RESCUING Socrates

How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation

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CHAPTER 3

Making Peace with the Unconscious: Freud

Along with Socrates, who admonished Athenians to live examined lives, and Augustine, who turned his attention to himself to discover the ultimate truths of Christianity, Sigmund Freud's primary concern was with self-knowledge. Twenty-five hundred years after Plato, and fifteen hundred years after Augustine, he pursued his investigation using the intellectual tools of modern science and framed his theories within the medical discourse of his day. He left behind a mixed and contested legacy. But in the pantheon of thinkers, ancient and modern, who have shaped our understanding of the human mind, Freud holds his own. For me and many of my students, his ideas and provocations have led to far-reaching insights and personal transformations.

I'm not sure if I had heard of Freud before college. My first clear memory of his name comes from the six-week academic boot camp required by the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), through which I had been admitted to Columbia. That was in July 1991. Along with literature, writing, and math, the HEOP summer curriculum included a course in
psychology taught by Dr. Jama Adams, who was also a practicing psychologist. I had never laid eyes on a psychologist in real life, and the idea that Dr. Adams could have special insight into the mind—and that people revealed to him their intimate lives—made him an object of fascination.

My idea of a psychologist came, primarily, from an immensely popular call-in radio show called *El psiquiatra en su hogar* ("The Psychiatrist in Your Home") that played in the Dominican Republic in the mid-1980s. Dr. Máximo Beras Goico (el psiquiatra) offered flash consultations on the air. Armed with rational and scientific common sense, he fielded all kinds of questions from all kinds of people. It was a national education hour. He took on old wives' tales, folk traditions, superstition, and plain prejudice. He was combative, funny, penetrating, and the most learned person I had ever heard speak. He never mentioned Freud or the unconscious, but it was common for people to call in about one thing, and, lo, their real problem would turn out to be something entirely different, something they didn't realize or hadn't wanted to talk about but which the astute doctor was able to draw out. Those were the best calls. It seemed to me that sometimes he could hear things that rest of us, including the person speaking, did not realize were being said. And this special skill, this secret power that was not magic or religion, had struck me as an amazing thing.

In this way, I was prepared—or unprepared—for Freud.

In the HEO program, teaching my cohort of Columbia students-to-be, Dr. Adams would sometimes talk about his own clinical practice. The thick psychology textbook he assigned for the class made for engrossing reading. His lectures were my first big thrill of college. Early in the class, perhaps on the first day, he introduced Freud by saying something that took firm hold
of my mind: “The reasons we give ourselves for doing the things that we do are never the real reasons.”

At eighteen, I knew that my motives for doing the things I did, or for believing the things I believed, or for wanting the things I wanted, had a way of shifting from under me. Sometimes new and unsuspected reasons would come into view, like the silhouette of objects emerging from darkness at daybreak. They had been there all along, in front of me, but shrouded in unconsciousness. When I had thought I was being strictly scrupulous and reasonable, I might later come to realize that I was being hostile and vindictive. When I had thought that I was really, honestly indifferent, I might later discover that I was, in fact, inwardly crushed. Those vague intuitions had now found distinct expression: “The reasons we give ourselves for doing the things that we do are never the real reasons.”

In lecture eighteen of his 1917 *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud identified three “major blows” delivered by science to humanity’s “naive self-love.” The first blow was the discovery that the earth was not at the center of the universe. Instead, our planet, like the others, circled the sun from a location that had no obvious significance. The unsettling realization that the universe did not feature the earth as its focal point changed nothing about how people went about their everyday lives, but it also changed everything. This understanding is so common today that it takes effort to imagine just how disturbing the revelation would have been to people accustomed to thinking of themselves as God’s special concern. It was not well-received by religious authorities.
The second blow delivered by science doubled down on the notion that humans were not as special as they thought. By the mid-nineteenth century, a vast array of evidence had been collected pointing to the fact that human beings emerged, like other species, through a process of gradual evolution by natural selection. We came about in fits and starts, guided by nothing but the need to survive an unforgiving “struggle for existence,” as Charles Darwin called the third chapter of his monumental “long argument,” *The Origin of Species*. What Darwin demonstrated in 1859—even as three-year-old Sigmund Schlomo Freud, over in Moravia, grappled with the Oedipal complexities of his nuclear family—was not, as is popularly believed, that humans descended from apes but, far more disconcertingly, that humans *are* apes.

We associate the first of Freud’s “blows” with Nicolaus Copernicus and the observations of Galileo Galilei at the turn of the seventeenth century. The second blow we associate with Darwin. The third blow was delivered by Freud himself. It concerns the psychoanalytic “discovery” of the unconscious or, more precisely, the idea that who and what we are is primarily determined by unconscious mental processes. Freud, who has never been accused of excessive modesty or understatement, considered this the “most wounding blow” of the three, coming to “disturb the peace of this world” and the “megalomania” of our species.

According to Freud, not only are we not at the center of the universe, and not only are we not biologically special, but we are not even masters of our own minds. We are not transparent to ourselves. We do not command our thoughts, our desires, the psychic forces that shape us; they come to us from a place we do not know. The conscious self operates on the illusion of self-transparency, of self-command, of being what it is by virtue of
its awareness of itself. But alas, Freud tells us, the whole apparatus is an illusion, an elaborate mechanism of self-deception.

When introducing Freud to students, I like to point out that the lack of self-determination in our conscious mind is evident in everyday experience. Whenever the mind is not occupied with some external stimulus like reading, conversation, or a screen, it will wander; it will not stay in place or remain blank. Like nature, the mind abhors a vacuum. As you walk or drive from, say, your home to the grocery store, thoughts will come in a continuous stream, with no gaps in between them. The vast majority of them you will hardly notice, though you can make a point of observing your thoughts, practicing the watchful attentiveness that’s often called “mindfulness.” But even for experienced practitioners of mindfulness meditation, it’s almost impossible to sustain this watchfulness for long; you will soon be “lost” in thought, riding a train whose origin, destination, and conductor you do not know. Your mind will be generating memories, plans, intentions, fantasies—verbal and nonverbal—each sliding into the other seamlessly, following some enigmatic logic of association. When this experience becomes pronounced, we aptly call it daydreaming because of its similarity to the mental events we remember having experienced while asleep.

In Freud’s understanding, the mind is driven, and the conscious “I” is not the driver. Our self-command, which tends to feel absolute, is, in fact, always profoundly compromised because the controlling forces in our mind are inaccessible to us. The mythical image of the centaur captures our situation: a human head and torso emerging from the body of a wild horse. The human part, our conscious self, has the power of speech and reason, but the horse on which it sits is a wild beast, the bringer, as in the ancient myths, of chaos, mayhem, and
unbridled lust. They are not two, but one. The beast cannot
know itself except by means of its rational protrusion, which is
not beast anymore, but a self-conscious agent. However, this
agent believes itself to be an autonomous actor and knows
nothing of the beast from which it draws its vitality and where
all of its life functions are organized.

The conscious sense of self, the “ego,” is the proverbial tip of
the iceberg: the tiny outcrop of an immense mass of uncon-
scious mental processes that constitutes who and what we are.¹

According to Freud, unconscious material breaks through
into the open on a regular basis, but always disguised and un-
recognizable to the conscious mind for what it really is. These
occurrences disrupt our normal mental operations and com-
monly manifest as “errors,” or, in the stilted translation of the
authorized standard edition of Freud’s works, “parapraxes.”
These are the mundane mistakes and foibles that punctuate our
everyday lives: slips of the tongue, hearing something other
than what was said, forgetting a name or a word, misplacing an
object, dialing the wrong number, hitting “reply all” when you
only mean to respond to the sender.

Freud argued that these “errors” are neither random nor
meaningless, as is readily admitted at least in some cases. A fa-
vorite example of Freud’s was when the President of the Lower
House of the Austrian Parliament, at the opening of a particu-
larly contentious session, brought down the gavel and declared
that the session was officially closed. What’s funny about this

¹. Freud identified the conscious sense of self with the German first-person pro-
noun, Ich. In the authorized English translation, instead of the English equivalent “I,”
Freud approved of the Latin translation “ego,” reaching, as he always was, for sci-
entific exactitude. Hence, his famous structural model comes to us in English as divid-
ing the mind into ego, id, and superego, rather than the straightforward English
translations of the German terms: “I,” “it,” and “super-I.”
slip is precisely that it is not meaningless; it expresses a fantasy that the President of Parliament would find embarrassing and which he would perhaps not admit even to himself: the wish that the contentious session of parliament he is opening would instead be closing.

