

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Challenge of Being Human

by Michael Eigen

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Opening to the Challenge

Reading Michael Eigen's new work, *The Challenge of Being Human*, his 26th book in an extraordinary opus of psychoanalytic texts, I am struck by how he holds up a mirror to my mind (with regard for the unknowable) that is simultaneously unflinching and compassionate with its open, honest questions and invitation to self-reflection. I am compelled and helped to go further because Eigen suggests to do just a bit at a time, to keep beginning, to not have to have all the answers, to open to what I am really, actually feeling and experiencing. In this spirit, reading Eigen is like having a therapy session with him.

The Challenge of Being Human aptly begins with a chapter on "Alternate infinities." Starting in this way, Eigen exhorts the reader to engage the alternate infinity that he presents in a Bionian/post-Bionian spirit, by oscillating between and among multiple dreams of the infinite. For Eigen, the infinite is very personal: he takes the time-honored, pointing-out instruction to "regard all dharmas as dreams, including this one" and helps me see this pointing-out in a new light. Dreams become infinities through his unique teachings that draw from Bion's O, Kabbalah's *ein sof*, and Zen's dharma. And Eigen helps me alternate my own experiences of practice in a number of infinities I am immersed in: composing lyrics and melodies, singing, Quakerism, yoga, Zen Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, Grotstein's and Eigen's Bionian/post-Bionian psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and dreaming. You may have different infinities that compel and fascinate you, but I believe Eigen's basic invitation to

alternate their disclosures is most helpful. In this process of alternation, dogma dislodges and truth opens up. In this way, psychoanalysis retains the integrity of its own lineage while opening in conversation and even in convergence with other lineages of spirituality, the arts, philosophy, and science.

In two of the chapters — “Psychopathy in everyday life,” and “Thinking about squirrels” — Eigen does the great service of helping me recognize and begin to own my grandiosity and self-abasement as what Grotstein might have called, after Bion, “the Siamese twins of delusion.” It is so much easier to point outwardly, at Trump and his minions, than to also recognize these facets of my own deluded mind. *Ouch!* And, what a relief! And, what a nightmare! Here, Eigen exhorts us to look into the way in which the roots of psychopathy — destructive urges that sacrifice others on the altar of the self — are present in our own mindstream and, in that emergent recognition, Eigen asks us, “How do tendencies to hurt another become relatively divorced from concern?” (p. 17). Eigen does not provide easy answers. Rather, he changes the frame of consideration by helping us to shift from a stance of pointing outwardly at the world stage of psychopathy and instead locate the dilemma of psychopathy in the very challenge of being human, where we are not exempt from the quandary of how to manage it.

In “Image, fullness, void” and “Affect images and states,” Eigen teaches us from within the living image in all its vividness, emptiness, openness, and felt sense, just as we might do in the consulting room with patients. Perhaps, like the prescient sphinx in its mythic capacity, Eigen rests at the threshold of a psychoanalytic dawning. With him as analytic guide and companion, the psychotherapeutic journey becomes one of an opening that is without end and that can begin again, and again. For instance, I find in my work with couples the presenting questions, “Will we stay together?” or “Will we break up?” become, “Who are we to one another, now?” — a question that keeps opening through the windows of past, present, and future.

In “Where are we going?” and “Everything human; hidden sprouts and psyche talk,” Eigen shares three different graduation talks he presented at psychoanalytic institutes. Here, he urges us to work with psychopathy just as we, as a field, began to work with

borderline states years ago with great success. As a malady of our time, he calls us to bring our considerable clinical capacities to the task of engaging with psychopathy, to see what healing impacts might emerge. What happens when we hold our own twin tendencies toward grandiosity and self-abasement clearly in mind, and work with them from the inside? Can such recognition within open or deepen a capacity to work with these dynamics when they are writ large in the psychopathic presentations of patients? Does such willingness to look within at these twins of delusion create a parallel willingness to work with these same dynamics as they appear in patients, rather than imagining that psychopathic patients are alien others beyond help?

Above all, in the chapters “Mini moments,” “Leaving and the impossible place,” and “Giving it a try,” Eigen’s poetic prose drawn from sessions with patients teaches us by example what an asymmetrical, non-dual, relational treatment that issues from, courses through, and then returns to the infinite can be. He shows us by example how to open a question further, how to listen from the matrix of interbeing, how to be oneself in the consulting room as an able, ethical guide. For instance, Eigen presents the following exchange, where therapist and patient are not clearly identified. Thus, in the reading, multiple interpretations of who is speaking to whom emerge, and isn’t that the way it is? Here is the exchange:

I once had a therapist that asked me repeatedly, “What do you want?” When I was away from him I kept asking myself, “What do I want?” One day, an answer came.

What do I want? What do I want? The voice doesn’t come from out there. A new thing about it is I hear myself in it. It’s my voice, too. It and I use each other as disguises. Infiltrate each other’s costumes. It’s me, too. I do hear my I in the voice, part of it. I’m part of the voice, in it, with it.

I hear your voice with your I in it echoing in my cave.

Sometimes it’s a magic cave. (p. 89)

Chapters titled “O, orgasm, and beyond,” “Just beginning: Ethics of the unknown,” and “Life kills, aliveness kills” bring the reader into direct contact with what Eigen has called “this double capacity two-in-one, one-in-two, a distinction-union structure that is made up of both dimensions, a paradoxical monism, a kind of psychic DNA/RNA” (p. 61). Eigen goes on to discern,

They can be more dissociated or fused and take myriad forms in spectrums of experience. Sometimes we feel the forms they take are inexhaustible and sometimes we feel trapped in rigid organizations. (p. 61)

In the face of such a challenge, how are we to cope, how are we to proceed? Eigen wonders with us, encouraging us to merely begin to look into this doubleness — this distinction-union structure of psychic life — and plants seeds of being able to go further. At the same time, Eigen suggests that we have barely begun to enter into our capacity to work with others and ourselves in this inherent dilemma and to take responsibility for our condition. He shows us how — at every turn in psychic life, in every instant — we are connected to others and how we are separate beings. We exist inside of one another, endlessly, and, at the same time, the one who exists is just uniquely herself. We cannot escape this paradox of distinction-union. It is a riddle of our nature, to be lived.

As Eigen brings us into contact with this immense and seemingly overwhelming challenge of being human, he does so from an equal challenge issuing from the ground and a goal of an ethics of care and the power of love. He invites us to embrace our profound sensitivities in the service of opening to the infinite, impossible profession. In so doing, possibilities open up; we might surprise ourselves. With Eigen as fellow traveler, we receive immense support along the way, helping us to open to the challenge of being human just a little bit more.

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