THE SECRET OF OUR OWN MORTALITY

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Abstract: *In this paper, the author tries to underline some aspects about one of the most important secrets: the secret of our own mortality. It is a paradox, all of us know that we will eventually die, but this knowledge is quite unbearable and makes us anxious, which is why it is very difficult for us to represent our death.*

This secret of mortality is related to what Freud called “the biological rock” – our supreme and ultimate limit! – which represents the constitutional, biological dimension of the human being in its uniqueness and the way in which our psyche manages this reality, impossible to change.

The first part of paper is an exploration in the nature of secrets, healthy and pathogenic ones, known or unknown, conscious and unconscious. There are secrets which represent the intimate core of every person, what Winnicott called “an incommunicado element”. This is very precious, secret and sacred, and allows us to maintain a constant creative dialogue with ourselves and others while also ensuring our psychic sanity. There are also other secrets, pathogenic ones, which we encounter in the perverse, narcissistic structures and that disturb the relations with others. There is a third category of secrets which we call ‘The secrets of Polichinelle’. They are like taboo subjects, as nobody touches them, but everybody knows them. In this category we find all the secrets connected to sexuality and, as a normal extension of them, the secrets linked to our own mortality.

In the second part of the paper, the author presents some vignettes from a case, which illustrate the theme of loss and the difficulty in accepting the limits set by the biological rock.

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The secret and all that is connected to it is both attractive and challenging. However, it can also be frightening, encouraging us to mobilize many defenses against it. In the psychoanalytic process, we have the question ‘To know or not to know?’, a question that, according to one’s answer, selects those who enter in psychotherapy and those who don’t. The difference doesn’t consist only in the presence or absence of emotional problems – because all of us have them in some degree! – but rather what makes the difference is how people who choose this process have the courage and determination to find many unknown things, secrets about themselves and others.

Etymologically, the word ‘secret’ comes from the Latin word ‘*secretum*’ which means separate, distinct, and has several meanings: on one hand, secret means ‘mystery, under cover, what is not discovered, known, explained’, and on the other hand, secret means ‘confidential, privacy, the core of science, art’ (DEX - The Dictionary of Romanian Language, 968).

We therefore observe two meanings of the secret: first, it is something which is hidden and separate (from others or from one’s self) and second, it is something intimate, connected to privacy, the essence of a thing or of a person.

There is also a third meaning of the secret, best outlined in the expression ‘the secret of Polichinelle’. A comedic figure of the marionette theatre from 16th century France, Polichinelle would tell different anecdotes about people, politics and society. In one of them, Polichinelle plays the part of someone who committed an illegality, breaking the law and waiting to be sentenced for it. When the lawyer showed him the law that had been broken, Polichinelle tore the paper, as if, should the paper cease to exist, he was to remain unpunished. In this story, the secret has this meaning of something that everybody knows, but we believe it to be secret, in any case something we ignore or do not want to know about. (The Dictionary of Words, Expressions and Famous Quotes, 1969, p 362-363)

Starting from all these meanings, we can talk about a first category of secrets, a constructive, creative one, which represents the intimate, private space or essence of something or somebody. In his work ‘Communication and Not Communication Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites’, Winnicott

said: *“Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true, that each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact, unfound.....At the center of each person is an incommunicado element, and this is sacred and most worthy of preservation.”* (Winnicott, 1963, p. 240)

This non-communicating element represents the intimate and sacred core of every person and it develops at the beginning of our lives in the relation between mother and child through the internalization of a good relationship with the maternal object, providing the child with ‘the continuity of being’, a feeling which creates the process of integration and a state of unity.

So, we have two types of communication: one is an explicit communication with the external world and others – which is generally agreeable and satisfactory – and another communication with ourselves, which is silent and non-communicated for the others; this communication with our inner world gives us the feeling of real. The two types of communication coexist. Should the silent communication with one’s own self be subtle and smooth, without too much interference from the outside, allowing the person to develop a true self, then the external communication with others will be much richer and enjoyable. (Winnicott, *Communication and Not Communication Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites*, p 241).

