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DEATH OF A PARENT: OPENINGS AT AN ENDING

MARY-JOAN GERSON, PhD, ABPP

When I dealt with my mother's death, I developed a deeper and more complex understanding of adult development from a psychoanalytic perspective. I think we have yet to adequately delineate lifelong development and, in particular, the shifts in representations of our parents as we age. I address the implications and interweaving of these shifts both emerging from and impacting psychoanalytic treatment. A case example of a woman whose representations of her parents significantly expanded after the death of her father is presented.

Keywords: adult development, cyclical psychodynamics, death, maternal death, parental representations

For a long time psychoanalytic developmental theories have suffered from a kind of arrested development. We have privileged early experience over the unfolding dynamics of the life cycle. Mitchell (1984) sounded an alarm about this issue in his seminal paper "Object Relations Theory and the Developmental Tilt." There were notable exceptions to this bias. Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) was a pioneer in extending the dynamic unfolding of the self through early adolescence, identifying the chumship phase, essentially the ability to form an intense friendship in early adolescence as the necessary foundation for adult intimate bonding. Erikson (1950) specified three adulthood stages—intimacy, generativity, and integrity—but his principal interest remained focused on childhood and adolescence. Jung (1933) referred to middle adulthood as a life stage in which an individual can begin to get in touch with heretofore repressed aspects of personality, but his views have had little impact on subsequent psychoanalytic notions of development.

As clinicians, many of us understand that adult development is complicated. As Settlage (1992) noted,

> In childhood development, each stage is initiated by a biologically predetermined maturational change… In contrast, adult development is not initiated by biological maturational change, and the adult stages are not universal. For example, not everyone marries or becomes a parent, and all women do not become pregnant. (p. 349)

Address correspondence to Mary-Joan Gerson, PhD, ABPP, 330 West 58th Street, Suite 201, New York, NY 10019. E-mail: mjgerson@gmail.com

In our analytic literature, we are now reading a bit more about the vicissitudes of middle-age and late in life challenges, but rarely about the fundamental and inexorable shaping of self as lifelong phenomenon.

One exception is the work of Galatzer-Levy and Cohler (1990), who identified the absence of the developmental trajectory of self object functioning throughout the life cycle, noting mentorship, parenting, and the reminiscences of old age as unexplored sectors and requiring analytic attention. They stated, "Traumata in later life can profoundly influence development—hence analytic work and analytically informed interventions should not focus solely on early development but need to include the analysis and reworking of all phases of the life course" (p. 98). The emphasis on early experience has unfortunately constricted our sense of the possibilities for psychic regeneration later in life. Emde (1990) proposed,

> In particular, we reject that disturbed early development inevitably leads to later pathology. We are dealing with a system that repairs its own failings and flaws. To say that "as a twig is bent, so grows the tree" is true neither for trees nor people. Self-righting tendencies are an important feature of all living systems. So, too, with people's psyches: deviations in development may lead to interesting and unusual, but not necessarily dysfunctional, growth of the personality. (p. 98)

In fact, the most contemporary discourses on development from a psychoanalytic perspective emphasize unpredictability. Harris (2009), drawing on models from complexity theory, chaos theory, and nonlinear dynamic systems theory, stated, "Very small and subtle shifts in a complex, multi-faced experience can produce radically distinct patterned but unpredictable outcomes" (p. xii).

The death of a parent is one of the most intense junctures of adult life. I often think of E.E. Cummings's poem "Dying is fine" (Cummings & Firmage, 2013) with regard to my own mother's death.

Shifts in Parental Representations

"Dying is fine"

dying is fine)but Death ?o
baby
i

wouldn't like
Death if Death
were
good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you
begin to feel of it,dying

's miraculous
why?be
cause dying is
perfectly natural;perfectly putting

it mildly lively(but Death
is strictly scientific

& artificial &
evil & legal)

we thank thee
god almighty for dying(forgive us,o life!the sin of Death[1]

I certainly anticipated this event in my own life. My mother was in her 90s, had a very slow-growing pancreatic cancer, and was becoming weaker. When I reflected on the all various ways that my mother's death had impacted my life, I realized that a frame emerged through which I could observe aspects of my own late in life development. My goal in this paper is to open up a discussion of parental—in particular, maternal—death as a reflection of ongoing adult development. I'd like to begin by briefly citing two affecting experiences I had at the end of my mother's life. The first was the somewhat liberating experience of finally becoming a good-enough daughter to her. The second was the discontinuous experience of actually losing her and the revised image I had of her after her death.

