ideas. He frankly acknowledged that this critical internal observer was the reason he wrote almost nothing in his brilliant career. It is well-known that his co-authored works were largely written by the colleagues he had mentored, since the anxiety about how his writing would be received by readers was intense. Indeed, as I write this piece, I worry that the very colleagues who invited me to share my thoughts about why I write may find my contribution altogether lacking and reject it.

Analytic writers today are also haunted by the problem of using clinical material. Most of us dread that a patient will one day discover that he or she is the subject of an analytic paper and feel deeply betrayed or

justifiably furious. While there were once reasonable strategies designed to protect the patient's anonymity (Gabbard 2000), our digital age has produced an extraordinary access to analytic writing that gives pause to even the most stout-hearted among us who would like to use disguised clinical material.

We must acknowledge that there is no safe harbor for an analytic writer. Nor is there an escape route from the conflict inherent in writing. Joyce Carol Oates (2001) once noted that "to write is to invite angry censure from those who don't write, or who don't write in quite the way you do, for whom you may seem a threat" (p. 169). The act of putting one's ideas in play creates a chorus of detractors in the dark recesses of the author's psyche. Indeed, as I write this potential contribution to the literature, I am recalling my experience of writing my first published psychoanalytic paper forty years ago, in which my opening lines clearly depicted my dread of the reader's response. It was a paper on stage fright in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. The paper began with a Beatles lyric: "What would you think if I sang out of tune? Would you stand up and walk out on me?"

Henrik Ibsen may have summed it up best when he noted that to write is to sit in judgment of oneself.

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4306 Yoakum Boulevard, Suite 535
Houston, TX 77006
E-mail: glen.gabbard@gmail.com