On the other hand, all of us have a partially ‘false self’ which protects our ‘true self’. However, this partially ‘false self’ doesn’t affect our state of vitality and freedom. Winnicott said one more thing: the satisfaction of need is not the only thing that is important, the quality of relation also remains decisive. There is a big difference between a mother which feeds her baby feeling a state of pleasure and dedication towards him and another mother who nurses her baby and experiences great anxiety in regards to his voraciousness, perceived as an attack on her breast. These experiences are felt in different ways by the two babies – and mothers, too – even if both of them were fed. Winnicott emphasized that these kinds of experiences can build a feeling of trustworthiness or, on the contrary, lead to a feeling of betrayal and mistrust, when the baby feels ‘fobbed off’ by a nursing that wished to be satisfactory yet was actually not. (Winnicott, 1963, p.232)

Regarding the baby, Winnicott added something very important: *‘Per contra, the infant’s experienced aggression, that which belongs to muscle erotism, to movement, and to irresistible forces meeting immovable objects, this aggression, and the ideas bound up with it, lends itself to a process of*

placing the object, the placing the object separate from the self, in so far as the self has begun to emerge as an entity' (Winnicott, 1963, p. 232)

This means that only when the baby - with his own effort - sucks the milk from his mother's breast - looking for and creating the breast- only in these conditions, he has a sense of feeling real and a state of vitality! Otherwise, just being feed by mother, without his own participation, (that means the mother must let him to create the breast!) it is not only a dissatisfaction, but most important, it is a very faded experience, a poor life without joy and vitality, some ingredients that are so precious for our life!

So, this "*incommunicado element*"- which always remains secret and sacred -, and this *mutuality* in the relation between mother and infant, both together offer us in time a constant creative dialogue with ourselves and others, thus ensuring our psychic sanity and vitality.

However, there is another type of secrets which can have pathogenic effects and risk creating compartmentalization or/and dissociation within the personality of the person keeping them, but also in the person receiving them. In the majority of situations, a secret works as a defense against unpleasant feelings. We keep secrets because they elicit feelings of shame in us. We are afraid that somebody else, a person we hold dear, will view us differently or, even worse, reject us entirely. We also keep secrets because we feel guilty, knowing that if we talk about that secret, we will hurt somebody dear etc. Otherwise, we keep secrets because we are afraid of consequences and this fear is overwhelming and prevents us from clearly seeing what solutions we can find. In all these situations, there is a neurotic psychic function, the person who keeps the secret cares for others, he is not indifferent to the other's reactions or feelings should he reveal the secret.

There is another situation in which the secret is considered by the person who keeps it as an advantage, allowing him to be one step ahead, his purpose being to control and dominate.

In her paper 'Secrets and Lies', Milagros Cid (2019), emphasized the connection between secret and anality, both of them having the act of keeping something inside in common. We know that the persons described by Freud as having an 'anal character' have some specific features: stubbornness, tidiness, greed, the need for control in the relation with others. They don't reveal too much about themselves, are quite suspicious, prudent and attentive over their own behavior and others', too. First, they wait for others' actions and only after this will they react. The other is seen as a separate subject, but

a subject who can be dangerous or/and intrusive. The persecutory anxieties and the fear of invasion are very present for these persons. As a consequence, these persons have a small investment in others. They keep their distance in their relations and the need for control and domination prevail. We can expect these subjects to have and keep secrets, like something precious, or dangerous, or dirty.

Other situations are those in which the secrets are kept by the narcissistic perverse or psychopathic person. They view others as objects which can be used and manipulated. It is in this way that secrets serve their interests. For the perverse narcissist, there is a lack of empathy and consideration for others and for psychopath persons there is a striking lack of guilt.

In all these situations, the pathogenic effect of keeping secrets involves not only hiding and perverting truth but also splitting the Ego. Inevitably, the person who keeps the secret has to create a special place in his mind, to somehow encapsulate the secret, forcing their own Ego into fragmentation. In external reality, this person develops a duplicitous behavior in relation with others, trying to keep his secret above all. Still, all his defenses don't work completely – some gestures, words, lapsus, mistakes and so on, betray that person in relation with others. The secret is felt even if it is not revealed, put into words. For instance, in the case of children who – in spite of the parents' attitude and rationalizations such as 'The children mustn't know, they will suffer, they don't understand, they are too young and so on' – always know and feel when the truth is kept from them, when something is hidden.

