

Interview with Donald Kalsched:

Trauma and the Soul

by Van Waddy

Van Waddy: I found your latest book, *Trauma and the Soul*—your insights into the relational trauma caused by the failure of early attachment between mother and child, with all its relevant research, clients’ dreams, contemporary insights, poetic interlacings of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, St. Exupery’s *Little Prince*—to be a rich read. We are fortunate to have you come and visit with us in February.

You seem to have a kind of kaleidoscopic view of the workings of the Self. Whereas Jung focused mainly on what he saw as the positive “intent” of the Self—to bring the ego to individuation and wholeness—you have identified, studying your clients’ dreams and history, a darker or more primitive element to the Self. You found early trauma victims to possess a force in their psyche that attacks integration, for survival purposes. And you have identified this self-care system as another aspect of the work of the Self, is that so? Your thought is that, while Jung acknowledged a tyrannical inner object in the psyche (the Negative Animus) that interfered with a person’s pursuit of individuation, he missed the defensive processes or inner aggression in the psyche that *resisted* healing and transformation in the service of protecting the wounded, innocent child (soul). So, the Self, in your eyes, supervises both the integrative and disintegrative processes in the psyche. Have I understood that correctly?

Donald Kalsched: Your formulation is basically correct as far as my first book is concerned. There I was trying to account theoretically for the clinical fact that in the unconscious material of trauma survivors, we sometimes find a tyrannical figure or “force” that attacks a vulnerable part of the personality, and that this “force” or figure seems to appear at special “moments” in the transference when the child part of the person wants to attach again to the therapist. It became clear to me that this dark figure was a defense against possible re-traumatization in reality and that hence its “intention” seemed protective even though its effect was persecutory. Its aim was survival but its function was to dissociate. The idea that the Jungian Self might have something to do with this process came from a paper written by Michael Fordham called *Defenses of the Self* written back in 1974. Fordham claimed that he saw defenses organized in some in-

fant even in the first days of life—long before ego-consolidation—to protect them from death wishes of their mothers. He hypothesized that these defenses might be organized by the primordial Self, and that the usual process of de-integration/re-integration was interrupted, leading to dis-integration and a severe split in the psyche between libidinal and anti-libidinal energies.

As you probably notice, however, in my new book, I’m less interested in theorizing about what Jungian or psychoanalytic “structures” or inner objects account for the defensive “drama” in the inner world (everyone has their own ideas about this), and more concerned with describing the mytho-poetic (dream) figures that seem to be involved in dissociation. There is definitely a remarkable “intelligence” in what I call the self-care system. Splitting and dissociation are not something “we” do...they are automatic mechanisms, yet they are organized for the survival of the personality and perhaps even for the future growth and recovery of a lost heart of the self we might call the human soul. So wherever we want to “locate” such an intelligence in our theory we can. This intelligence is certainly “deeper” than the ego. When Jung spoke about such an intelligence he spoke of the Self. He spoke of the experience of the Self often being a defeat for the ego, but he did not talk about the Self as organizing the ego’s dissociation. That’s a disaster for the developing psyche. It ends (or suspends) the symbolic process. The idea of such a dark side to the Self was my adaptation of Fordham’s idea. It made sense out of the clinical material but whether it’s “correct” or not is of little interest to me at this point. Theories, after all, are the very devil, as Jung himself said long ago.

VW: What I like about your new book, actually, is that you depart from head and wander through poetry and literature and your patients’ dreams in a way that allows us to metaphorically journey with the traumatized, split-off soul back into a more embodied center. I like the way you speak of psyche—with all the dark and light forces you describe there—as engaging those mytho-poetic energies in the collective unconscious, like saving angels sent out to find and heal lost souls. This is a very positive and encouraging book, really. Your own journey is very present here, like all your study and work with clients’ dreams have taken you on a journey too.

DK: Yes indeed. What you describe as the “mytho-poetic energies in the collective unconscious” are a key element in healing trauma, but they have to be engaged in *relationship* and that is what I’m emphasizing in this new book. I said a moment ago that dissociation “ends (or suspends) the symbolic process.” It does not end or suspend the mytho-poetic energies of the unconscious. Trauma survivors often have mythic dreams and fantastic archetypal images (frequently on the persecutory side of the spectrum) but it’s not until they find themselves in a therapy *relationship* that this material starts to become symbolically meaningful for them *personally*. We can say that archetypal energies and affects start to become humanized within the transitional space that is re-created between the analytic partners. Trauma forecloses transitional space and therapy re-opens it. And the vehicle for this re-opening is the transference. Dreaming into this potential space then grounds the mytho-poetic process in an embodied relationship. Dissociated traumatic memories start to be recovered in this process and their previously unbearable affects held and processed within the new bi-

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personal field that analysis provides. We could say that the imagination becomes creative again, whereas before it was a process of “fantasying”—that’s Winnicott’s term for a defensive use of the imagination as an escape from an unbearable reality. In the new book I talk a lot about re-opening transitional space—about play and metaphor and imaginative use of the transference—all of which re-opens a link between the two worlds of spirit and matter. When these links are re-established, the soul comes to presence in the “space between the worlds.”

