From 1969 to 1972, I was a Post-Doctoral Fellow in Clinical Psychology at the Western Missouri Mental Health Center in Kansas City. I was drawn to this institution because of its Director of Clinical Training, the legendary psychotherapist Austin Des Lauriers, author of *The Experience of Reality in Childhood Schizophrenia* (1962). In that book, he argued that so-called schizophrenia consists, at its core, of a catastrophic loss of the sense of the real. Its psychotherapy, accordingly, involves most centrally the reconsolidation and restoration of that sense. Although Des Lauriers made use of medical-diagnostic language in his writings, his fundamental conception was about something happening in subjective experience—i.e., it was phenomenological. Looking back, it seems to me that working closely with him infused a lasting phenomenological spirit into my thinking. His influence was most dramatically and fatefully transmitted in his supervision of my work with a patient who believed she was God. In what follows, I tell the story of that patient and her therapy.

**The patient who thought she was the Holy Ghost**

I first met the patient to be described when she arrived at the screening clinic of the mental health center where I was being trained one morning at 3 am. Brought to the hospital by her mother and brother, her eyes were wide with excitement, perspiration drenched her clothes, and she was shouting and carrying on. She cried out that she needed to see someone important. I presented myself as that important person and sat down to hear her story. There had been multiple flashes of golden light in and around her home, she explained, and the flashes had come into her bedroom and penetrated her body. She said: “They filled me up and I was going to BUST!” I asked her to tell me what she thought this golden energy was. She answered: “I had sexual intercourse with Jesus Christ!”
The patient, whom I shall call Grace, 28 years old, was admitted to the inpatient service and one of our psychiatrists gave her the diagnosis: schizophrenia, paranoid type—DSM-II: 295.3. She was well-qualified for this diagnosis, seen from a purely medical point of view: clear signs of thought disorder, inappropriate affect, visual hallucinations, delusions of grandeur. I, however, was interested from the beginning not in her diagnosis but in understanding her strange and amazing ideas. I went to see her the next day following her admission and offered to be her primary therapist. She consented to the proposal.

I saw Grace every day for the next two weeks and then began to consult with Des Lauriers. During these early meetings, she spoke almost entirely about religious matters. I tried to show interest and listened attentively as she went on at great length.

One topic she spent hours speaking about concerned the history of the Catholic Church and what she saw as a tragic distortion in its portrayal of the figure of Jesus Christ. “Jesus was human and real,” she loudly exclaimed, “and not just a remote divine essence. He suffered pain, He felt alone, He was betrayed. He was a Man, He was Human, He was not just God!” She seemed to regard it as her personal destiny to correct this historical one-sidedness of Catholic doctrine, to restore to Jesus His human dimension. I asked her if she had read The Last Temptation of Christ by Nikos Kazantzakis (1955), which has an idea like hers as its theme. She answered she only read prayer books and the Bible.

A second topic in these early contacts concerned a special relationship she claimed to have with officials in the Church in Rome, including the Pope himself. The College of Cardinals she believed were, as we spoke, deliberating about her canonization, and she awaited their proclamation of her sainthood. She said she knew the Holy Father personally and had on more than one occasion magically flown through the sky to visit him in the Vatican. There had been compelling visions of having floated down from above, alighting at the Pope’s side or even on his lap.

A third preoccupation was with the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. “They are three,” she cried out, “and they are One!” God the Father, she told me, had been miraculously incarnated in the Bishop of her Diocese, and God the Son had appeared in the person of a psychotherapist she had seen and been very attached to during her later teen years. Grace herself embodied the Holy Spirit. When I asked her how she could know such things, she arose from her chair and shouted: “I am the Way, I am the Truth, I am the Light!” She was telling me that she was God. I had never met anyone like this and I had no idea what to do with her. So, I turned to Austin Des Lauriers, and he showed me a way.

