INTRODUCTION

In previous chapters, I have emphasized the crucial importance of the processes of self differentiation and self articulation to development and described the psychoanalytic treatment of a number of patients whose central pathology in this area took a variety of forms (see Brandchaft, 1986). This significant developmental step determines whether self experience can be established and consolidated as the primary referent for the interpretation of events and for the direction of an unfolding design for living and personal destiny (von Broemsen, 1991).

However, for this developmental achievement to occur, the parents must be capable of the profound shift in perspective that marks their own psychological differentiation from their child. They must have relinquished their need for the child to be the ideal child if they are to be able to appreciate and respond to the unfolding of the child’s intrinsic endowment.

In the case of William, who I shall discuss shortly, his caretakers’ needs for what their child should and shouldn’t be constituted a ready-made design for his life. Subsequently William’s attempts to break free of these constraints and give expression to a self of his own took ever more urgent and distressed forms. When these attempts were arbitrarily and relentlessly dismissed or punished, William early developed a pattern of uncontrolled rage. These expressions, of William’s distinctness, as well as others, were responded to as incomprehensible betrayals and as intolerable narcissistic wounds. What in William was a spirit yearning to be free became for his parents one to be crushed.

In circumstances such as these, the child does not have the power to counteract the need of the caretaker to commandeer his development and shackle his course. The power of the parents, on the other hand, is

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1 Portions of this chapter were presented at a conference at the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Institute, March 17, 1991.
overwhelming. They may use open or implied threats in the face of the
to the child's helpless dependence upon them. In addition, parents occupy
role of reflectors of an ultimate reality, the definers of who the child is,
and the imparters of meaning to the child's experience. This position
provides them with an enormously powerful tool with which to bind
the child to their frames of reference, and thus to them, especially in their
definitions of who he really is. Enduring negative or positive, hopeful or
despairing, nourishing or depleting meanings are attached to the organi-
zation of the child's experience of himself and his world and become
installed in the child's prereflective unconscious where they continue to
shape the quality of his life and determine the direction that life takes.

Prereflective structures are unconscious in a different and more pro-
found sense than the structures created by repression. The organizing
principles that make them up exist outside the sphere of possible revi-
sion. They function as unalterable facets of absolute truth and ultimate
realities—"facts of nature" not themselves products of the mind. They are
the repository of psychological tradition and come to constitute its inten-
tionality. They are the locus of resistance to change, and they consti-
tute and define an area of intransigent resistance to therapeutic trans-
formation. Everything we observe in ourselves and others emerges from the
interaction between what is observed and the eyes that are observing.
But our eyes reveal only what they see. They do not reveal either the
optical or the psychological principles of organization that govern their
operation.

Finally, the caretakers possess enormous power to inhibit, undermine,
or destroy the development in the child's innate capacity for self-
reflection, which might afford him the opportunity for correction, choice,
and independent judgment when these alone could offer an escape route
from his imprisonment. The child becomes incapacitated because he can-
not integrate experiences that contradict the constructs of the parents.

The result is what I have come to believe is the most pervasive and
disabling disorder of our times. The tormenting, unrelenting, often felt,
about who and what one is, the absence of sustaining internal referents for
one's sense of one's own self, and the lack of confidence, courage, and
freedom to choose a course of one's own are all rooted in this existen-
tial conflict.

The case of William, the opening phase of whose treatment I will pre-
sent here, is one of obsessional character disorder. His mind had become
the battleground and torture chamber in which these central conflicts
continued to be played out and over again. William refused to fit the
role assigned to him and became the target of the emotional storms of his
mother and father. He subsequently developed an obsessive preoccupation
with lightning and thunder. This, and the malaise and despair that were
relentlessly enveloping him, led him to seek analysis.

REPORT ON THE CASE OF WILLIAM

William, a middle-aged professional, entered analysis with me about
18 months ago with a number of problems. Recently, however, he has been
under great pressure because of outbursts of explosive rage that have been
making life miserable for him and everyone around him. He has been mar-
rried for about a dozen years to a woman left widowed with three small
children. The immediate source of many of these outbursts has been the
turbulent relationship existing between William and his now teenaged step-
daughter, Jennifer. Jennifer rejects his attempts to endear himself to her
and is generally disrespectful, provocative, and contemptuous of any attempt
to regulate her behavior. She drops her clothes wherever she takes them off,
his room looks like a cyclone has gone through it, and she comes to life
Chinese when she is on the phone, any hour of the day or night. William has
difficulty falling asleep, so between his growing irritability and Jennifer's
defiance, or resentful compliance, the stage is always set for an escalating
imbroglio. Sitting at the dinner table, he may throw a plate or may get up
ahead of the door, and say, "You'll all be better off when I am dead." He
may then get into his car and drive around for a while before returning
home. Usually this repetitive cycle will be followed by expressions of con-
triteness and self-abuse about how terrible he is and how nobody should be
required to put up with him. William is tormented by obsessive thoughts
of being responsible for damaging Jennifer and Fran, his wife, and by a
background conviction that Fran is sorry she married him and will surely
leave him. He cannot rid himself of these feelings in spite of his awareness
that his wife is devoted to him.

