Fear of Breakdown and Breaks in Unity:
Mysteries of the Unlived Life

CMPS Annual Conference  Saturday, March 11, 2017
Fashion Institute of Technology
218 W 28th Street, New York City
Fright of Breakdown and Breaks in Unity: Mysteries of the Unlived Life

While it presents several provocative ideas, some of which Winnicott characterized as new even to him, the concept of fear of breakdown was at the center of his evolving thinking. It suggests that some patients who present with fear of an impending breakdown may actually be summoning feelings from their past, from a kind of breakdown that already happened in infancy. Such a breakdown could have been triggered by an extreme failure of the “facilitating environment” (e.g., a rupture in the mother/infant bond), which left the infant unprotected and alone to take on what Winnicott termed “primitive agonies.”

Through the work of analysis, and particularly in the transference, the patient may gradually experience, for the first time, the pain and terror of the original breakdown. Patients then may access lost parts of their inner experience, which Thomas Ogden characterized as the “unlived life.”

Galit Atlas, in *The Enigma of Desire*, presents the theory of breaks in unity, moments in development that provide existential pauses or gaps that can lead to fragmentation and breakdown as well as provide opportunities for reintegration and breakthrough. Childbirth and motherhood entail breaks in unity that can lead to a loss of the distinction between self and object as well as fluctuations between inside and outside and between conscious and unconscious. The mother’s enigmatic breaks in unity are unconsciously transmitted to the infant. Unassimilated traumatic experiences of the mother held in the mind of the patient must be worked through in analysis with the recognition that these breaks in unity are both “me” and “not me.”

The conference will focus on the thought-provoking ideas presented in “Fear of Breakdown” and explore the stimulating questions they raise, which go to the core of our work as analysts—questions related to our use of countertransference, our experience of ourselves, and the ways we conceptualize the treatment while aspiring to remain fully open to experiencing the patient.

Rory Rothman will introduce the day with an overview of Winnicott’s “Fear of Breakdown” and explore the context of her interest in this area. M. Gerard Fromm, a noted Winnicott scholar, will expand our thinking from fear of breakdown to fear of breakthrough, when parent, child, and, later, patient confront intergenerational trauma. Galit Atlas will present her theory of breaks in unity. Rory Rothman will moderate a conversation with the presenters.

The afternoon session will begin with a clinical presentation by Barbara Steif of a patient with the fear of breakdown. Rory Rothman will then moderate a question-and-answer session between the audience and the presenters.
CMPS
Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies

Fear of Breakdown and Breaks in Unity: Mysteries of the Unlived Life
CMPS Annual Conference
Saturday, March 11, 2017
9:00 AM - 5:30 PM

Fashion Institute of Technology Conference Center
28th Street and Seventh Avenue, New York City

MORNING SESSION

9:00 - 9:45  Registration
9:45 - 10:00  Lucy Holmes, Conference Chair
              Welcome, Announcements, and Introduction of Speakers
10:00 - 10:20  Rory Rothman
              Introduction to Winnicott’s “Fear of Breakdown”
10:20 - 11:00  M. Gerard Fromm
              “Fear of Breakthrough: This Past and Future Thing”
11:00 - 11:40  Galit Atlas
              “Breaks in Unity”
11:40 - 12:30  Rory Rothman
              Conversation with Fromm and Atlas

AFTERNOON SESSION

12:30 - 2:30  Lunch Break
2:30 - 2:40  Lucy Holmes
             Introduction of Case Presentation
2:40 - 3:30  Barbara Steif
             “Fear of Breakdown: The Story of Poor Pitiful Pearl”
3:30 - 5:00  Rory Rothman
             Question-and-Answer Session with the Audience and Presenters
5:00 - 5:30  Wine-and-Cheese Social
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O
terview and Introduction to the Topic

A rich vein of stimulating ideas runs through D.W. Winnicott’s posthumously published final paper, “Fear of Breakdown.” These ideas raise thought-provoking questions that go to the core of our work as analysts — questions related to our use of countertransference, our experience of ourselves, and the ways we conceptualize the treatment while aspiring to remain fully open to experience the patient. Rory Rothman will introduce the day with a brief review of Winnicott’s “Fear of Breakdown” and explore the context surrounding her interest in this area. Following the presentation of papers related to “Fear of Breakdown” by Fromm and Atlas, she will then moderate a conversation with the presenters.

