

Honoring the Invisible Guest: What Spirit Asks of the Therapist

A talk by Michael Geis, MD

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The relationship I have with my patients is a space where the reality of those other figures--from wherever they come, from whatever dimension they're coming from--can step in and be greeted hospitably by me--

Michael Geis

Introduction:

Michael Geis, a psychiatrist in private practice here in Santa Barbara, limits himself to long-term intensive psychotherapy integrating psycho-analytic and Jungian perspectives. He has lectured on Psychotherapy and the Soul at Pacifica Graduate Institute and at the University and Santa Barbara City College's Adult Education program. We are fortunate to have had him present Grand Rounds before; everybody loves his lectures. Please join me in giving Dr. Geis a warm welcome.

Michael: Thank you. I do this once a year and I'm always very excited to bring together what I've been thinking about over the previous year. Those of you who have heard me speak before will hear some familiar trends I've been thinking about for some time. I'm always thinking about what we do in long-term, intensive psychotherapy, which is what I do; I see most people for a year or two. In this talk, I'm going to look at psychotherapy from the eyes of the poets, because they help me use a different language about what we do in the therapeutic process. So, please bear with me. Czeslaw Milosz writes: *The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person, for our house is open. There are no keys to the door and invisible guests come in and out at will.*"

This is the topic of my talk today—the invisible guests.

The 12th Century poet Rumi, as translated by Coleman Barks, remarks on these guests in a poem called, "The Guest House." Let me share it with you because it picks up Milo's' theme.

The word "Guest," is quite a word. It has a long spiritual tradition of an invisible presence because it implies hospitality--are we going to be hospitable to the Guest, or not? Here's Rumi:

THE GUEST HOUSE

*This being human is a guesthouse,
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes as an
unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows
Who violently sweep your house empty of its
furniture.
Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight,
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
Meet them at the door, laughing, and invite them in.
That's my job, to invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.*

Now, what is this "beyond"? We're going to take a look at that. *Each has been sent as a guide from beyond*—what Rumi calls, *the Guest*. The other important concept, about being hospitable to the guest, is an empty circle. On one side of the circle is me, on the other side is my patient. Then there's this large space between where neither know which guests are coming in that day. This relational space is very alive; it's as if this is the true psyche. Psyche – it's a hard word to define.

Where do dreams come from? The interesting thing about that space when we're intimately involved with a patient is that this space becomes the psyche and then guests start appearing in it between us. Hold that thought for a moment. For me, it's a question of what I call "hospitality" towards the invisible *some things* trying to form in that space.

Now sometimes you're sitting in that space with a patient and it seems like nothing is happening. One of my favorite examples of that "nothing" is a poem by Stanley Kunitz called *What of the Night*. Here, the therapist is sitting in that space, waiting for some indication of the guest. The patient says, "This has been a horrible winter. I have been so lonely." Something about that word *winter* touches me. I feel *the guest* prodding me with that seasonal word, the feeling; *this winter I've been in*.

How is it—if the guest is invisible—how do we sense what is trying to come in that's important? Sometimes a word shines a little bit. In the poem, Kunitz uses the metaphor of a bell. He hears a bell; he's pretending he's a country doctor. Now here's the second part of the poem:

*What wakes me now like the country doctor
Startled in his sleep?
Why does my racing heart shuffle down the hall
for the hundredth time to answer the night bell?*

He's hearing something. He's sensing something.

Whoever summons me has need of me.

This relationship between you and the guest is very important:

*Whoever summons me has need of me.
How could I afford to disobey that call?
A gentle, insistent ring pulled me from my bed,
From loving arms*

And here it shifts...

Though I know I'm not ready yet.

And then doubt comes in.
I'm not ready yet?

Who can ever be ready for some of this stuff that's going to come in there?

*And nobody stands on the stoop, not even a stray cat
Slouches under the sodium lamp
Deceived or self-deceived, I can never atone for it*

It's very important we don't stop there. We're not deceived yet, or self-deceived. What we're seeing there, is the nothing. That's something! It's the space, and can we just tolerate it? You don't have to force it, just wait. Just relax. Take a breath. Maybe nothing is coming yet and you've got to be patient; there's a waiting in that space of the nothing.