Paradoxically, while the parents hide the secret in the name of love and with their best intentions, the children feel this as an act of betrayal and aggression and their relation will be deeply affected. A child doesn't know all the reasons of his parent, why he lies and hides the truth. The child will perceive that situation in a confused way and his Ego risks splitting in order to manage it. He risks losing trust in his own perception of reality and has this following dilemma in mind: "Is what my mum and dad tell me true or is what I see and feel myself true?" Unfortunately, in many cases, because the child needs to be content with his parents, he will sacrifice his own correct perception in the benefit of unconscious complicity with his parents. The cost paid by the child in such a situation is huge: development of a false self, an inhibition of thinking, different defenses or other symptoms.

In one of my consultations at the hospital, I saw a mother who had just given birth to a child who lived only a couple of hours before passing away.

Additionally, the mother, because of medical complications, had to undergo surgery to have her uterus removed. In this way, she suffered a double loss: the loss of her infant and the loss of her uterus and, as consequence, the impossibility to have another child.

Fortunately, the young woman had another child, a five-year old boy, to whom she felt a strong connection. This boy wanted another brother or sister. During the mother's pregnancy, as her belly was growing, the child would stay close enough to hear the sounds from within and even talk to the unborn baby. He would embrace his mother and ask her when the new baby will come. So, in the present situation, after the loss of the new-born, the mother was thinking what to tell her son when she would arrive home.

The next day, I saw the mother again. She came with her husband, visibly affected by the loss of her child. Both of them told me what they thought about this situation and what they will say to their son: she (my patient) wasn't pregnant and she didn't expect a child. She had just had indigestion and that's why her belly grew and she had to come to hospital. Now, she feels well and she will come back home.

I realized how deep their suffering was and that it was why, not only did they negate the external reality, but, more than this, they completely 'forgot' the previous reality, the time when she was pregnant. I reminded them that their son talked to, heard and embraced the baby from the belly of his mother and all family – parents, child and grandparents – talked about him all the time, waiting for the birth.

At first, the parents looked at me with surprise, then, they looked at each other and realized the absurdity of their story. The double loss determined them to find a magical solution, ignoring a very painful reality as if it didn't exist. Finally, they understood suffering is inevitable and they have to work through the process of mourning.

Fortunately, there was also another case with a different outcome, among my consultations at the hospital.

A young girl of thirteen arrived together with her mother. The girl was hospitalized in the Paediatric Department for some digestive disturbances: stomach pain, sickness and emesis. All medical investigations had been conducted and the results were good, she didn't have anything severe. When I saw her, I remarked the girl seemed older than her real age. She was serious and she looked at me very carefully. I asked her if she noticed some connections between her symptoms and a recent event or something

that happened at home. Very quickly, she started to talk, as if she had been waiting for this moment for a long time. I was very moved by how clear she described the situation of her family, the conflict-ridden relation between her parents, her efforts to understand both her mother and her father, and the difficulties in containing all these heavy feelings. She was worried about her mother, who she had noticed was feeling worse in the last months. I was very surprised to realize how mature she was and I felt as if I were talking to an adult. She was asking me to help her, but not from the position a child, nor that of a victim, but rather, from an adult position, an adult who evaluated a problematic situation and is trying to find solutions for it.

As for her mother, she was looking at her daughter in awe, unable to grasp how easily the child could speak, how she could reveal household secrets with ease. There was also admiration in her mother's eyes. The fact that the young girl hadn't developed a false Self – the way her mother did – and refused to enter in complicity with both her parents was a good sign of psychic sanity, delivering a good prognostic in regards to her future development and life.

All these secrets are conscious, kept and managed differently by each one of us depending on the situation, and they can have pathogenic effects. Still, we must underline that not all secrets are pathogenic, as we don't have to directly evacuate all we know, we should select what we say and also take into account consequences.