In his popular 1904 book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud presented a plethora of examples of slips that were errors only in the sense that they said something other than what the speaker intended; but they were not errors at all in that they revealed a deeper truth about the speaker’s state of mind. Another favorite example of his is that of a lady “well-known for her energy” who reports that when her husband asked his doctor what diet he should follow, the doctor said the husband did not need to follow any diet at all—in other words, said the lady, “He could eat and drink whatever I want.”

The significance of these revelatory errors suggested to Freud that “the slip of the tongue may perhaps itself have a right to be regarded as a completely valid psychical act, pursuing an aim of its own, as a statement with a content and significance.”

Freud argued further that it is not only these relatively rare instances of slips that have significance; in fact, all such “errors” do. They are all leaks from the unconscious.

Freud worked out this novel theory of how the unconscious becomes manifest through his work with neurotic patients. At the turn of the eighteenth century, patients suffering from neurotic illnesses went to see doctors who, like Freud, specialized in neurological disorders. The catch-all name for these neurotic conditions was “hysteria.” Cases of hysteria appeared in myriad

forms. Their defining feature was that the symptoms had no detectable organic origin and often did not correspond to any underlying physiological function.

Freud had returned to Vienna in February 1886 to open his medical practice after spending five months in Paris studying under the renowned neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. At the time, Charcot was showing dramatic results in the treatment of hysteria through the use of hypnosis. His striking demonstrations left Freud in awe—Charcot could not only induce hysterical symptoms like paralysis on normal people (any magic-show hypnotist could do that), but he could also remove such symptoms from true hysterics.

Back in Vienna, around the same time, Freud's close friend and mentor, the eminent neurophysiologist Josef Breuer, was himself experimenting with hypnosis to treat the bizarre collection of symptoms plaguing a young patient named Bertha Pappenheim. Although Freud never treated Pappenheim and only heard about the case from Breuer, Freud identifies her as the founding patient of psychoanalysis. The case formed the centerpiece of the book he and Breuer published in 1895, Studies in Hysteria, where she was identified as "Anna O."

The key breakthrough in Anna O's case was the discovery of certain disturbing memories that she had expunged from her awareness and which, when recovered under hypnosis, provided relief from her strange symptoms. A further detail became the key to Freud's understanding of the unconscious: the peculiar way in which Anna's symptoms resembled the repressed memories. For example, Anna's inability to drink water was relieved

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3. Subsequent research has cast serious doubt on whether Anna O. ever experienced any real relief from her condition. Irrespective of this, the clues Freud drew from the case opened the door to the entire theory of psychoanalysis.
by the memory of her deep but unexpressed disgust at seeing a dog lapping water from the glass of a lady she disliked. The paralysis on the left side of her body could be traced to a terrifying memory in which, dozing off while sitting next to her ailing father, she had a hallucination of a snake emerging from behind the bed but found herself unable to drive it away because her arm had become numb from hanging over the back of the chair.

It dawned on Freud that hysterical symptoms were, in fact, disguised expressions of wishes, fantasies, and memories that had been split off from awareness because they were, in one way or another, unacceptable. The repressed material would break forth as a symptom. And thus hysterical symptoms held a signifying relation to the repressed mental content from which they originated. The doctor’s task was to interpret the symptom so as to arrive at its unconscious root and then bring the patient to a better and less incapacitating experience of the repressed material. The more Freud followed this approach in the treatment of hysterical symptoms, the vaster the realm into which it opened appeared to be. Unconscious mental constructs turned out to be not marginal and incidental aspects of our mental life, but constitutive and dominant.

And so came into the world the third great wound to man’s narcissistic self-regard.

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Freud has been given a bad rap. When introducing him to sophomores in the Contemporary Civilization course, I often begin by asking them whether any of them have read Freud before. Few have. I then ask them to tell me what they know about Freud. Invariably, one of the first comments I get, often from a
Psychology major, is that Freud's theories have been discredited and are not taken seriously in academic psychology. It's true. Like Marx, whose work as an economist is virtually ignored in Economics departments, Freud's influence exists largely outside of the discipline in which he understood himself to be working.

But Freudian thought is pervasive. Unlike many other major thinkers, his views have fully penetrated popular culture. People who have never heard of Freud regularly make use of his vocabulary and his concepts. Sit at a bar or anywhere there is free-flowing conversation, and it won't be long before you hear Freud whispering from within the words of the people speaking: someone's ego might be singled out as problematic; Freudian slips might be noted and Oedipal complexes invoked; you might hear speculations about how someone's personality quirks are rooted in childhood trauma, or how the narcissism of today's youth will destroy our country. If you find the whole thing to be too much, someone might recommend you get therapy.

Part of the infectiousness of Freudian thinking comes from his skill as a writer. Freud is fun to read and fun to think about. He is always eager to shock and scandalize you and force you to reconsider something that, on its face, strikes you as absurd. Almost anything that Freud wrote invites the reader into self-analysis, to consider psychic structures that are exceedingly hard to see precisely because they are the lenses through which we see. And, of course, the prominence he attached to sex happened to work as a master stroke of marketing. Or, rather, the unequaled effectiveness of sex-signaling in marketing—no matter how antiseptic the product—supports Freud's notion that it is everywhere you look in the mind.

As with other influential thinkers, one should not read Freud as presenting ultimate truths. In other words, the most
productive way of approaching Freud in a liberal arts context is to uncover his fundamental ideas and wrestle with their significance without getting entangled in his often tendentious theoretical and clinical elaborations.

The text I usually teach as an introduction to Freud is a small book based on lectures he gave in 1909 during his only visit to America and published in the standard edition as *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. I teach it immediately after Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*. It’s a tricky juxtaposition, because after Nietzsche’s raw and elemental force, Freud can seem tame. But where Nietzsche is a bolt of lightning, Freud is an electrical current; where Nietzsche is an exploding geyser, Freud is a steam engine.

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The contrast between Freud’s ambiguous place in academic psychology and his enormous value in general education illustrates an important feature of liberal learning: its tendency to run against the prevalent disciplinary currents and intellectual vagues in academia. The practice of liberal education, especially in the context of a research university, is pointedly countercultural. For the typical faculty member in a top university, undergraduate general education represents a kind of professional backwater, a form of “service” with little to negative value in the ladder of professorial prestige. This is all the more pronounced in general education programs that focus on the study of “canonical” texts. Works that have decisively shaped the evolution of our dominant social institutions—including the university itself—are often treated in academia as contaminated objects, purveyors of the prejudices and injustices that afflict our society. This ideological hostility to the “great books” has been one
important contributor to the weakening of general education in recent decades.

The story of how the place of liberal education became so precarious in the modern university can be told from many angles, but a few things are evident across the board. One is that the erosion of humanistic learning of the kind that I found in the Columbia Core Curriculum and which still, not without difficulty, persists there, is directly linked to the rise of the "research university" and the dominance of what Anthony Kronman has called "the research ideal" in higher education.4

The research university is a breathtaking cultural achievement. Its roots can be traced to reforms in the nineteenth-century German university led by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who founded the University of Berlin in 1809. The organizing idea behind the research university is straightforward: an institution dedicated to the production, accumulation, and dissemination of knowledge. By the mid-nineteenth century, the research university had become the banner vehicle for the Enlightenment ideas we associate with the "scientific revolution" and with figures like Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Objectivity, verifiability, and the experimental method became the hallmarks for what could be properly considered knowledge.

To put it in its most elementary terms, the driving force behind the rise of the research university has been the triumph of modern science. The scientific model of research dominates the university and has proved its value again and again. Modernity, as we know it, has been made and remade through the

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4. In the third chapter of his book Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), Kronman gives a historical account of the development of this ideal and of how it is implicated in the decline of secular humanism in the academy.
discoveries, inventions, and innovations produced through scientific research. Though I am a humanist by training and conviction, the primacy of science in the university strikes me as entirely justified and appropriate.

Yet the research enterprise of the modern university is not aimed at the cultivation of whole persons. Its central preoccupation is with the production and accumulation of new knowledge. Liberal education, on the other hand, concerns itself with the subjective experience of being human and with the basic character of the human good. These very terms sit uncomfortably in the epistemic regime that rules the research university. In my ten years as Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum at Columbia College, I worked and taught in the crucible of this tension. Indeed, the entire institutional history of Columbia University can be told through the tensions between the original College and the protean University that formed around it. And this is not unique to Columbia. Many of the leading universities in the United States emerged from colleges that had been dedicated to the training of young men for various forms of leadership but which came to see this quaint mission as an antiquated burden.

