

Finding Order in Meaning, Being and Becoming through Memoir: An Interview with Joan Wheelis about *The Known, the Secret, the Forgotten*

Fred L. Griffin



Fred L. Griffin



Joan Wheelis

There is a growing interest in memoir among the general readership, and an increasing number of psychoanalysts who are writing books about their lives that readers within and outside the field are eager to read.

This article centers on one particular memoir by a psychoanalyst, *The Known,*

Joan Wheelis, M.D., is a training and supervising psychoanalyst at Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute; assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School; clinical faculty at McLean Hospital; and teaches at Massachusetts General Hospital / McLean Hospital Psychiatric Residency Program.

*Wheelis's parents were both psychoanalysts who practiced in San Francisco, in offices that occupied a part of the home in which she grew up. Her father, Allen Wheelis, was the author of 15 books, including psychoanalytic and philosophical explorations, novels, and memoir. Joan Wheelis's mother was known professionally as Ilse Jawetz. Fred L. Griffin, M.D., is training and supervising analyst at the Dallas Psychoanalytic Center and clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. He is author of *Creative Listening and the Psychoanalytic Process.**

the Secret, the Forgotten, written by Joan Wheelis and published in 2019 by Norton. After a few comments to set the context, I interview Wheelis about her book.

Memoir and Clinical Psychoanalysis

Memoir is a literary genre that is more about the emotional experience of a life than the factual accounts. Memoirs are as diverse in their nature as their authors, both in the ways they are constructed and what they aim to do. Rather than trying to define what memoir is and is not, I am more interested in how it goes about doing what it does: how it brings order to one's life; how it plays with memory and time; how it attends more to the subjective experience of what is emotionally true than the objective truth; how the process of writing memoir may lead to a discovery of meanings as it captures states of being; how writing memoir may be itself an act of becoming. All of this is to say, writing—and perhaps reading—memoir is not so unlike what happens in the analytic situation.

Why are psychoanalysts interested in memoir?

Many psychoanalysts are drawn to creative writings and to their authors. It is not only a scholarly interest that makes good writing so appealing, and not just because we rely upon words to achieve the talking cure. For those of us who love language, words are fascinating in the ways they are used to create implicit and explicit metaphors as the psychoanalytic process unfolds. Imaginative language—shared by analyst and analysand—has the potential to communicate the past, the present, the as-if experience of transference-countertransference, and

the possibilities of a future. Through the creation of metaphor, the writer Cynthia Ozick tells us, “We strangers can imagine the familiar hearts of strangers”; this act “transforms the strange into the familiar” (*Metaphor & Memory*, 1991).

Language in creative works, moreover, generates nuances of sound and rhythm; it can convey how it feels to hear and say words. In so doing, language communicates something more, beyond the words themselves. I am referring to how language works inside us, between us and others.

The Known, the Secret, the Forgotten, Joan Wheelis's memoir about her relationship with her parents, both accomplished psychoanalysts, beautifully captures such elements of language and memoir that many psychoanalysts find intriguing. Wheelis writes in her opening chapter:

My parents are both dead, yet their lives are very much within me. Time and memory rushing in like waves on distant shores. Pulling shells and stones and crabs out to sea and then tossing them back to shore again. Loudly and then softly, inexorably.

This is language we can feel, that has the power to stimulate the imagination so we not only grasp something of its meaning, but also sense how the author is trying to reach the reader. Her words bridge the gap between her and us.

Memoir is a unique kind of self-inquiry conducted not only at the writer's desk but also in the public square. For some authors, memoir brings narrative order to a life. For some, writing memoir is a therapeutic act. Deriving its name from

Continued on page 19

the French word for reminiscences, memoir generates its own unique treatment of memory and time. Memoir can create states of mind much like those found within the psychoanalytic process as consciousness is in fluid interplay with time and memory.

Memoir can create states of mind much like those found within the psychoanalytic process as consciousness is in fluid interplay with time and memory.

In speaking about the emotional ambience of timelessness captured in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov writes:

A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present...Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die...I confess I do not believe in time.

John Banville, novelist, short story writer, and author of *Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir*, raises questions about the reliability of memory in memoir when he writes of “the blithely treacherous nature of memory, about its playful deceptions, its willful insistences, its blind spots and black holes.” He challenges us to question our notions of time— “When does the past become the past?”—and goes on to say memoir is an art form that articulates states of being: “Art is a constant effort to strike past the mere daily doings of humankind in order to arrive at ... the essence of what it is, simply, to be.”

These authors speak of the authenticity of emotional experience conveyed in memoir—how it transcends our everyday ideas about time and memory and demonstrates something about being and becoming more fully human.

These elements of memoirs speak of qualities that mirror the depths of the psychoanalytic experience and echo what we hope to achieve in a personal analysis. Many psychoanalysts are drawn to this near-unconscious treatment of inner and relational emotional

experience and to the realness of one person turning to another— be it psychoanalyst or imagined reader— in an effort to reach toward emotional growth and the freedom to be oneself.

The Known, the Secret, the Forgotten

Fred Griffin: Why write a memoir? Did you set out to write such a book, or did it happen in a different way?

