

“I’m stabbing you right now”: A Case Transcript – The Bad Self Transformed

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One of the major theorists in the history of psychoanalysis, WRD Fairbairn, astutely observed that persons abused by their parents unconsciously develop negative self-images to preserve their parents as God-like figures. This “moral defense” renders such persons “bad,” and consequently their parents’ rejection of them makes sense. Fairbairn also stressed how psychotherapists must compete with the relationship that patients fiercely maintain with their own internal “objects.” Giving up these “internal families” leaves patients feeling psychologically orphaned.

I recently observed a dramatic example of this process in a case I was supervising. The patient, Ms. A, a highly intelligent, attractive 40 year-old woman, sought psychoanalysis for treatment of chronic depressive symptoms. She was the second of three children, and the only daughter. Her father, a constitutional attorney often away at work, was critical and self-centered. Her mother, a thoracic surgeon, seemed to compete with her from infancy. She overtly rejected her, calling her “stupid,” “ugly,” and “foolish.”

Ms. A’s mother practiced with another prominent surgeon, a male who molested Ms. A first at ages four and five, and then again at age 14 when he attempted to rape her. The mother, who was having an affair with this same medical colleague, defended him. She insisted that Ms. A had fabricated the sexual assault. The evolution of the chronic mental pain in Ms. A, the extreme feelings of emptiness, emotional insecurity, and terror of intimacy, was unusually obvious. Equally so was her terribly negative image of herself, a self-valuation that contributed to her tendency to choose abusive romantic partners.

What follows is the transcript of a critical juncture in the psychoanalysis conducted by my supervisee. This particular interchange occurred about two years into the psychoanalysis, after many layers of defense had been penetrated, and the transference was being intensely scrutinized.

Ms. A: If you continue to move that close to me, to follow me so well, to know me, I will hurt you.

Dr. B: How?

Ms. A: I’m thinking of that dream I had, of the glass window with the wooden frame around it. And I am on a grass field, lying down, covered by it. Remember?

Dr. B: Yes.

Ms. A: Now I imagine nothing but the glass. The frame is gone. As I try to stand, the glass shatters. You are there, trying to help me up, but the shards of glass are pointing towards you. [Ms. A began sobbing uncontrollably at this point].

Dr. B: And you fear I will be hurt.

Ms. A: Not hurt, bloodied and killed.

Dr. B: But I'm right here, with you, hearing you, looking at you. And I'm not hurt.

Ms. A: [Entering a semi-psychotic state and becoming agitated now]. You're not getting this. It's not a metaphor. It is real. I'm stabbing you right now. [She sobs again]. The glass is cutting you up.

Dr. B: [Silence, and then:] You feel like your being itself is dangerous, like you will kill me.

Ms. A: Because I will.

Dr. B: You are so open and vulnerable right now, so defenseless. And I'm right here with you.

Ms. A: [Seeming as if she did not hear what Dr. B just said]. No, I will poison you for sure, and you won't see me anymore. You will vanish. You will not have me as a patient.

Dr. B: [More silence, and then]: Ms. A, we are here, together, at the core of your open wound. You had no mothering and little fathering. You think you caused it. [More silence]. And you are convinced your trauma will recur, that I will abuse and abandon you, and all because of you. And yet here I am, uninjured, right next to you.

Here is a true moment in time, a feral, transformative encounter between two people that clearly exemplifies Fairbairn's key ideas. Dr. B guided the relationship to an extremely regressed point, one in which Ms. A experienced herself, in the anguished present, as the bad infant deserving of criticism and neglect. She successfully competed with Ms. A's attachment to her "internal objects," entering the space they previously occupied.

By staying so closely attuned to Ms. A, Dr. B was able to offer a different, healing emotional experience. Ms. A's depression lifted for several weeks. If Dr. B and Ms. A are able to re-enact these encounters at such depth and intensity – "shattering" describes them appropriately – it can be expected that the chronic depression will resolve and, to use Fairbairn's own words, the "bad" self will be "exorcised."