The development of girls involves a highly complex navigation between the push of differentiation and the pull of identification with their mothers (Chodorow, 2000; Jordan, 1991a). As Chodorow (2000) stated,

> Mothers, I argue, by virtue of their sense of gender (whatever the individualized conscious and unconscious fantasy and emotional casting they give to this gender) experience daughters as, in a certain sense, like them and sons as, in a certain sense, unlike them. Reciprocally, girls and boys themselves appropriate and transform these unconscious maternal communications through their own intrapsychic capacities for fantasy, their own defensive reactions to anxiety and guilt, and their own desires, passions, and impulses. (p. 33)

When personality and temperament are aligned between mothers and daughters, the inevitable intense struggle between mutual identification and differentiation becomes energized rather than fraught. I was altogether unlike

[1] Reprinted from *Selected Poems* by E.E. Cummings. Copyright © 1956, 1984, 1991 by the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust. Used with permission of the publisher, Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

my mother in personality and temperament. She was contained, and I was high-spirited. She was private and deferential, very polite in her relational style; I was always outspoken, in adolescence fiercely so. When I spoke my mind freely, she was predictably disapproving. I was a tomboy, which she found unseemly. She experienced my difference from her as a rebuke. She provided good-enough care for me, but I didn't feel I was in any way her wished-for daughter. And I always felt that I was somewhat out of focus for her because of our dissimilarities.

I married; she adored my husband, and I produced two children whom she very much enjoyed. However, I continued to feel vaguely problematic to her throughout my adult life. Then my mother grew old and vulnerable. She fell early in her late 80s and ultimately required full-time care at home. I was faced with the inordinately challenging problem of introducing a caregiver into the life of a formerly independent person. Jennifer became an emotional anchor in my mother's household, but I remained fairly devoted, suggesting and coordinating as much diversion for her as possible, scheduling weekly visits with my children and providing daily phone calls. I felt oddly performative about this, aware that I was being more dutiful and responsible than truly concerned. But in the last 2 years or so of my mother's life, I felt that a barrier was removed between us, a screen was lifted. I think it was her profound dependency on me that drew us closer. She seemed grateful that I brought her special foods from the neighborhood. She appreciated that I micromanaged her care-taking schedule and compulsively tracked her medical condition. Most remarkably to me, she came to view me as caring, tender, and attentive. When she looked into my eyes, I knew that she was seeing a daughter who was there for her, reliable and competent. I was glad that she could have this experience of trust, but much more so, I was restored by having the experience of reflected goodness from her.

Of course, I had spent hours talking about my parents in my two analyses, but that work, though it likely contributed to the shift I found so profound, was qualitatively different from the actual new relationship I experienced with my mother. As much as we can psychoanalytically rework internalizations and self-structure, through transference and countertransference exploration, the change in self-experience that can occur when there is a real-time shift in deep attachment can be uniquely transformative. If we truly believe in the co-construction of experience, how powerful when such openings occur in the primary relationship? I think that I'm particularly receptive to the reshaping of parental representations because of my work with families and with couples (Gerson, 2009). I've been struck by the illuminating moments in family therapy involving grown children and by the therapeutic healing that partners can offer each other.

Besides the pressure of dependency, which I mentioned already, I think a key factor in the expansion of my relationship to my mother was that I had grown to think of myself differently as a result of my analyses. I had come to enjoy and privilege my commitment to friends and loved ones, to see myself as generative,

facilitating versus obstructive, sensitive rather than bruising. But my analytic transformation was galvanized by what I would call a reenactment at the scene of the crime, not in effigy. I think as analysts we don't privilege these opportunities and experiences enough. We often assume that the work we do with patients, unpacking past mystifications and deprivations, constitutes the heart of their journey. We don't listen enough to subtle changes in self definition as patients relate differently to primary attachment figures. Perhaps our own psychoanalytic narcissism motivates us to think of the treatment relationship as central. But in fact we can gratify our narcissistic needs if we enjoy the expanded possibilities for engagement with parents that our work yields.

