

AGENCY, SURRENDER, AND GRACE IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

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There is a vital dialectic between agency and surrender in life and in the analytic process. Without an ability to will, one cannot choose one's actions; one becomes a passive victim of circumstances rather than an agent who can influence one's own destiny. On the other hand, an exaggerated sense of agency fails to take into account the limits of our ability to control life, and is associated with a type of narcissistic omnipotence that can be linked with an experience of isolation. In this article I explore some of the subtleties of the interplay between willing and surrendering in the analytic process. I also examine the way in which an inability to surrender can impede the patient's ability to take in what the analyst has to offer. And finally I adapt the concept of *grace* from theological discourse to highlight a dimension of the analytic process that involves an emergence of the patient's capacity to make constructive use of the analyst's interventions.

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There is a vital dialectic between the experience of *personal agency* and *surrender* in life and in the analytic process. Without a sense of personal agency or will, one cannot choose one's actions; one becomes a passive victim of circumstances rather than an agent who can influence one's own destiny (Farber, 2000; Greenberg, 2008; Mitchell, 1983; Meissner, 2009; Schafer, 1976). On the other hand, an exaggerated sense of the power of the will both fails to take into account the influence of unconscious determinism and the uncontrollable aspects of life, and promotes an inflated sense of personal agency. This inflation goes hand in hand with a type of grandiosity that fails to recognize the fundamental otherness or alterity of life.

The view that one is master of one's own destiny is consistent with the values of secular humanism and Western individualism. And while the rise of secular humanism and the *triumph of the therapeutic* (Rieff, 1966) have been associated with progress, they have also led to a type of one-sidedness that can be associated with a sense of meaninglessness, isolation,

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and despair. This despair can be accompanied by bitterness and cynicism, resulting from the experience of having one's sense of omnipotence thwarted by the exigencies of life. The therapeutic worldview that has come to play a dominant role in American culture rests on an implicit assumption that taking responsibility for our lives plays a critical role in changing. But where does personal responsibility end and chance take over? Is there any role in the equation for arbitrariness, or what the ancient Greeks referred to as *tuche* (luck, fortune, that which is beyond control, the inscrutable character of the gods)? The ancient Greeks had an exquisite sensitivity for the significance of human agency and its limits. The philosopher [Martha Nussbaum \(1986\)](#) argues that the great Greek tragedies raise profound ethical questions by portraying a world in which the best of efforts and most honorable of intentions can be thwarted by misfortune or "bad luck." As [Roy Schafer \(2009\)](#) suggests, this type of tragic sensibility adds both depth and richness to the psychoanalytic vision. It recognizes that as human beings we are inevitably confronted with fateful situations that are insufficiently under our control. In these situations:

. . . we must choose a course of action while knowing or sensing that the anticipated benefits of each choice will be compromised by painful consequences. . . . Adding to the gravity of the situation is the person's realizing that many consequences cannot be anticipated. The action chosen may be taken through physical behavior, in speaking out, or silently, as in adopting a consequential emotional position relative to unfolding events. And there is no way around acting; even remaining inactive is making a consequential choice (pp. 3–4).

In some respects, Freud had a poignant awareness of the limits of human mastery and self-determination. In addition to his belief in the pervasive role that unconscious factors play in determining our lives, he had a tragic awareness of the difficulty of coping with life's harsh realities, and an uncompromising belief in the value of facing these realities without what he regarded as the illusory comforts of religion. At the same time, Freud's emphasis was on the importance of increasing human choice and autonomy, and this emphasis in many ways influenced the development of subsequent psychoanalytic thinking ([Aron & Starr, 2012](#)).

Counterbalancing this thrust is a line of psychoanalytic thought dating back to Sandor Ferenczi and elaborated in the work of analysts such as [Balint \(1979\)](#), [Winnicott \(1965\)](#), [Kahn \(1963\)](#), and [Kohut \(1977\)](#), that recognizes the importance of dependency. Following in [Ferenczi's \(1933/1980\)](#) footsteps, Balint critiqued what he referred to as the philobatic bias (i.e., the tendency to valorize autonomy) of psychoanalytic theory and practice and emphasized the importance of promoting a therapeutic regression with certain analytic cases that he described as experiencing what he termed a *basic fault*—a fundamental sense of emptiness or *lack of being*. He suggested that for patients of this type it is important to depart from the customary analytic stance of abstinence to be more gratifying of their wishes. Balint maintained that in certain phases of treatment it can be vital for these patients to reconnect to a primary desire to be able to depend upon the love and caring of the authority figure. He linked this desire and expectation to the Japanese concept of *amae*, which can be defined as the expectation of being able to depend and presume upon another's benevolence. Although the experience of *amae* is conceptualized as universal one, it tends to be encouraged in Japanese childrearing practices, in contrast to Western childrearing practices that discourage it ([Doi, 1973](#)).

