

A masterful writer and clinician, Charles has penned a volume that illuminates principles integral to psychoanalysis and depth psychology. With rich case histories that offer expert attention to eating disorders, narcissism, and psychosis, Charles stays close to her subject in a manner that demonstrates a style of gentle in vivo development in response to early traumas. While simultaneously providing ample footing for graduate students and analytic candidates seeking integration of theory and practice, this is a book that seasoned clinicians will also find illuminating. I highly recommend it and hope that it will become a sought-after cornerstone in supervisory seminars.

—**Louis Rothschild, PhD**, independent practice, Northern Baltimore County, MD; author of *Rapprochement Between Fathers and Sons: Breakdowns, Reunions, Potentialities*

In this work, Dr. Charles leads us on a guided tour through what psychoanalysis has to offer patients in the wake of early relational trauma. With clinical wisdom and sophistication, she weaves together theory and clinical examples in ways that are at once sweeping and simple. Dr. Charles's expertise and synthesis of the literature will fill gaps in the knowledge of experienced clinicians while also inspiring students to think about the nature of engagement. As in her other works, here Dr. Charles demonstrates her steadfast commitment to carrying the best of psychoanalysis forward in her own voice.

—**Christina Biedermann, PsyD, ABAP**, Associate Professor, Illinois School of Professional Psychology at National Louis University, Chicago, IL

Echoes of Trauma is equally evocative and accessible, bringing to life the legacy of trauma in the consulting room. It promises to inspire clinicians of all levels of experience to immerse themselves more authentically in the art of this work. An essential reading for anyone who works with traumatized individuals.

—**Stephanie Kors, PhD**, Assistant Professor, Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore

Reading this book is like listening while a fine musician explores the possibilities of an instrument. The melodies that Marilyn Charles plays are familiar, but the ways she engages with them are creative and moving. Anyone interested in applied psychoanalytic theory and practice will find *Echoes of Trauma* both clinically useful and personally enlightening.

—**Nancy McWilliams, PhD, ABPP**, Visiting Professor Emerita, Rutgers Graduate School of Applied & Professional Psychology, New Brunswick, NJ

With “trauma” literature proliferating over the last few decades, the subject can get rather tired and one dimensional. In *Echoes of Trauma*, however, Charles returns our formulations about trauma to a more sophisticated, developmental, embodied, and generously conceptualized form. Charles’s text is a treasure of theoretical depth with tremendous clinical application. This is the very best of contemporary psychoanalysis.

—**David M. Goodman, PhD**, Dean, Woods College of Advancing Studies at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA

Echoes of Trauma is a scholarly work by a master clinician that will be studied for years to come. The author’s integrative approach may well represent the future of psychoanalysis.

—**Deborah Anna Luepnitz, PhD**, Institute for Relational Psychoanalysis of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA

Marilyn Charles weaves her wealth of clinical experience working with the most complex patients, her sophisticated knowledge of psychoanalysis, and elements of her own life story into a narrative that illustrates how therapists can accompany their patients on a journey into meaning. She demonstrates how trust, respect, attunement to mourning, and deep humility can create a space that invites even the most vulnerable patients into a journey toward healing and toward drawing wisdom from their own lived experience.

—**Michael O’Loughlin, PhD**, Professor, Derner School of Psychology, Adelphi University, Garden City, NY; coeditor of the journal *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*

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INTRODUCTION

Companions on a Journey

It is of the essence of our impossible profession that in a very singular way we do not know what we are doing. [At] the heart of our work . . . is a mystery.

—Coltart (1992, p. 2) in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

Not only can man's being not be understood without madness, it would not be man's being if it did not bear madness within itself as the limit of his freedom.

—Lacan (1955-1956/1977d, p. 179), in "On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis"

Psychoanalysis affords a unique lens through which to recognize the complexities of personal, familial, and sociocultural layerings and to investigate ways in which these levels of experience intertwine. Psychoanalysis also offers a method that can help us work our way through our traumatic antecedents, both personal and cultural. Recognizing the story that courses through us provides a ground on which to build a more solid and resilient identity. Crucial

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Echoes of Trauma: Meaning and Identity in Psychoanalysis, by M. Charles

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to these efforts is a recognition of the impact of trauma on the development of affect regulation, metacognitive capacities and reflective function, and identity itself.

