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An Ordinary Journey

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Prologue

Around the time I decided to write a case study for this *Festschrift*, and I was in the process of selecting a case that seemed both essential and dramatic enough for this purpose, I received a letter from a former woman patient whom I will call Anna. After reading the letter, I let the two-and-a-half years of therapy pass through my mind and I knew that I would write about her case. Why? Even though the temptation to choose a dramatic unusual case (a case that stands out), was great, I knew that a lot of my energy and a lot of my feelings, both frustration and fondness, went into cases like Anna's. These are the "classical" cases where bioenergetic analysis helps to effect a slow turning of the patient's life; where the numbness, unhappiness and lifelessness that start with childhood trauma and overshadow and penetrate all aspects of the person's life, slowly turn into aliveness, at times painful and at other times pleasurable. And above all, the person lives! Anna is such a case.

No Feelings, No Memory

I saw Anna, a married woman in her middle 40s, for the first time at one of the bioenergetic workshops that I lead. In these workshops I use considerable exercise work of both a gross and

subtle variety, as well as work in pairs to get participants in touch with their bodies. This will quite often serve as the entry to individual work. As the days pass, the work with each other and the intimate disclosures in the work with me, often accompanied by childhood memories that cause the others to recall similar memories, create an emotional climate in the group that is quite intense. People become familiar with each other in a deep fashion that usually takes months or even years to occur. Nothing like this happened for Anna. Although she participated in everything, she was not really involved in anything. She went through the exercises in a mechanical and obedient way, her body moving stiffly, her arms hanging (almost dangling) from shoulders raised up high. The stiffness in her ankles and knees resulted in a shockwave up her body whenever she took a step; it appeared as if she let herself fall passively into each walking step, having no inner sense of what the ground is. At the same time, her body was well-shaped and womanly. Her face carried a masklike expression, with the skin tightened over the bones, similar to women who have had facelifts. This aspect gave her face a frozen appearance; but frozen in rage, while her eyes looked frozen in terror and out of focus. Because her face also had a triangular shape, it reminded me of a furious wild animal that is cornered and frightened such as a wolf or a fox. Her voice was full, but again there was a mechanical, monotonous quality; when she spoke her words never seemed to come out of her body, but from somewhere around her, and they were not accompanied by any change in facial expression or by gestures.

Whenever the group members worked in pairs she was passive, standing around waiting to be chosen; it actually looked as if she were waiting with the expectation of not being chosen. Yet with all her rage and terror she also seemed to enjoy it when she was approached by others. She let herself be engaged in talk; she did not back off, but she looked awkward and inexperienced with the contact. Obviously most of the group members at some level picked up her yearning for contact; despite social awkwardness, she did not end up alone or avoided. She was fre-

quently asked to join the others both during group time and in the evenings, but it was as if she were in a theater play where the others are the actors and life takes place on the stage. She was merely watching the course of life, much too frightened to enter, and at the same time she was drawn in fascination to the lively scenes of strong and intense emotions. On the third or fourth days, I addressed myself to her and said that I saw her watching attentively and that I was interested in what was going on for *her*. For the flash of a second she stared at me in disbelief, then broke into harsh and dry sobbing that racked her body. She stopped as abruptly as she had begun and said that everyone else has feelings and memories, but she doesn't feel anything and doesn't have any memories of her childhood. She didn't even know that it was possible to have childhood memories. In talking with her, it became clear that she did know things about her childhood, events that she was told mainly by her sisters, but she didn't have any memory recall before the age of eight.

Such a generalized amnesia is not often encountered. Let us review the meaning of amnesia. Essentially it is a defensive response to severe conflict or trauma that is overwhelming to the body and its ego.

It serves the defensive purpose of shielding the individual from anxiety. The intractability of an amnesia, consequently, is related to the amount of anxiety bound down and to the ego resources that are available for coping with the liberated anxiety (Wolberg 1977, 866).

Given the robotlike and deadened quality of Anna's body that go together with the memory repression, the amount of bound anxiety must be extreme. But anxiety (or better), terror, of what? What was so overwhelming in her childhood that Anna's only resource for coping with it was to fully deaden herself and thus become a scared observer of, rather than a participant in life? To my mind, this can only occur as a reaction to traumatic experiences such as severe physical injury (either through an accident or through sexual or physical abuse), or through witnessing events that are overpoweringly horrifying. As a result of the workshop Anna entered therapy with me.

