It has always been difficult to disentangle the role of therapist from that of
the educator or the spiritual guide, and consequently to differentiate
psychotherapy from the teaching of vague lessons about social or personal
reality or even from spiritual indoctrination. Freud’s famous phrase about
psychotherapy as “Erziehung zur Realität” (reality education) and Jung’s
hope that analysis might fill the void left by the decline of religion,
together with the ever present Socratic injunction to “know thyself”—
which at times has been interpreted to read: “know thy Self”—all have
helped to bring about a fertile confusion about the possible dimensions of
psychotherapy. The present debate about a so-called transpersonal psy-
chology has further extended the limits of what at one time was thought to
be the proper function of psychotherapy.

I hope to clarify the possible meaning of both the personal and the
transpersonal within a contemporary reading of a psychoanalysis that by
now owes an immense debt to both phenomenology and linguistics.
Within this context I distinguish three essential stages in the progressive
humanization of the child.

The first stage would be that in which the child makes a first appear-
ance in nature. Many cultures distinguish the child’s biological birth from
his entrance into the human community. The Aowins of southwest Ghana
do not accord a social status to a newborn child until eight days after
delivery, when he is introduced to the community, given a name, and
scarred on his left cheek in the manner characteristic for the tribe. If the
child dies prior to this social introduction, it is considered not a social
event and no public commemoration takes place. Writes Victoria Ebin:
“Here, as in many societies, the mark which the child receives both seals
his identity and signifies his right to share in a common heritage. By
acquiring a name he has acquired a permanent place among the Aowins
and his social significance is writ upon his body” (1979, p. 35).

We may thus postulate a second stage of development, which we will

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characterize as personal because it indicates the child’s first concrete appearance within the social order, when he is assigned a social identity or mask (persona) in the form of a scar and a name. The personal makes its appearance here as a kind of marking, writing, or cutting that draws the natural within the social realm. Where the prepersonal presents us with a natural and virginal expanse, untouched by ax or plow and as yet unresponsive to cultural life, the personal presents itself as a landscape under cultivation and, as such, fully integrated into village life.

From the position of the child, the family or the clan constitutes the first social matrix within which it becomes possible to accept the mark and the mask, and where the wounds inflicted by culture may heal into scars that are proudly worn as signs of distinction. Within this schema the third or transpersonal realm marks the final stage of the process of humanization, in which the maturing adult reaches beyond the confines of familial life in order to be effective within the large domain of cultural and intercultural relations. At this stage the young man or woman is no longer [merely a subject] of culture but becomes instead a creative participant in the process of the transmission of a heritage and in the succession of social functions. If the personal makes us subject to inscription, the transpersonal opens for us a terrain of writing and cultivating in the fullest sense.

Where, within this schema, do we place the emancipatory function of the therapist? Is his function analogous to that of Socrates, who drew his adolescent students out of the narrow confines of their familial upbringing in order to invite them into the wider context of a reflective cultural world? Is the function of therapy fully analogous to that of the university, and is its mission confined to informing, to teaching the art of judging, to opening new horizons of cultural activity for the young? Or is therapy’s function perhaps a more humble one, confined to helping to effect the completion of the first traumatic transition from a state of nature to one of culture? Insofar as psychoanalysis places the familial drama of Oedipus at the center of its concerns, it appears that the therapist, far from playing the role of the wise man or guru, takes up the humble function of familial life. He does this by creating a new context within which it becomes possible for the patient to overcome his resistance to the mark and the mask, and to get past his incestuous longing for a virginal, paradisical, undifferentiated whole into which all the painful differences of the world can be made to disappear. The work of therapy resembles the work of the family insofar as it seeks to mark the patient, and, through an acceptance of this marking, to leave open to him the wider circle of humanity. Where the master’s function is to draw the adolescent into the wider world of culture, the therapist has the more humble task of leading the patient