Although Freud (1923/1961) grounded psychoanalytic theory in his recognition of the body at the core of all human meaning, there has been a tendency to lose touch with these moorings in our theorizing. Current trends toward the cognitive threaten to leave behind the nonverbal systems through which essential meanings are registered and, in this way, to also leave behind the signs we are offered to help a person put together the keys to their life story, keys that have eluded them. And yet, as Iain McGilchrist (2009) has reminded us, to be fully human, we need to be able to use both sides of our brain. As the move toward the rigidly rational increasingly overtakes psychology, our solutions to problems become increasingly disembodied and mechanistic. This alienation from self and other is itself insidiously traumatic.

Psychoanalysis is a personal journey made possible by a structure that supports the individual's capacities to learn and to grow. The psychoanalytic canon has been burdened by an overreliance on the male voices that, together, create an authority that threatens to obscure and obstruct the development of an internal authority guided by conscience. We seem to be in an adolescent passage in which Freud's authority is being stamped out by the voices of those who feel marginalized by it. In this volume, I hope instead to invite you to consider how, in light of your own experience, you might make use of the ideas and methods you find within psychoanalytic texts to immerse yourself in your own meaning-making and find your own way. That, to my mind, is the true path of psychoanalysis: an immersion into an embodied psychic reality with sufficient companionship to be able to map out the terrain and make meaning from the experiences.

With these ideas in mind, I offer you this volume with the hope of inviting you into an investigation of these issues. To that end, I look at the impact of trauma across the lifespan and at its intricacies and manifestations. I hope to contextualize the language of psychopathology within the more pressing issues regarding how adaptations to distress can lead development astray. I argue for an embodied view of human development, highlighting ways in which unmourned and unexplored trauma repeats itself across the generations. As the source moves further into the remote past, the "problem," rather than being visible and potentially resolvable, becomes instead the family *até*—the unexpiated misfortune passed along the generations—experienced as a curse that formulates the phantoms haunting at our heels in the form of unresolved trauma masquerading as destiny.

FINDING OURSELVES IN OTHERS' DILEMMAS

There are many books about trauma. This volume is intended for clinicians who engage deeply and personally in the work and who recognize the importance of being able to find ourselves sufficiently in the dilemmas of those who seek our assistance in order to be authentic in our engagements—not imposing our own ideas or sensibilities, but rather inviting people to engage more deeply with their own. Although it will likely be helpful to have a grounding in psychoanalytic theory, I hope that you will persist despite unfamiliar jargon and discover the basic principles of human meaning and becoming that it marks.

This struggle with the unfamiliar and the unknown is precisely the work of psychoanalysis. As Bion (1977) noted, we are always at the crossroads between growth and evasion, fending off what can seem like catastrophic change in relation to challenges not yet faced. The arena of *catastrophic change* marks the spaces we have not yet successfully mastered in our developmental efforts thus far and, therefore, it is precisely the arena into which psychoanalytic and other insight-oriented therapies invite us. For those with histories of the type of *small-t trauma* (the type of serial onslaught of unresolved distressing events often thought of as complex trauma) that results from dysfunctional parenting, developmental challenges can feel like demands for catastrophic change.

We consider ways in which trauma is an inevitable part of life, marking and shaping the human experience. From that perspective, we can perhaps meet those who seek our assistance respectfully and empathically in even the most terrible and terrifying places they find themselves. I believe that good clinical practice is based on experience—tempered, moderated, and augmented by what we learn from others but always grounded in our own histories of what it means to be a human being in the world.

From that vantage point, we can integrate new ideas and perspectives into a framework with a humanistic integrity at the core that is grounded in the truth of personal experience. If we look at the major psychoanalytic theorists, what is salient is the recognition of the importance of individual truth, from Winnicott's (1971) view of the play space through which growth might emerge, to Bion's (1990) view of internal truth as the star we steer by—something we can only perhaps glimpse in the present moment—to Lacan's (1975–1976/2016) later writings about the *sinthome*, the unique construction of self built from one's experiences as a person. The *sinthome* marks our trail as surely as our fingerprints identify us. From that perspective, our job as a clinician is to be a companion on a journey guided by the other

person's internal compass in relation to the truths of their own experience. We might add signposts and anchors along the way but always in relation to the map they are building that shows their unique construction of a universe that is also populated by other points of view and frames of reference.

