

IN LEAPS AND BOUNDS

Psychic Development and
its Facilitation in Treatment

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To

ROHAN & SHALINI MAITRA

whose development I have watched with tenderness and care

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About the author

Salman Akhtar, MD, is professor of psychiatry at Jefferson Medical College and a training and supervising analyst at the Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia. He has served on the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, and the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*. His more than 400 publications include 103 books, of which the following 21 are solo-authored: *Broken Structures* (1992), *Quest for Answers* (1995), *Inner Torment* (1999), *Immigration and Identity* (1999), *New Clinical Realms* (2003), *Objects of Our Desire* (2005), *Regarding Others* (2007), *Turning Points in Dynamic Psychotherapy* (2009), *The Damaged Core* (2009), *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2009), *Immigration and Acculturation* (2011), *Matters of Life and Death* (2011), *The Book of Emotions* (2012), *Psychoanalytic Listening* (2013), *Good Stuff* (2013), *Sources of Suffering* (2014), *No Holds Barred* (2016), *A Web of Sorrow* (2017), *Mind, Culture, and Global Unrest* (2018), *Silent Virtues* (2019), and *Tales of Transformation* (2022).

Dr. Akhtar has delivered many prestigious invited lectures including a plenary address at the 2nd International Congress of the International Society for the Study of Personality Disorders in Oslo, Norway (1991),

an invited plenary paper at the 2nd International Margaret S. Mahler Symposium in Cologne, Germany (1993), an invited plenary paper at the Rencontre Franco-Americaine de Psychanalyse meeting in Paris, France (1994), a keynote address at the 43rd IPA Congress in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2005), the plenary address at the 150th Freud Birthday Celebration sponsored by the Dutch Psychoanalytic Society and the Embassy of Austria in Leiden, Holland (2006), the inaugural address at the first IPA-Asia Congress in Beijing, China (2010), and the plenary address at the Fall Meetings of the American Psychoanalytic Association in 2017.

Dr. Akhtar is the recipient of numerous awards including the American Psychoanalytic Association's Edith Sabshin Award (2000), Columbia University's Robert Liebert Award for Distinguished Contributions to Applied Psychoanalysis (2004), the American Psychiatric Association's Kun Po Soo Award (2004) and Irma Bland Award for being the Outstanding Teacher of Psychiatric Residents in the country (2005). He received the highly prestigious Sigourney Award (2012) for distinguished contributions to psychoanalysis. In 2013, he gave the commencement address at graduation ceremonies of the Smith College School of Social Work in Northampton, MA. Dr. Akhtar's books have been translated into many languages, including German, Italian, Romanian, Serbian, Spanish, and Turkish. A true Renaissance man, Dr. Akhtar has served as the film review editor for the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, and is currently serving as the book review editor for the *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*. He has published fifteen collections of poetry and serves as a scholar-in-residence at the Inter-Act Theatre Company in Philadelphia.

Introduction

This book consists of three essays on psychoanalytic understanding of personality development and the utilization of such understanding in treating patients. *The first essay* covers the period from the earliest infancy through childhood to the adolescent turmoil and its resolution. It addresses the following developmental landmarks:

- Renouncing omnipotence and accepting reality
- Establishing a satisfactory bond with the mother
- Moving toward autonomy and independence
- Benefiting from contact with the father and the attendant triangulation
- Increasing cognitive sophistication
- Acquiring a moral sense
- Consolidating identity and the capacity for romantic love.

The second essay deals with the period after adolescence and addresses the psychosocial challenges characteristic of young adulthood, midlife, and old age. It elucidates the following major milestones:

- Consolidating a life dream, finding a mentor, and establishing a work identity
- Assuming the role of a wage-earner and “house-holder”
- Enjoying sex, love, and marriage
- Becoming a parent and partaking of the attendant pleasures and responsibilities
- Noticing and accepting changes in one’s body and their impact upon identity
- Encountering limits in diverse psychosocial realms
- Accommodating changes in one’s relationship with parents
- Letting go of children and not letting an “empty nest” become an “empty chest”
- Becoming a grandparent
- Downsizing and retiring from one’s job
- Dealing with the deaths of friends, siblings, and spouses
- Getting really old, facing infirmities, and preparing to die.

The third essay builds upon the foregoing conceptual discourse *and* deals with the various ways in which the resultant deepened understanding of psychic development can inform our clinical approach. Emphatically reminding the practitioner to keep in mind that development is a life-long process, this essay provides clear guidelines for facilitating growth by conducting “developmental work” with our patients. Needless to add, such work is an additive to—not a replacement of—our customary methods of listening, affirmation, confrontation, interpretation, and reconstruction. The guidelines offered here include:

- Providing nonverbal ego-strengthening measures
- Creating psychic space for thinking
- Helping the patient find words for inner experiences
- Continuing to work despite what might seem reprehensible in the patient’s material
- Remembering that an occasional regression is integral to development
- Validating the patient’s reality
- Restraining the greed for interpretation when a thwarted developmental tendency makes its first appearance
- Seeing goodness and potential for growth in the patient

- Enhancing the sense of personal agency in the patient
- Helping the patient talk about issues related to mortality and death.

The complex tapestry woven by these three essays is sandwiched between a *Prologue* and an *Epilogue*. The former defines and describes what I have euphemistically called the “pre-self”; this “structure” refers to the foundations of the self laid down by events occurring before our birth and during our intrauterine life. The latter offers a delineation of the “post-self” which involves our continued existence as memories in the hearts of our loved ones. Acting in unison, the five chapters of this book deepen our understanding of the nuances of human development and of the interventions that we clinicians can make to facilitate its desirable unfolding.