Now the problem with the nothing in our lives is that the glow of life has faded. You know Wordsworth's famous line about the fading of the glow in his "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood". In his simple religious language, it goes like this:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.
We don't know where we came from. We just don't know:*

*The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star
Hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar*

This *something* comes as we're born, according to him:
*Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come from God,
Who is our Home.
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

But, here's what's going to begin to happen to us:

*Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The youth, who daily farther from the east must travel,
Still is Nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.*

The relationship I have with my patients is a space where the reality of those other figures--from wherever they come, from whatever dimension they're coming from--can step in and be greeted hospitably by me. The light *fades into the light of common day*. We're all sitting here in this light right now. I love the phrase the poet Shelly uses. He calls it, *a film of familiarity* – that's what we're sitting in. He doesn't mean a movie – he means a thin veil over our eyes.

Shelly thought poetry purges this veil from our inward sight-- this *film of familiarity*--obscuring from us the wonder of our own being.

It compels us to re-examine that which we perceive and imagine that we know; it creates the universe anew, after it has been annihilated in our minds by impressions, blunted by this familiarity. Poetry—for Shelly—was, “Ah, I can feel it again. I can sense.” But, you see this is what we are waiting for, too.

Outside of this film of familiarity, in the space of nothing, is anything coming in that's healing, that's important, that carries energy with it; that has a shine to it--that has depth. Can that be perceived? That's the challenge. And, you know, we're back to those guests.

Can anybody recognize when an important guest is on the threshold? It's so important we perceive, for their sake too, what's trying to come in. Walt Whitman, at the end of his major first long poem, “The Song of Myself,” as he's getting ready to end the poem, he thinks about you and me and he's wondering: “Is anybody going to “get” me, because I don't have much longer, now.”

Listen how he ends his opus:

Listener

He's talking to you – and me...

Listener, up there!

Okay. I'm asking you to imagine the guest that's trying to be a presence here. It's very important to that guest that we *get* it-- we see it, we hear it. Here's Whitman as this invisible guest, talking to us: *Listener!* He's talking to me as a therapist, “up there”....

Listener up there! What have you to confide to me?

Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,

(talk honestly, no one else hears you,

and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh,

That's you and me, if we're nigh – if we're close.

I concentrate toward them that are nigh,

I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work?

That's us. Have we finished?

Who has done his day's work?

Who will soonest be through with his supper?

Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone?

Will you prove already too late?

Do you hear the urgency of this invisible guest? Is anybody there? Are *you* there? Are *you* listening? Are you through with your supper? Are you going to walk with me? He's always asking us—“Are you going to walk with me? I know where the road is,” he says. Ah, come with me, I know where the road is. Can you hear me? Does it make sense to you? Why have I written all this? Are you there?” And then he's getting ready to die.

*I bequeath –
Not literally, but in the poem:
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I
love.
If you want me again, look for me under your boot soles.
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean.
I shall be, but I shall be good health to you,
nevertheless.
And filter and fiber your blood.*

And here are the last three lines of this opus. They are so terrific. Get this:
*Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged.
Missing me one place, search another.
I stop somewhere, waiting for you.*

“I stop somewhere waiting for you.” That is the sacredness, in a way, of our being able to tolerate the nothing and to wait in that space for who is trying to come in. When Goethe got ready to write “Faust,” he had started it as a young man many years before. Now, in his old age, he picked up the pen again to write it and he wrote a dedication. It’s just a few lines. He does not dedicate this work to the public or to some particular person, at all. Here’s the translation:

*You approach me again, indistinct figures who folded
themselves
To my cloudy eyes a long time ago, in the early days.
You obtrude yourselves.*

They’re coming again.
You obtrude yourselves.
Well then, you may prevail.

That’s the dedication to the invisible guests who once again are coming to him and he says, “Okay, I’m ready.” That’s what we’re talking about.

Now, what does it take for the therapist to be ready to go toward an invisible guest? Are you with me? We’re listening to the poets. Here’s one I’ve read before in here – maybe twice before. When I find a poem like this, it usually lasts about ten years. This one is

remarkable. It’s by Sharon Olds. It’s called, “That Moment”. She’s talking about bringing her unborn children into this world. That’s the metaphor she’s using for the invisible guests, so don’t get too stuck on whether these are her real children or not. They probably are, but they are so much more. It is the *invisible* and I want you to watch what has to happen to her in order to bring them in. What had to happen to Goethe to say, “You are obtruding yourself into my life, again?” What do we have to do in the face of the nothing in order to wait? Who do we have to become as therapists to do this? Who does she have to become, so to be, in this metaphor, a mother?