For Bion and Lacan, perhaps the greatest hazard is that we will put more faith in theory than in whatever is happening in the moment: “The *practice* of psychoanalysis is the only place where it is possible to read people, not books” (Bion, 1990, pp. 63–64). This statement suggests that our practice must be guided by the exigencies of the present moment—as best we can locate ourselves and the other person within them given that the essential problem is not their relationship to us, but rather their relationship to themselves, “which may be so bad that he cannot even make use of what he already knows” (Bion, 1990, p. 50).

BLENDING DEVELOPMENTAL AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL THEORY

My model is a developmental one based on the idea that the meaning of any event is predicated on the history of experiences for that individual, only some of which are accessible to conscious reflection. Development is never final but can become waylaid. To understand any person's problem at a particular moment in time, we need to learn something about the history that has given rise to it, some of which they may be able to tell us directly, but some we may have to intuit from signs and symptoms. As Tronick (2022) suggested, dysfunction emerges not from singular events, but rather from experiences that are chronic and repeated, shaped by both “external interpersonal relational experiences and internal somatic and brain—neurosomatic—processes” (p. 661).

Following Freud, psychoanalysis has skewed toward the rational despite the recognition that what is often most crucial to our learning comes from the unconscious registers. The model offered here is based in a commitment to a maternal pedagogy that recognizes the essential value of lived experience in meaning-making (see Crociani-Windland & Charles, 2022a). Meanings are moored in the body:

To solve the problem of what it means to be a human subject, a self-reflective self, we should not consider the brain in isolation, but focus on its tight interrelated connections with the body. We should also abandon the solipsistic stance and address the issue from a social point of view. (Gallese, 2014, p. 2)

The patriarchal turn in Western culture has led to a valorizing of the male voice despite repeated calls to attend more carefully to “women's ways of

knowing.” Freud recognized early on that his views were informed and limited by his person, but it has taken many decades to begin to take his question “What does a woman want?” seriously and to refine our ideas regarding the impact of culture on lived meanings. Notable women did speak back. To name just a few, Shoshana Felman (1993) addressed Freud’s question directly, insisting that only a woman could answer it as subject rather than object. Joan Riviere (2019) theorized about women as persons in their own right, and her translations of Freud carry the poetry of his words. Karen Horney (1950, 1967) considered the impact of culture on meaning and being, and Marian Milner (1969, 1987) followed Freud’s model, learning through her own experience how to foster development in those who came to her seeking assistance. Nina Coltart (1992) affirmed the essential mystery at the heart of this work that requires us to tolerate the paradox of intuition and not knowing. Julia Kristeva (1986) traveled alongside Lacan, highlighting the feminine and maternal aspects of development and meaning. Although Melanie Klein (1930/1981a, 1940/1981b, 1957/1975) has persisted in the psychoanalytic canon, intrepid freethinkers, such as Milner and even Kristeva, tend to be glossed over as we turn to the authority of their male counterparts. In that turn, we have unbalanced ourselves, and I hope to soften that imbalance by including some of those missing voices—or at least to sound their echoes in my own work. I do carry them with me.

To illuminate this complex territory, I trace some of the threads from psychoanalysis and developmental theories that help make sense of how we become who we are and how we might grow beyond the places we get stuck. Psychology and psychoanalysis are each grounded in developmental views that oppose any mechanistic stance regarding disease models of human suffering. Insight-oriented approaches rest on the notion that building reflective capacity is the key toward greater well-being. For me, the strength of these theories, as opposed to medicalized formulations, is precisely that they *are* developmental, inviting us to consider how we might mobilize our capacities for growth and change in the service of building more viable and satisfying lives. We do not get to choose the challenges that confront us, but psychoanalytic work helps afford us choices in meeting those challenges. Growth requires facing the sticking points rather than merely trying to manage or override them.