A Memory Emerges: Rage with Her Father

Though Anna was aware of wanting help, on a deeper level she had a hard time actively participating in our therapeutic endeavor and remained an observer. She talked in great detail about her dissatisfaction with her present life, with her husband, with her work, with her children, but it was a verbal discharge that stayed very much on the surface. When we did physical work, neither grounding nor mobilization techniques had a noticeable effect on her. She went through the motions, didn't dislike it, but stopped after a while, looked at me and waited for my next proposal. Anger built up in me and I decided to use it countertransferentially, hoping that expressing my feelings and concern might evoke some kind of emotional response in her. I told her in an angry tone and with some impatience that I needed more involvement from her and that I felt like a circus trainer. I was not prepared for her strong reaction. First Anna became even more paralyzed, then she grabbed the tennis racket and started beating the foam cube furiously. The same woman who had remained so passive for three months turned into a fury and went on and on, her face contorted in rage.

As she went on, sounds poured out of her, slowly forming into a word — “warlock” — (*Hexenmeister*)¹ and finally she broke down into her harsh sobbing, this time for a long while. The mask on her face melted and her face softened and rounded. When she opened her eyes the look of terror had subsided and was replaced by pain. Still sobbing, she told me that she had recalled her first childhood memory. She saw her father, an icy, distant, Prussian, ordering the whole family around, snapping at her two sisters, his wife, and her for the slightest infraction. The threat of being battered seemed to be in the air. She saw herself paralyzed by fear. And that was how she felt with me, paralyzed by fear because she had heard me say that she was doing everything wrong; and when I used the phrase “circus trainer,” she “just had to grab the tennis racket and hit, hit, hit.” During the hitting the memory of her father — the war-

¹*Hexenmeister* denotes the master over witches and the closest English equivalent is “warlock.”

lock/circus trainer — tyrannizing the whole family emerged suddenly, as if illuminated by a spotlight.²

After a short time Anna's body rearranged itself into the old patterns (except for some color in her cheeks and more charge in her eyes), but she could still recall her feeling of rage, though in a somewhat split fashion.

Prior to the outbreak of this rage and the memory of her father Anna did not recall any other conscious rage or anger. She now became aware that there is a stream of distrust and dissatisfaction that derives from the rage that runs through the whole of her life. This dissatisfaction and distrust took the form of sourness with and blame of the people close to her and an avoidance of remote acquaintances. At times the distrust turned into a paranoia with regard to what people think about her. Up until now she had not taken the initiative to change anything in her life, but now she slowly started to change the texture of her life, interrupted by moments of frustration and by setbacks.

As indicated earlier, the word "warlock" plays a key role. When we dealt further with this strong image, Anna found that her father was not only icy, but was also sadistic. He kept her obedient, and she was unable to move away or to express herself in any fashion. She was his preferred target, and looking at her well-shaped body, it was probably his way of handling his sexual feelings.

As important as Anna's breakthrough was, it did not explain the memory loss. I expected earlier memories to emerge, memories that showed with greater clarity why Anna experienced

²As I mentioned earlier, experiences that are accompanied by emotions that are too overwhelming and thus produce too much anxiety become traumatic and may fall to amnesia, while the overwhelming emotions are repressed (in Anna's case, murderous rage). Bioenergetic techniques, like hitting, open the way to rediscover these repressed emotions, and on such a wave of feeling, the traumatic memories may emerge and be recalled. In Anna's case it did not happen through deliberately using the technique of hitting. The experience and practice with hitting was a necessary prerequisite. It needed the momentary negative transference to emotionally stir Anna up to the point where I "became" her father. This phenomenon, together with the key word "circus trainer," revived the repressed impulse to strike back and Anna could actually experience her own impulse!

her father's and her own rage as so catastrophic to necessitate such complete repression. And, after all, where was the mother?