Joan Wheelis: My father died in 2007, and I wrote a short piece entitled “Last Cut,” about cutting my father’s hair, which I read for his memorial. I never intended to write a book, but over time I thought to put together some other reminiscences of my father for my son. After my mother died in 2012, the process of sorting through the belongings of my parents led me to discover their journals and letters and took me on a journey into their past as well as my own. The vignettes that I wrote started to coalesce around themes of love and loss. Ten years after I wrote the first vignette for my father’s memorial, a memoir took shape as a kaleidoscope of reminiscence and reflection on my relationship with my parents.

FG: What was it like to release your book out into the world? Any regrets?

JW: I had no regrets. Perhaps because it took so long to write, I had more than ample time to metabolize its content. With the reality of its publication, I

asked myself if I would be comfortable with family, friends, colleagues, and patients reading it, and I was. I still am.

FG: Did you learn anything about yourself you weren’t expecting? Did anything take you by surprise?

JW: The experience of writing the memoir was varied. Initially it was extremely difficult and slow and brought up many uncertainties about my writing abilities and comparing myself with my father. Sometimes an idea came to me while I slept, and I wrote an entire piece when I woke up. Sometimes I had an idea but couldn’t write a word for months. At times it felt cumbersome and plodding and other times it was exhilarating and fluent. Rather than writing from nine until noon each morning like my father, I had no routine. Sometimes I wrote early in the morning before I started seeing patients, in the breaks between patients, in bed late at night or on the weekends. My father always wrote on bond paper on a clipboard with a fountain pen. Sometimes I wrote on my computer, sometimes I jotted things down on a scrap piece of paper or in a notebook with a pencil or a ballpoint pen. These comparisons with my father’s habits were invidious and often made me feel fraudulent. It took a long time and much encouragement to feel I had a worthy voice of my own.

FG: Did you find that writing your memoir was a therapeutic act? A process of self-analysis?

JW: The first piece I wrote, “Last Cut,” was therapeutic as it helped me take stock of my father’s death. It also initiated a process of self-analysis as I revisited some of the vicissitudes of my relationships with my parents and my son in each vignette I wrote.

FG: In an earlier conversation, you told me it was after your mother died in 2012 and you were in possession of all of your parents’ belongings that you were

Continued on page 20

Interview with Joan Wheelis

Continued from page 19

struck by the “enormity” of the material possessions and, I assume, of the emotional legacy of what you had to go through. You told me this memoir is, in part, a way for you to put things in order. I am thinking here about Joan Didion’s statement: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” But you may have something else in mind.

JW: I have always told students that the goal of psychoanalysis is to develop a narrative of one’s life that one can live with. I resonated with Joan Didion’s statement when I wrote in my book, “We create stories to live by.” Writing the memoir felt like that in so far as I organized recollections differently from my lived experiences. Even deciding which chapter should follow another was a way of creating a new narrative distinct from the timeline of my life. Like a dream where a vivid piece may stand out to send the dreamer into unexpected psychological excursions, writing the memoir seemed to offer me such an opportunity to discover and reorganize what mattered.

In the end it was reassuring. Developing another narrative of my life felt liberating. Mortality felt less tethered to existential angst, allowing the telling of the story to create structure for closure. Like the satisfaction to leave a house after a full and rich summer—fixing a broken step, storing kayaks and picnic tables, picking apples and pears to take back home, sweeping the deck, finding the missing sandal, pulling down the shades, locking the door. Everything in order with expectation but not certainty one will return again.

I thought of my son and how I enjoyed thinking I would leave him with much of myself in this memoir but also the room to develop his own narrative. The last line of the memoir, “Or maybe not,” refers to my musing as to whether my

son might someday look at a photograph of me and see our physical similarity. He told me he found this last line abrupt. Of course, it was. To claim any certainty about his sensibilities still to be realized is to arbitrarily answer questions that remain for him. I thought of how I have responded to the question: “When do you know an analysis is over?” with “when you understand it can go on forever.” To end my book with another inquiry was in recognition of the timelessness of self-analysis.

FG: *The Kirkus Review* said, “This is more of a memoir about memory—its connections and deceptions—than about the author and her family in particular. It shows how the dead live on.” A memoir about memory. Does it seem so to you?

JW: Yes, very much so. This book is as much about time and memory as it is about love and loss. As I had access to my father’s journals as well as his published writing, I was repeatedly struck by the interplay of my own memory and his about shared experience. Finding objects and letters of my parents after their deaths ignited my own memories and sometimes led to interesting experiences of both the collapse and expansion of time.

After my parents died, I found an audograph, which is an old version of a tape recorder, as well as a stack of cobalt blue discs that could be played on this machine. I discovered that many of these discs were recordings of love letters dictated by my parents to one another after my mother finished her residency training at Austen Riggs and before my father left as a staff member there to join her in San Francisco. Listening to these recordings was like sitting in a room with my parents. The clarity and familiarity of their voices from 60 plus years prior was unnerving, and

transporting. Listening to them speak to one another, before they were married, expressing their love for one another, their hopes and desires for the future, their wish to have a baby was to take a walk with them in their past.

