“IMPORTANT IDEAS FROM BION FOR JUNGIANS”  
An Interview with James Gooch, M.D.  
BY JOANN CULBERT-KOEHN, L.C.S.W.
I wonder if you could tell us something about why you chose Bion and how you made that decision?

I basically knew nothing about Bion. In reviewing the literature for my graduation paper from the Southern California Psychoanalytic Institute, I just stumbled across Hannah Siegel’s book *The Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, and in the chapter on the depression position was a list of the depressive affects, and a reference to Klein’s two papers on the depressive position. I included some of this material and I had a very scary experience when I got back the critique on my paper that said “Gooch is tarred with the Kleinian brush” and I thought, “Jesus, what have on earth have I gotten myself into.”

I then learned about this war that was going on between the ego psychologists and the Kleinians in Los Angeles, and I thought, “my goodness, I didn’t even know anything about this…I better find out more about this because it damn near cost me my graduation from the institute.” I thought, “my goodness, this is more like an indoctrination place than a place of higher learning,” which was an unpleasant shock.

I put together a study group to read the object relations literature, and in the process, during a conversation with a fellow resident, I mentioned this whole experience to him…and my interest in finding out what object relations was all about. He said to me, “well, do you know Mason and Bion?” “I said no, I’ve never heard of them, who are they”…and he said, “well, they’re London Kleinian analysts who are here in town practicing, and you ought to ask one of them to join your study group.” I asked Mason, and he wasn’t interested in reading literature, he wanted to talk cases. I took the opportunity to present to him for a time, an analytic case I was working with and I found his ideas certainly totally new and very helpful and after the last session I said, “Dr Mason, I’d like to learn more about this…I found it to be very helpful…how would you suggest that I do this?” He said, “I would suggest you have an analysis

I had just finished 8 years of analysis and I said, “Dr. Mason, with whom would you suggest I go for analysis

He said, I suppose I would go to Dr. Bion because he has had so much good experience and is so well known”. So, Bion, being not well-known at all to me…I called Bion, and I got another sort of off-putting response
which is that he doesn’t want to talk to me on the phone, but instead, he wants me to write him a letter. saying what I start out trying to say on the phone. I get a letter back from him saying starting on such and such a date in September I can see you on Monday at this time, Tuesday at this time, Wednesday at this time, Thursday at this time, Friday at this time…Bion.

JoAnn

So, in September you arrive in Bion’s office. What was the beginning like? Was it like strange, or did you just kind of sink right in…what happened in the beginning?

Jim

It was certainly different, but one of the things that struck me from the very beginning, was Bion’s very early on beginning to make interpretations about my omnipotence, which I had gotten 2 years of out of my classical analysis except there was a dramatic difference from the very beginning. And that is, that I do not recall one single incidence in which Bion made that interpretation in which he did not interpret what he guessed and made it clear…he always made it clear he couldn’t read my mind, he wasn’t telling me…. it was his speculation. He would cite the evidence if there were evidence in the session, but he would often say something like “well, I can’t tell from what you said why you would need to be reduced to that, but my experience is that people are feeling helpless about something when they are in an omnipotent state of mind. Invariably, I would know what I was feeling helpless about even if there weren’t evidence in the material of the session. So I found every one of the interpretations scored, whether he could cite the evidence or whether all he could say is “I don’t know what it is but I suspect you are feeling helpless about something.”

JoAnn

But you could find the evidence?

Jim

I could find it, and usually quickly. I can’t tell you how different that experience was, because I found it extremely painful to have interpretations being made to me about my omnipotence and not know why, because usually I knew that I was in that state, so it was not news to me…but what I didn’t know was why on earth was I in that state. I don’t remember that once with my classical analyst. It felt so different; that he was really with me and tried to help me understand…and whatever it was I was feeling helpless about, to grow the capacity to stand that.

