***International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology***

Volume 11, Issue 3, 2016, pp. 293-299<http://tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15551024.2016.1178049>

What is a Life Well-Lived?

A Review of *Looking Back: Memoir of a Psychoanalyst*

By Paul Ornstein with Helen Epstein

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At the High Holiday service last fall the new Jewish Reform prayer book, *Mishkan HaNefesh*, changed a central ancient prayer. Instead of the original plea, “Inscribe me in the Book of Life,” it now reads, “Inscribe me in the Book of Life Well-lived.” On first hearing this I wondered, “How does one begin to identify and evaluate a well-lived life?” I thought again of this question as I read Paul Ornstein’s lovely and surprisingly profound memoir titled simply *Looking Back: Memoir of a Psychoanalyst*. If you want to know what a life well lived looks like, read this book.

Still the book raises many questions for me. What are the ingredients of a well-lived life? From our own lives, from our history as psychoanalysts, from analytic theory, and from child and family literature, we have gleaned ideas about the foundational experiences that inform positive human functioning. Selfobject experience, affective attunement, mentalizing experience, and positive parental vision—we are persuaded that these foster in children conditions for psychological growth and development and a solid sense of self. Yet, how do these ingredients combine with experience, and what are the quickening agents that propel a person toward a well-lived life? That is, what is the mysterious alchemy that transforms these ingredients into a realized life? Finally, how as analysts do we foster such a process in the adult lives of our patients? Although we have some directions here, this terrain is still somewhat murky. Using Paul Ornstein’s story, this review will inquire into these questions.

Ornstein’s long life—91 years and counting—spans what seems like several centuries. His story begins chronologically with his birth in the small Hungarian village of Hajdunanas, a day’s travel from the capital city of Budapest. He grew up there in a traditional world of Central European, Jewishly-observant culture, a world bounded by Jewish ritual and practice but—by the mid 1920’s--with some bows to Western secular influences. Then, along with Ornstein’s physical and psychological development, the story traces his cultural expansions, expansions resulting from 20th Century urbanization and advances in science, technology and media. During his rabbinic studies in Budapest, beginning at age fifteen, he had easy access to secular books, newspapers, radio, and movies.

However, in 1944 when Ornstein was nineteen, his story turns dark as he confronts the horrors and barbarities of mid-20th Century European history. The Nazi’s invade Hungary and institute the “Final Solution.” Ornstein tells us about his Holocaust –in forced labor--and its aftermath, tells of his own narrow escapes during the war and the murder of his mother and four siblings and unnumbered others as well as the demise of the coherent world into which he was born.

This could be story enough: the end of a young psychological life in the 1940’s through shocking trauma and loss. But Paul Ornstein’s story is not this. Rather, his is a story of resilience and survival; a story of curiosity, education, fathers—the blood kind and the psychological kind; of enduring friendships, abiding love, marriage, and children; of hard, persistent work, professional satisfaction and success, economic comfort, travel, and continuing education; of generativity in the forms of teaching, writing, speaking, and grandchildren; and, presently in retirement, continuing curiosity and more education. Miraculous! How can this be? Can we possibly understand the factors that help inoculate a person against cataclysmic loss and trauma? And can we possibly understand the motivation that created such a well-live life?

In his narration Ornstein gives us some clues about the elements of resilience, and I’ll enumerate some of them: tradition and cultural values and heritage—that is, a coherent and cohesive human surround; idealizing and mirroring family relations; parental vision for the child’s future and also parental encouragement of and trust in the child’s managing of challenging life situations and frustrations; pursuit of education and ambitious goals; and supportive and loving social and intimate relationships.

As a boy participating in ongoing family rituals, in his religious school education, and in walks with his father to the synagogue each Sabbath, Ornstein absorbed Judaism and the sense of belonging to a rich religious, ethical, and psychological tradition. For example, as a young boy he asked his father why at weddings—at the moment of intense joy--Jews break a glass in order to remember the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The father replied that in remembering past pain and sadness, “We shall feel our joy and happiness at the wedding all the more intensely.” The paradox and usable life lesson: in meeting and surmounting loss and pain, the joys of life become sweeter and more meaningful. Here is the ensuing dialogue:

[Paul asks] “But then, why choose to remember the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem…Why not remember some of our own losses and sadness?”

[The father responds] “In their wisdom…the Rabbis wanted to connect each and every one of us individually to earlier generations and to our collective historical past.”

