



Listening in the Time of the Plague

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Short Communication

I begin this brief editorial commentary on January 27th, the Day of Remembrance. To those of us Europeans born in the long shadow of the war, today we conjure the iconic image of four Soviet soldiers on horseback entering the notorious iron gates of Auschwitz, inscribed with “Arbeit mit Frei”. Now, as the world is swallowed up in a global war against a tiny, invisible, and enemy that changes shape in its insidious parasitic pursuit of its own survival, we, as a species, ought to be joined in knowing who our enemy is rather than fighting each other. And yet, still, we are not. Why? Because of our characteristic human trait of endowing our value systems, beliefs, and codicils of conduct, with profound meaning; and meanings, though of the mind, are also fueled by ancient tribal instincts and aggressive drives. We, in America, have been assailed for four years, by a daily assaultive spectacle of scandals, wrongdoings, ineptitude, aggressive narcissism and misinformation, so impressive and effective, as to have disoriented half the population as to what is real, so that reality-testing, especially with young patients, has become an essential part of every session. Disorientation, insecurity, insulation, and unsureness *viz. a vis.* the ‘other,’ have outstripped isolation as the current communal plaint, the mask protecting, but also hiding, the inner self. The dullness of daily routines is disrupted by disquiet, a new sense that nowhere is safe anymore, that the enemies are within and around, all the time. Anxiety, angst, and suspiciousness have supplanted fear of a contagious disease that kills, as the land that was once everyone’s is now a land shaken by division.

At no time has it been more a privilege than now to be a practicing psychoanalyst. Unlike many I have specifically avoided zoom contacts with patients and kept to phone sessions. This method of communicating not only improves the quality of the more reflective mind-to-mind-interaction by drastically restricting the range of distracting stimuli and forcing verbalization, but also gives patients far greater freedom of expression, all funneled through the vocal and verbal line. Now tone, timbre, delays, halting silences or explosive streams of loud flowing speech, all these paralinguistic tropes become the main source of descriptive input. My ears grow highly attuned as I listen carefully to breathing, noises, silences, speed or slowness of speech. I can almost hear my patients ‘thinking’ when contemplating a pointed question. The dialectic dialogue is super-charged now, as the sessions and my voice become the only constant secure moorings for many, a safe space to release of tensions, find solid containment, complain freely, and shed mounting ambivalence now that families are cooped up in New York apartments most of the time. And then there’s that formidable unique instrument, the dream, as keen and deeply revealing as an MRI, that direct window to the unconscious and indispensable tool of all psychoanalytic work. The dreams have proliferated!! With daytime activity and movement so curtailed and restrained it’s as though the nighttime escapades have taken off!!

Covidian Dreams

Needless to say, as a psychoanalyst in the old tradition, dreams are a centerpiece of my practice, a passion and a true instrument of the treatment in integrating an unconscious self with conscious awareness. When well analyzed no representation at a linguistic level can ever reach the artistic craftsmanship in condensing images full of emotions, subtle impressions and complex meanings; conjuring long-forgotten people and relationships; painting eerie dreamscapes that depict moods and situations; and creating narratives with outcomes that spin cautionary tales, as does the ever so personal dream.

But dreams of late and there have been more than ever-are full of current iconic objects, collective emotions, and dramatic scenarios. The ‘mask’ omnipresent, with a sense of danger, even in sleep, that one may not venture without it. The ‘subway’ and its crowded platforms, such a classic New York metaphor for the unconscious, just as the dark waters of lakes and murky seas, have all appeared often. The absence of the smile or laughter, a common theme, exasperation with the constant proximity of family-husbands, wives, children- always in the same space, all looking

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out but stuck inside. The need to 'get away' is prominent in wish-fulfillment dreams. People take themselves too far away beaches, vacation homes, hotels, airplanes, but always with an ominous sense that outside is forbidden, dangerous, tsunami waves approaching, or fires raging, strange objects flying down from the sky, insects climbing up from the floor boards. After the insurrection on the Capitol on January 6th, one woman dreamt she was wandering about in a grey devastated deserted city after a nuclear explosion; another was driving in neighborhoods she thought she knew well but couldn't recognize anything anymore.

Sessions begin with deep sighs, patients say they feel heavy, overtaxed, worn down, uncertain of everything unable to see ahead, to plan, or even hope to make plans. Uncertainty and the lack of liberty to move freely about seem to be the prime existential problems of New York patients today. Unable to have what they took for granted they don't know where to turn or what to want. Everyone seems to have been devoured by the passive pleasures of Netflix and those who can afford it to online shopping. Food deliveries are soaring, while those who enjoy it are cooking more than ever. Emotions usually filtered through the daily rush and noises of a hectic city are now bared and raw, unvarnished and exposed to the light of simplified yet infinitely more taxing days. Couples fight, some hate while others love more, one long-time feuding couple is divorcing now, as the pandemic rages, their children confused, dispersed, and uprooted. This is not to say that each is not continuing, deep in sleep, to work on their own issues and evolving development. The psyche continues its progress always one step ahead of us, if only we would take the time to heed its wisdom.

The Analysts Toll and Privilege

I end my day and workweek tired, sometimes a wreck, as though I've forgotten where I was when I started, consumed by the many functions I serve for each of my patients, trying to recover and reset my center. This is partly due to my own style of intense concentration and absorption in them and their current unconscious messages and partly because analytic attention employs an all-consuming and very comprehensive type of empathy. All senses are engaged, drawn, as if with special antennae, towards the 'other' and their unconscious meanings embroidered through their free recounting. It is not enough to stay on the surface. Everything has another more metaphorical, deeper meaning, implying things that have come up as issues that need reworking or revisiting. And so, the weeks and months pass, months turning into years. People wonder why analyses last so long-they wonder when they should end. The truth is that they could go on just as they could end at any time. Things will always be changing and there will always be more to deal with more to learn about ourselves more to work-through. Yet we are always where we are right now. Time is not experienced as passing in the semantic space of an analytic practice since the unconscious knows no time. This is just one of the great privileges that I feel in this profession, along with the one-on-one intimate dialectic, a dialogue deeper, more open and franker, by far, than any other one will ever have. The great honor of gaining and earning another's trust with the most private, secret, and vulnerable parts of themselves, brought in safe-keeping to nurture in growth and insight, while outside the world rages on, in the time of the plague.