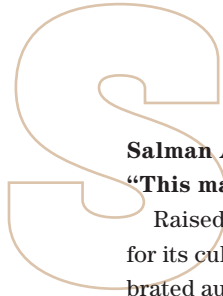


*Healing
with
Words*

Salman
Akhtar,
MD



BY KAREN L. BROOKS



Salman Akhtar decided on his epitaph long ago: “This man shall write no more books.”

Raised in Lucknow, a city in northern India renowned for its culture, Akhtar comes from a long line of celebrated authors on both sides of his family (a street in his hometown is named after his mother, his father published many acclaimed volumes of poetry, and the government of India recently issued a postage stamp bearing his uncle’s image). He inherited his relatives’ writing talent and has set a goal of publishing 100 books during his lifetime. At age 69, he is more than three-quarters of the way there.

Although Akhtar is not the only writer in his family, he is the only physician. By his last year of medical school in India, he had not yet found a specialty that felt quite right. Then, one day, he saw a sign.

“It said that Professor Narendra Nath Wig, MD, was presenting a lecture on poetry and psychodynamics. I thought, ‘How can a doctor be talking about poetry? That’s amazing,’” he recalls. “We’d had almost no psychiatry training in medical school. So I went, and I listened. And it became clear—I was going to be a psychiatrist.”

Akhtar finished his degree and applied for a residency with Wig, whose university took just two psychiatry residents per year. Nine young physicians applied, and their rankings were posted publicly on a board outside.

“I was number three. I stood there in tears. There was nothing else I wanted to do,” Akhtar says.

But a moment of serendipity changed everything. A man standing next to Akhtar saw his pain. His name was Ravi Berry, and he was second on the list. But he had also matched for two other residencies—ophthalmology and medicine—and kindly offered his slot with Wig to Akhtar.

“Ravi is a legend in my family. I owe my career to him. He went on to become an ophthalmologist, but many years later decided he actually was meant to be a psychiatrist. He moved to the U.S. and did a residency in Cincinnati, where he now practices.”

Akhtar himself came to the States right after his residency, as he wanted to be a psychoanalyst and there is no formal psychoanalytic training in India. He served



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another residency at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, followed by a fellowship at the Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia, where he now teaches.

A faculty member in Jefferson’s Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior since 1979, Akhtar is a renowned lecturer who has given presentations on every continent. “I take four or five international trips a year and try to get back to India at least twice. If I don’t go twice a year, it starts hurting. I am anchored there by an invisible rope,” he says.

In addition to the 77 books he has authored or edited (many of which have been translated into multiple languages), he has written more than 300 scholarly articles on topics such as forgiveness, regret, love, family, pets, personality disorders, psychoanalytic technique, film, immigration and culture. His portrait hangs in Jefferson’s DePalma Auditorium, and he has received many honors for his writing and teaching, most recently the 2012 Mary S. Sigourney Trust Award for distinguished contribution to the field of psychoanalysis.

For more than a decade, he has served as scholar-in-residence at Philadelphia’s InterAct Theatre Company, where he participates in post-show discussions on Sunday afternoons. He passed his enthusiasm for the humanities down to his children; his daughter, Nishat, is an artist and graphic designer, and his son, Kabir, is an Emmy-nominated television editor and director.

Akhtar recently sat down to discuss his life and work.



WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN PSYCHOANALYSIS?

After my chance meeting with Dr. Wig introduced me to psychiatry, there was another doctor who recommended I read a book by Sigmund Freud called *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. I picked it up and within two minutes knew this was what I was going to do.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS?

Most psychiatrists have about 100 patients and see them at sporadic intervals. My whole practice is currently nine patients. I see each of them often—usually three or four times a week. By the end of their careers, most psychoanalysts will have treated 45 patients total. Three or four will have had no response, then there will be 20 to 30 successes and 10 to 15 stunning successes. Psychoanalysis is like pregnancy; if the treatment takes, you can tell when you're in the third trimester. And then you and the patient decide together when it's time to part.

Also, to become a psychoanalyst, you must first undergo your own psychoanalysis, which can take years. For seven years, I went to a psychoanalyst five times a week.

WHAT QUALITIES ARE IMPORTANT FOR SOMEONE IN YOUR FIELD TO HAVE?

To be a good psychotherapist, a person must love children, animals and poetry. These three things require you to give up ordinary spoken language, listen between the lines and think in a different way. The ability to communicate in different ways is a good quality for any doctor to have.

OF ALL YOUR BOOKS, IS THERE ONE YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?

I couldn't answer that; the books I've written are like my children. There is one in particular that is total madness, though: the *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, published in 2009. I took every single term that exists in psychoanalysis and wrote its definition and history. It was handwritten at first—about 2,800 pages. Nobody in their right mind would ever do something like this!

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR PSYCHOANALYSIS?

At least in the U.S., psychoanalysis will not continue in its pure form because we have an increasingly hurried society with an emphasis on medication rather than communication. Freud used to see patients six times a week. When I was training, most psychoanalysts saw patients five times a week. Today, it is conventional to meet four times a week and is trending toward three times a week. This country and its lifestyle do not permit traditional psychoanalysis. However, psychotherapies informed by psychoanalytic theory shall endure. 🐼



Night Writer

Writing poetry is one of Akhtar's favorite pastimes—in fact, he has published eight collections of poems. "Most of my poems are written in one shot at 3 a.m. and hardly ever edited," he says. "I wake up with a poem and get it down immediately." Here are two of his works.

DEFENSES

I want a giraffe with a goat's neck, a dog that flies in the air.
A mountain of water, a lake filled with iron.
A tree that walks, a train that goes nowhere.
A soundless song, a whistling grave.
A four-year-old grandmother, a twelve-foot-tall son.
For only having these things will stop me from falling in love with you.

A WISH

I want to be like my dog.
To speak more with my eyes than with my tongue.
To be happy with a walk around the neighborhood.
To not need clothes.
To never be sleepless and always find it easy to wake up.
To have keen ears and loyal blood.
To own a dictionary of smells.
To grow old with all my favorite toys around.
And when the time comes,
to be put to rest by someone who truly loved me.