Like in the ancient myth of Oedipus, the college gave birth to the university, and the university has ever since been trying to kill its parent. At Columbia, President A. P. Barnard proposed outright in 1889 that the College be abolished. Though the motion failed before the Trustees, Columbia College faced repeated attempts at its dissolution as Columbia University took shape around it. At about the same time, over at Harvard, President Charles W. Eliot was weighing the advice of historian

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Edward Channing, who proposed that "the College ought to be suppressed or moved out into the country where it would no longer interfere with the proper work of the University." At the University of Chicago, as Robert Hutchins acknowledged in his 1929 inaugural address, "members of the Faculty have urged that we withdraw from undergraduate work, or at least the first two years of it." Johns Hopkins, which was founded in 1876 and is widely recognized as the first fully developed American research university, was initially conceived without an undergraduate college at all.

There are other examples that illustrate that while many colleges live within universities and gain extraordinary advantages from them, the two institutions have always been at odds: the university is a center of research and innovation, while the college is a center of teaching and self-actualization. Columbia College Dean Herbert Hawkes noted in 1922 that "the student is the focus of the undergraduate college," with an implicit contrast to the university, where the focus was on the subject or on the academic discipline. In his book on the American college, Andrew Delbanco put it succinctly: "[The college] is about transmitting knowledge of and from the past to undergraduate students so they may draw upon it as a living resource in the future. [The university] is mainly an array of research activities conducted by faculty and graduate students with the aim of creating new knowledge in order to supersede the past."

8. Quoted in Bell, 1966, p. 24; the emphasis is mine.
The research ideal in the academy has extended even to the practice of liberal education. Academic careers, even in the liberal arts, are made through "research," with monographs, articles, and conference papers serving as the principal measures of achievement. One of the results of this system of professional incentives is the production, in the liberal arts disciplines, of ever larger quantities of published research for ever narrower audiences. In the sciences, the research ideal has generally led to more effective accumulation and dissemination of knowledge; in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, it has generally meant fragmentation of expertise and withdrawal from the human questions that breathe life and meaning into the liberal arts. Because these questions are only marginally susceptible to scientific investigation, the research orientation of the academic profession ensures that they are largely neglected.

It's true that nearly all undergraduate programs will require a number of general education courses for the bachelor's degree, but when you scratch beneath the surface of the catalog descriptions, you typically find departmental courses, rooted in disciplinary specializations, with perhaps some tweaks here and there to justify their being offered as general education. True general education has been virtually squeezed out of the curriculum by the dominance of disciplinary specialization and the organization of universities into corresponding academic research departments.

Many colleges now think about liberal education simply as exposure to a range of academic disciplines, turning their general education requirement into a recipe for how many and how varied a set of academic disciplines a student must sample before graduation. But in important ways, liberal education must be non-disciplinary. As Jacques Barzun pointed out after a
lifetime in both liberal education and university administration, "To be of any worth, the liberal arts . . . must also be taught as arts, not as scholarly disciplines—and that must be done by teachers. The present system, which favors faculty research over teaching, turns the liberal arts into professional subjects."  

Liberal education begins from the premise that the fundamental issues facing a student are not scholarly but existential; its basic mission is not epistemological but ethical. This does not negate the fact that a good part of a college education, especially today, must concern itself with preparing economically productive individuals who can perform specialized functions in society. But that’s not the soul of the college. College must also be an oasis from the economic and technological forces that shape and distort our social institutions. Only from such a place can one understand and critically assess these forces.

The idea of a non-professionalizing education can sound very strange today. It’s an idea starkly at odds with the market values that dominate in our culture. Every summer, when I teach my low-income high school students, I get puzzled looks when I first propose that the point of college isn’t to prepare them to get good jobs. Many students—and their families—can’t imagine what else could possibly be the point. I confess that it is hard to tell them what the point is. It is, in fact, almost impossible to communicate the meaning of a liberal education through arguments and admonitions. The difficulty is compounded when students come to college looking to escape poverty and marginality.

But what works with everyone else is what works with low-income high school students: doing liberal education. Contagion

is the only effective method of communicating its value. The process is one of transmission rather than instruction. After three weeks in which we meet for two hours each day to discuss ancient, Enlightenment, and contemporary philosophical texts, I don’t have to tell these “disadvantaged” students about the value of a liberal education. They know. They have had an experience that cannot be easily summarized, packaged, or reduced to instrumental value. They have certainly acquired new skills and accumulated a lot of new knowledge, but more importantly, they have tapped into inner capacities that have bearing on their entire lives—not only what they learn and what they do, but who they become.

My critique of the influence of the research ideal on liberal education should not be understood as denying the value of research in the liberal arts. Whether archival research, or work on original manuscripts, or unearthing new information about an author or text, research enriches our understanding of whatever material we use to conduct liberal education. It is an essential part of the life of the scholar. But the research ideal remains of limited value in undergraduate general education, and its dominance in the university and in the academic career has been detrimental to liberal education. A good deal of the contemporary “crisis” in the liberal arts stems from the institutional and professional landscape in which they operate. Research should have a central place in the ongoing education and activity of liberal arts scholars. The problem I am highlighting concerns its extension into undergraduate liberal education.
The prestige and authority of science—which helps explain the precariousness of general education in the modern university—also accounts for Freud’s insistence on the scientific legitimacy of psychoanalysis. He presented his observations as “discoveries” and fought a skeptical medical establishment tooth and nail over their scientific validity. Freud was determined to claim the same authority he had presumed in his laboratory work for the bizarre ideas he developed about the mind. His quest for scientific respectability drives much of his psychoanalytic writing.

But the scientific straitjacket into which Freud tried to fit psychoanalysis never fit well. In retrospect, Freud’s focus on clinical results and medical respectability looks like an artificial and probably counterproductive limitation. Psychoanalysis proposed a novel way of understanding what it means to live as a conscious human being. What it has to say about the nature of the mind has implications for every aspect of experience. It is only incidentally related to pathology. Psychoanalysis, in its broadest conception, treads the same grounds as liberal education inasmuch as both are concerned with the nature of human flourishing.

The effort to validate psychoanalysis through protocols of scientific demonstrability was bound to be unsatisfactory for the same reason that literary analysis cannot be reduced to a science. Both are modes of interpretation in which meaning emerges from the ambiguous margins—from allusions, symbols, resonances, subjective associations, patterns of sound, and patterns of sense. Interpretation in both literature and psychoanalysis is a subjective effort to reach a satisfying understanding. The form of knowledge generated by psychoanalytic interpretation is always situated in a particular subjective experience of the world. It is not generalizable or reproducible; it is always provisional and incomplete. The truths of psychoanalytic and
literary interpretation are pragmatic in the sense that William James explained in his 1906 lectures on pragmatism: "Ideas... become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience."\textsuperscript{11}

The self-knowledge that results from psychoanalysis is not a cognitive acquisition but an inward unfolding. In this, it resembles the knowledge that results from a liberal education—a sort of knowledge that ultimately resolves to a clearer view of oneself. In liberal learning, as in psychoanalysis, the act of knowing transforms us. In knowing something about ourselves, we become something else; the thing that we know is changed by our knowing it. The meaning and value of liberal education—and of psychoanalytic insight—is always located in a specific life and involves its subjective capacity for self-reflection. Jonathan Lear gets at this similarity when he defines psychoanalysis simply as "facilitating the development of self-conscious thought in the analysand."\textsuperscript{12}

My intellectual relationship with Freud—based on reading his voluminous writings and teaching selected parts—is hard to separate from my personal experience of psychoanalysis. And the process of reflection and self-exploration in which I engaged through psychoanalysis is, again, hard to separate from the broader impact of liberal education on my life.

\textsuperscript{11} William James, \textit{Pragmatism} (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 30; the emphasis is in the original. While pragmatism as a philosophical system claims that this is actually the same notion of truth we find in the sciences, many scientists disagree.

\textsuperscript{12} Jonathan Lear, \textit{Freud}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 5; emphasis in the original.
The summer after sophomore year at Columbia, I rented an apartment and got married. I never returned to living on campus. I joined the rush-hour commuters on the New York City subway system every morning, attended classes, worked my work-study job whenever I was not in class, and returned home to Queens in the evening. My experiment as a residential college student was over.

I had first met Michele when I was a junior in high school, and she was one of my brother’s classmates at Queens College. She treated me like a pet, and I enjoyed her sisterly attention. When we reconnected the summer after my freshman year of college—when I was back home, sharing a room with Mom and Ray and living out of that old suitcase—it was a whole different story. Sparks flew everywhere. She was older, she was American (in the Puerto Rican sense), she was smart, she was pretty, she was emotionally intense, she was in love with me. My enormous hunger for intimacy had found a match.

