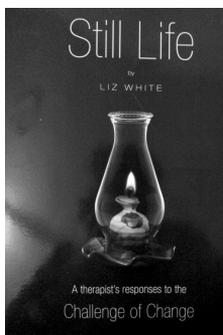


I HAVE CREATED THE UNIVERSE
TO MEET YOU
HERE I AM
TO EMBRACE YOU

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***Still Life: A Therapist's Responses to the
Challenge of Change***

By Liz White

Liz White, Toronto, Canada

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Reviewed by John Farnsworth

Still Life. It is a title that intentionally resonates with multiple meanings. As the author, Liz White, looks back over forty years as a practitioner, her reflection brings an extra resonance to her title. Now it alternates between stillness and activity, now between contemplation and still *choosing* life. Both experiences are central to the tapestry of perspectives she presents in a book that is part reflection, part working manual.

Liz White may not be a familiar name in this part of the world but she is highly respected in her native Canada and the northern hemisphere. I know, from first-hand experience, how she has won this reputation. I saw her wonderful, imaginative doubling and her robust enactment of counter roles at an international psychodrama conference some years ago. Her acuity, vitality and sensitivity have long stayed with me. All these qualities are present in this, her latest book. Here, she gathers together insights from a lifetime's work, offering a wealth of approaches all infused with the spirit of psychodrama.

The book itself is solidly grounded in sociometry but also embraces a diversity of other perspectives. They range from references to David Wallin's (2007)

Attachment in Psychotherapy, to emotional intelligence, Buddhism, meditation and mindfulness, bibliodrama and even as far as a chocolate chip cookie recipe. The recipe emerged from a sociometry exercise, *The View from Here*, where the three circle layout reminded the author of a chocolate chip cookie. The movement between text, illustration and exercise typifies the book as a whole, constantly intertwining reflection, action and commentary.

Still Life: A Therapist's Responses to the Challenge of Change is designed to unfold as both an arc of change and a trajectory of growth, spread over five sections. It moves from *Awakening to The Struggle with the Self, Holding On ... Letting Go and The Courage to be Authentic* and ends with an act of peace-making in *And What of the World?* Liz White brings these sections to life using an A4 format with large, clear diagrams that illuminate the central theme of a particular section. *Befriending our Defences* in Section Two is typical. Illustrated with a full-page diagram, it divides the circle of spontaneity into four quadrants, each one naming a strength and an associated defence. The Accommodator, for instance, is twinned with The Peacemaker and The Challenger with the Annihilator. Whilst psychodramatists might refer to these as coping or progressive roles, this is not the language the author draws on. Her language, however, hints at different approaches that have evolved in psychodrama from one part of the world to another.

The strength of this perspective is to concretise a role, or role cluster, and illustrate its use in action. In this case, it is achieved by clearly describing an extensive exercise and by using dialogue to bring it alive. This draws us into the action and then the exercise too. Similar practices appear throughout the book, often with imaginative and suggestive expansions. *The Five Faces of Catharsis*, for example, incorporates not just the familiar concepts of abreaction and integration but extends to three others, the catharses of inclusion, meaning and spirit. Each catharsis is illustrated by brief, effective vignettes.

Likewise, *Belonging and Becoming* provides a rich diagram that examines and enacts *The Group as Matrix*. In moving from the individual to the group, the chapter draws on the writer's earlier circle of spontaneity and her four defences, now integrating them with the slowly moving quadrants of the four seasons. Each of these is embraced as part of an evolving arc of group change. Group building gives way to group managing, then to confrontation and on to reflection as part of a cycle of the seasons. The cycle is renewed by a return to Spring, the fourth quadrant, linked here to inclusion and group building. The arc of change also facilitates constantly changing attention between the group and the individual, fitting for a practitioner who works both as therapist and group leader.

Change is a central theme in *Still Life*. Liz White describes how it was also central to the way the book was written. She discloses her own struggles with change (*Over My Dead Body*), particularly her experiences of empowerment and deepening identity through the collective feminism of the 1970s. She also

describes the way that writing this book has been an experience of change in its own right. “I had the idea that this would be the quiet reflection of an elder therapist’s life work, kind of nostalgic, a bit dated, sometimes quite helpful” (p.101). It was not to be. The book took on a life of its own, with her editor in the role of encouraging auxiliary. She finally reflects that, “I am not the person I was when I started writing this book”. Instead, all the currents of her life have mingled with the writing, “feeding into a realignment that has no name” (p.102). This reflective quality distinguishes the book from her earlier work, such as *The Action Manual* (2002). This was a stimulating, inventive and expansive group of exercises that offered practitioners a wealth of possibilities for training, investigation or enactment. *Still Life* does this as well. But, unlike *The Action Manual*, it is constantly infused with a spirit of reflection that invites the reader to engage with it and not simply put it into practice.

There is one last important note that echoes throughout the writing. It is articulated both in the group exercises, such as The Seasons of Mourning, and in the text. In both, there is recognition of personal endings, of loss and of the diminishing roles that Liz White confronts in herself at the outset. “It is challenging indeed to be writing about change at my age, seventy-eight at the time of writing” (p.3). The reader can hear her reach at this point for an accommodation, a “definitive final chapter that would wrap it for you readers”. It is not whether she achieves this that counts but her bravery in acknowledging it with us. Little wonder the book is called *Still Life*. As she comments, it is “a journey towards my still life: to what is life-giving, and getting rid of what isn’t” (p.3). The book stands as a living model of the author’s description, an enactment and an ongoing engagement with us and with her own arc of change.

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