

Conference Review

The Sixth International Conference on the Work of Frances Tustin: On Bringing Patients to Life, 19-21 July, 2012, Sydney, Australia

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Frances Tustin (1913-1994) was a British child psychotherapist who trained at the Tavistock Clinic in London and who was an analysand of Wilfred Bion. She is internationally recognised for her work with autistic children and wrote around thirty articles and four books: *Autism and Childhood Psychosis* (Tustin, 1972), *Autistic States in Children* (Tustin, 1981), *Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients* (Tustin, 1986), and *The Protective Shell in Children and Adults* (Tustin, 1990). In 1995, a year after Tustin's death, the Frances Tustin Memorial Trust was established by Dr Judith Mitrani (see the Frances Tustin Memorial Trust, 2012).



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The Trust is dedicated to the teaching, expansion and extension of Frances Tustin's work on the understanding and treatment of autistic spectrum disorders in children, adolescents and adults. This includes the sponsorship of international conferences on Tustin's work, which have been held in London, UK (2004); Caen, France (2005); Venice, Italy (2006); Berlin, Germany (2007); Tel-Aviv, Israel (2008); and, this year in Sydney, Australia. This Sixth International Conference, entitled *On Bringing Patients to Life*, was organized by the Trust, in conjunction with the Australian Psychoanalytical Society, the New South Wales Institute of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, The Institute of Child and Adolescent Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, and the Couples and Family Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia.

I would like to share some of my impressions and learnings from this conference. There was a mixture of plenary sessions and small clinical workshops; a couple of films of presentations by Frances Tustin towards the end of her life; and two presentations by way of video links from London: one from Anne Alvarez of the Tavistock Institute, and the other from Maria Rhode of the Tavistock Institute and the University of East London. So there was a lot going on. One of the highlights for me was a plenary session by Kate Barrows, a British analyst: *Narcissism and autism: Poles apart or on the same spectrum?* In

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her presentation Barrows suggested that narcissism and autism are indeed on the same spectrum; she considered whether the difference between autistic and narcissistic defences is primarily structural or whether it has more to do with the degree of concreteness and the capacity to symbolise. In thinking about the implications of this for clinical work, particularly in relation to patients who we might think of as having narcissistic difficulties, it is interesting to think of these patients as perhaps more having serious difficulties in relating, and how do we as therapists then attempt to reach them in their place of “walled-offness”.

This concept certainly resonated for me in relation to particular patients, who are perceived by those around them as being “narcissistic” because they do not appear to value relationships with others and often behave in a dismissive way in their interactions. It makes a difference whether you think of such a person as being predominantly denigrating of others and rather grandiose, or whether you think of them as being unable and unwilling to connect with others, thus more autistic than narcissistic. In describing the essential difficulties of autistic children, Simpson (2008) noted that there is “a deficit in the capacity for reciprocity in their relations with other people” (p. 23) and that these children from the start show self-sufficiency and act as if people are not there. In the discussion that followed Barrows’ presentation, Neville Symington suggested that thinking of someone as narcissistic might well be a “moral” standpoint, whereas thinking of them as someone with autistic pockets or enclaves might fit more with the position of the “healer of the soul”. This comment seemed to resonate with some people, and to agitate others. There was a discernible ripple through the room and one person wondered if it could really be that simple. Symington replied that it might not be, and also pointed out that he had written a book about narcissism, implying that he had given quite some thought to this topic! (Symington, 1993) Again, in reflecting on this clinically, I found myself thinking about the experience of being “bored” with a patient, a common countertransference feeling with a narcissistic patient, and how much responsibility we might take for these “bored” feelings that we feel. To take on Symington’s comment about how “moral” we might become in the face of apparent narcissism, it seems that being bored carries a certain moral indignation with it: “This person is boring me and I have to endure it because this is how it is to be with a narcissistic person” is the underlying premise. A rather different approach would be to attempt to reach the patient, in whatever ways might work.