When I finally sat down with him and described what I had seen and heard from Grace in our initial meetings, he expressed little interest in the details of her many religious delusions and hallucinations. About all that, he simply said: “Well, she’s talking to you. That is good—it gives you a beginning. Be happy that she is actually wanting to talk to you.” I then asked what I should say back to her in the face of her preoccupations. Des Lauriers responded with questions: “How is she dressed? What are her clothes like? Her shoes? How does she fix her hair, or does she? With all you are telling me, I doubt if she pays much attention to her appearance.” I described to him then how she appeared—she wore raggedy old sneakers, faded jeans, and an old sweatshirt—plus her hair was usually uncombed and kind of all over the place.

Perfect [Des Lauriers said] because although she pays no attention to how she looks, you can show her that you do. Tell her that her raggedy sneakers are magnificent, compliment her on her old sweatshirt. Show a sparkle of humor and friendliness in your eyes as you talk to her. Maybe you could bring out a comb and stand with her before a mirror, helping her make her hair look nice. Kid around with her about this, maybe combing your own hair.

He explained further that the purpose in all this was to establish myself as a concrete bodily presence in her world, a human being existing in time and space, physically distinct from her but relating to her in an impactful way. The hope was that in such interventions a bond could begin to form that would facilitate the stabilization of her reality and lead eventually to her recovery.

I asked Des Lauriers whether she might experience all this talk about her appearance and her body as a sexual seduction, and if she did, what was I to do about that? I was thinking about her experiences of being unprotected and her claim to have had sexual intercourse with Jesus Christ. I remember the essence of his reply:

Don’t worry about that at all. This young woman is in the midst of a catastrophe beyond imagining. The experiences she is having are about something far more fundamental than sexuality. You have to use everything you have and everything you are to reach her. You are male and she is female, and her awareness of this difference may have a role to play in the reclaiming of her identity as a person, as a woman. If sexuality somehow becomes an issue down the line, you will deal with it then. It is the least of your worries at this point.

I then returned to my daily meetings with Grace and tried to implement what Des Lauriers was suggesting. When she launched into long disquisitions about the history of the Catholic Church and its one-sided theology, I listened to her but then responded by making comments about her raggedy tennis shoes. I was surprised by her initial reaction—she laughed when I told her the shoes were magnificent, and seemed not to mind having been interrupted. When she began to speak about the goings on at the Vatican and among the Cardinals, I told her she had beautiful blue eyes. Again, she smiled and almost seemed to take up my admiring words. As she began to hold forth about the Trinity, I told her to stand up and look at herself in the mirror as we stood next to each other. I combed her
hair then, remarking on its nice light brown color. Then I combed my own hair before the mirror and asked her if she thought I needed a haircut. I parted it down the middle and inquired as to whether I looked good, or like one of the Three Stooges. Still again, she laughed. I took her for a number of short walks on the hospital grounds, and interrupted her streaming religious fantasies by stopping at a small pond and touching the water. It was very cold and I asked her to feel it. When she held back, I splashed a little in her face, and then apologized. She laughed for a moment, but then returned to her thoughts about Jesus Christ having been both a man and not just God. When she came into my office and I noticed a scratch or a bruise on her arm, I made a fuss over it and told her that her skin was beautiful and she should be very careful to protect it. Sometimes I made a production out of retrieving a Band-Aid from the nurse’s station and applying it to her wound. This last intervention seemed like a good idea in that it might, I thought, strengthen her sense of the bodily boundaries of her own selfhood by drawing her attention away from the streaming of her religious fantasies. It often appeared to me that she was lost in her imagination and experiencing a near-merger with the cosmos as a whole.