Turbulence not only marks William's relations with Fran and Jennifer but
also characterizes many of his interpersonal relations. Let me cite a typical
example. William had installed an expensive computerized system in his busi-
ness. One part of the operation kept breaking down, and after many attempts
on the part of the servicer to repair it, it was decided that a replacement part
was needed—as it turned out, a major undertaking. Patience is not one of
William's stronger suits, and when his daily inquiries brought no satisfactory
response, his rage began to spiral. Underneath William's imperious demands
were his disintegrative experience of being ignored and his conviction that
his thriving business, like anything he might enjoy, will, inexorably, turn
to ashes, and he became completely preoccupied and miserable. The presi-
dent of the computer company responded ever more coldly and curtly, finally
telling William in effect to stop pestering him or take his business elsewhere.

Such incidents reproduced the childhood settings in which his ultimate
fate was in the hands of a powerful other absolutely impervious to his
appeals or entreaties. At any time, he could be experienced by powerful
others as causing too much trouble, as someone who could arbitrarily be
gotten rid of. This combination of utter helplessness and despair as some
adversary was deciding his ultimate fate always lay somewhere behind William’s uncontrolled rage. He experienced his rage as the ultimate proof that he was bad and the cause of irreparable damage, and his outbursts were most frequently followed by intense self-reproach and self-hatred.

Such repetitive experiences with employees, clients, wife, in-laws, and colleagues conveyed to me how utterly chaotic was William’s life. At the same time, paradoxically enough, William had gone through a protracted course of education at a demanding and prestigious postgraduate school without interruption and with sustained dedication to the work. He reported that he had never had, or caused, any serious difficulty with any teacher and had always achieved high academic standing at every level.

**Fears and clouds**

There were other symptoms that were distressing to William. He had many phobias, including, importantly, a terrible fear of flying, a particular source of concern and humiliation for him. His business necessitated travel to various cities, and he was distinctly handicapped by his inability to fly.

This phobia was all the more puzzling because William was an officer in the Air Force for many years and had never been “grounded” until recently. Shortly after he had begun his treatment, William made plans with some business associates to attend an important convention. At the airport, however, he was unable to board the plane, despite the urging of his friends. William was utterly humiliated, and adding to his shame was his worry that he had let me down. Thus did this underlying central paradigm first emerge in the transference, namely, a terrible fear of his disappointing me and my getting rid of him for his failure to fulfill expectations of my own. If William is himself, he cannot have a relationship, he is convinced, whereas if he is to have a relationship, he cannot be William. William is trapped between two prison cells.

William’s fear of flying, it emerged, was a special case of an underlying preoccupation that is always present and frequently becomes obsessively tormenting. He believes that it is predestined that catastrophe will befall him and/or someone he loves. For example, William worries endlessly about his children. Once his youngest son fell from the crib. William took him to the hospital for X-ray examination. It was negative, but William is still haunted by the feeling that a brain tumor will show up at some future time. Each time little Jason has a headache, it becomes the trigger for renewed torment and foreboding. In addition, he worries that the radiation to which he subjected Jason will result in Jason falling prey to leukemia.

At night, William’s mind conjures up one worry after the next. He becomes obsessively preoccupied with doubt and uneasiness that he has not locked and bolted his doors and failed to activate the alarm system. So he tumbles out of bed to check and recheck.

Perhaps the most intense and persistent of William’s fears and obsessive concerns center around lightning and thunder. He has become an expert meteorologist and analyst of cloud formations. Outside, he is forever searching the heavens for the sign of a developing cloud formation. I noticed in my office also that he would frequently turn his attention to the skies through my window while continuing to speak. For some time, William appeared to feel that he had to keep his distractions to himself. However, I recognized that he was afraid I would be displeased with him because of his own preoccupations. I told him that I sensed he had never had, and how much he longed for, an association in which he could feel the “rightness” of his being himself, saying and feeling and thinking whatever he chose. I went further and subsequently suggested that if he found that to maintain my interest and commitment he had to distance himself from his own perceptions, or preoccupations, as he feared, it would not be that there was anything wrong with these or him. Rather, I hoped to help him come to feel safe in considering that a shortfall had developed in our relationship and that he and I would need to be alerted to it. William seemed to find these interventions helpful. When he had become more comfortable in his excursions into out-the-window gazing, he was able to describe to me exactly what he saw. I also became comfortable in listening to what was occupying his focus. We spent many hours in this type of camaraderie, and I learned a great deal about climatology, cloud formations, and William.

I believe that my interest in these experiences, and my attempt to understand them on William’s own level of consciousness, made a very important contribution to the therapeutic alliance. I observed, after some time, that he scanned the heavens less, both in my office and outside. Instead, his attention seemed directed very much more to a scanning of his inner experiences.

William has had several attempts at treatment previously, the last some years ago in a psychoanalysis that lasted about five years. Apparently, this experience somehow served to congeal William’s belief that if he failed to respond in the way another expected or needed, and thus incurred their impatience or disappointment, there was something essentially at fault about him. This patterned continued to emerge in the transference with me. It enabled me to observe and tell him that, apparently from his childhood, when someone was displeased by or disappointed in him, William had come to accept his or her explanation that he was bad as his own and this continued to hold him, and his sense of who he was, hostage to any external reflection. I emphasized my opinion that the analysis offered an opportunity to understand this process so that he might reclaim the proprietorship of the criteria that defined him and the ability to distinguish what he was from what someone else thought him to be. I told him I wished to help him develop the confidence in his own experience
of himself, to enable him to free himself from these shackles that were imprisoning him.

"Attila the Hun"

William was born in the Midwest, the first of two children. His father was an accountant who was called into military service when William was four and was out of the home for the next two to two-and-a-half years. A dream, the first William reported, seems to encapsulate his experience of his childhood. In the dream, "a bearded man with long hair was pursuing me, and I awoke shouting 'Never!'" In reflecting about the dream, William said that the bearded man reminded him of the movie Ghostbusters II in which there was a portrait of a person similar to Attila the Hun who threatened New York City with his slime. The bearded man seemed to represent the ominous clouds that had so long threatened him, like Moses.

