Narration of an Absent Mother: When Fantasy Replaces Reality

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Hanna and Marc have been in a tumultuous relationship almost since the very beginning of their marriage over twenty years ago. They have been to multiple couples and individual therapists throughout their marriage in a quest to get to the “roots” of their conflict and mutual dissatisfaction and to be able to heal their relationship. Hanna insists that Marc’s relationship with his mother is the core of his acted-out hostility towards her. She believes that his mother was narcissistic, unloving, and abusive. Marc does not understand what Hanna is talking about. In his view, his mother was “narcissistic, all right,” but she was also “wonderful.” He felt loved—actually adored—and affirmed, and her love nourished him.

As couples therapists we often find ourselves facing an odd situation: when Partner A narrates his or her childhood, Partner B jumps in to remind A of all the “bad things” that A's parents did. In B’s recollection, Partner A’s narration is too “positive”—A’s parents were actually much more abandoning or oblivious, at times even abusive. Now, whose reality is more accurate? Why is that discrepancy so common, and how should a couple’s therapist handle it? I hope to answer this question later in my paper.

Bowlby (1958), the father of attachment theory, recognized that humans have a lifelong fundamental need for safety, security, and a sense of being cared for by a sensitive and responsive caretaker. Psychic life is organized around the individual’s repeated attempts to achieve safety from threat and to connect to others who offer protection and security (Slade, 2014). As Rene Spitz’s (1946) studies of orphanage babies and Harlow’s (Harlow, Dodsworth, & Harlow, 1965) isolated monkeys experiment clearly showed, this basic need is for more than mere physical minding. Primates need warmth and a subjective sense of “felt security” (Srouf &
Waters, 1977) rather than the “objective” availability of a caretaking other for their psychological, and even physical, survival. What matters is the subjective feeling of safety, which is much more than the absence of discomfort and anxiety.

For both Fairbairn (1956/1994, 1963/1994) and Fromm (1964), this need is at the heart of personality formation, childhood fixation, and psychopathology. Fairbairn (1956/1994) was struck by how abused children remain attached to their abusive parents; he realized that the dread of social isolation is a major factor in human development, and that “the earliest and original form of anxiety, as experienced by the child is separation-anxiety” (p.155). However, maintaining the human bond in the absence of secure, satisfying care-giving necessitates psychic maneuvers to avoid the pain and disappointment of rejection while keeping the attachment figure close, involved, and invested. Therefore, the individual splits and internalizes the object. The rejecting (i.e., antilibidinal) aspects are split off from the exciting (i.e., libidinal) aspects of the object and repressed, leaving a kernel of distorted idealized internal images (Fairbairn, 1963/1994).

Fromm (1964) suggested that the longing to be cared for and protected like a young child by a maternal figure who is nurturing, responsive, and attuned is ever-present throughout life, always threatening one’s independent existence. The pre-oedipal attachment to the mother and the yearning for what he called “paradisiacal bliss”—a symbiotic relatedness to a loving mother who makes one feel safe and secure—is the cause of developmental arrests. In extreme cases this attachment is expressed as a longing to return to the womb. Much of normal behavior as well as many clinical phenomena, such as those observed in neurosis, psychosis, and addiction, can be understood as the ego’s attempts to preserve a sense of safety (Sandler, 2003). In presenting this
idea, Fromm challenged Freud’s suggestion that sexual strivings are at the heart of childhood fixation and that personality organizes around the resolution of the Oedipal conflict.

The deep-rooted need for maternal care is also reflected in common myths throughout history and across all cultures. The epithet “mother” evokes a universal feminine archetype of a caretaking stance characterized by nurturance, warmth, sensitivity, attunement, and unconditional love or acceptance. This matriarchal principle translates into universality, equality, peace, tenderness, humanness, and concern for the world’s welfare and happiness (Bachofen, 1992). In Greco-Roman myths, when one does find a maternal figure, she is often portrayed as someone who will do anything to save her children. To mention just a few: The goddess Gaia, the all-powerful Mother-Earth, whose motherhood was challenged by giving birth to six deformed children—three hundred-armed Hecatoncheires and three one-eyed Cyclops—does everything she can to free and nurture her children when their own father, Uranus, tries to hide them and forbids her from seeing them. Rhea, Cronus’ wife, saves her baby from being eaten by his father, who was swallowing his newborn children in an attempt to avoid the prophecy that he would be dethroned by his own child. Rhea deceives Cronus by giving him a rock wrapped in a child’s clothing and thus saves her son Zeus from the same destiny as his dead siblings. Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility who nurtures and protects livestock and agricultural products, endlessly wanders the earth disguised as an old woman in search of her daughter Persephone after Persephone was abducted to marry her father’s brother Hades, the god of the dark underworld. In her agony, Demeter lets the earth perish. Only when her daughter is returned does she allow the earth to flourish again. Since Persephone has already been claimed by the underworld, Demeter is forced to agree that Persephone will spend four months each year
in the underworld. During these months Demeter grieves her daughter’s absence and withdraws her gifts from the world, creating winter. Persephone’s return brings the spring.

