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On becoming a psychotherapist

Margot Waddell

My own training as a child psychotherapist, indeed, the route whereby I eventually “became one”, is inextricably related to the role that Martha Harris played in my life at the time. The tale that follows is therefore inevitably an idiosyncratic one. I first met Martha Harris in 1971. I had not yet completed my PhD on the work of the 19th century novelist George Eliot and had become deeply demoralized not only by the ardours of the scholarship itself, but also by the suicidal desperation of so many of my peers. They were among the brightest, the most interesting, most radical, and most unusual of their Cambridge generation. Yet for some the local mental hospital, Fulbourne, tended to beckon and, despite the enlightened psychiatric regime that presided there, a few did actually, shockingly, tragically, die. Others died in car crashes, or war zones as did Jimmy in Biafra, a beloved medical student and friend. But these were extreme times: privileged, political, angry, liberated, it was an age of marching, pamphleteering, acting, guitar-playing alongside the highest standards of work.

These were values, qualities and activities which remain so alive in my mind today.

One day, I was bewailing to a fellow student the psychological plight of such an apparently blessed generation of youngsters, myself included. Tamsin's disposition was more practical than mine: "You probably shouldn't be here at all. Why not think in terms of training at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London", she said. "But it's very difficult to get in there if you have an arts degree. Ideally you should be a doctor. Why don't you go and talk to my godfather in the clinic in London where he works? It's called the Tavistock, and it specializes in children and adolescents. You might find it interesting."

I rang up the person she mentioned, John Bowlby, and made an appointment to meet him. Little did I know at the time that John Bowlby was the foremost proponent of attachment theory and was writing about *Childcare and the Growth of Love*: the adverse impact of separating mothers and children during the first two years of life. Committed as I was to contemporary feminist issues, I would not have taken to this position. But I did take to him. Within twenty minutes or so, as I remember it, of talking to this warm, kindly, intelligent, thoughtful man, he suggested that I pop up the corridor and speak to his colleague, Mrs Martha Harris. Publicly, and theoretically, they were at daggers drawn. Privately, and impressively, they were good friends. As I left his room, he said that if I did ever come to the Clinic and wanted a godfather-like person to talk to, I should feel that I could rely on him. And so, in due course, I did. And he always was utterly available and, indeed, reliable.

So, I went ahead and knocked on that door. I was invited in by a woman who seemed to me at once so strong yet, I felt, verbally hesitant and also vulnerable. She spoke with the distinct accent of the Scottish borders and I immediately took to her.

The only part of the subsequent conversation that I remember in any detail was of Martie, as I later came to know her, asking, rather sceptically, what I knew about psychology. What was my degree? When I told her that I had spent the previous three years researching George Eliot's intellectual milieu in relation to her novels, she said, with typical forthrightness: "Oh well, there's

nothing much that academic psychology can teach you then. We'll just have to fix up an informal-type link with a Cambridge psychologist to clear your credentials and then you can begin the training". PhD and much else as yet unfinished, that is what I did. I moved to London; took a job working with disturbed adolescents; began analysis and, in a sense, the rest is history.

Except, of course, nothing is ever history. For what I didn't then know was that that interview with Martha Harris, in a small room on the second floor of the Tavistock Clinic, London NW3, was to change my way of thinking forever. Until then, conventional academic qualifications had ruled the day, especially in a world that undervalued women's education and put up markers that few could achieve. Slowly, I began to realize that psychodynamic training required quite other things: not so much the kind of intellectual abilities that I had, up to that point, been struggling after in the course of my formal education, but rather, certain capacities, hard won by dint of a very different kind of work.

It took me a long time – years and years – to discover the nature of that work. I remember asking Mrs Harris, in the very early days, what was meant by the term "introjective identification". "You'll discover in due course", she said, as I thought, at the time, annoyingly gnomically. I wanted answers. "It's not an easy notion to define, unless you've felt it on the pulses", she said, also, to me, gnomically annoying. Never properly having studied English, or indeed anything, at school except Latin and Greek, I did not recognise the allusion to Keats's letters, a rich vein of wisdom that I was yet to discover in Mrs Harris's fortnightly seminars on Personality Development. Unbeknownst to me then, those seminars were to provide the infrastructure for much that was to shape the rest of my personal and professional life. The style of teaching was passionate, and, more especially, evocative – far from the didactic mode to which I was accustomed, even in thrall to. Her style was less about conventional "knowledge" than about wisdom – a distinction that so struck me in the course of one of Bion's lectures that I attended in 1979. One cannot see the wisdom for the knowledge, he said – about the noise of conflicting and competing psychoanalytic theories.