*It’s almost too long ago to remember
When I was a woman without children.
And listen to “children” as these invisible guests:*

*A person, really, like a figure
Standing in a field, alone,
Dark, against the pale crop.*

That’s where we are. We’ve got our life, we’re standing in the field; it’s just me, it’s just her. Alone. That’s where she starts:

*The children were there;
They were shadowy figures outside the fence,
Indistinct as distant blobs of faces at twilight.
I can’t remember, anymore, the moment I turned to take
them,
My heel turning on the earth, grinding the heads
of the stalks of grain under my foot,
My body suddenly swinging around as the
flat figure on a weathervane will swerve
When the wind changes.*

What is the wind? The word “spirit” in Greek is usually translated as “wind.” When the oracles spoke, Apollo would come through them, and there would be a wind. *There would be a wind.* This is an ancient word, “wind.” She’s standing in a field alone and all of a sudden, she can’t remember how this happened, but she turned on the earth:

*I turned on the earth, grinding the heads of stalks
of grain under my foot,
my body suddenly swinging around as the flat figure
on a weather vane will swerve when the wind changes.
I can't remember the journey from the center
of the field to the edge*

Notice that *to the edge:*
– *or the cracking of the fence like the breaking down
of the borders of the world,
or my stepping out of the
plowed field altogether and
taking them in my arms as you take the
whites and yolks of eggs in your arms,
running over you,
glutinous, streaked, slimy, glazing you.
I cannot remember that instant when I gave my life to
them
the way someone will suddenly give her life over to God,
and I stood with them outside the universe
and then, like a god, I turned and brought them in.*

In that powerful metaphor of bringing something in, those *blobs of faces at twilight*, she has to leave her independent existence. Something has to break down in us to get to them, to step out of that single plowed field we know so well, to open up, reach out and take them in.

In psychological language, we've got all these words; what is repressed in the person? What is dissociated in the person? But we're looking for what is alive. What, like these children, wants to come in? Like what an artist brings into being, or the health of the person, the vitality, the life of a person.

Okay. I want to tell you briefly about one of my patients and then I want to show you a film. Here is a woman in her early 70s, living by herself. And, as is not uncommon in this kind of work, we eventually find the invisible guest is a child who, she says, "Was me as a child." A child who seems to be suffering from a lot of neglect, and where she finds that child is in the dark, in a hole in the dark, waiting. That's where her

autobiographical child is right now--in her imagination, in her imagery as a guest. The child is in a hole in the dark and it's cold and the child-- maybe 3 or 4 years old--is folded up. The patient has left that child a long time ago and become an independent, very self-sufficient woman, like we ordinarily do. We leave certain ones behind and try and have to build a personality that can make it out there. As Whitman says, *I stopped somewhere waiting for you*. This child is waiting in the dark. My patient tells me, "We go down to the dark together. I go with her." She reaches her hand out for the child and the child doesn't take it. The child is indifferent. The child is folded away. The child doesn't expect anything and is not about to take that risk to reach a hand back out. The child found a way to live down there by being folded up. The child doesn't expect anybody to come and is living like that, patient.

My patient is impatient. I want to get her out of there; I want to do something for her. Nothing is working. She tells me, "You know, I think I understand this because you know when I'm in a crisis and I call you, if I call you on the phone, which I don't do very often, but if I do, and if you answer the phone, I go immediately silent. I can't bring any words out, even if I call you. So I think I understand this kid, hunched in, folded away." I say, "Well, since I'm down there with you, let me offer you my hand. First in the imagination, just why don't you take my hand because this is very hard on you sitting next to this kid who doesn't respond to you. Why don't you take my hand?"

And she does in her imagination. I think once or twice, she actually did take my hand but, at first, it was "What happens if you take my hand in this story?"

That relaxes her and she's able to wait and just sit there with this kid who's doing nothing.

She has a dream in which we're in an auditorium together and she says, "Your presence was enormously comforting to me." She just saw me in the auditorium. "Your presence was enormously comforting." But, we still don't know what to do about the child.

One of my favorite poems about not knowing what to do is by Wendell Barry. He calls it “The Real Work.”

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work, and that
when we no longer know which way to go,
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

So we’re learning how to wait. On one of her walks, she imagines an old woman who lives in the hills and she tells the old woman about the child in the hole and the woman says, “Take my hand. You’ll feel some warmth from me.” Sort of an echo of what I had offered. “Take my hand, you’ll feel some warmth from me,” and the woman adds, “Remember the warmth flows both ways.” You’ll feel it, the child will feel it, and it will come back to me, the woman says. “This warmth flows both ways.”

So she’s able to wait a little bit longer and then she has a dream. “I’m in Greece. There’s a pit, a deep pit, a deep hole, and I’m rolling down it. I’m going down. And there’s some kind of obstacle, a something in that pit along the way and her name is Persephone,” she says. I asked her if she knew who Persephone was.

