

2023 Foreword to My Theory Papers

Natalia A. Shulgina*

I dedicate my theory papers to Rev. Dr. Rodney J. Hunter, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Theology at Emory University, who first introduced me to the wondrous world of CPE.

In reviewing my theory papers for publication, I cannot help but notice the gap between the “there and then” of their original writing and the “here and now” of my reading the papers today. The student vignettes and strands of theory, so carefully woven and rewoven, which once felt so certain and complete, now beg for revision and reconsideration. There is one place in particular that stirs unease: the JC vignette in my Personality Theory paper. As I read my own account of interacting with JC in supervision, I am struck by how disrespectful, demeaning, and racially offensive JC’s words seem to me today. I feel a deep awakening of anger at allowing a student to address me in such a way. I feel profound sadness as I think of the many layers of my personal story and patterns of social conditioning that trained me to silently accept and habitually ignore interracial disparagement. Today, over two years since that early supervisory encounter, I wish I could go back—not merely to rewrite the vignette but also to reenter and redefine the relationship! And with that comes a burst of new energy and hope because the intensity of my disquiet, the depth of my anger, and wisdom of my sadness are signs of my growth.

My reading today is different because my theoretical understanding and supervisory practice are different. No longer do I see trauma-informed supervision as centered on a warm, emphatic connection, and unconditional nurturing; now I see it as including the work of setting clear, healthy boundaries and challenging conduct and communication that wound the dignity of human persons. No longer do I understand the theological virtue of forbearance as “putting up with everything” in the name of educational exploration; now, my forbearance is informed by my commitment to give voice to pain and speak out against injustice. Finally, I now see supervisory authority and power differently; for me, the core lesson has been not so much in the areas of preventing the abuse of power but in the steep curve of learning to recognize and daring to use my power.

As I look back on this turbulent encounter one more time, I nod in recognition. As in theory, as in learning, as in life, what we know is not static, and what we see depends on the people with whom we do the looking. As a person of color, a minority immigrant educator, I have changed—as a result of my certified educator candidate training and in the course of my co-journeying with other BIPOC and White educators—and I have committed to the slow work of healing our society. My place at the ACPE table of learning has changed me, and in a subtle yet real way, my own change is a seed of ACPE’s transformation. The dance of action, reflection, and new action continues . . .

* Natalia A. Shulgina is an ACPE Certified Educator Candidate and Pastoral Care Manager at UNC REX Healthcare in Raleigh, North Carolina. Email: natalia.shulgina@unchealth.unc.edu.