[Winnicott \(1965\)](#) is well known for his emphasis on the value of regression to dependence in analysis. He believed that when one's developmental experiences have not been "good enough" a false self-organization comes to dominate the personality and the true self fails to develop. In these situations it can be critical for the analyst to be sufficiently gratifying to

promote the type of regression to dependence through which the individual gradually comes to trust the analyst sufficiently to let the true self begin to emerge.

Emmanuel Ghent (1990) in his seminal paper “Masochism, Submission and Surrender,” builds upon Winnicott’s (1965) emphasis on the relationship between regression to dependence and the emergence of the true self, to provide a conceptually and clinically fertile analysis of the role of surrender as an important human need that is linked to growth and creativity. According to Ghent the experience of surrender involves a type of acceptance and “letting go” of one’s defensive need to control things, to impose one’s preconceptions upon experience and to try to define oneself in opposition to the other. It involves an experience of “being” rather than “doing.” And it involves the emergence of a type of faith that there is a real or separate other out there who can provide nurturance (Eigen, 1981; Ghent, 1990).

Submission, in contrast to surrender, involves a type of resignation (Ghent, 1990). It involves a defensive, self-protective subjugation of the needs of the self to the other. Submission occurs in response to dominance and control. This is not the case for surrender. One can choose to submit. One cannot, however, intentionally surrender, although one can prepare the psychological ground for it. Ghent (1990) suggests that the tendency to equate surrender with submission and defeat is particularly characteristic of Western culture. In contrast, he maintains, it is more common in Asian cultures and the spiritual traditions of the East to regard surrender as a healthy process associated with growth. While Ghent is right about the importance of surrender in Eastern philosophy and spiritual practice, it is interesting to note that there is a vital dialectic between will and surrender in the East as well. For example, there is an emphasis in Buddhist meditation practices on the importance of personal agency, sustained effort, and self-discipline.

In fact, I believe that this emphasis has contributed to the enthusiasm with which the self-help industry has embraced mindfulness-based practices. They are easily adapted into the form of a self-help technology that fits well with the Western emphasis on agency and autonomy. In Japan, forms of Buddhist practice that emphasize the importance of sustained effort and disciplined meditative practice as a gradual path toward awakening are referred to as *self-power* approaches. In contrast, approaches that emphasize the importance of faith and surrender are referred to as *other-power* approaches. The practice of guru devotion, which involves cultivating faith and devotion to one’s teacher, provides an excellent example of an other-power approach. As Ghent puts it “The guru creates an illusion—an illusion which permits the disciple to yield, surrender false self, and therein have a chance of finding himself” (1990, p. 217). This experience of surrender allows the student to enter into a type of transitional space in which the distinction between subjective and objective, fantasy and reality, self and other, diminishes. The process of idealizing the spiritual teacher helps to diminish the defensive boundaries of the self, and facilitates a greater sense of connection to the cosmos through the sense of connection to the teacher as an embodiment of the principle of enlightenment. It promotes a diminishing of one’s narcissistic sense that one is the center of the universe and that everything revolves around oneself (Safran, 2003).

Another example of an other-power approach can be found in the tradition of Shin Buddhism, a form of Pure Land Buddhism, which is the dominant form of Buddhism in Japan. Shin emphasizes that the task is not to purify ourselves over time through our own efforts, or to strive for perfection, but to accept ourselves as we are, in all of our human folly. In Shin it is taught that liberation is a gift that is given by Amida Buddha (one of the infinite number of Buddhas, considered to be an embodiment of a universal principle of compassion) rather than a state that is achieved through our own efforts. There is a

playful, teasing, yet at the same time compassionate sensibility to Shin literature, that emphasizes that despite our many pretensions and our striving to achieve perfection through our own efforts and wisdom, in the end we are all fools who are dependent upon the compassion of the Amida Buddha (Unno, 2002).

From a psychological perspective, in Shin Buddhism one experiences an awakening by having faith in the Amida Buddha and his vow to liberate all sentient beings, and by abandoning any of his or her own efforts to attain enlightenment (Unno, 1998). The reason this is important is because from a Buddhist perspective, our everyday sense of self-preoccupation and self-sufficiency lies at the heart of the problem. Abandoning oneself to the Other can thus be understood as undermining a kind of normal but dysfunctional narcissism that separates us from the larger system that we are all part of.

