

## BOOK REVIEW

### **In two minds: tales of a psychotherapist**

Paul Valent

Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009

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Sooner or later, clinicians learn to confront life-and-death decisions, at both a literal level and then, slowly, the varied reverberations that ripple through our personal and professional lives. Initially, such moments stir our primal feelings: intense vulnerability, helplessness, panic or sheer numbing. At these moments, we can no longer think or feel. With time, training and experience, our extreme reactions are gradually transformed, as we learn to regulate how we respond, less at the mercy of our instinctive reactions.

Dr Paul Valent provides an insider's view to personal and professional transformations through richly detailed clinical case studies alongside pivotal moments in his family life. His insights into the unfathomable and secret moments of trauma make this book a compelling read.

Why and how traumatized patients trigger overwhelming emotions in therapists is revealed during a close reading of Dr Valent's assessment and treatment of a range of grim clinical conditions: complex post partum depression, sexual degradation, murder, rape and child abuse. But there is much more to this book than in-depth psychological case studies. As a skilled psychotherapist, he provides a language to those silences that 'trauma' is, complex experiences beyond the registry of 'common' senses.

After spending nearly four decades clinically repairing psychological trauma, Dr Valent underlines why such therapy is both so consuming of time and emotionally such a burden. This burden, 'compassion fatigue', 'emotional burnout' or 'vicarious trauma', is, at one level, reflected in his book's title – to be in two minds is the state of dissociation which usually follows severe traumas, as most of the patients, his case studies, experienced. Another level highlights how psychiatry itself is in two minds, profoundly split in its attempts to locate human suffering between 'brain' and 'mind'.

Yet another level emphasizes that to be in, or between, two minds is an ongoing existential struggle for both his patients and himself. At the start of his career, Dr Valent provided therapy to his patients to make these self-discoveries, eventually discovering his own need for deeper self-understanding. His first analytic experience was apparently unsatisfactory, to say the least. However, he persisted to delve further. At times, I had

a small quibble when I felt that his style, biting honesty and compassionate, veered too close to the poetic: "I did not encourage love to be a consciously aware spring of new meanings" (p. 118).

The complex case studies also covered aspects of his significant work with survivors of Victoria's 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires, of immediate relevance in the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday devastating bushfires.

Along the way, Paul exposes pivotal moments between three generations of his family relationships. Gradually, a pattern of the ongoing, mutual influences between his personal and professional life emerges. For example, his disclosure, "The little that I gave to my patients I had withheld from my father" (p. 57) surprised me as a colleague and friend for over 20 years, as I have observed Paul's commitment and generosity in many professional settings.

More in keeping with my own view of his work are the many moral questions and astute clinical observations. For example, during supervision of a new psychiatric registrar's case of a 57-year-old woman whose headaches started at the age that her mother died, Dr Valent asked, 'What happens if we are synchronized to these dead people?' (p. 140). He thus introduced the young doctor to the idea of trauma transmission from generation to generation. More self-observation followed: "I absorbed my parents' fears and numbed them into my nothingness. But I also had my own individual fears to suppress, including that my parents would abandon me again." (p. 322).

His previous abandonment at the age of 4, part of Paul's harrowing Holocaust testimony recorded as he approached retirement, is the powerful penultimate chapter. But now I jump ahead.

Paul's candid account of his generational family struggles started in his early childhood traumas, to reverberate decades later on in his graduation as a doctor. Then he felt that his mother "...was no help. After her initial joy she retreated back into her own world. She proudly told stories about me being a doctor to her card partners, but the stories bore little resemblance to reality. I could not talk to her, really". He tried to reassure himself that everything was fine, but of course, in retrospect, he realized that was far from the truth. He needed to get away, as many trauma survivors at one time or other need to.

Then, married, with family on the way, Paul returned to Australia from England and Israel. He continues to trace his professional development, informed by a deepening self-understanding. From his initiation into clinical psychiatry, to a first and then second personal therapy, Paul returns again and again to highlight parallel developments between his personal, family and professional relationships. His understanding of the power and generational impact of trauma became original contributions in his earlier books and valued

1 contributions to the emerging field of traumatology,  
 2 gaining him international recognition.  
 3 In the background is the ever-present shadow of his  
 4 childhood Holocaust trauma.  
 5 What I found deeply moving throughout Paul's book  
 6 was his alertness and sensitivity to the many expres-  
 7 sions of hidden trauma in diverse settings: patients in  
 8 his consulting room; bushfire victims; his first analyst;  
 9 personal experiences during his testimony; revisiting  
 10 and reliving his childhood moments with his children  
 11 in Budapest.  
 12 Aged 63, Paul's Holocaust testimony led to his feelings  
 13 of amazement as he observed the developments of his  
 14 story as he told it. He concluded with the moving,  
 15 unanswerable question: "My testimony was another  
 16 level of integrating my story. How many levels did  
 17 patients need to recover their own pasts? I wondered  
 18 how many levels their therapists needed to recover?"  
 19 No wonder Paul conceded his "hate (of) superficial  
 20 equation of survival with resilience". He preferred to  
 21 account for his survival as a combination of luck, his  
 22 parents' grit and his ability "to obey and disconnect my  
 23 thoughts and feelings. Did I do well?" (p. 328).  
 24 This book deals with the complex and disturbing legacy  
 25 of trauma's expression in personal and clinical life.

Paul acknowledges the power of trauma in great detail, 61  
 accessible to both mental health professionals and the 62  
 general reader. Yet I wondered how the latter could 63  
 sustain reading chapter after chapter. Or, would they 64  
 need to pick up the book, then take a breather as they 65  
 pace their return for a later time. 66  
 How to sum up this book? Paul provides a partial, but 67  
 profound testimony to the fact that his life's work 68  
 reached well beyond personal struggles to survive. His 69  
 major contribution is providing opportunities for repara- 70  
 tion in the lives of his many patients, colleagues and 71  
 others who otherwise were doomed to the constricted 72  
 lives imposed by the secrets of past trauma. Thus Paul 73  
 has restored, preserved and perpetuated the memory of 74  
 his murdered family, enriched the lives of his current 75  
 family and future generations, and advanced knowl- 76  
 edge of trauma in his chosen profession. 77  
 Taking all this into account, Paul's writing embodies 78  
 his life's mission – to live life according to the proverb, 79  
 'Physician, heal thyself'. For me, reading his tales of 80  
 psychotherapy has been an experience that will linger, 81  
 I suspect, for many years. It is that sort of book. 82  
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George Halasz 86  
 Melbourne, VIC 87

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