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WTF?!?

*Oppression, Freedom,  
and self*

Founded in 1964 by John Warkentin, PhD, MD and Thomas Leland, MD

**Voices: Journal of the American Academy of Psychotherapists**

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Journal of the American Academy of Psychotherapists

# VOICES

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Sometimes a catastrophe is only a course correction.

—James A. Owen

# VOICES

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

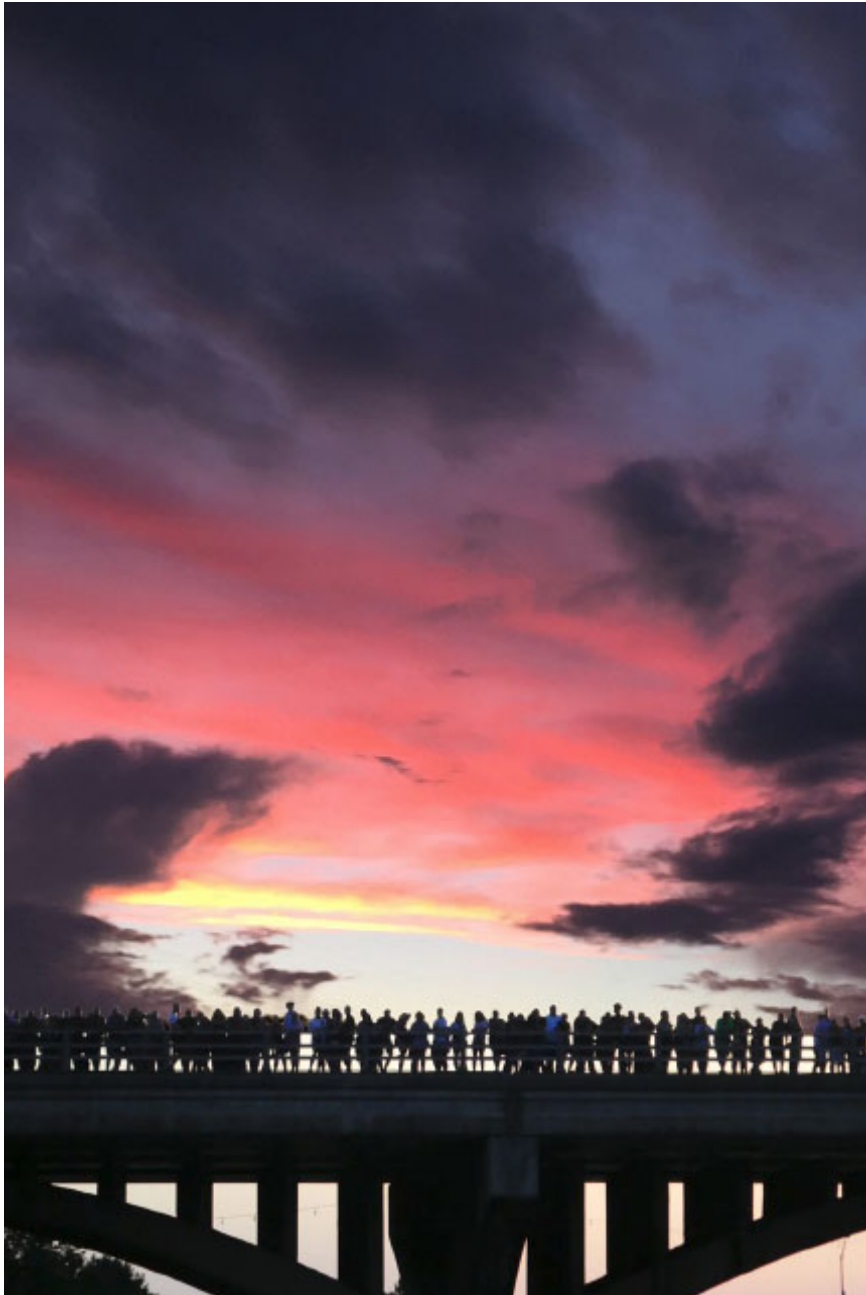
WTF?!? **Oppression, Freedom and Self** Winter 2018: Volume 54, Number 3