Surrender and Grace

In Western theological discourse, the Christian concept of *grace* can be seen as a paradigmatic example of an other-power approach. The concept of grace in many ways goes against the grain of the secular humanistic ethos that dominates our therapeutic culture. And I believe, for this reason, that a hermeneutic analysis of the concept of grace from a psychological vantage point can have interesting implications for the way in which we think about the role of personal responsibility in psychoanalysis. The concept of grace in Christianity has important affinities to the notion of the *Buddha's compassion* in the Shin tradition. They are different ways of emphasizing the importance of other-power. The tension between the relative importance of human agency and deeds versus God's grace is central one in Christian theology. In the Christian scriptures grace signifies the "free, benevolent and merciful love of God for his people" (Duffy, 1993, p. 27). In general terms, the concept of grace is used to refer to the "freely," "gratuitously" given gift of salvation that God provides to humankind through Christ. In other words, grace does not have to be earned. One of the defining features of St. Paul's theology is the distinction between Judaism's emphasis on redemption as a reward for good deeds, and Christianity's emphasis on salvation through God's grace. One of Paul's critiques of the dominant form of Rabbinic Judaism of his era was what he believed to be its emphasis on empty ritualism or legalism rather than inner spirituality.

With St. Augustine the dialectic between personal agency and grace comes very much to the forefront of Christian theology. Augustine indicated that he was influenced by Paul's statement: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (Haight, 1979, p. 34). According to Augustine the defining feature of God's grace is that it is "free" because it is neither merited nor earned. Although Augustine does not deny that human beings have free will, he argues that we are free only by virtue of the absence of external constraints. We are free to act as we choose, but as a result of original sin, we choose to act in accordance with our desires, which are always evil.

How are we able to transcend our evil natures? It is only through God's grace that we are able to choose God's grace; that we are able to turn toward God and choose that which is good. Thus, even the ability to experience God's grace is an unearned and gratuitously bestowed gift. It is not a reward for good deeds or even a reward for faith. The act of faith is not chosen or willed or even a result of openness. It is a gift of God.

From a secular humanistic perspective, Augustine's position can seem harsh and uncompromising. How can it be said that one has free will, if one is only free to choose

evil? If even the choice of turning toward God is the result of God's grace, then how can one have any moral responsibility? Nevertheless, I think it is worth trying to make psychological sense of the type of spiritual dilemma that Augustine is trying to resolve. To the extent that salvation is the reward for good acts or even good beliefs (e.g., having faith in God), then there is no escape from the closed circle of doing things for instrumental reasons. The value of any act is a function of its results. One cannot desire the good in and of itself. One can only desire it for selfish reasons.

For Augustine, sin is egoism, or what we would call narcissism. Sin is "the turning of human motive and intention and consequent behavior back in upon itself so that value outside the self is not enjoyed in itself, but used for the self. The person as a center of consciousness is a center of reality and what is beyond the self is drawn into the self and exists for the self" (Haight, 1979, p. 156). The other is related to only as an object—not an independent center of subjectivity. If, however, my salvation is entirely dependent upon God's grace, then it is a radical blow to my narcissism. It is a radical way of breaking into the self-enclosed state of human existence.

At the heart of Martin Luther's theology is the doctrine of *Sole Fide* (i.e., faith alone). Luther was attempting to reclaim the Augustinian insight that salvation is not a reward for merit, but rather a gift of God's grace (Sproul, 1995). For Luther, the phrase free will is in his words "too grandiose and comprehensive and fulsome" (Sproul, 2002, p. 94). It was critical from Luther's perspective that we place all of our trust in God's perfect power and integrity. According to Luther, God bestows the gift of his grace upon us precisely as we are in all of our unworthiness and our sinfulness.

The concept of grace as developed in the writings of theologians such as Augustine and Luther is both a radical challenge to our narcissism, and a potential balm for corrosive feelings of unworthiness. As long as we believe that we have to become worthy before we can be loved, we live in despair. If however, we are all unworthy, and God loves us all, then we no longer need to strive to become worthy (Oberman, 1989).

Paradoxically, only when one feels most unworthy and when one's last claim on salvation has disappeared, when nothing remains but a readiness to surrender to God's almighty will and judgment, only then can one feel that God accepts and forgives us as we are (Haight, 1979). In a sense then, the concept of original sin serves a function in Christian theology, not unlike the function that the notion of human folly plays in Shin Buddhism. Both can function to relieve the individual from an oppressive sense of personal responsibility, by conceptualizing the experience of unworthiness as part of the human condition rather than as a personal flaw.

From my perspective, the Shin Buddhist idea that we are all fools has a somewhat more playful, less judgmental feeling to it than the idea that we are all sinners. On the other hand, the idea that we are all sinners perhaps speaks to a deeper, more corrosively intense sense of guilt than the acknowledgment that we are all fools. I realize that this positive psychological gloss on the concepts of original sin and grace goes against the grain of a dominant cultural narrative. But I believe that approaching these ideas in this particular hermeneutic fashion can play a role in challenging prevailing cultural assumptions valorizing autonomy, and pathologizing dependency that can color the practice of psychoanalysis in a subtly pernicious way.

