

Theoretical Thinking as an Enlivening Experience:

An Experiential Method for Making a Creative Relationship With Theory

By Lynn Preston

We all know the experience of coming upon an idea or perspective that wakes us up, enlivens us, changes us inside and expands the lens through which we see the world we inhabit. We may feel filled with anticipation about where the new thinking can take us. The moment of "getting it" has an element of freshness and surprise and at the same time it can feel like something we have always somehow known.

When a theoretical way of thinking takes hold of us, our practice takes on vigor and dimensionality; even the treatments that we find most burdensome and confusing can be infused with new hope. The idea may not be new to us, but it suddenly speaks to us - "I never saw it quite that way before." We feel held and inspired by the path of thinking it presents to us, or perhaps more accurately by *our experience of walking the path* - *our interaction with the thinking*.

It is this alive relationship with theoretical thinking that brings vitality and cohesion to our professional identities. It keeps our foundational ideas fresh and ever developing and gives us the confidence to be open to new unfamiliar approaches. It generates the vital link between theory and practice. Such theoretical selfobject experiences are the oxygen of psychoanalytic work.

In this workshop we will explore a method for facilitating creative theoretical experience. Using Eugene Gendlin's guidelines for "thinking with the implicit," we will enter into a series of contemplative experiences of inner dialogue with concepts that have called to us and sustained us, as we also locate the growing edge of our current thinking about them. We will interweave these introspective experiences with lively, open dialogue inspired by Hans Gadamer's ideas about what makes "genuine conversation."

By slowing down, paying attention to and improvising with our own implicit and explicit assimilation and creation processes, we will enter into the interstices of our own theoretical organizations of experience and co-create a laboratory for understanding the phenomenological dimension of theory. Our project is to articulate and experiment with the processes by which theory is taken in, personally understood, elaborated, integrated and applied.

This workshop will be helpful for experienced clinicians, beginning analysts, teachers, writers and all those who want to enrich and deepen their enjoyment of theoretical thinking. It is an opportunity to make a more personal, intimate, collaborative and user- friendly relationship with the psychotherapeutic conceptualizations of our time.

FORMAT FOR THE WORKSHOP

1. **Introduction** -Theory as an enlivening and grounding experience We will explore how a creative personal relationship with theoretical thinking can be an invaluable professional selfobject experience. We will start with an introspective experience and conversation about our personal relationship with theory - how theoretical ideas have grabbed us, moved us, rescued and sometimes imprisoned us. We will talk about making the kind of relationship with theory that is a living interaction - (i.e. getting to know a set of ideas and the terms on which they stand, dialoguing with them, trying them out, experimenting with them, arguing with them, expanding on them and integrating them into the rest of the family of ideas in one's professional household.) We will also make room for our frustrations, confusions and conflicts about the contemporary self psychological landscape in which we live.

2. A METHOD FOR GENERATING CREATIVE THEORETICAL EXPLORATIONS

After a didactic exploration of Eugene Gendlin's concept of "thinking with the implicit" participants will be invited to focus on theoretical ideas so as to generate an alive link between the explicit and implicit dimensions of thinking. Through a series of contemplative experiences, we will tune into the edge of our thinking/feeling by sensing the palpable feeling dimension of the concepts we are exploring.

These introspective processes will be interwoven with lively, respectful dialogue - The generative thinking process is fundamentally dependent on the kind of empathic responsiveness that welcomes new unpackaged tendrils of self expression.

3. DISCUSSION and SHARING

We hope that the reflective processes will lay the foundation for conversation in which each person's experience is valued as part of an emerging unpredictable new whole. Welcoming differences and "otherness" as well as similarities and resonances is a vital part of this integration process.

Appendix

A Brief synopsis of some of the steps of this focusing process

- A. In the spirit of "reverie" allow yourself to recall an idea - a theoretical concept -that opened a door for you. Perhaps it is a way of thinking that resonates deeply with your lived experience. Or perhaps, less dramatic than that, a perspective that you are intrigued by - one that calls to you for further exploration. Perhaps it is a theoretical concept that you take for granted as the bread and butter of your work - one that has nurtured you for years.**
- B. Put this idea in your own words - relinquishing the familiar terms it comes with.**
- C. Find your own name for the concept - allow this name to conjure up the *feel of it inside you***
- D. Think of an instance of how this idea works in your practice or in your own life.**
- E. What does this idea DO for you or in you? What does it ask or demand or inspire in you?**
- F. Can you find a fuzzy edge of the idea that puzzles you or calls for further exploration or asks a question?**
- G. What do You, with your particular history and organization of experience, know about this territory that the original idea didn't have? How can you further it? (we should never leave a theory in the same condition in whi**

ABSTRACT

We all know the experience of being captivated by a theoretical perspective that wakes us up, enlivens us, changes us inside and expands the lens through which we see our world. We feel eager to absorb it, dialogue with it and see where it can take us. This kind of generative interaction with theory illuminates our practice. It is this alive relationship with theoretical thinking that brings vitality and cohesion to our professional identities. This workshop is an exploration of how such theoretical selfobject experiences can be fostered and harnessed as fuel for psychoanalytic work. It presents an opportunity to experiment with what I call "genuine introspection" - a method for making a creative relationship with theory by experientializing the process of theoretical integration.