He always made it clear what the evidence was and that only I could know whether there was any truth in it or not. And I increasingly could feel in the music, and the dance, the cadence…the timber of his voice that he was speaking to me from his heart. That he had to be having an emotional experience himself to be speaking to me that way; so even though he wouldn’t tell me what his associations were, it was painfully clear that he was in touch with something within himself that had been evoked by me.
As a matter of fact, it was not an uncommon thing for him to say, “even though I tell you almost nothing about myself, you’re likely to know a great deal about me based on what I’m able to understand about you and what I’m not able to understand in you.”

JoAnn  
It would seem to me that his manner of interpretation was quite different than Klein’s or Hannah Siegel’s. Is that your understanding…that he came to this on his own?

Jim  
I would guess that he came to it on his own. When I read Klein’s analysis of Richard however, I have the impression that she was doing the same, though she was much more cagey about it, and she would not write nor talk about what her private associations were, nor how she used them. But I can not imagine someone speaking to another human being as she spoke to Richard; with the respect and compassion that I feel when I read it without coming from her own heart and having respect for the anguish that she was trying to call attention to.

JoAnn  
Jim, can you say something about Bion’s attitude towards the use of the couch and other frame issues…and something about how he defined analysis.

Jim  
Well, he didn’t have to say anything about the couch because when you walked into his office the couch was sitting in the middle of the room; it was an analytic couch, there were chairs, but it spoke for itself.

So, as I recall, I laid down on the couch the first day I went into his office without it even being discussed; but it has been a few years ago, maybe I’ve forgotten something by now.

JoAnn  
How do you think Bion defined analysis? Obviously you can feel it in the books, but what are your thoughts.

Jim  
Well, I can tell you that one of the things that stands out in my mind that he said to me about analysis is “this is just an ordinary conversation about a very delimited range of experience—namely your emotional experience,—and what happens to you if you cannot have emotional experience. Something like that. I think that he believed, based on his experience that the analyst needed to understand with respect—mature respect — compassion and discipline what the analysand’s experience was, and add to that as he could, which I think necessitated his using what was evoked in him by the experience. He not infrequently would say to me when I would say something in conceptual terms, “could you give me an example of that, because I might better understand and it might give me some clue as to what to say.” Where I think he was using the evocation of the imagery and the affect associated with the specific to stimulate his own
emotional experience that he would then use to elaborate what else there was to my own emotional experience. That he felt that it was essential to show the person how to stand, what they couldn’t stand, in order to understand their experience. But the main thing was in standing it in an atmosphere of respectful compassion and discipline and that through that process—an in vivo—a mysterious experience that we call internalization, or introjection, or introjective identification, or I think the old psychoanalysts would have called primary identification will occur. But actually, it’s a mystery how it happens. But that something can begin to grow that wasn’t there before.

He was assiduous at interpreting idealization of him, positively or negatively. I remember his disclaimers that he couldn’t read my mind…that he needed me to doubt what he said, and to question what he said…that he needed me to keep him properly informed in order to have any idea how to do his work…and that it was not something he could do by himself.

JoAnn So, he was modeling a kind of non-omnipotence.

Jim Oh ya, in a big way. An association to this was…one of the things that struck me about him was the care with which he dealt with the practical epistemology and the conduct of a session. What was the evidence. What was corroboration, or not. I can remember saying to him things like, “I can’t feel that.” And his saying, “well, this or that that you said suggests that it’s correct but we’ll have to wait to know till you can feel it, or even though you’ve said you agreed with the interpretation the fact that you said this, that, or the other thing makes me suspect that it was not correct, but we’ll have to wait and see.”

JoAnn Some people describe him as quite formal. It doesn’t sound like you experienced him that way.

Jim No, but he did have that; I could see how people could take him that way. He did have that bearing about him, but you didn’t have to listen very hard to feel through…you could see through that.

JoAnn I’ve never asked anybody this, but was he comfortable talking about sex in your opinion?