VW: You make the point that being in relationship with a safe *real* person (the therapist) allows the other to bring the traumatic memories and experiences out into the *real* world rather than isolating them within and trying to deaden any feeling content. Recovering and re-experiencing this unconscious material as it surfaces in the dream images, in a safe environment, allows the trauma victim to “suffer” these early traumatic memories in a body-based, *feeling* way, in the outside world, rather than deadening them and isolating them within. Would this be an example of what you call “authentic suffering”?

DK: Yes, “authentic suffering” was Jung’s word for it and he said it often exists “underneath” the “neurotic suffering” on the surface. However, these terms contain strong (pathologizing) value judgments and so we should try for a more sympathetic understanding of what we all suffer when we are wounded psychologically—especially as children. The new trauma paradigm in psychoanalysis stands to help us with this more empathetic understanding.

In condensed form, here is what we now realize. Human development always involves a certain amount of necessary suffering as the realities of life, the world, and of important people are assimilated by the infant. Disappointment and grieving are always a part of this process—although not at catastrophic levels. The negotiation with reality is mediated by the primary relationship (usually with the mother) so that the impact of reality is modified and becomes meaningful and ultimately even enjoyable. Creativity increases. Suffering is not avoided but stays within tolerable limits and the child’s vitality affects grow stronger, ego-agency and resilience increases, and en-souled living becomes possible.

Contrast this with the traumatic situation where the realities of life, of the world, or of important people overwhelm the child with painful impact—an early death of a parent for example, catastrophic events in the natural world, or a parent or relative who abuses or neglects the child. In all these cases the child’s experience is not mediated and becomes *un-experience-able* as *whole experience!* Whole experience is normally an integration of affect in the body, images in the mind, and a component of meaning—how things “make sense” to the child. When reality is simply too painful to experience, then the psyche has a way of allowing life to go on—but at a price. This is a psychological defense we call *dissociation*. Dissociation is organized by a remarkable “intelligence” in the psyche that insures survival. I have called it the “self-care system.” We don’t have to think about it. It’s a “mechanism.” It happens automatically. Suddenly the little girl being raped by her older step-brother is “on the ceiling”, looking down dispassionately at what is happening to her body. When this little girl grows up and enters psychotherapy she will have no whole memory of this trauma because whole memory appears to depend on whole experience. Instead,

her experience—and hence her memory—will be fragmented by dissociation. A “child” part of her will hold the physical pain of the trauma in her body, an “adult” part will hold the anger and resentment toward the perpetrator. And another part of her grown-up functioning self will attribute an “interpretation” to make meaning of this terrible event. In this way, the child survives but in pieces. And the pieces don’t know about each other. And a lot of psychic energy goes into maintaining the amnesia barriers between parts of the self. One must not get too close to another person, lest the alienated parts of the self want to attach again to a real person. And the worst thing is that what can’t be remembered gets repeated... The trauma survivor is often caught in the “repetition compulsion”—unconsciously enacting the inner drama on the outer stage of life without understanding it. This often means continual re-traumatization.

As you can imagine, there is a lot of *suffering* in this process, but it never resolves itself. This is what Jung and Freud meant by neurotic suffering. With each repeated disappointment, the “system” gets stronger and the person gets weaker—more demoralized and despairing. The perverse part is that this suffering, designed by the defensive process, is “preferable” to the more acute (but meaningful) suffering that will be experienced as the dissociated parts come together and re-create whole experiences—usually in psychotherapy.

This is the ironic discovery that trauma survivors often make in psychotherapy. They hope to be liberated from their chronic, unresolvable suffering into the kind of *happiness* they imagine all the other “normal” people in the world have—only to discover that the only cure for neurotic suffering is a deeper kind of suffering. That is what they never got help with before and it is the true avenue to their real humanity and aliveness. Ultimately to the recovery of their souls! As their witnesses in the psychotherapy adventure, we therapists have the difficult task of introducing them to this more painful acute suffering—just like Virgil did for Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, to which I devote a whole chapter in the new book.

