

Reclaiming Unlived Life

Thomas Ogden

*Book Notes by
Michael Mervosh*

Chapter 4 – Intuiting The Truth Of What Is Happening

This chapter is a study of Bion's important and difficult paper, "Notes on Memory & Desire", about intuitive thinking, written near the end of Bion's life. It is considered to be a landmark contribution.

Bion supplants 'awareness' from its central role in depth processes and, in its place, addresses the therapist's (largely unconscious) work of intuiting the psychic reality (the truth) of a process session by *becoming at one with it*.

Sense Impressions & Unconscious Thinking

Memory is always a misleading record of fact since it is distorted by the influence of unconscious forces. (Bion)

Desires interfere, by absence of mind when observation is essential, with the operation of judgment. Desires distort judgment by selection and suppression of material to be judged. (Bion)

Desires simply do not interfere with observation, they involve 'absence of mind', a shutdown of genuine thinking.

By allowing unanswered questions to build up and be contained within the mind, one can begin to form impressions, as opposed to understandings – impressions that suggest, but only suggest, meaning.

The function of the reality principle is to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavor to make a real alteration in them. (Freud)

The mind, under the dominance of the reality principle, employs a new form of action, the mental action of 'thinking'.

Freud places reality at the center of his theory of thinking, as does Bion.

Ogden used the framing of the *truth-seeking principle* and the *truth-fearing principle*.

Memory and desire are mental operations that 'deal with' sense impressions and the pleasure (truth-fearing) principle, which cause memory to fashion the past as we wish it had been, and lead desire to treat the future as if we were able to foresee it and control it.

In other words, memory and desire interfere with the objective of seeing things as they are.

- *Genuine thinking, which is predominantly unconscious, seeks out the truth (reality.)*

Sensory experience distracts from and undermines genuine thinking. Without the truth, or at least an openness to it, thinking is not only impossible; the very idea of thinking becomes meaningless.

It is important to note that Bion is unequivocal about the necessity to abstain from memory and desire. He intends to be shocking in an effort to shake up the status quo of process sessions.

1. Memory – “do not remember past meetings...”
2. Desires – for results, cures, or even understandings must not be allowed to interfere.

Bion intends to stun the reader with these words. How is it possible not to remember, and not to strive to understand?

Therapeutic 'observation' s concerned neither with what has 'happened' nor what is going to happen but with what *is* happening.

Therapeutic thinking is concerned *only* with the present, with what *is* happening, and is conducted solely in the present moment.

The realm of the unconscious, is the realm of the practitioner. No one knows the unconscious in the way that the therapist does, and one must protect it from being 'confounded' with the conscious realm of experience.

The unconscious is not a realm of physical sensation. Physical sensation resides in the domain of conscious experience.

Intuiting Psychic Reality

Awareness of the sensuous accompaniments of emotional experience are a hindrance to the psychotherapist's intuition of the reality with which he or she must be at one. (Bion)

Intuition has its roots in the unconscious mind. Receptivity to sense impressions, awareness, and understanding are all in the domain of conscious thought processes.

For Bion, unconscious thinking is far richer than conscious thinking, which is required to conduct the business of waking life.

The unconscious is free to view experience simultaneously from multiple vantage points, which would create havoc if one were to use such thinking while trying to carry out the tasks and conduct the interpersonal relationships of waking life.

- *The therapist's work is to intuit the unconscious psychic reality by becoming at one with it.*

Dreaming is a transitive verb. It is not dreaming *about* something, it is *dreaming something*, 'dreaming something up', an aspect of ourselves.

In *dreaming*, we are *at one* with the *reality* of the dream; we are the dream. We are intuiting (dreaming up) an element of our unconscious emotional lives. We are at one with it in a way that differs from any other experience.

- *In dreaming, we are most real to ourselves, we are most ourselves.*

In dreaming, the therapist must engage in an act of self-renunciation.

By allowing oneself to become less definitively oneself in order to create a psychological space in which the therapist and patient may enter into a shared state of intuiting and being-at-one with a disturbing psychic reality that the patient, on his or her own, is unable to bear.

The therapist doesn't seek to enter into reverie, any more than he or she seeks intuition. Reverie and intuition come, if they come at all, without effort, unbidden. (Bion)

Intuition, The Known, & The Unknown

What is known about the patient is of no further consequence: it is either false or irrelevant. If it is 'known' by patient and therapist, it is obsolete...the only point of importance in any session is the unknown. Nothing must be allowed to distract from intuiting that. (Bion)

What is known has nothing further to offer and requires no further psychological work. It has yielded what it has to yield, and if patient or therapist continues to dwell on it, it fills psychological space in a 'clogging', deadening way.

What is known is either false or irrelevant.

- *Analysis is only concerned with the present.*

It is false in that we use what we believe we 'know' to create the illusion that what is unknown is already known, thereby eliminating the need to deal with 'as-yet-unknown' (troubling) psychic truths.

The work of intuition is manifested in the ways patient and therapist have been changed by the experience of jointly becoming one with the formerly unknown (and deeply troubling) reality.

The experience of coming to terms with, being at one with, a formerly unthinkable psychic reality changes both the patient and the therapist. The interpretation is superfluous.

What is of importance is the unknown, which is alive....and won't be known except for slowly and over time.

The Present Moment Of The Past

The past is always part of the present, and the entirety of the past is alive in the present moment experience of the therapeutic process.

Evolution & Interpretation

In any session, evolution takes place. Out of the darkness and the formlessness something evolves. The evolution is what the therapist must interpret. (Bion)

Bion uses the term *evolves* to refer to what is happening in the therapeutic experience – the emotional experience that is occurring.

Bion's way of thinking transforms the most fundamental clinical question from "What does that mean?" to "What is happening now?"

This involves the therapist's ability to talk to the client about the psychic reality that is occurring (now) in the present moment of the therapeutic process.

Dreams that clients tell us are not memories; they are experiences evolving in the present moment of the therapy and have many of the qualities of dreaming – including that the often-experienced surprise and disappointment of finding that the dream, which a moment ago was so present and alive, is 'unaccountably and suddenly absent'. No amount of conscious concentration will bring it back.

Bion uses the term *interpret* to refer to the therapist's talking to the client about the psychic reality this is occurring (now) in the present moment of the therapy.

When we interpret, we are talking with the client, directly or indirectly, about what is most real and most alive at an unconscious level at that moment.

- *The purpose of talking with patients is multifold, but it always includes the effort to help the patient become more fully alive to his experience in the present moment.*

Concluding Comments

The significance of this way of being with our clients shifts away from awareness being in a central role in the therapeutic endeavor.

In its place, the therapist's primary task is the (largely unconscious) work of intuiting the (unconscious) psychic reality of the present moment by becoming one with it.