

A Clinical Study of Actualized Unconscious Fantasy and Therapeutic Play

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Actualization of an unconscious fantasy develops when the actual trauma during the child's developmental years is very severe or a series of actual traumas are accumulated, and when they interfere with the usual restriction of fantasy connected with such conditions only or mostly to the psychological realm. Such fantasies are felt as "real" by analysands who have them. During their analyses, these analysands become involved in therapeutic play in order to revisit the conditions which made their unconscious fantasies actualized. This way they tame the influence actualized unconscious fantasies have on their lives.

Therapeutic play is a transference story developed by an analysand that is expressed in actions in order to master repeating maladaptive responses to an unconscious fantasy associated with trauma. Specific actions typically continue for days, weeks or even months. The patient's preoccupation with and reporting of these actions to the analyst becomes the central focus of verbal communication from session to session. The analysand develops new ego functions by ending the story in a new and more adaptive way. Analysands who have actualized unconscious fantasies need to be involved in therapeutic play in analysis in order to tame, modify, and master the

influence of concretized beliefs, even when those beliefs are no longer unconscious due to therapeutic work (Volkan 1987, 2004, 2010; Volkan & Ast 2001).

CASE OF KLAUS

Klaus, an engineer, came to me for analysis in his late thirties after he was legally separated from his wife. He claimed to love his wife and their three children and seemed to be mystified as he entered psychoanalysis as to what had happened to his marriage. I learned that he had an older business partner whose every wish he fulfilled. Although rumors of an affair between his wife and his partner had reached his ears, and he had in fact occasionally seen the pair holding hands, he could not believe that they were guilty of any misconduct. He nonetheless felt bedeviled and had occasional emotional outbursts against his wife, both of which finally led him to seek analysis. When he started analysis he was no longer dependent upon his partner. They had gone their separate ways and in his new business Klaus had no partner.

His German parents had come to the United States before World War II and had settled in an urban Jewish neighborhood. Although they were anti-Semitic, they had developed a reaction formation and were carefully courteous toward the Jews in their community. Always with an odd kind of secrecy the father, who had served in the German army during World War I, told stories of bravery as well as cruelty. The mementos of his days in the military were locked away in a trunk, but Klaus grew up associating his German family name with aggression and longed to change it. This feeling seemed to account in part for his placing

such a high value on using his ex-partner's Anglo-Saxon sounding name in business because he felt that a typical German name such as his own would alienate clients.

Klaus was an only child born to parents in their early forties. He was left alone much of the time since his parents had to work in their store. His mother taught the little boy where the hands of the clock would be at the time he might expect their return home from work and this exercise left a lasting memory.

Trauma

As his analysis progressed, I learned of the initiation of his obsessional neurosis, which had occurred when he was at the pubertal age of twelve. At that time the family moved to a new city, and for some months lived in an apartment so small that the whole family slept in the same room. One night when the child lay in his bed that stood alongside his parents' bed, the father unexpectedly turned on the light, and the youngster caught a glimpse of his mother preparing for intercourse by putting Vaseline on her vagina. Although the light had been quickly extinguished, in analysis he gradually recognized incestuous wishes and fears that were mobilized. He recalled that during the night after this *traumatic* incident he had lain in bed listening intently for any sound from his parent's bed. He also recalled measuring in his mind in an obsessional way the distance between his bed and his parent's bed.

The move to the new location did not work out for the family and soon after this incident they returned to their original city. By then Klaus had a severe obsessional neurosis and, one day

after hearing a schoolmate call another a “motherfucker,” his symptoms were exacerbated in reference to his reawakened incestuous conflict. Things might have been all right for him except that his neurosis crystallized when he broke into a theater with some friends as a prank and a man surprised by their break-in had a fatal heart attack. Klaus blamed himself for this old man’s death., His unconscious wish to get rid of his father was *actualized*. Klaus’ obsessional thoughts about being a murderer generalized to the point that when he read about a murder in the paper, he thought of himself as the person who committed it.

His symptoms were in remission when he married in his twenties but, as mentioned, he proceeded to find an older man, his ex-partner, to take him under his wing. As long as he submitted himself to the “father” he could not become a “motherfucker,” aggressive German or a murderer, and he therefore need not entertain obsessional thoughts. When he learned that his wife was having an affair with his ex-partner he began to have angry outbursts.

