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Reflections on James S. Grotstein: An Intense Beam of Light

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
— T.S Eliot: Four Quartets

With the passing of Dr. James S. Grotstein, we have lost a remarkable man who not only had deep personal links to the history of psychoanalysis, but who also occupied a position at the pinnacle of contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice. I am honored to have the opportunity to share some personal memories of my relationship with him.

For me Jim was a teacher, supervisor, mentor, and a ‘Mensch’ of unsurpassed caliber whom I first met in 1993 at PINC. Entering my initial training in the early 1980’s, the San Francisco analytic landscape was narrowly grounded in American ego psychology and the British were yet to sail up over the horizon. However, by the time I joined PINC’s 2nd cohort in 1992, our curriculum reflected that they had indeed arrived. As part of our visiting faculty, Jim was heir to the richer tradition in Los Angeles having himself been a key figure in bringing Kleinians to the ‘Wild West’ in the early 1960’s and being in a transformative personal analysis with Bion.

Jim's analytic sensibility was panoramic in scope, profound in depth, and inspiringly creative in vision. I had never encountered anyone who could so compellingly integrate Freud, Klein, Lacan, Fairbairn, Winnicott, and Bion, as well as approach them from the philosophical, existential, and spiritual vertices. He could move seamlessly from discussing the most primitive states to the most transcendent states, gracefully interweaving both the scientific and the poetic registers. His ability to do so with humility, humor, and heart was deeply inspirational to me. In 1998, I realized that Jim would be the ideal discussant for my PINC graduation paper, and I was thrilled when he graciously agreed. His participation made that occasion an important personal milestone, and his steady support was tremendously helpful in refining the paper for publication (Rather, 2001).

From 2002 to 2006, Jim led a monthly Bion study group that met in my home. In this relaxed and intimate setting, Jim radiated a contagious enthusiasm as he brought clarity to the mysterious, and mystery to the obvious. He created a synergistic reciprocal space in which his passionate thinking primed ours, and ours his. I was very honored during this period when he asked if I'd be willing to write detailed feedback on several manuscripts including A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis (2007), a masterpiece of psychoanalytic synthesis and originality. Quite characteristic of his openness and generosity, in the book's foreword he not only acknowledged my contribution, but also thanked the members of our study group by name for teaching him about Bion!

Jim was a master clinician with an extraordinary mind and a huge heart, but space allows mention of only a few things I learned from him. The first is to set external reality aside while listening to the analysand's associations as a 'dream' narrative *always* striving for communication and containment. The second is not only to try to set aside memory and desire to make room for right-brain reverie and intuition, but also simultaneously to listen with left-brain processing actively generating psychoanalytic hypotheses every step of the way. The third, and for me most important, is to set aside reductionist ideas of "mental health" and "pathology" regardless of how aggressive, resistant, perverse, or destructive the patient might seem to be. Jim was fond of saying that the patient is always 'right' and that the analyst's task is to discover the anxious psychic reality in which this is true. Jim was 100% on the patient's side always reminding us that our actual patient is the "once-and-forever infant" struggling to accept being weaned from the paradise of lost entitlements (Grotstein, 1990). An example of this occurred in 2006 when I presented a case while on a panel with Jim and Mark Solms, the neuro-psychoanalyst, and editor for the revised Standard Edition to be later published in 2024. The patient, a woman in four-times-a-week analysis, was profoundly addicted, resulting in serious health problems and near brushes with death on several occasions. Because she had been in so many failed recovery therapies and programs over the years, I had decided not to oppose her drug use in any way, but only to try to explore its unconscious benefits. There was a degree of alarm and concern in the audience over this approach, but Jim came fully to the support of my patient and my work. He argued that the patient was not motivated by self-destruction but was actually doing the best she could. Her addiction from his position was an infantile 'cure', and what needed to be

discovered in analysis was the infantile ‘illness’. In this case, such an approach worked beautifully and many years later the patient is still clean and thriving.

I will also remember Jim’s use of humor to leaven his clinical work and teaching. In the midst of great seriousness and reverence for our work came sparks of effervescent irreverence. For example, in comparing Bion’s theory of thinking with Descartes’ dictum ‘cogito ergo sum’, Jim often quipped that the French philosopher had ‘put Descartes before the horse’. Our study group eventually ended when travel became too burdensome for Jim, but we were fortunate to meet for a reunion in 2010. This was something of a bittersweet occasion as Jim was slowing down with age and had serious health issues. Still, his mind was razor sharp, and his sense of humor continued to hint at the depths of what he was teaching. On that last Saturday morning, as on so many others when Jim had bounced up the stairs, I was impressed by his enthusiasm even though he had arisen in the wee hours to travel from LA. Given that he always emphasized that we do our best thinking in dream-work alpha, we exchanged what had become something of a ritual greeting:

“Jim, you were up before sunrise, can I get you some coffee?”

“No thanks, Lee, it just keeps me awake!”

This was to be the last time I would see Jim in person and the last time these words would open another wonderful encounter. I will always wish to hear them again, but I want to express gratitude for having known this ‘man of achievement’ who did ‘dare to disturb the universe’ in such a loving way. He was one of a kind and will live on in my mind as the intense beam of light that he was and will always be.

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