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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

## Dignity, Humanity, and Trust: Ongoing Gifts from Donna Orange

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Donna Orange once wrote: “I try to live my clinical life between two values, for my patients and for myself: basic human kindness, and restoration of dignity.”<sup>1</sup> These two priorities are perhaps the secret to understanding her long and illustrious career, and the reason why she was attracted to challenging and rich interdisciplinary projects like Cura Psychologia. This brief article is not an effort to eulogize her beautiful life, which was full of compassion and care. The following will also not attempt any kind of summary of her significant body of work. What I will offer here is a testimonial to Donna’s collaborative contributions to the Cura Psychologia project, and some indications about the work ahead of us if we are to follow her lead into the future of interdisciplinary work at the convergence of philosophy, psychology, and theology. As hard as it is to speak of her in the past tense, given the recent and tragic nature of her passing, she has left before us the vital task of continuing very specific and purposeful interdisciplinary work. The thread that holds together this patchwork reflection is Orange’s hope for *humanizing* work in both academic and professional endeavors. Throughout her life and career, she saved her most dynamic creativity and her most fierce critiques for anything that might stand in the

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1 Donna M. Orange, “Is Ethics Masochism? Or Infinite Ethical Responsibility and Finite Human Capacity,” in *The Ethical Turn: Otherness and Subjectivity in Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, ed. David Goodman and Eric Severson (Routledge, 2016), 71.

way of the central task of humanization. In this brief response to the great many words that Donna left to me and to us, I focus on two themes that articulate the heart of her contributions to the Cura Psychologia program: fallibility and the hermeneutics of trust.

For Orange, the first obstacles to the great task of humanizing are found not in the complexities of the world or in the lived experience of others, but in the many ways that the words and face of the other might be distorted or contorted by the disposition of the self. She shook her head in consternation while I was explaining something about Emmanuel Levinas, her favorite philosopher—not because she disagreed, but because she was determined to see these ideas expressed plainly and clearly. Donna was relentless in this insistence that we must make plain the power of the message about humaneness, compassion, dignity, and love. Here, and everywhere, I hope to honor this charge.

### **Attitude of Fallibility**

A perennial problem in academia, and the many professional fields impacted by academic thinking, relates to the problem of specialization. When people specialize in a particular field, they gain increasing confidence in their understanding. This tracks with our everyday experience of the world: we grow more confident the more we drive cars, use cast iron pans, or play the piano. However, in the academy this specialization tends to correlate with a declining ability to listen to the expertise of others, or imagine the fruitful interplay between ideas as they fall differently on diverse ears. Academics often attend conferences where they meet with mostly likeminded people, and then bicker—sometimes bitterly—over miniscule details within their shared discipline. This results in a hardening of opinion and a general indifference to the work being done elsewhere. From its inception, the Cura Psychologia project has opposed the tendency of academics to labor in these “silos,” insisted on the hard work of open dialogue, and hoped that something fruitful would emerge from the experiment. When we first met to brainstorm about the project, Orange emphasized that we centralize our focus on academic humility. She called this an “attitude of fallibility.” Without this attitude, Donna was certain that the other person’s story would never be heard, let alone addressed responsibly. Such an approach to the other person is a fundamentally humanizing practice. The story of the other is free to unravel the understanding of the one who listens.

To cultivate this attitude of fallibility we must hold “our theories lightly.”<sup>2</sup> There is something complex at work in this concept of holding lightly to our frameworks, themes, diagnoses, and comprehensions of the other. We must enter into a conversation with the capacity to be surprised—certainly by what we may hear, but more importantly by the inadequacies of our hearing. The most important work of interpretation happens before one hears the message, in the labor of preparation and self-examination. This preparatory labor is not itself a first-work, but a mode of responsibility for the other person, which is already afoot when one meets the other person. There is no human moment *prior* to responsibility. Hermeneutics—the habits and practices of interpretation—is called upon to meet the demand for care and aid.

Among the many challenges left to us by Donna Orange is the ongoing injunction to be honest with ourselves about what is actually being asked of us when we encounter another person. As a psychologist, Donna understood this latent demand of the other person to be an acute and powerful burden in the context of psychoanalysis. As a philosopher, she found resources in the work of Levinas to understand and articulate the way a person might endure the weight of unbounded responsibility. A word Donna often used for this encounter, particular in the context of psychoanalysis, was *undergoing*. To think “with the other and [undergo] the situation with him”<sup>3</sup> is to stand beneath the burden that the other person carries, and the armor one might wear to protect oneself from this experience is risky and fraught. The key is to take up ideas and frameworks loosely, forever holding the tools and ideas gently, constantly aware of the deep possibility of their inadequacy for the task. Is such an undergoing a form of masochism? Donna stridently refuted this suggestion with a powerful essay in the book *The Ethical Turn: Otherness and Subjectivity in Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. She wrote: “suffering without ego, without intention, with sincerity, does not seek pain, it simply suffers it for the sake of the other. To surrender is not to seek pain or punishment.”<sup>4</sup>

Fallibility, for Donna, also involves a willingness to know one’s limitations, and to recognize that the summons to responsibility in the suffering of the other person does not necessarily make one equipped to help. She

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2 Donna M. Orange, *Emotional Understanding: Studies in Psychoanalytic Epistemology* (The Guilford Press, 1995), 51.