So that is what it was like in the early months of our meetings. I saw her 5–7 days a week, most often for an hour or more, and continued to listen to her many thoughts and fantasies. In keeping with Des Lauriers’s consultations, I interspersed into her long discussions on religious matters my own remarks and reactions, redirecting her attention to our concrete situation of being with one another physically in space, meeting at our appointed times, Monday through Friday and sometimes on the weekends. He suggested I make a big deal out of the timing of our sessions—which created a contrast to her imagined dwelling in the realm of Eternity. I don’t want it to sound like I was constantly interrupting Grace—I was not. I listened patiently for dozens of hours as she held forth at great length, and tried my best to understand what she was saying. Much of the time I could not follow her as she flooded me with her fantasies, and many of our sessions were extremely difficult and exhausting for me. There were however repeating themes. I saw that she was enjoying our contacts and looking forward to them every day. She was always the first to greet me when I arrived at the hospital in the morning, and she was the last to say goodbye at night. In addition, she began to bring me paintings as gifts. Some of these she had completed in the art program at our hospital, but others she asked to be brought from home by her mother. These were chiefly concerned with religious themes: the Holy Virgin, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection. But there were a number of others that seemed more abstract: images of fire, with the words “I AM PAIN,” “I AM ANGER,” or simply “I AM,” scrawled across the canvases in large capital letters. I accepted these gifts and told her I would protect and treasure them. She did not want to discuss her paintings; she just wanted me to have them. The thought occurred to me that in giving me her art, she was entrusting her soul to me for safekeeping. I did not say this to her however—I was too busy talking about her tennis shoes.

The history

Let me now say a few things about her history. Des Lauriers never showed much interest in her background and did not encourage detailed explorations of events from long ago. His clinical experience had taught him that psychoanalytic inquiries into life history were of no value in the psychotherapy of so-called psychos, and his approach was accordingly oriented throughout to working in the here and now, addressing the ongoing catastrophes of the present. I however wanted to know what had happened in Grace’s life to bring her to the state in which I found her. There were short intervals in our early conversations when she showed a lucidity and so I was able, over the course of time, to assemble a narrative about her childhood development. Some of the details and reflections provided in what follows also came from many discussions I had with her years later, following her recovery. Other parts of the account derive from thoughts I have had about my journey with Grace long after our work was completed.

She was one of three children in an Irish Catholic family, with two brothers, raised by her mother and father. Describing herself as always having been an anxious child, she said her mother was cold and harshly disciplinary, but her father was warm and loving. She had numerous memories of sitting on his lap, of helping him with chores around the house, of waiting eagerly for him in the afternoons when he came home from work, and of being comforted by him when she was beaten up by her brothers or disturbed by bad dreams in the night. Her mother during her early years she remembered only as someone who criticized and punished her.

When Grace was 10 years old, her father fell into an unexplained severe depression. She recounted how her mother pleaded with him to get dressed in the mornings and go to work, but how on most days he refused and stayed in bed. Her mother also tried to arrange for him to go for counseling, but this help too he resisted. His deepening depression was broken only by sudden rages, violent outbursts in which he shouted and cursed and threw objects against the wall. Grace said: “When my father exploded I felt the world was coming to an end!” Afraid for her father and her family, she prayed for things to improve. Finally, a morning came when he was much better, almost euphoric in fact, and she thought her prayers were being answered. Later that day he left the house, slashed his wrists, and hanged himself.

“A dark cloud descended on the family,” Grace said, “and there was a wall of silence.” No one told her what had happened to her father, and she only learned of it and circumstances two days later, by reading an account of it in the newspaper. Everyone was devastated, but no one spoke a word about what had occurred. The father was buried without a funeral and his name was not mentioned aloud in the home for the next several years. It seemed to me, judging from Grace’s account, that her family had made an effort to act as though the father had never existed in the first place. The most important person in Grace’s world, I thought, had thereby been relegated to the effective status of someone who had never been.
As time passed, a dumrning sexual intensity began to color Grace's feelings for her beloved therapist. She was deeply ashamed of her longings and kept them to herself. This man seemed so pure and good, and here she was wishing for erotic contact with him. The actual content of their discussions, as best I was able to gather, increasingly shifted toward him speaking about his own life and work, his own personal struggles, with Grace offering her emotional support to him. There were two currents, deeply conflicting and confusing, that then began to flow in her unspoken inner life. One of these issued from a sense of not being understood by her therapist, of things he said not making sense, of abandonment. The other current was of being in the presence of someone entirely holy.

