

Times Spent In The Woods:
Discussion of Frank Summers' "The Expressivist Turn in
Psychoanalytic Theory and Therapy"

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Frank's beautifully written, zeitgeist driven article powerfully foregrounds what doubtless now must be considered a sine qua non of a truly transformative therapy—the search for and realization of personal self expression. And perhaps such clinical searching and realization have always been around, despite, as Frank cogently fleshes out, our one hundred-plus-years, party-line insistence on the presumptions of normalcy and the traditional, hyper-codified psychoanalytic theory and technique that aimed to produce it. (We went for sexual trauma, then sexual fantasy, and then Oedipal conflict, as Frank reminds us. Does the American Psychoanalytic Association still require that “certified” institutes insist on the proper analysis and resolution of the Oedipal complex in all personal and training analyses?) Perhaps, similar to how we officially thought of countertransference 100 years ago—largely publicly denied and/or repudiated out of shame—the reality of privileging creativity, anormativity, and self expression may have resided underground, generally remaining in the confines of the private mind and the consultation room. Or, perhaps not, though I would like to think otherwise. Perhaps it resided in the “second analysis.”

Indeed, we analysts have moved on from the virtual microscope, presumably examining emotional petri dishes while remaining distant and independent of them, to the Escher mirror globe, investigating its round character, all the while relentlessly seeing ourselves in it, admittedly in ways we don't normally think of ourselves, or in ways we sometimes would prefer to disavow. Doubtless the expressivist turn, intertwined with the relational turn—a developmental double helix, perhaps—has freed many of us to calm down and watch, and patiently wait for, and then encourage the “potential space and the shift to a future perspective of possibilities,” as Frank points out. As Frank also underscores, the “negative capability” of Keats is our hoped-for prerequisite: Many of us in our field these last few decades have written about the importance of tolerating and sustaining uncertainty in the analytic setting (at the moment I'm thinking of Stephen Seligman, Donna Orange, Adrienne Harris, and Doris Brothers, and there are many others). The uncertainty seems to pay off.

Frank opens wide the door of relationality, perspectivalism, fallibilism, contextualism, and expressionism—all five essential components of a therapeutic atmosphere. However, few writers, in my opinion, have rendered so central, and in such an accessible manner, the centrality of self expression and the potential pathways to it. Bravo! I would argue, though, that tantamount to identifying and encouraging self expression—acknowledging the vital developmental tendrils of which Kohut and, later, Marion Tolpin wrote—our capacity to understand the contexts, past and present and imagined future that have

conspired to place us where we now find ourselves (including our self expressive, developmental thrusts) might be as important as self expression itself. Frank rightly illustrates the nascent beginnings of the expressivist turn in the work, for instance, of Winnicott and Kohut. In regard to Winnicott, Frank speaks of “inborn dispositions that can take form as authentic self expression, and the environment either facilitates this growth process or impinges upon it.” And to Kohut, “the ‘release of the nuclear program of the self,’” given a suitable and responsive enough selfobject milieu. These are powerful precursors to and scaffolds for the expressivist turn. I would add that our contemporary climate increasingly eschews the notion of a specific, predetermined, innate program of self expression thought to reside **in** the individual, but rather privileges attempting to understand the unique formative contexts in which such self expression and action emerge. In my view, the “open ended exploration of the realization of individual potential” also includes attempting to grasp the past, present, and imagined future contexts in which such potential comes to light.

As Frank underscores, therapeutic action in this light is, of course, ensconced in a dialogic process: It takes one to sense the developmental, self expressive tendrils of another. Central in this process is the “biphasic model of analysis” to which Frank refers: “understanding what is and creating what has never been,” via dialogue. I believe Frank has articulated here the essence of therapeutic change. This model of therapeutic action strongly resonates with a complexity theory sensibility—the attitudes embedded in which privilege the analytic pair’s interest in and focus on what feels vital, alive, new, destabilizing, and emergent. Indeed, an expressivist, complexity-informed analyst, waits and watches for the ever-so-brief, new, “spontaneous gestures” of which Winnicott wrote, and attempts to interrupt the “‘vicious circles’ of understanding without movement.” In his clinical illustration, Frank astutely recognizes his patient’s fleeting comment that “I never have had anything good, never been happy **except of course, for times spent in the woods...**” How many therapists would have missed this? Many, I think. The expressivist turn, and its accompanying sensibility, encourages us to wait, watch, and listen—to wait for those often rare moments of spontaneous gestures, which gestures, I would argue, are not solely emergent from **within** the individual, but are products and properties of larger, complex, and truly therapeutic systems. Frank pursued his patient’s “meaningless reference to the universal experience of vacation relief,” and his pursuit paid off: This constituted what in complexity theory is referred to as a **phase shift**—those rare, tipping-point moments of possibility that emerge and then successfully transition into states of greater self expression, creativity, and self realization. Frank elegantly articulates this phase shift when he says, “That awareness acted as a perturbation, disturbing his rigid identity between what he called the ‘drudgery’ as ‘strength’ and any potential abandonment of it as failure and weakness. To go against the grain of his family and his own history would be a feat of courage, a word that surprised him as he uttered it. This line of inquiry transformed the analytic discourse.” Going against the grain requires an attuned other, one attuned to the ever-so-brief acts of freedom and self expression.

In thinking about the expressivist turn, questions emerge: How might less experienced therapists learn to differentiate between emerging self expression, originality, and creativity, on the one hand, and the ubiquitous pseudo-vitality that belies “systems of pathological accommodation” (Brandchaft, 2010), on the other hand? Are there potential pitfalls to overzealously hunting for and privileging true self expression? And what might be the transference ramifications in regard to the patient’s experience of the analyst privileging “new ways of being,” new “possibilities”? Doubtless this last question could only be answered by understanding the specific dyadic context operating at a given point in time. It is always useful to reflect upon how a specific patient might be assimilating the specific comments, interests, and attitudes communicated by the analyst. Also, I wonder about the role of the **analyst’s** true self expression in the analytic relationship—a topic that has, of course, already received much attention in the authenticity/countertransference literature. And finally, I wonder about the potential interface between Frank’s emphasis on engaging in moments of emerging self expression—the “times spent in the woods”—and the Boston Group’s elaboration of the importance of responding to what they refer to as “now moments.” I applaud Frank for his insight not only into our changing zeitgeist—the expressivist turn—but also for his personal sensibility that afforded his patient an environment in which he, his patient, could emerge and grow.