My Mother's Death

I was fully expecting my mother to die. And yet when she did, I suffered a very sharp reaction of loss and grief. The new trajectory of appreciation and attachment that had developed between us was aborted; it had gelled so late and was now abruptly terminated. And then what occurred was a revised and reorganized representation of who my mother actually was as a woman. I think another aspect of psychoanalytic developmental theory is the tendency to develop a fixed image of the parent. The snapshot version is instrumental in grasping and interpreting current conflicts and struggles. We do listen attentively before the image becomes delineated, a process analogous to lifting a print from a negative in a developing wash. But once the image has emerged, we refer to it as a somewhat iconic representation, useful in terms of our empathic connection to our patient. "His father was tyrannical because of his own childhood abuse." "Her mother was narcissistic and competitive." Parents become somewhat wax figured over time in treatment. I try to retain a sense of curiosity and openness to recollections from the past or reports of ongoing contact with parents, but the truly unexpected becomes more and more subversive.

Actually I think that representations of parents, past or present, is really a rather ephemeral, fluid process. There are developmental considerations at work here. It may feel more crucial for very young adults to hold a fixed parental image as they launch into independence. However, opportunities propagate as we move through the life cycle. Although many of us were warned, "Wait until you have your own children," or in its worse form, "I only hope your children torture you like this," we rarely deeply enough reconsider the struggles of our parents in terms of our own parenthood dilemmas, and we don't encourage our patients to do so. Almost sixty years ago, Therese Benedek (1959) formulated a cogent thesis about the possible reworking of developmental injuries at each corresponding stage of the parent's life cycle. She stated,

> In each "critical period" the child revives in the parent his related developmental conflicts. This brings about either pathologic manifestations in the parent, or by resolution of the conflict it achieves a new level of integration in the parent. (p. 385)

Although her position has remained foundational to psychoanalytic writing about parenthood, it has not sufficiently penetrated clinical practice. More often we are determined to be different from our parents and heal ourselves through rewriting past history.

Through years of analytic exploration, I developed a representation of my mother that was well delineated. There were her sectors of pleasure, very different from mine and very separated from me as a child: her Mahjong and knitting passions, her devotion to her twin. I thought of her as a somewhat culturally and intellectually limited woman, tending a rather small and orderly life. Then she died. I began the process of emptying out her apartment, dividing the cherished from the disposable. I began with her dresser drawers, which had always seemed somewhat magical to me. My mother was a very organized woman, and into her 90s could answer the question, "Do you have brown thread?" with a specific and instantaneous GPS location. But when I began to excavate the contents of this dresser, I found something that was very surprising to me. It was not a diary revealing a hidden lineage or the record of an illicit relationship, the most likely candidates for a jolt in recognition. It was a book with a beautifully embossed cover of poems my mother had carefully transcribed. They were chosen and recorded before her marriage and into its earliest years. I was taken aback. Nowhere in the portrait of my mother was there a place for poetry. That was my domain as an English major, children's book author, and very occasional and casual poet. My mother was salt of the earth, and she seemed to have had no interest in the life of the imagination, the illusive, the symbolic. And yet the evidence pointed otherwise. One could say that this aspect of herself had foreclosed later in her life, but I couldn't imagine a trace of it. The discovery reverberated within me, drawing me closer to her in a way I had been unable to do myself. And when I took apart her closet, for the first time, I appreciated the style and occasional flair of some of her clothing. It was a rotation from an image of the clunky and dowdy wardrobe I pictured her dressed in most of my life. In the ensuing process of evacuating her apartment, I realized there were other similarities between us, shared strengths that I had denied. It was as if in an effort to heal some of the deprivation I suffered, I created a kind of hyper differentiation in adulthood. She, perhaps, disappointed by my pushing her away, failed to remind me of our commonalty.

I felt a bit unsettled by these new glimmerings of connection. They actually led to my feeling her loss more fully and acutely, as some of the defensiveness in my attachment had been eroded. But I felt even more solid as a woman,

experiencing some of my strengths in terms of a foundational heritage. In my own prior analyses, strengthening and enriching as they were, it was the divide between myself and my mother that I emphasized. I think that too rarely our patients grow to acknowledge some of the dissociated identifications with deeply resented parents, as if it were too painful to recognize a positive legacy in the context of injury. In my own work as a psychoanalyst, I'm aware that my patients sometimes recover unacknowledged aspects of parents. And I do work with several middle-aged patients who have a then-and-now image of a once-potent parent. But because of my own socialization as a psychoanalyst, I'm perhaps not as focused on these psychological discoveries as I might be. And I likely do not mine them sufficiently as an aspect of the transference and countertransferential field that the patient and I inhabit. For example, as a patient comes to trust me more, might she not naturally open herself up to trusting other, previously disappointing attachment figures? And if there is a gratifying response to her efforts, doesn't her transference relationship to me rotate once again?

