



Book Review

A Starving Madness: Tales of Hunger, Hope and Healing in Psychotherapy by Judith Ruskay Rabinor. Gurze Designs & Books, 2002.

Reviewed by Francis Rumsey

When I offered to review this book, I only knew the title and subtitle. ‘Sounds interesting’, I thought. The emotive title aroused my curiosity in what I assumed would be a book of case studies about psychotherapy clients’ needs, hopes and healing. When the book arrived I realised what I had let myself in for. Somehow I had failed to read the messages contained in the title that (as I now realised) had been screaming: “this is a book about the treatment of eating disorders”. Judith Ruskay Rabinor, the author, is a New York clinical psychologist who specialises in eating and body image disorders, and ‘A Starving Madness’ tells the stories of a number of her therapeutic encounters.

And yet, of course, I had been right at the outset. As the stories unfold the reader is reminded that eating disorders are nearly always only symptoms of inner pain, isolation, conflict and need. Eating, or not eating, is a means of exercising control in one area of life where that is possible, perhaps in order to hide from, displace or mask something deeper. Rabinor tells her tales with considerable sensitivity and warmth, demonstrating the way in which her therapeutic relationships have developed, how she has been affected by them and how her clients have changed or resisted change. She does not hide her clients’ failures and delights in their successes, making this a rewarding book

to read – showing, as it does, the many remarkable facets of clients that present with such difficulties.

Her therapeutic style seemed at times a little didactic for my present tastes (for example: “I explained to her that while talking usually does help us open up to our emotions, it can have the opposite effect and distract us from them...” “If we can tap into our physical sensations”, I said, “we give ourselves the chance to unlock and access old pain and let go of it.” Or “Everyone has bad habits”, I told Mia. “The good news is that habits can be changed. Did you ever bite your nails?”). However there is much of interest in this book and in addition to her description of more conventional approaches the author tells, in the last chapter, of her experiences with using EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing) as a tool in psychotherapy. At first sceptical of the approach, she seems to have become persuaded of its value as an ingredient in the recipe that led to one client’s process of change. Fascinating stuff.

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