[Ornstein tells us] “The way I would put it today is that the Rabbis understood that we needed a cohesive group-self to support each individual self. Tradition creates a collective continuity, whereas each of us has only a very limited lifespan.” Loc. 167

In spite of his doubting God and abandoning religious practice for a good part of his adult life, Ornstein’s Jewish identification has continued to inform his life and contribute to the consolidation of his sense of self. And evidently, he has passed on this identification; as he writes, “I didn’t worry too much about whom my children would marry…It was important to me that they marry Jews and they all did, without it ever being discussed.” Such is the power of a coherent tradition in directing life choices. Loc 1981

Zionism is another cultural identification that Ornstein has carried throughout his life. The dream of settling and building a Jewish homeland was nourished in his family; both parents were Zionists who longed to relocate to Palestine. His father did after World War II. Zionism guided Ornstein’s future vision during the Holocaust and organized his career plans after the war. The ordeals and complexities of being a displaced person, however, made traveling to Palestine impossible after the war. Then, lucky accidents allowed Ornstein and his wife Anna to immigrate to the United States in 1951. Nevertheless, he describes his intense experience on his first visit to Israel in 1959:

Catching the view of Israel’s coastline from the plane just before landing, the feeling of “homecoming—even if only for a visit—put us in touch with *being a link in the chain in countless generations of Jews* and finally entering the country of our own. This was our “ultimate” liberation. Loc 1019

And elsewhere he describes “a deep inner struggle” in not making his home in Israel:

Anna and I felt it was a betrayal of the Zionist cause, a betrayal of our life-long ideals, a betrayal of what we would now call our “nuclear self.” Zionism was certainly one of the building blocks of my nuclear self and not having moved to Israel is something I shall never be able to live down. Loc 1153

The metaphor of being a link in a strong and solid chain performs two different and important psychological functions: first, it lends solidity and importance to one’s individual life and contributions, but, second, it also serves to moderate any tendency toward inflated self-importance. Ornstein, all of his personal and professional accomplishments and contributions notwithstanding, possesses an endearing humility. Its tone colors the memoir.

In addition to a strong cultural inheritance, Ornstein grew up in a healthy, intact family. There does seem to have been some strains in his parents’ marriage: while the beautiful and brilliant mother was practical and savvy, interpersonally skilled, and ambitious, her husband, though brilliant, well educated, and scholarly, was a disappointing businessman. The mother chafed at the family’s economic challenges. In spite of the strains between them, however, they were both loving and encouraging parents. As Ornstein puts it,

“That tension [between them], only rarely affected the child-centered atmosphere of our home. Both my parents were very loving towards their children. It is this aspect of my family and my “privilege” as the first-born, I believe, that contributed to the sturdiness of my self-esteem. Future adversity could not shake this foundation. Loc 234

Ornstein describes his mother as modeling both “activist attitudes towards the world” (Loc 221) and life-long learning and self-improvement. She was also his affectionate booster and coach, particularly of his educational activities. His father, the most important and indelible model of his early years, provided idealizing and mirroring selfobject functions for the boy. The father’s learning and mastery of language dazzled the young Ornstein, who writes:

His use of apt metaphors, richly interspersed with Biblical and Talmudic quotations as well as with references to classic Hungarian and world literature, made his speeches memorable to me. He could also easily complete any crossword puzzle. One time…I asked him: “Will I know as much as you do if I go to rabbinical school?” He said, “You will know a lot more than I do.” Comments like these left me with good feelings, both about him and about my own future. Loc 187

This relationship with its combination of mutual admiration and paternal encouragement opened Ornstein to benevolent authority—and idealizing experiences--throughout his life. Such openness, in turn, enabled him to find other nurturing fathers in the world and to receive what they had to offer him: Maurice Levine, his mentor and colleague in Cincinnati; Michael Balint, his first close psychoanalyst friend; and, especially Heinz Kohut, his great teacher. Kohut’s teachings particularly embody and articulate the sustaining value of the kind of selfobject experiences Ornstein received in his first family.

Ornstein also presents the shadow side of idealization. He tells of great anxiety early in adulthood whenever he was called on to speak. Initially, the occurrences of anxiety puzzled him, but in his psychoanalysis he determined its source in his father’s gift for public speaking and his own resulting intimidated feelings. His psychoanalysis—and practice in public--helped him to master this anxiety.

Clearly both parents held a positive future vision for their boy; that is, they projected him into a successful and fulfilling future life. Ornstein evidently believed them: throughout his trials and overwhelming losses during and after the war and into his productive and comfortable adulthood, he always planned—often with his mother’s *chutzpah* and savvy--what constructive thing to do next. His parents also trusted that Ornstein would figure out and manage successfully his life trials. For example, they supported his leaving home at an early age. Family financial difficulty required Ornstein to drop out of his gymnasium a year before graduation, but almost immediately he devised a way to continue his education, free of expense, at a rabbinical seminary in Budapest. Hence, at fifteen, through his own resourcefulness he left home and parental protection. Despite such an early emancipation, he found both inner supplies and developed skills that allowed him to thrive.

Positive family relationships also prepared Ornstein for close friendship and love relationships. He found tight knots of friends at rabbinic school, in forced labor service, and throughout his life. He maintained one extraordinarily enduring friendship—with Steve Hornstein—which began in childhood. The two men maintained a close relationship after reunion in Hungary at the war’s end, through medical school, their respective marriages, immigration, and a long professional and personal and family association in Cincinnati. Only Hornstein’s death finally separated them.