"I have frequent nightmares," William went on. "Attila the Hun is what my parents saw me as. I was trouble, a menace. I was constantly being reminded of what a bad boy I was, scolded, reprimanded and always threatened that I would be sent away. When I was four, they put me into prekindergarten school all day because I was too hard for my mother to handle. I remember being terrified, but they wouldn't take me out. I was sent away to camp for the summer when I was seven." In a subsequent session, William recalled how he had been "homesick" at the camp and suffered the taunts of the other campers. William subsequently remembered that he was told that when he was a baby, they could not get him to stop crying, so they had to put him into his crib and shut the door until he cried himself to sleep. He remembers every move being monitored and scrutinized and being called "fidgety" and told he had "St. Vitus' dance." "William," they would say, "just won't toe the mark," and when they felt he had done something wrong, he remembered waiting in terror for a whipping with a belt buckle or the hairbrush or being sent to sit on a chair in the cellar, not to move until he had "learned your lesson!" These whippings did not stop until William was 12. He told of constant threats to be sent away to reform school or to military school.

What triggered the dream of Attila the Hun and the threatening Moses emerged in a subsequent session. William approached Jennifer in an attempt to engage her with a "kidding," or perhaps "teasing," remark, to which she responded with aloofness. So William went to bed later with this interchange, and its corrosively dismissive effect, rankling within him. While he was in this frame of mind, the telephone in Jennifer's room kept ringing with one call after another. At 11 o'clock he pleaded with her to get her friends not to call at that time of night, to show "a little consideration" for him, as he put it. Jennifer responded with some average expectable demeaning reply, and his wife joined in on Jennifer's side. William, feeling besieged, told Fran unceremoniously to shut up her mouth, and later he had to apologize for the language he used. The incident was the trigger for the dream and its apocalyptic outcome.

As William's recollections of his childhood continued to unfold, it appeared that, from the beginning, William was unable to be the baby his mother needed him to be and believed she had been deprived of by giving birth to him. From the first, as a colicky baby, he was unable to accommodate himself to her central requirement that he be of as little trouble as possible. Her responses reflected her terrible disappointment and sense of betrayal and failure. They installed in him this enduring definition of himself as a misfortune, troublemaker, bad boy and of punishment deserved and awaiting. Subsequent responses to his needs as overburdening, or his demands as causing trouble, initiated in him increasing cycles of helplessness, mounting distress, and rageful temper tantrums. All elicited similar responses in which were conveyed the same meanings, ultimately culminating in threats to get rid of him. These emotional storms had become concretized in his fears and in his obsessive brooding about clouds.

The terrors of rejection

William's current marriage was preceded some years before by a relationship with a young lady who became a source of torment for him. He had become enamored of a beautiful southern model who had seen him in his Air Force uniform and fallen in love with him. He felt he could not live without her, but when she was with him for some time, he began to realize he couldn't marry her yet exactly equally couldn't bring himself to tell her. So the matter stretched on for seven years, while William became more and more tormented. He was convinced he had fixed it so that she would no longer be a desirable woman to any worthwhile man, and thus he had sentenced her to a barren and bleak existence. Filled with remorse, and unable to stand it any longer, he finally ended the affair by driving her back to the town from which she had come.

William never recovered from the wrenching guilt, and the onset of his preoccupation with lightning and thunder occurred shortly after this affair had ended. In attempting to avert a repetition of his childhood experience of causing irreparable trouble for his mother, William had prolonged the relationship long enough, as he believed, to ruin his paramour's future and thus to ensure such a repetition. Following the affair, however ingenious or desperate William's attempts to atone or compensate for his sense of guilt, forebodings of an ominous fate, relentlessly set in motion, continued to preoccupy him.

William met his wife sometime afterward, about 10 years ago. She was an attractive woman who had been recently widowed when her husband fell ill to a fatal disease. She was left with three small children, Jennifer
being the eldest. For William, Fran’s attractiveness was enhanced by the challenge of providing fatherless children with a father. He had hoped that by unhesitatingly offering to rescue the fatherless children, he would prove to himself, and to Fran, that he really was a good person after all. Alas! The fatherhood project worked only until the first time he got angry with one of the children. Having hoped to make things so much better, he once again found himself in the familiar position of causing trouble, and with this discovery, any positive sense of himself collapsed. The first and most intense feelings that he brought into the analysis were those that followed these outbursts of temper together with vitriolic denunciations of himself as not worth being alive. He seemed convinced that inevitably he would cause the breakup of the family and that he would be alone.

It was clear that he expected some sort of scolding from me for his behavior, and I took this up first—his hope for me to help him understand his experiences and his fear that he would find confirmation in me of how bad he really was. I went on subsequently to suggest that in these outbursts I sensed there was something he could not help, something out of his control. I said that it would be important for us to look into his experience in some depth in order to be able to understand what forces were at work, so to enable him to have some choice, and exert some control, as to the course of his own behavior. “And,” I said, “whatever it is that turns out to explain what happens to you in this connection, I am quite certain it will not be that you are, in essence, a rotten seed.”

