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Stephen Mitchell and the foundation of Tel Aviv Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis

In Memory of Stephen Mitchell [2]

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“... The very being of man is a profound communication. To be means to communicate... I cannot do without the other, I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me”.

Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogical Principle. 1984. p. 96

The authors' thoughts and memories in remembrance of Stephen Mitchell and his contribution and involvement in the establishment of the Tel Aviv Institute. On the occasion of Steve's fifth Yahrzeit, the article pays tribute to the person and his revolutionary vision of man, interwoven in relations.

These days we are marking five years since December 21st, 2000, the day a dear friend and colleague, Stephen Mitchell, passed away. We feel honored to express our deep gratitude to him and to commemorate his unique and significant contribution to the psychoanalytic community in Israel as a full partner in laying down the foundations for the Tel Aviv Institute for Contemporary Psychoanalysis (TAICP).

As I begin the task of describing my personal and professional relationship with Steve Mitchell, doubts and hesitations naturally arise in my mind. First, because my acquaintance with him was relatively short and there are many who knew him better and longer. Nonetheless, our relationship was very close and intense and had a profound impact on me, and I dare believe it had a similar effect on Steve.

Secondly, our friendship was closely related to the project of establishing the TAICP, and I was not sure I could write about him without entering too deeply into issues concerning the Institute. However, it was through this project that our relationship was born and evolved, so it is only natural that it will be interwoven into my account. I am sure that Steve would have been delighted and proud to know that as I write, we are welcoming the institute's fifth class of full-scale candidate trainees.

Finally, I feared that what I wanted to say would resemble the attempts of a person who has just enjoyed a very helpful therapeutic session to explain what exactly helped him. I was afraid I would be unable to convey his significance to me, his special way of lending support, of illuminating dark areas, of facilitating my self-expression and providing me with the courage to implement our joint vision.

Taking these fears and apprehensions into account, I will try to portray my relationship with Steve. Our relationship started in July 1999, by which time I had begun thinking that the dream of founding a new and independent psychoanalytic institute in Israel could finally materialize. I needed to consult someone and to obtain an external point of view about whether I was being realistic or merely daydreaming. For obvious reasons, I knew that my

consultant would have to come from outside the Israeli Psychoanalytic Society, which was founded in 1933, and was the only psychoanalytic institute in Israel. At the time, the chair of the society adamantly opposed the establishment of an independent institute. Although this was never the Society's official position, the atmosphere rapidly became hostile, and threats were made against any training analyst who tried to collaborate with us.

I decided to turn to Steve for several reasons. The first was my appreciation of him as a highly innovative and daring theoretician. Another reason was his association with the William Alanson White Institute and the New York University Post-Doctorate Program for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, both of them serious, distinguished non-IPA institutes. Steve also represented a long lineage of theoreticians whose writing had affected me throughout the years, including Erich Fromm and Frieda Fromm-Reichman. Finally, as founder and editor in chief of *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, Steve was well known for his executive and organizational skills. He had a vision of a new paradigm in psychoanalysis, the interpersonal-relational school of thought, and thus, he was in the midst of realizing his own dream. All these attributes and achievements, along with Steve's unique personality, made him a figure to look up to and emulate.

My connection to Steve began through my wife Batya, who spent her sabbatical at Columbia University in New York in 1995. During that time, Batya attended a weekly clinical-theoretical seminar led by him. Since the participants of the seminar were all experienced psychoanalysts, and Batya, at that time, was not a psychoanalyst, Steve had comprehensively interviewed her and decided to accept her into his yearly seminar.

Batya was deeply impressed by him and his thinking, and during a visit to New York in June 1999, she met with him again and presented him with a preliminary draft of the conceptual foundation of the new Israeli Institute, (written by Dr. Batya Shoshani, Dr. Gila Ofer and myself), in order to receive his initial reaction. His supportive, encouraging and above all enthusiastic response marked the beginning of our friendship. It also marked the starting point for the founding of the Institute.

The first step was to form the steering committee which would lead the way to the foundation of the new psychoanalytic institute. This team included Dr. Batya Shoshani, Dr. Gila Ofer, Mrs. Michal Hazan and myself. I became the elected chairman of the Institute, and the four of us were elected as the executive committee. The first step was following Steve Mitchell's advice and recruiting an international advisory committee lead by him. In addition, he had helped us in rewriting our conceptual foundation document, so that we could send it to a dozen or so well-known psychoanalysts and ask them to join the advisory board. Afterwards, we started to recruit a group of senior clinicians and university professors, who became the founding group of the TAICP. We began meeting on a regular basis, and simultaneously began our own official training as candidates.

