

Book Review

Home is Where we Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst.

By Donald W. Winnicott. (1986). London, UK: Pelican Books. ISBN 978-0-14-013563-3; 287 pp.

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On page 42 of this collection of essays by psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott, he comments: "I come back to the maxim: be before do. Be has to develop before do." It is a theme which emerges often in this poetic evocation of the primary themes which underpin Winnicott's clinical work and theoretical ideas. Throughout these papers, which range from an exploration of the concept of the healthy individual, to the place of the monarchy in British society, Winnicott emphasises that the holding facilitative maternal environment is central to the emotional health of the infant. His lucid prose invites the reader to consider that this early environment is essential to the health, not only of the individual and the family, but to society, and that the risk of ignoring the importance of creating a "home" within the psyche, is disastrous for all.

After Winnicott's death in 1971, the papers in this volume were selected by his widow, Claire Winnicott, and two other colleagues from 80 of Winnicott's unpublished essays, and from essays previously published but not easily accessible. The range of papers selected illustrate the breadth of Winnicott's interests, and the central ideas which informed both his practice and his commitment to make analytic thinking accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Indeed Winnicott is something of a flag bearer for those who consider analytic ideas have a place in the political and social domains as well as the clinical setting. Almost all of these papers were first delivered as public addresses.

The papers are divided into three sections: (1) Health and Illness, (2) The Family, and (3) Reflections on Society. Each section builds on the previous one as Winnicott expands his scope from the individual to the family as the essential building blocks upon which his vision of a creative society is based. Whilst his vision is broad, the papers all reflect his deep conviction to his central themes. His topics range from exploration of the concept of "cure" in analytic practice, to exploration of adolescent immaturity, and broader societal themes including feminism, and the "aims of war"; and embedded within almost every paper is Winnicott's emphasis on the crucial significance of the early environment. Indeed the initial papers have the feel of a fire side chat: they evoked a feeling of comfort, as I felt the "presence" of a wise, creative, and grandfatherly man, reassuring me that if we can provide the maternal holding so essential to the health of the new born infant, all will be well when subsequent developmental challenges arise.

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The second section builds on these ideas as Winnicott explores familial themes, including the importance of the mother being held by wider society.

It is in the third section of papers that Winnicott's courage is revealed as he explores some of the more controversial issues of the mid twentieth century. If the early papers are fire side chats, the later papers are provocative and, at times, disturbing as Winnicott tackles socio-political topics such as feminism, the contraceptive Pill, war and its aims, democracy, and freedom. When considering "The Pill" he non-moralistically challenges us to recognise that what we are talking about is "killing babies" (p. 203). He suggests that to avoid facing this uncomfortable perspective is to avoid the disturbing uncertainty of unconscious and sometimes primitive motivations. In his paper on feminism he notes the infant's inevitable and absolute dependence on the mother and suggests the unconscious fear of woman, for both men and women that this evokes. In considering the Pill he makes disturbingly casual reference to his own part in arranging patients to "get rid of" babies, primarily due to his assessment that the mother would not be able to provide the maternal care which would have been "good enough". His essays on democracy, on freedom, and on the aims of war, all have as a central theme the need for "good enough mothering" if the emotional health of individuals and thus of society is to be maintained. In his reflections on war he wonders if Britons would claim that Germans who supported Hitler were developmentally pre-adolescent in their submission to Hitler's authority, whilst the British are striving for something closer to adult maturity, and wisely cautions his fellow Britons to recognise that destructive impulses and motivations exist in us all.

In these later papers Winnicott is ambitious, as he takes psychoanalysis from the couch to the world; the effect is both encouraging and disturbing. It is encouraging in that his emphasis on the health of the individual and the micro focus on mothering and family as the building blocks of a healthy society resonate with a psychotherapeutic approach to social concerns. The disturbance inevitably arises from reading papers of their time, which do not reflect the post modern and post structuralist turns of contemporary thought, which encourage us to recognise the influence of structural power relations. Thus Winnicott's unreflective consideration of his role in facilitating his patients' abortions, perhaps reflects Winnicott's time and context, and suggest that he, like his patients, may be influenced by things other than early maternal holding, or intra-psychic conflict; and that the structures informed by patriarchy provide him with access to authority many of this female patients do not have. Nevertheless Winnicott's courage, his commitment to infant care, and his understanding of the impact on infants when this care is unavailable, is undeniable and moving. In addition, his emphasis on inviting the general public to consider the uncomfortable realm of fantasy, and unconscious motivations, as he takes psychoanalytic ideas into the public domain, is impressive.

It is in the final paper, in which Winnicott reflects on the symbolic meaning of the monarchy for the health of Britain, that the themes throughout the book are brought to a potent synthesis. I have never been overly enthusiastic about the place of British royalty in our political sphere, much less our psyche; however, as Winnicott invites us to consider that the person on the throne is "everyone's dream" (p. 266), to be suspicious of the logic

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of rational thought, and to wonder about how this dream soothes and provides holding for us all, I felt drawn back into the poetic comfort of Winnicott's engaging tones. Once again I felt invited to consider that, if the maternal environment is good enough, things will go well; that if the home that we start from is holding enough, then all will be well. It's a lovely dream, and Winnicott is a brave and evocative dreamer. For a moment at least, I felt lulled back to sleep, to dream this dream, and to feel held by the potency, clarity, and dedication with which Winnicott offers his vision. For anyone who wishes to meet Winnicott the man, in all his warmth, and his flaws, this collection of his papers will provide rewarding reading.



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