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Fabiana's Dreams

Dreams signal the essential moments in the search for identity. In the story of Fabiana, a patient in one of my therapeutic groups, three dreams had particular importance. These dreams (actually two dreams and a "scenic representation") showed the state of the self and the progress in her healing process (Pines, 1999). First of all, though, I would like to present Fabiana.

Two changes

During a five year period of participation in group therapy, Fabiana has managed to effect a number of changes. Two of these changes are particularly significant - a change in her relationship with her family and her success in acquiring the ability to make decisions.

At the beginning of her analysis, Fabiana was twenty-seven years old. She didn't get on well with her family at all. Her opposition extended to anything that could be connected with traditional values. For example, she refused, and radically opposed, the idea of a wedding or of having babies. Fabiana's opposition was nourished by fear. Fabiana was frightened of her family and particularly of her mother. The very thought of her mother coming, for a brief visit, from Sicily to Rome, threw her into a state of confusion and fear. In the presence of her mother, Fabiana would feel utterly inadequate, she would despise herself, and be unable to find any sense in what she was doing. Now Fabiana visits on holiday, the village where her family lives, and where she herself lived until she was eighteen, and draws a sense of protection and calm from it. Furthermore, she is content to be cooked for and taken care of by her mother.

Fabiana's opinion of her mother has changed. Fabiana says: "Of course, my mother's way of thinking is very different from mine. But she has really done a lot considering the way in which she was brought up. Above all she has made a great effort to understand me, and continues to do so." The second change is that she can now make decisions.

Fabiana no longer lets situations influence her or accepts things as they are, on the contrary, she makes decisions. The acquisition of this ability has considerably increased her self-esteem. This achievement has also proved to be fundamental in setting up a new relationship with her family. Fabiana no longer considers meeting her mother or other relatives as being the cause of a sense of loss or nullification. She no longer finds it necessary to defend herself by resorting to strong opposition, isolation and flight. She now knows that she has the ability to choose and to carry on with her own life project.

Right to exist

The ability to develop a different relationship with her family also came from the experience of being part of this group.

Taking part in a small therapeutic group is a global experience for its members. One participant explained this well in the following words: “The group is a world for me as it is for the other members.” Thanks to this aspect, the small group stimulates an intense experience of belonging. This, in turn, is very important for the participants’ sense of Self, of being a person with a right to live and to occupy an affective space. Many patients have not experienced an adequate acknowledgement of this right in their family environment. Taking part in a therapeutic group, gives them a second chance.

Liveliness: developing a soul

Over the years, some aspects of Fabiana’s personality which had always been present but hidden and unexpressed, emerged. They have, in fact, come to life and acquired new depth and intensity. For example, Fabiana now pays attention to those around her. She has become enterprising. The loyalty to the clan she belongs to has changed into a loyalty which is associated with independent thought. The sense of belonging is now something different from submission or total consensus. The process of “liveliness” has been helped by the existence of different ways of thinking within the group compared to those of Fabiana’s place of birth and also those of the social reject and rebellious youth movement she had joined when she moved to Rome.

People who emigrate to far-off countries face difficult conditions and find it hard to cope with customs, rules and ideas which are different from those they knew. They have to cope with powerful regressive forces. They may well become ill, become dissipated and feel lost. However, in certain conditions the emigration experience can be a real success. First of all, the person who changes country must not be too ill. Secondly, he should find a non-hostile and somewhat stimulating environment. Thirdly, there should be some affinity between the person and the country, where he is going to settle down, so that, he does not suffer too much on changing country. Given these three conditions, the person can often discover new and unexpected resources in himself. The new country – a new and unknown “outside,” when it is not empty or structure-less – offers open space, in which to collocate thoughts, desires and therefore aspects of one’s self. Thoughts, desires and aspects of one’s self that previously had no place in which to exist or were compressed and asphyxiated.

Something similar happened to Fabiana on entering the group. The small group is a place where different worlds meet - the worlds of the different members of the group. These worlds are all on the same level. Encountering different worlds has helped Fabiana to understand that different worlds exist within her, too. Hitherto, undisclosed channels for communicating and undiscovered fields of action have been revealed to her. (Pines, 2000).

The second element which has stimulated this liveliness in Fabiana, and cause the emergence of hidden aspects of her personality, is getting in contact with the experiences of other members of the group. People who take part in a small group – and among these, Fabiana – learn to see, when one of them speaks or relates, whether what is said has the characteristics of an experience or those of a dream or illusion. Furthermore, they are able to clear away repetitive and confusing flights of fantasy and to focalise their interest on present and relevant elements. For example, the members of a group can say to one of the participants: “Now stop talking about your parents! Tell us about what you are doing!”.

