My Experience of Michael Balint

A Patient’s Anonymous Bequest

Background: The Analyst and His Work

Michael Balint had a difficult life. He was born into a devout Hungarian Jewish family, the son of a family physician. Balint and his wife Alice were both psychoanalysts and very active in the Hungarian Association. They were both analysed by Ferenczi. After Ferenczi’s death, Balint succeeded him as Director of the Psychoanalytic Polyclinic in Budapest. Their son John was born in 1925 but a second son, born in 1927, died at birth and Alice developed an aortic aneurysm. In the face of Jewish persecution Balint changed his name from Bergsmann to Balint, renounced Judaism and was christened much to the disdain of his father. He saw his father for the last time when he and Alice left Budapest to practise in London just prior to the outbreak of World War 2. Balint’s parents both perished in the Holocaust choosing to suicide rather than go to the gas chamber. Alice died soon after their arrival in London. Balint had a short second marriage which ended in divorce. He subsequently met Enid with whom he spent 20 happy years. She too, was an analyst and, like Alice, took a great interest in Balint’s psychoanalytic writings.

Balint’s far reaching contributions to psychoanalysis range over three broad areas. Firstly, he made his own very significant clinical and theoretical contributions, from his early papers of the 1930s culminating in 1968 in his last theoretical book, *The Basic Fault*.

The second major strand of Balint’s work followed from his appointment by Ferenczi’s widow as the literary executor of Sandor Ferenczi. Balint prepared for publication both the Clinical Diary by Ferenczi and the Freud-Ferenczi Correspondence. Balint wanted these to be published simultaneously, as read in conjunction they would make more sense. Unfortunately publication was delayed for many years after Balint’s death until quite recently.

Balint’s third important contribution relates to his work with general practitioners. His book *The Doctor, the Patient and His Illness* outlines the Balint Method which he developed with Enid to help general practitioners with psycho—therapeutic techniques and insights. Balint groups are widely used in General Practice today to help practitioners think about the psychological aspects of the doctor-patient relationship.

Encounter with Balint
I am writing, not as a therapist or psychoanalyst, but as a retired surgeon who looks back on a rewarding career and 40 years of a fulfilling marriage. I am very grateful for the benefits I derived from my experience in psychoanalysis which was transformative for me. I would like to share this personal reflection and recollection to address my indebtedness and as a contribution which may be of interest.

The Date: August 1958.
The Location: 7 Park Square West, Regents Park, London.
The Psychoanalyst: Dr Michael Balint.
The Presenting Problem: A fear of intimacy and marriage which felt extreme. This was connected with my relationship with my Irish protestant father who protected his good name as a family physician by advising his eight children (five girls and three boys) that premarital sexual activity was the product of a warped mind and to be avoided at all costs. He used the word ‘whoremonger’ freely—the suggestion being that any man promoting a premarital relationship was making a whore of the lady.

As a pre-adolescent boy, I had a great admiration for my father who had risen from a humble Irish farming background to become a surgeon and family physician. I idealised him to the extent that I made a personal vow to adhere to his lifestyle principles. However, with the emergence of sexual feelings at the age of 14 or thereabouts, my father’s teaching that association with girls would lead to fornication and ‘whoremongery’ caused conflict and I became depressed. My instinct for sexual gratification was in conflict with my father’s teaching. On reflection it seemed he was afraid his good name would be tarnished should one of his three sons impregnate a local girl. The word ‘whoremonger’ carried great weight for me and caused considerable anxiety.

As I approached 30 years of age, I felt it was time for marriage. Most of my friends had taken the plunge and I feared not being able to follow suit. I proposed to two girls in quick succession and filled with remorse and guilt broke off both engagements. The crazy thought in my mind was that the whole world would know I was a ‘whoremonger’. On the advice of my brother, I made an appointment to see Dr Michael Balint. At the time I was in London studying for surgical examinations.

With much fear and trepidation, I attended my first appointment with Balint in August 1958. I walked up the five steps to apartment No 7 and was ushered in by the maid. The first interview was confrontational. I discussed the nature of my problem and pointed out that I felt uncertain about the wisdom of my being there. Balint’s response was: We are now in August. Stay with me till December and then you decide if you are doing the right thing by seeing me.’ I was allocated four sessions weekly and assumed the supine position on the couch. This was an intimidating position for someone new to analysis. It took several months for me to realise that my fears of my father were transferred to Dr Balint. At every session, in the early months, I blurted out my feelings with considerable difficulty. There were protracted pauses due to my anxiety. With the passage of time I began to realise that the analyst was on my side. I began to experience Dr Balint as a benign father figure, quite different from the very unhappy Irishman who was my real father.