As William became more aware that his rage reactions were automatic and out of his control, he was better able to anticipate the interactions that would inevitably ignite them. So he was also able to extricate himself frequently before he lost control of himself. At the same time his growing interest in understanding the patterns of his experience also served to modulate his reactions. It became clear that many of these experiences replicated and reactivated childhood experiences of painful and humiliating rejection, making him hostage, over and over again, to terrifying experiences of his existence slipping away.

At the same time, William was becoming more aware of how pervasive were his obsessive forebodings. These were never absent but became tormenting whenever any adverse circumstance occurred. An illness of a child, the loss of a client, and a disagreement with a business associate would all have this corrosive effect. Especially intense in this regard was any argument that ensued between William and his wife. Always hovering in the background was his conviction that she was sorry she married him and was just waiting to leave him. Here also was concretized the fear that without her there was no existence that he could conceive of. A further feature of William’s experience was that he appeared unable to distinguish his fears, for example, that Fran would leave him or that Jason would die of a brain tumor, as products of a disturbed and disturbing state of mind from an unchallengeable divination and blueprint of a future already determined. Therefore, no experience in the analysis that provided some comfort, or additional understanding, could be sustained. Each would inevitably be followed by a recurrence of torment. This repetitive and predictable process began also to stimulate William’s worries that he was becoming a great deal of trouble to me in his inability to change. For some time the main effect of the therapeutic effort was that William was better able to sustain periods of calm and relative well-being, even if the background contratheme was never absent.

About a year after he had begun his treatment, William began to entertain the hope that he might overcome his fear of flying. He began to make plans to take his family on an airplane trip as part of his vacation. In a typical session, he reported a renewed obsessive preoccupation that his son Jason had a brain tumor. A few days later that fear had subsided, only to be replaced by another precipitated by his wife’s menstrual bleeding in the middle of her cycle. He could not drive the thoughts out of his mind that she was suffering from an ovarian cancer. When I attempted to have him reflect on what might have triggered these fears, William, after some time, replied, “It must be—it is—my mother and father have been calling me. They want to come out for a visit, and I don’t want to see them. I haven’t returned their calls or spoken to them in six weeks. They called again this past weekend, and Fran spoke to them. They are sitting there worried and angry, waiting for my call! And I see my grandfather pointing his finger and saying, ‘But she’s your mother!’ And I feel like there is a rubber band in me being stretched tighter and tighter, and it is about to break!”

I paused, then said to William, “As you describe that experience, I see little William—bad little William—worrying his mother and making her and father angrier and angrier. Little William is alone in his bedroom, and his mind is filled with the picture of them worrying and enraged, and he causing all this trouble. They are regretting that they had such a boy as he, a boy that they are ashamed to tell grandfather or the neighbors about. Little William is feeling more and more frightened and bad and alone. They expect him to come and apologize, say how sorry he is to cause them such pain, how bad he is, and how he would never do it again. He knows they will say, ‘You always say that, but you’ll never change!’ And he would have to tear himself down before they would turn off that disowning stare.”

I observed him following me in rapt attention as I called up this ghost of his past. He hung on the scene I had painted for him, and then he erupted. "Fuck it," he said, "Fuck it. They made me afraid in order to make me do whatever they wanted! Be whatever they needed! But I'm not going to worry! I've had enough! I'm up to here! I'm not going to worry about it," and a certain calm settled over him.

I waited, and then he said, "I'm feeling a little light-headed." A tension seemed to be replacing the calm.
I replied, “In what has just now happened, there seems to be the residue within you of their wrath and warnings to you—not now as lightning and thunder but as light-headedness. You have challenged an existing way of being that tied you to them, stretched the rubber band—and whenever you dare to take charge of your own destiny, as just now, you feel estranged and endangered. You know that the reason you don’t call and don’t want them to visit is not because you want to cause trouble for them but because you are determined not to continue a tie by intimidation, by submission, but only when you enter it voluntarily and freely.”

He said, “I am getting there. We still have work to do, but I can feel the enthusiasm welling up within me wanting to burst out!”

Separations

I now wish to report on an hour that occurred a short time following the hour just described. William was resuming the treatment following a holiday Monday in which an hour had been omitted and the physical separation prolonged by one day.

William spoke of events that had taken place since last we met. They involved difficulties he had gotten into. I sensed that he may have been a bit edgy over the weekend—and I asked if he were aware of anything like that, and, if so, could he shed any light on what was bothering him underneath.

William thought for a moment and then responded that he was still bothered with an uneasy feeling about not having called his parents. He didn’t want to call them because he knew they would make him feel awful for making them worry by his not calling before. And he doesn’t want to call them now because they’ll expect him to invite them out for their annual visit this summer.

In the next session, he reported that he had taken Fran to a restaurant for dinner. An altercation occurred with a man who was seated at an adjoining table, and they finally left the restaurant and went to another. “Fran said maybe I ought to see you seven times a week,” William continued. I asked what he thought about the observation, to which he replied, “She said she notices the difference when I don’t see you.”

So I asked whether he also noticed the difference and whether he could tell me what it was. In a straightforward way he replied, “I like coming to see you, and it leaves something missing when I don’t see you.”

He went on to speak of a time before settling in Los Angeles. He was attempting to decide where to settle and had been offered a great opportunity in a city in Ohio. He visited the city, but when he was there, he felt terribly anxious and alone, and he remembered an empty feeling that was very painful. He added that now he realized that these were the same terrible feelings he had when he was sent away to camp at age seven that had always been described to him as “homesickness.” He thinks now that that was why he got married for the first time in graduate school when he was 21. (That marriage lasted only about four months, and he knew he had made a terrible mistake.)