Judaism and Christianity glorify mothers. In Judaism, the Divine Presence of God (the Shechinah) is feminine. The Shechinah is often portrayed as a loving mother who is present at times of personal need and distress. She suffers along with her children Israel in exile; she toils at their side while they are slaves in Egypt; and she protects them in the wilderness after they are liberated. She is there for the individual as well as for the collective; the Talmud states that she “dwells over the head side of the sick man’s bed” (Talmud, Shabbat12b, Epstein, 1972).

In Christianity, Mary, the de-sexualized mother of the messiah, is perceived as the dominant parent of Jesus. She is venerated and considered to be the most meritorious saint of the Church—the mother of all mothers. Mary’s devotion to her son is characterized as unwavering even when he refuses to see her—when he is surrounded by followers and announces that his disciples are his family members. She tolerates with great agony his loss to the temple and his crucifixion and insists on participating in his burial. The Virgin Mary is believed to bestow seven graces upon her devotees: peace to their families; enlightenment; consolation of their pains; provision of as much as they ask for; defense and protection in every instant of their lives; help in the moments of their death; and provision of eternal happiness, consolation, joy and forgiveness of sins (Cameron, 2010).

It is important to note that our cultural myths and, unfortunately, our societal realities, also include mothers who commit the unthinkable—killing their own children. Medea, a Greek mythological character, as well as Susan Smith and Andrea Yates, to name a few real-life mothers, murdered their children. Not to minimize these heinous acts, more often than not, child-killing mothers suffer from attachment disorders themselves. Their pasts are fraught with abuse
and neglect and, when no psychosis is diagnosed, their crimes are invariably motivated by
getting the children out of the way in order to pursue an attachment relationship with a rejecting
partner, or as revenge against a deeply devastating rejection. The irony is that the killings of
their own children originate in their own longings for love and care gone awry. Judging from the
public's reactions to these crimes, it seems as if the fear of a destructive mother and the horrors
of maternal cruelty are far more intense than that of a punishing castrating father. One can avoid
a father’s wrath by obedience, but there is no defense against maternal destructiveness since, like
a mother’s unconditional love that is not earned, her hate has no reason and cannot be averted
(Biancoli, 1998; Fromm, 1973).

Current research confirms the human tendency to idealize maternal figures as an attempt
to cope with devastating realities of neglect and a subjective sense of being uncared for. Main
(2000), a linguist and attachment researcher, studied internal parental representation through
analyzing the narration of the parents in the Adult Attachment Interview. Subjects were asked to
describe early relationships with their parents and to evaluate the effects of these relationships
and experiences upon their present functioning. Subjects were also asked for five adjectives to
describe each parent as well as memories that supported their choice of each adjective. The
interviews were transcribed verbatim and the subjects were then classified as representatives of
one of four "states of mind with respect to attachment": secure-autonomous, dismissing,
preoccupied, and disorganized. What is important to our discussion is that analyses of maternal
narration of individuals who were classified as dismissing indicate that their discourse appeared
to minimize the importance of attachment-related experiences. Narrations were superficially
collaborative, but internal contradictions render them apparently untruthful. The mother tends to
be described in highly positive terms ("excellent mother, a wonderful, caring relationship"),
which are unsupported or actively contradicted by episodes later recounted ("I didn't tell her I broke my arm; she would have been really angry"). These contradictions appear to go unnoticed by the speaker, as though isolated. Interestingly, dismissing individuals showed marked increases in skin conductance levels when asked to recall experiences of rejection, separation, and threat from parents, suggesting a strong subjective, although unconscious, negative response (Sroufe & Waters, 1977).