I can only think that what happened to me was that I came upon something of the process of introjective identification as having been taking place when, newly appointed to a post at the Tavistock, I was, perforce, having to carry on as a staff member in the wake of Mattie's terrible and, as it turned out, irrecoverable car crash. I was required to take over her teaching – beginning with Personality Development. This course I taught for many years, having prematurely had to grow up and take my place in the adult world of teaching and training, when, in reality, I knew that I myself still had everything to learn. In those early, anxious days, I found myself able to draw on so much that I didn't even know that I knew. For there were things that, as it turned out, I did "know" from her. Projective identification can be spotted at the time. The introjective version was, as Mattie so rightly said, only discoverable as having been taking place over longer stretches of time. It depends on a path of inner change of a kind so wisely and truly noted by George Eliot in *Middlemarch* in terms of "the secret motion of a watch hand" (1985, p. 226).

One of the things that Mattie said during the early days of Personality Development stuck in my mind with the force of recognition: the kind of "unthought known" described by Kit Bollas. It is a recognition that somehow throws everything into place. She commented that, given the extraordinary complexities of early development, as understood by psychoanalysts, psychologists and child psychotherapists, the strangest thing is that anyone gets through it at all. Later I discovered, and wholly agreed with, a similar thought articulated by Freud in the context of adolescence. Yet this was a matter of great interest to Mattie, as to me. How is it that, given the pressures, the casualties, the deprivations of all ordinary human life, most people, willy nilly, do, in their way, get through?

In fact, being in many ways a late developer, as she once described me, even at this stage, now in post, I was riven with doubt as to whether I had, in fact, "got through". Her description of me was in response to, at one point, my being held back a year in the training. Fearful of the answer, I nonetheless eventually asked "Why?" Mattie replied with the resonant sentence, never forgotten, "Development runs unevenly." Perhaps this related

to my impetuosity in going to her after a year of Klein theory seminars. I announced that I simply couldn't understand Klein and that I should probably leave the training. It all sounded so mad, I said. She persuaded me not to, urging me simply to wait, to work with the children and then see. I did work and, with time, I did see.

My uncertainty about ever having actually qualified remained however and was based, among other things, on the fact that, being so panicked about committing my soul, as opposed to my mind, to paper – as I saw it – I had never managed to write a qualifying paper at all. The only straw that I had hung onto for ten years since that cop-out was Mattie calling over the wall of the adjoining loo in the Adolescent Department, "Oh by the way, you will be qualifying this summer." No ceremony then, no certificate – or had I lost it?

Never convinced, anonymously I finally rang Burgh House – then the ACP HQ – to ask if they had on their list of qualified Child Psychotherapists someone called Margot Waddell. "Oh yes" was the reply, "she qualified a decade ago." Incredibly relieved, I then set out to try, belatedly, to "earn" that qualification, to write in a different register from the past and to impart something of the immense wisdom gleaned from my early years of training. There began a never-ending road, a never-ending inside story and I have Mattie to thank for opening my eyes to the nature of that endeavour.

Treading in her footsteps, I began thinking about development not primarily cognitively, nor behaviourally, nor in terms of theories of child development or social adaptation, but emotionally, psychically, in terms of the inside story, a story that I first encountered in those early seminars. There I began to understand something of a "psychoanalytic attitude". That picture is one that puts the emphasis on the complex relationship between internal states and external tasks; on capacities rather than abilities; with the stress always on what an experience means to a person.

By the time that, at Mattie's behest, I attended a two-day summer seminar with Wilfred Bion (Bion having been invited by her to visit London from Los Angeles in the late 70s) I was

just about ready properly to “cross-over”. The “crossing” was to be of enormous significance to my own development. It was from what I later came to realize was an attitude of mind that needed to know “about” things to one that was willing and available to “learn from experience”; willing to be able to engage with experience “first hand” rather than simply sticking to the more cautious approach to life through second-hand ideas; willing, in Wordsworth’s words, “to work and to be wrought upon” (*The Prelude*, XIV.103).

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Remembering Mattie

Alessandra Piontelli

It is difficult to speak of Mattie as just a teacher. Mattie was indeed a fantastic teacher, one of my best ever, but she was also a dearest friend, a motherly figure, a deeply humane person and much more.

We met in the early 70s, when I had just graduated in Medicine, and was specializing in Neurology and Psychiatry. We were both going through very difficult times. Mattie’s beloved first husband had recently died, and the pain for the loss was almost unbearable. She and Don Meltzer were not yet together. I was in my early twenties and already going through a rocky divorce while having to bring up a young child almost totally alone.

I don’t know what the age-gap between us was, but age difference didn’t seem to matter and we both immediately felt at ease talking about our lives. Our deep friendship started then and continued until she died.

Mattie supervised my first two infant observations and three years later, when I was living in London, the psychotherapy of a latency child.

During the early and mid 70s Mattie travelled frequently to Italy, lecturing and giving private and public supervisions. After