It finally came to her that she was indeed with her Lord and Savior Himself. But here she was also feeling desolate and abandoned. Perhaps in an effort to communicate something of her confusion to him, she brought in a series of drawings of strange geometric figures: lines, triangles, rectangles, irregular polygons. Grace was unable to tell me why she had chosen such images—I thought to myself the figures symbolized a failing effort to make order out of chaos, sense out of an intensifying emotional situation that made no sense at all. Her therapist had no comment on her art and showed no awareness of her worsening state.

Finally, near the end of the third year of counseling, she interrupted their session one day by rising from her chair and screaming out, "JESUS CHRIST ABANDONED ME!" She said his jaw dropped in surprise, he mumbled out words to the effect that Jesus had not abandoned her, and she marched out of his office never to return. A few days later, she was hospitalized for the first time, following a violent episode of breaking mirrors and dishes in her home and shouting about God. I read her psychiatric records from this first hospitalization and saw that all the major features of her religious delusions and preoccupations were already present. No effort was made by her therapist to have further contact with her.

Thus began her adventures in psychiatric treatment. In the ensuing period, Grace had a dozen or more separate admissions to the inpatient service in a local community mental health center. The stays in the hospital ranged from weeks to months in duration, always following the same pattern. She would become overwhelmed with hallucinations and religious delusions and become disruptive in her home where she lived with her mother and one of her brothers, hospitalization would occur, sometimes with the help of the police, she would be medicated, and after a variable period the delusions would recede and she would be discharged. And so it went for the next eight years, until she and I found each other.

**A transformational moment**

My experience of working with Grace in the early months of our relationship was one of riding a volcano. I saw her almost every day. Although our meetings sometimes seemed to calm her and enable her to talk rationally and coherently for
brief periods, periodically she would erupt with religious fantasies and shout them to the heavens. Once, she burst in upon a game of pool I was playing with another patient and pushed the two of us away. Then she picked up the cue ball and held it high in the air, crying out: “This is the Holy Ghost!” Then she slammed the ball down on the pool table and shot it at the other balls with great force. She seemed pleased when a number of the other balls flew off the table. Another time she interrupted a bingo game I was conducting for depressed ladies. She stood center stage and began to spin around and scream: “I am cured! I am healed! I am saved! And who is it that is my Savior? That man, Dr. Atwood! Whooppee!” On still another occasion I arrived in the early morning to find her walking dramatically about the floor in the hospital, arm in arm with a man who entertained the idea that he was God. Grace saw me come in, and called out: “We are married, Doctor, in the eyes of Christ!”

There was a ferocious intensity in Grace’s claims, a kind of omnipotence that seemed to know no limits, an omniscience that was never to be questioned. Des Lauriers continued to support my doing whatever I could to bring our interactions down to the most concrete of levels, but the passion of her religiosity only seemed to be increasing. I remember going to him after a number of months and asking him: “How long in the face of a woman engaged with God can I talk about her tennis shoes?” I remember him laughing but then asking me for a more complete description of her expressions. I gave him a detailed fresh account of what she was saying and doing, all of it centering on her relationship to God. That relationship included the central idea that she was, by virtue of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, herself God. Des Lauriers then said: “She is really a sick girl, isn’t she?”

As we went along in our daily meetings, she now seemed to me to be getting worse rather than better. My interventions emphasizing our concrete situation with each other, as Des Lauriers had recommended, seemed increasingly to go nowhere, and her passionate expressions about God were intensifying. I began to feel like tearing my hair out.

