

Psychosis as a Means to Individuation - A case of severe psychosis healed through working with dreams, active imagination and transference. 10th august 2016. Ole Vedfelt. Danish Society for Analytical Psychology. Copenhagen. Length of text 3400 words excl. references

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The subject of this break-out session is healing severe psychosis through working with dreams, active imagination and transference.

From Jung's early writings to his, "Memories, Dreams, Reflections," he suggested that psychosis is a meaningful inner-event. Jung stated in his memoirs that, "...clinical diagnosis gives the doctor a certain orientation but it does not help the patient... the crucial thing is the story... the cure ought to grow naturally out of the patient himself," (Jung 1961, 145-153). Today, these viewpoints are as removed from mainstream psychiatry and psychology as they were in Jung's day. We need descriptions of the complexity of treatments, the multicausality of life stories, and the multifinality of treatment outcomes.

I present a case of a woman who started working with me when she was in her late 30's. We met for two weekly sessions for a period of seven years, with a several follow-up sessions after that. I have an extensive material consisting of dreams and notes which I prepare for a book. I'm pleased to present the essence of this work and look forward to feedback and questions after my presentation.

I am a full Jungian practitioner since 1980. I have post-graduate training in Jungian psychodrama, gestalt and art therapy, body-psychotherapy, and other relevant, trainings. I educate and supervise psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists. Together with my wife and coworkers, I conduct psychotherapy education at the Vedfelt Institute for Integrated Psychotherapy in Denmark. I have published books on male psychology, dreams, consciousness and unconscious intelligence, in various languages. This autumn, Routledge in London will publish my latest book entitled, "A Guide to the World of Dreams - an Integrated Approach to Dreamwork."

The Initial Phase

Susanne, as the client was called, had been referred by Peter, a Jungian psychiatrist. He had participated in a course at an adult education art school where Susanne and her mother had also attended. Susanne had a total breakdown during the course.

During our first session, Susanne was so beside herself that it was almost impossible to carry on a coherent conversation. At several points, she went into micropsychotic states, rocking back and forth, shaking her head and rolling her eyes back. Yet, she could tell that she wanted help in continuing to live when in the future her mother passed away.

To every session she brought dreams she had written down. I concentrated on the most positive and those that suggested transference. In a dream she recounted in the first session, she was: *alone on a beach by a high bluff. A man's arm pointed over her shoulder, helping her to tell the difference between real and fake fossils.* It gave me a picture of person withdrawn into her own nature. Something in her life had fossilized, yet an effort was still being made to distinguish right and wrong, and perhaps, reality from fantasy. Our first session had a dramatic effect on her. She dreamed: *small, insect-like men tried to force their way into her house. There was no possibility of escape.*

In a later dream *a man washed the outside of her window.* Our communicating was always easier in a metaphoric language. I went behind a windowed door in my consultation and played the window cleaner. With me behind glass she talked more freely. We used it to explore her limits for closeness in relations.

After this session she dared to tell me some horrible dreams from before we had started therapy: *A monkey had his head cut off; She fell into a grinder that was going to grind her to pieces. Her dream self exploded into a thousand pieces.* She was often five-years-old in her dreams.

Later she had dreams about dolls. She confessed that she still played with them. I invited her dolls to join us. We were able to communicate through her dolls when Susanne was blocked. Then in a dream *she opened the door and met a postman with kind eyes.*

The Enchanted Forest

Some strange names and initials began to appear in Susanne's dreams. Cryptic messages arrived, piece-by-piece, until she could reveal that they were referring to an "enchanted forest". One day we made a circle of potted plants on the floor and took a walk in her forest. Susanne told of creatures

and events. It was like sandplay without a sandbox: everything took place inside her living world of imagination. I mirrored her and asked about the things I did not understand.

After our first visit to the forest, she dreamed: *she was in the forest with me. She was 5 years old. A big, black dog on a chain came toward us, but I helped her get to safety. She wandered safely beside me and held my hand.* It reassured me that the dog in her dream was chained and that Susanne felt safe next to me.