I said, “You know, she’s the queen of the underworld, the place where you’re heading down to, that blackness.” That was the dream. In the session I asked her to go in there: “Go down there in your imagination. Just close your eyes, and go down because that woman may be waiting for you.”

And indeed, there’s a woman down there in that blackness who greets her and suddenly in that darkness that the Greeks call the underworld, where the ancestors are, where the dead is and where the spirits are, all of a sudden while under there, she found herself in a sunlit meadow and it was so warm. Remember the child is living in the cold of the dark. All of a sudden, she’s still under there, but she’s in a bright meadow and she says, “The meadow is Persephone. She has given me herself in this form.” And she goes back to the child and says,

“I want to tell you a story. I went into a dark hole and I met a woman there and the child opens her eyes and says, “Tell me more. Who is this woman? What does she look like? What happened down there?” It’s so interesting that the child came awake and engaged as she tells the story of that dream and that encounter.

All of this is by way of introduction to what I want to show you on this screen. This famous American play—*Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder—has been done thousands of times. In this scene we’re going to try to notice everything I’ve just told you about—the invisible guests, the underworld, the dead, the spirit, everything.

The first two acts are about an ordinary town in Connecticut, the last part of the 1800s and it’s the story of a young boy and girl from two families that we get to know, falling in love. It’s very ordinary. It’s so beautifully ordinary. In the third act, Emily, who is about 28 at this point, has just died in childbirth with their second child. Wilder imagines the dead like we are right now. They’re sitting on the stage in chairs, like you are. The idea is that they’re in their graves like this and they’re talking to one another because they’re waiting.

In Wilder’s theology, they’re waiting for a transformation to another dimension. That dimension is hinted at called eternity, but they’re waiting. And their job, while they’re waiting, is to forget everything that happened in the world of the living. That is very different than the Greek underworld that remembers what has gone on here and are, as ancestors, quite concerned with what’s going on here and with us. So already there’s a difference, an important difference. We’ll look at that.

So, they’re waiting. Emily, her parents and her husband have just come into the cemetery. She’s going to be buried and she suddenly walks out. She’s in white. She walks over to join the others in the chairs and they greet her. She greets her mother-in-law, Mrs. Gibbs. And she looks around at her husband, her parents, and they don’t understand, do they? No.

Emily says, “I, can feel that life so strongly. You know, I think I can go back.” And they all say, Oh no. Don’t do that. Like they know she can, in a way.

“I think I can go back.”

“Don’t! You’ll regret it. We’re here for something else. Your job is to forget all that.”

The Stage Manager, who has walked through the whole play talking to us—who I like to imagine as Wilder himself—walks out and Emily says, “I can go back, can’t I?”

“Yes,” he says. “Just pick a day. Pick any day.”

And she says, “I think I’ll pick an important day.”

And everyone says, Oh, don’t do that. You’ll be really sorry.

Emily says, it can’t be when I fell in love and it can’t be with the birth of my child....

Now, I want you to watch this through through a certain vision. She’s of the dead. She’s going to be granted a day back. She picks her 12th birthday.

“Okay,” the stage manager says, “it’s this date, snow is falling. What part of the day?”

“I want the whole day.”

“Okay. It’s dawn.” He sets the scene. She comes back into our life, but she is no longer in the film of familiarity. She is no longer in the light of common day that we’re all sitting in here. That’s what’s so incredible. She knows she’s dead, but she enters the life with that knowledge and the whole life of that day begins to be transformed in her eyes. She has such a gift as an invisible presence.

She is now going to contact her mother and her father, with all of this: “I know something now.”

Shelly says the poetic faculty returns us to our being. The glow that we once had or can have comes through the poetry. She’s got it. She wants to bring it back. The Greek view of the ancestors and of the dead who are still thinking about us, and who want to come to us, this is not that—Emily being one of the immortals going to eternity. This is our ancestor, thinking about us and coming to us with a gift.

I have several old Jewish men in photographs in my office that I don’t know. When I found them, I liked the look in their faces and in their eyes. They watch me do the work. I put them up behind so my patients don’t see them; I see them. They are my ancestors, supporting this very difficult work.

28-year-old, newly dead Emily comes as an ancestor who can see things that her family and we can’t see. Now, here is the issue. Will they receive the gift? I say, something’s coming through there. Can the therapist get it? Can we get the gift? That’s the question.

Reflections on The film, Our Town:

Michael: A very powerful invisible guest who has such a gift, “Mama, just look at me.” And, for a moment, she thinks maybe it’s happening...but it isn’t. Ordinary life is happening. What if all this had been Emily’s dream? What if she came in as our patient and said she’d had this dream that she died and this is what happened? It’s very interesting. In the early ‘40s, Hollywood made a movie of this play and it probably won’t surprise you what Hollywood did with the ending.