One of the most moving parts of the conference for me was a presentation by an American analyst called Jeffrey Eaton. His presentation was titled *The self and its circumstances: Aspects of emergence from autistic states*. In it, he carefully and exquisitely talked about his clinical work with young children with autism, Asperger’s syndrome and autistic spectrum disorders, and shared his work with one particular child, an eight year old boy whom he called Eric. Eaton worked with Eric for five years in twice weekly sessions, at times increasing the number of sessions when this was needed. (In his original assessment of Eric, Eaton had recommended meeting four times a week, however his parents found this unrealistic for financial, practical and emotional reasons.) During the presentation Eaton described his work with Eric, showing at times drawings that Eric had made, and shared his thoughts about these and also his visceral experience of

working with this patient, which he described as being like “a permanent earthquake”. This was also his patient’s experience of his own state: “It’s like a permanent earthquake. It never stops shaking”. Eaton described how the feeling of this was a turning point for him and a realisation of what it was to be in Eric’s body and to see how he saw the world, feel how he felt the world. In some way he managed to convey this feeling during his presentation as I, too, felt emotionally shaken and rocked in hearing his account of the work. This may have been enhanced by sitting in the front row and so being in amongst the action, as it were, unfortunately without having thought to bring tissues with me!

Eaton described himself as being inspired by Tustin’s example of working psychodynamically with autistic states of mind and that, by establishing a psychoanalytic situation, the emergence from autistic states and the growth of aliveness and self-expression become possible. In a write-up of this work in his own book *A Fruitful Harvest*, Eaton (2012) illustrated what he means by this:

I hope to show how the impact of discovering the externality of another human being, developing the capacity for sharing attention, and learning how to play all gradually become sources of the healing influence that allowed Eric to move from a very narrow and constricted experience to a much wider awareness, even to coming into contact with a colony of souls within. (p. 35)

During his presentation Eaton also very humbly described the process of working with autistic children as “understanding and helping where we can”. His view, shared by others at the conference, is that autism cannot be “cured” as such; instead the work is to increase the possibilities for living a life that is worth living by increasing aliveness and awareness. I thought of this as also extending to any clinical work: that “cure” in the psychoanalytic context is not about getting rid of something problematic but, rather, about increasing the possibilities for freedom within oneself and in relation to the other.

There were many other aspects of this conference which were inspiring and uplifting. Anne Alvarez’s videolink presentation, *The birth and rebirth of psychic life*, for example, in which she shared something she has noticed about the process of training beginning therapists, namely, that, in their anxiety to do what they are “told”, for example, to interpret the transference, that they will often turn themselves inside out to make such an interpretation, often at the expense of attuning to the patient. She illustrated this with a lovely story about a beginning therapist working with a young female patient aged about ten years. The patient came into the consulting room with a freshly grazed knee, and it is obvious that it had been bleeding earlier in the day. She tells the beginning therapist that she tripped at school and now has this grazed knee. The therapist, who is anxious to be seen to be doing the right thing, and is mindful of their upcoming break of one week, says “I think you are telling me that my being away for the next week is incredibly painful for you” — rather than a normal response, which would be something like “Oh, my goodness, that must have hurt” to which could be added something like “... and to top it all off we’re not seeing each other for a week.” Alvarez referred to this as “hitching a ride” on a normal response. This was all said with such ease and yet we all know how difficult it is, particularly at the beginning of our careers as psychotherapists,

or with particular patients, to strike the right balance between so-called “normal responses” and an attentiveness to the patient’s inner processes, all at the same time. Alvarez’s main point was a plea to let beginning therapists use their usually very fine abilities to attune to and be with their patients, in other words, their humanity, which usually involves some variation on Winnicottian holding, rather than to give the message that to interpret the transference should take precedence over all else. As she said, it takes decades to make a therapist. Her essential message seemed to be “First, be a person.”

This theme of being a person was echoed in Neville Symington’s talk, *How autism thwarts the making of a relationship*, which drew on his latest book *The Psychology of the Person* (Symington, 2012) and also in Annie Reiner’s talk, *Autosensuous movements and Bion’s thoughts without a thinker*, which she opened by saying that she sees herself not as a psychoanalyst or a writer or an artist, although she is all of those things, but that she is a person. She also told a lovely story which helped me to think about why it is so difficult to write about patient work. The story was that one day someone said to Picasso about a painting he had painted of a woman “that doesn’t look like a woman”. Apparently he replied “It’s not a woman; it’s a painting of a woman”. Likewise our writing about a session is not the session; it’s a representation of the session.

This was a rich conference, full of so many moments of learning and illumination. I am grateful that I was there and look forward to the next one.

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