Medical formulations have invited us to focus on diagnostic categories that tend to obscure the developmental aspects of the person’s dilemmas. In my work at the Austen Riggs Center, a small hospital where psychoanalytic treatment is offered within the holding environment of a therapeutic community, I have the opportunity to work intensively and extensively with

individuals for whom psychiatric offerings have not resolved their problems. Rather, there is often a confluence of difficulties that were not attenuated sufficiently by parental offerings to have provided the type of mastery experiences so crucial for tenacity under pressure. The recognition that reflective functions can develop during insight-oriented psychotherapy has led to a body of research using Lysaker et al.'s (2005) Metacognition Assessment Scale—Abbreviated that tracks particular aspects of reflective capacities as they develop. This development parallels Bion's (1977/1989, "The Grid") Grid progression from *notation* toward more active thinking and integration of meanings, affirming that, despite very different language structures, efforts to provide people opportunities to grow beyond where they have become caught have meaningful commonalities at the core.

My research into metacognitive changes over time in individuals who have engaged in psychoanalytic psychotherapy has shown interesting patterns that have implications for technique and for expectations we might have for those whose symptoms fall within various diagnostic categories (Neal et al., 2023). Recognizing a person's particular strengths and vulnerabilities is crucial to being able to meet them where they are, something that both the attachment and psychoanalytic literatures mark as essential to building a viable relationship. That point of meeting is a human juncture of great intimacy, one that requires clinicians to be sufficiently familiar with their own internal workings to make use of their own thoughts and feelings in adaptive ways and to recognize the other person's vantage point sufficiently to sustain and enhance engagement, thereby modeling their own reflective functions.

Freud offered us a method of recognizing parallels between ourselves and others. Over time, locating Freud in his own context has helped us deepen our appreciation for the impact of contextual factors on individual development and on theory so that we can find our own way in this complex and evolving terrain. As clinicians, being able to find ourselves sufficiently in the individual and collective dilemmas described by those seeking our assistance helps afford us the wherewithal to stand beside them in their journeys without imagining that our job is to "solve the problem." We cannot know another's truths in the same way they can know them for themselves, and we cannot impose our understanding on another without undermining their autonomy and development. That recognition helps us have faith that they can encounter the information they need to the extent that we can leave room for it. We also need to be able to locate ourselves in time so that we can apply Freud's method to current data and disentangle ourselves from some of the more limiting presumptions embedded in his theories and be

able to recognize that “truth” continues to evolve in relation to changing times. We need to be able to encounter theory with interest without imposing injunctions, in order to move out into the unknown with both faith and humility. In these efforts, a developmental, contextual view of the troubles that ail us is crucial in our work with those we encounter in our consulting rooms today.

THE OVERARCHING MAP OF THE JOURNEY

In this volume, we look at the intra- and interpersonal contexts in which identity develops. We consider how development is shaped, including relational and meaning-making aspects. Research into parent–child relationships has taught us a great deal about the interpersonal processes that underlie meaning-making from the very basic rhythms of experience that form the relational matrix of parent and child (Sander, 1977). These rhythms are put into play before birth, the patterned elements of early life forming the interpersonal context that undergirds the beginnings of language. Familial and cultural legacies infuse the language as it is communicated, shaping the meanings of life stories as they evolve interactively between parent and child.

Psychoanalysis has taught us a great deal about the process of meaning-making itself from what Bion (1977) termed *beta elements*, aspects of experience that are present but have not yet been thought about and reflectively integrated into our conceptions of self and world; or what Aulagnier (2001) termed *pictograms*, referring to our earliest experiences of self in relation to other that are suffused with affect and that underlie personal and interpersonal meanings. We use Bion’s (1977/1989, “The Grid”) *Grid* as a matrix through which to consider these two interrelated matrixes of meaning-making. Across the horizontal axis, Bion has outlined the affective-relational trajectory that tracks the increasingly complex functions to which thinking addresses itself from *attention* to *action*, as noted in Freud’s (1911/1958b) “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning.” Down the vertical axis, Bion has tracked the evolution of the complexity of thought from proto-symbols, through images and myth, to algebraic patterns of meaning. I hope that using the frame of the grid helps you track the two vertices of development I then illustrate for you: the relational and the cognitive. Each, importantly, is linked to the earliest rhythms of experience that underlie the patterned, affectively driven meanings through which we come to know self and world.