When he was seventeen and she only fourteen, Ornstein met his future wife Anna. Early on he recognized great beauty, compatibility, and understanding in her. In the memoir he paints a portrait of a “marriage of true minds.” Photos of the two of them reveal, first, Anna’s resemblance to Paul’s startlingly beautiful mother and, then, the two of them as gorgeous young kids with a shine in their togetherness that persists at every succeeding age until the present. In the memoir Ornstein alludes to Anna’s sustaining presence throughout their life: how her intelligence and understanding helped to create a rich professional partnership, organized a smooth running and loving family life, eased every transition, and softened every pain in his life such as his analytic termination and his outlier position in the Cincinnati psychoanalytic community. He concludes:

My strength at this age is that I have Anna with me. We were married when she was 19 and I was 22. Now she is 88 and I am 91. If you live this long, it doesn’t depend only on you, but on how you’ve been living all along and with whom. Loc 2056

And so Ornstein has given us great examples of what we as system thinkers understand: mind and self develop in the context of relationship with other human beings and the social and environmental surround. He has told us of his social and cultural tradition, of his family context, of his friendship and intimate relationships, and of his consistent openness to new learning and novel experience. The memoir also emphasizes Ornstein’s flexibility in organizing action plans that fit external circumstances.

The importance of lived experience in directing action and formulating ideas is a central aspect of Ornstein’s life. His flexible responsiveness to contextual contingencies is evident whether he is plotting escape from forced labor and the Russians or plotting his educational and career opportunities and strategies or plotting a robust retirement in which he has become a Dostoyevsky scholar and teacher. One example of his flexibility, which particularly struck me, occurred when his plan to enter Palestine through Romania failed. Although he then had to leave medical school, which he had begun in Cluj, Romania, Ornstein immediately switched plans to go to Switzerland with Anna. With no visas, that plan didn’t work either. Undaunted, Ornstein and Anna found a way—after admirable negotiations with and cajoling of the administration--to pursue medical school in Heidelberg, Germany. Ornstein’s capacity to scan his environment on order to grasp—and then assertively pursue--the best available paths toward his future life is quite awesome.

Ornstein’s discovery and embracing of Heinz Kohut and self psychology is another example of finding a fit for himself—in this case a psychological fit--within the world of psychoanalysis. Kohut’s emphasis on careful observation and empathic listening as guides to comprehending the other had particular meaning for Ornstein. According to Kohut, directly accessing the other through empathic listening rather than through theoretical formulations and dogma is an avenue leading to learning, deep understanding, and acceptance rather than to judgment. As Ornstein puts it,

[Kohut] never imposed theory on the data but moved seamlessly from the data to theory. It was mainly this very feature that I most admired in Kohut’s approach, in addition to his obvious humanity. (Loc 1718)

[He helped me to recognize] early on how tightly the methods of observation (empathy, i.e., vicarious introspection) and data gathering (the nature of the patient’s problems) as well as the process of change (“cure”) were inseparably connected. Loc 1773

Kohut’s trust and insistence on direct experience both in his clinical work and theory development is analogous to Ornstein’s own reliance on the direct confrontation of complex environmental data and internal emotional experience in formulating life plans and action.

In addition and congruent with Ornstein’s own capacity to learn and grow through openness to others, Kohut taught that the practice of empathic observation promotes continuing growth in its practitioners. Ornstein expresses it thus: “Learning from patients is a life-long blessing in our profession—if we are open to it. Such openness is what I feel I have gained from Kohut’s work.”Loc 1773

Now at the close of his memoir and this review I am left with some unanswered questions about Paul Ornstein. My musings occupy the gray and mysterious area where human individuality emerges: the area between what’s constitutional and what’s cultivated, the no-man’s land between nature and nurture. Native intelligence, curiosity and a motivation toward expansive living, a fresh and youthful sensibility, and a tolerant and regulated temperament—certainly these are some of the qualities that Ornstein was either born with or had constitutional predispositions for. Were they nurtured and did they come alive in his first family? Did environmental circumstances--surmountable obstacles and optimal frustrations and the consequent need to devise action solutions, often on a dime--force or hone their development? What place did benevolent disavowal occupy in Ornstein’s constructive responses to cataclysmic trauma? And, most puzzling of all, what are the sources of his amazing and vital life energy, his relentless motivation toward development and pleasure? For example, in this remarkable passage, he describes Anna and his arrival at a displaced persons’ camp in Germany in 1946. Against the background of his losses and dislocations—and considering the general distressed atmosphere in DP Camps in Germany—Ornsteins’s predominant memory of pleasure is astonishing:

To have escaped to the West, gave us the unexpected opportunity to travel, something we had never done before. I can’t say that, at the time, we mastered our rage and grief. We postponed dealing with them. In retrospect, I can see that we were numb in a certain way, more than we realized then. The fact that Anna and I met again brought us back to life together…We did not suffer from “survival guilt.” In spite of everything, we were able to enjoy life. Loc 846

I am most appreciative for this chance to spend some time with Paul Ornstein in his book and to ask these questions in the context of such an inspiring life. For entrée into a life history that spans the great events of the last century, that charts the growth and development of psychoanalysis into a humanistic and humane endeavor, and that depicts a life very well lived, I commend *Looking Back: Memoir of a Psychoanalyst.*