During the first year of our acquaintance (from the summer of 1999 to the summer of 2000) my relationship with Steve involved daily email correspondence and long telephone conversations over the weekends. Thus,

I accumulated many “Mitchell” hours. We also had many face-to-face meetings during his visit to Israel in March 2000, some of them personal and others in intensive sessions with the Institute’s founders.

There was a period during which our email correspondence was the high point of my day, as a typical anecdote from that time might illustrate: my daughter was traveling in India, and at some point she began signing her emails “Steve Mitchell,” explaining that by doing so she could be absolutely sure that Dad would read the letter! Upon seeing this correspondence between our daughter and ourselves, over dinner at our house, Steve laughed to the point of tears. His vitality, humor, warm rapport and directness were always evident and engaging.

Steve Mitchell’s visit to Israel triggered three formative events in the establishment of the TAICP. The first was an 8-hours intensive workshop he led with our founding group, thoroughly discussing the differences and similarities between psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. This workshop was held during a weekend at Gabi Mann’s house. I am certain that the seminar itself and the way Steve conducted it had a significant role in shaping us – then a mere group of professionals – into a cohesive team. Steve provided us with the basic tenets for the conceptual foundation of our Institute-to-be.

I had asked the TAICP legal counselor to be present at this gathering in order to collect the signatures of all the founding members, a procedure which officially established the TAICP as a legal entity and non-profit organization. At that moment, our conceptual foundation was symbolically translated into concrete reality.

The second event was Steve’s and my decision that he would immediately and officially assume the role of chairman of both the advisory committee and the qualifying committee of the TAICP. Steve also gave his consent for his name to appear on the Tel Aviv Institute letterhead.

The third event took place during the March 2000 conference, in which Steve was the main speaker. In his opening remarks, Steve dramatically announced the foundation of a new independent Psychoanalytic Institute in Israel, to be constituted by a group of fifteen senior clinicians, all of them well-known supervisors and professors in academic settings, headed by myself. Steve also announced that he would be chairman of the advisory committee of the newly founded institute.

It is difficult to describe the overwhelming impact that this announcement had on the four hundred participants of that forum. People were stunned; the news continued to reverberate throughout the rest of the conference. It was an extremely dramatic moment in the history of the psychotherapeutic community in Israel, which had changed forever. The TAICP had been transformed from fantasy to concrete reality—and the rest is history.

Steve had said on various occasions that the Psychoanalytic Institute in Jerusalem, notwithstanding its importance and contribution as the only organization in Israel authorized to train psychoanalysts since 1933, had acquired the characteristics of a monopoly. Steve’s ideas resonated with mine.

Obviously, the two most malignant outcomes of a monopolistic organization are (a) complete equivalence of signifier and signified, and (b) a patronizing relationship between the Institute and potential candidates. The Psychoanalytic Institute chose its candidates, but the candidates did not choose it, since there was no alternative. Between 1933 and 1999, an absolute identification had been formed in Israel between “psychoanalysis” and the Israeli Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, which included their structure, ideology, target population, work methods and so on. In other words, the Jerusalem Institute version had turned from a “version” into a “truth,” thus leading to the trap of equating signifier and signified.^[5]

This state of affairs demanded the establishment of another Psychoanalytic Institute — a natural outcome of the democratization process. There is no question in my mind that our stay in the United States in pursuit of our PhD degrees, the absorption of an egalitarian–democratic philosophy and especially the successful struggle of the APA with the American Psychoanalytic Association, had a profound influence on me and encouraged me in my decision to establish a new psychoanalytic institute in Israel, even though the Israeli Psychoanalytic Society had complete hegemony in the training and qualifying of psychoanalysts in Israel. This democratic ideology stemmed inherently from the core of Steve’s values and beliefs as well as my own, and both were influenced by the Frankfurt School.

As our relationship strengthened and deepened, I turned to Steve for more assistance. I came to realize the honor and privilege of being acquainted with a person who played such a cardinal role in the process of revolutionizing psychoanalysis in the United States, and probably the entire world. Steve invested a great deal of effort and energy in the establishment of our institute and was unconditionally generous with his time, wisdom, extensive knowledge and contacts. This was manifested in his willingness to take over as chairman of our institute’s advisory board and to utilize his contacts within the international community to enlist supporters such as Thomas Ogden, Jessica Benjamin, Daniel Stern, Adam Phillips, Lewis Aron, Neil Altman, James Grotstein and Robert Stolorow. Later on, more members joined our international advisory and qualifying committees, among them Paul and Anna Ornstein, Owen Renik, Joyce Slochower, Jonathan Slavin, Michael Eigen, Joyce McDougall, and James Fisch.