As for unconscious secrets, these are best expressed during the analytic process through an array of defenses and symptoms utilized by a subject. These can be viewed as disguises masking emotional experiences that could not be processed, and which are thus expressing themselves in the psychic space. Psychosomatic disturbances are also in this category of unconscious secrets, although these can be better 'seen' through the somatic suffering they cause.

As I stated at the beginning of the paper, there is a special category of secrets which we call 'The secret of Polichinelle'. They are like taboo subjects, nobody touches them but everybody knows them. In this category we have all the secrets connected to sexuality and, as a normal extension of them, the secrets linked to our own mortality.

Of course, we all know that we will one day die, but it is almost impossible to represent our own death. It remains something abstract, at most a sophistication of mind exercised in forms of art: in a painting or a theatre performance, we hear it in a requiem or read it in a book. Still, death is always present in our day-to-day life. As specialists who work in hospitals, we see the

sick people, the old people or others who suffer from some chronic, incurable afflictions and we realize how limited physical resources are in these cases.

But we don't need to work in hospital in order to acknowledge the phenomena of death: every day, strands of hair fall off, sometimes, a nail or a tooth breaks. As we grow old, wrinkles appear in the corner of our eyes, osteoporosis, paradontosis, scleroses appear in our bodies, and we reach menopause, andropause. All these mean that... we are getting old!

Even so, the death remains somewhere far away from us until a moment comes when we begin losing our loved ones from our lives. And only then do we realize what it means, and their loss confuses and overwhelms us.

In 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud (1915) described the two processes – mourning and melancholia – as being distinctive, but I believe that, sometimes, both of them coexist because, when we lose a loved one, we feel as if we have lost a part of ourselves. The Italian words: 'Partire è un po' morire' means to say goodbye is to die a little. That's why, the suffering is so intense and the process of mourning so difficult to go through.

On the other hand, we flirt in secret with the illusion of immortality. For the people who do something very important and creative in various fields, we say "Fame makes them eternal!" Our narcissism is always fed with eulogies, gratifications, prizes, awards and recompenses, all give us a feeling of power, superiority, uniqueness. We feel like gods, immortals. More than this, we know how fragile and vain these illusions are, they last for as long as we are on top but fall apart quickly when we are knocked back a peg or when we get sick. In its place a huge anxiety emerges.

In his 1915 paper 'The Actual Considerations about War and Death', in the chapter called 'Our relation with death', Freud remarked that our relation with death is not at all a sincere one, as we like to say or wish. We declare that we know we will die because, as "we each owe life a death!", but in secret, nobody believes in his/her own death. More precisely, it is impossible for us to represent our death. However, the simplest truth is that death is the most normal, inevitable and irreversible phenomenon!

For a better understanding of this relation, Freud mentioned two aspects: the relation between the primitive human and death and the way in which our unconscious understands the experience of death.

The primitive human had two opposite attitudes: on one hand, he admitted death, being cruel and without mercy with his enemies, he killed with pleasure

and without hesitation, killing being a normal act for him. On the other hand, he had doubts regarding his own death, he couldn't represent it.

Freud considered that a huge step in the history of humanity was taken when humans had to face the loss of loved ones and confront the pain this caused them. This was an intermediate position between the cruel and merciless attitude towards enemies and the attitude towards one's own death. The way in which one manages the loss of someone dear lies in that which is specific to and characterizes our feelings, as human beings, respectively affective ambivalence. Consequently, those close to us are loved and hated at the same time and that's why, after a time, their loss can be a little bit more bearable.

In what concerns our unconscious, we all know that it cannot bear negation and it is timeless. Thus, it cannot accept its own inexistence, and the infantile phantasies of omnipotence, present in our mind, even if diminished in time, continue to be present – with different intensity – throughout our entire life.

In 1923, in his paper “Ego and Id”, Freud (1923, p. 306) emphasized that our Ego is first a somatic one and it depends on the functions of the body. We always rely on a good functioning of our body and we are affected by its vicissitudes and limits.

Later, in 1926, in “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety” Freud (1926, p. 312- 313, 344-347) returned to the theme of loss and mourning and, after an excursion into psychopathology, he admitted that the most powerful anxiety is determined by the loss of a loved one. The strong investment of the object, the state of helplessness and total dependence of the infant on his mother from the beginning of life, lead us to react with pain, anxiety and depressive moods when we lose or are separated from a loved one.