We went to the enchanted forest once a week, and all the second weekly sessions went to ordinary talk therapy. Susanne played with some small gnomes who lived in the enchanted forest. A deep well led to Mother Hulda, the good, underground mother from Grimm's fairytales. When Susanna was afraid, she could sleep with Mother Hulda. There was also a castle where Susanne was the princess. But there was no king or queen. The castle was ruled by a strict High Gnome who tyrannized and criticized everyone. The whole realm was called Sirifurth, and on the outskirts of Sirifurth was the Glass Dog that could swallow people.

Fragments of a Life

Parallel to our excursions to the forest, our regular talks flowed more easily. I slowly formed a picture of Susanne's life and her early history. I also realized connections between her symbolic inner world and her external life.

To Susanne, Sirifurth was not imaginary, not playfulness, not psychodrama. It was her inner-most reality, in contrast to her external life which was strangely zombie-like.

Susanne's mother had been hospitalized with a post-natal depression for long periods during Susanne's first year of life. Her mother had difficulties relating to and even touching her baby girl. Care of the child had been taken over by a friend of Susanne's mother - and old-fashioned nurse - who, according to Susanne, had no compassion for small children.

Susanne had a mentally ill sister with a failed suicide attempt. Her sister still liked to recount how she, out of jealousy, had abused her little sister: force-fed her, squeezed her fingers and poked her in the eyes when she would not go to sleep.

At the age of five, Susanne had an operation for a condition that left her unable to have children. She said she had been an "impossible brat" at the hospital. She screamed and kicked. She told this almost like a funny anecdote - without visible emotions. She did not seem to be ready to work on this. She had several, long-term hospitalizations with follow-up operations until she was 22 years old.

Her relationship to her father was impenetrable. He had died some years before the start of her analysis. She had only experienced emptiness and emotional numbness in connection with him. Her only thought was, "I never got to know him." The age of five seemed to be crucial to her withdrawal to the The Enchanted Forest with no King and queen.

Early on, Susanne played piano, good at drawing and exceptionally clever at school. She had problems with some teachers, while others protected and helped her. In puberty, she felt betrayed by her best friend who took the boy she was infatuated with as her own boyfriend. This was the beginning of what she called her "mute period," from which she had almost no memories. Her teachers forced her to do her final exams. She passed with flying colors but remembered nothing after that.

I inquired into and encouraged Susanne's positive qualities. She was conscientious, intelligent, had lovable sides, which had attracted friendly helpers. A teacher in high school referred her to a psychoanalyst who helped her get a higher education, which got her a job where she worked on her own in an office. Her boss and colleagues respected both her qualities and her eccentricities.

The analyst got her to move into her own apartment, yet after finishing analysis and her father's death, she moved back in with her mother who took care of everything. They slept in the same bed. Susanne got around in her car, driving between her mother's flat, the library, work and me. Otherwise, she dared not venture out. She had some contact to her extended family. Our contact improved and we rehearsed practical matters in her external life through short role-plays. We left my consultation at times and went to a museum, a supermarket, a cafe etc. She moved back into her own apartment and began to build up a new identity there.

Inner Transformation

At some point, Susanne presented me with a homemade medal and dubbed me, "Knight of Sirifurth". She expanded our excursions to the wasteland where the Glass Dog ruled.

One night she dreamt: *she soared on a kite and I was on the ground holding a thick red string so she would not fly away.*

I received a letter from Peter, the Jungian psychiatrist. The participants from the art course had a reunion. Susanne showed up - without her mother. "You have carried out a miracle," he wrote, "Susanne is a different person." Both Peter's letter and the dream about the red string renewed my faith in the process.

A few times we tried to hoist her up and down a bit inside the Glass Dog with the red string observing and communicating. This seemed to work as graduated exposure and desensitization.