I said that the terrible feelings had evidently persisted throughout his life from childhood, and it seemed that the feelings he was beginning to notice around the weekend, and around the coming absence for the summer vacation, had something of the same quality. If we could pay attention to them, perhaps it would help us to understand in depth and explain the underlying state of mind that makes it more difficult for him to retain a sense of well-being and balance when we are apart and discover what this “empty feeling” was all about. I reminded him of the description he had used about how he feels when he thinks about flying—“the bottom falling out”—and said that it might have something to do with that experience of “something missing” and the empty feeling that was becoming discernable in relation to my absence.

I noted that William seemed eager to explore these experiences and especially that he seemed reluctant to leave.

Flash of lightning, clap of thunder

Perhaps emboldened by our discussion of his anxiety directly in relation to me, William, in the following sessions, turned to his fears at night, his continuing and lifelong restless insomnia, and the tormenting anticipations that preoccupy him as he lies in bed, trembling in the dark. Unable to see and thus prepare, he feels absolutely defenseless, and his torment escalates. “All this,” I said, “helps me to understand your enormous sensitivity to the appearance of any cloud on the horizon and how familiarizing yourself with the physics and climatology of cloud formations helps you counteract and contain this underlying terror of helplessness. This fear also contributes to your anxiety about riding in an airplane, for being caught there unawares leaves you no place to run or to hide.”

When William hears the clap of thunder, he immediately leaves his bed and goes to the couch in the center of the living room—the most inaccessible place for lightning to strike. Thunder, he knows, travels at the rate of 1,000 feet/second, whereas light travels almost instantaneously. So if there is lightning, followed by thunder, the number of seconds of the interval will tell him how far or near the danger lurks!

It is the crescendo of the thunder as it rolls to its final pitch that frightens him and then the anticipation of the next bolt of lightning—the one that is waiting to strike him.

I wondered aloud what personal meanings these experiences had for William and what in those tormenting experiences was being replicated over and over again.
William replied, “To me they mean uncontrolled and uncontrollable violence. They mean an intent to hurt and punish me, to make me squirm. I never liked violence as a child, never liked to see anyone hurt or be hurt myself. That's why I liked wrestling; that was play—people fight each other, but no one gets hurt.

“But,” William reflected, “back there people weren't afraid of thunder and lightning; it happens so often, everyone gets used to it. I moved out to here to get away from it, but it followed me. ‘You're not going to get away from us,’ it said.”

I noted that he had moved out here to get away from the relationship with his parents and their tormenting and damaging impact on himself. But it had followed him like the lightning and thunder, and now the prospect of his parents themselves following him had kicked up the old fears, made him aware that he was still engaged in a frightening struggle, now not with his parents but with the residues within himself—the ominous warnings of what will happen to him if he upsets them—that continued to hold him in their fearful clutches.

William then remembered that he had had a dream some time ago. “I am in a house, near a body of water. The waves at first are gentle, and then they get more and more violent. I am on the second floor, but the waves are rising closer and closer, and I am going to be swallowed up!”

“Again,” I said, “your dream seems to speak to your feeling of a violent threat approaching, relentless and uncontrolled, and you powerless, pinned down, and unable to protect yourself.” He told me that a previous analyst had told him it was his tears, but he couldn’t connect with that.

William fell silent, strangely as it seemed to me, and then I inquired about it, he said that he was embarrassed because he had told me that. With some encouragement to elaborate, he said that I might be offended, like if a man had a girlfriend and she finds out he has other girlfriends.

I remarked about his continuing fear of offending me, perhaps lest one area where the sky was clear should become frightening and clouded. I noted that it was an interest in some attachment that was his, and not mine, and not to me, that would cause me to be troubled and that triggered this fear. I suggested that in this manner his tie to me, which he hoped to use to free himself, could itself become another prison cell, and therefore it was a mark of trust to bring it up in order for us both to continue to be aware of this threat. I said at the same time an old and deadly threat seemed to be surfacing in this way, and I wondered about that.

I was aware that William’s increasing engagement with me was inevitably stimulating both hopes and profound fears. He had resumed an early attachment that felt to him as part of himself so that it left an emptiness when we were separated. At the same time he was afraid that it would become one more prison to confine him. I was aware that the key to the understanding of both his transference fears, and the early childhood terrors they were reflecting and replicating, would lie in the analysis of the experiences of aloneness, the “empty feeling” and its meanings to William that were now occurring and becoming evident to William when we were separated.

I was also aware of the addiction-like hold William's obsessive thinking continued to exert upon his mind. It was not only when he was afraid of having upset me that obsessions were likely to reassert their grip on him. It was also when he felt I helped him use his own experience as the basis for his definition and assessment of himself, and to determine his own course, that the foreboding tended to become more ominous and threatening. I was acutely aware that his mind was a prison from which he could not escape. And I began to puzzle the following question: What was the overwhelming power that this self-punitive way of thinking held, and why did it remain so endowed?

William called one day to report an event that had made a deep impression upon him. He had spent an evening with an old friend, Ben, eight years older than he, who had lived next to William when both were growing up. During the course of the evening, Ben said that he had remembered William’s mother as high strung, and then he went on to say, reproachfully, “And you didn’t do anything to help her!” Ben recalled then that once upon coming home, he saw little William on the porch of his home with his suitcase, looking forlorn. He asked William what was troubling him. “I’m running away,” he recalled William saying, “and my mother packed my suitcase!”

