

BOOK REVIEW

Chaos and Control: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Unfolding Creative Minds

By Desy Safán-Gerard
Routledge, London and New York
280 Pages

Reviewed by Beverly Feinstein and Isaac Malitz

This remarkable book about creativity, the artistic process, and the psychoanalytic treatment of creative individuals is the only one that we know of written by an artist who is also a psychoanalyst capable of explaining complex psychoanalytic concepts in terms understandable to the general public. From the perspective of a psychoanalyst Dr. Safán-Gerard is able to truly understand the dilemmas confronting those of us who struggle with artistic expression and to provide a skillful melding of research, clinical material and personal vignettes that can markedly expand the clinicians awareness of the artist's emotional experience. In an incisive and insightful way, she covers such issues as the role of destructiveness and reparation in the creative process, the ability to hold onto the anxiety-provoking experience of "not knowing", the essential dialogue with the artistic object, the alternation of spontaneous, "chaotic" periods of expression with reflective control, the development of passion and absorption, and the origins of creative block.

We believe that even outside of a clinical setting, this book can be directly useful to artists. Although addressed primarily to a clinician, the book is largely comprehensible and appealing to a layperson. And it addresses some specific, practical issues encountered by artists in their work. The artist learns that psychological difficulties are an intrinsic part of the artistic work and that if he/she is confused, upset, experiences strange thoughts or emotions, this may not indicate "personal psychological defects" so much as be a byproduct of the work he is doing. This alerts the artist that a part of his artistic activity is to be an observer and manager of such issues rather than responding with panic or anger.

The book enumerates some specific psychological issues that frequently arise in artistic work, e.g., creative blocks, destructive attitudes toward ones work

or oneself, depression, manic behaviors, grandiosity, disturbing “accidents”, helplessness, engulfment, fear of failure and dissolution. It is normalizing and calming to see these issues recognized and described.

Dr. Safan-Gerard provides fascinating examples of how these issues can be intertwined in a positive way with the work. For instance in musical composition, it is possible for a composer to channel destructive impulses into multiple iterations of a work (create/destroy, create/destroy, create/destroy,) where each iteration is produced with calmness and confidence because the composer feels a certain mastery of the overall process. Furthermore, sometimes the composer finds ways of expressing the interaction of create/destroy in the final composition.

A large part of the book is a detailed narrative of some of the Dr. Safan-Gerard’s own creative work. This demonstrates how psychological issues are frequently part of the work; they are not a noise factor. They are a phenomenon to be observed and managed, and can be integral to the actual creative result. The author allows the reader to “look over her shoulder” in examples of her creative work, providing specific examples both in narrative and with illustrations of her paintings of how issues arise and are managed. We become aware of how much the work activity of the artist, as compared to the work product, is a rich and rewarding pursuit.

For all of these situations, Dr. Safan-Gerard provides a cogent and coherent psychoanalytic framework for clinical work with creative patients that is of significant value to the practicing therapist, as well as concepts that are applicable to the creativity of the psychoanalyst. This volume is thoroughly researched and provides many sources for further reference for those who are interested.

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