Jim Based on my wife’s experience in analysis with him; I had the impression that he actually was very uncomfortable with her love for him. It was very painful for her and she certainly confronted him with something like, “well, you can say what I’m not to you, but you can’t say what you are to me.”
JoAnn  Is there anything else you’d like to say, especially more about what you gained.

Jim  I would bring up what seemed to me quite disparate issues that I would not have connected myself and he would point out that by the very fact that they occurred in the same session they were different aspects of the same experience. He was bringing together the splits. They were very simple interpretations that were extremely helpful for integrating my own experience.

The dramatic one was relatively early in my analysis when he made this interpretation in part object Kleinian language. I was utterly outraged and was ready to get up and walk out. However, he went right on thank goodness, and said, “I haven’t the slightest idea whether there is any truth in that or not, nor do I have any idea what on earth it would mean if there is, but you may.” It was as if the room literally got brighter.

JoAnn  He wasn’t force-feeding you…he was just putting something out and you could take it or leave it.

Jim  It clicked with associations to my current life experience, but then fell into a gestalt that made sense that I had not seen myself at all; I had been totally oblivious to it…unconsciously.

JoAnn  Did he ever talk to you about his own analysis with Klein, or did he ever say anything to you about Freud or about Jung?

Jim  He made references that gave me the impression that he gave Klein a very hard time. He could be very ornery and very tenacious and stubborn at time. You could get into a very contentious kind of feeling with him, he didn’t back away from any emotional state with me.

JoAnn  At the time you were in analysis with him was he giving lectures or teaching seminars?

Jim  He referred to teaching as being experiences. He would have an assigned subject, he never read anything…he only spoke extemporaneously. He spoke for a few minutes and then he expected the audience to respond with comments or questions or whatever they wanted to…and then he would sit down and shut up and he would not budge…until somebody said something. You would feel like you were gonna explode until somebody began to have dialogue with him. Now my theory about this practice was that he felt that psychoanalysis was about emotional experience and that the great danger in psychoanalytic writings, and lectures, and seminars was that people lost touch with their emotional experience and got into
some dissociated intellectualized state with which he was determined not
to collude.

JoAnn   In what way does you practice analysis today reflect your analysis with
Bion?

Jim    One of the things that Bion was very sensitive to throughout the analysis
was the danger of an analysand or supervisee imitating their analyst or
supervisor…or for that matter, Freud, or Klein, or anybody. For him being
an analyst meant discovering the psychoanalyst within you. It’s like a
fingerprint. He forewarned me that in his experience it might take 2 or 3
years after I’d completed analysis and supervision to find myself as an
analyst—not in a static sense—but in an unfolding sense.

I don’t think about theory when I am practicing analysis in a session, or
almost never, what I find myself thinking about are my own emotional
responses to what has been said or done, and what it evokes or provokes in
me. Another thing I learned from Bion, that I find very useful is the
importance of respecting and appreciating the complexity of emotional
life. In this mode I can hear the different voices within the personality that
may be in the room at any given moment, and, as a result can try to
address the ones that seem to be the most urgently in need. In addition, I
learned to respect the full cast or ensemble of all the voices. This gives the
person a sense of the complexity of themselves. He would say something
like, even though psychoanalysis may be the most thorough on-going
instrument for understanding and observing the human psyche, it has
barely scratched the surface.

JoAnn   Did Bion ever talk directly in a session about religious experience with
you?

Jim    He would boil down the language of religion to describe the experience
that he felt was of fundamental importance. He talked about the evidence
for religion being very strong suggesting that it was fundamental human
need.

JoAnn   Are there things you personally found lovable or especially difficult about
Bion.

Jim    I found his emotional honesty profoundly moving and touching. I also
admired his courage not only in a session, but particularly in the writing of
his books. Initially I would get so furious with his writing that I would
literally throw the book away because I couldn’t stand the frustration and
consternation that I felt. However, I stuck with it, because it had a unique
affect on me that I had not had in reading any other book. I found that
when I worked at his writings my mind became open to such new
intuitions that the struggle became very, very worth the effort. Reading Bion had a very profound effect on my life. I discovered something that made the practice of analysis feel extremely different. It felt wholesome but it was much scarier. I would be very frightened at the start of a session about what I would have to confront; would I be able to stand up to it and would I be able understanding it. I realized that if I could just get through the session and avoid saying something crazy, or faint, or get up and run out of the room this will have been a successful session.