In order to attend my four weekly sessions with the analyst, I told my surgical tutor a white lie indicating that my absences four times weekly were due to my taking additional lessons for my surgical examinations. In a sense I was not lying because the analysis helped me considerably in passing my final examinations.
By December the depression had lifted and I was feeling better and more confident so I continued in analysis. The word ‘whoremonger’ had receded from the forefront of my mind. I began a relationship with a nurse at the hospital where I was working and in the words of Dr Balint, she helped ‘to make a man of me’. I could hardly believe that this encounter was supported by my analyst. Nevertheless, the word ‘whoremonger’ continued to crop up from time to time.

Toward the end of 1959, I passed my surgical training examinations but at about the same time my father was killed in a road traffic accident in Australia, knocked over by a drunken lorry driver. Whilst attending my father’s funeral, a surgeon offered me a partnership in his practice conditional on returning to London for a further year of specialist training. This provided the fortuitous opportunity to return to my analysis whilst refining my surgical skills. At the time of my father’s funeral, the depression regarding my sexuality had returned and I found myself drinking whisky to excess. The ‘whoremonger’ was back. I had met a young girl and quickly became engaged, making plans for her to join me in London, but this never eventuated. I continued with Dr Balint throughout 1960 whilst working in a London hospital. Towards the end of this I fell in love with a medical student and after a six months courtship we married. This felt like a triumph for me and my psychoanalysis.

Following our marriage, we returned to Australia where I successfully established a surgical practice. Forty-five years later I look back on a satisfying medical career and a happy and harmonious marriage. My wife and I have enjoyed rearing three seemingly well adjusted children.

I have many recollections of my time with Balint. When analysing, he would lie in a reclining chair and cover himself with a blanket if the weather was cold. I paid my account monthly and was responsible for payment of missed sessions. He was consistent and reliably on time. He had a keen sense of humour and midway through one year when he had moved the furniture around and had relocated the couch he quipped, ‘We are now going to do the other side’. When I burnt a hole in the carpet in his waiting room (I smoked a pipe in those days), he did not hesitate to point out my indiscretion and use it as grist for the mill. On another occasion when I had a late afternoon session with him, he fell asleep and started snoring. In my naive way I thought he was pretending to be asleep and congratulated him on his performance. He apologised for his indiscretion and in view of his being 62 years of age at the time and the lateness of the hour I was well able to understand the situation.

I remember well an incident where I complained to Balint that my surgical tutor seemed to have a problem communicating with me and that it was always difficult to involve him in a conversation. Dr Balint said to me ‘has it occurred to you that he may be as frightened of you as you are of him?’ This had not occurred to me. Dr Balint suggested ‘the next time you get a chance to pay him a sincere compliment, do so and see what happens.’ A few weeks later my chance came when I complimented him on an article he had written in a medical journal. It was an excellent article and my paying him a sincere compliment set our relationship on a completely different footing and we subsequently became very good friends. It was an important educational moment for me.

Critics of Balint would say he broke the rules from time to time. Balint’s only son, John, was born in 1925. I was born in 1927. On reflection, I felt that perhaps he treated me like another son. He gave me fatherly advice from time to time, out of character and perhaps technically wrong for the modern day analyst. For example he suggested the name of the hotel where my
wife and I might honeymoon. He also agreed to support my application for membership of Diners Club. In relation to my anxieties about passing examinations he did not hesitate to share with me that when he resat his graduation exams on migrating to London he had failed his medical exams but had easily passed his surgical exams.

Dr Balint had poor vision as a result of glaucoma and was unable to drive. As far as I know he went everywhere by foot, taxi or public transport. Balint’s right thumb was also missing. Lack of courage prevented me seeking an explanation. Inability to oppose thumb to index finger is a severe disability and it means when signing documents, the implement for signature has to be placed between index and middle finger.

After the end of my analysis, I kept in touch with Balint with a monthly note to which he invariably replied. I also met him when he was on a lecture tour of Australia in the late 1960s. He was elected president of the British Psychoanalytic Association in 1970. He had a first heart attack in 1970 at the age of 74 and wrote to inform me of his condition, advising that a full recovery was expected. A few months later, on the 31st December 1970, he succumbed to a fatal heart attack whilst in the ambulance on the way to hospital. This was before the days of bypass surgery and the use of stents. I became depressed following his demise and mourned his passing deeply. Over the years since his death I have sought top-up analysis from several analysts to whom I am grateful.

I do not want to claim that this is by any means a complete account of my analysis with Balint, or that my analysis was complete, but I do know that it was significant, enabling and worked for me. What I experienced as helpful was Balint’s straightforward, non-judgemental acceptance, his interest, his humour and his ordinary humanity. Without psychoanalysis, I doubt very much that I would have been able to marry or enjoy life as fully as I have.

Author: Name supplied but to be withheld from publication.

Postscript: the author died recently, peacefully at home in the loving company of his wife and children and their respective families.

References

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