Rory Rothman, PsyAD, is a training and supervising analyst on the faculty of CMPS and the New York Graduate School of Psychoanalysis. She also serves as Director of Admissions of CMPS and NYGSP and Book Review Editor of the journal Modern Psychoanalysis. Her research on early mental states and somatization was featured at the 2010 CMPS annual conference and in her article “When the Body Does the Talking.” She is a licensed psychoanalyst in private practice in Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights, NY.

Fear of Breakthrough: “This Past and Future Thing”

Something happened, says Winnicott, but the person wasn’t there for it to happen to. Yet its traces are ever present and always on the horizon. This “flash of insight” – one of many during an electrifying period of theory development for Winnicott – is grounded in clinical work with psychotic and traumatized patients. If we take the first sentence of this paragraph literally, we could read it as an intergenerational truth for all of us: Something indeed happened to our parents; we may not have been there but we were on the horizon. In this presentation, M. Gerard Fromm will examine Winnicott’s fear of breakdown idea as it may relate to the transmission of trauma, to the question of psychosis, and to its manifestation in the transference. At the end of his paper, Winnicott, at his most eloquent, turns his formulation around and speaks of nothing happening, when something could have happened. Might this tragically empty moment speak to the fear of breakthrough both parent and child sense as they stumble into the fallout of trauma one has been carrying for the other?

M. Gerard Fromm, PhD, is a Senior Consultant to, and former Director of, the Erikson Institute of the Austen Riggs Center. He is on the faculty of the Yale Child Study Center and the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis, and has taught at, and provided organizational consultation to, a number of psychoanalytic institutes across the country. He is President of the International Dialogue Initiative, an interdisciplinary group that studies the psychodynamics of societal conflict, and Past President of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations. His books include Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma across Generations; A Spirit That Impels: Play, Creativity and Psychoanalysis; and Taking the Transference, Reaching toward Dreams: Clinical Studies in the Intermediate Area.

Breaks in Unity and the Fear of Breakdown

Galit Atlas’ presentation, based on her book The Enigma of Desire, reexamines Winnicott’s “Fear of Breakdown” (1974) from a contemporary perspective. Atlas explores Winnicott’s idea in the context of what she terms breaks in unity, the undertheorized realm of the maternal body and the complex relationship between birth and loss, as she listens to the break within a breakdown and to the breakdown within a break. She proposes that an inherent part of the process of motherhood includes an existential break: a break of physical and emotional boundaries, a break of meaning, a break of continuity, and therefore a break of the unity of the self. These processes are integral but often unspoken dimensions of childbirth and motherhood. Exploring the realm of the maternal body, Atlas considers the nature of development and psychopathology as they relate to early maternal development, infant—mother boundaries, and unconscious communication.

Galit Atlas, PhD, is a psychoanalyst and clinical supervisor in private practice in New York City. She is the author of The Enigma of Desire: Sex, Longing and Belonging in Psychoanalysis (Routledge, 2015). She is on the faculty of the NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and the Four-Year Adult and National Training Programs of NIP. She serves on the editorial board of Psychoanalytic Perspectives and is the author of articles and chapters that focus primarily on gender and sexuality. Atlas is a contributor to The New York Times, and writes essays elucidating psychoanalysis for the general public.

Case Presentation

Barbara Steif will present the case of a patient with the fear of breakdown, focusing on the experience of the analyst-patient dyad. Listeners will be brought into the relational drama of the mother-infant transference, including love, hate, pathos, trauma, and grief.