If we think of parental figures as ever-morphing spectral presences in the transference and countertransference field, we may become aware of shifts in our patients and in the treatment that we ordinarily would not observe but that once visible are illuminating. This enrichment of therapeutic work is related to Wachtel's cyclical psychodynamics. Wachtel (1982) pointed out,

> When, however, the very notion of an average or expectable environment is challenged, when the particular subtle variations in the responses we elicit from others become our focus, then the entire picture of how personality is formed and maintained looks very different. The behavior of other people is the most critically important feature of the environment in understanding most of the phenomena which are of particular interest to psychotherapists. (p. 260)

I am suggesting a particular psychoanalytic instantiation of cyclical psychodynamics by focusing on parental figures and hypothesizing the therapeutic value of shifting parental representations and transference and countertransference experience.

I don't think we reflect enough on our own transference reactions to the parents described by our patients. We consider our analytic commitment executed in viewing the parent through the subjective lens of our patient, but that lens can be clouded by our own particular countertransferentional refraction. Steven Cooper (2014) wisely addressed this issue in a recent paper. Cooper's patient is Rachael; her mother is Sarah. Rachael spurs Cooper's self-examination by teasing him that he is more preoccupied with her mother than with the boyfriend she just broke up with. He responds by thinking,

> I became more aware that in feeling such unmitigated hostility toward Sarah, I am resisting Rachael's experience of her mother as an internal object. … Like Rachael, in a sense Sarah dominates me too in that I feel that she has defeated me over and over

> again. Rachael and I are tiny serfs in the face of Sarah's domination and destructiveness. (p. 628)

As the treatment progresses, Cooper advances his examination of his countertransference toward Sarah's mother. He added,

> In response to Rachael's frequent forms of self-loathing I began to feel a new sense of guilt about my angry feelings toward her mother. I began to have visual images of Rachael's mother, both as an older woman and as a young grief-stricken woman in ways that I had never experienced before. (p. 629)

There are key analytic issues embedded in the position I've taken. I think it is useful to think of the stages of adult development in which a transformation in parental representations can occur. Parenthood, as I've said, is too often a locus of dedicated reversal rather than an exploration of past hurts from an adult perspective. Second, there may be patients for whom a reconsideration of parental trauma is impossible because of the extent of the injury or particular defensive and characterological issues. Third, I'm implicitly raising the question of developing empathy toward those who have wronged us and forgiveness for their actions. These are complicated psychological processes that are beyond the scope of this paper (Horwitz, 2005). Last, there is the question of the difference between reimagining parents after death versus the experience of new engagement while they are alive. A writer friend of mine commented to me that "we should let the dead grow," and for some of our patients this may be an easier project.

Jeanine's Journey

Jeanine first came to see me with her husband, who was 15 years older than she. Their prevailing issue was an ordinary one of inequity in coparenting responsibilities regarding their elementary-school-age children, a son and daughter. She was burdened; he agreed to this allegation, and the work was focused and successful.

Approximately one year later Jeanine called and asked if I would see her alone in individual treatment. I'm often reluctant to do so because of the shift in treatment focus, my experience of the significant other (reported vs. in vivo) and the implicated of transference and countertransference issues. I felt that Jeanine and I could take the leap in treatment paradigm because of her prior analysis and her sophisticated mind. We worked together in various lengths of engagement, with breaks of 2 or 3 years, for the last 25 years, ending in the spring of 2015.

I can't fully describe the richness of this treatment, which traversed every sector of her life. Her work as a writer of social criticism expanded in range and

in recognition; her marital relationship became more secure. There was a tremendous emphasis on her relationship with her children, with whom she felt profoundly identified and unusually prone to situating in catastrophic scenarios.

Before I focus on Jeanine's revised experience of her parents very late in the work, after her father' s death, let me highlight what I see as some key aspects of the treatment. First, I think that Jeanine was more dedicated to psychoanalytic interpretation than I. Aside from quite accurately chiding me for knowing less about Lacan than she, Jeanine defended herself from relationship hurt by constructing well-crafted dynamic explanations for why her husband and her friends failed her. Somewhat intellectualized explanations and interpretations seemed to buffer her from more vulnerable feeling states. I would often respond by accentuating the immediacy and nonsymbolic aspects of the interactions she was describing. It seemed oddly reversed at times.