At the end of his life, in 1937, Freud wrote “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” which represents a rather pessimistic perspective toward psychoanalysis and the therapeutic process. Finally, nothing guarantees the therapeutic success because nobody can predict the future, what will happen then and how we will react to the events of life. Still, if we can talk about therapeutic efficiency, we must restrain this only to the present time and how the person feels in this time.

At the end of his paper, Freud reminds us of the biological rock – our supreme and ultimate limit – which represents the biological dimension of the human being in its uniqueness and the way in which our psyche manages this reality, impossible to change. (Freud, 1937, p. 361)

Now, I will present some vignettes from two sessions from a case which reflects this theme of loss and acceptance of limits given by the biological rock.

I called these vignettes:

Florence. The secret of the garden with rose and wild horses

Florence began analysis a very short time after the death of her father. He died following a severe illness that developed very fast in the last phase.

The reason for coming to therapy was obvious. Florence was overwhelmed by the pain of loss, she cried almost all the time and even when she went back to work, she was absorbed by her pain and all activities were done somehow automatically, without interest and pleasure. She told me she didn't know what to do and, despite the severe and chronic affection of his father, it was almost as if she couldn't understand why she had lost him.

Florence is around fifty years old and has a beautiful family with two daughters and a loving husband. She works in the cultural field and she loves what she does. She communicates well with others, open and sincere, and placing her trust and interest in other people.

She was an only child in a family with parents who loved her, caring and attentive to her needs. She felt protected, understood and accepted by them. She had a special relationship with her father, as they shared the same opinions about different subjects, social, political and so on. They advised each other about important things or just ordinary, daily smaller things. Almost in every situation, she called him and they talked. She didn't do this prompted by a feeling of insecurity or a need for confirmation, but just because she felt understood and listened to by him. As for the father, he was always quite an anxious person and he became worried if she didn't call. In fact, if she were to think of a negative aspect of her father, Florence could say that he worried too much, he was an anxious man.

For her, the loss of her father was very difficult to accept. Many questions revolved in her mind: why he didn't fight back more, maybe she should have done more, maybe other doctors could have helped, or another clinic, or maybe they should have gone earlier to the clinic etc. She was trying to find purpose in religion but it was not enough for her to know he was just sick, old and died, that this was it.

The first months of analysis, she talked a lot about his suffering: the diagnosis, what kind of interventions he had done, what treatment he followed.

When the final diagnosis was found, they decided to go to a clinic outside of Bucharest, where he had to undergo surgery. Unfortunately, his body was already weak, the treatment from before had been too strong and finally, he couldn't fight it anymore.

Florence told me all this with a mixture of sadness, anxiety and frustration. She thought about what could happen in the future. Maybe her mother would die and so on. But, above all, she missed her father a lot. She wanted so much to see him again, to talk to him. She was feeling a wistful longing for him, all the time. She kept his cell phone in her purse and once, because she couldn't find her phone, she called herself using her father's phone. Later, when she looked at her phone's received calls and saw his number, she was shocked for a moment. Also, at home, in the bathroom, she kept some of his bath towels, perfectly arranged on a shelf she could easily look at. And sometimes, she opened the wardrobe and touched and smelled his shirts.

In fact, all her states followed the stages of mourning: denial, anger, guilt and depression. With every session, we tried to understand the meaning of her feelings together and to understand and clarify her thoughts.

After some months, around half a year, she stopped crying every time. She was feeling a little bit calmer. She had fully taken on her professional activities again, being present and active at work and at home, with her family: the girls, her husband, her mother. Still, she missed her father a lot. He was always present in her mind.

In that time, Florence started to frequently travel to the countryside, to the house where her father and grandparents lived before and where her father was buried. After her father's death, at the beginning, she mostly viewed this house as a duty and a bit of a burden, since she had to take care of it, of the garden, and so on. But in time, slowly, things started to change. Once, when she went there, she tidied and went through his things, discovered a notebook with his writings about daily things to do and she kept it. In autumn, she planted some fruit trees and roses in the garden. In winter, she kept the house warm and got some new pieces of furniture. When the spring came, the garden was cheerful, the trees bloomed and the house was nice and cozy.