VW: I sometimes speak to my clients who talk about “happiness” about the notion of getting “enough.” Not getting enough from the mother, they often think that finding true love is fusing with another person. Your lovely chapter on *The Little Prince* talks about all the grief and loss involved in reattaching to another human being and that this means learning to bear the conflict of separation, grieving for all the things that aren’t going to happen. Would you expand on that?

DK: Yes, that chapter on *The Little Prince* is about innocence—the innocent child at the core of all of us—and how that childhood innocence must be slowly transformed by experience-in-reality if we are to become capable of en-souled, animated living. Most trauma survivors, when they start therapy, don’t know that an innocent part of them has been exiled to “another planet” in the unconscious. And the reason for this exile is that the patient, as an actual child, has been catastrophically disappointed or disillusioned in its otherwise innocent “reaching out” for connection and for love in the world of its family. So if the innocent part of the self can no longer live “in reality”, it removes itself (dissociative defenses do this) to another world where it continues to live in suspended animation, full of longing for the love that has been denied it—often loving something in the natural world that doesn’t “expect” anything. In the story, this is the

single Rose that the little prince adores, and waters, and fusses over on his planet.

Because the innocent core has remained untransformed by reality contact, it remains “omnipotent” in its expectations and pre-disposes the host personality to all kinds of unrealistic expectations in real relationships—such as the fusion that you mention. It doesn’t know how to relate across a boundary of separateness with another person... yet, it oscillates between incredible isolation and despairing loneliness on the one hand, and merged identification on the other. Harry Guntrip, a British object relations theorist called this the “in and out” paradigm of the schizoid individual—too close and then too distant.

In the story, this problem is worked out in a relationship between the little prince and the crashed airplane pilot who has utterly lost his childhood creativity and animation and become all dried up—bored and boring. The little prince brings the pilot’s creative childhood back to him while he, on the other hand, offers a relationship to the little prince, who needs to learn how to love without fusing and identifying with whomever he loves.

This delicate negotiation between innocence and experience is worked out in a beautiful way in our story through the medium of relationship—just like in therapy with trauma survivors, and one of the major “teachers” along the way is a fox who becomes the little prince’s first friend on earth. The fox functions as a kind of intermediate symbol in our story. Like a *psycho-pomp*, he emerges at a crucial moment where the little prince has fallen into complete despair about ever being able to survive in the “real” world into which he has descended. Like an important dream in the analytic process, the fox steps into the picture at the darkest moment. And he brings a redeeming message. He explains to the little prince that if they are to have a real relationship, it will mean that the little prince will have to “tame” him. And that this will take time. They will have to establish emotional ties with each other and this will mean regular meetings at the same time of day (like therapy!), so that they will come to trust each other and get to know each other, personally. They will start to matter to each other as unique individuals. They will start to love each other.

And what’s more, explains the fox, this love will spread out over the whole world. “Look,” says the fox, “do you see the wheatfields over there?... you have hair the color of gold... so when you tame me, the wheat, which is golden will remind me of you ... And I’ll love the sound of the wind in the wheat...”

When, finally, the little prince must take his leave of his new friend, the fox starts to cry and the little prince apologizes for upsetting him. The fox explains to him that this upset at separation is part of loving someone and that it’s perfectly OK. The little prince is incredulous! “How could tears possibly be OK!” he wants to know. The fox’s reply is simple and profound... “Because of the color of the wheatfields,” he says.

In this beautiful passage, the fox is describing the way that love lights up the world with its exquisite beauty. He suggests that the sense of this beauty supplies a living symbol—the metaphor for a larger spiritual reality that supplies a missing third thing between “having” and not having, between self and other, between “me” and “you.” In other words, accepting the true separateness of another person—loving them in their own freedom as it were—means the acceptance of sadness and grief and genuine mourning. But there is something more that one glimpses through the sadness—the beauty of wheatfields. We

might call this recovering one’s innocence but on a “higher” level. It’s as though loving another person in their own separateness—and the apprehension of the world’s incredible beauty—go hand in hand. We hear a haunting refrain from what Wordsworth called the “still, sad music of humanity.

VW: Thank you for talking about that lovely chapter. What comes through is *mystery*. It also illustrates for me your own ability to travel between “planets” and come up with language that poetically blends clinical, spiritual, dream material, trauma work, and soul, all in the same body of work. Thank you for your time with this and we very much look forward to your being with us in February.

DK: I’m looking forward to it too.