3 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Seabury Press, 1975), 288. Also See Donna M. Orange, “For Whom the Bell Tolls: Context, Complexity, and Compassion in Psychoanalysis,” *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2006): 14.

4 Orange, “Is Ethics Masochism?,” 70–71.

often warned new clinicians about the tendency to think that they are the right person to meet the needs of any and every client, as this may itself be an egoic failure of responsibility to help the suffering other find resources and aid. My fallibility raises twin risks: I can fail by holding too tightly to what I know—and therefore fail to listen with humility and openness—or I can fail by presuming that I am capable of meeting every need in every other. In both cases, Donna summons us to embrace our fallibility and keep it before us in all things.

### **Hermeneutics of Trust**

Without questioning the importance of doubt, or the science of inquiry based on wariness and suspicion, Donna finds resources in Hans-Georg Gadamer to propose a humble and open approach to dialogical conversations. Drawing from Gadamer, Donna proposes that a certain type of conversation leads toward deeper and more complex understanding. She referred fondly and often to a Gadamerian theme: “we can understand what the other says only by taking it as the answer to some question, a question that we need to find and comprehend”<sup>5</sup> Such an approach turns upside down the “hermeneutics of suspicion”<sup>6</sup> and puts trust first. She advocated for “approaching the other prepared to learn from the other”<sup>7</sup> For Donna, a hospitable response to the other person is based on a disposition of listening, trust, and care, and is founded on an obligation that cannot be expressed finitely. Our interpretations may be wrong, and we may be misled by the other person, but the duty to provide hospitality both supersedes the project of knowing and provides the conditions for genuine openings to understanding.

Kindness and hospitality are not procedural or performative, but are modes of response aimed at the restoration of dignity. Donna often suggested that these dispositions are required and immediate responses to the suffering of the other, and that reflection and theorizing come *later*. The restoration of dignity, which is a foremost goal of the psychoanalyst, originates from trust rather than suspicion. In both the psychoanalytic and philosophical worlds that she traversed, Donna pointed out that one is hard-pressed to find extensive discussions about hospitality, kindness, the restoration of dignity, and the importance of humanizing the other. Leaning on Gadamer and Levinas, she admonished anyone whose theory would run out ahead of the encounter with others. The first thing to do

5 Donna M. Orange, *The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Clinical Practice* (Routledge, 2011), 19.

6 See Orange, *The Suffering Stranger*, 26–31.

7 Orange, *The Suffering Stranger*, 19.

is to listen humbly and openly to your neighbor. Nobody knows for sure what comes next, but she proposed with dogged resolve that hospitable listening comes first.

All of this made Donna the perfect thought-leader for the Cura Psychologia experience. Donna and I shared the title “Senior Instructor” for the program, but we often laughed at the idea that our task was *instructive*. Our goal for each convening was to carve out a space for humble conversation on the shared task of creating a more humane and interdisciplinary approach to psychology. In the interdisciplinary work required to humanize and dignify the labors of psychologists, philosophers, and theologians, we sometimes found ourselves in profound and fundamental disagreement about *ideas*. We arrived at each convening from academies that are intentionally or unintentionally crafted to encourage us to work in silos, and as scholars trained to defend militantly the arguments, thinkers, and academic territory that we inhabit. This arrangement has deprived all disciplines of mutual nourishment, and facilitated dehumanizing thought and practice. On Donna’s inspiration, our work as “instructors” involved shaping a space predicated on the respect for humanizing discourse, on the fundamental importance of consent-based interactions, on the responsibility to hold loosely to our hard-won opinions and perspectives, and on the dignifying practices of trust and care.

And now, suddenly and before our work in this project was even complete, Donna is gone. Yet the challenge she offered, and the echo of her fiercely generous words, are resounding. Listen first, with humility and unbounded responsibility. We must work hard to have ideas that can be held confidently, but without standing *behind them*. The ideas are helpful not before, but after the words of the other are received in hospitable care. Donna’s work points us toward a future in which the testimony of the other, and my responsibility to attend to it, always has the first word. Such a future is incredibly unlikely in a world full of reductive and dehumanizing encounters. But perhaps the impossibility of such a future is all the more reason to heed her invitation to work for it.

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