We live in a world that stubbornly refuses to conform to our fantasies and resists our attempts at influence. While we are all responsible for making choices and for exercising our wills to organize our actions in accordance with our choices, we are all confronted with the limits to our ability to achieve much of what we desire. In any psychological or spiritual system there is always the potential danger of instrumental thinking. To the extent

that one acts with a strong investment in the fruits of one's actions, one will inevitably be disappointed. There is always an element of indeterminacy to things, and one can never know in advance what the consequences of one's actions will be. The instrumental mode of being prevents us from being able to accept or appreciate things and people in their own terms. In other words, the instrumental mode of being is ultimately an egocentric or self-centered mode that involves relating to the world and the creatures in it as objects to be used by us, rather than as other beings, or subjects in their own right. The instrumental mode of being involves a failure of intersubjectivity (Benjamin, 1990, 2004). It involves an inability to genuinely experience the other as a separate subject with his or her own desires, needs, and limitations.

In light of this understanding, the theology of grace as reflected in the writing of both St. Augustine and Luther can be viewed as an important critique of instrumentality (Haight, 1979) and a call for intersubjectivity. In Martin Buber's (1958) words:

The Thou meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking . . . The relation to the Thou is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole. No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between I and Thou. Desire itself is transformed as it plunges out of the dream into the appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about (pp. 11–12).

Although I believe that the process of helping our patients to assume a greater degree of personal agency plays an important role in the analytic process, I also believe that there is something about helping our patients to become more accepting of the limits of personal agency that is important (Safran, 1999, 2012; Schafer, 2009). In addition, it is important to bear in mind that in some important way neither the patient nor the analyst can bring about change through an act of will. Instead there is something about the process of “letting go” and surrendering to an organic process that emerges as the analytic relationship evolves that is critical.

Simon's Unfulfilled Fantasies

Simon, who I have written about elsewhere (Safran, 2006), began treatment with me in his early twenties. A central theme for him was his inability to find a lasting romantic relationship with a woman. Simon was the youngest of six siblings who were all boys. His father, a wealthy entrepreneur, was often out of town on business. When Simon's father was at home, his major form of contact with his sons was through sports, and Simon, a bookish child, was not as athletic as his brothers. Being five years younger than the next youngest child in the family, Simon was often left out of family activities. He never developed a comfortable relationship with father, and his mother, who he felt closer too, was a wealthy socialite with limited time for the boys. Simon tended to retreat into compensatory fantasies about becoming a famous writer one day. He also learned to fend for himself, and regarded his own dependency needs with ambivalence.

Over time I came to see that Simon experienced a fundamental sense of emptiness—a basic fault in his experience of being. His fantasy was that if he could find the right woman he would be completed, and his sense of emptiness would disappear. One of the impediments to finding the right woman, however, was his fundamental sense that he was unworthy, that he was not good enough the way he was. He was not masculine enough, not witty enough, and not spontaneous enough. And when he was socializing with others,

he felt that his mind just didn't move quickly enough. Simon had always had the fantasy that if he were to become a famous writer, then he would be sufficiently worthy to earn the love of a woman he truly desired. But in fact, Simon rarely completed anything he was trying to write because his writing did not meet his own high standards. Simon's dilemma was exacerbated by the intense shame and self-loathing that he experienced because of his failures as a writer and because of his inability to sustain a long-term romantic relationship. At a fundamental level he felt alone and not part of the human community.

When I first met Simon, he was a shy young man, who was desperately afraid of rejection, and who had rarely dated. I was struck by an eager, almost "puppy dog" like quality to him, and his apparent willingness to trust me and make good use of what I had to offer. I found Simon to be quite likable, and I observed myself settling into the role of the good father, providing him with the support and mentoring that appeared to be missing from his background. Simon responded in kind with appreciation and enthusiasm. While I was gratified by Simon's enthusiasm and his efforts to make concrete changes in his life, I also had an intuition that his eagerness masked a more cynical side that would emerge over time.

As treatment progressed, Simon worked hard to overcome his fear of rejection by women. Over time he became willing to take more risks, experienced and survived a number of rejections, and found a number of women who were receptive to his advances. He developed a number of romantic relationships, but they were all of relatively short duration—2 or 3 months at most. Inevitably Simon found his romantic partners to be either too "needy" or not sufficiently challenging. Again and again Simon was faced with the dilemma of whether to stay in a relationship that felt unfulfilling, or end the relationship and face unbearable loneliness once again. He showed considerable courage in ending these relationships, despite his tremendous fear of being alone and doubts about his own ability to find someone else. Every time a romantic relationship ended, Simon felt lonely, worthless, and became more despairing about the possibility of ever finding the "right woman." At such times he felt hopeless about his future and hopeless about our work together.

It was difficult for Simon not to feel that his inability to find the right partner was not fair. He felt envious of his old high school friends who were all married, having children, and building successful careers. And he was also becoming increasingly embittered. It was also hard for Simon not to feel that there should be a proportional relationship between the amount of effort he put into trying to change and the outcome. Simon alternated between blaming himself for not being able to find the right mate, and blaming me for not being a good enough therapist. During this stage of our work together he would typically begin sessions by announcing, "I've got nothing to say today." Then he would sit there in silence—a long, painful silence, during which he would utter only the occasional word. Exploration revealed that he felt pressured to produce something, resentful toward me for not bringing our sessions to life, and for not being more helpful in general.