Grace at this point informed me of a secret that she had hitherto kept concealed. She said: “Doctor, there is something I have not told you. I am going to tell you now. I have been working on something for two years: a Plan.” I asked her then: “What plan? A plan for what?” Her answer, shouted: “MY PLAN TO REACH MY GOLD!” At first, I did not understand, and asked: “Your goal?” She responded with a roar: “MY GOALLLLLLLLLDDDD!” It was then explained. For the previous two years, Grace had been conducting a special program of meditation and prayer designed to transform the world, bring peace to conflicting nations, solve all the Earth’s problems, and bring on the Second Coming of Christ and the End of Times. The word “GOLD” condensed two ideas: “goal” and “God.” It was the precise goal of her striving to become one with God. There had also been the flashes of GOLDEN light that came to her in the night and penetrated into her body.

Executing this Plan involved something more. Once the meditations had begun to take effect, there was to be a meeting between Grace and her former therapist, a reunion that then the Bishop would also join. A merger of the three could then take place, and an Ascension into Heaven as the Trinity burst forth in radiant glory. She told me that I had an important role in this: I was to call her former therapist and arrange the meeting with him that would be the prelude to the Ascension. “I know I can count on you to call him and arrange for our meeting, Dr. Atwood. Call him. Now!” I was uneasy with this instruction, and unable to foresee what would happen in such a reunion. I told her I was not sure this was a good idea. She screamed in response: “You will do it! If you want to know me and be a part of my life, you will participate in my Plan and follow all my instructions regarding it! So do it! Now! My time has come!”

I told Grace I would give her my answer the next day and somehow managed to extricate myself from our meeting. I left her still shouting at me. Then I called Des Lauriers and arranged a special consultation with him. He listened as I described this conversation and I remember him frowning as I gave an account of Grace’s Plan and her instructions regarding my role in carrying it out. He then said:

There is all this talk about her plan. What about your plan for her? Your plan is that she is to get well and be able to return home and live with the people who love her. The only meetings that need to be arranged are the ones between you and her. I think, George, it is time for you to rise and shine. You have to go toe-to-toe, mano-a-mano, and fight fire with fire. I think she may, contrary to appearances, be seeking a strength outside herself that she can finally count on after so many years of abandonment. Go home and think about what you can say to her tomorrow.

That night I was so worried about what the next day would bring. I had never opposed anything Grace had said, and I did not know what to anticipate from her if I now assumed a different attitude with her. By this time, I had spent upwards of 150 hours with her, being receptive, patient, and friendly throughout. I dreamt that night that I was married to her—a terrible nightmare from which there could be no escape.

I met with Grace the next afternoon, and our session took an entirely different course, for both of us. When she arrived, I saw she was ready to resume talk of her Plan, but before she could even begin I asked her to wait and listen to something important that I had to say to her. She shouted I was “cutting her off!” I answered: “No, it is you who are doing the cutting off at this point. I have listened to you carefully for days and weeks and months, and I need you now to be quiet and listen.” Finally, she stopped talking. Here is what I then said, in a calm but firm voice:

There has been a lot of talk about a Plan. I want you to know that I now have a Plan for you, and in my Plan you are going to get well and be able to return home from the hospital and live with the people who love you.
In terms of any meetings to be arranged, there is only one person on this planet you need to be concerned with meeting. I am that person. It will be in our work together that my Plan for you will be followed up and be successful. I need you to take what I am saying in. It is up to you and to me, and no one else.

Grace tried to interrupt me several times as I presented this little statement, but I stopped her in each instance and held my ground. I had to repeat myself perhaps three times in somewhat different words. Finally, she was silent, and then she began to cry. We were well into our seventh month of our meetings, and I had never seen her cry before this moment. She cried and cried, and then she cried some more. The crying went on for twenty minutes or more, and then stopped. She said just two words, “Thank you,” and then she left my office.

I remember worrying that night about the impact of the confrontation we had just undergone. Would Grace kill herself? Would she grow worse than ever and disappear into the madness? When I arrived the next morning, I found she was not in the hospital—she had somehow prevailed upon the staff to release her for the day on a visit home. I called her home to see what was going on, fearing I would learn she was on the roof screaming to the Heavens about the Second Coming.

