



Encountering Clinicians: Susan Kavalier-Adler

Exclusive NJSCSW Interviews with notable contributors in the field of mental health

Interviews by Jack Schwartz, Editor NJSCSW Forum

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For thirty years Dr. Susan Kavalier-Adler has been one of the key contemporary psychoanalytic innovators and driving forces. She has been internationally recognized for her award winning writing (over 60 publications, spanning psychoanalysis, creative process, object relations, literature and Argentine Tango, with two books about to be published). Dr. Kavalier-Adler is the founder and Executive Director for the Object Relations Institute in New York. Along with her many training seminars, supervision groups, classes, and her clinical practice, she even finds time to establish a reputation as an accomplished proponent of Argentine Tango. NJSCSW was thrilled to have Dr. Kavalier-Adler take time from her multi layered schedule to discuss her work, life, object relations and the Argentine Tango.

NJSCSW: Your work reflects so many influences literature, dance, art, psychoanalysis, how did it develop?

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: I began with my doctorate in clinical psychology from Adelphi, then to the Post Graduate Center for mental Health to study in Psychoanalysis in New York. I also got involved in dance therapy at the time, and studied under a pioneer in the development of dance therapy, Blanch Evan. I found the movement through dance allowed me to enter my feelings which were a great counterbalance to the intellectualized work I was doing with my PhD dissertation. It was a three year period I completed my master's thesis and PhD on using dance therapy with mentally challenged children. At that time, I had a few choices in front of me, I was working in an outpatient hospital, and I considered various schools, and chose NIP, which had the most diversity, but I had been creating my own curriculum which was the impetus to launch the Object Relations Institute in 1991.

NJSCSW: There are many theories of psychoanalysis, why Object Relations?

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: Most of my influences I drew from my own reading and research, although when I was in NIP I had a class with Stephen Mitchell, and he introduced me to the writings of Guntrip and the British Object Relations School, and as I progressed I really got into to the work of Melanie Klein. But that was on my own.

NJSCSW: Mentioning Stephen Mitchell, there seems to be some division in between the Relational School and the Object Relations School of Psychoanalysis.

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: There are important differences, you see the object relation theory focuses more so on the internal world on the individual, in a clinical setting the emphasis is on

understanding this internal world and psychic structure along with the developmental issues which they carry into their everyday life. Similar to the relational school in the object relations school we are in the here and now, but object relations goes deeper with the focus is on the internal world of the patient and how it plays out in the sessions, how the analyst is being used in terms of dissociated projective identifications or repressed projections. The full focus is on the patient, and how the experience of the analyst is used psychologically by the patient, as opposed the any separate agenda the analyst might have from their real personality as you have in the relational school, where the patient can get lost.

NJSCSW: With the emphasis on the internal world of the patient, I can understand your interest in Melanie Klein whose work focused mostly on early primitive mental states.

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: From my many journal articles, I utilize Klein's formulation of the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position, although the term depressive position is somewhat unfortunate, what it really should be called is the *mourning position*, since it is about becoming integrated and healthy, so unless people know the theory they can think of the word depressive in the wrong way.

NJSCSW: In fact your award winning writings, specifically your book, *Mourning Spirituality and Psychic change: A new object relations view of psychoanalysis*, makes that case, and offers another new fundamental paradigm shift in psychoanalysis. That leads to my question, what was the genesis of ORI?

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: I tell you when I opened ORI was a phenomena we had people lined up around the block. You see the whole city was either classical or self-psychology and here I come in with object relations from the British school, which offered some much like how to deal with trauma, how to understand the internal world of a person, really getting to the core of a person, the pre-oedipal level where a person establishes their sense of subjectivity, the formation of psychic dialectic and psychic conflict, studying how a person can be at war with parts of themselves, that critical distinction between developmental arrest and developmental progress is highlighted in the British and American Object relations. I had been teaching the core theorists, such as the work of Klein, Winnicott, Fairburn, Masud Khan's first book, also don't forget Balint, whose book the *Basic Fault* is very important. When self psychology was dominating the field I found myself against the tide, in a different direction, and created a seminar, and this private seminar evolved into my institute.

NJSCSW: Whether it is your teaching, supervision seminars, interests in literature and the creative process, your work seems to draw from many areas.

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: Yes, I had been doing much of my research on my own, but I did become extremely sensitive to the subject of mourning through my own person tragedy of having my father die when I was ten. It was quite profound, the mourning process opened up at first with the dance therapy then to psychoanalytic therapy that started my fascination with its meaning. I draw from my experience and my work with patients, to understand how mourning is fundamental to developmental growth and how it connects and interacts with creativity, in the capacity to love and have intimacy. For Freud, in *Mourning and Melancholia*, he writes how mourning reflects aggression turned inward. But, Klein took it further and saw the aggression as an active part of the mourning process, as seen in fantasy, and in the *demon lover complex*, a

result of in those that fail to mourn due to developmental arrest from trauma in the primal stage of self development.

NJSCSW: The concepts of “developmental mourning” and the “demon lover” reflect significant contributions to the theory of psychoanalysis, adding to the key paradigms such as separation-individuation, transitional objects, self-objects, etc. and are so useful in the clinical setting.

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: Yes, the primary focus of my work is on the use of the psychoanalytic situation to promote a developmental mourning process that allows self integration, self differentiation, create the capacity for symbolization, to move from the primary state to a higher developmental level thus facilitating separation-individuation and the growth of capacities for both love and creativity to take place. In my first two books I focus on women artists and writers who attempted to use the creative process for psychic development and for psychic reparation and healing. I found that these brilliant women often failed in their attempt to use the creative process for psychological purposes without undergoing an adequate clinical treatment. Curious to understand why, I used the extensive research I did on the biographies and creative work of these women to describe the repetition of primal trauma as it appears in the work and lives of these women *as a demon lover complex*. This demon lover complex appears in themes of muse-god figures who continually turn demonic when the woman artist seeks merger with them through their self-expression in creative work. There is always dialectic between the internal and the external world, the intense love and hate. The only way this could be worked through is with an analyst will to tolerate these intense feelings and function as a container, actively processing these primitive states and bring them to a symbolic level. In more primitive states these affects are always being split off through projection identifications.