At first it was difficult for him to acknowledge these critical feelings of me outright, but I experienced a kind of sullen resentment emanating from him. He in turn insisted that I was critical and judgmental of him, and I undoubtedly was at times. I also felt stuck and deadened inside. When Simon's experience was dominated by his anger at me for failing him, it reinforced his belief that ultimately he was alone, and he resolved to make changes on his own rather than wait for help from me that was not forthcoming. At such times he shifted into a resentful, defiant counterdependent state, making it more difficult for him to be open to anything I had to offer him. These impasses had a painful, wearing quality to them—the type of "doer or done to" quality described so well by [Jessica](#)

Benjamin (2004), Lewis Aron (2006), and Jody Davies (2004). Either I was the judgmental, withholding analyst who could not accept Simon for who he was, or he was the demanding, petulant, and unyielding adolescent, who was unable appreciate anything that I offered him.

Over time Simon and I repeatedly explored and worked our way through these enactments. But the phrase “worked our way through” implies a more active or agentic type of process than that which took place. Many contemporary analysts focus on the central role that living through painful enactments of this type with our patients plays in the analytic process. We speak about becoming new objects for our patients, of rupture and repair, of “knowing one’s patient inside out” (Bromberg, 1991), and of containment. And while I think all of these concepts capture aspects of the process that took place in my relationship with Simon, I want to highlight an additional dimension. Part of what we shared was the experience of *just waiting* together. What do I mean by *just waiting*? While it is difficult to fully articulate the nature of this process, my impression is that Balint (1979) touches on it in the following passage from *The Basic Fault*:

. . . at times the analyst must do everything in his power not to become, or to behave as, a separate, sharply contoured object. In other words, he must allow his patients to relate to, or exist with, him as if he were one of the primary substances. This means that he should be willing to carry the patient, not actively but like water carries the swimmer or the earth carries the walker, that is, to be there for the patient, to be used without too much resistance against being used (p. 167).

During these painfully stuck periods in my relationship with Simon, I would acknowledge to him that I felt stuck and that we were stuck together. And I would tell Simon that although we were unable to find a way out of our impasse right now, we would struggle and wait together until new possibilities emerged. And then I would wait and try to keep my eyes open for subtle shifts. My experience is that if I am in the right state of mind, I am indeed able to see the seeds of new possibilities when they are beginning to emerge in the analytic situation. This does not necessarily mean that I am sitting quietly or doing nothing, although there may be such periods. It is more a matter of acting, attending to the quality of my patient’s responses, monitoring my shifting countertransference, and observing the shifting configurations of our relationship. If and when conditions ripen and I am sufficiently open and receptive, I am able to see new possibilities as they emerge. Of course there are times when I feel hopeless, and this was certainly true of my relationship with Simon. I believe that at such times the task is to “wait without hope. For hope would be hope for the wrong thing” (Eliot, 1963, p. 126).

In parallel with waiting for new possibilities to emerge in our relationship, I would encourage Simon to wait for shifts in his own internal states and for shifts in external circumstances. When Simon was feeling defeated and hopeless, I would sit with him and encourage him to tolerate these feelings and wait for them to pass. When no new possibilities appeared to be emerging for him in his life circumstances, I would encourage him to observe and wait for new circumstances to emerge.

And gradually through a process of struggling together over an extended period of time—and waiting—I was able to see subtle changes emerging in my relationship with Simon, and Simon was becoming aware of new possibilities emerging in his life. He was also, once again, becoming receptive to what I had to offer and appreciative of my willingness to stick with him through these difficult periods in our relationship. But his receptiveness now had a somewhat different quality to it. It was less eager and more

discriminating in nature. It now had more of an earned quality to it. And I was gradually recovering my earlier feelings of warmth toward him, along with an emerging respect for him as his own person.

The tensions that had emerged between us during the more difficult phases of our work did not disappear. They became incorporated into the overall fabric of our relationship. And during those times when Simon experienced setbacks or disappointments in his daily life, his doubts about the value of our work together tended to surface again. Nevertheless, Simon gradually became more accepting of my limits as a therapist, and more accepting of himself and his own limitations. He was becoming increasingly comfortable with himself as the person that he was. Simon still felt critical of himself for not being sufficiently masculine, spontaneous, or witty. But his relationship with himself was in some way becoming easier or lighter. There were now times when he could even laugh at himself.

Simon was also becoming more disciplined about his writing. He took a series of writing workshops, and began completing essays and submitting them to small magazines. In time Simon was offered a job acting as an assistant editor working for a magazine that had accepted one of his essays. It was not a glamorous job, but it was something. And ultimately Simon did meet a woman, at a moment when he was sufficiently receptive to let her in more than previous women he had dated. Her name was Anne. Anne was not the woman of his fantasies, and he did struggle with his ambivalence. But eventually Simon asked her to move in with him.