I reached Grace’s mother, and here is what she said:

Dr. Atwood, what did you do? Grace came home this morning and she is herself again! She sat down with me on our porch for tea and asked me about the latest gossip about our neighbors! She talked about wanting to help me take care of our house. She even mentioned she wanted to get a job again! Dr. Atwood, this is a miracle!

Later that day, Grace returned from her home visit and she and I sat down to talk. I found her completely transformed. She spoke to me excitedly about having enjoyed her visit with her mother and about her future when she left the hospital, including some ideas about getting a job and helping her mother out financially in maintaining their home. She was rational, coherent, not at all religiously preoccupied, completely sane. As an apparent result of a 30-minute meeting with me the day before, her so-called psychosis had vanished, without a trace. After witnessing this astonishing transformation, I have never been able to see psychosis in the same way. One needs to have experiences such as this one in order to learn what is and is not possible through psychotherapy.

A few days later, I met with Des Lauriers and described what had happened in the fateful 30-minute meeting with Grace, and the resulting change that had occurred in her condition. He was happy that I had followed his suggestion and liked the way I had implemented it. He told me a few stories of similar crisis points that he had experienced in the therapy of the most severe psychological disturbances, with parallel remarkable effects. He also mentioned a famous comedy routine of Shelley Berman that my confrontation with Grace reminded him of. In that hilarious routine, the comedian gave an account of trying to reach his sister when the phone was answered by her very young son, his nephew. The little boy basically played games with his uncle, teasing him, refusing to give the phone to his mother, acting silly, even hanging up and having to be called back a time or two. This went on and on, endlessly, frustratingly for Shelley Berman, until finally he shouted to the boy: “THIS IS GOD! GIVE ME YOUR MOTHER!” The boy, now scared out of his wits, complied.

I was able recently to locate a YouTube recording of this funny story. In it, Shelley Berman not only says that he is God, but he tells his nephew that, if he does not immediately give the phone to his mother, lightning will strike the boy and he will be burned to the ground! I made no such threats against Grace, and I also did not claim to be God. But I did push my own Plan to help her become well again, and in effect pushed back hard against her long-standing, driving agenda to bring on the End of the World and become one with her God in Heaven. She not only accepted what I was offering to her; she embraced it like a drowning person grabbing on to a life preserver. Des Lauriers thought this was what she had been asking and reaching for all along.

Did the “miracle” of Grace’s transformation last? No. In the ensuing weeks, she fell back several times, again becoming consumed by the religious fantasies and delusions. In each instance I had to repeat my little spiel about the centrality of our work together in following the pathway of her healing. Each time this occurred, however, it was easier, and after two months all references to her former religious preoccupations vanished, never to return.

Looking back over the following two years of my continuing psychotherapy with Grace, two things stand out in my memory. First, her dependence was initially extreme. If I was late for one of our meetings, even by just a few minutes, I found her reduced to abject terror. She was also often remarked on what a powerful person I had become in her life, occasionally telling me I possessed a profound spiritual quality. Reading between the lines, it seemed to me she was experiencing me as a kind of God-figure. I chose not to respond to such attributions directly, because I thought she was using our connection to reassemble a shattered personal universe. A second development that appeared as her recovery continued pertained to Grace’s long-deferred emotional reactions to her father’s suicide. She spoke at length about his death to her mother and brothers, and for months wept bitterly about the tragedy. Feelings of deep rage at him for deliberately ending his life also surfaced during this period, and she wondered if she could ever forgive him for choosing to die. She was angry not only for herself, but also for her brothers and especially her mother, who had almost been destroyed by the suicide.

My psychotherapeutic sessions with Grace continued until the end of our third year, after which I saw or spoke to her only once a month or less. We remained in touch however for the next three decades, exchanging birthday and Christmas greetings. Grace was a faithful Catholic and attended Mass almost every day, working part-time in a secretarial capacity for her church and living with her
Dialogue

RDS: This is a great clinical story, George, vividly describing events that I know have had a lasting impact on you. In your introductory remarks, you say that working with your beloved Des Lauriers “infused” you with a phenomenological spirit. Can you say more about that? How exactly did he transmit this influence?