We rented a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Sunnyside, Queens. Our life together was a shelter where I got love and companionship, and from which I made daily forays into the world I was trying to make my own. Building a home with Michele helped bring order to a world that came at me faster than I could assimilate and from unknown directions. It was a respite from upheaval. We had a cat. Then two cats. We had a car. We started going to church—Michele with the fervor of a new convert, and I with the been-there-done-that reserve of an old hand. I enjoyed the safety of known turf, but felt none of the ardor and devotion of my teenage years.

Not long after we moved in together, under the influence of her newly awakened faith, Michele proposed that we stop living in sin and either get married or separate. I thought about it for
a few days, but it was not a hard decision. The sin was of no concern to me, but separating was unimaginable.

On a sweltering July afternoon that summer—against the advice of everyone we had consulted—Michele’s brother Mike walked her from our bedroom to the living room, where my old pastor Ernesto Cervantes performed the wedding before a handful of friends and relatives. Mr. Philippides signed as the witness on my side; Michele’s mother was the witness on hers.

A decade later, the uncoiling of my personality in psychoanalysis precipitated the unraveling of that marriage. Analysis was not the only factor, of course. Michele had reached a fork in her own road. We had moved back to Manhattan after three years in Queens, she had gone to Columbia for a master’s degree, I was finishing a PhD in English, she was a teacher in a private school on the East Side. We drank martinis, I smoked pot, our closest friends were two gay couples who worked with Michele. At every turn, our cosmopolitan lives had become increasingly incompatible with the evangelical faith to which Michele felt called. Forces larger than we could contain drew us toward different worlds. We could not walk together into a shared future. After eleven years, we parted ways on amicable and even loving terms, but with the pain and heartbreak of the end of a world.

Physicists say that immediately after the Big Bang, the universe underwent a period of “cosmic inflation”—a short burst of astonishing expansion in which it assumed its fundamental features. Something like this happened to me in graduate school. It was the first time since arriving in the United States that my world had stopped spinning. In the relative stability of a PhD program, a campus job as a pre-med advisor, and my married life, a stable center began to form inside me, like the still eye of a hurricane. With this came a monster appetite for
knowledge and newness. The intellectual tools I had developed as an undergraduate I now unleashed with fury on everything that crossed my path. I was the proverbial kid in the candy store. I took deep dives into classic jazz, Noam Chomsky, linguistics, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dominican politics, the *Economist*. I formed intense and fleeting friendships, explored New York City on foot, re-established contact with my father. My ardent diversions slowed down progress on the PhD, but I didn’t care. What I was doing felt different than what my graduate school peers or even my professors were doing. In that period, my life assumed the dimensions it continues to inhabit.

I entered the PhD program in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia in the fall of 1995, immediately after graduating from college. After spinning my wheels for a few years, I chose early American literature and culture as my field of specialization. By the summer of 2002, I had passed my doctoral exams and was settling into a dissertation on anti-slavery and the American transcendentalists. As I had done since freshman year of college, I was working twenty hours a week in the School of General Studies’ Postbaccalaureate Premedical Program. In June, I began psychoanalysis.

I had started seeing Phillip, my therapist, that spring. The ostensible motive was to get my little brother Ray to try therapy himself. He was fourteen then, disaffected from school, and finding it hard to sort out his complicated life. For three years, he had been living with Michele and me while attending Manhattan Country School, the progressive private school where Michele taught Spanish. On the recommendation of the school psychologist, I convinced Ray to join me in trying out therapy,
seeing different therapists in the same practice and coordinating our appointments so that we would go there together. Our agreement was that if, after a few sessions, he didn’t want to continue, he could stop. He did and I didn’t.

After a few months, Phillip suggested that we shift from once-a-week therapy to Freud’s signature modality: psychoanalysis. Much of the difference between the two comes from their intensity—psychoanalysis demands four or five sessions a week. The practice today is confined to a small corner of clinical psychology strongly concentrated on the island of Manhattan and a handful of other world cities. Because of the number of sessions involved each week and the corresponding cost of the affair, the practice requires abundant money as well as abundant leisure. If not exactly leisure, writing a dissertation gave me a lot of scheduling flexibility. So when Phillip proposed that we switch to psychoanalysis for the same reduced fee I was paying for therapy, I saw what an improbable and anomalous thing it was for someone like me to have the chance to pursue this esoteric program of self-examination, and I said yes.

In the early days, insights came fast. I was reading Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journal. I was dreaming a lot. I was discovering the scent of a person whose track I had lost somewhere between Cambita and New York. I was individuating from Michele. I was allowing myself to breathe. I was unclenching my fists.

Phillip said to me one day, speaking (weirdly) in the first person, as if lending me his voice to say something I could not say myself: “The one thing I can’t allow myself is to need anything from anyone.”

On another day, I read in Emerson’s journal that “Captain Franklin after 6 weeks traveling to the N. Pole on the ice found himself 200 miles south of the spot he set out from; the ice had
I felt the ice on which I walked was floating, though I could not tell the direction.

I started writing down my dreams. I have them a lot. Phillip said one day that I was lucky to dream as I do. I had classic dreams: finding myself naked in public; performing in a play without knowing the script; unable to find the classroom where my class is meeting, for which I am also late. I also had a repertoire of recurring dreams that always returned with subtle variations, like jazz renditions of standard tunes: climbing, by hand, the complex latticework of the 59th Street Bridge, always terrified, and always going from Queens to Manhattan; finding myself in my grandma’s house in Cambita, sad and searching for something I could not find; witnessing the apocalyptic end of the world at dawn from my father’s porch, often perched on his shoulders.

I started to become aware of a dead space that lay between me and the world, between me and my own experience of myself.

I realized that I had not felt anger in years; I would not allow it. Gradually, I began to feel the emotion again. In dreams, it would sometimes break out like a tornado, devouring everything in its path. One night, I dreamed I was yelling at my father with all of my might, engulfed in an all-consuming rage. In the dream, I was yelling in English. I had never used the wrong language in a dream before.

One night, I dreamed of a disturbance beneath the floorboards in the first-floor apartment in Washington Heights where Michele and I lived. I went down to the laundry room in the basement to investigate the source and discovered a small mound of earth about the height of my chest. It was the tip of a

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massive volcano growing under my apartment, irrepressible, spewing fumes and flames and making the ground shake. In the dream, as I see the mound, I understand that no one can escape, that it is going to consume the whole world.

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Freud identified free association as the “fundamental rule” of psychoanalysis. His basic instruction to the patient was “say whatever comes to your mind.” An invitation to free-associate is a pretty tricky request. In my own analysis, nothing was more certain to instantaneously erase every thought from my mind than Phillip asking me to tell him what I was thinking. The suggestion would produce a sort of affective paralysis. It made me dumb and mute. No words, no thoughts, just an oppressive awkwardness. It never lasted long, but it had a sickening intensity. After a few seconds, I’d move on to an agitated inner dialogue that was always some version of: “What should I say? What would Phillip like me to say? What is the most psychoanalytically sophisticated thing I can say?” My thinking seemed always trapped in a hall of mirrors.

The first lesson of free association is that it is never free. Precisely because free association pretends to be “unmotivated,” it presents a canvas on which you cannot help but paint a true picture of yourself. When you free-associate, you make an effort—at which you always fail—not to censor anything that passes through your mind, as if, in Freud’s words, “you were a traveller sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing view which you see outside.”14 Your task is to put aside any criterion

of selection and not concern yourself with being proper, or interesting, or incisive, or impressive, or relevant. The analyst’s job is to listen to this discourse in a special way, one that aims to capture from the flow of associations something that the patient does not know he or she is saying. In his 1912 paper “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis,” Freud called this special way of listening “evenly suspended attention,” and described it as consisting “simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular” and of “giving equal notice to everything.”

Phillip would often start sessions by asking me, “Where are you today?” More often than not, I could not come up with an answer. I could not get a fix on myself. Psychoanalysis confronted me with places unseen and unsuspected around which I had fashioned an asphyxiating stability. Like dark matter in the universe, which cannot be observed directly but can be detected because of its gravitational effects on objects around it, these dead spaces distorted my experiences and perceptions, suffused my life with a sense of hollowness and desperation. Starting psychoanalysis, I did not know, and could not suspect, that my peculiar psychic malaise, while permitting me a high degree of functionality by almost any measure, made it impossible for me to access an authentic sense of myself. It also made it impossible to make true contact with anyone else.