In our regular talks, Susanne could now tell that, when the Glass Dog swallowed her, she could not remember anything afterward. The Glass Dog had seriously begun to "rampage" during her "mute period" in puberty. Later as an adult, she would wake up in her car in unknown places at night without knowing how she had gotten there. Once in a fit of jealousy, she almost ran down a man. But the Glass Dog had swallowed her so nothing happened to the man. As new, dramatic turn came when the Princess, the small gnomes and the knight lured the High Gnome into the dungeon beneath the castle. This brought a bluster of daring into Susanne's everyday life. But the Glass Dog went on a rampage soon after. She brought a drawing to a session that depicted a pair of eyes above a map. She whispered that it was a rebus for the Glass Dog's name. After a little guesswork, I came up with: "We see land." That meant that the Glass Dog's name was "Weesylant." I wanted to give her back her drawing, but it scared her: now that she had revealed his name, he would take revenge. I saw the Glass Dog as a coping strategy. I suggested that we put him in my freezer. Then we could take him out if we needed to negotiate with him later. Soon after, Susanne reported that she could not sleep because the High Gnome was making noise in the dungeon. She brought a drawing of the High Gnome's horrible, troll-like face, which we also put in my freezer.

A transitory phase

These changes sucked the energy out of the Enchanted Forest. Broadly, she transgressed from a psychotic to a narcissistic layer in her personality, swinging ambivalently between inflation and deflation.

Outwardly, Susanne began to reconquer inner developmental potentials and social skills that were lost in the psychosis. She had conflicts at work and in the new friendships she tried to create, but this also provided water for the therapeutic mill. An erotic transference with me led to a work through of past unhappy infatuations. Thoughts of suicide were examined in relationship to her mother and sister. The transference was characterized by splitting and projective identification. Susanne allowed herself critical dreams about me, and I had to get supervision for my own counter-transference.

Through this, her ego strengthened and her ability to mentalize increased. Her relationship to me reestablished on a new level. In time, Susanne succeeded in things she had fought for, such as getting supplementary education, having a pay raise, making a few friends, joining a choir, painting aquarelles, etc.

A Traumatic Turning Point

A crucial turn came 4 years into her therapy. I was on a long vacation. When I got home, the symptoms had returned which had earlier led to Susanne's operations. A doctor doing the objective examination was worried. If there was no improvement in a month, operation might be necessary. Susanne was spooked.

Before the symptoms returned, Susanne went to a female healer who was involved in a meditation group that performed Distance Healing. A clairvoyant girlfriend of the healer said Susanne carried a lot of hatred within her. Susanne protested but the clairvoyant replied that she Susanne was projecting. The healer wanted to mediate their disagreement. She had Susanne lie down on a cot, receive healing at her Heart Chakra, and meditate on light, love and forgiveness.

Susanne wanted to cancel a meeting with the two women, but she was afraid they would feel rejected and send her mean thoughts. Yet, the suddenly occurred physical symptoms and gave Susanne a legitimate reason for cancellation.

A session about a dream just after the healing made Susanne realize that she had submitted to the healer's demands about light and love, just like when she had to be nice at the hospital.

Still she got no relief. Now she was anxious about being re-hospitalized and had terrible dreams:

She dreamed she was five years old in the hospital after a violent temper tantrum. As punishment, a nurse had given her an injection of potassium cyanide with a giant syringe. It made all her bones dissolve. She was on her back in her hospital bed and dared not move out for fear of becoming fluid like an amoeba. A large, black bird flew toward her and pecked at her. She did not dare move for fear of disappearing entirely.

The dream had condensed the syringe for *potassium cyanide* with a pump used for enemas before an operation. The nurse reminded Susanne of a particular nurse with whom she had raging fights.

Her sister had tried to commit suicide with poison. Fear of death and total formlessness was when the anesthesia took effect. The black bird was from the Cinderella fairytale where birds had pecked out the eyes of the sisters, because they were mean, just like Susanne.

The Psychotic Construction

I asked myself. Was it only a physical state and a paranoid relapse or was it also an opening to a constellation that occurred so unconsciously that it could only be experienced in her body and acted out in actual life?

Susanne's ego was actually more integrated and her mentalizing ability had increased. The narcissistic transference had been processed, so I could unequivocally be both inner healer and the Good Father. I combined methods from psychodrama, art therapy and body psychotherapy.

We explored her flailing and kicking and headshaking as at the hospital; carefully, slowly, step-by-step so she was always able to mentalize her experiences in contact with me.

Experiential reorganizing where Susanne experienced what she had needed in these situations always followed emotional release. For instance, her father should console and support her. Either I played the role following her direction or she drew a picture of it.

