

Book Review

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NEVILLE SYMINGTON

A Different Path—An Emotional Autobiography.

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Nada Lane

“Now I was looking for something, and I found Neville Symington ...”

On a recent pacific island holiday, these words above made me almost jump off my banana-lounge-chair. There I was one lazy afternoon, reclining under a palm tree, engrossed in Jeanette Winterson’s memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*. I’d just reached the part where, following a psychotic breakdown, Winterson comes across one of Symington’s book on the shelves of Blackwell’s bookshop in Oxford. Winterson writes:

Symington helped ... I had been holding on to the side of the open boat that was my life, and hoping not to drown under the next wave ... a priest turned shrink, who had a simple direct style and was not afraid of talking about the spirit and the soul ... Symington talks about how the mad part will try to wreck the mind. That had been my experience. Now I could contain it.

(Winterson, 2011, p. 176.)

Winterson is not alone. Many people have had the good fortune of *finding* Neville Symington and as Winterson suggests, Symington is a man of many parts. He holds British qualifications in Philosophy, Theology and Clinical Psychology. He completed his psychoanalytic training in London and is a Fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society. It is Australia's gain that in 1986 with his wife and their two sons, Symington migrated to Sydney. He was Chairman of the Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis from 1987 to 1993 and President of the Australian Psychoanalytical Society from 1992 to 2002.

Symington has lectured in Britain, Norway, Denmark, Poland, Portugal, Germany, the United States, Brazil, Israel, Japan, New Zealand and Australia and is the author of many academic papers and books, including *Narcissism: A New Theory*, *The Making of a Psychotherapist*, *A Pattern of Madness*, *Becoming a Person Through Psychoanalysis*, *The Analytic Experience*, *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion* (joint-authored with his wife Joan Symington). He has also published a novel *A Priest's Affair* and a book of poetry *IN-GRATITUDE and other POEMS*.

In 2013, Symington received the Sigourney Award in recognition of his contributions to psychoanalysis worldwide. In his address to the Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis in 2014, James Telfer said: "Neville's ... creativity is not that of the printed word alone but of his personal presence in the international analytic community. His achievement comes from connectedness ... he speaks with a free and original voice that strives for clarity."

It is this free and original voice that Symington uses in his most recent book, *A Different Path, An Emotional Autobiography*. The titles of the eight chapters give the book its direction: Father, Mother, School and After School, Nightmare in Lisbon, The Seminary, The Birth of Subjectivity, In Exile, Disaster and Recovery.

The beginning chapter, Father, sketches the paternal family history going back to 1880 when Symington's Scottish grandfather migrated to Portugal, eventually establishing a prosperous port wine business. By the time of Symington's birth, the family was well integrated into upper class Portuguese English-Catholic society.

Symington describes an idyllic childhood within the bosom of a close extended family. Symington's father had two brothers, and between the three boys they fathered eight sons. Seven of these sons were successful in business and remained in Portugal. While the eighth son, Neville "*journeyed down a different path*" (p. 1) leaving the familiar territory of home to become a psychoanalyst. The how and why of this *different path* is the subject of Symington's autobiography.

I believe what led me along this unusual pathway was a mixture of two conflicting elements: a capacity for leadership in the field of psychological and philosophical understanding and an angry resentment towards an

undigested authority that proclaimed and commanded how life on this earth should be lived. The understanding of this problem and its attempted resolution has been my life's emotional task. (Symington, 2016, p. 2)

Symington writes in the same jargon-free style that characterises his professional psychoanalytic writing, except here in his *emotional autobiography*, he is perhaps more conversational, using the device of speaking directly to the reader. For example in 'Father':

112 So, you will need to know what my father was like. He was an unsophisticated man ... I loved him dearly and some of my happiest memories are of being with him on the marshes of northern Portugal shooting snipe in the winter or catching butterflies in the spring and summertime ... His care and patience and his joy in teaching me the art of collecting butterflies gave me a fond love of him which still lives inside me. He was so kind, so courteous, so loving. It was a tragedy that inwardly he was so tortured and unhappy. (Symington, p. 3)

The writing is replete with descriptions of internal psychological states interwoven with the glorious sensuous detail of external landscapes. The following vivid portrait of the Portuguese English-Catholic social milieu in which Symington was raised is illustrative of what to expect throughout the book:

So each weekday he [father] would get up early and go to Mass, return and have breakfast, read the Portuguese newspaper, give my mother a peck on the cheek, and then drive to the office ... (Symington, p. 44) Port was part of the family life ... I used to love sitting with my father drinking the port ... The port vines are grown on terraced slopes of the Alto Douro. (Symington, p. 45). The mountains of the Douro where the vineyards are carved out into the hillside are the most beautiful on earth. I love the Douro and whenever I return there I feel like a baby returning to Mummy's warm breast. (Symington, p. 46).

As Freud has done, Symington looks to literature for psychological insight. Great literature, Symington suggests, describes "*the different parts of ourselves, the inner conflicts of the soul*" (Symington, 1998, p. 23). In Symington's *Narcissism A New Theory*, he proposes that Tolstoy is unique in his understanding of the phenomenon of narcissism and that Anna Karenina the character, after whom Tolstoy's epic novel is named, exemplifies narcissism. In contrast, Symington admires Levin, another central character, who although plagued with thoughts of suicide, continues to live until he makes the transition from meaninglessness to meaning.

Symington, like Levin, also struggles in his youth with the terror of committing suicide: "... *the impulse to suicide pressed in upon me with great strength and fierceness and therefore I was in a panic that I might act on the impulse*". (Symington, 2016, p. 152).

