

A King After The Apocalypse pp 182 -183

“In families, conflict can focus on who defines reality; this is worse when a family member is identified with having, or having had, a psychotic experience. Usually, the patient is assumed to be unable to ‘reality test’. In one clinical situation, a delusional young man believed he was destined to be the king after the apocalypse, Jesus, or the devil. His psychosis also evidenced itself by odd verbal references, somatic symptoms, and disorganised speech and behaviour. His mother made great efforts to reach him through identifying how he was in exactly the position she had to her father. The patient would speak back in a rage, ‘No. To you I am like footsteps in the sand that you fill with water’, or, alternatively, ