Entering the Consulting Room

THE EYE DOESN’T SEE, A HEART GRIEVES OVER

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Abstract:

Peter, a pre-adolescent (12 year-and-3-month old) boy, is the only child of a blind couple. His parents decided to take him to counselling because of his manifestly poor school results in the ongoing school year. Peter has been, since age four, his parents’ true eyes. The family nucleus was shown to be somewhat (in)visible; an undifferentiated amalgamation, a three-part-symbiosis, where the subject-object undifferentiation was plainly visible, and felt, to the naked eye. Peter was thus a boy imprisoned in his parents’ mind, subject to the tyranny of their disability. He had never gone out by himself or had a sleepover at a friend’s place and he does not go out at weekends. Paradoxically, school appears to constitute his last stronghold of freedom. The parents’ massive projection onto their child, and the absence of emotional ability to question themselves within this setting of inverted parenting was evident; the dysfunctions of this claudicant parenting context had already translated into clear repercussions in Peter’s development level and intrapsychic experiences. This boy had from an early age shaped himself to be his parents’ parents. This parenting captivity set off feelings of hostility and rebellion, particularly directed towards the maternal figure, crystallised in a recurrent moaning of bitterness and disenchantment. At the beginning of the therapeutic relation, the priority seemed to be to work on operating a shift from the factual quality of his delivery to the emotional impact of his internal invariants, thus promoting analytic insight when he connected isolated emotional patterns with the connotation of positive experiences. By presenting/debating this clinical case, we intend our communication to address two points: (1) To illustrate how a child, resorting to an adultmorph behavioral pattern and to a mind’s lying discourse, concealed the anger felt by a parenting status imposed on him at birth, and experienced by him as tyrannical – an anger which, in a way, ended up feeding the family blindness installed in a relational symbiosis; (2) To question, in terms of evolution prognosis, the limits and viability of a psychotherapeutic intervention effective enough in breaking the lying codes of a family blindness through the pursuit of truth.

Key-words: inverted parenting; lie narrative; unconscious blindness; search of true.

Peter, a 12-year and three-month old pre-adolescent boy, the only child of a blind couple, was brought to counselling due to his manifestly poor results in the ongoing school year.
At our first session, the well-timbred voices of his parents, both employed as telephone operators, is the element that somewhat dilutes the aesthetic negative impact of a genetic glaucoma that creates an appearance of glooms in their facial expressions.

They said that they had now been married for thirteen years and that they found that Peter was afflicted by the same eye condition as they were as soon at his birth. At three months old, Peter had surgical intervention on his eyes, and by the age of two he was already wearing heavy-prescription glasses.

Despite considering that Peter “has led a perfectly normal life so far”, they added that “Due to the fact that we are blind, we have developed in him the habit of walking with us on the street ... to be our guide.” In fact, since the age of four, Peter has truly been his parents’ eyes. He walks them to their workplaces; it is he who guides them in their supermarket shopping; he’s also the one who deals with the bank and, since ATMs became widely available, he knows the PIN of all of his parents’ bank cards. When we were on this subject, the father said: “He knows plenty about our life and, as such, the relationship that exists among us three is very strong”.

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Peter was thus a boy imprisoned in his parents’ minds, subject to the tyranny of their disabilities. He had never gone out by himself or had a sleepover at a friend’s home, and he does not go out on weekends. School appears to constitute his last stronghold of freedom. In fact, his parents mentioned that, during elementary school, Peter was an exceptional student, probably the best in his class. He went to and returned from school by himself and, even in kindergarten, which he started attending at the age of two and a half years, he had no adaptation problems at all. Currently, the family lives in a social housing complex area in Lisbon. Peter attended the local school up to the sixth grade. He then moved to a secondary school in a different part of Lisbon, so that he could walk his mother to work every day.