The Man in Her Present Life: Anna's Husband

Anna has been married for over twenty years to a lawyer who is in private practice in a small town. They met when they were students, and they got married when she became pregnant. When she talked about those early times, the relationship seemed to be based on mutual dependence, with little love and occasional sex which ended in pregnancy and finally marriage. Early in their marriage they developed some bonding through struggling together with the difficulties of having a baby while still being students and having little money.

Anna obtained her degree in chemistry in later years, but never worked in her profession because it would have interfered with her husband's need to have her help in his practice. After her third child she started to work in her husband's office as a paralegal, later as the supervisor of the other paralegals. The relationship did not grow more loving; it rather grew more dependent and stayed without passion. The relationship with her children was emotionally sterile and they never played a major role in her life. A lot of her current dissatisfaction piled up from these empty role behaviors and the sexual unfulfillment.

After the burst of fury toward her father, the dissatisfaction turned out to also be a covering veil for a deeply-rooted anger against her husband, whom she held responsible for her dull life and professional stagnation. In her talks with me, it became evident that she never directly talked with her husband about her dissatisfactions. She simply disconnected and went on mechanically with what she thought needed to be done. Anna began to recognize that she repeated the pattern of passivity instead of involvement, which had developed in her family of origin.

Around this time she came into a session very upset. Neighbors had trapped a stone marten (a carnivorous weasel-like animal with sharp teeth and an angry disposition), that had killed some of their pets. Anna saw this small animal, cornered in the

trap, fiercely fighting for its survival, snarling, the eyes red with rage. She said she was stunned by its ferocity, infatuated by its response, and identified with its struggle that she recognized as also her own. When she shared this with me, I remembered my first workshop impression of her as a small, cornered, wild animal. Her biting impulses became available and my work centered on the incongruity between the biting and the terror in her eyes. She now started to express more anger at home, where she had previously felt trapped and imprisoned, and also talked more about herself to her husband, including how cornered she felt as an appendage working for him. He reacted first with depression and withdrawal, and also expressed his disapproval of her being in psychotherapy. But this time, after an initial reaction of despair and resignation, Anna stayed with what felt right to her. She continued her therapy and also continued expressing herself to him; the expression was awkward because she hadn't learned how in her own family, and it had never been previously exercised in her marriage.

With the freeing-up of her assertiveness, she also recovered some of her earlier sexual feelings for her husband. The same awkwardness that she showed in her talk was evident in her sexual approach. She bought black, sexy underwear (something she had never done before), and one evening, while he was watching television, she sat down on his lap in her new lingerie. It would have taken a husband who was more self-possessed and less threatened by his wife's unexpected changes to react with excitement. He looked embarrassed, mumbled something about the expense of such luxurious underwear and turned back to the television. Anna froze—still caught in her reaction to her father. She withdrew, but not for long.

Fire: Anna's Mother

Whenever we had worked with reaching, it was apparent that it was meaningless to Anna. The strong block in her shoulders did not let any feeling through; it was experienced as just a mechanical movement. After getting more feeling into her shoulders through the hitting, and being more secure on her feet

through grounding work, she started to have sexual feelings and also some vague twinges of longing in her chest, motivating her attempts to create more contact with her husband.

After the sexual rejection from her husband, she was at first frozen in anxiety again. We kept working with the reaching and at one point, when I moved my face into her field of vision, her eyes filled with tears. She broke into deep sobbing, but she could not move her arms. They felt paralyzed to her. To me they looked as if they did not belong to her.

Still sobbing, she shared with me what she had been told happened to her mother and herself when she was about four- to six-months old. It was near the end of the war and their house was bombed. There was a fire, and a burning door fell on her cradle and her mother's bed next to it. Obviously nothing happened to her, but her mother was severely injured and spent the next couple of months in a hospital. At this age, Anna must have been totally terrified by the burning door falling on her cradle, and the only person who could have given her some reassurance in connection with this terrifying event had disappeared.

Anna had never experienced deep feeling for her mother. She pitied her for having to live with a sadistic and cold husband, but she never felt any close connection with her mother, good or bad. This story from her childhood was told to her when she was an adult. All her life Anna had had recurrent nightmares of fires, but nobody knew about it because, as a child, she would never call out or go to her parents. She remained paralyzed by fright in her bed until she fell asleep again. Anna had forgotten the story of the burning door and the abrupt separation from her mother until now. She had never really recovered from this early shock, and when I first got to know her, she was walking through life still in shock.