Regarding the incident that had occurred when he was twelve, I would focus on two circumstances reflecting this trauma. One is that as an adult Klaus became an engineer, a surveyor who measured distances. One recalls that after the bedroom episode he had repeatedly measured the distance between his and his parents’ bed, reflecting his desire to be near his mother, but in a concomitant defensive effort, far enough away from her. I might say that this aspect of his defensive response to his incestuous desires, contaminated with fear, had become sublimated and adaptive. He grew up to measure distances for a living, so to speak.

The second event stemming from his trauma related to Klaus' (conscious) fantasy of inventing something that would bring sunlight to the dark side of the earth during the night hours. His fantasies included thoughts of a spaceship with a vast mirror that would reflect the sun shining on one side of the globe to its dark side. I could see in this a repetition of aspects of the bedroom episode: he would lighten up the darkness and thus see his mother's vagina, but at the same time his defense against incestuous wishes prevailed and kept him from anxiety since it was completely evident that he would never, in reality, be able to bring light to the darkness.

Clock watching

One Monday morning after fifteen months of analysis, Klaus called to say that he would have to cancel his hour since he had been away skiing and was unable to make the airplane connection that would bring him back on time. On Tuesday, he came to his hour and reported having sat in the airport for eight hours, all the while overwhelmed by anxious discomfort as he vigilantly watched an airport clock closely. His own insight prompted him to speak then of how when he was a child his mother left him to await her return according to where the hands were on the clock. Separation from the analyst gave him much of the same kind of separation anxiety, but there was more to his clock watching. When one hand of the clock slid over the other he thought of scissors cutting something and I believed that this perception arose from his fear of castration.

Klaus told me that one evening at the ski resort after drinking with friends he had “found” himself climbing into the bed in which one of his friends lay asleep with his girlfriend. Klaus was not too drunk himself to be aware that something unusual was going on, and to recognize an impulse to be in the same bed with another man and another man’s woman with whom he would have liked to have intercourse. He was in a sense repeating the wishful aspect of the earlier bedroom incident, of course while with a different couple in a new environment—in this case, the ski resort. His approach awakened the couple and they left the room. He explained with embarrassment the next day that he had been too drunk to know what he was doing.

A Dream

The day after Klaus told me about the incident at the ski resort, he reported having had a “flood” of dreams during the previous night. Until then he had seldom reported his dreams. His use of the word “flood” suggested associations with the flood of light that had once revealed both too much and too little to him. He vividly recalled a dream:

My wife [from whom, in reality, he was by then divorced] was having intercourse with a man I could not see enough to identify. Then I saw myself riding a bicycle, going through a park on it, and then through a building that was a brothel.

Soon after reporting this dream Klaus talked anxiously about how “blind” he had been to the relationship between his ex-wife and his former partner. He seemed to use the word *blind* as a defense against seeing something forbidden. In associating directly to the dream, he recalled having ridden on a bicycle long ago through a park in which a young woman was

murdered. He reported that after this ride he had become obsessed with the notion that it was he who had committed the murder. Once more his being a “murderer” came to his mind. I sensed that he had murderous rage against his seductive mother, as well as toward the rival/older partner/father. His older, former partner’s involvement with the patient’s ex-wife identified him more clearly as a father in open competition with his son.

The brothel in the dream reminded Klaus of an episode involving an uncle. The uncle had taken him to a brothel when Klaus was a young man and invited him to make use of one of the girls. Klaus had refused, but the married uncle did take one of the girls thereby shocking his nephew who thought it wrong for a married man to have intercourse with a woman not his wife. He then oddly referred to his uncle’s behavior as *incest*, but then could not explain what he meant by this term in this context.

Klaus’ dream had been triggered (*day residue*) by his having gone to a club where he parked his car in what turned out to be the space assigned to his erstwhile partner, from whom by then he had separated. Reactivation of the drama is, of course, evident in the younger man’s parking in the space belonging to his senior; symbolically, the patient had entered the symbolic vagina that was for his father. Being obliged to move, and realizing that he had lost out in the competition with the ex-partner for the parking place—and his woman—he became very angry. Recalling more about the dream, Klaus shouted while on my couch, “In my dream my wife was wearing a black dress. There was something peculiar about it. Oh! Oh! I know. The stripes of the dress were fluorescent material shining like light.”