At one point my father was playfully describing a conversation with psychoanalyst David Shapiro about his struggles as to whether to accept a wooden cabinet made in the Shop at Riggs by a patient and whether he should keep it for a while or return it and all the psychological manifestations of each option. I telephoned David in New York and played this for him. I could hear him laughing. He said, “I’m sitting right next to that cabinet! I never gave it back.” It felt so exhilarating to listen to my father’s voice in 1953, then speak in the present with David who still had the object and the memory of my father at that time. It was such unusual access to the layering of memory and the interface across time. Like the process of analysis zigzagging through present and past experiences when time and memory come together and then pull away.

Also, when I read my father’s journal describing important events, I noted the convergence and divergence of his memory of an event with my childhood as well as adult recollections of the same event. It was another entry point to explore the intriguing layering of perspective and construction. Like the movie *Rashomon* where Kurosawa shows us the subjective, self-serving, often contradictory stories told by the different characters who wrestle with their experiences of a specific event.

FG: In a review of your book, Warren Poland said it captures “the struggle to become and be a person.” It demonstrates certain kinds of “transformations.”

Does it seem so to you?

JW: Yes, it does. In writing the memoir I was aware how important answers used to be for me growing up and how much I

Continued on page 21

Psychoanalysis in a Broken World: Who We Are and What We Might Become

At the June 2020 APsA online meeting, the third panel in the “Psychoanalysis in a Broken World Series” was moderated by Jane Kite, training and supervising analyst at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute.

The panelists, Past President Prudy Gourguechon, President Bill Glover, President-Elect Kerry Sulkowicz, and Program Chair Don Moss, grappled with three questions.

Jane Kite introduced the topic:

Against a societal backdrop that has laid bare the disavowed history of systemic racial injustice in this country, and in the shadow of death, the panels in this series have invited new insight, new energy, and new depth of feeling. They have created the possibility for us of a different experience of being an analyst.

We are at an inflection point as a field. Who are we as psychoanalysts at this historical moment? What are the questions we need to ask, and more importantly, what are the actions we need to take? Can we

pivot from what has been a nearly exclusive focus on psychic reality to material reality and back again?

We are, manifestly, a notoriously conservative and largely white organization legitimately proud of our intellectual heritage, and legitimately confused about how and where to turn next. Personal pain and personal curiosity have been, for most of us, the engine driving our careers as analysts. We are part of what now reveals itself as a broken world. How do we reliably bridge the deeply personal and the powerfully social?

What is the place for psychoanalysts outside the consulting room, especially in the context of the contemporary moment?

What is the nature of the tension between those working inside the consulting room and outside the consulting room, and how does this impact our training?

Prudy Gourguechon: Psychoanalysis has always had a place outside the consulting

room. Freud, Abraham, Aichorn, Erikson, and in our era Lord John Alderdice, Sverre Varvin, Sally Weintrobe, Jorge Bruce, Dorothy Holmes, Gil Kliman, Harold Kudler, Stuart Twemlow, Henri Parens, to name just a few, have made enormous contributions, using psychoanalytic concepts to explain and facilitate change regarding social and cultural problems.

Despite this persisting and proud legacy, only a small minority of analysts are engaged in non-clinical psychoanalytic work. And our training programs have almost exclusively ignored training in applying psychoanalytic knowledge outside the consulting room. Not all analysts are suited to this work or interested in it.

I believe there are five distinct cohorts of analysts:

1. Those who want to do good clinical work inside their offices and really don't experience the excitement or

Continued on page 22

Interview with Joan Wheelis

Continued from page 20

turned to my parents for answers to my questions. It created a sense of safety and security. Writing this memoir made me aware of the shift that had occurred in me. Exploring the questions and living in the uncertainty of the answers felt rich and empowering. While disconcerting at times, it led to living more flexibly.

FG: Roy Hoffman of the *New York Times* describes your memoir as an “often luminous work [that] is less an act of therapy than a hushed celebration of everyday mysteries...[Wheelis’s] success is in letting enigmas endure beyond the

couch, questing on for the known, the secret, the forgotten.” It seems here Hoffman is pointing to something we psychoanalysts are sorting through: Is the psychoanalytic process about a search for meaning or about attunement to states of being and becoming? Or both?

JW: Yes, I believe the psychoanalytic process of sorting through is both about being and becoming, which is being comfortable with change and not knowing, while searching for coordinates of what can be known and become meaningful. Being too certain takes one down the familiar roads with little discovery. No compass at all can lead one to being in the woods without light. Finding meaning requires enough comfort to explore the questions and

enough discomfort to wrestle with ambiguous answers. The stories told and retold, forgotten and remembered help that process to occur.

FG: Can we look forward to more books by Joan Wheelis?

JW: I hope so. I am working currently on a book about my mother’s Austrian parents who perished in the Holocaust. Again, I have an unusual treasure chest of letters and diaries dating to World War I as well as many of their things, books, documents, linens, and my mother’s stories. As I make this journey, I have discovered new family members and acquaintances, enlarging the view into the lives of my grandparents. Looks like more to come on time, memory, and continued self-analysis!

 APSA