My life had been full of discontinuities, vast stretches of experience and emotion that existed like islands, incommunicado. I did not have the tools—the threads and the needles—with which to stitch together the patches that made up my life. I

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possessed no language with which they could speak to each other. Analysis would mean working out terms of self-understanding capacious enough to assimilate the disparate lives that, nearing thirty, I had already lived. It would mean integrating parts of myself that were alien to one other and to achieve some sort of wholeness. In the strenuous effort that analysis required, I was motivated by a profound longing to live just one life.

Around this time, I saw Woody Allen’s mockumentary film *Zelig* (1983). It wasn’t funny that first time. It was just disturbing. Woody Allen’s character, Zelig, is known as the human chameleon, a man without a center, without self-identity. His desperate need to be liked and accepted has caused him, without his knowing and without his being able to help it, to take on the characteristics of the personalities around him. In Zelig, I saw why I had such a hard time free-associating: it was almost impossible for me to access a sense of self except as a tool to ingratiate myself to others.

This is why at first I had resisted lying on the couch. As we were preparing to go from once-weekly sessions to the psychoanalytic standard of four sessions a week, Phillip left it up to me whether I’d lie on the couch (with him out of view) or sit on a chair facing him, as I had been doing in our therapy sessions. Explaining the reasons I didn’t want to lie on the couch convinced me that I should do it. My hesitation boiled down to a need to monitor Phillip’s reactions to what I was saying as I was saying it. I wanted cues about what would be the right things to say, the things he would want me to say, the things that would make me his favorite patient. Even before the analysis proper had started, I had bumped into something important: a dread of finding myself unmoored and an inability to relate to others except as an effort to win over their affection.
One day, Phillip blurted out, as if unable to help it, "Your damn charm is going to kill you!"

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*Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*

The methods and insights that Freud worked out in psychoanalysis have been important in my ongoing process of self-understanding; they are essential tools in my continuing liberal education. Many of Freud’s ideas were anticipated in literature and in philosophy well before his time, and he drew freely on ancient sources to sharpen his own intuitions. But he is unique for the systematic approach he developed, the brilliance of his exposition, and his effectiveness in popularizing his theories. It was this mission of exposition and popularization that brought him to America in 1909 to deliver his *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*.

Freud delivered the *Five Lectures* at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, on the occasion of accepting an honorary degree from its President, G. Stanley Hall. President Hall had invited leading American scientists and intellectuals to attend the lecture series as a way of introducing the young science of psychoanalysis to the country’s intelligentsia. Present at the lectures were notable figures like William James, Franz Boas, and the political radical Emma Goldman.

Freud published two subsequent sets of lectures on psychoanalysis: the *Introductory Lectures to Psycho-Analysis* (1917), and the *New Introductory Lectures to Psycho-Analysis* (1932). Because of their concision and clarity, the 1910 Clark Lectures offer the most accessible overview of the major concepts in psychoanalysis. As texts, they stand somewhere between philosophical
speculations, scientific expositions, and literary creations. They brim with suggestiveness, perspicacity, and charm. But what makes them most valuable for liberal education is the clear articulation of a set of concepts and practices that can inspire any reader to novel forms of self-analysis. Among these concepts and practices are: hysteria, or thinking with your body; listening to the unconscious; and the interpretation of dreams.

**Hysteria, or Thinking with Your Body**

Freud started his lecture series by giving credit for the origin of psychoanalysis to Joseph Breuer and his treatment of patient zero: Anna O. The breakthrough in the case was the “momentsous discovery” that Anna’s physical symptoms were not “capricious or enigmatic products of the neurosis” but, in fact, “residues—‘precipitates’ they might be called—of emotional experiences” from her past.16 With his gift for epigrams, Freud boiled it down to a memorable bon mot: “hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences.”17 As these memories were brought to consciousness under hypnosis, Anna experienced the strong emotions that she had suppressed during the actual events, and this “catharsis” brought relief from her debilitating symptoms. Freud understood that Anna was experiencing with her body what her mind refused to acknowledge.

Phillip said to me once that you can think with your body. Many of us experience this in the way we handle stress. One memorable example for me occurred in May 1999 and disrupted a particularly frantic period in my life. That winter and spring, I had been preparing for the oral exams in my PhD

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17. *Standard Edition*, Vol. 11, p. 15; the emphasis is in the original.
program. I also had my campus job advising postbaccalaureate premedical students, working twenty hours a week during the semester and full-time during breaks.

This was also the third year of a program I had started that taught English to immigrants living in Washington Heights. I had set it up with two people from the Manhattan office of the Partido de la Liberación Dominicana, a then left-wing minority party that had, improbably, come to power in the Dominican Republic in 1996. Frank and Clodomiro, who became dear friends, would find the students and a venue; I would create a curriculum, teach the class, and, if necessary, hire and train other teachers.

I consulted various people at Columbia—experts in the teaching of English as a Second Language and people with experience administering academic programs—and they uniformly and somewhat condescendingly explained to me that what I was trying to do was much harder than I realized, that I should at least hire a consultant to help me. Ha ha ha. A consultant. It seemed to me that they didn’t understand what I was doing. They thought that I was setting up a business. I ignored their advice, hired two other teachers, and started offering elementary and intermediate English to about sixty students. Most of them were Dominican, many of them taxi drivers, and some had only rudimentary literacy even in Spanish. We met on Mondays and Wednesdays from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. I adapted an off-the-shelf English as a Second Language curriculum for the program, taught the elementary level, and helped organize the fundraisers (raffles, parties, etc.) that, each month, achieved the miracle of bringing in enough money to pay the other teachers.

Ah, youth. It was a crazy thing to do, really. But that didn’t matter; even if the program succeeded only a little, it would have still been worth doing. Teaching English to immigrants
who were struggling to get by in New York was, literally, giving them a voice with which to participate in the broader world around them. And with six hours a week, you could really get somewhere. Every week, they could say new things and do new things. Before class and during breaks, they would regale each other with stories of the new feats of communication they had attained: giving directions, understanding an announcement by the train conductor, deciphering a news headline, telling the doctor where it hurt.

This was during the time when Michele was studying applied linguistics at Columbia’s Teacher’s College, focusing on second-language acquisition. With what I absorbed from her and my own experience of learning English, I believe I made a competent teacher for my students. But the key ingredient was my identification with them and theirs with me. We fully recognized each other and quickly grew to love each other.

Taking a page from how Michele taught Spanish to middle school second-language learners, I didn’t allow any Spanish in the classroom. This meant a lot of pantomime and a lot of drawing figures on the chalkboard, like a game of charades. We would play-act scenarios in the classroom—visiting the downtown office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, applying for a job, ordering food at a restaurant, being stopped and frisked by the police. These skits generated the most hilarious turns of creativity and wit. We learned about Thanksgiving and the Electoral College, we sang songs from the American songbook, we parsed excerpts from State of the Union speeches. The thing that sustained the crazy experiment for the three years it lasted was the attachment and solidarity we all developed.

By that time, I had been living in the United States for thirteen years. Until I got to college and onto student health insurance, a meal plan, and a work-study job, my life looked very much like
many of theirs, making ends meet with the help of food stamps, welfare, and section 8 housing assistance. What motivated me was an urge to pass on to them anything that my experience suggested would be useful as they made their own way in America. I wasn’t just teaching them English, but trying to forge tools with which they could transform their reality. I was trying to restore a dimension of agency in their lives that had been lost in leaving their native culture. I wanted to introduce them to possibilities that were invisible from where they stood. I wanted to make intelligible to them the entire world I had come to live in.

It was the most meaningful kind of teaching I have ever done.

That same spring, I was also teaching a very different kind of course to a very different kind of student: the notoriously demanding (and now extinct) Logic and Rhetoric, the first-year composition requirement for Columbia College students. I had myself painfully learned the rudiments of expository writing in this class just a few years earlier. For the first half of the semester, students wrote two short papers each week, which I reviewed and corrected line by line. Later in the semester, they wrote one paper a week. As anyone who has taught first-year composition knows, the work is grueling. But that too was exhilarating. I was learning to teach students not just how to express their thoughts, but how to form them: how to think about the world around them clearly and incisively. On these students, too, I poured myself without reserve.