NJSCSW: I see developmental mourning as such a useful concept, that makes sense in the analytic process, similar to, but in a way, more organic and clinically useful than the broader paradigm of separation- individuation, developed by the American Object Relations school of Margaret Mahler.

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: Mahler’s contribution was important. Mourning helps the child go through the separation-individuation process and to thus achieve self-integrity. The child needs to let go of the primal parents and lifelong mourning may be involved, but critical separation-individuation stage mourning is essential. The more pathological the parenting and the more disrupted the early maternal bonding the harder it will be to let go, because then no adequate internalizations will be formed to create an inner blueprint for new and future relationships to be created. If mourning does not take place, development is arrested. This developmental mourning process can occur at any stage in life. I am reminded of a 86 year old woman abstract artist, who is still in treatment. She struggled with intense shame issues and unresolved mourning. She also has a physiological condition affecting her tear ducts that inhibits her ability to cry. Yet despite this she can feel the pain of loss and is aware of the narcissistic defenses she has used to protect her from the rage and suffering related to early loss and grief. In surrendering these defenses she has opened to external world relationship connections and internal world connections that allow her to now experience new synapses opening up in her mind and new creativity emerging in her artistic work even at the age of 86.

NJSCSW: It is well known you are a strong proponent for of Argentine Tango, in fact I know you dance frequently at the Lafayette Grill downtown, and also at the ORI conferences you have presented Argentine Tango as a form of dialectic or metaphor encapsulating the drama of intimate relationships, is that how you see it?

Dr. Kavalier-Adler: Yes, very much so. As far as tango as a paradigm of the clinical relationship and clinical moment, the capacity for psychic dialectic is seen in both Argentine tango and in the clinical moment, through the connection of follower and leader, with the analyst as follower tuning into the unconscious of the patient. When self integration and separation-individuation are achieved in development, psychic dialectic and its modes of inter-subjectivity and intimacy become possible because the subjectivity of the self comes into awareness and so does the subjectivity of the other. In Argentine tango we speak of the follower responding to the leader in the moment, without anticipation. So too in psychoanalysis we have the clinical moment "without memory and desire"--Wilfred Bion--, Winnicott's transitional play space, where spontaneity merges, illustrating the developmental level where the 'true self' emerges. This is Klein's depressive position, where repression rather than dissociation evolves, allowing for containing of one's feelings thoughts and impulses, rather than throwing them out, or deflecting them into the other ("projective identification").

NJSCSW: Tango feels very much like play with technique and style, contained yet free.

Dr. Kavalier Adler: Tango is something to surrender to, rather than to defend ourselves against. There are different circles of connection interacting on different levels and interweaving in the spirit of tango, and the connection creates emotional meaning that we share. We work with object relations in the clinical moment, just as in the Argentine tango moment, as well as with the overall mourning, separation-individuation, and self integration process.

Dr Kavalier-Adler is the Co-Founder, Executive Director, and Senior Faculty & Training Analyst and Supervisor of the Object Relations Institute for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis. She is the author of three books (two more soon to be released) and over 60 articles related to her view of mourning as a developmental process ("developmental mourning") that is fundamental to self integration as well as to psychic change, healing and transformation throughout one's lifetime. Her unique integration of British and American object relations theory can be seen throughout her writing, fully defined as a theoretical perspective related to "developmental mourning" in her first book *The Compulsion to Create: Women Writers and Their Demon Lovers* (Routledge, 1993, Other Press, 2000). Dr. Kavalier-Adler's focus on a well-known brilliant women writers in this book and on brilliant women writers and artists in her second book, *The Creative Mystique: From Red Shoes Frenzy to Love and Creativity* (Routledge, 1996) allows her to explore how the creative process can be the focus of progressive mourning for self integration and reparation or can be the captive of a demon lover complex (an object relations view of pathological mourning and psychic arrest) in those that fail to mourn due to developmental arrest from trauma in the primal stage of self development. Dr. Kavalier-Adler's third book, *Mourning, Spirituality, and Psychic Change: A New Object Relations View of Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 2003), the National Gradiva Award winner from the National

Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis in 2004, further explores the clinical arena, elaborating her theoretical perspective, in relation to Freud and the British theorists. This book extends the clinical application of Dr. Kavalier-Adler's theories that can be seen in her first two books with in-depth descriptions of the developmental mourning process in dialectic with transference work in analysis, and with the interactive engagement of the psychoanalyst and patient.

Susan Kavalier-Adler, PhD, ABPP, NCPsyA, D.Litt is a practicing clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst, training analyst, and teacher for over 35 years and supervisor of Psychotherapists practicing psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and group therapy, as well as a consultant for those involved in the wish to write for personal healing or for writing projects, related to her experience running writing groups in her practice for 28 years. Dr. Kavalier-Adler offers individual, couples, group psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, as well as individual and weekly group supervision for mental health practitioners in her downtown Manhattan office. She conducts a once a month intensive mourning and therapy group and creative healing writing groups and is currently forming a weekly therapy group to help individuals get feedback about their self sabotaging tendencies and cycles, as well as on their susceptibility to seduction that can undermine strivings towards an independent life.

For more information on Dr. Kavalier-Adler's private practice and her unique approach to supervision, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, please visit www.kavalieradler.com and Drkavalieradler@gmail.com