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<i>Voices: Journal of the American Academy of Psychotherapists</i>		i
<i>Table of Contents</i>		v
<b>Editorials</b>		
<hr/>		
<i>Next</i>	Kristin Staroba	1
<i>Finding a Voice for Peaceful Discord</i>	Carla Bauer	2
<b>Articles</b>		
<hr/>		
<i>Raising Unicorns:</i>		
<i>A Story of Radical Acceptance in an Inhospitable World</i>	Patti Digh	5
<i>I'm Right, You're Wrong... How's That Working for You?</i>	Philip Spiro	13
<i>Race, Melancholia, and the Fantasy of Whiteness</i>	Cherian Verghese	19
<i>Trauma of These Times: A Presenter's Personal Struggle</i>	Bonnie Buchele	31
<i>The Abiding American Character: 2018, Twelve Years Later</i>	Rhona Engels	35
<i>The Abiding American Character: 2006, From the Archives</i>	Rhona Engels	37
<i>Commentary</i>	Tom Burns	45
<i>Commentary</i>	Dairlyn Chelette	46
<i>Friendships Lost and Found:</i>		
<i>Racial Oppression and Emerging Freedom</i>	Cathy Roberts	49
<i>Voices in the Classroom: Teaching Diversity is Not a Job for One</i>	Lisa Kays	53
<b><i>Turning Purple</i></b>	Susan McClure	61
<i>Uses, Misuses, and Abuses of Power by Donald Trump, Me, and You</i>	Nicholas Kirsch	65
<i>Short Report: Considering Our National Mess:</i>		
<i>Finding a Way to Talk About Politics</i>	Polly Hart	72
<i>Annihilation Anxiety</i>	Beulah Amsterdam	75
<i>Can Politics Be Pathology?</i>	Lisa Kays	81
<i>Getting It Right</i>	Gina Sangster	85
<i>Commentary</i>	Judy Lazarus	87
<i>See Me, Seema</i>	Xanthia Johnson	89
<b>AAP Tape Library</b>		
<hr/>		
<i>Tape #89: Interview with Dr. Sidney Jourard</i>	Dr. Ernest Kramer	92
<i>Commentary</i>	Robert Rosenblatt	99

# Turning Purple

*We have met the enemy...and he is US. —Pogo*



Susan McClure

Susan McClure, Phd, is a clinical psychologist who has been in private practice in Charleston, South Carolina, since 1983. Trained in a variety of psychodynamic approaches, she blends dream work with voice dialogue in her work with individuals, partnerships, and groups. Before becoming a psychologist, she worked as an urban planner and community organizer and edited a community monthly magazine for 7 years; she continues to keep her hand in those pursuits. [smcclure47@gmail.com](mailto:smcclure47@gmail.com)

Months before the 2008 presidential election took place, I stood in front of the TV in tears as candidate Obama talked about his vision of America no longer being a society of red and

blue states, but of an electorate that embraced the larger definition of an America that had become purple. At the time I wanted to believe it was possible that red and blue could be blended into purple and that this Black man could be the agent of that transformation. But I should have known better: Change usually happens when the pendulum swings from one end to the other before moving slowly toward the middle. We may yet make it to purple, but from my own personal experience, that isn't going to happen any time soon. For now, the division between red and blue seems to be getting worse. This collision of opposites is showing us how polarized we are as a nation, with one another, and within ourselves.

The peninsula of Charleston, SC, where I have practiced for 35 years, is evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, as is my practice. I realize this is not the case for most of my friends who are psychotherapists, and I have come to believe that the differences in our experiences may be largely a function of whom we relate to day in and day out. A substantial segment of my patients are in or have retired from the military; another segment come from the Southern gentry, some of whom have families who are written about in history books both from the time of the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. The majority of them had been dissatisfied with Obama's

understated and conciliatory manner and seemed to celebrate Trump's comfort with strutting his wealth, power, and position in the world. The rest of my practice is composed of therapists, lawyers, artists, and entrepreneurs, most of whom were born other places and moved to Charleston because they chose to.