This historical note should not undermine the role played by more than a few training analysts from the Israeli Psychoanalytic Society, who offered us their moral support, their vast experience and their guidance; Though the objection to the newly founded institute had never become the official stance of the Israeli Psychoanalytic Society, these analysts became the focus of extreme criticism in an atmosphere that became increasingly persecutory. Myself, as the initiator of this “rebellious” venture, had my name slandered and my reputation smeared. I often felt shamed and humiliated, and at times I was at the end of my rope. I am quite certain that without Steve's and Batya's faith in the foundation of the TAICP as a legitimate and a just cause, and especially their moral and emotional support, I probably would not have made it through the Via Dolorosa of founding a new institute in Israel.

In addition to his tremendous help with the Institute, Steve was also an important source of assistance and creativity in the establishment of the Israel Psychoanalytic Journal founded by Prof. Moshe Halevi-Spero and myself.

I feel very fortunate, and have been deeply moved and inspired by Steve's generosity, his executive ability, his pragmatism and his vision, married with diligence and decisiveness. Thanks to some common personality features and tendencies, we greatly enjoyed each other's company and ideas and saw many issues eye-to-eye. Like any good "analytic couple," we had our honeymoon at the beginning, but after six months of acquaintance, differences of opinion began to emerge. One of them called for a "couple's therapy" intervention. The topic of dispute was one of the most debated issues in psychoanalysis: the required number of analyses a candidate should conduct, the number of weekly hours for each analysis, and other closely related issues. We agreed that Prof. Emanuel Berman would be the right person to serve as mediator. Emanuel was on the one hand deeply involved with the traditional establishment, the IPA, and on the other hand, held strong, innovative and revolutionary ideas concerning psychoanalysis in general and training in particular. Fortunately, Emanuel was in NYC at the time. We had a long telephone conversation, and he made some suggestions that I found reasonable. Then he had a long breakfast with Steve in which he presented a compromise, which Steve could accept. Like any good mediator, Emanuel went back and forth between Steve and myself. He was able to see and empathically represent both parties' points of view and perspectives, and our differences were ultimately bridged. After a short while, tension subsided and our previous good rapport was restored. My contact with Steve became increasingly personal and provided me with strength and faith in myself, in the idea, and in the feasibility of its execution.

Thinking of Steve, I am reminded of a Talmudic saying that defines a person who has attained the highest moral level as "one who expounds well and practices well." I believe this virtue was genuinely reflective of Steve. Through our relationship and conversations, I learned quite a bit about him and felt the power of his theoretical and clinical thinking. I will mention three characteristics, which I experienced personally and which can serve to describe his approach.

First, my strongest impression was his directness; he always spoke eye-to-eye and without airs. He never infantilized, neither in friendly nor in therapeutic relationships, but always conducted a communication between adults.

Secondly, I was impressed by his freedom to create, initiate and think while disregarding dogmas. Every human situation, every idea, deserved serious consideration, examination and utmost open-mindedness.

The third characteristic was his understanding that everything is dynamic and a part of a process, whether in relation to people or to theory. Thus he viewed the different approaches in psychoanalysis and the arguments between them as essential to creating a fertile dialogue that could advance and improve psychoanalysis, rather than "the truth" versus the sacrilege. He himself

continually sought the conjunction between the intra-psychic and the interpersonal.

From my interactions with him I acquired strength and a sense of legitimacy, due to his belief in the individual's deep-rooted and natural right (and perhaps duty) to dream, decide, and realize his thoughts and aspirations, even when these collide with the establishment. This view is closely related to the concept of agency—of the individual as sovereign, which Mitchell so steadfastly believed in and elaborated and whose roots are to be found in the thinking of his supervisor, Erich Fromm. In this context of agency and choice, he helped me understand that while feeling the enjoyment that comes with realizing and exerting one's agency, one simultaneously loses and renounces. These inescapable losses must be felt and mourned and, while accepting this, one must carry on.

Steve's sudden and unexpected death on December 21st, 2000 left the Tel Aviv Institute for Contemporary Psychoanalysis prematurely orphaned. I lost a mentor, an ally, a dear friend and a soul-mate. Not a single week goes by without remembering and thinking of Steve. When facing the new dilemmas arising in our young Institute or the difficulties emerging in practicing psychoanalysis, I find myself summoning his voice and his image in order to engage in an imaginary dialogue and discover new paths I couldn't see before...

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[2] This article was presented as a eulogy in Tel Aviv, Israel, 2001.

[3] Although most of the article is written in first-person, it should be noted that the two authors have contributed to this article in equal parts.

[4] The authors thank Dr. Gila Ofer for her contribution which has enriched this article.

[5] see Hanna Segal's illuminating paper on symbol equation versus symbol formation, in Int. J. Psycho-Anal., 38:391-397 1957.