Second, until the last phase of treatment, Jeanine was somewhat reluctant to fully explore her transferential relationship with me. She was positive about our work and said that it kept her psychologically anchored, but I often felt that this affirmation was more formal than personal. We did have moments of conflict, which we unpacked, and we looked at dreams she had about me, but I couldn't readily intensify transference exploration, and I too frequently backed off. Jeanine endured what she called a breakdown in late adolescence and frequently depersonalized when she got anxious in the session. I felt that she had to determine the parameters of our work, that I had to function within the contours of her defensive structure more than I usually do with patients. I felt that what Jeanine needed from me was a confirming presence, an analyst who listened and absorbed but did not cause too many perturbations in her psychological equilibrium. Was I enacting a need to be the kind of mother I had not had earlier in life, in spite of the rapprochement I experienced with my mother in adulthood? I knew all too well the possibility that my psychoanalytic participation, if not my very choice of vocation, is motivated by a wish to redress and repair my own developmental struggles and conflicts. Moreover, Jeanine is a brilliant and articulate woman, and her critiques of others could be damning. Was I protecting myself, my personal and intellectual identity, by not challenging her more directly? My overall countertransference experience was dual: I recognized and was gratified by feeling important to Jeanine, but I simultaneously felt constrained and subdued.

Her parents: What was unique about this treatment was the frozen quality of Jeanine's parental representations throughout the arc of our work, and the dramatic shift in them toward the end of treatment. Jeanine described an emotionally desperate childhood. She was one of three children, wedged between an older sister and a much younger brother. Her parents were lower middle class, immigrants from Europe, with faded memories of a plusher life, which they elevated in flights of fantasy. Her father was critical and rageful.

Anything could set him off, certainly any hint of indiscreet dress or demeanor in his daughters. Her mother, she believed, submitted to his rages and was victimized by them. There was a smudge on this image that caught my attention. Although described as a victim, Jeanine's mother often talked to her daughters about her intense romantic feelings toward their father and her undiminished sexual attraction to him.

Jeanine's disgust at her father's rage was etched in her psyche. I'm always drawn to investigating one-dimensional parental representations, but there was little I ever raised about him that interested Jeanine, including evidence that she was the child he believed was most gifted, most like his own mother, whom he adored.

I was a bit more successful in interrogating the experience of her mother as helpless victim. Evidence of her mother's deceptiveness regarding decisions and plans for Jeanine and her siblings, difficulty in directing her mother's attention to her needs, and her mother's burdensome deployment of Jeanine and her sister as babysitters for their little brother began to emerge but were usually muted by Jeanine, her mother's behavior bundled as "childlike." It was as if the revelations about her mother paled in relation to paternal oppression.

She tried to take up reflections from our work with them, but they recognized nothing credible in her grievances. As she got older along with her parents, she felt more removed from them: visited them less than her siblings and said she felt nothing toward them. This is not to say that she stopped talking about her parents. She still had a strong reaction to every reunion with them and dwelled on the difference between her own and her siblings' attitudes. Once in treatment, I asked her about the relevance of her focus on them to a current concern, and she objected, "I'm talking about my parents. This is analysis!" she protested. In retrospect, I think that in spite of the yield of our work in several areas, there remained a double lock on the treatment: Jeanine's fixed and rigid personification of her parents and her successful induction of me as a compensatory caretaker without sufficient investigation of the link between these dynamics.

In typical intergenerational irony, though fairly neglected in their own childhoods, she and her siblings were summoned into the position of caretakers for her aging parents. They had to be relocated from their retirement community to a New York state location that was mid-distance between the siblings.

The first surprising element of this phase of her treatment was Jeanine's acute concern for the dignity of her parents' decision making, much more readily ignored by her siblings. When I inquired about what seemed to me an empathic response, she insisted that her concern arose from an abstract morality and had nothing to do with feeling for them. Then, in his new surroundings her father's health deteriorated. As he weakened, Jeanine noted that he seemed to be a bit less narcissistic and slightly more authentic with her. Her father wryly noted that he had become "boring." In the past, this

level of self-recognition would have been unimaginable. She was struck by his expression of a genuine interest in her life.

