

## **NWRPA Newsletter July 2022**

### **Talking to a Brick Wall**

**Dr Mark Fisher**

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#### **Summary by Frank Kelley**

Mark Fisher's interest in psychoanalysis began whilst a research fellow at Oxford in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2000, after two decades working in the NHS Merseyside as professional lead in psychotherapy, he founded the Rodney Street Counselling and Psychoanalytic Practice, a clinical and supervisory practice in Liverpool and online.

For more about Mark's thoughts on brick walls see his blog at:  
<https://simonmfisher.blogspot.com>

On the joys and necessities of not hearing and misunderstandings.  
"I like talking to a brick wall – it's the only thing in the world that never contradicts me!" Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

*Talking to brick walls* is an everyday expression. It is a metaphor, unless we are psychotic we do not literally talk to walls. Mark saw a builder with a T-shirt saying *bring on the wall*. There is a TV game show called *The Wall* where contestants race through gaps in a wall.

A wall can be a metaphor for how language and words bind us together. Or how walls can differentiate and divide us.

Mark has a number of titles for this talk. One connects to when he was a kid and saw a black and white documentary where Winston Churchill built a rather wonky wall. Mark's association between Churchill and this wall lasted him a lifetime. This is the way associations work.

I am fond of the way Mark uses the classics of literature in his talks to us. In this case another of his titles relates to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. The play is set in Athens, and consists of several subplots that revolve around the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. One follows a group of six amateur actors, the mechanicals, rehearsing the play which they are to perform before the wedding, *the most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe*.

This is an ancient story which goes back to Ovid. A tragedy of two lovers in Babylon who want to meet regularly. This is not easy so they meet at a wall with a minute gap. They talk through the wall and decide to elope. Messages get mixed and they do not get to meet. The man commits suicide and the woman mourns and then kills herself. One actor plays the wall and the chink in the wall which allows the lovers to speak.

The mechanicals alter the play to make it more acceptable to an aristocratic audience and so as to not upset the ladies. In doing so they make the play innocuous and turn a tragedy into a farce. They invented a new genre of tragicomedy.

Another title relates to his earlier professional life in the NHS working with drug users and AIDS patients where he became disillusioned about his own empathy.

A young gay man talked about the recent fall of the Berlin Wall and Mark had empathy about fears of the Russians ruining healthcare. Three days later the staff on the ward greeted Mark as a hero with a wonderful process of empathy. The young man rediscovered a will to live and went home and tried to resume his life.

Mark thinks as a young man he was self centred and gullible and believed the staff view of him. The young man died after three months. Mark now thinks, and this is a good thing about being an elderly analyst, it was a delusion that his words were so profound that they turned this man's life around. What he thought was empathy was imagination and defensiveness hiding behind a wall of professionalism.

A signifier, a word, what is it for. They refer to other words. Interpretation is this kind of expansion which depends on other people. I have no control over how other people interpret my words. It is very difficult to fix words hence the failure to establish authoritarian rules about meaning.

Mark referred to our presentation in June by Paul Melia about the painter David Hockney. Hockney painted an empty chair which has grief and loss. This painting becomes a treasure house of signifiers.

We have little control over signifiers and this lack of control inevitably means loss and misunderstanding. For example in public information about the pandemic we were urged *follow the science*. So follow science, or follow medicine, or follow virology, or follow epidemiology, or follow the organisers. The public life of *follow the science* loses meaning.

In analysis the analysand produces signifiers in a chain. Freud's *fundamental rule*, of the analysand not censoring their thoughts and speech, mean the signifiers are not under control.

A metaphor is like saying one thing is something else. The loss of control when you speak means the words leave you and become common property.

There is a tremendous barrier between the conscious and the unconscious. This real barrier is a good thing and allows us to live our life. However if there are chinks or crumbles in our wall our words are not doing their demarcation job.

Analysis cannot mend our walls. But we can say yes I had too many expectations, or I did hate you, or I was too weak. We can allow the hidden parts of our world to become more evident and accessible.

**Thank you to Dr Mark Fisher.** It is a challenge and a pleasure to follow the winding path through his rich lived experience of psychoanalysis.