Listening to this memory, I saw clearly how William’s history was repeating itself relentlessly and beyond his ability yet to recognize or control. Coming to a session to me was opening a door to leave the psychological home constituted by the constructs of his parents. In his sessions with me, he experienced an alternative way of seeing himself and his life. He got the idea that there was a different lens with which he might see and face himself. Yet when we were apart, inexorably he returned to the familiar constructs of badness and intimidation. It occurred to me as I thought about him, forlorn and alone on that doorstep of his childhood, that it must have been a cataclysmic experience of nonbeing, of ceasing to exist, that compelled him to return defeated to the only frame of reference that made his existence acceptable. And I sensed deeply that these were the waves of his dream threatening to inundate him and that it was something of the same kind of threat to existence that continued to operate within him now.

Subsequently William scheduled his airplane trip a month into the future, an act of heroic courage and impressive trust. It was to coincide with his and my summer vacation. He became concerned once more about dying and the humiliation of not being able to board the plane. He also recognized that a shift in his own inner state had taken place, so that he was once again more irritable, and this led to a series of short skirmishes with Jennifer, “like dogs that live together and keep snapping at each other.” He
recognized this as an outcome of his worried state and did not feel that it was a demonstration of his badness.

Prior to this separation, the second protracted one of the analysis, William noted that he was able to pay attention to a feeling that he recognized as familiar. It was in relation to my leaving, and it went back to the distant time when he was four and when his father left for the Army. Did he think it was because of him, an early thing for him to feel responsible for and sorry about? Surely he could feel, as he does so often even now, that he was no bargain—not being nice to his mother, and she high strung and unsettled as she was. And now her husband was getting out, and she was alone with this little devil whom nobody could control and who refused to toe the mark.

Problems in William's outside relationships appeared and, with the bond to me stronger, presented opportunities for William's growth and better solutions. These situations occurred within a relatively short period of time and enabled me to find an approach with William that seemed to have been helpful. One was an incident with Jennifer in which she, about to approach the driving age, was in a car driven by a friend, and the driver violated a rule of safe driving that could have endangered all three, Jennifer, her friend, and William. William was frightened and back home challenged her with a stinging rebuke about the quality of the friends she picked, and Jennifer stormed out of the room in a rage. In speaking about this, William recognized that he had been curt to her and then asked, somewhat plaintively, "Why does she have to react in that way?" I responded that it was a good question and, perhaps, if he could pursue it, the understanding he might arrive at might enable him to make a contribution to the betterment of their relations, which I knew he wanted very much, without demeaning himself.

William's associations led to his experience of his mother who, like Jennifer, was always on the phone. He still can't stand to hear her; she grates on him. He has an almost physical reaction to her, and he has to shut her out. William paused for a moment and then said, "Do you suppose she could have that reaction to me? Jesus Christ! I never thought of that!"

Another instance occurred when William reported an incident at work, with great agitation, saying he had really fucked up. He got into an argument with an employee and was abusive to him, and the employee, indispensable to him, walked out on him. Now William was convinced his business was going to collapse. I responded that it would be well for him to be aware of his tendency to fit this incident, which might not turn out to have such disastrous certainties, into an underlying scenario of irreparable damage, proof of badness, and confirmation that he would be forever sorry. In fact, from a different frame of reference, what had taken place between himself and his employee might not be so far outside the give-and-take that life involves, and if he could extricate his mind from the feelings that he had ruined everything, and that he was now in the throes of a fate that dictated his business would collapse, he would be able to consider alternatives that might be helpful to him.

The next day William reported that he had felt better. He called the employee, apologized for his rudeness, said he considered him a very valuable part of the enterprise, and asked him if he would consider coming back to work. The employee responded that he would give it some thought and later called back and said he would return. William said that he was glad, that he appreciated it, and that he was sure that in the future he would be able to control himself better. The employee said it was big of William to be able to apologize, and the whole matter subsided.

Despair and self definition

William's determination to overcome his fear of flying continued to produce this pervasive anxiety that enveloped every experience—that William, or someone close to him, was going to die. His resilience was thus compromised, and the taut state of mind probably affected the people around him, including Fran, his wife.

He reported an incident in which he had been verbally abusive to a maid. She walked out on him, and when he, in a repentant mood, called her at home to apologize, she refused to speak to him.

So that left Fran, now in a rage, to be dealt with. "It's alright," she stormed, "for you to say that Brandchaft and you are working on it. He isn't left without a maid. He doesn't have to go and find someone to replace her and worry while trying to run an office at the same time. "You're hopeless!" she concluded hopelessly. "You'll never change!" He was convinced now that she was about to leave him.

William then began to sink into his old pattern, berating himself for being bad, denouncing himself as not really fit to be a father or husband, and thinking indeed everyone would be better off were he to just disappear or die! He realized he was sinking into an accelerating slide of self-abuse, and he was able to stop the slide somewhat by saying to himself, remembering me, that it wasn't as if he had killed someone. It was bad that he lost his temper, he told himself, but he wasn't bad.

To make matters worse, there was lightning the previous night. Although he noted that his anxiety was less than he had anticipated it would be, still he found himself seeking the refuge and safety of an interior room, away from the direct path of the flash of lightning that was about to occur.

I suggested that it seemed to me that he also hoped to find a haven of protection in my office and with me, both from the effects of Fran's anger with him on his sense of what he was and from his own attacks upon himself launched because he had to see himself through her condemning eyes and was not yet able to sustain a more compassionate view of his own. An expropriation had taken place, I said, in which the definition of what and
who William was had slipped away from him, and he and I now had the task and opportunity of reclaiming it.