**JoAnn** What did it feel like when you finished your analysis with Bion.

**Jim** I felt like I could continue as an analyst and not do violence to myself or somebody else.

**JoAnn** One of the things that Bion says helps to avoid this is gaining the capacity for alpha function. Was that a palpable thing for you?

**Jim** Yes, I could feel my experiences and stay with them. This brought growth for me and if I didn’t grow, my patients weren’t growing. This is a very underestimated notion of Bions... the importance of “is growth occurring,” and if growth is not occurring, then something is awry.

**JoAnn** What about intuition in the analysis and the growth of intuition?

**Jim** I remember the scariness of beginning to experiment with that and the reward of doing so, and the growing and developing faith in it. At the same time I couldn’t yield to the temptation to believe I was a mind reader or omniscient. I realized that a major percentage of the time it’s extremely valuable...though sometimes it’s off.

**JoAnn** Did he talk about intuition explicitly? I think he does in some of his writing.

**Jim** It was clear he was using it. I remember an interpretation that got me thinking. He cited the evidence as he usually did, and I remember saying well, “I can see why you say that, and believe that it’s probably true, but I just can’t feel it.” And he said, “Well it may the sort of thing you experience with an ant.”

**JoAnn** What about the termination?

**Jim** I worked with him for five years, and at that point we both felt that the zest and the growth in the analysis had slowed down and yet I felt there was a hell of a lot more I needed to do, so I said “well, what about my wife taking my hours.” He agreed that we would experiment with that and
so within two months I had gradually cut down from my four hours per week, and she began to go two, and I went two.

**JoAnn** Did you ever regret giving up your hours to her? Was that hard in the beginning?

**Jim** It wasn’t as I felt that she was able to make better use of it than I was. Also and she was not hesitant to share her experience with me and I learned through her.

**JoAnn** What books or articles that Bion wrote would you recommend to beginners?

**Jim** I think each person will have to discover that for themselves...where does it resonate with your emotional experience, and when you read Bion, or for that matter as far as I’m concerned any analytic literature, what is the emotional experience that the person is writing about? Now Bion actually gave up trying to describe it, and said he didn’t feel he could do that, but he did feel that he could evoke the emotional experience in the reader that he was trying to communicate. And hence, the painfulness of reading Bion is that he’s trying to evoke what it was actually like when he worked with his analysands.

Read Bion, but the only way you are going to grow from this will be if you concomitantly read yourself. Also it’s useful to have a dialogue with Bion in your mind. Often there are multiple meanings in what he’s trying to communicate, and it’s important to tolerate the complexity, not knowing, the confusion, the doubt and the uncertainty, etc. So, its an exercise, you’ve got to really work emotionally when you’re reading Bion, and resist the temptation to do too much intellectual work.

**JoAnn** My personal preference is *Second Thoughts*; that is what I started with. The articles are short and immediately clinically relevant and you don’t have to read all of what came before, to get it.

**Jim** And I would say of the pieces in *Second Thoughts* (1) the paper ‘On arrogance’ is especially interesting.

**JoAnn** How about ‘The theory of thinking’?

**Jim** ‘Attacks on Linking’ is good especially the part of that paper that’s on normal projective identification. The papers we have mentioned are all in *Second Thoughts*, but it’s better to find what speaks to you.

**JoAnn** What do you think is important in Bion’s writing that gets ignored?

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1 Bion W.R. (1967). *Second Thoughts*, London: Karnac
Jim I think the importance of growth is important. Bion had a realistic epistemology and he used this to help me in the very practical way of having and learning from my emotional experience so that I could become myself. His catch phrase ‘learning from experience’ can get people into a head-trip. If this happens you can lose the focus on your own emotional experience in the experience of your encounters with others.