And again, like Levin, Symington strives for meaning and freedom: "... one of the central battles in my life has been the resisting of pressure from the social environment surrounding me and from the Establishment, and following what is truly me as opposed to what has been imposed on me"(p. 197).

While there is plenty of angst in this book, there are also good times. The chapter, *The Seminary*, offers a fascinating glimpse into the nature of deep friendships within the confines of life as a student priest and also of the intellectual enrichment of seminary life:

... I studied with passion through all these years. I read nearly the whole of Cardinal Newman ... I read the whole of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* ... and many others ... (Symington, p. 127). I am very grateful to the Catholic Church for having given me this education. (Symington, p. 123). The six years at St Edmund's were very happy. Intellectually I threw myself into philosophy and theology. (Symington, p. 125).

The final chapter, 'Disaster and Recovery', recounts the tale of a disastrous marriage alongside Symington's experience of psychoanalytic training at the Institute in London. The writing is bravely honest. Symington admits to 'cheating' in his interview for entry into psychoanalytic training: "I knew it was a disaster and I hid it from my interviewers. I was *in* the disaster—so much in that I did not speak about it. In those interviews I cheated and that is all that can be said about it." (p. 270).

For those interested in the inner sanctum of psychoanalysis, this final chapter makes for riveting reading, not least because at the time Symington was at the London Institute, he encountered well-known names. Isabel Menzies, for example: "She was more probing ... and consequently I was more reserved and did not give of myself freely ... It has taught me that someone will not give of their private self unless the clinician gives of him or herself". Enid Balint, "a lively quick-witted woman ... I trusted her intuition", recommended John Klauber as a suitable analyst. Symington provides a moving account of his first meeting with Klauber, whom he came to respect. In that first meeting, Symington almost "cried with relief" when he realised that Klauber was able to detect in him a madness when no one else had.

Klauber: "Do you mind if I be entirely frank with you ...?"

"No please do," I said in terror.

“I think you are very ill, you know.” (p. 271)

For readers who balk at the idea of a psychoanalyst writing openly about his personal life, this book might shock or offend. Symington reveals himself to be a man “torn between passionate love and violent hatred ... a wild creature.” How Symington negotiates love and hatred is one of the themes explored in this book. His “terrible hatred” for his mother at various periods of his life is explored to great effect. He does not slide away from discussing his own madness and depression:

114 I have also been depressed all my life. It has always been an effort to summon the energy to fulfil the aspirations of my imagination. I also find it much easier to spend time in verbal conversation or in writing than doing practical tasks. Later in life, as a psychologist, when I did the IQ Test I learned that this was the classic sign of depression. (Symington, pp. 4-5).

Freedom, truth, sexuality, religion, the pious Catholicism in which he was raised, how these intersect or oppose each other are explored, not as abstractions but in the context of personal experience. The reader is taken into the heart of Symington’s family life:

The Symington family were all Catholics and devotion to the Catholic faith was as natural to us as breathing ... (p. 20). We Catholics had the truth ... We knew we were right. One of the inner struggles of my life has been to take possession of personal faith and slough off the self-righteousness and superstition which are handmaidens of one another ... (p. 21).

“Why, why why?” has been a natural question for Symington. His inquiring nature was already evident at eight years of age. In preparation for making his First Communion, he asks of the nuns, “But what is adultery?” (p. 21). On being told it was a sin committed by adults, his curiosity is aroused even further. But with no instruction in matters sexual by his parents and raised with a solid belief in the goodness of his family, “The idea that there could be any sexual misconduct in the family ranks was quite unthinkable to me. We were all good Christians, devout Catholics ...” (p. 21)

And of course, as in all archaic hero mythologies, the innocent young Symington is eventually “confronted head-on” with a more shocking reality of family (it would do readers a disservice to reveal more). This traumatic knowledge sends Symington into a “mad frenzy ... I was in the grip of something which totally crushed my own individual creative self. In common language I was mad. I had become possessed by a force that was stronger than me.” (p. 116). It is in this state he makes the decision to enter the priesthood.

In his acceptance speech of the Sigourney Award in 2013, Symington said:

“I have trodden a somewhat lone path in the psycho-analytic world since I published my book *Narcissism: A New Theory* in 1993.”

In choosing to publish such a deeply intimate and psychologically revealing book as *A Different Path*, Symington continues to demonstrate his courage in speaking his mind.

Glen Gabbard in his introduction to Symington’s Sigourney Award ceremony (2013) wrote: “A central feature of Neville’s thinking has been freedom of thought ... Neville has certainly made a practice of thinking his own thoughts and has positioned himself as something of a maverick within the field. He has taken unpopular positions and argued them with skill and tact.” This latest book is a testament to this.

For one thing, it challenges the idea of psychoanalyst as a figure on high, mysterious and unknowable. A reason given for the importance of non self-disclosure by the psychoanalyst is that knowledge of the psychoanalyst’s person would interfere with and damage the transference relationship with the patient. Again, to quote Symington (Sigourney Award 2013, acceptance speech) “... At a seminar ... I presented a vignette from an engagement I had with a patient ... two analysts said to me: ‘But you speak as if you were an equal’. I replied, ‘But I am an equal; we are all faulted creatures; we are all patients.’”

A disclosure of my own: I have read many of Symington’s books, have attended his lectures and have had the privilege of individual psychoanalytic consultations. I read this new book with great interest and with feelings of gratitude to Symington for mapping out for the reader his own personal ‘*different path*’. In doing so he has inspired this ‘*faulted*’ reader to take courage in her own path. I imagine I am not alone in this.

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