William said that he was afraid that I would be discouraged and disappointed in him and agree that nothing had been accomplished in his treatment, though he continued to feel, in spite of this sinking back, that he was in many ways better than when he first came to see me. However, when he felt that way, he also felt that he was kidding himself, just believing what he wanted to believe because he didn't want to admit that he had an incurable devil within him!

First I reflected to William my sense of how much his confidence in his own experiences, his own perceptions, and his own evaluations had been undermined when they conflicted with those that his caretakers needed or wanted him to have. I went on to suggest that this erosion of his confidence in his own mental processes was at the root of his obsessive doubting and had left him as a ship without a rudder and that the resumption of that part of his development that he once got stuck in, and that keeps tripping him up over and over again, seemed to me to be a continuing purpose of the analysis.

I said that I sensed that he was more fully coming to recognize, and appreciate, how important the goal we had set was to him. That contributed to his empty feelings when we were separated, as we were soon to be. He was afraid he would lose me and thus be left permanently without the feeling of substantiality of his own, which we were in the process of helping him acquire. “But,” I said, “this worry seems to be increased because you are frightened that, since you continue to be upset and thus to need me, you will become too much trouble for me.”

We then went on to explore what might have contributed to unsettling him that resulted in the flare-ups and inability to control himself with Fran’s maid. He suggested that it might be his fears of the impending vacation: He is planning this trip so as to be with his son and then, later, to be able to attend the conference in the East with his friends that he had been unable to take last year. He knew, he said, he would get on that plane. He was only worried that he would be killed.

I acknowledged my recognition of his determination to face what he had such terror about. I went on to suggest that I wanted to help him recognize that although he feared the plane would crash and that he would die, that set of ideas had no bearing, contained not a hint of clairvoyance or relevance to what might or might not happen. Although events within his experience had predetermined that he should and indeed had to feel and think the way he did, no such events had predetermined the course of the plane or the outcome of the trip. That course would be determined by events and considerations that were absolutely independent of his fears and of the warnings his mother had instilled in him and indeed independent of him altogether. The plane operates according to laws of its own, not those he was attributing to it. He had early had imprinted upon him the indelible message that if he were troublesome, as he had been with Fran and the maid, then he was simply a source of trouble and that he needed to be, and inexorably would be, taught a lesson he would never again forget. He would be terminated!

I told him that I wanted to help him extricate himself from the tyranny of those threats. I hoped to help him appreciate that he was in no more or less danger than any one of the passengers who had made that trip 100,000 times without mishap. The danger in the prospective trip, I said, was that he might fail to recognize that the danger lay not in the plane trip but in the state of mind that ruled him so cruelly and determined so far the quality of his life.

We went back to the incident with Fran and the recognition of what effect her flaring anger (the lightning) had had upon him, his own sense of himself, how he defined himself, and his fears of my getting rid of him.

I said, “How sad that no one in your childhood had helped you put into a different perspective the events, or behavior, that had continued to cause trouble for them. How sad that nobody appeared to recognize that behavior, theirs, yours, everybody’s, is multi-stranded, not single stranded. Nobody recognized that progress never occurs in a straight line upward or that every day can’t be, nor should be, filled with sunshine. Everybody believed, by virtue of whatever peculiarities made them who they were, that if you fell back into an old pattern, that you and they had accomplished nothing and that you were hopeless. All of this is now so deeply interwoven in the very fabric of your being that it seems an inseparable part of your most authentic and purest self. All this was planted indelibly in you by an overburdened mother, who Fran has just reminded you of through being beside herself over and over again because you don’t do or feel what she needs you to—an echo of a mother screaming, out of control, feeling frustrated, betrayed, and hopeless, ’You’ve done it again! I don’t know what to do with you! You’ll never change! You’re not really sorry!’ ”

William listened intently and then said, “I remember a game I used to play over and over again. You had to roll a ball down a slightly inclined plane, and there were 50 holes that I had to keep it out of. You could control the pitch, the yaw, and the roll of the board as the ball was descending by two knobs. But if you got it by 49 holes, and it fell into the 50th, you lost!”

“I guess,” he said wistfully, “I’m still trying to wiggle myself down some course in which I won’t ever fall into a hole before I can feel that I’m worth anything at all.”

The summer break kept approaching, the conclusion of 14 months of treatment. The day before the break was two days before William had scheduled himself for his own vacation, which was to include this important
plane trip. He said that he knew he was challenging fate and attempting to conquer his terror by flying. As luck would have it, the skies had grown overcast, and they were scheduled to stay that way for at least for the rest of the week. They stimulated in William the anticipation of an ominous happening. So he had spent a restless night. He reported the following dream:

I was in an encampment, and I was engaged in a life-and-death struggle. My adversaries were Japanese, and they were shooting at me while I had a weapon in my hands, attempting to fend them off. I was not afraid. Then, suddenly, I felt a bullet tear into the skin of my chest. It hurt, but I was alive, but now I was frightened. I looked at the wound. It appeared to be a flesh wound, but it had grooved a path upward, and I was unable to assess the damage done or assure myself about it. I could not see beneath the skin.

William recognized that the dream reflected that it was not just an airplane journey but a life-and-death struggle he was engaged in—something far more serious than his altercations with Jennifer or Fran. Nothing less than a fight to survive. He had become more aware of that. He paused and said he wondered what it was in its purest and most original form. William paused again, then, deep in thought, said, “It is more than that I expect punishment for the bad things I’ve done—more than that—more than trying to atone. At the deepest level, I’m aware that I feel I haven’t earned a right to live and that I, or someone else, will erase the fact of my existence. I didn’t earn the right to be born, and I’ve been uneasy about being alive ever since!”

