

Notes for St John's

November 23, 2008

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It Takes Two Minds to Think One's Disturbing Thoughts

(It must be borne in mind throughout this discussion that when we speak of thinking, we are always referring to thinking and feeling, which, here, are viewed as inseparable aspects of a single psychological event.)

The human need for truth leads us ultimately to loosen our reliance on the illusion of safety that is provided by magical thinking and to attempt to engage in genuine thinking, thinking that confronts reality in its full, unforgiving alterity. Magical thinking is exemplified in childhood in the illusions that comfort us; e.g. that our parents will be around to care for us and nothing can go wrong, or later in life, believing that the president is taking care of us. Only by means of confronting our reality through the act of thinking can we learn from or be changed by our lived emotional experience.

Mature thinking is characterized by one's capacity to tolerate the anxiety of not knowing and experiencing the developmental conflict of looking at multiple points of view. To be quick to collapse into knowing sidesteps the work of processing lived emotional experience. It is in the collapse and the subsequent re-thinking that we find another person most helpful. In other words, genuine thinking, though driven by the need to know what is true, is at the same time characterized by a firm recognition that conclusions are always

inconclusive, endings are beginnings. There is a need for employing a technique of constantly changing points of view. This concept holds that thinking necessarily involves viewing reality from multiple vantage points simultaneously, for example, from the points of view of the varying aspects of one's own personality or the perspective of someone else: mother, father, spouse, doctor, friend, and so on. Reality, viewed from a single vantage point, represents a failure to think. Viewing reality from multiple vantage points allows each vertex (each way of viewing reality) to be continually in the process of re-contextualizing and being re-contextualized by the other ways of seeing/knowing/experiencing.

Health involves a capacity for generating and maintaining a multiplicity of perspectives from which to view/experience one's life in the world. Thinking, so conceived, is a process in which ideas and feelings live in continual conversation with one another, a conversation in which thoughts are forever in the process of being transformed (de-integrated) and formed anew as a consequence of shifting organizations of meaning.

From the beginning of life the mother/infant dyad engage in the creation in the infant of a capacity to think. This psychological birth is, I believe, brought about by the infant's primitive fears being transferred into the mother, through motor activity, non-verbal utterances, facial and color changes, and so on. The mother experiences and interprets the child's emotion and takes action to reassure the infant. She does this when she has come to believe that her feelings are a reasonable response to what is occurring. Thus, in the process of this healthy non-verbal communication, the mother and infant think

together, and, in so doing, the infant achieves a beginning capacity to perceive himself, his mother, and the world realistically. Eventually, the child develops a vocabulary to enhance and confound the dialogue.

Paraphrasing Bion:

As a realistic activity [i.e. as a two-person thinking activity] it [the infant's behavior in non-verbal communication] shows itself as behavior reasonably calculated to arouse in the mother feelings of which the infant wishes to be rid. If the infant feels it is dying [i.e. feels as if he is losing his rudimentary sense of self as a consequence of his inability to cope with his disturbing emotional experience] it [the infant] can arouse fears that it is dying in the mother. A well-balanced mother can accept these and respond therapeutically; that is to say in a manner that makes the infant feel it is receiving its frightened personality [no longer dissolving or fragmenting] back again but in a form that it can tolerate—the fears are manageable by the infant personality. (W.R. Bion, 1962)

In this way, mother and infant together think thoughts that had previously been so disturbing as to cause the infant to fear he was dying. The activity we know as “thinking” (intra-subjective) was in origin non-verbal (inter-subjective) communication between the mother and infant.

It requires two minds to think one's most disturbing thoughts. The two minds engaged in thinking may be those of the mother and infant, the group leader and group member, the patient and analyst, husband and wife, and so

on. The two minds may also be two “parts” of the personality. When the thinking capacity of the parts of the personality in conversation with one another proves inadequate to the task of thinking one’s troubling experience, the minds of two separate people are required for thinking one’s previously unthinkable thoughts. Since every stage of development involves facing emotional experience for which one feels unprepared, we are, throughout our lives, in need of other people with whom to think. The human unit begins as a couple, and the individual continues to return to a couple throughout life to be reconstituted.

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