GEA: I had read Des Lauriers’s (1962) book, The Experience of Reality in Childhood Schizophrenia, before I met him, and I had seen that it was about experience most centrally, in spite of its use of medical—diagnostic terminology. I recall feeling a powerful resonance to its underlying message, which is all about a kind of cataclysm that occurs in subjectivity, and about what is required of a psychotherapeutic relationship in order for a restoration to occur. The resonance was so strong that it came into my mind that I might have written his book myself, or that I could become capable of having written it following more years of clinical experience. Its pathways of thought seemed oddly familiar, as if I had read it before, as if he had taken a collection of my half-formed, fragmentary intuitions and extended and deepened them into an elegant structure. Looking back, I think I was responding to his underlying phenomenology.

RDS: And yet, he writes of “schizophrenia,” a non—phenomenological, actually anti—phenomenological diagnostic concept. It is confusing.

GEA: Yes, it is confusing, and I think it is so because it is itself confused. If you think about it, Des Lauriers’s masterwork’s title is virtually oxymoronic: it speaks of Experience—which is phenomenological—and it speaks of Schizophrenia—which is diagnostic and anti—phenomenological. I had conversations with him in the mid—1970s in which this came up. He told me he had deliberately made use of diagnostic language in an effort to reach out to the broader psychiatric community and spread his ideas and discoveries. His book also employs a lot of terminology from psychoanalytic ego psychology, and this too he chose in order to find contact with the psychoanalytic world. He said these decisions had probably been mistakes, because the language used ended up obscuring the underlying phenomenological message and its powerful therapeutic implications. I now think of Austin Des Lauriers as a transitional figure in the evolution of a consistently phenomenological contextualism applied to extreme states involving a sense of personal annihilation. It’s kind of sad, because he was a complete genius and I worshipped the ground he walked on.

RDS: We’ll take up the issue of diagnostic language in a later chapter. Regarding Grace, do you think that Grace experienced a sense of personal annihilation—or better, a collapse of her emotional world—in reaction to her father’s suicide? Did she try to resurrect him and her world in her preoccupations with God and Jesus Christ? Did she need to resurrect him in you instead? Did Des Lauriers sense that without explicitly naming it when he told you it was time for you to rise and shine?

GEA: Grace’s father’s suicide, along with her family’s turning away from his death and life, was a savage blow against her world. She had believed her father loved her, but how could he have, in view of his having deliberately chosen to die? He had been emotionally central to her; but, in the absolute silence following his death, it was as if he had been erased, relegated to the status of someone who never was. These twin invalidations, I think, attacked everything she believed in. I see her turning to Jesus Christ as an effort to resurrect a collapsing personal reality by replacing her father with the God she believed would never leave her. This function of solidifying Grace’s world eventually passed over on to me, without question, along with the terror of abandonment arising out of her massive history of trauma. Des Lauriers saw clearly the necessity that I assume unequivocally centrality in the restoration of her shattered universe.

RDS: Devastating loss entailing a collapse of one’s emotional world and a quest for its resurrection—I know that you are all—too—familiar with this theme yourself, George. Perhaps this speaks to how deeply you could relate to Grace’s experience and also to how you worshipped Des Lauriers. Talk to me about all that, please.