Furthermore, the members of a group benefit from contact with life experiences. It’s as if there was a pool of experiences from which one can draw out what he needs. A real life experience makes it possible to discover, in the Self and in the world around, something that is enduring and that can be studied and cultivated. This gives a sense of being in a safer position

The dream about the mouse-baby

A well-known saying goes: “If you want to find a friend, be yourself” – the question is what is your “self”?

There have been three crucial moments in Fabiana’s search for identity.

A dream she had during her third year of group analysis shows how Fabiana found the courage to take a look at herself.

Fabiana: "I was at work. Everyone knew that in a certain room there was a horrible monster. The monster was horrible –they said – because it fed on itself. I wanted to see it, at all costs. The door had been left ajar so I could see it. I thought the monster would be big, or even enormous, but surprisingly it was small. It was a child. It might have been three years old. The body was that of a child, but the head was that of a mouse. It was biting its arm. I had two conflicting feelings towards it - disgust and tenderness. I would have liked to take it home with me. Two colleagues, and friends of mine, were there with me. One said that I was very brave. The other said that I would not be able to cope with the task. I was doubtful: I was not afraid of the monster, but I didn't know how to feed it and bring it up".

Fabiana adds: "Immediately after the dream, I thought, that if someone has nothing to feed on, he feeds on himself".

The child in the dream is three years old. Fabiana's analysis had lasted the same length of time. The head is that of a mouse. The mouse is biting its arm. When Fabiana started her therapy, she was on drugs almost every day, injecting herself with heroin. During the first years of group therapy she continued using drugs, though not as frequently as before. With the decrease in use of heroin, bulimia appeared. Fabiana often filled herself up with food and then vomited repeatedly. The mouse might quite possibly represent this hungry and violent aspect of Fabiana's personality. I would like to underline another aspect of the dream. Before opening the door, Fabiana thought that the monster would be "big, or even enormous." When she finds the courage to look at it she realizes it is small. I believe this difference in dimensions is because Fabiana looks at it from where she works, that is from inside the group. When she is alone, the monster-child is enormous, while, when she's together with her analyst and the other members of the group, it is small. It even elicits a sense of tenderness. Fabiana says she "would have liked to take it home" with her. For the first time, Fabiana thinks of keeping "her self," instead of getting rid of it.

Tamagotchi

A second representation is offered by an object which she brings to a session a year later.

The Tamagotchi is a red pendant three centimetres long, in the shape of a heart. Fabiana explains that on one of the two sides of the pendant there is a small rectangular panel - a monitor. She points out that her Tamagotchi is not a puppy or kitten, but a baby dinosaur.

The Tamagotchi-dinosaur weighs seventy kilos. It has to be nourished, cuddled, cleaned and put to bed. Whenever it needs something, it gives a warning signal by sending out a soft sound. If you don't take care of it, in an adequate and continuous way, the dinosaur dies.

Till now, it hasn't been much of a hassle for her. Although, sometimes, it seems nothing satisfies the Tamagotchi, there is not much that needs doing, only what Fabiana described before. It is sufficient to try one thing after the other – feed, cuddle, clean it when it dirties itself, put it to bed – and see which one of these works.

The Tamagotchi can be turned off. When Fabiana is at work, for example, she turns it off. Even now, before coming to the session, she has turned the switch off. While saying this, Fabiana takes the Tamagotchi off her belt and shows it to the other participants, but doesn't give it to them. Then, she turns the Tamagotchi on. The virtual dinosaur puppy gives a chirp. Fabiana rapidly presses some tiny buttons on the side of the monitor. She turns the Tamagotchi off and hangs it back on her belt.

In the dream about the monster, the hungry and violent aspects of Fabiana's personality were represented by the mouse, while now there is a dinosaur. Dinosaurs are very primitive animals, they are also often loved by children.

Fabiana's brief demonstration during the meeting shows a 'caring' side and a 'cared for' side. The caring side is represented by Fabiana and the cared-for side by the Tamagotchi-dinosaur. This situation is quite similar to that of a little girl playing "mummy" with a doll and identifying with the doll to whom she is being the mummy.

Through the Tamagotchi game, Fabiana shows her most urgent needs. The Tamagotchi cannot wait - if the answer to its needs is not immediate, it turns off and dies.

Birth

The third crucial contribution to the emergence of her self is a dream related by Fabiana during her fifth year of analysis. It is a dream about birth and also a dream about separation, and it prepares for the moment in which Fabiana will finish her analysis.

Fabiana: "I was in the hospital where I work. Four of my female colleagues and just one man were there. Just as in the group, where there are four women and Roberto. I was about to give birth. My colleagues were standing round me, then they took me to a special room.

Dr. Neri was in that room, too. I asked him: "Why are you here?" Dr. Neri answered: "I'm here to help with the birth."

I gave birth. The scene changed. I had had a baby girl. She was quite big: she must have been six years old. I was quite happy. Although I was present, I was dead. This made me sad, mainly because I would not be able to enjoy my baby.

