

MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

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I have thought of images as transitional phenomena. It is the imagination's way of presenting what cannot be directly experienced because it is unknown or unmanageable. On the boundary between known and unknown, the image itself is conscious, but it can also contain layers of hidden meaning, layers of experience of a transitional form.

Hillman describes a way of working with images. He talks about image-sense, a way of being with the image which is different from looking at a picture. It is a way of being with images which is not about interpreting. It involves going to the image, being there, feeling it, turning it around in order to experience what is there. It requires an inner freedom to allow imagery so that new insights emerge. This is sensing the image- imagining, which is different from knowing about the image-symbolising. (Hillman, 1979)

A client was telling her therapist about an image she had on waking that morning. It was of a bird in a beautiful cage. The cage door was open, but the bird remained inside still and silent. He responded that the difficulty leaving the cage seemed to symbolize the client's life at the time. Nothing happened. It made sense and it was nothing new. A silence ensued; then the therapist wondered what it would be like for someone to enter the cage. The impact of his words was immediate. They went straight to the client's heart and she felt a terror. The terror of being completely taken over by another's reality was revealed to her and she experienced it then and there.

This image of the bird in the cage, for me communicates something of the core of this client's trauma. I use the term un-lived state, because for me it represents an experience that is in suspended animation in the client's experiential world in that it hasn't been received and validated by another in relationship. There is no movement, no development. The therapist has found a way of staying with the image and I imagine what the therapist may have experienced in entering the image to be something like the following: 'the bird is still and silent, unbreathing, but with eyes wide open, looking, perhaps waiting. The door is open, but the way out is not clear. It is as if the bird doesn't know she can fly. Does she know she has wings? Has she ever seen another bird? It seems not. This makes more sense than a fear of leaving. I feel a desire to move closer but a fear of what might happen.' The image, however, allows an intermediate space- a transitional space for play. The therapist's response of expanding the metaphor changes the scene. Suddenly there is movement, from the heart through breath. There is expression, like a baby from the womb being shocked into using her own breathing organs. There is life.

Hobson promotes a similar way of being with images, a way which reveals hidden activity and involves a kind of coming to life. He describes the movement from fantasy to imagination as

“a special instance of how psychotherapy involves a discovery of activity in apparent passivity.” (Hobson, 1985:14)

Passive fantasy is a term he uses for images occurring spontaneously, sometimes unwanted intrusions, as in nightmares or flashbacks. Like Hillman, he advocates an active willingness to allow images to emerge, an expectant waiting so that the ***‘mood’***, for

which the image is a *'fantastic analogy'*, to express itself. This is active fantasy or what Hobson terms *'a symbolical attitude'*. Cultivating and promoting a *'symbolical attitude'* is important for this is how one can learn to develop a capacity for *'imaginative activity'* an even more active stance, thinking about the image and viewing it with a critical eye. (Hobson, 1985:101-103) For me *'imaginative activity'* is *'imagining'* as Hillman describes it, taking to the image thoughts of the individual's relational contexts present and past, while maintaining an open receptive attitude to the details of the image and how they might change. This is important because hidden in the image is how the person experiences being, and being in the world with others, as well as the means of revealing what is hidden. Thus the image is a *'living symbol'* (Hobson, 1985:199). A symbolical attitude to the image of the bird in the cage with the open door views this image not only as a communication of a fear of leaving the cage, but also as a *'living symbol'*. The imaginative activity of the therapist in expanding of the metaphor, gives immediacy and vividness to the expression of a hidden experience.

Images thus may be seen as a first level of organisation emerging from, but remaining still embedded in the raw data of experience, what Stern calls the *'experiential matrix.....the fundamental domain of human subjectivity'*, and Hobson terms the *'ground of experience'* which is *'the source of creativity'* (1985:82). As new insight emerges we remain in touch with this level of undifferentiated, pre-reflective experiencing.

I believe that images that emerge when working with trauma states hold memories in suspended animation, similar to what Bollas (1987) describes in the *'unthought known'*. This he describes as a *idiom* of being and being related to, which is not to do with language. I understand it as a kind of knowledge, not yet mentally realized, stored in the being of the individual. A somatic knowledge, it contains wordless memories of being and relating, and being related to, from infancy and early childhood. If the therapist understands the idiom then it may be possible to express something. The *'unthought known'* resonates with what Donna Orange terms *'emotional memory'* which she describes as

“any form or part of experience that largely bypass cognitive processes and carries significant residues from the intersubjective world of the past.” (Orange, 1995:113)

The concept of *'implicit memories'* (Rothchild, 2000) of pre-verbal and non-verbal experiences is similar. I understand the *'unthought known'* to be memories of being and interacting, including memories of the contexts in which they were laid down, encoded in how that person is in relationship. Though unavailable to the individual the *'unthought known'* is present in all the nuances of being and behaviour, and I maintain that it becomes known to another in relationship through the imagery which emerges. In the words of Hillman,

“The supposedly concealed is also on view and subject to keen sight” (1996:123)

Within the image of the bird in the open cage are encoded memories of self-experience which had not been seen and responded to, and therefore had not been lived. Subject to keen sight the hidden terror was lived and witnessed, thus validated. In remembering and living thus something timeless is bounded by an event in the history of the self. Cycles of experience are complete.

What may also be discovered are beliefs about the self in relationship, what Stolorow and Atwood call the underlying principles, underlying the organization of an individual's experience (1992:29).

These pre-reflectively encoded beliefs, which are emotional rather than cognitive, are what keep the person encaged though the door is open. Remembering, reliving, fully living what has been held suspended means that these beliefs can be reflected upon. For the above client her belief that in relationship there could be only one survivor because her vitality, her aliveness, her emotional expression was unbearable, indeed dangerous, was recognised. This made sense of staying locked in though the door was open.

In the therapeutic relationship the therapist's capacity for actively imagining various possibilities extends the horizon of experiencing for the client, providing the space for remembering states, and living hidden experiences, which in turn increases the client's domain of reflective self awareness. This brings to mind the words of Santayana

“in imagination not in perception lies the substance of experience while science and reason are its chastened and ultimate forms.” (Santayana in: Milner, 1950).

New experiences are lived, untangled from a timeless, repetitive states associated with trauma. In a responsive validating context new memories are created. New possibilities may be envisioned. There is the possibility of choice. We come to remember / know our history, but also a new history may be lived in the current relationship. This is why the edge of trauma is also a creative place to be if we can find a way of staying there and expressing something of what it is like, or asking a question which reveals something. The new experience doesn't replace the former however, although the process is freeing. It frees the imagination. The bird will fly.

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