In one of her case illustrations, Main quotes a dismissing woman who stated regarding the effects of her relationship with her mother: “I didn’t have any of these traumatic experiences people talk about. I had a good childhood.” (p. 1085) and selected exclusively positive, idealistic adjectives to described her mother as “caring, loving …and supportive” (p. 1084). However, when asked for memories that would illustrate why she chose these adjectives, she had difficulties recalling concrete incidents of being comforted when distressed. Concrete episodes of being rejected were not recalled either, suggesting a strong need to suppress negative experience with the maternal caretaker. In contrast, secure-autonomous adults tend to describe their mothers in more realistic and balanced terms, acknowledging both positive and negative events and attributes. In a separate study of mother-infant interaction, observed unresponsiveness of the mother in the home as early as one month of the infant’s age predicted a dismissing status during adolescence, which explains the need to maintain an internal idealized maternal image (Beckwith, Cohen, & Hamilton, 1999).

In this paper I argue that our need for a caretaking maternal figure is so profound that if we do not experience a nurturing figure in our “real” life relationships, we invent her in our minds. This idealized maternal figure is a necessary fiction—a fiction which is essential for our psychological survival. Because the most convenient way of heightening feelings of safety is
through the modification and control of perception, the real rejecting, abandoning, or unavailable mother is neglected in favor of a phantasmic, idealized mother whose image is colored by wish fulfillment—a “magical helper,” an omnipotent and omniscient figure who provides everlasting care and gives comfort. This type of fantasy depicts a magical world, a scenario in which the limitations of our physical universe no longer hold. It carves a path out of dissatisfaction with the real world and creates an opening to the impossible object and inaccessible enjoyment. “Fantasy is above all the creation of possibility out of impossibility” (McGowan, 2007, p. 24). We then become attached to this internal image that our fantasy created. In order to gain reassurance, we engage in an “intrapsychic role relationship” (Sandler, 2003, p. 19, italics in source)—an internal dialogue with this inner object.

Viewing phantasmic idealization as facilitating normal development is somewhat different than the traditional psychoanalytic understanding of idealization of the mother as reflecting either a developmental arrest or a defense against object-instinctual investments, namely one’s own aggression towards the mother or her feared destructive and retaliatory power (Lachman & Stolorow, 1976). It is argued that humans need to be loved and admired; they, therefore, tend to idealize others from whom they expect narcissistic supplies. The mother then becomes an idealized selfobject or a mirror for one’s own grandiose wishful self—a source of narcissistic sustenance—and actual contact with her precludes fragmentation of ego functions. The presence of this idealization, when the real qualities of the mother cannot register, signals a failure in separation and internalization resulting in a developmental arrest. Other psychoanalysts conceptualized idealization of the mother as an expression of a conflictual need for her coupled with a warded-off rage and envy toward her. Defensive idealization serves to deny the real qualities of the mother because the latter is associated with instinctual conflicts—unbearable
frustration with a depriving, or terrifying, persecuting bad object. Klein (1935/1975, 1952/1975) believed that idealization of the mother is an “omnipotent reassurance” (1952/1975, p. 70)—a safeguard against a retaliating or dead mother, which therefore represents security and life itself (1935/1975, p. 355). The compensatory phantasmic ideal object relieves the child from anxieties and provides unlimited, immediate, and everlasting gratification, as well as security and protection from persecutory objects (Alvarez, 1992).

As psychoanalysts, we often rush to deconstruct what we believe to be an overly cathected and idealized phantasmic internal parental object. Our assumption is that a distorted internal image is somehow malignant, contributing to fixation, and that mental health must be governed by the reality principle. It is true that attachment to an idealized maternal image can impinge on one's life. When no flawed human can measure up to a rigidly idealized vision of a caring other, relationships with real human beings are doomed to be experienced as depriving, and establishing a loving relationship is almost impossible. Similarly, a secure sense of one’s good self is also unattainable when it is constantly checked against an idealized internal object. I suggest, however, that at times, holding on to an idealized created image may be a key for adaptation—a transitional object that facilitates a healthier developmental trajectory and that allows one to transcend a reality of maternal deprivation. As a transitional object, an idealizing fantasy can be viewed a form of imaginative play, a mental activity designed to overcome pain rather than deny it and to foster growth. It fills gaps in reality in order to make the maternal absence more bearable by way of gaining mastery and confidence in the accessibility of a maternal object. Through this process a deprived child who is susceptible to desolation and emptiness may learn “not about the properties of the absentable objects, but about the property of the objects which return, and about his own capacity to make them return” (Alvarez, 1992, p.
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It can become a safe base from which to explore the world and a safe haven to return to when distress and disappointment permeate real life. Child analysts have noted that idealization of the mother is an essential, growth-promoting process, not only a defensive mental maneuver. It promotes ego development by facilitating identification with a benign ego ideal and provides “potent assurance” rather than “omnipotent reassurance” (Alvarez, 1992, p.119) guaranteeing everlasting security. As we observe in normally developing infants, the love for the mother, and in our case, phantasmic mother as well, can become an antidote against destructive aggression. Normally developing children modify their aggression in order to preserve the bond to the mother (Fraiberg, 1987). Premature recognition that the imagined “good mother” is only a phantom of the patient’s imagination can throw the patient into a panic or disorganized states. When there is a loss of sense of safety and security, the outside world is likely to be experienced as toxic and persecutory.