I thought: "Who will take care of her?" I gave myself an answer: "My colleagues will." I was quite calm then. I looked for Dr. Neri, but couldn't find him."

Fabiana gives birth to a baby. The presence of the analyst at the delivery, confirms Fabiana's generative ability and indicates that he is the father figure for the baby girl.

Shortly after, though, the scene changes. The baby's mother dies. More precisely, although she is still present, the mother is dead. Fabiana's mother - according to what I was told by Fabiana, during our meetings before starting group analysis - suffered serious postnatal depression and was taken into care for six months. Her mother was hospitalised a second time some years later when Fabiana was still a child.

On waking, Fabiana - who identified herself with her depressed mother - is mistaken, and can no longer find the analyst. She gives the baby to her female colleagues.

A series of events in the following months allows us to reach a better understanding of who this "dead mother," this "mother who feels dead," really is. Above all, these events allow a more adequate understanding of what Fabiana thinks she could do about this aspect of her mother, which is present in her, too.

The 'birth' dream inaugurates a new phase of her analysis. During the months that follow the dream, Fabiana recuperates aspects of her "drug addict" identity. During the group meetings, she talks a lot about heroin and what it was that led her to drugs. Furthermore, she tells us about male and female friends who used drugs.

Fabiana reclaims this aspect of her identity, from a social point of view too. Although she does not use drugs anymore, she starts following a drug addict meeting service. She informs her colleagues at the hospital. She speaks about drugs with friends from home.

I remember that during our first meeting, before entering the group, Fabiana told me that she sometimes used heroin, adding that she used it to cure her depression. I said that heroin did not seem to me to be the correct medicine for depression, and maybe group therapy would be more useful.

Group Work

In the first of the three images of herself that Fabiana brings (the dream of the mouse-baby) to the attention of the group, the group appears as a “place of work”. In this dream, the group is also represented by the presence of two “friends and colleagues.” They express different opinions on the possibility of Fabiana taking the mouse-baby home with her.

During the second representation, the other members of the group witness Fabiana’s caring attitude towards the Tamagotchi.

In the last dream, the women in the group take care of the baby when the mother dies. The women in the group, that is, substitute for the depressed or absent mother and also substitute for the analyst, who Fabiana cannot find.

However these images do not suffice to indicate how the group has worked through the contributions that Fabiana brought in (Friedman, 1999). This work may be better explained through a brief clinical episode. I have chosen the episode in which group members speak of one of the Tamagotchi’s attributes – the fact that it is a Tamagotchi-dinosaur.

Marcello: “Dinosaurs are primitive animals that lived in a world that no longer exists.”

Loredana: “There are carnivorous and non carnivorous dinosaurs.”

Antonia: “In certain conditions, all dinosaurs are carnivorous.”

Analyst: “I have read somewhere something similar about chimpanzees.”

Antonia: “What Dr. Neri has said has made me think that he wants to show us evolution: from a world of dinosaurs to a world of chimpanzees.”

Gabriella: “The doorkeeper of my block, who comes from Sri Lanka, is very jealous. When he drinks, he goes crazy. Yesterday he beat his girlfriend up.”

Loredana: “Still, the girl might like the fact that he is jealous and beats her.”

Analyst: “We, too, are authorised to make contact with violent passions. And even madness. We are an analysis group.”

Fabiana: “During one night in the past year, I went into a building which the Dutch government provides for homeless people, at a very low rent. In the middle of a large room, there was a man, sitting at a table, who was writing in a notebook. I spent the evening with some friends and then I went back to that room to sleep on a sofa. The man was still writing. The day after, when I woke up, he was still writing. I looked at the notebook and he was writing down all that happened in the room: “A girl comes into the room, she goes out” A Dutch friend of mine told me that “he was out of his mind. He coped with his madness by writing.” Everyone of us has his own way of coping with his madness.”

Analyst: “It certainly is a case of madness, as Fabiana says, but I think that this homeless man, is above all, very lonely. What kind of loneliness does he suffer from? We may be lonely because someone we love or someone who we are used to having around us, is absent. However, there is a different kind of loneliness - cosmic loneliness. The loneliness of those who are alone, because the world has disappeared.”

Marcello and Loredana’s comments on carnivorous animals recall a central theme of Fabiana’s: “What to eat? What to feed on?” Two years before, commenting on the “dream of the mouse-baby who bites his arm” Fabiana said: “I thought, that if someone has nothing to feed on, he feeds on himself.” Marcello and Loredana, when they speak about “carnivorous dinosaurs,” indicate that eating means facing up to the fantasy of attacking and eating other animals.