Earliest experiences of self-with-other optimally provide the type of containment necessary for building the basic affective self-regulation on which

cognitive development depends. We see how disruptions in early life impact development, leading to various types of symptom pictures, many of which may be more usefully conceptualized through the lens of the complex trauma that results from repeated disruptions (Van Nieuwenhove & Meganck, 2019). These disruptions also have profound implications for identity, which is formed within the context of interpersonal relationships. We learn who we are from how we are treated. Over time, given sufficient attention to our own developing capacities, we begin to recognize that others have their own characters and perspectives that shape their perceptions of us. We learn that small-t truth is personal and that we need to be able to stand for our own—that our stand is stronger to the extent that we can consider alternate ideas and integrate them. People often think of trauma in terms of major life events, but those major life events may be difficult ordeals without necessarily derailing us. Crucial to resilience are the relational underpinnings that help us to self-regulate under pressure and to believe in our own capacities to endure and to thrive, turning challenges into opportunities for mastery.

To investigate the impact of complex trauma requires an exploration into the development of self that underlies all issues of identity. As Stern (1985) and many others have shown, the self is developed in relationship to others at the levels of both physiology and meaning-making. Physiologically, the infant depends on caregivers to attend to and attenuate distress, in this way developing communication channels and the capacity for affective self-regulation. Even before the caesura of birth, however, the developing fetus begins to regulate in relation to the rhythms of the mother. In the last trimester, an enhanced interconnected rhythmicity develops that becomes the precursor for the establishment of a safe containing space through which rhythms of meaning can evolve between parent and child (R. Feldman, 2006).

These rhythms may be seen as the presymbolic structures that undergird the possibility of communication between human beings. Rhythmic coordination between parent and child is not only crucial for relational development but also forms the timing patterns that become the type of procedural knowledge that underlies many human activities (Jaffe et al., 2001). The discovery of mirror neurons (Gallese, 2009) affirms the importance of what is learned through being-with others, highlighting that much of what we learn is taken in directly and absorbed without conscious awareness. That lack of conscious awareness eases the integration but can be confusing when known “truths” are challenged by alternative data. Those moments of challenge become opportunities for growth to the extent that space can be held for learning. For the young child, that space requires an attentive other who can recognize the dilemma and hold hope for its resolution, a relational

pattern we also find in psychotherapy in which our job is often to hold hope for the possibility of growth beyond the place where the person finds themselves caught. This growth is catalyzed by the learning that occurs between persons as they engage meaningfully and respectfully with one another.

Freud (1900/1953b) has helped us organize our understanding of the underbelly of experienced meanings through his term *primary process*, referring to the amassed data that we store without necessarily knowing what is there but draw on in making meaning from our daily lives. This is the realm of Laplanche's (1997) *enigmatic messages* transmitted from adult to child, meanings that have an impact but cannot be parsed from the perspective of a child's mind or experience. Aulagnier (2001) has dipped even further to detail a layer she termed *primal experience*, suggesting that the foundations of experienced meanings are laid in the earliest moments of food- and warmth-seeking in the meeting of the infant's body with that of the caregiver, taking in not only the physical encounter but also the affective infusions attendant to that encounter. That affect, suggested Aulagnier, becomes a template on which all later renderings of self are built. The unconscious becomes the repository of rich confluences of meaning, parsed and unparsed, that forms the background from which each person's vantage point or, in Lacan's (1964/1977e) terms, the *Imaginary*, is constructed.

THE PATH FORWARD

To elucidate this territory, we begin in Part I with an exploration of the intra- and interpersonal contexts in which identity develops. Using Bion's (1977/1989, "The Grid") Grid, I offer a way of thinking about the clinical work as an enterprise in which we might stand alongside the person as a way of better understanding the predicaments that have brought them into treatment (Chapter 1). After offering a view of emotional development grounded in research on attachment theory and early child development (Chapter 2), I discuss the development of the complexity of thought, from proto-symbols, through symbol formation, to more complex verbal language structures (Chapter 3). We then broaden the field to discuss ways in which culture impacts identity development (Chapter 4). In these efforts, I weave together the personal, theoretical, and clinical, drawing on previous writing I have done on memory and identity, emotional development, and the impact of individual and collective trauma on identity development.

