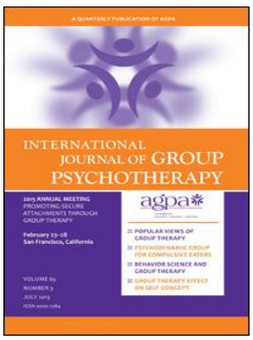

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Permission to Narrate: Explorations in Group Analysis, Psychoanalysis, Culture

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BOOK REVIEW

Check for updates

Permission to Narrate: Explorations in Group Analysis, Psychoanalysis, Culture by Martin Weegmann. London, UK: Karnac, 2016. 143 pp.

> Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows.
>
> Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect* (1927, p. 88).

Martin Weegmann ends his book with a quote from Jackson Browne, "The next voice you hear will be your own." *Permission to Narrate* is written with the hope of helping clinical and theoretical thinkers find their own voice. The title comes from Edward Said, a Palestinian American academic, who contributed to helping traumatized people find a way to tell their story. Permission to narrate is an important dimension of what we do in our group and individual work: We permit a counternarrative to be told, one that can lead to greater freedom.

Weegmann makes his argument introducing resources that are infrequently mentioned in the group world. He begins with a review of a modern theory of rhetoric that looks at how we shape and give voice to our experience. Beginning with Aristotle's argument that rhetoric "should not be counterposed to knowledge or truth" (p. 3) as Plato thought, he develops Foulkes's idea of the group analyst as poet through a deep exposition of modern theorists of rhetoric. Weegmann then explores positioning theory and the theory of the "dialogical self." He sees the self as a "theatre of voices" which is envisioned from a variety of positions in which "we act out a complex psychic repertory" (p. 33). Moving from the multiplicity of the self, he explores monsters like Frankenstein and individuals characterized as "freaks" like the Elephant Man as exemplars of what we are not. This leads to an excellent and

welcome chapter on Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA, he explains, offers an opportunity to renarrate one's life within the dialectic between who I am and who I don't want to be. AA provides a unique place to develop a narrative identity free from alcoholism without denying the horror of the past or the hazards of the return of the monster one had become.

Permission to Narrate closes with chapters on revolution, the ways in which his reading of Freud has changed over time, and the disciplinary anxiety within group analysis. Weegmann describes "a rhetoric of revolution, from the exhilaration it inspires to the fear it engenders" (p. 68). He wants to inspire us to revolution. He wants us to not be afraid to find our voice. In his chapter on reading Freud, he reveals his own fascinations and idealizations that fueled and sustained his curiosity, a curiosity that survived his deidealization of Freud. He concludes with a chapter about the discipline anxiety within group analysis about its relevance and survival. He outlines his concerns and challenges, and argues that group analysis has outlived its dependence on psychoanalysis. He encourages wider foundations and a more engaged attitude toward our current culture, a culture very different from the founders of group analysis.

With his emphasis on rhetoric and narration, it is striking that no mention is made of Jerome and Julia Frank's *Persuasion and Healing* (Frank & Frank, 1991). In its third edition, this classic plows some of the same ground. Frank was an early teacher of Yalom and a researcher on group outcomes. His deep interest in culture and the variety of healing methods blends nicely with Weegmann's arguments which, if taken seriously, will enrich and encourage the flourishing of group analysis.

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