This transition to a different school seems to have caused a deep social clash. According to his parents’ comments, Peter is a vain boy, who has always insisted in taking to school toys and other like products advertised on TV (which he forced his parents to buy), as well as all sorts of status-label clothes, which he enjoyed parading before his classmates. Peter’s parents described veritable “duels”, during which they felt pressed, and ultimately forced, by his son, to acquire those things Peter referred to as “duly deserved rewards”. They would eventually give in to him because they saw that he wanted to be the first to take some newly-advertised status-label clothes to school. However, when Peter began to receive poor grades, their parents decided to deny him such rewards – which were now perceived as “underserved”.

The gloominess of the biological hell began then to “show up”, and Peter needed to mask his heavy prescription glasses with status-label outfits, in an attempt to somehow de-label his genetic heritage and his wounded narcissism. Peter reacted aggressively when his expressed desires failed to be met, saying to his parents: “You are no good, and what I wish more than anything is to see myself away from
here. My life is hell". To this, his father would reply that, unfortunately, he was a rather clever boy, both for good and for evil, for many a kid would wish to have a hell such as his.

The parent’s massive projection onto their child, and the absence of emotional ability to question themselves within this setting of inverted parenting (Lebovici, 1983; Kaes, Faimberg, Enriquez & Baranes, 1993) was evident, notably so when they said things like: “We do not find it normal, the relationship that exists between him and us”. The reason for counselling assumed thus a clear configuration when the father said: “He does not listen to us, nor does it pay due attention to what we say. It is important that another adult talk to him.”

Sadomasochistic traits were dominant in the relational settings of this triangulation; young Peter would force his parents to buy toys and clothes, so that he could reap secondary benefits by parading before his classmates his narcissistic pseudo-trumps, notwithstanding subjecting himself to be mugged and beaten by them, so much so that the mother mentioned that “Last year, he was terrified to go to school; he did not want to go, had vomiting bouts and often said that his tummy ached”.

The first time I had a session with Peter in the presence of his parents, I found it disturbing the arrogance and contempt he manifested towards the “other”; he said: “I do not understand why I am here [i.e., in the session]; I do not even have any time to think about my life, and I had actually forgot the day I was supposed to come here”. When asked about their parents’ concern for him, he said that they would surely speak ill of him because: “Normally, there are not many good things to speak well about me”. He betrayed, thus, a narcissistic self-deprecation and a brutal unconscious culpability, for, as he himself put it: “There was a time in which I had very high marks; now, all my marks are negative”. His internal world’s trade mark bore damaged and negative marks that hid behind the transferential arrogance installed in his relation with the therapist (Salgueiro, 2001).

Peter felt the school as a domain of freedom; he often repeated: “I only have fun when I am at school; there, I am free”. It came, however, at a very high cost, in that the freedom to infringe school rules was increasingly making him a prisoner of his own unconscious culpability, for it forced him to skip several classes to play football, and them to systematically resort to shrewd lies to justify those absences.

Throughout the few sessions I had with Peter, it was clear that, in his manifest narrative, sadness co-existed with anger, letting out the melancholy and the profound hatred with which he flogged his own thinking. In his words: “Sometimes, I get very angry, I get nervous, and hate gets to my head; when it happens, I just want to disappear, because anger gets to my head”.

The dysfunctions of this claudicant parenting context had already translate into clear repercussions in Peter’s development level and intrapsychic experiences. This boy had from an early age converted himself to be his own parents’ parents. This parenting captivity set off feelings of hostility and rebellion, particularly directed towards the maternal figure, crystallised in a recurrent moaning of bitterness and disenchantment. He said: “My mother does not give me any freedom at all. She is a disappointment to me. Generally, she says she does not need me; she does not want to show her weakness. My mother tells me that she was already walking around alone before I was born”. Sometimes, our sessions were thus
transformed into a factual reporting of events that constituted his daily life. At the beginning of the therapeutic relation, the priority seemed to be to work on operating a shift from the factual quality of his delivery to the emotional impact of his internal invariants, thus promoting analytic insight when he connected isolated emotional patterns with the connotation of positive experiences. In line with this notion, and to give an example, for instance concerning the systematic invectives against the maternal figure, the therapist would resort to examining contradictory events, and to confront Peter, asking him: “Why is it that, despite your continuing complaining about your mother, you keep feeling the need for her to accompany you to these sessions? In fact, you complain plenty about your mother, but you always end up having her trailing behind you all the time.”