GEA: Actually, Grace and her tragedy opened me up to my own shattering experience of loss. Before she appeared in my life, I was largely unaware of how deeply I too had been affected by the loss of a beloved parent during childhood—the sudden death of my mother when I was 8 years old. Seeing Grace contend with the emotional devastation wrought by her father’s killing himself released in gradual stages my own arrested mourning. There was an additional parallel between her response to tragedy and my own: both of us had adopted a rescuing attitude in our lives, based in identifications with our lost idealized parents. Myawning awareness of this parallel was involved in a series of papers I wrote very early in my career, including one that was our first collaborative essay, “Mesianic projects and early object relations” (Stolorow and Atwood, 1973; Atwood, 1978). Both of us, I saw, had resurrected our lost worlds by becoming saviors of others. I was able to relate quite profoundly to Grace’s experience of loss, but I could not do so without discovering my own buried grief. As you know, the story of George Atwood’s loss of his mother and its lasting impact on his life and thought is told in a chapter of the second edition of our book, Structures of Subjectivity (Atwood and Stolorow, 2014), entitled “The demons of phenomenological contextualism.”
I am not sure how any of this pertains to my hero-worship of Des Lauriers, although I am sure that it must. There were a number of other challenging clinical cases in which consultations with him led to breakthroughs that I could not imagine happening without his input. He always seemed to understand the situations I presented to him, and to know exactly what to do. The pattern was repeatedly the same: I would become entangled with a severely disturbed patient, a crisis would occur in the therapy, I would run to Des Lauriers and receive the golden words, and I would then implement his advice and a resolution of the crisis would occur. What took place with Grace was a special case of a general pattern. He saw quite clearly how much I was learning from him, and how he had become a powerful mentor in my development as a psychotherapist. He was completely accepting and told me he had experienced the same thing early in his training.

RDS: What about my earlier question regarding whether Grace experienced a sense of personal annihilation? I suggested a better description of what she felt was a collapse of her emotional world. Is the collapse of a world the same thing as the annihilation of one's selfhood, or is there a difference between the two?

GEA: In the final chapter of our book, *Worlds of Experience* (Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 2002), I discussed this question as follows:

Experiences of self and world are inextricably bound up with one another, in the sense that any dramatic change in the one necessarily involves a corresponding change in the other. Self-dissolution, for example, is not a subjective event that could leave the world of the individual otherwise intact, with the selfhood of the person somehow subtracted out. The experience of self-loss means the loss of an enduring center in relation to which the totality of the individual's experiences is organized. The dissolution of one's selfhood thus produces an inevitable disintegrating effect on the person's experience in general, and results in the loss of coherence of the world itself. Likewise, the breakup of the unity of the world means the loss of a stable reality in relation to which the sense of self is defined and sustained, and an experience of self-fragmentation inevitably follows in its wake. World-disintegration and self-dissolution are thus inseparable aspects of a single process, two faces of the same psychological catastrophe.

(p. 148)

I remember presenting the story of Grace in a seminar conducted by Des Lauriers shortly after my work with her commenced, still many months before we had our breakthrough. In formulating her subjective situation at this early stage, I said in my presentation that I thought there was no "ego" present in her world, that the sense of "I" was somehow strangely missing in the swirling of her fantasies and delusions about Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. Des Lauriers told me he found my formulation extremely interesting. I also think of the many paintings she gave me in those early days of our relationship, particularly of the representations of a consuming fire with the words "I AM PAIN," "I AM ANGER," or just "I AM," scrawled across the canvases in large capital letters. Such creations seemed to me to unequivocally express a surging protest against a sense of having been erased and annihilated.

RDS: You characterized Des Lauriers's influence on you as an "infusion" of phenomenological understanding and as a receiving of his "golden words," followed by their implementation. Grace introduced herself to you after an infusion of the "golden light" of Jesus Christ into her body, which she further said was "sexual intercourse." What do you make of this parallelism? The theme in common is an incorporative identification with an idealized parental figure. Is this commonality an example of what we have called an *intersubjective conjunction* between your two emotional worlds?

GEA: My answer to your question is an unequivocal "Yes." Sometimes, I have the impression that the healing process of psychotherapy always and necessarily involves a parallelism, one in which the psychological changes undergone by the patient mirror corresponding changes occurring in the therapist. Grace, under my care, drew upon our bond to assemble a newly-coherent sense of her own personal identity, even as I, under the guidance of Austin Des Lauriers, brought all that I was learning from him into an integrated psychotherapeutic orientation. In both of us, this process of personal transformation included a coming to terms with catastrophic loss and an awakening of deep mourning.