In the months before the 2016 election I noticed that more and more of the material from both conservative and liberal patients was oriented toward positions, opinions, and rants about candidates and what was happening in the political arena. I began to be concerned that the personal quality of our psychotherapy work was being subsumed by the energy of the collective. While I almost never comment on my own political opinions or identification in therapy, most of my patients correctly assessed that I was a Democrat and their views of me and interactions with me began to revolve around the way we were alike or different. A patient I will call Alan, a retired submarine captain, told me during the months before the election that he had hesitated talking about how poorly he felt the people in the armed forces were treated under the two previous Democratic administrations. He had tears in his eyes as he talked about the hardships his fellow submariners had faced. This experience affected me deeply as I recognized that in some way I didn't remember, I had communicated that I was not available to hear anything about Democratic incumbents.

Although I have always considered myself a Democrat, I could not support either Clinton or Sanders. During most of the pre-election season, as I watched the debates and a broad cross-section of news sources, I noticed that I was becoming less partisan. Simultaneously I

developed a growing distaste for self-righteousness and disrespectful ways of presenting one's positions, which I felt were turning the election uglier and uglier.

Meanwhile, in my own practice, I continued to be faced with looking at all of the issues through each patient's eyes. I found I could find some value in both conservative and liberal positions. These people were making intellectual and ethical sense to me, although their backgrounds and points of view were in some ways quite different from mine. Many of them had been raised "South of Broad," which is where the families live whose last names can be found in history books. What disturbed me the most was the ease with which the red and blue clients projected their shadows onto one another and vilified the other. I had to move carefully in my sessions to avoid that happening between me and my patients.

Another thing happened: The longer this went on the more cautious and quiet I became. I was responding to the polarization by becoming more neutral, which was my first tip-off about what being purple might be like.

By the time I settled on a presidential candidate I could both personally admire and politically support, John Kasich, most of my friends and colleagues (Democrats) were distancing themselves from me. For them my purpleness was a betrayal of our relationship. How could I be their friend or colleague if I could see some value in the positions of their opponents? I was shocked and hurt by their reactions and felt devalued by their unwillingness to listen to the process by which I had come to my decision. After all, I believed I had arrived at my decisions as thoughtfully as they had. The toughest moment came when my closest friend since graduate school said my political stance had made it impossible for us to continue to be close. Given all we have shared and how deeply we understood one another, I was devastated that she seemed unable to trust me or my judgment.

The day after the results were counted I heard from several friends and colleagues who had been Clinton or Sanders supporters and who were in shock and outrage, incredulous that Trump had won. And I also listened to my patients, half of whom were ecstatic and half of whom were scared and upset, trying to make myself available to both as they processed their feelings about themselves and the country now. I didn't know how to deal with the results of the election, but I did understand that regardless of who had won, the polarization and oppositional way of relating had formed a deep chasm in my own relationships and in the lives of everyone I knew. That was the thing that scared me the most.

It is clear that our country is in the process of a chaotic and dramatic transformation which touches our personal and professional lives. Red and blue patients, friends and colleagues, all repeat to me their dreams about Trump, and sometimes I am invited to share with them fears of how they may be like him. For most of them it is appalling. For some it is exciting and promising.

A year and a half later while attending a process group at an AAP conference I found myself sharing this experience. As we discussed our reactions to the polarization of the country since the election, I volunteered that it had brought me to vote for John Kasich in the primary and shared how much it had cost me in friendships. I was surprised when one of the members leaned forward and said pointedly: “It is people like you who got Trump elected!” Her feelings were still raw. And my purpleness was definitely not ok. Another member came up to me during our group break and told me she never again would see me in the same way she had. Interestingly, I found I had become used to this kind of reaction. I do not take it personally anymore. I think most of us are scared about how bad things might get.

If I step back, the upheaval we are now experiencing seems to be part of our psycho-logical, cultural, and political character, which at one point led to the Revolutionary and Civil wars. Perhaps we are again reworking what it means to be Americans. Perhaps we are still creating a nation in which there is room to transform red and blue into purple. But for now we are at war in fundamental ways that again threaten our sense of selves and our safety as individuals. No wonder we feel vulnerable. No wonder emotions are running so high. Regardless of where each of us is on the spectrum of red to blue and where our patients are on it, our task is the same, is it not? We are psychotherapists and as such have come to value and to be able to be present to what the OTHER thinks and feels and to understand that their vulnerabilities and defenses are affecting their lives as much as ours are. Perhaps from that place we can reunite as Americans someday. I doubt that will happen quickly, but our future as a country depends on it. Maybe we are a part of making that happen.

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