Shortly afterward, Simon's supervisor at work left to join the staff of a new magazine in Boston. A few months later, he offered Simon a position working with him in Boston. After giving it some thought, Simon decided to accept the offer. He continued to be ambivalent about Anne, and we spent a number of sessions, exploring whether or not he should ask her to move with him to Boston. Ultimately, despite his continuing ambivalence about Anne, Simon did invite her to come with him.

Simon terminated his treatment with me when he moved to Boston. This was a few years ago. I have not heard from him since that time. I have no idea whether he and Anne are still together or whether he is still working for the same magazine or writing. I think of Simon from time to time and wonder how he is doing. When I reflect on our time together I am aware of bittersweet feeling. I know that in some sense Simon was disappointed with the final outcome. Things did change in his life, but not in quite the way he had fantasized at the beginning. And although I would like to believe that I was helpful to him, I suspect that I will never really know how Simon came to regard our time together in retrospect.

Jacob and the Cage of His own Will

Jacob is a 45-year-old man who initially consulted me for problems he labeled as "anxiety" but which turned out to have an important obsessional quality to them. He was brought up in an orthodox Jewish family. When he was growing up, his parents valued him for his intelligence, good behavior, and precocious maturity. Of all the children in the family he was the good one, the one who was concerned about the welfare of other human beings. He grew up identifying himself with the image of the wise, righteous caretaker—a *Tzaddik*—and eventually trained in the helping professions. He now runs a large community organization and is constantly at the beck and call of everybody within the organization. His life is defined by doing the right thing. He is plagued by obsessional

worries that he may not be attracted to his wife, or that he is attracted to men, or that he will lose his temper in a meeting at work, and say something outrageous.

One of the most striking things about Jacob is a complete lack of liveliness and spontaneity that is consistent with his obsessional style. He conscientiously attends all our sessions, talks dutifully about his problems, provides me with his own analysis of the situation, and attempts to describe his feelings and experience as well. But I have difficulty feeling emotional contact with him. In one session I conveyed my sense to Jacob that although I experienced him as present in many respects, and eager to make the most of our work together, I also felt like there was some type of wall between us. It felt to me as if everything was being filtered through a layer of gauze. This seemed to touch Jacob. He teared up and was able to speak about his feeling of being trapped behind a wall. He described his sense of “talking about that Jacob’s experiences,” rather than just being Jacob. He spoke about the experience of feeling like a puppeteer pulling Jacob’s strings.

Over time we have explored the way in which Jacob’s identity as the Tzaddik, his tendency to provide me with his own analysis of his problems, and his distance from his immediate experience are associated with a fear that if he ever depends on others he will be abandoned. Jacob has begun to articulate a desire for me to give him the answers and provide more guidance and direction. Interestingly, at these times I have an image of myself as a vending machine. Jacob puts a coin in the slot and expects the candy to drop out. Although I believe Jacob is beginning to shift in a healthy direction with respect to acknowledging his dependency needs, I nevertheless feel pressured, vaguely resentful, and unable to give him what he seems to want.

Jacob is struggling to free himself from the cage of his own will. As he becomes more attuned to his own need, desire, and vulnerability, he is consciously able to articulate both a desire for help from me and a fear of letting go. I am particularly intrigued by the way in which his attempts to get me to take care of him at this stage of our work together have an instrumental quality to them that makes it difficult for me to be responsive in a way that will be helpful. I am impressed by his willingness and ability to actively work on changing things, but there is a kind of nonorganic quality to his efforts.

Grace, the Experience of Gratitude and Its Obstacles

The term *grace* is etymologically related to the term *gratitude*—a term introduced into the psychoanalytic lexicon by [Melanie Klein \(1957\)](#) in her classic monograph: *A Study of Envy and Gratitude*. In what can be seen as the culmination of Klein’s life’s effort to illuminate the relationship between love and hate in psychic development and psychoanalysis, she argued that the experience of gratitude is an important developmental achievement that is associated with a transition the depressive position, and the experience of the mother as a separate subject. According to Klein, the infant’s ability to feel gratified from the experience of feeding at the mother’s breast is the prototype for the subsequent ability to experience gratitude. And the ability to experience gratitude is a prerequisite to experiencing the other as trustworthy and the self as possessing an internal sense of richness. And the capacity for generosity emerges out of the experience of gratitude.

[Klein \(1957\)](#) emphasized the infant’s desire for the mother’s breast, not just as a source of food but also symbolically as the source of life itself. In her words: “A full gratification at the breast means that the infant feels he has received from his loved object a unique gift, which he wants to keep. This is the basis of gratitude. Gratitude includes belief in good objects, and trust in them. It also includes the ability to assume the loved

object—not only as a source of food—and to love it without envy interfering” (p. 188). According to Klein the frustration of the infant’s desire for the breast is inevitable, not just because the mother is separate from the infant, but because the infant’s envy of the breast interferes with his or her ability to be gratified.