JoAnn It seems to me that learning from experience is the thing that helps one get away from omnipotence.

Jim I think speaking from one’s heart and the appreciation of the complexity of psychic life at any given moment; those are some of the things that I think aren’t often inadequately appreciated about what he’s trying to call our attention to.

JoAnn What do you think Bion meant by “the language of achievement;” what was your understanding of that?

Jim Oh, to me that was one of the more important practical things he uttered. It refers to “what is the kind of thinking that leads to being oneself.”

JoAnn Can you give us an example?

Jim Well, I remember one of the things that one of my classical supervisors told me is that, “before you make an interpretation, you have to be sure that you are correct.” I thought, “man I would never make an interpretation if I had to be sure I was correct…I’m never sure I’m correct.

I went to a lecture during the “Kleinian Wars” in which there were Kleinian analysts and Ego Psychology analysts having a panel discussion and after that, I had a dream that these men were having a fistfight, a brutal fistfight and I told Bion my dream, and Bion said “I think you’d like for me to make an interpretation about what this means about you, and not take your experience last night seriously.

JoAnn I want to ask you to say something about Bion’s idea about psychoanalytic training.

Jim Well, I was at the time developing a training program in psychoanalytic psychotherapy at the Rice Davis child study center that was modeled after the Tavistock training program in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. I went to talk to Bion about his ideas about psychoanalytic education and boy, were his ideas radical. I asked him if he would come speak to our faculty

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about this and he was very reluctant. However, he did agree, but then he called me and said “no, I’ve changed my mind, I don’t want to do that…they won’t listen to me.”

He felt that the training schools should list a bunch of core concepts that the trainee would be expected to learn about before they applied for graduation. Then they could learn about them in whatever way they chose. He thought that the Institute should invite people to teach what they were interested in teaching. However, he said it should be very clear that there was no guarantee that anybody would show up for the instructor’s class. He felt there should be no requirement that anyone should take a seminar with an instructor if they didn’t want to. He thought a seminar should never be more than four weeks long with at least four week breaks in between seminars.

He was cagey about the mandating of a training analysis. He wasn’t explicit but, reading between the lines, it seemed that he thought it should be a personal analysis by an analyst that the candidate chose for him/herself. He didn’t even have a fixed opinion as to when it should be started in relation to the training time or how many hours should be required. He was very matter of fact about everything involved with training. When I asked him specific questions, to let me see what he was reacting against, he said “I would suggest you read Sigmund Freud’s letter to Salome about training.”

JoAnn What did he say to you on his ideas about the psychoanalytic establishment?

Jim He thought that the psychoanalytic establishment was in danger of crushing the life out of psychoanalysis. He thought that one was needed, but that there was always a danger that it would not nurture psychoanalysis but would kill it, squelch it, stunt it.

JoAnn What were his ideas about the relationship between the mystic and the group?

Jim He thought that the group needed the mystic, that in his terms is a synonym for genius (4) that can think thoughts about things that haven’t been seen that way before, and then communicate them to the group. As a result of this, the group can see what is wholesome and useful. He thought that this was a fundamental human need.

JoAnn Did you get any impression of how Bion’s experience in the First World War affected his writing and personal life?

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3 See Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salome letters (1972) New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanivich
4 See Bion W.R. (1970) *Attention and Interpretation*, pp 64-75 London: Karnac
Jim

He was profoundly affected. I was impressed by hearing of the experience of a college professor who used Bion's war diary as a text for an English class. He felt that the reason that Bion was able to write in the way he did was because of his unique personal experience, particularly in the First World War, but also the trauma of leaving his parents in India when he was eight to be enrolled in an English private school. These incidents created profound loneliness and trauma, and his life's work was to try and turn that to good account so as not to stay completely stuck in a state of PTSD. Despite this, I think Bion never got over the First World War (5).

JoAnn

I mean, some things are too big to integrate, but he did make use of it.