They were busy times. During the day, I advised postbac premed students on getting into medical school and wrote the comprehensive recommendation dossiers that accompanied their applications. Then I taught Columbia first-years how to write clearly and precisely. Then I traveled north two miles to a different world and taught Dominican adults about how to live in America.
About January of that year (1999), I scheduled my PhD oral exam for April 1. The exam would cover a reading list of 120 books in my three chosen fields: Orality and Literacy, American Puritans, and African-American Language and Literature. After finding my feet in that hectic spring semester, I organized a reading schedule and realized, with horror, just how much material I'd have to get through every single day, without breaks, to be ready for my April Fool's Day exam.

Every night I'd get home, close to 10:00 p.m. on teaching nights, put on headphones, and listen to Billie Holliday while reading for a few hours. I'd then take off the headphones and put into notes the most important things I had encountered in the reading. Weekends were marathons of grading and reading for the exam.

Thursday, April 1, arrived, and I took my orals. At the end of the two hours, I stepped outside the seminar room in Philosophy Hall where I had been examined by four professors and waited as they deliberated on my performance. When I came back into the room, the chair of the examining committee told me that while the committee could not formally award a "pass with distinction," they all felt that I had given a distinguished performance on my exam. As we were leaving the room, the professor overseeing my subfield on American Puritans, and who would later become my dissertation advisor, joked that I could now take the weekend off. But I actually couldn't, since I had two classes to teach on Monday and a stack of papers to grade on the weekend.

It was around this time that I noticed a bald spot on the back of my head, right above the base of the skull and a little to the left. It was about the size of a quarter and growing. When I ran to the bathroom, held up a hand-mirror, and examined the horrid spot, a freezing chill ran down my spine. I probably had
brain cancer. My visit to the Columbia Student Health Service the next morning did not confirm this suspicion. The nurse practitioner who saw me prescribed a cream and told me that sometimes this can happen as a response to stress. “Have you been stressed lately?” With full sincerity and seriousness, I said, “No, I haven’t.” And it was true. In a way. Throughout those months of resolute intensity, I did not feel stressed. I felt fine. I did not even feel particularly tired. If anything, I felt energized.

No, I had not felt stress from the combined demands of my job as a premed advisor, my college teaching, running the ESL program, and my orals preparation. Instead, I grew a bald spot on the back of my head. And in case the message my body was sending wasn’t clear, six weeks after my orals, while playing softball, I ran fast to slide into second base and, with one cracking misstep, broke my right tibia and fibula. I did it without intervention from anyone, all through my own effort.

My leg and my bald spot both recovered over a summer spent almost entirely sitting on a couch and looking out the window.

My bald spot was simply a stress-induced physical ailment. Those are common and widely recognized. What makes it psychoanalytically significant is that I was completely unconscious of the stress. In sealing myself off from it—in not allowing myself to feel my own reality—I was enacting a central defensive mechanism I’d used throughout my life and which in this case gave a dramatic sign of its inadequacy and its danger. In my failure to allow myself a conscious experience of what I was feeling, I was displaying the underlying symptom Freud came to recognize in all neuroses: a denial of reality.

My self-inflicted leg break is even more illustrative of what Freud began to see in his treatment of hysteria. I broke my leg because I was running too fast on that Saturday morning. A few
weeks later, I returned to the field wearing my cast to show everyone I was OK. Which, of course, I wasn’t: my leg was broken in two places, and I was on crutches. On the day of the accident, while I sat on second base waiting for the ambulance to arrive, my back had grown tired, and the ever-kind Barbara Hanning sat back-to-back against me so I could rest. Overjoyed at seeing me now, Barbara reassured me that I would return to the game before long, adding, “But you will probably not run bases with the same bravado.”

I had not realized that I ran bases “with bravado.” But it was true. I ran with breakneck abandon. The particular moment of the accident had a fractal relation to my entire life: the softball field was not the only place where I was running too fast and with a kind of frenzy that I could not sustain or control. I broke my leg and forced myself to sit down for three months. The injury I had inflicted on myself seemed to have a symbolic relation to an unconscious situation I was living. As if unable to reason out that I needed to slow down, my body brought it about through other means.

\textit{The Unconscious Speaks}

Self-deception is a pervasive feature of human life. We are almost constantly engaged in it in one way or another. Self-deception is a manifestation of the unconscious at work—one part of our mind is lying to another, and “we” are not aware of it happening.

The treatment of hysteria using hypnosis revealed to Freud that patients suffered from traumatic memories that had been split off from consciousness. The fact that these memories were not truly lost but kept in some separate part of the mind led him to posit a force that kept them there and prevented their admission into consciousness. He called this force \textit{resistance} and the
process by which this force bars problematic memories from consciousness repression.\textsuperscript{18}

Perhaps I may give you a more vivid picture of repression and of its necessary relation to resistance, by a rough analogy derived from our actual situation at the present moment. Let us suppose that in this lecture-room and among this audience, whose exemplary quiet and attentiveness I cannot sufficiently commend, there is nevertheless someone who is causing a disturbance and whose ill-mannered laughter, chattering and shuffling with his feet are distracting my attention from my task. I have to announce that I cannot proceed with my lecture; and thereupon three or four of you who are strong men stand up and, after a short struggle, put the interrupter outside the door. So now he is “repressed,” and I can continue my lecture. But in order that the interruption shall not be repeated, in case the individual who has been expelled should try to enter the room once more, the gentlemen who have put my will into effect place their chairs up against the door and thus establish a “resistance” after the repression has been accomplished. If you will now translate the two localities concerned into psychical terms as the “conscious” and the “unconscious,” you will have before you a fairly good picture of the process of repression.\textsuperscript{19}

Freud does not see repression itself as problematic. Indeed, as he would drive home in what is probably his most widely read book, \textit{Civilization and Its Discontents}, repression is absolutely essential for civilization. The problem with hysterics is not that they have repressed something, but that their repression has


been ineffective. To explain this, Freud returns to the example of the unruly person who has been expelled from his lecture:

If you come to think of it, the removal of the interrupter and the posting of the guardians at the door may not mean the end of the story. It may very well be that the individual who has been expelled, and who has now become embittered and reckless, will cause us further trouble. It is true that he is no longer among us; we are free from his presence, from his insulting laughter and his sotto voce comments. But in some respects, nevertheless, the repression has been unsuccessful; for now he is making an intolerable exhibition of himself outside the room, and his shouting and banging on the door with his fists interfere with my lecture even more than his bad behaviour did before. In these circumstances we could not fail to be delighted if our respected president, Dr. Stanley Hall, should be willing to assume the role of mediator and peacemaker. He would have a talk with the unruly person outside and would then come to us with a request that he should be re-admitted after all: he himself would guarantee that the man would now behave better. On Dr. Hall’s authority we decide to lift the repression, and peace and quiet are restored. This presents what is really no bad picture of the physician’s task in the psycho-analytic treatment of the neuroses.20

In the neurotic patient, the repressed memory continues to erupt into consciousness in the form of a hysterical symptom. In other words, hysterical symptoms are substitutes for the repressed material. Freud’s entire psychoanalytic method hinges on the proposition that these substitutes—the symptoms—are not arbitrary ailments but bear an “indirect resemblance” to

their repressed origins. At the opening of the fifth of the *Introductory Lectures*, he made the point with typical flair: “One day the discovery was made that the disease symptoms of certain nervous patients have a meaning.”

21 Symptoms are not merely the *result* of unconscious thought patterns but their *expression*—the two are semantically linked. Like a word in a language, the symptom corresponds to a meaning. But whereas in natural languages the relationship of the word and its meaning is arbitrary, in psychic life the symptom is linked to its unconscious origin by an organic resemblance, like a shadow is related to the body from which it is cast or a protein is related to the segment of DNA from which it is transcribed. With neurosis, some psychic experience has proved impossible to integrate into the patient’s sense of self and instead has been repressed from consciousness. But the repression leaks, and the leaks encode the unconscious material.

Freud and some of his followers sometimes spoke of the unconscious as if it were a separate and reasoning mind, obeying its own bizarre logic. But I find it easier to think of the unconscious as the repository of a form of psychic conditioning, as a kind of root programming that shapes how our conscious mind works in ways that escape our notice. For Freud, the unconscious contains the basic configuration of the instinctual drives that power our psyche. The most basic layer of this organization is established in early childhood, typically in response to the dynamics of our nuclear family; ultimately, it underlies our personality. Like the eyes in our head, this root programming is invisible to us except as reflected in a mirror. We see *through* them, but cannot see *them*.