As she got in touch with the tremendous intensity of life, she said, “I want to live!” It was if she had a near death experience, and then woke up in bed next to her baby. That’s what Hollywood did with it—which is a little bit equivalent to me asking, “What if she’d had a dream?”

We are shown something so intense, so real, beyond the film of familiarity and the light of common day that our challenge as therapists in being able to be open to such intense moments is partly why I’m showing you this. We too are in this *light of common day*, and what is it to be open when some other dimension comes in like Emily and says, “I see something, I am something; I’m trying to tell you something about life and living.”

Another woman I'm working with is Italian, about 65, and has never had an intimate relationship that worked, and always felt the loss. "There's something wrong with me," she said. "Something off about me, I don't understand it. Why did this never happen?" The space that she had kept open for so long for that possibility, she says is now over. It was very puzzling for me to hear that because with me she was very alive, related, connected and she would say, "The way I am in here is very different from the way I am out there. I am very shy out there. I have always had difficulty with closeness," but she wasn't with me. In the back of my mind I thought, *she's preparing herself with her relationship to me to have more confidence and courage for something out there. She's discovering another dimension of herself.*

She tells me the thoughts that it would never happen for her began as a girl. She'd told her mother at about nine-years-old, "I will never be able to marry." And, she never did. I'm thinking...*but there's another side to her. Look at the way she's being with me.* And she says, "It's over. The space is actually old now and the edges are frayed. It has to die." And then she says, "You and I are standing in a graveyard right now."

There's the entrance of the invisible guest. There's Emily's entrance.

You and I are standing in a graveyard right now.

When I say, "Can the therapist bear the invisible guest?" I'm looking at how I had to allow my hopes for her about that marriage, die. She says, "It's over. I don't know what the future is going to bring, but I have to bury this dream." She says it's strange, too, because the week before, she said, "You know there's another woman in me who likes coming here and relating to you, but she doesn't want to relate intimately out there. She does it in here and has no interest in an intimate relationship out there. In fact, she's from another dimension," she says.

I tell you that story in terms of what the therapist also has to be willing to bear, when the Presence comes in and says, "Help me bury this." Let me try to bring this to a conclusion. Things appear in the sacred space between me, my patient, and the therapist I am trying to become. I want to court these invisible presences--to say "Thou" as Buber says—to what these life energies are that come towards me. Like Emily coming toward her parents; like the woman who asks, *help me bury this*; like my patient saying, *I don't know what to do for that child; she's folded away.* I try to help them come forward; I take all these presences as real—they *are* real. The relationship I have with my patients is a space where the reality of those other figures--from wherever they come, from whatever dimension they're coming from--can step in and be greeted hospitably by me.

Whitman says, "I stop somewhere waiting for you." If I can, I help whoever's waiting; who is that, waiting for her? It is those I try to serve.

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Q: I was just going to say, not to be too literal, I'm wondering if part of that waiting has to do with being silent when we want to speak.

DR. GEIS: As a therapist?

Q: Yes—as the therapist.

DR. GEIS: Waiting in silence and holding off the speaking.

Q: Yes.

DR. GEIS: I like that, especially if we're just filling up the space. Silence. Yeah. Thank you for that.

Q: After a number of decades as a therapist, I have to admit that one of the reasons I went into the field, was my own personal quest for meaning....

DR. GEIS: For meaning?

VOICE: Yes. After attempting to get that from--I don't know how many sessions perhaps sitting only a few feet away from you in an adjacent building--I realized that space could never contain my meaning. It had to leave with my client. It had to leave with my client.

DR. GEIS: Okay.

VOICE: Then the space folds back on itself for the session. I always hoped that if it had been born within that space, it left with my client. Mine is only a guest, the expectation that you described that I would be helping let the visitor in, in some fashion or form. And I like to think that I've learned how to facilitate that in some way.

Do you have an expectation, a sense of what is going to happen, a kind of sense of urgency? Does that happen to you?

DR. GEIS: I think usually I'm surprised.

VOICE: Yeah.

DR. GEIS: All of a sudden, you know. Like the stories I told today, I'm usually caught by surprise. But this question of our meaning....To be a welcomer of the guest is, for me, to step into a myth and that myth has deep meaning, even though some of... most of those guests aren't mine. But to be able to find a way to open to the guest...I'm hoping that when I leave the office, I can find a way to do that out there for myself as well. As a therapist, as a healer, having devoted so much of my life to doing that, it has deep significance for me to say, "That's what I'm doing". It's an ancient role, I hope. Thank you all very much.