Even in adults, the playful shift between reality and fantasy, and seeing the two not as separate and incompatible entities but as interrelated internal resources, can enhance wellbeing. Fantasy, as infantile as it may be, can be a source of vitality and meaning that can enrich objectivity (Loewald, 1977/1980; Mitchell, 2000).

For life to be meaningful, vital, and robust, fantasy and reality cannot be too divorced from each other. Fantasy cut adrift from reality becomes irrelevant and threatening. Reality cut adrift from fantasy becomes vapid and empty. Meaning in human experience is generated in the mutual, dialectically enriching tension between fantasy and reality; each requires the other to come alive (Mitchell, 2000, p. 29).

In that vein, idealized fantasy can enhance one's ability to love. Loving feelings towards another person, at times, can only become possible if one can connect with an internal good and
loving object, real or imagined (Lieberman, Padrón, Van Horn, & Harris, 2005; Mitchell, 2000). In a paper entitled “Passion (or Past Shunned): The Use of Fantasy to Recreate Past Loving and Sexual Self-experiences in the Present,” Braucher (2014) unfolds his personal history of two psychoanalyses. His first analyst emphasized the domineering attributes of his mother, who had stifled his growth. As accurate as his analyst's perception was, this analysis pathologized his relationship with his mother and did not promote Braucher's ability to establish a loving adult relationship with a partner. It was only through his second analysis, where the analyst "loved" Braucher's mother and allowed him to love her, in which he was able to move on and find his own loving relationship.

To return to Hanna and Marc, the couple with opposing perceptions of Marc’s mother and the question of who is right: I would say that as long as the idealized internal maternal image does not interfere with the patient's current life, it does not matter who is "right." Furthermore, an attachment to a phantasmic loving mother can enhance relationships, not necessarily contaminate them. Rather than becoming the arbiter of reality, couple therapists can be more effective in helping couples survive their differences by facilitating the partners' sympathy to each other's need to hold onto a "good object."

The following examples, taken from both pop culture fiction and clinical therapeutic work, attempt to illustrate the importance of idealized internal maternal representations as means for psychological survival. Failure to create and invoke an idealized image may result in repeated failures to establish loving and nurturing relationships or to become a nurturing object for others. Conversely, the ability to create a real or imagined internal nurturing object is essential for one's ability to survive maternal deprivation and for becoming a nurturing figure for others.
Fictional Illustration

Don Draper is the fictional creative director and founder of the advertising agency in the popular TV series *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007-2014). His past is fraught with trauma, abuse, abandonment, and premature overexposure to sexuality. Through flashbacks, confessions, and visits of people from his past, we learn that he was born to a 20-year-old prostitute, Evangeline, who died during childbirth. Draper was named Dick not by a parent, but by the midwife who delivered him after the mother shared at her death bed that she promised to cut the father's penis and boil it in hog fat if he "get[s] her into trouble." This starting point earned Dick his childhood nickname of the “whore’s son.” He was forever a shameful reminder of his father’s philandering—he was never wanted, never intended to exist. As an adult, as if to gain some sense of value, Don wonders how much money his father paid for the sexual pleasure that conceived him.

Dick is raised on a farm by his abusive and alcoholic biological father and his cruel and rejecting wife, until his father is killed by a horse in front of his eyes when he is only ten years old. He later moves with his stepmother to their maternal aunt’s house in Philadelphia, which is actually his uncle’s brothel. There, in addition to experiencing abuse and neglect, he is also exposed to overstimulating adult sexuality and confusing loyalties. Among other confusing things, he is exposed to a primal scene – witnessing his pregnant stepmother trade her body for room and board at the bordello.