The Beginning of Reaching Out

The material involving the fire story constitutes the second turning point in Anna's therapy. While I held her hand—she was still unable to reach out—she told me her childhood night-

mares. Simultaneously, she sensed that she wanted emotional closeness and physical contact with her husband. She was suspended between her need/desire and anxiety, still remembering her experience with the black underwear. It became clear to her why she was unable to separate from him, even when she was completely dissatisfied with the relationship. The inadequate symbiotic tie with her mother kept her bonded to him without choice. In the therapy, her transference to me now made it possible to work through the various aspects of her relationship with her mother, freeing energy for her adult relationship with her husband and her children. As her husband responded more openly and with acceptance, her anxiety subsided, and she continued to reach out.

A motorcycle accident involving her son accelerated the process. She saw me on the day after her 18-year-old son had a severe accident. She talked about it in a detached fashion as if he had little to do with her. When I confronted her with her detachment, she at first became paralyzed, then started crying and talking about how much she had wished during our last session that I had touched her by putting my hand on her back, but she was unable to say it. She talked about how important it was for her that I can feel what she cannot and that my angry reaction had brought her into touch with her own feelings. I asked her how she would feel if I hugged her, and she replied that she didn't know if it would be too much but that she sensed that she was yearning for it. "And even if I allow myself to be touched I cannot touch you or reach out to you. I would just start crying." I told her that her crying would be alright with me; it would show me that she was concerned and feeling. Tentatively at first she hugged me, then more and more of her body got involved. She cried a little and then started talking about her son, this time with more feeling.

Anna continued to improve; she was happy having found a new relationship with her son which extended also to her daughters, and her relationship with her husband continued to grow more emotionally and sexually intimate. Over time, her body changed significantly. Her limbs were more connected,

her movement more graceful, and her face lost some of its terrified quality. Also, she considered leaving her husband's practice and finding a job of her own.

My Leaving: Reaching Out Continues

Anna's process of becoming closer with her family and of establishing herself in an independent career came to a halt when I told her that I would be leaving for the United States. At first, she didn't react at all and went on with the session as if she hadn't heard me; then she reacted with disbelief. When she returned for the next session, she told me how infuriated and enraged she had been with her family since the last session, labeling it a "destructive burning rage." She also reported that she had two nightmares of "devastating fire that would destroy everything and everybody."

My leaving seemed to have activated the early rage in Anna towards her mother that she could never express before. It took a couple of sessions before she could accept and feel it—against me and her mother.

It was time to tell Anna that I believed she was so furious because she had started to love me as she must have loved her mother, and I, too, was disappearing into nowhere, as her mother had. "And maybe your burning rage comes from your love that was also burning but not responded to." Anna said, "It dawned on me for the first time that I could love you but I think it is true . . . and it is also true for my mother I guess . . . and maybe I am also enraged because that very love makes me so awfully dependent." For the remaining six months of the therapy, Anna mourned my leaving. Yet her life goes on.

Epilogue

I was back in Germany for a couple of days after more than half a year since my leaving. In the meantime, Anna had written a letter asking to see me for a session since something important had happened that she wanted to tell me. During the summer

she had temporarily helped out in the office of a physician friend as an X-ray assistant. She saw many people undressed and had realized a growing distaste, even disgust, particularly with flabby and obese women. It confused and disturbed her, and she hadn't understood what was going on until the night she had a dream about her mother that she could not remember. Upon awakening in the morning, Anna had a vague memory of being in bed with her mother, with the mother pressing her own body against her daughter's. (Anna's mother had been flabby and obese.) Anna felt disgusted and strange envisioning her mother's body, broke into heavy sobbing, close to vomiting, and said, "I hate my mother." It became evident to Anna why it was always important to her that I am slim. She remembered that she was about eight-years-old when the bed scene occurred.

The circle came to a close; this was the age prior to which Anna could not remember anything. The memory block was broken by rage and hate towards her mother — and a memory of possible molestation. Whether this starts a new circle of therapy is to be seen.

References

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