Jim

Yes. You can see how some of the imagery that Bion uses in his writing came from those early traumatic experiences...whether it was in his childhood or in the First World War.

This is particularly evident in Memoirs of the Future (6). It’s written like a play with different characters speaking different lines, but it’s obviously written by Bion. I think it was his attempt to illustrate psychic life by describing an internal dialogue amongst the different characters that are internal parts of the self who are in occasional dialogue, but more frequently cacophonic miscommunication.

My own feeling is that Bion probably wrote the book to make a sort of a time capsule for when psychoanalysis had been destroyed by the establishment. What was inside could then be re-discovered at some future date.

Audience

My understanding is that Bion was a fairly good watercolorist...and I’m wondering if he ever spoke about how the creative process informed the analytic process.

Jim

He uses the metaphor of a painter creating a canvas in a number of places, particularly in the book on transformations (7). He, I don’t think writes about his own experience as an artist...he certainly felt that aesthetes, mythologists, and theologians had a lot to teach psychoanalysts if we’d listen.

In light of the above, he felt that using psychiatric diagnosis and the idea of psychopathology, even though it may have it’s place...is potentially, extremely hurtful. When we give a person a diagnosis we obliterate what a schizophrenic or other seriously disturbed people have to teach us.

7 Bion W.R (1965) Transformations, pp1-6, London:Karnac
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**Audience** I’m interested in your remarks about what he said about training…and when you said that analysts would have classes but there would be no mandatory attendance and I was just thinking about what would happen if we did that. So, is the reason why he would do that is so that the analyst would be in the same place of anxiety as the candidate? In other words…they would both be in the same soup…the analyst would have to sit there and wonder if anyone would show up?

**Jim** Well, I think that was part of it, but I think it also had to do with his idea that analysts-in-training were adults, and needed to be responsible for themselves and not be infantilized.

**Audience** Because mandatory attendance certainly takes care of the analysts anxiety!

**JoAnn** Takes care of the analyst’s ego…

**Jim** As well as the analysand’s or student’s responsibility for how and what they are going to learn…and what’s useful…to be able to use their own experience in deciding how they learn best.

**Audience** Tagging along with that I wondered when you said the candidate presents their work in the end…what constitutes their work? What is that they would present?

**Jim** Implicit in it would be how they worked clinically.

**Audience** So, present a case?

**Jim** Yes. And then whatever theoretical approach they thought relevant. However, what seems most important would be “how does this person make emotional contact and facilitate psychic growth and development.

**Audience** When we were in school many years ago, we did a Tavistock group. Are those still around…is anyone still doing those? What’s the feeling about these now?

**Jim** You know its something I’ve not had very much experience with, and in this country A.K Rice gets the credit, even though the ideas are very similar to Bion’s ideas on experiences in groups. These notions are widely used by industrial psychologists all over the world. They’re particularly used with upper-management and mid-management to help them to see where they break down as a work group and deteriorate into basic assumption groups. When they understand how this process works they can then take that experience back to the work place.

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8 Experiences in groups
Audience: I was interested in your phrase about the human encounter...and it made me think about your evolution as an analyst and I was just curious about your thoughts about using the couch and number of sessions versus face-to-face sessions in your work.

Jim: My belief based on my experience is that there is certainly nothing magical or sacrosanct about using the couch...or even the frequency of sessions. On the other hand many people find that lying on the couch makes it easier to pay attention to what’s going on in their own psyche-soma. I think that part of it is that they are not distracted by the analyst and the analyst is not worried or distracted by being watched. So I’m much freer to move and use my own body when I’m hearing a session with somebody on the couch because I’m not worried about my impact on them. However, there are some people who do not find the couch useful or efficacious. I am a child analyst so in that setting being looked at doesn’t bother me. Kids do all kinds of things...they stand on their head, they crawl under the couch! Yes, there’s a freedom that comes from my having been trained as a child analyst and having practiced that way for a significant period of my career.