The flashbacks of Don’s childhood, often triggered by his adult life disappointments, are fragmented and intense, bearing the footprint of traumatic, intrusive events. They invariably depict Dick as an observer of adult interactions. He is ignored, dismissed, and most often demeaned. He witnesses arguments and sexual encounters, which frighten and overstimulate
him, while he is trying to put the pieces together on his own. No affectionate and caring adult makes an effort to help him make sense of what he sees and hears; no explanations are offered to help him integrate the experience into a coherent narration. He is left with fragmented, nonsensical memories and underdeveloped self-reflective capacities fused with hypervigilance.

Don never saw his mother, and the fragmented pieces of information he hears about her portray her as a debased human being. In his fantasy, however, he imagines his mother as an innocent-looking woman who comforts the father when his own wife loses another baby at childbirth rather than as a stereotypical sexually enticing prostitute. Unfortunately, Don was never able to create and then invoke an idealized nurturing internal object. His internal maternal representation was innocent and helpless at best. As an adult, he resorts to casual, non-committal sex or alcohol for self-soothing and incessantly seeks women as a “safe haven” for comfort and affirmation while overtly denying need. Don is an illustration of a gifted individual who is able to transcend his past in many ways, but his dismissing attachment state of mind and inability to internalize or create a nurturing maternal figure sabotage his efforts. He is easily loved by women who are willing and able to give him the secure love he so longs for, but he is unable to reciprocate their love and ultimately betrays every woman who loves him. Similarly, he strives to be a caring father for his own children but ends up disappointing them as well.

Clinical Illustration

Molly, a woman of natural beauty and grace, was 49 years old when she began therapy with me. She had made numerous aborted attempts to start therapy but was never able to stick with one therapist because she felt unsafe and easily criticized. Molly was the first girl born after five boys. She lost her father at age five, and her life turned to hell soon after, when her mother, a
dependent woman, married an abusive man to whom she devoted all her attention. Molly not only had to defend herself from this man but also ran to the rescue of her older brothers, who were repeatedly abused by this man when the mother was not around. After giving birth to another daughter, the mother’s second marriage dissolved and Molly was accused of causing this breakup. In addition, Molly was repeatedly physically and sexually abused by her older brothers, and had no one to turn to—no one to believe her story and no one to fend for her. She grew up with a chronic sense of threat and danger. Except for her maternal grandmother who took her into her own room to shield her from the abuse, the only benign holding object in her life was God. Her deep religious belief in a protective, providing, and fair God was her saving grace, a guiding beacon that helped her hold onto hope and a sense of being protected.

Molly's recollection of her grandmother is of a loving and nurturing caretaker. However, based on Molly’s own narrative, there is a good reason to believe that the grandmother was far from a perfectly attuned and protective caretaker. Yet the full meaning of her digressions did not register in Molly's mind. For example, it appears that the grandmother knew about the repeated abuse but failed to stop it. Molly recalls an incident where her grandmother hit her brother with a shoe saying: "I know what you are doing!" Molly sees this as evidence of her grandmother's protectiveness and devotion, and derives a sense of affirmation that her experience of abuse was real. At the same time, she ignores the fact that the grandmother did nothing to fully stop it. She is also unable to connect her chronic sense of being unattractive with her grandmother's message that she had big unattractive lips, rather than recognizing and celebrating her noticeable beauty.

Over the last three years of seeing Molly in treatment, we tried to work through many issues and have deconstructed many misconceptions, but I have never punctured her idealized vision of her grandmother. This is the only benign internal object Molly relies on. Without it
Molly could feel defenseless, despondent, and alone in an unsafe world full of perpetrators lurking to take advantage of her vulnerability. In spite of being deprived of maternal care herself, she has been able to nurture three daughters who are now growing to become adaptive adults—drawing from the love of her idealized grandmother.

**Summary**

In this paper, I argue that our need for a caretaking maternal figure is so profound that if we do not experience a nurturing figure in our “real” life relationships, we invent her in our minds and become attached to this internal representation. This idealized maternal figure is a necessary fiction – a fiction which is essential for our psychological survival. Holding on to an idealized created image may be a key for adaptation—a transitional object that facilitates a healthier developmental trajectory and that allows one to transcend a reality of maternal deprivation. In other words, idealization of the mother is an essential, growth-promoting process, not only a defensive mental maneuver. It promotes ego development by facilitating identification with a benign ego ideal and provides “potent assurance” rather than “omnipotent reassurance” guaranteeing everlasting security.

**References**


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