For Klein, envy—the experience that the other possesses something desirable, which he or she will not fully share—is a derivative of the death drive. She highlighted the corrosive role that envy plays in human experience, and believed that the infant’s envy of the breast is the prototype for all subsequent experiences of envy. Klein’s emphasis on the corrosive nature of envy and on the role of envy in spoiling the patient’s ability to be receptive to the analyst’s attempt to help, has been extremely useful clinically in the work of Kleinians who focus intensively on the process of working with difficult treatment impasses (e.g., Joseph, 1989; Rosenfeld, 1987).

One does not, however, have to assume that envy is a derivative of the death drive. For example, Ghent’s (1992) conceptualization of the distinction between *need* versus *neediness* provides a useful alternative way of understanding the developmental process through which patients’ feelings of envy, spite and vindictiveness can come to interfere with their ability to make constructive use of the analyst’s interventions. According to Ghent, the authentic expression of need reflects a genuine longing for “. . . human warmth, empathic responsiveness, trust, recognition, faith, playful creativity—all the ingredients we think of when we speak of love” (p. 142).

In contrast, neediness can be conceptualized as a “manipulative, at times vengeful demandingness, which is, in large measure, an expression of rage at lifelong deprivation of one form or another; far from aiming to secure an appropriate response to real need, it is directed either at obtaining some immediate satisfaction, which, contributing nothing nourishing to the inner feeling of emptiness, amplifies the feeling of deprivation, or at provoking the alienation or empathic remove of the other thereby adding another notch in the tally of deprivations” (Ghent, 1992, p. 142).

What type of developmental experiences contribute toward the development of the type of chronic experience of deprivation that manifests clinically in the inability to express one’s experience of need in a fashion that is likely to elicit the type of nurturance that is longed for? As Symington (1993) suggests, one way of conceptualizing the dilemma of patients such as Simon and Jacob is that as a result of chronic developmental trauma and/or abandonment, they have developed a style of object relatedness that is narcissistic in nature. This type of narcissism is typically hidden or unconscious in nature rather than overtly grandiose. According to Symington, the *narcissistic option* involves a type of unconscious choice that takes place in infancy to turn away from a psychic object that he calls the *lifegiver*. This lifegiver, according to Symington, can be conceptualized as a psychic object that functions as an alternative to the self.

In Symington’s words: the lifegiver is “an emotional object that is associated with the breast, associated with the mother, or in later life associated with the other person; it is *in* the other—an object that a person seeks as an alternative to seeking himself” (1993, p. 35). The lifegiver is thus a psychic object that is internalized through interactions between the infant and his or her caregivers. It is an internal object that permits the individual to turn to the other for nurturance. And, according to Symington (1993, p. 122), it permits the individual to cooperate with the other “in the battle of life. In this “battle for life” the Other can be embodied in archetypal form as Amida Buddha or Jesus Christ, or in concrete form as a good friend, a benevolent mentor, or a *good enough* analyst.

One can also conceptualize the clinical phenomenon of vacillating back and forth between narcissistic counterdependency and resentful attempts to coerce the other into

providing nurturance, in terms of Beebe and Lachmann's (2002) balance model of self and interactive regulation. The development of a secure attachment style is associated with a midrange level of coordination in the mother–infant dyadic system. Infants develop the capacity for healthy affect regulation as a function of being part of a dyadic system in which there is an ongoing process of cycling between episodes of mutual regulation, followed by episodes of miscoordination, followed by interactive repair.

This type of pattern tends to facilitate the development of the ability to flexibly move back and forth between the use of one's own self-soothing skills to regulate emotional distress, and the adaptive use of relational support for purposes of regulating one's emotions. In contrast, infants whose caregivers are chronically misattuned, or who pursue emotional contact in an excessive or intrusive fashion, can develop a tendency to be overly dependent on the use of self-regulation strategies, overly dependent on the use of relational support, or alternatively may vacillate back and forth between the excessive use of self-regulation strategies followed by desperate and coercive attempts to obtain support from others (Safran, 2012).

In Taoist philosophy there is an important concept known as: *wu-wei*. Wu-wei is related in important respects to the principle of surrender. While wu-wei is often translated into English as “nonaction,” the problem with this translation is that it is too easily misinterpreted to mean passivity. For this reason, *not forcing* or perhaps, *effortless action* are better translations. This type of effortless action is a reflection of a particular state of mind. As Slingerland (2003) puts it, the concept of wu-wei denotes “a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and nonetheless accord perfectly with the dictates of the moment” (p. 7). This type of effortless action involves an ongoing attentiveness to the shifting configurations of the moment: An ongoing attentiveness to our own shifting emotions and levels of energy, and an ongoing attentiveness and responsiveness to the shifting circumstances around us. Sometimes it is advisable to advance, sometimes it is advisable to withdraw, and sometimes it is advisable to just wait. This type of effortless action can be thought of as being similar to what we mean when we speak of working *with the grain* or *trimming the sails to the wind*.

