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Lessons of the Masters (2004)

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This is the title of a recent book by George Steiner based on his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures of 2001-2002. My introduction to his thinking was reading his *Grammars of Creation* a few years ago, which led me, among other things, to read Proust. He suggests that, pivotal in the unfolding of Western culture, stand Socrates and Jesus, who were charismatic masters who left no written teachings and who founded no schools. In the efforts of their disciples and the passion narratives inspired by their deaths, Steiner sees the beginnings of the inward vocabulary, the encoded recognitions of much of our moral, philosophical, and theological idiom. He goes on to consider a diverse array of traditions and disciplines, recurring throughout to three underlying themes: the master's power to exploit his student's dependence and vulnerability; the complementary threat of subversion and betrayal of the mentor by his pupil; and the reciprocal exchange of trust and love, of learning and instruction between teacher and disciple.

I found his theme fascinating and prompted me to read a number of books to which he had referred, but finally led me to wonder how Michael Balint might fit into his thesis. It seems to me that Michael might be someone special, the exception that proves the rule, a Master who strived to liberate his disciples from dependency. Not that he escaped rebellion, even if it falls short of betrayal. I recall listening to a paper read at the second Balint congress in Budapest which suggested Michael was not the initiator of what we now call Balint-work, but ascribed that role to a named other. I was astonished that the author of the paper should choose a Balint conference to air this view, rather than by the nature of the assertion that Michael was not the prime mover. The fact that I cannot remember either name of the author of the paper or the name postulated as the true genius can, of course, be construed as evidence that I have repressed both as a consequence of dependence on my part of 'the master'. Again, at the memorial meeting for Enid Balint arranged

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by the British Psychoanalytical Society I heard Bob Gosling suggest that Enid's calm demeanour had been a key element in modulating Michael's wildness. David Malan, who had attempted a rigorous scientific approach to evaluating brief psychotherapy published in *A Study of Brief Psychotherapy*, once remarked that when Michael Balint came through the door, science went out of the window. Did these critical views suggest that, although Michael was convinced that his whole work was based on psychoanalytic principles, other analysts were aware that he was in some sense a maverick, basing his approach somewhere between scientific medicine and psychoanalysis? He certainly did not think that being a practising psychoanalyst was in itself sufficient to qualify for being a Balint group leader, even though he considered undergoing analysis essential. This is illustrated by the case of an analyst who was in the position of associate co-leader to Enid in a GP trainee (registrar) group, whom she had invited to learn the necessary skills, but proved to be unable to apply psychoanalytic expertise in a way appropriate to a leading a Balint group. What, then, was the latent factor necessary? Having a thorough understanding of the nature of the work of a GP (or specialist if that is the focus of the group work) was certainly a vital requirement — I always had an uncomfortable feeling that Michael could conduct a surgery in my practice better than I could. But it is not only that. In my own case I was astonished that Tom Main considered that I could lead a Balint group which was then seeking a leader. I was even more astonished when Sandy Bourne, at a group leader conference held in Bern, Switzerland, made the remark that I had reached the country inhabited by analytic leaders by an alternative route. If these encouraging noises mean anything then it must mean that both analysts and non-analysts must make a journey into a `Balint space' of special expertise. Not that I am smug, let me assure you. One member of my last (research) group expressed disappointment in not having had an analyst leader of the group. While remembering that Michael always forbade the overt use of analytic terms, especially transference, he never changed his view

that all group leaders should be analysts, though he did sanction the members of the groups who were doing research on psycho-sexual matters to lead groups set up under the auspices of the Family Planning Association. Whether this meant he thought that restricting the area of pathology made this a safe procedure or that whether he was really changing his mind we shall never know. My first GP group was co-led with Mary Hare, so I had a feeling of safety in her analytic insights, while she relied on my firsthand experience of general practice. This was a happy and, judging by the current position of several of the group members, a mutually enriching one. Mary's long battle with depressive tendencies was won after we attended a conference in Japan, at which we presented a paper, when she confided that she now realised, at last, the worth of her own professional work. What is clear to me now is that though I fell under the spell of Michael, there was nothing he enjoyed more than being stood up to, so to speak. I well remember Rosa Taylor saying, during a group meeting, that he was like Henry Ford who didn't mind what colour the car was as long as it was black. He laughed his head off!

The greatest personal rewards for me have been events that have mirrored things the Balints spoke of: how something learned by a ‘student’ has changed his/her professional aims, or how a colleague feels their work was understood even beyond their own understanding. But this satisfaction is not achieved by feeling the recipient is in thrall to the 'master' but rather that one has opened the door of the cage and let the bird fly free. So I believe that Balint-work makes us all free, even though this echoes the dreadful, cynical, words that surmounted the gate of Auschwitz. Perhaps that very echo means that Jewish genius transcends even a holocaust and may lead us to understand what is the essence of the process which we have shared in Balint-work training. This somehow combines the insights of psychoanalysis and traditional medicine, and sets a completely new standard for teaching and learning. Can this help the International Balint Federation in its quest to define the necessary qualities of future Balint leaders?

Reference

Steiner G. *Lessons of the Masters* London: Harvard University Press, 2003.