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Psychoanalysis concerns itself with bringing some of this underlying psychic conditioning into conscious awareness. Its promise is that the progressive elucidation of these unconscious structures can deepen the experience of our own lives and give us some degree of freedom from the compulsions they impose. We live in a cage whose dimensions are set by an unconscious order established in early life. Psychoanalysis is a method of expanding the floor of that cage.\(^{22}\) To the extent that psychoanalysis—and, in fact, any form of introspection—uncovers aspects of our experience that were previously invisible and unsuspected, it enriches our lives and creates new possibilities for living authentically.

As Freud came to see in his mature clinical practice, the job of the analyst is not simply to uncover a patient’s unconscious, but to facilitate a process that has been, for some reason, strangled, so that the patient can incorporate previously unconscious material into a fuller sense of him or herself. As psychoanalysis has expanded away from the debilitating forms of neurosis that Freud treated and into more ordinary kinds of psychic distress, this idea has been refined further, with an emphasis on the unconscious not as something that needs to be revealed, but as something that needs to be experienced by the patient in a conscious way. Unconscious material doesn’t require exposure but translation. We can think of the unconscious not as something that needs to be disclosed but as something that needs to be ripened and integrated into consciousness. Psychoanalytic insight is not an add-on to the self but a metamorphosis of the self—it’s the realization of the caterpillar that it has been living in a cocoon and the discovery, upon emerging, that it is actually a butterfly.

\(^{22}\) I owe this arresting image to Noam Chomsky’s discussion of a slogan used by labor organizers in Brazil. Noam Chomsky, interviewed by David Barsamian, “Expanding the Floor of the Cage,” Z Magazine (April 1997).
Living with an awareness of the unconscious—that is, living alert to the clues and language of unconsciousness—re-orient our relationship to ourselves. It adds an element of humility to our self-certainties and opens vast possibilities for development, growth, and transformation. By making the unconscious element of human experience a direct object of investigation, Freud shone a light on a concealed dimension of Socrates's dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living.

**Dreams**

Psychoanalysis takes to heart the ancient, popular, and intellectually suspect idea that dreams have hidden meanings. The seriousness with which it takes dream interpretation is perhaps its most distinctive characteristic. "If I am asked how one can become a psycho-analyst," Freud told his American audience in the third of the *Five Lectures*, "I reply, 'By studying one's own dreams.'"\(^{23}\)

Dreaming is so ordinary that we can forget just how strange a phenomenon it is. As a general rule, when you dream, you are not aware that you are dreaming, but take the dream to be your reality.\(^{24}\) But dreams can be so bizarre and so *unlike* reality that you wonder how it is that you don't realize immediately that you are dreaming.

In dreams, we accept fundamental incongruities in the fabric of reality as if they were entirely normal. If in the course of a regular day, I discover that I can fly by pedaling in the air, I should

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\(^{24}\) The strange phenomenon of lucid dreaming—when you are aware that you are dreaming—is, of course, the exception to this general rule. But lucid dreaming is extremely rare.
realize immediately that I am dreaming; but I don’t—I just go on thinking that this is the way things are now: I can fly. If I find that I am in a seminar room teaching a class but have forgotten to wear pants, I should realize that I am dreaming; but I don’t—I simply believe that this is what has happened, and I try to deal with the situation as best I can. The fact that in dreams we so easily accept an absurd world suggests that our grip on reality is much more tenuous than we imagine.

Freud considered *The Interpretation of Dreams*, first published in 1900, to be his most important work. When he learned that the eminent psychologist and philosopher William James would only attend one of his Clark lectures, he dedicated that day to dreams and the psychoanalytic method of dream interpretation.

Given the value Freud placed on free association, and the difficulty patients have when trying to do it, it’s no surprise that he would develop a keen interest in dreams and turn every tool of psychoanalytic interpretation in their direction. Dreams are the closest one can come to perfectly free associations. Along with “errors,” like slips of the tongue and free association on the couch, dreams offer the third major psychoanalytic window into the unconscious—and it is a far bigger and more transparent window than the other two. Freud called dream interpretation “the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious.”

Freud understood dreams, like hysterical symptoms, as distorted expressions of underlying unconscious thoughts. He called the mechanism of distortion in a dream the “dream-work,” and the unconscious wishes it distorts he called the “latent dream.” The narrative we reconstruct after we wake up—which adds another layer of distortion—is the “manifest dream.” The manifest dream is a doubly disguised substitute for

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the latent dream thoughts that motivated it. The distorting forces are the ego's defenses. In the relaxed state of sleep, these defenses are compromised and permit the emergence of material that has been effectively suppressed during waking hours:

You can convince yourself that there are such things as latent dream-thoughts and that the relation between them and the manifest content of the dream is really as I have described it, if you carry out an analysis of dreams, the technique of which is the same as that of psycho-analysis. You entirely disregard the apparent connections between the elements in the manifest dream and collect the ideas that occur to you in connection with each separate element of the dream by free association according to the psycho-analytic rule of procedure. From this material you arrive at the latent dream-thoughts, just as you arrived at the patient's hidden complexes from his associations to his symptoms.26

Psychoanalytic dream interpretation tries to reverse-engineer the latent thoughts by unwinding the distortions of the dream-work. If, as Freud believed, the human mind is highly associative, the branching associations stemming from the discrete elements of the manifest dream will eventually begin to coalesce around significant nodes. These associative convergences reveal the unconscious thoughts that motivated the dream and that appeared disguised in various ways. In other words, by free-associating around each of the elements of the dream, you can begin to get a feel for what the mind was thinking about while you slept.

Dreams were a particularly rich source of discovery in my own analysis. For a while, I kept a dream journal. Many of my

dreams were vivid and transparent. I dream a lot. Or better put, I remember dreams a lot. I would walk into a session with a new dream as if I had received an overnight letter with instructions for a psychic scavenger hunt. Most of the time nothing came of it. We would bat around ideas and associations, with me proposing multiple interpretations—never resting from the compulsion to try to place myself one step ahead of Phillip. Sometimes, parts of our conversation about dreams would return to me like a motif in a symphony, appearing again and again and gaining in significance and weight as time went on.

One day, for example, I dreamed that I was in a prison. It was an elaborate dream full of strange and bizarre twists. Our efforts didn’t seem to yield much, but at one point Phillip said, “And you are a man who dearly loves prison.” That comment startled me. It is quite the opposite. Nothing matters to me more than my freedom, my independence, my self-determination. I cannot stand being compelled or expected to do anything. But I could not shake the irritating idea that I am a man who loves prison. It kept coming back, sometimes in a session with Phillip, but more often in my own ruminations. The idea eventually ripened into an insight: that in order to assert a self-defining impulse toward freedom, I always find, or make for myself, prisons.

During my six years of analysis, I also reached a satisfying interpretation of a different sort of dream, a recurring dream. The dream would have me back in Cambita, going into my abuela (“grandmother”) Milita’s house, where I mainly lived from the time my parents divorced when I was five to the day I came to the US when I was twelve. After my parents’ break-up, Mom returned to Grandma’s house, and I went with her. Keysi stayed with Dad. After Mom left for the US, Abuela Milita looked after me with absolute devotion.
The dream was always set in the period after Abuela Milita suffered a stroke that left her bedridden. The last few times I saw her, on return trips to DR, her speech was too blurred and too strange to understand. The awkwardness I felt sitting by her bedside was unbearable. So my visits were short and perfunctory.

Without her vivacious presence and upkeep, the house where I had spent most of my childhood felt strange and ghostly. The front doors, which opened to the small living room, were no longer ever used. One walked along the house through a side path—el callejón—and then entered the house through the kitchen in the back.

The recurring dream consisted in my walking along this path to the back of the house and then finding my way to Abuela’s room through the dark, empty house. While some of the content varied each time—and sometimes this scene came as part of a longer dream—the atmosphere at this juncture was always the same: an empty, lifeless house and a desolate sense of loss. One of the last times I had the dream, I wrote about it in my journal and made a comment that would begin the process of interpretation:

Struck vividly by how I didn’t grieve Grandma’s death; didn’t feel it; nor her illness. It was as if a stranger had fallen ill and was dying, not the sweet, loving, devoted, indulging second mother, a woman who would give me everything, and do everything, whose favorite and special charge I was. How was this? How did that come about that I dissociated myself so thoroughly from the loss of her, the love of her, the death of her? How is it that she almost ceased to exist for me? That she largely ceased from mattering?