Simon and Jacob Redux

Simon understandably felt that there should be a one-to-one correspondence between his efforts and the outcome. But working with the grain involves being attentive to shifting conditions and configurations. Sometimes the time is not yet ripe for our efforts to pay off and sometimes it never is. In retrospect it seems to me that a key theme in my work with Simon focused on helping him learn that periods of despair and emotional contraction tended to be followed by periods of opening, and encouraging him to direct his attention outward to others when he was feeling more receptive.

When I first met Simon he believed that he had to become sufficiently worthy to earn the love of the right woman, and that woman of his fantasies would fill the emptiness inside of him. But his search for the idealized soul mate was, of course, doomed to failure—just as his search for the analyst of his fantasies made it difficult for him to be receptive to what I was able to offer him. At first the desperate quality of Simon's search for the perfect analyst was masked by both his tendency to dissociate both his own feelings of dependency and his resentment toward others for not meeting these needs. But

as he gradually became more trusting of me he paradoxically became more aware of his needs and his resentment.

Jacob's shifting style of seeking for help is intriguing to me. It has an effortful quality to it. It's not that I don't want to give Jacob what he asks for from me. I find it difficult to produce on demand. But what am I to say when Jacob asks me what he should be doing differently? If I could tell him I would. But I can't tell him anymore than he can will himself into being different with me. I can understand why Jacob tries to coerce me into giving him what he needs. He doesn't know any other way. Jacob cannot will himself into being with me in a way that organically evokes the support and guidance from me that he desires. But in time as our relationship evolves, hopefully we will grow into new way of being together that will provide him with what he needs.

Perhaps Jacob will need to actively resent me before he can make better use of me, just as Simon came to resent me and blame me for my failure to provide him with what he needed. I am beginning to see hints of frustration and exasperation in Jacob's manner. It may well be that as Winnicott (1969) maintained, there is something about the process of destroying the object in fantasy and experiencing its survival that is an integral process of coming to experience the other as real—as subject rather than object. As Symington (1993) suggests, sometimes for patients trapped in a form of narcissistic isolation, the experience of love needs to be preceded by the experience and expression of hatred. While hating the other is not the same as letting the other in, at least it is an acknowledgment that the other exists as other.

Conclusion

I have spoken about the role that surrender can play in the analytic process and explored the relationship between the experience of surrender and the phenomenology of grace. Taken out of its theological context, the experience of grace simply entails the genuine recognition that there is a benevolent other who exists outside the realm of our subjective omnipotence, and the emergence of a receptivity to the emotional nurturance that this other can provide. This state of receptivity cannot be consciously chosen or willed. Both Simon and Jacob struggle with the question of where to locate the responsibility for change. Does it reside in the self or in the other? In a sense this is a question we all grapple with to varying degrees.

We can say that the analytic process is a *collaborative enterprise*. But this really a way of finessing a question that warrants a more nuanced response. For many patients such as Simon and Jacob the question of how to find a way of making use of the analyst's help is the heart of the analysis. For these patients, the discovery that the analyst is willing to and capable of sticking with them until he or she is able to find a way of entering into their patients' worlds in a way that feels helpful to them is an experience of *grace*—an experience that there is an *other* out there who freely and gratuitously provides them with the gift of their caring. This caring does not have to be earned by the patient and it cannot be coerced. It emerges from the analyst as a genuine and spontaneous response of one human being to another when the analytic relationship evolves in a way that allows him or her to resonate with the patient's needs. And in these moments the patient is able to taste the experience of gratitude, and a sense that there is goodness in the world.

In a classic essay, Leslie Farber (2000) distinguished between two different realms of the will. The first realm of the will is that in which we consciously and intentionally choose one course of action over another. The second realm is more unconscious and

automatic in nature and moves in a general direction rather than toward a specific object. We can consciously and intentionally will some things, but not others. For example, we can consciously will ourselves to go to bed, but not to fall asleep; self-assertion or bravado but not courage; religiosity but not faith.

In closing I would like to quote a passage from Farber's (2000) essay that captures some elements of what I have been trying to articulate in this paper:

Whether God is dead, as Nietzsche said, or merely in eclipse, as Martin Buber would have it, I know I am granted occasional and surprising moments in my life, neither self-induced nor drug-induced, that lie outside the dominion of my conscious will. At such times my soul is indeed conquerable and I am more servant than captain of my fate. Yet even as these moments arise, I know my temptation to declare myself their master who must manipulate them into public certainties of knowledge or relationship. Since they are easy objects of my will, I stand ready to reduce them to nothingness out of my insistence on everything (p. 85).

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