The analyst speaks about the passage from dinosaurs (very ancient animals) to chimpanzees (anthropoid monkeys). Antonia points out that this implies evolution. Gabriela continues with the same theme but, at a certain point, she removes herself in a way from the equation. She attributes passions to people from Sri Lanka. Loredana puts herself at this level where relationship and strong feelings exist. She speaks about jealousy, passion, pleasure and identifying herself with the

girlfriend of the doorkeeper. Gabriella notes that the violence of passions can make one lose control. Passion can lead to madness.

The analyst allows passion and being mad during sessions.

Fabiana can then speak about a special kind of madness, which coincides with extreme loneliness. Maybe her mother and the analyst also feel alone in this way.

A characteristic of the therapeutic group

The group permits the expression and sharing of states of mind and extreme feelings – being hungry, feeling mad with jealousy, feeling boundlessly lonely.

These states of mind can be expressed because the group is not only hunger, madness and solitude. If it was only this, it could not even be talked about.

The world of the group has not disappeared like that of the dinosaurs. The presence of the analyst and of the other members of the group gives hope that the feelings and states of mind expressed will be gathered up, will find meaning and be transformed.

The ability to gather up, name and give a sense to and transform states of mind and feelings is an essential characteristic of the psychoanalytic group. (Neri, 1995).

Mental setting of the analyst

What gives this characteristic to the small psychotherapeutic group?

I will take into consideration just one aspect of the question, the one that highlights the analyst's contribution.

The presence and mental setting of the analyst do not determine how the group works, however they define its peculiarities (Neri, 1998a). The characteristics of the analyst's mental setting while working are:

- patience
- to be gratuitous (a non utilitarian approach)
- non-sense
- reciprocity
- investment

Patience

The first characteristic of an analyst's mental setting while working is patience.

Ability to "be patient" does not come solely from technique. It is more a result of the development of certain aspects of the analyst's personality. This is what makes his own personal analysis essential.

Winnicott (1965) talks of "keeping alive," underlining the importance of the analyst's ability to tolerate his patients' attacks, thereby keeping himself and his ability to be interested in their needs and requests alive.

Bion (1963) speaks in terms of an "oscillation between patience and certainty." Patience provides preparation and is alternated with moments in which the analyst reaches the certainty of an idea, which he can then communicate to the group.

Corrao (1998, 1998a) takes issue with Bion's desire for certainty, he particularly underlines tolerance towards the uncertainty of results in analytic work. An ambition to 'construct' is more of an obstacle than of real help in analytic work. According to Corrao, uncertainty is not a fortuitous element, on the contrary, it is an integral part of analytical practice and method. The basic epistemological theory of psychoanalysis is founded on the principles of uncertainty, incompleteness and reversibility.

To be gratuitous (a non-utilitarian approach)

The second characteristic of the analyst's mental setting is being gratuitous.

An effective analyst is one who is able to allow himself the pleasure of imagining and thinking, without having to cope with calculating how 'useful' and 'congruent' those thoughts may be. Marion Milner (1956, pp. 178-9) writes:

“When we discover how to stop looking at the world with the limited and focalized attention of utilitarianism, and stop interfering and trying to use it for our own purposes, then, [...], something very similar to a miracle can happen.
[... When we abandon this utilitarian outlook we start to feel more in contact with the world.] This is a state [of intimate relationship, which is a condition] which we have surely all experienced in certain moments of our childhood, but have often lost when the utilitarianism of adulthood takes over [...].”

Non-sense

At first sight, this may appear to contradict what I said previously, when I talked about “that the ability to give some sense is a characteristic of a psychoanalytic group.” However, if there are no moments of “non sense,” one will not be able to give more authentic sense to states of mind and feelings.

Non sense is a condition, free from propositions, and with a ‘just turning over’ functioning of the mind.

Images, emotions, thoughts and feelings emerge without any connection between themselves.

An analyst should accept them without forming any hypothesis about the existence of a theme.

Looking for a hidden theme, as the technique of free association suggests, would imply creating an organisation.

On the contrary, the analyst and the group members need to experiment and live through the condition of lack of sense, becoming able to cope with the unknown.

Reciprocity

An analyst should put himself in the place of the group members and allow them to see the situation from his observation point. He should try to learn the language spoken by his patients and be happy if they learn his language.

Investment

The last aspect of the analyst’s mental setting, which I wish to mention, lies in his ability to invest his affect on people taking part in the analysis with him, on himself and on his work.

Routine can cause the analyst to suffer from a sort of affect haemorrhage as psychoanalyst and psychotherapist.

A supervisor’s or a colleague’s intervention, communicating esteem and showing him personal affection, will allow the analyst, who is suffering from a process of impoverishment, to find new faith in himself and to recover his ability to understand and give treatment.

This is why it is necessary to choose the professional group one belongs to, with great care, and from time to time, choose a new one.

Making this choice does not necessarily mean that the first choice was a mistake. It does not even mean that the original group should be abandoned or erased. It really means adding something new, facing up to an experience of scientific and professional emigration and immigration.

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