At the end of summer, in one of the sessions, Florence told me about a recent dream that featured her father. This dream was very clear, as opposed to others about him, which remained vague or could no longer be recalled.

She related her dream: "I was in a house, but it was not my actual house, nor was it the one from the past. My father rung the door and I opened it. I

remarked that he looks very well, bright and relaxed, even if I knew that he was sick. He wore light-colored clothes, some beige trousers and a white shirt. He said: "I am sorry that I left but I couldn't stay anymore. I cannot eat, I cannot drink". I invited him in the house but he refused, he said "no, I must go". I told him "Let us take you" but he answered me quickly "No, I will go alone", and I knew that he was going to the hospital again".

I asked Florence what she thought this dream could suggest, if she could think of some connections or associations, but she told me that she didn't think of anything in particular, she just noticed how bright he was in her dream. She was happy about it and, in a way, she considered the dream as a good sign from him.

At the beginning of autumn, after a visit to the house in the countryside, Florence talked about the richness of colors and fruits from the garden, about gathering the harvest. She talked about the beautiful roses and flowers. She and her mother had made apple jam from the fruits of the garden's trees.

She said:

(F) "My mum and I made the apple jam together, we discovered a special recipe and indeed, the jam is very tasty. I liked making jam together so much. It was the first time for me. Before, only mum cooked, I just ate it, but now, I became a producer and even a maker.

(she smiles then continues after a short pause)

You know, if somebody told me before that, one day, I will make jam and enjoy it so much, I wouldn't have believed them! All my life, I was more of a city person, the countryside and its activities didn't draw me in anymore. Of course, I saw how involved my father was in these kinds of activities, he always brought us a lot of fruits. He encouraged me to eat them, saying that the fruits are natural, without chemicals. He took care of them, poured his love in them, but at that time, I didn't pay too much attention. Then, after my father brought fruits, my mum made some special comfitures, a lot of jam and so on. We always had all these sweet delicacies in the house, we ate, we offered them to others, and to me, this was all very normal. Now, when I look at myself, I don't believe that I am this person who did so much, taking care of the house, working in the garden, planting trees, picking fruit, making jam...

Now, the garden is so beautiful, we intend to plant new fruit trees and flowers. If I were to sum it up in a few simple words, I would say this: I feel that I have found my roots there and I am happy because of it!

And I am so glad that my aunt is still alive and she lives there, close to my father's house, and we talk and enjoy spending time together, it is so special for me, I feel that I am reconnected with my childhood again, with those happy moments, feelings, people. I remember when I was a little child, we had a kind of storehouse and a basement, as extensions to our house. In this storehouse, there was an ancient dresser made of wood with many drawers in which my grandmother kept rose and some special nutmeat comfitures. I remember her voice when she'd tell me: "Go and take something good from dresser".

(a moment of silence)

You know, I feel that my father is inside me and I have become him, doing what he liked to do, continuing his work."

A short time after this session, after a weekend, Florence came to me and spoke about the trip made with her family in a special place from the Danube Delta. This place has a sandy ground with sand dunes and a desert landscape. People could come here if they went through an oak forest with a subtropical aspect. In this forest, somehow weird, the so-called 'wild' horses roam freely. In fact, these horses had belonged to the people who lived there for a long time, but when they moved on, they left their horses. That's why they are so-called "wild horses".

While she was speaking, I thought about those horses, domesticated before and wild and free after. Could they be dangerous? Should they remain free or should they be tamed? What are they for Florence? What forces, fears, desires, creative tendencies are revealed from her unconscious after the death of her father?

Florence continues:

(F) The trip was nice... but, whatever I do, I stop and I want to call my father, to talk to him. I feel a wistful longing for him. (silence) I had a new dream with him but I don't remember what.

I ask her if she thought more about the last dream.