Jeanine broached, anxiously, at this time the possibility that we might have to terminate treatment in the not-too-distant future because of financial pressures. I wondered whether this was purely financially based; most of the issues in her life had reached a reasonable, if not optimal, state of resolution. We discussed it briefly and posted it for future exploration. In retrospect I think that as her frozen parental internalizations, or what Sullivan called me-you integrations, were thawing, she was recalibrating her own need for me to compensate for their failures.

Then her father died. For Jeanine, the finality was penetrating. Although I think Jeanine was ripe for new awareness at this point in the treatment, I also believe that the reality of death broke through her characteristic intellectualization. In the history of psychoanalysis, we have come to privilege real events in the lives of patients, notably in the area of childhood abuse, but I think the impact of external realities is crucial in adult development as well. Rather than gelling an earlier vision of her father, what was striking about Jeanine's reaction was the affective opening in her, her ready willingness to talk about his loss, absent theory, or explanation. She said she actually felt some love for her father and she missed him. "How could this be?" she asked her husband. "My therapist thinks it's possible."

I was aware that my own experience toward the end of my mother' s life was affecting my openness to Jeanine's relationship with her father. I had no illusion of denying this, but I hoped not to encourage a false rapprochement. For Jeanine, however, the nascent connection to her father led to her keenly experiencing the irrevocable loss of a childhood in which she was cared for and cared about. She felt extremely precarious at times, on the edge of psychosis, she said. She realized that she had avoided talking about childhood trauma from the primal experience of her child-self but had largely processed it from a subjective distance. I was impressed by her openness and aware that our therapeutic pace was quickening. At this time, she reported a dream, a very Jeanine-like dream elegant in its intellectual structure and aching in its underlying emotional intent. The dream begins with her saying out loud, "It's the frame that's important," and through a frame she sees an image of her father's enraged face and the cowering body of her mother. Her associations are to a documentary on terrorism she just saw—the point of which was that recorded terrorist data can always be tracked and that locating the position or source of information is the really important secret to decode. She realizes that the dream is ironic; she renders the violence of her father as public and unambiguous—it is the wounds that have remained unseen by leaving herself out of the frame that have never healed.

At this time, Jeanine began to talk more seriously about terminating our work. She worried about surviving without me but began to talk about a sense of maintaining some psychological equilibrium without ongoing treatment. I didn't

want her to end, though I knew she was ready. She was a very compelling person to work with—smart, engaged with life, had all the values I admire—and she had been a figure in my own life for 25 years. I was beginning to grieve her loss as well and—as with all losses we endure—the inevitable connection to my own mortality

The aftermath of her father's death was filled with increasingly disturbing reflections about her mother's self-referential character and callous behavior, most clearly revealed in the absence of grief for the loss of a man she purportedly adored. Why hadn't she realized all this about her mother before, she asked somewhat accusingly? In all the time we've worked together? She knew that I had raised questions about her mother throughout treatment but was distressed that we had never addressed what she now saw as the magnitude of her maternal deprivation. I asked her whether she felt I had failed her, as her mother had. She cried and protested, but her distress indicated otherwise.

I felt unnerved by Jeanine challenging the depth and breadth of our work. But it was overdue, and her challenge was more direct and emotional than the intellectual critiques she had rendered in the past. Allowing herself to see her parents differently, to acknowledge a new kind of truthfulness, enabled her to face what our work had yielded. Jeanine and I had formed a collusive and constricting bond of mutual self-protection, not unlike the father-damning bond she had formed with her mother. She had protected me by never really looking at my limitations as a therapist, and I had protected her—through compensatory care-taking—from facing her deprivation.

One day Jeanine came into a session with an important revelation, she said. Two days before, she had become agitated at a family gathering in which her mother had acted flagrantly self-absorbed. She said that when she got home, she meditated and at some point experienced what felt like a luminous insight; she called it an epiphany. She was suffused with pity for her mother, whom she saw for the first time as deeply limited and handicapped. There are multiple possibilities for interpreting this new personification, but my hunch was that it reflected an internal sense of stability that followed the clearing of protective cobwebs that had covered her mother and me.

Jeanine and I set a date for termination, approximately three months into the future. In one of our last sessions, Jeanine talked about a friend of hers who had wasted her time in therapy because she had seduced the therapist into a state of blindness. "Has this happened between us?" I ask. "No," she says, "you've been direct with me. I don't know if it's your belief about therapy but it was crucial." This time, I didn't have to back off.

