

Jamieson Webster

A conversation with a New York psychoanalyst.



Psychoanalytic terms—including such pop favorites as “repression,” “Oedipal complex” and “narcissism”—are part of the vernacular, and yet psychoanalysis as a profession remains maligned. But analyst Jamieson Webster, who practices in Manhattan’s SoHo neighborhood, is fine with that. A professor at the New School as well as a cultural critic, Webster agrees with Freud, who believed that since psychoanalysis concerns things that make us uncomfortable, it will always face resistance. Here, Webster talks about the benefits of forgetting, the myths about psychoanalysis, and how difficult listening is for all of us.

What drew you to psychoanalysis? I think being sick is the only reason people become analysts. I read Freud early, and when I was 14, I wanted to be a parapsychologist, which was about hauntings and the uncanny. The minute I got to New York, I found an analyst, but really, I was in trouble. You spend a lot of time in analysis wrestling with your issues, and then have to figure out if you want to become an analyst because you truly want to help people. Analysis confronts the altruistic impulse as false. It isn’t going to fulfill the wishes that made you go into this in the first place; it’s going to make you stare at those wishes in their unfulfillability. At that point, you must determine if you still want to do this work.

Like an artist, that work involves bringing details to the surface. The power of certain painters—when they create a work of art—is that they make something visible that wasn’t visible before. Psycho-

analysis does the same thing by highlighting an off-center detail, something that sticks out, and pushing it back into the center for the patient. Dreams often have drama, but there’s frequently a little detail that unravels their meaning. That’s why we should read literature more than we should study neuroscience. Patients are strange, and when you break through them, there’s all this crazy material but also something wonderful.

There’s a trend—in creative writing courses, in media campaigns—to “tell your story.” How is that different than what happens in your sessions? There’s an entitled impulse that people believe they have a story to tell. But it’s very difficult to tell your story, and the story you tell is always a lie. You must work in peculiar ways to discover that your conscious narrative is wrong and then find the other meanings. I would have been terrified if I had to tell my own story. Psychoanalysis is more about breaks in the narrative than the narrative itself. Maybe a different story can emerge after breaking something down. I understand the impulse in identity politics, about how your narrative has been written out of history, but that’s a fight for power. There’s something dangerous about confusing identity and power. Psychoanalysis is about who we are, and there’s no power there. What you end up saying in analysis is a deeply disempowered story.

If you’re writing your own story, you’re not listening. Are we experiencing a crisis of listening? I think so. Take psychoanalytic training: five to six years of

graduate school and a minimum five to six years of analytic training. That’s 12 years of learning how to listen! Realizing how hard it is makes me very pessimistic about what’s possible outside this office. When listening is this hard, I get scared when I think about real situations that have real consequences. Most of the time when you’re in a conversation with others, you’re filling in your own story. Usually, we talk about safe spaces for speaking, but I think it would be much better to have safe spaces to listen.

Psychoanalysis is not about morality, and it’s very hard to listen without morality. We’re returning to morality today—there’s outrage on every side—and while there are things to be angry about, we need to get morality out of the picture before we can really listen. It’s judgment, usually reactionary and immediate, that typically comes from your own self. You’re persecuting yourself for something about which you feel guilty.

One myth about psychoanalysis is that repression is terrible. We live in an age where, because of technology, nothing is lost. Are there benefits of forgetting? Forgetting allows us to restart. It creates the unconscious, which gives us a hidden reservoir to put things in, to which later we can return. Patients in their most anxious states are trying to keep everything right there in front of them instead of putting it all back into the container, letting it come back in due course, and establishing their own unique rhythm of forgetting, remembering and having things come to consciousness. Without repression, we’d all be delirious and insane.

“Forgetting allows us to restart... Without repression, we’d all be delirious and insane.”

Webster regularly contributes to *The Guardian* with psychoanalytical musings on sexting politicians and presidents with personality disorders.