(F) I don't know, the dream has a connection to him or something about him. I don't recognize the house I was in, yet in dream it was my house. He rung the door and I opened it. As I told you, he wore a white shirt and some beige trousers. He looked good, bright. What he said sounded very clear: I am very sorry I left but I had to, I couldn't stay anymore, I couldn't eat and drink." Then, he told me that he had to go, I said: We can take you but he said "no, I must go alone, I'll take my car" and I knew that was going to the hospital. In the dream, I knew he was sick, too."

While she was speaking, I was thinking of the way in which adults talk with children about the loss of somebody dear to them. Children don't know anything about death; this is an abstract concept for them. They don't represent it. But we, as adults, can describe some parts of it. When a child asks us: Why did my grandmother/grandfather/another loved one/my pet die? we tell him that the body of this person couldn't function anymore: he/she cannot eat, drink, breathe, speak, move anymore. And in the moment when the body can't do all these things, that person dies.

In fact, we communicate in the same way as adults. In hospitals, when a patient dies, the doctor explains to family members the severe medical condition in which a vital organ – the heart, brain, liver, kidney – didn't resist anymore and finally, the body succumbed. In fact, we talk about the biological rock of being, impossible to change!

I said to Florence:

(A) You know, in the dream, your father told you what we, as adults, generally say to our children when somebody dear died: his body didn't function anymore, he/she cannot breathe, speak, eat, drink or move anymore. In fact, all these mean... to die!

After a moment of silence:

(F) You know, I was aware that my father didn't feel well, he also knew that. And it was very difficult with all these things to do, going to hospital, doctors, coming back home. During the last evening before he passed, he saw me very desperate and he asked me leave the room. He stayed with my mum, who irritated me so much because she was looking for the candles. When they remained alone, he told her "I am tired" and it was true, after that, he died...

He was so careful not to disturb me, to make me worry, he didn't want me to see how much he suffered! And I would have done anything to help him. When we went to the clinic for investigations and for the surgery he was supposed to get later, I thought and hoped that he would live another ten years after the intervention. Then, when I saw how bad he felt, I thought that even if he were to live just one year more, it would still be good... (she started to cry). I would have done everything for him, to save him. And I was exasperated when I realized that he didn't want to fight, he couldn't remain motivated. To be very honest, I felt that he didn't want to fight, but I didn't want to recognize it. In the last summer vacation, I asked him to come with us but he didn't want to. He told me: "I know my body very well, I cannot go with you". And in the last evening, I entered in the room and he said 'Get out!

Don't stay here, go to rest.' I realize that he didn't want me to see how much he was suffering, to see that he was finally... dying. "

While she was speaking, I thought of a patient from hospital who I had recently seen, the same day, a couple of hours before the session with Florence. This male patient was a family friend and his daughter asked me to go and see him. He had surgery and his medical state was severe. When I entered the ward, I saw him resting in a bed, weakened, with a drip in his arm, the oxygen mask on the pillow and some drainage tubes coming out of his body. But in spite of this critical condition, when he saw me, the first thing he said was: "Georgiana, please, excuse me, I couldn't brush my teeth."

I also remembered my grandmother, who I lost many years ago, and who, being on the brink of unconsciousness, pulled her dress down to cover her legs after the doctor who had examined her exposed her legs.

Florence continues:

(F) I told you that during this trip I felt the need to talk with him again. This sandy place is a special one. The sea was there first, and after a while the sea drew back and only the sand remained, like a desert. I looked around and it was so desolate, only empty houses, without people, without life, which gave you a strange sensation!

We went to a house to eat and rest little bit. In that house, two women (the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law) cooked for us. The young woman told us that it is difficult to live here, there is no doctor, if somebody feels ill, he must go to the next town. When her child was cold and had fever, she took care of him, gave him an antipyretic and finally, he recovered. And at school, there is only one teacher who teaches eight children of different ages. While she was talking, I was looking around and the place was desolate. In the yard of their house, there were three upside-down boats, two of them used as banquettes and one used as a decorative object. The last was filled with cacti, the flowers of the desert! The women were so talkative and lively, in fact, they talked all the time. Most of the time, they lived alone because their men are fishermen and left to fish in the sea. The most surprising for me was what the younger woman said: "Even if it is difficult to live in this place, I will never leave", and I was looking around and didn't understand why she would say this, I was feeling a little scared at the thought of staying overnight, in the dark desert, only sand around. It was like a surrealistic landscape from another story, reality...Two talkative and lively women contrary to this desolate desert!