I shall conclude the account of this opening phase of an analysis at this point. William got on the plane, and his vacation proceeded without difficulty. Neither he, nor I, believed that this would be the end of his travels or his travail. However, I believed that a basis had been laid for the continuing investigation into the nature, and especially the adhesive power, of William’s obsessional torment. The further unfolding of this struggle against the expropriation of a self and for its reclamation I will defer to a subsequent time. Here let me say only that also fueling his anxieties were his unvoiced fears of how he might inadvertently do damage to me. Recall the incident with Fran, when she, angry over the loss of her maid, made a caustic remark about his work with “Brandchaft” with the clear indication that it was not benefitting him—and her—sufficiently. As I only subsequently realized, this likely triggered in William additional fears that I would be adversely affected by others’ criticisms of my treatment and hold him responsible for the damage to my reputation. In fact, this type of reaction subsequently became more pronounced in the months ahead and presented a serious problem as the analysis proceeded.

Conclusion

I have presented an account of the first portion of an analysis of a patient suffering from an obsessive disorder. The obsessional mental operations, when they had become the focus of empathic inquiry, were seen to reflect a specific area of arrest in the developmental process of self differentiation and self articulation. As a consequence, the establishment and consolidation of self experience as the primary referent for the patient’s self definition and sense of self had never taken place. The patient consequently remained addicted to the definitions of self and parental constructs that the parents needed in order to attempt to control the course the patient’s development took. The resumption of the developmental process becomes possible within the context of a therapeutic bond of psychoanalysis. I have attempted to describe some of the characteristics of that bond, together with some of the therapeutic procedures made possible in the case of William.

COMMENTARY

This previously unpublished case study provides a more extensive and detailed view of Brandchaft’s clinical approach than anything he has offered elsewhere. The analysand, William, suffered with an obsessive preoccupation with clouds, lightning, and thunder; several phobias, including the fear of flying; and a profound malaise and despair that had been refractory to previous long-term, intensive analytic efforts. His conflicts and rages were readily apparent, though his certainty that he was the cause of his own troubles and his conviction that others would give up on him was less apparent, although painfully real to him.

Diagnostically, Brandchaft sees William as a case of obsessional character disorder. More important, however, William’s tormenting doubt about his very nature epitomizes the developmental conundrum that is the subject of the previous two chapters. The focus is on self articulation and whether the intersubjective milieu can provide a developmental scaffolding in which self experience can be established and consolidated as the primary referent for the interpretation of events and for the direction of an unfolding design for living and personal destiny. In William’s case, obstructions began with his parents’ own difficulties in differentiating from him, for they couldn’t see William as he was apart from their dreams of what a child might be. Like Martin in the previous chapter, who epitomizes the “rebellious” solution to the problem of harmonizing needs for close ties with a desire for a life of his own, and Mr. N in a preceding chapter, who epitomizes the “submissive” solution, William believed that if he was himself, he couldn’t have a relationship, and if he had a relationship he couldn’t be himself. The resulting conundrum
Brandchaft describes as “the most pervasive and disabling disorder of our times.”

The case report describes only the initial phase of treatment, but it is replete with illustrations of Brandchaft’s manner and responsiveness. Brandchaft was sensitive to the first signs that William’s fears were entering the transference (initially in the form of the fear of displeasing him), and he handled the circumstance without covering it over with reassurance. Rather, he spoke of the patient’s longing for an association in which he could feel and think and say what he chose. Gently pointing William to future challenges in the transference, he added that if William ever sensed he had to keep thoughts and feelings to himself in the analysis, it would indicate they needed to deal together with the problem. His genetic interpretations—“when someone was displeased by or disappointed in him, William had come to accept his or her explanation that he was bad”—were similarly admixed with the hope for change—“the analysis offered an opportunity to understand this process so that he might reclaim the proprietorship of the criteria that defined him and the ability to distinguish what he was from what someone else thought him to be.”

Brandchaft holds that the child does not have the power to counteract the need of the unreflective, rigid caretaker to commandeir his development: “Parents occupy the role of reflectors of the ultimate reality, the definers of who the child is, and the imparters of meaning to the child’s experience.” Meanings experienced in the family, whether nourishing or depleting, become part of the child’s prereflectively unconscious organizing principles (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984) and continue to shape his life outside his awareness. Accordingly, Brandchaft recognizes that the patient has an abundance of underlying scenarios and preestablished meanings into which day-to-day events are assimilated. The analyst neither corrects nor edits the patient but helps the patient to recognize his own frames of reference and, crucially, helps the patient to develop the capacity to distinguish his own view of any circumstance from the automatic meanings that were “installed” so long ago.

Rather than countering one of William’s morbid, self-effacing ideas, Brandchaft encouraged William to explore the thought or feeling in depth, so as to understand it better, thereby accepting the patient’s belief without sharing it; in this way, William began to reclaim (or develop) a capacity for self-reflection. Brandchaft is well aware of the pains attendant on challenging and changing “an existing way of being” that is tied to the parents and sensitive to the “estrangement and endangerment” William suffers when he begins to dare to take charge of his destiny. Brandchaft is also extraordinarily attuned to the sensations and feelings attendant on William’s development of a new attachment to him, as William returns again and again to worries that parallel his experiences with his parents in childhood—and to the belief that he will be a burden to Brandchaft and will be rejected because of it.