



Anne Alonso



At the time of her death in August of 2007, Anne Alonso was widely held to be a leading teacher and practitioner of psychodynamic therapy of her day.

Anne had the gift of narrative and a talent for rhetoric, two threads that ran unbroken through the tapestry of her life. The story she told was the story of the unconscious and its impact on relationships. For many, even seasoned psychotherapists, the unconscious is theory or tool or construct. For Anne, it was daily reality. Her clinical genius was rooted in the fact that for her the other side of the mind was as real as conscious life. While this shadow world and its landmarks are theory to most people—flat and two dimensional—to Anne it was not a map, but the territory itself. She was “from here,” a guide through its mysteries.

In the academy and in the hospital, Anne wove the story of psychoanalysis so convincingly that hundreds and hundreds of trainees and students and colleagues and patients routinely began their own quotidian stories of selflearning with “Anne says...” As clinician, supervisor, and advocate of psychoanalytic theory and practice she was unexcelled.

As befits a thoroughly psychodynamic person, her roots inform who she became. The complexity and contradictions of human personality were embodied in Anne. She was an Arab woman with a Catholic education, but that was the least of it. She was rooted in paradox. Her first languages were Arabic and French. Her father, Ernest Abokalil, was a Lebanese immigrant who was a leftwing union organizer with a capitalist streak, proprietor of a restaurant near the mills of Manchester, New Hampshire (which informed Anne’s love of food and cooking). Her mother Helen Hashim died before Anne was a year old, so Anne was raised by her father, grandmother, and aunt. Her experience of the female role in Arab culture was given extra dimension by her schooling with an order of French nuns whom she always remembered affectionately for their joy and grace. This diversity of origins perhaps fed her uncanny capacity to bridge cultural differences and her later preeminence as a practitioner of group psychotherapy and scholar of

social systems. And her devotion to feminism may have begun as she stood, handinhand with her father, hearing his male friends commiserate with him, “It is too bad, our brother, that you had no sons.”

Anne had a special interest in group therapy. She served as the President of both the Northeastern Society for Group Psychotherapy and the American Group Psychotherapy Association. Most of her published papers had to do with group therapy.

Her Presidential address when assuming office at the American Group Psychotherapy Association was entitled “Group Therapy and the Village Well.” The importance of community was omnipresent for Anne, and the use of groups as therapeutic vehicles was a natural for her. Her teaching was also often done in groups — and almost always included food!

Anne’s influence was felt far beyond the United States. At her memorial service a Chinese physician stood to address the large crowd. He spoke of how important it had been for the Chinese mental health community that Anne had come to teach them. And he spoke of how available she had remained, conducting regular consultations via email and conference calls – all without charge. This physician had come to say his goodbyes completely on his own and without notifying anyone. It was important to him.

Anne’s work in Argentina, Mexico and many other countries dramatically enhanced the use of psychodynamic therapy and group therapy in those locales.

Anne spent her entire professional career affiliated with the MGH, beginning with her internship in 1968. Her first experiences were in the Acute Psychiatric Service, where she demonstrated a love of working with very disturbed patients, a love not always shared by psychoanalytic practitioners. She was one of four founding members of the “General Psychiatry Practice” in 1975, the first faculty group practice that was the seed crystal for the growth of the MGH Psychiatry Service’s outpatient division. Anne also founded the Center for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy which attracted several dozen colleagues as faculty to offer advanced postgraduate training for therapists, most of whom had graduated from the Psychiatry residency at MGH. The center offered a curriculum of seminars and supervision which became the intellectual center for the study of psychodynamic therapies at MGH. Through the Endowment for Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, which she founded and to which she was a major contributor, she supported not only the Center but contributed support to one of the few active psychodynamic psychotherapy research programs in the country at MGH. The endowment attracted celebrities and donors to support its work and rallied to the Endowment’s motto “So there will always be someone to talk to.”

She cared for patients, taught seminars to psychiatric residents and psychology interns, and was a beloved and iconic teacher of the discipline of psychotherapy. A winner of teaching awards, she pioneered in the study and teaching of the art and discipline of psychotherapy supervision as well. She was the most sought after supervisor among a large faculty. Her advice and wisdom were often captured with sensitivity and humor in sayings such as: “the helping hand strikes again,” “don’t just do something sit there,” and “no good turn goes unpunished.” Therapists in training were prepared and strengthened for their work by introjecting Anne’s calm presence and patient insight. That she was so comfortable with listening to the greatest anguish allowed patients to find a way to bear their pain more readily themselves.

MGH was, indeed, Alma Mater to Anne – the mother she lost and then regained.

Respectfully submitted,

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