While Florence was talking, I was thinking about the two women, who are they for Florence? Me and her, talking about life and death? I said:

(A) I think about the difference between how vivid the women are and how desolate the desert is. And I think that you felt that life and death coexist, they are together. More than this, now, you know what your father felt in the last moments before he passed, when life and death coexist, his body was dying but he was still alive, aware that soon, he was leaving.

Silence. Florence weeps

(F) Yes, it is true, my father knew. Now, I know this and I think I knew before, too. But I didn't want to recognize it, I didn't want to accept, to let him go. And he wanted to leave with dignity, without me seeing it...

(A) You know, your dream expresses your love for him! Now, you understand he couldn't stay anymore, couldn't fight. And just now, when you had this dream, you let him go!

Some Discussions:

These vignettes from Florence's analysis show us how difficult it is for everybody to go through the process of mourning and what great challenge it is to accept the limits of our body. The loss of a loved one leads us directly to our own mortality and this is so overwhelming and anxiety-provoking!

Florence had a beautiful childhood, her parents loved her so much and she loved them, too. Speaking in Winnicott's terms, she has been in a good communication: a 'silent' one with her subjective objects, her inner world and also, an 'explicit' communication -pleasant and satisfying- with others in the external reality. She communicated very well with her father (all discussions and rich emotional sharing experiences between them). She communicates well with her mother too and recently, their communication has become more rich and deeper during the analysis, they cook and make jam together!

Moreover, Florence has communicated very well with me in analysis: she gives me 'a good jam/comfiture' (she does good and useful analytic associations, she dreamt a special dream and so on) and in this way, we 'make a good jam' together, too.

Still, the death of his father blocked her communication, with herself and others. She felt a huge anxiety and, in order to avoid a possible depression, she developed some maniac defenses, a strong tendency towards actions: looking

for many doctors, searching for different treatments, searching for clinics and so on. But in this way, partially, she interrupted the authentic communication with herself and her father, and he felt it.

In regards to her father, he also felt a huge anxiety, being sick, knowing the diagnosis, seeing many doctors and so on. For a while, he fought with the sickness: he took drugs, respected a very drastic diet and all treatments. He did all these because he still could do it and also, he believed in these interventions. In Winnicott's terms, he was like a baby who suck the milk from the mother's breast; he wants and can do this. And he felt alive and he wished to continue living. The thoughts about his own mortality remained bearable.

Still, from a moment, he couldn't do all these, his medical condition became more and more severe, his body had started to let him down. He didn't lie himself (or organize some maniac defenses like Florence) and, keeping the silent communication with his subjective word, he knew that would die soon. He kept the inner connection with his true self and outside, in relation with Florence, he developed a compliance attitude. Partially, he played a role. He felt that she is almost overwhelmed and he wanted to protect her. Fortunately for him, his wife knew and understood him very well, and she could be close to him when he passed away.

During the analysis, Florence managed and understood her anxiety much better. She had the dream with her father and through the interpretations from this session, she could reconnect again, her creative conversation with herself and others. She understood that her father did the best he could and now, she can accept his attitude. And with this dream, she said good-bye to him!

Some Conclusions:

Freud said at the end of his work 'Our Relation with Death' (1915, p. 71) which is the secret of our mortality: "Si vis vitam, para mortem", meaning that if you want to endure the life, you have to prepare for death.

Paradoxically, all these processes – to endure the suffering and pain, to accept the limits of the biological rock – don't necessarily make us more powerful, but much more authentic and alive in our lives, in the relations with ourselves and others. And this means a constant effort for understanding and reconstruction, in both ways, properly and metaphorically. We mustn't remain in depression, in passivity or the position of a victim; we continue to move and build, we continue to love!

As Florence shows us, instead of the desert left by the loss of those we love, a beautiful garden grows inside of us, full of roses, where the horses roam free, sometimes docile and other times, wild!

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