"It is my belief about therapy, but directness is also part of my personality. Wasn't I too much at times?" I asked.

"Well, sometimes it was difficult," she said, "I didn't accept what you were asking, and you've become even more direct in the last five years. But my parents mind-fucked me and you managed to help me trust myself." And

indeed, creating a relationship field in which the patient comes to trust her own perceptions and beliefs, is exactly what I believe makes psychoanalytic treatment unique.

There were, as I said, gains in this treatment earlier on, but the last phase was a very late opening of a more vibrant connection to me, and a revised personification of the parents. It is interesting to me how if we stay with our structure, what Levenson (1983) described as the necessary psychoanalytic algorithm (capsule form: agreement on the frame, the detailed inquiry with attention to gaps in the narrative, and the examination of the transference)—we can't really predict when a new unfolding will occur. Of course not all of my patients change their views of their parents so dramatically, though I do characteristically keep a wide-angle lens focused on parental description.

I think that for Jeanine, the ability to finally feel the solidity of our work enabled her to open herself up to some nourishment from her father and more clearly delineate her suffering from her mother. And I think, reciprocally, the sense that she could robustly survive owning her experience, allowed her to recognize that she had a secure attachment to me; previously she had anxiously feared separation from me. We talk about a two-person psychology, but we tend to locate the intersubjectivity of self and other exclusively in the analytic relationship, something I as a family therapist have questioned repeatedly. I was witnessing with Jeanine a circle that rotated around her representations and experience of me, as well as her parents. Thus it was equally as likely that as she defined her parents more realistically, she experienced me more realistically, with an inevitably limited capacity to affect her life experience.

In our last few sessions, Jeanine mourned our ending, and so did I. As opposed to earlier breaks in treatment, she said, this was really an ending, and she cried. She started musing about my age, and I guess she was considering a more inevitable separation. "You saved my life," she said, and that is a gift about my work I will treasure.

Conclusion

Talking about a parent's death has become a leitmotif in contemporary culture, with two very popular graphic novels as exemplars. Roz Chast (2014), with hilarious forthrightness in *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* described her role as caretaker to parents in decline, though her book underlines the prevailing assumption that "Old Age didn't change their personalities. If anything, it intensified what was already there" (Chast, 2014, p. 28). Once, I heard her discuss the book at a public meeting, and most relevant to what I am discussing was her being taken aback by audience members who stood up to offer personal testimony about her parents, which Chast found very surprising.

These were not the parents she had depicted. Much more fluidly, Allison Bechdel's (2006) *Fun Home*, now a successful former Broadway production, captures the challenge of reconfiguring a parent anew at each stage of the life cycle, in this case a father who killed himself. In the musical, the female protagonist is played as an 11-, 19-, and 40-year-old, all fitfully trying to understand and engage an elusive but hypnotic father. Indeed, Bechdel noted that the process of writing the play actually helped her empathize with her parents. She texted her 40-year-old avatar, saying "I feel like I have learned something about myself watching you" (Paulson, 2015, Arts, p. 1).

The history of our discipline indicates that complexity paradoxically yields clarity (Bechdel, 2006). I think as psychoanalysts we are embedded in a relationship field, which includes how parents are reconfigured throughout the length of treatment. Shifts in this reconfiguration, particularly after death, yield significant implications for personal identity, as well as the evolving transference and countertransference relationship. My own developmental experience, well into middle-age, which emerged from relating to my mother in the last phase of her life as well as after her death, has sensitized me to shifts in parental representation. And of course I have tried to remain open to additional changes in my view of my mother and the effect of these variations on me and on my analytic participation. Most of all, I find that my engagement with the kaleidoscopic patterning of parental and analytic representations has opened up a vibrant area of exploration in my work.

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Contributor

Mary-Joan Gerson, PhD, ABPP, is an Adjunct Clinical Professor, Consultant, and Past Director of the Advanced Specialization in Couple and Family Therapy at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, and a Supervisor at the National Institute for the Psychotherapies. She is the Founding President of Section VIII, Couples and Family Therapy, of Division 39, as well as Founding Co-Chair of the Committee on Psychoanalysis and Health, and the Committee on Psychoanalysis and Community. She is the author of journal articles and book chapters focused on the integration of psychoanalytic, family systemic, and attachment theory, including a full-length book, *The Embedded Self*, as well as numerous publications on chronic illness, adult development, and psychoanalytic activism.