Earlier in our therapy, Susanne had revealed a psychotic fear of being undressed on a cot and being touched by female physiotherapists. She had laid there completely lifeless. She painted the physiotherapists as twisted, demonic figures. In her dreams, this melded with her mother's, the healer's, her nannies' and nurses' clumsy caresses and physical abuse.

A guided relaxation took her back to the operating table. After, she drew something that could have been the multifaceted operating lamp and eyes staring out above surgical masks. She suddenly remembered the name Miss Weasing, who was her "evil spirit" with the enema pump. The name Weasing somehow harmonized with the Glass Dog's name, Weesyländ.

Back home, she painted aquarelles about the hospital. Miss Weasing was probably an uneducated young candy striper who was alone at night in an understaffed hospital and quite desperate because Susanne made the other children restless. She had locked Susanne up, force-fed her and pinched her.

Later, Susanne drew herself as a little girl about to be thrown into an oven and burnt like the witch in Hansel and Gretel, because she was evil. The oven was probably a light therapy cubicle Susanne had fought against with mortal fear. We then turned the image completely around: we took Weesyländ and the High Gnome out of the fridge and burned them in my woodstove.

Susanne's symptoms disappeared. Her doctor wondered about it.

At the end of a more extended period of exploration, the High Gnome was her favorite stuffed toy and nightly blanket. Her mother thought he had become disgusting and threw him out when Susanne was hospitalized. But at night in the hospital he appeared together with the small gnomes that became her playmates. Not until later, when Susanne got home from the hospital, did the High Gnome become strict. He showed up at night full of criticism and blaming Susanne for things she did wrong.

The End of the Story

And then a new childhood history emerged from her memory. Susanne rediscovered a good relationship to her father. He read her fairytales and helped her with homework. He was interested in books and shared an interest for literature and art and philosophy with her. Her mother was jealous and demeaned her father because his interests had no practical uses.

In the external world, Susanne entered into a harmonious marriage with a man 10 years older than her. She continued working and was creative and musical in her free time. She made female friends. Seven years after we began therapy, we ended it.

She got in touch with me 3 years later for support after her mother died, and four years later about a step-grandchild.

I truly wanted to use extracts from her extensive material in teaching and for publication. She gladly gave me the permission because it might benefit others. We made a project together where we met for 10 sessions to compare our experiences of the process. Susanne concluded that she had a PhD in herself. She acknowledged her earlier psychoanalyst's necessary efforts to socialize her, but without acknowledgement of magic forest she had felt like an empty shell.

Today, she is still doing well. Susanne sends a scanned aquarelle every Christmas. The yearly meetings of her old painting group became a tradition.

Individuation

Susanne matches most DSM-IV criteria for schizophrenia. However, I want to put this in perspective as an individuation theme.

Good mothering in the first year of life is crucial to individuation and relations later in life (Stern 1985) (Mahler et al. 1975).

Abandonment in early life phases tends to create a sadistic superego and the primitive forerunners to this (Kernberg 1976). This matches the lack of King and Queen at the castle, and that the sadistic High Gnome was in charge, and also the consciousness-devouring Glass Dog. Early abandonment creates vulnerability to trauma (Luthar & Zigler, 1991). Susanne's parents had been forbidden to visit her during her hospitalization at the age of five. That was standard procedure in some pediatrics wards, because of separation issues. Children resigned and became obedient.

From ages 5-7, leap in cognitive development means that children are better at constructing meaning of incomprehensible events, even if that meaning is unrealistic (Taylor 1999) (Vedfelt 2013). The Enchanted Forest was a developmental opportunity that was hibernating until Susanne found understanding surroundings.

In puberty, Susanne's could not pass the test but kept the Enchanted Forest alive.

38-40, the age Susanne sought me out, according to Jung, is a common turning point in individuation.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation appeared in the form of imagined playmates which are found in the childhoods of many creative people. Mother Hulda gave her comfort and consolation. The High Gnome acted like a brake. The Glass Dog was the last resort in impossible situations. Even the physical symptoms can be seen as a constellation of an archetypal bad mother experienced in the body and enacted in actual life.

Susanne is one of the cases in my entire career I have learned from most, about reaching out to the vulnerable areas in any human being. To me, this is testament of the ordinary human validity of Susanne's experiences.

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