At the earliest stage of the therapeutic process, the therapist had a role akin to that of a missionary – that of a guide in Peter’s journey towards restoring his internal world, the purpose of which was to help him see, so that he could believe in, the positive aspects of his internal objects, in a last effort to exorcise his low self-esteem and the narcissistic depreciation he had thus far been feeling, more than co-feeling.

However, as the sessions progressed, Peter would make a point of exhibiting in his conversation with me his ability to employ deceiving and sophisticated communication – the same ability he had been resorting to keep his parents in the dark concerning the “threat of flunking” that loomed in the air since the first trimester of the ongoing school year – as if a part of his lying mind (Fialho, 2001) was already consciously set, and at the service of his development.

In a somewhat peremptory tone, Peter would state: “I have done nothing, nothing, to pass the year, because I was always playing. There is no good news – no good news at all. I am going to flunk – and that’s only for starters. By the end of the second trimester’s evaluation, I had seven failing grades and, because of that, I would not be allowed to go to my father’s village during spring break. I was afraid that I was not going, and so I said to my mother that I only got four failing grades. And there was when I derailed the entire thing, because they went to speak to my head-teacher and they found out”.

Therapy-wise, it was easy to foresee arduous work. On the one hand, Peter’s unconscious culpability (Saraiva, 2010) triggered a ferocious ability to lie and deceive. On the other hand, he seemed to be “his own tyrannical judge”, masochistically punishing himself when he went on holidays, in that he fell ill most of the times, thus precluding himself from enjoying the pleasure of his freedom. On this subject, Peter said: “I have a problem whenever I go to new places. I feel happy because I know I am going to have fun, but I think to myself, will I get ill? And it has indeed happen – many times – that I get ill when I go on vacation”.

As it happened, the intermittent holiday periods, which he enjoyed with his family, the need to walk his parents to their workplace, and the seaside trips he took in the context of extra-curricular activities, began to work as the alibi with which Peter justified missing therapy sessions. The lying discourse was thus also surfacing in the psychotherapeutic context, thwarting the therapeutic alliance that could have enabled him to recover from his psychological blindness and move forward in search of his internal truth.
The point of the psychotherapeutic work is, through an interpretive intervention on the therapist’s part, that of providing meaning to a communication expressed through a manifest content – one we could call lying – and to help the patient to find his own truth in his chaotic internal world.

Yet, a feeling of frustration remains, still today; Peter abandoned psychotherapy and, because I owe it to the truth of my practice as therapist, I wonder if I had been a good enough therapist, able to resist to the artillery of defence mechanisms that policed his chaotic internal world.

I knew from the beginning that working with Pedro’s parents was a prelude to an evolutionary prognosis of the psychotherapeutic process, that it was a necessary condition to overcome the limits and the viability of a psychotherapeutic intervention, effective enough in breaking the lying codes of a family blindness set in a framework of relational symbiosis.

At the first signs of change, the psychotherapeutic process was also somewhat sabotaged by the feelings and destructive drives of Peter’s parents who, out of unconscious desires, or needs, made their choice to keep a symptom-bearer young man who could nevertheless remain being the family’s guide. Peter, in turn, goes on with his “Lying Internal World” and the truth code remains buried.

I would like to finish my paper sharing with you a small text that somehow decodes the echo of my feelings as a psychotherapist.

“The Edge

In the slope of a mountain, there stands a little church; it is all in ruins, but it never collapses, despite being in a valley in which avalanches fall at great speed.

The mason who built this church knew all of the mountain’s mischief, and he decided to erect the church sideways so that, when the landslides approached, they would collide with the edge facing the mountains. This way, the avalanche would split into two and continue sliding along the sides of the church to meet its death further away.

The walls have resisted thus far, but the will to come all the way up to see Our Lady lies buried under the snow.”

Tonino Guerra (1920).

O Livro da Igrejas Abandonadas [The Book of the Abandoned Churches]

BibliographicalReferences
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