But that period remains in my dreams. Keeps returning, returning, returning at night.
Eventually, I did come to feel some of the grief over Abuela’s death that I had not felt when she died during my sophomore year of college. When I heard of it then, it was as if I had been informed of the death of someone I vaguely knew, or as if I had been merely reminded that a person long dead was actually dead. But sometime after I made that journal entry, I went through a period of intense grief over Abuela. I was living alone at the time, deep in psychoanalysis, and constructing a new sense of myself after my divorce from Michele. The psychic upheaval and then liberation of the divorce probably opened me up to experience things I could not experience before. It was a bitter but satisfying grief. For some weeks, alone in my bachelor apartment on 142nd Street, I would break into uncontrollable weeping over Abuela and over the missed opportunities to be with her in those last years. It would come on me unexpectedly. Sometimes in the middle of a TV show, in the shower, when I walked into the apartment, halfway through a plate of rice and beans. Gradually, the grief subsided and, with it, the recurrence of the dream.

I don’t know if this holds true of all recurring dreams, but in this case, my dream seemed to be an attempt to grapple with an emotional shock that remained undigested in my unconscious. It’s like the mind was turning it over, trying to resolve it, or bring it to the surface, to the conscious mind, where it could be integrated into my waking life. Until that happened, the material remained unresolved and continued to break into my dreams when my resistance let its guard down.

The manner in which this dream paved the way for a release of grief is illustrative of the special kind of knowledge involved in dream interpretation. No one could have “interpreted” my dream to show me that it was about my inability to grieve Abuela’s death. Telling me that I had repressed my grief would
have done nothing. The interpretation was not something I
needed to learn but something I needed to experience. I had
known for years that there was something amiss about how I took
Abuela’s death, that I was unable to give myself over to an emo-
tional experience of it. But I couldn’t do anything about it; I was
locked into a posture I could not release. What the dream, with
its insistence, gave me was an entry point, a set of images, emo-
tions, and responses over which I could linger and which I would
eventually transform into an experience of the lost emotion.

As with everything else, Freud formulated precise rules and
principles for dream interpretation. The Interpretation of Dreams
is a detailed exposition of the technique. Neither my prison
dream nor the dream about Abuela offer good examples of
strictly Freudian interpretation. Interpreting them did not come
about through an explicit exercise of free association around
discrete elements, and neither unearthed some dark and unac-
ceptable wish. But in each case, an examination of the dream
revealed an unconscious condition whose unraveling was liber-
at ing. The dreams were, without question, meaningful expressions
of my psyche with the potential of deepening my experience of
myself. Ruminating on the dreams, turning them over in my
mind, letting my mind wander under their suggestions, revealed
important things to me. Not every dream holds important
meanings, but many do, and learning to live alert to this aspect of
our psychic experience can be enormously enriching.

The Five Lectures introduce a number of other psychoanalytic
concepts whose exploration in the classroom, and in one’s own
life, can yield profound insights. They are also largely free of the
glaring limitations that Freud’s thought is well-known for—his
prejudiced views on women and their psychosexual development, his understanding of homosexuality as the result of arrested sexual development, and the dogmatic certainty with which he insisted on many dubious claims. As with all thinkers from the past, our moral censure has to be applied with discrimination and historical awareness. "In what way are they right?" is almost always a more productive and a more difficult question than "In what way are they wrong?"

Many of the students I teach at Columbia come to Freud already comfortable with psychotherapeutic and psychopharmacological intervention as a way to respond to various forms of mental distress. But there are many, like me when I arrived at college, for whom any form of psychological treatment represents an embarrassing personal failure and a sign of character weakness. I have seen many of these students' attitudes changed by our reading and discussion of Freud. And, every few years, I hear back from someone whose life has been impacted by an insight whose seed was planted in one of our Freud discussions.

Much of what I have gotten out of psychoanalysis has emerged in this way, long after the analysis ended. Analysis taught me to look at myself in a certain askance way, to be attentive to what happens on the edges of my consciousness, to be less certain of myself, and more suspicious of reason, sense, and sanity. You learn to try to stay always a little off balance, just enough to perhaps glimpse at something your conscious mind has been refusing to see. Not coincidentally, this way of looking at yourself is also a powerful way to read literature and to approach human situations generally; it opens vital new avenues of meaning and discovery.

My analysis did not end in a deliberate way, nor out any sense of completeness or closure. It ended because I accepted an administrative position at Columbia College as Director of the
Center for the Core Curriculum and would no longer have the flexibility to sit for four sessions a week. Philip and I had begun the analysis at the William Alanson White Institute, and I paid only the nominal fee I could afford as a graduate student. After a while, we moved on to Phillip’s private office, with the same fee structure. After completing my PhD and getting my first job—as a poorly paid postdoctoral fellow in the Core Curriculum—the fee went up just a little. I still carry a fair amount of guilt that, just at the point when I could begin paying something approximating Phillip’s professional fee, I quit the analysis.

Psychoanalysis, occurring when it did in my life, was very much about restoring my capacity for emotional thinking, for processing emotions in a more conscious way. At a basic level, it was about accepting that my life had achieved enough stability, predictability, and safety that I could loosen my grip, that it was safe to feel emotions. There were big, ugly emotions to be felt from which I shrank. They were like things stuck in my throat that I could not bring myself to swallow—things about my early family life, about abandonment, about the trauma of immigration, about the trauma of poverty and alienation.

But the most immediate and most frightening issue I was facing during my analysis was that my marriage no longer worked. I could not face the fact that the only intimate relationship I had in the world, a relationship that had in so many ways been my stable center, was, in fact, fatally unstable and that the effort it took to keep it whole was slowly strangling me. That thought, that emotional truth, was too devastating to consider; I could not hold my gaze on it. Ultimately, it was the analytic relationship itself that created the space in which this reality
could emerge into visibility. I did not see it at the time, but over
the course of the analysis, I transferred my attachment from
Michele to Phillip and formed a kind of alliance with him. He
offered me an open and non-judgmental intimacy. He did not
need me to be any particular way. He was at ease with my rest-
lessness, my lust, my fantasies, my conflicts. With him, I did not
need to protect my image. I did not need to protect him from
me. From him I wrested permission to pull away from and event-
tually divorce Michele.

Phillip told me once that some people experience adoles-
cence when they are teenagers, and some when they are in their
thirties. I was twenty and Michele was twenty-five when we got
married in our apartment in Queens. There was a desperate and
volatile intensity to our closeness. We held on to each other like
you would to a plank after a shipwreck. But by the time I was
finishing my PhD and she was thriving as a teacher in a fancy
private school, I think that we both felt we were approaching
safe shores. They happened to exist on different continents. In
the eleven years we were married, Michele had many times de-
cided we should break up, but I could not bear it and would
claw her back in desperation—as if my life depended on our
being together. Then one day it began to dawn on me that even
if we broke up, I would be fine. The next time she proposed we
separate, I agreed. And I would not turn back. The time had
come to experience adolescence.
"This moving book is both a cry from the heart and a battle cry. It is the most convincing case yet made for liberal education as a gift to young people and indispensable for democracy. If every president, trustee, dean, and professor (of any subject) were to read it—really read it—hope and purpose would be restored to our colleges and universities and to all the students they serve.” —ANDREW DELBANCO, president of the Teagle Foundation and author of College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be

“In Rescuing Socrates, Roosevelt Montás tells his story of moving as a lost, lonely twelve-year-old from the Dominican Republic to New York, then eventually finding himself by studying Aristotle, Augustine, Plato, and many others in the Core Curriculum at Columbia University. Montás takes the reader on an inspiring journey where we come to realize how the power of these texts helped a young immigrant and man of color recreate his heritage and a sense of identity in a foreign land.” —ANIKA T. PRATHER, founder of The Living Water School

“This is a powerful and deeply personal defense of Great Books and liberal education. Montás has written a rousing reminder that a Great Books education is not a frivolous indulgence or a weapon in the culture wars, but a gateway to clearer thinking, meaningful human relationships, and life’s most important questions.” —MOLLY WORTHEN, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

“Roosevelt Montás has written an absorbing and perceptive book about how he, an immigrant from a rural town in the Dominican Republic, came to New York and was engaged and transformed by reading great books. His vibrant account is an autobiography of learning. It should be read by anyone interested in reading and big ideas.” —MITCHELL COHEN, author of The Politics of Opera: A History from Monteverdi to Mozart

“In this beautifully written book, Roosevelt Montás presents a compelling case for the immeasurably transformative value of a true liberal education. Through his personal story and a poetic journey of the works of four great thinkers, Montás illuminates how a liberal education is essential to engaging with the most fundamental aspects of human freedom and self-determination. Rescuing Socrates is a touching, insightful invitation to rethink the reigning model of education in favor of one that equips us to live examined lives.” —AMNA KHALID, Carleton College