In Part II, we look at transference and countertransference as essential lenses through which to make sense of the interpersonal aspects of psychoanalysis. Transference helps us recognize ways in which repetition is also a

communication that helps us make sense of the other person's interpersonal world-as-lived. From that perspective, the transference/countertransference matrix can be seen as a useful tool for better understanding a particular individual and locating them in their own unique social and emotional environment (Chapter 5). We then consider interpretation as a means for offering back to the person another perspective that might break into fixed ideas about the trouble and invite greater reflectivity rather than imposing meanings in ways that further obstruct learning and growth (Chapter 6). Our developmental model recognizes that our shared formulations, offered with curiosity and interest, invite those we work with to reflect along with us, adding data from their own feelings and sensibilities in ways that help illuminate the terrain and enhance their reflective capacities while also enriching and refining the formulations.

As we proceed, I highlight theoretical conceptualizations I have found particularly useful, drawing on threads from various psychoanalytic thinkers and schools and using brief clinical vignettes to illustrate how we might use our theories to facilitate the development of those we work with.¹ Part of what I am promoting is a feminine, maternal model of psychotherapy that foregrounds the containing environment as crucial to engendering creative participation (e.g., Baraitser, 2023; Crociani-Windland & Charles, 2022b). This model emphasizes making use of one's own experience to better understand others, promoting development through a process of modeling as we make use of our own reflective capacities. Essential in this regard is our attention to maintaining a reflective stance but also recognizing the communicative value of "noise" in the system—being open to odd thoughts and feelings that can give us data beyond the words being spoken. This stance also includes being open to the metaphors that evolve in the work as it transpires between the participants, most particularly the symbols that arise through dreams and reverie—always most attentive to those coming from the other person—remembering that they are in a privileged position in relation to their own internal truths. In this way, we can support a truly developmental model rather than one that moves toward normalcy at the expense of creativity (McDougall, 1978).

In Part III, we look at the relevance of a developmental view for understanding ways in which symptoms appear, turning our lens toward salient problems emerging in the clinical encounter today. Being able to mark symptoms as failed communicative efforts can usefully inform our work with

¹ All names and persons in case illustrations have been fictionalized to protect confidentiality.

troubles that might best be read in terms of developmental difficulties in affective and identity development rather than through a disease model. We consider ways in which trauma may be represented, focusing on symptoms and defenses, beginning with the somatic complaints that mark difficulties that accrue over time, registering in the body because they cannot be symbolized (Chapter 7). Eating disorders are explored as a particular way of managing distress that becomes addictive because it eases the distress temporarily without resolving the underlying issues (Chapter 8).

We then turn to the crucial juncture between feeling and thinking that Freud (1895/1955d, 1905/1953a, 1909/1955a, 1909/1955c) originally took up in his cases on hysteria and obsessions (Chapter 9). From that vantage point, we look at distinctions between the borderline and the narcissistic positions, elaborating on the obsessive defenses that leave people unknown to themselves. That exploration will lead to a more extensive consideration of issues we encounter with individuals caught in the narcissistic position (Chapter 10). We end this part with a consideration of the complex social and developmental challenges of those who find themselves in the psychotic position (Chapter 11).

In Part IV, we consider applications of our model. We begin with an example of how theory might enlarge and enhance our reflective and creative capacities rather than close them down, looking at the intersections between personal experience and evolving metaphors as they play out in the consulting room (Chapter 12). We then explore ways in which ideas about dreams and the psychoanalytic field can enlarge our creative capacities within the session (Chapter 13). We then consider how ideas of time can enhance the work (Chapter 14). In exploring intersections between meaning and being, I hope to bring you full circle in a process that invites you to reflect more deeply on your own relationships to small-t trauma in your own life. I hope this process will invite you to recognize ways in which the interplay of embodied experience, interpersonal engagement, and transference/countertransference, as well as reflection, dream work and narrative, and primary and secondary process, work together to provide the wherewithal for a more creative engagement in the challenges that living brings, including those we encounter in our consulting rooms.