At this point he felt overwhelming emotionality, shook and wailed as though grief-stricken, and declared that he could see the dream as a repetition of the incident when he was twelve when light suddenly fell on dark material. I did not interfere in order to help him to own his affects. He was now fully experiencing the emotions that he had repressed at the time—emotions pertaining to his desire to see more of his mother's genitalia and his fear of his father's retaliation. Moreover, he gained insight into why he had wanted to call his mother a whore and why he had regarded his uncle's visit to the brothel as incestuous behavior.

This was a turning point in Klaus' analysis. During the analytic hours that followed he was able to unrepres more material regarding his original childhood wishes. He was becoming more and more preoccupied with me and fantasized triangular situations involving both he and I along with my secretary who he once saw when he came to my office. His transference neurosis ripened. Soon Klaus began dating a secretary as a displacement for the secretary he saw in my office. Curious about her genitalia, he had intercourse with her to see if her vagina would cut his penis. He was referring, I thought, to *vagina dentata* fantasies. He could hear my interpretation of the situation as it appeared in his transference neurosis, as well as his expectation of punishment not only by me/father but by mother too (mother having a vagina with teeth that can bite).

Building a Viking ship

Klaus was now involved in a *therapeutic play*. He had found an advertisement in a magazine telling where to find the material for a Viking ship model. He was like a child whose eye had

been caught by a toy in a shop window. Should he buy the material for building a Viking ship or shouldn't he? I did not interfere. After a month or so he came to a decision and sent for the material. It was an expensive undertaking. When the material arrived he behaved, I sensed, as if he were a child playing with building blocks. He filled his analytic hours with accounts of his work with the model. As Klaus planned aloud the next step of his construction, I felt in a pleasant way like a spectator, as if I were watching my son in serious play. Then I observed that Klaus was launching forth into some original creativity beyond what was indicated in the instructions. He wanted to add a lantern that would blink, alternating *the light with darkness*. Although he was not initially aware of it, I saw that his addition would connect him with his trauma at the age of twelve. I wanted to wait and see where he would go with his plan to add a lantern to his Viking ship. He also planned on putting an extra toilet in the model, a toilet suitable for use by a woman.



(THIS IS NOT A PICTURE OF KLAS' VIKING SHIP)

The ship model had a feminine shape, and Klaus' measuring and re-measuring its narrow length led me to understand that it represented his mother's vagina. The head of a dragon he used for a figurehead on the prow was the father getting ready to possess the mother and lead her away from the boy. The blinking lantern recalled the bedroom disclosure when Klaus was twelve, as did the toilet designed for a woman. Klaus was concerned over where to put the women's toilet in a ship so narrow. The manufacturer's plans made no allowance for anything but a common toilet and I thought that by trying to add a toilet for women only he was trying to gratify his wish to separate his father's penis from his mother's vagina. He was concerned that it be situated in a place in the ship where no one would see a woman urinating.

His desire and dread about seeing his mother's vagina was also repeated here. Furthermore, I realized that his serious attention to the details of the interior of the ship reflected his fear of *vagina dentata*, evident in his testing his new girlfriend's vagina by penetrating her and trying to master his apprehension.

Klaus spent nearly \$10,000 building his ship. At that time, decades ago, this was a great deal of money. The model was just a showpiece and could not be used on water. Should I have interfered with his therapeutic play from the beginning when he talked about the money needed to build the ship and about his seemingly realistic need to use this amount of money for practical things in his life? Should I have made "interpretations" as I noticed the meanings of various parts of the project such as his adding a blinking lantern? I was aware of how, while on my couch, he had gone through an affect storm when he relived his bedroom trauma and verbally described the meaning of his experience following his dream of his wife having sex with a man while she was wearing a dress with fluorescent material shining like light. I thought that he would not heed my efforts to show him that his work on the ship model also reflected like phenomena. So I waited for him to finish his project. Interestingly, as soon as he finished the Viking ship model with his own modifications, Klaus himself became curious about what he had done. Both of us verbalized how he had created his mother's vagina, took control as to when a light should shine on it, and how a woman would be separated from a man and have her own privacy.

After his therapeutic play Klaus reported feeling very different and confident. The Viking ship was no longer important to him. No longer was he interested in my “woman,” the secretary, and no longer did he have *vagina dentata* fears. I observed how he began to identify openly with my analytic attitude and became curious about how he had repeated the trauma of age twelve in many, many ways, including his playing a role in pushing his ex-wife to have an affair with his older partner. In his analysis I now became a truly “new object” helping him to grow.

References

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