Barbara Steif, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst in private practice in Portland, Oregon. She taught human development at Columbia University and for fifteen years taught and supervised at the Northwest Center for Psychoanalysis in Portland and Seattle. Since 2011 she has been a Training Analyst at the Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles.
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Admission: $150  • Students with ID: $65

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CMPS
Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies
16 West 10th Street, New York, NY 10011
212-260-7050
fax: 212-228-6410  • cmps@cmps.edu  • www.cmps.edu

Lucy Holmes, PhD, LCSW, LP

Lucy Holmes, Conference Chair, is a CMPS and NYGSP faculty member and training analyst, and is in private practice in New York City. She is the author of two books, *The Internal Triangle* and *Wrestling with Destiny.*

Conference Information

The Fashion Institute of Technology

DIRECTIONS TO CONFERENCE

The Fashion Institute of Technology is located at Seventh Avenue and 28th Street.

By Subway
Take the 1 train to 28th Street.

LUNCH RECESS

There is a selection of restaurants with a range of cuisines at various price points in the immediate vicinity of the Fashion Institute of Technology.
The Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies’ Certificate Program in Psychoanalysis—one of the premier psychoanalytic programs in the country—offers students comprehensive training in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. Graduates are prepared to treat a wide range of mental disorders, utilizing both their intellectual insight and emotional understanding, and meet the educational qualifications for the New York State psychoanalysis license. The program includes both classroom instruction and supervised practice in our on-site clinic. Bulletins will be available at the conference, or please contact CMPS at 212-260-7050 • cmps@cmps.edu • www.cmps.edu.

CMPS Monthly Open Houses introduce prospective candidates to our program. 2017 Dates: Thursday, February 16, 6:30–7:30 PM; Tuesday, March 28, 2:15–3:15 PM; Thursday, April 27, 6:00–7:00 PM; Tuesday, May 9, 2:15–3:15 PM; Thursday, June 8, 6:30–7:30 PM. For information: 212-260-7050 • cmps@cmps.edu.

The CMPS Extension Division offers courses, conferences, workshops, and special events that bring a modern psychoanalytic perspective to a broad range of topics. Every semester, the course Introduction to Modern Psychoanalysis is offered for those interested in learning more about psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic training. All courses, events, seminars, and workshops are open to the lay and professional public and most are free of charge.

The CMPS One-Year Program is a two-semester course (10 Monday evening classes per semester) designed to enhance the work of professionals in the fields of mental health, education, the arts, humanities, and business, by introducing them to the principles of modern psychoanalytic theory and technique. Information/brochure: 212-260-7050 • cmps@cmps.edu.

The CMPS Research Library offers a catalogued collection of psychoanalytic books, journals, reprints, and reference publications. Wi-Fi is available throughout the school.

The journal Modern Psychoanalysis, published by CMPS since 1976, presents articles on psychoanalytic theory, technique, and research. It is indexed on PsycINFO and at www.cmps.edu. Modern Psychoanalysis is also available online through Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP). For information, call the CMPS office: 212-260-7050.

The CMPS Consultation and Referral Service, located at 16 West 10th Street, offers affordable short- and long-term therapy for a range of life challenges, including relationships, job stress, anxiety, depression, addictions, serious illness, and life transitions. For information or an initial consultation: 212-228-6036 or www.cmpsTalkingHelps.org.

Continuing Education Information

Social Workers: The Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies (CMPS) SW CPE is recognized by the New York State Education Department’s State Board for Social Work as an approved provider of continuing education for licensed social workers (#0206).

Psychologists: CMPS is approved by the American Psychological Association to sponsor continuing education for psychologists. CMPS maintains responsibility for this program and its content.

Learning Objectives: Participants will be able to (1) describe key ideas in Winnicott’s Fear of Breakdown, (2) describe some clinical manifestations of Fear of Breakdown and their potential origins, and (3) describe clinical work in the realm of psychic breakdown, with emphasis on the use of countertransference.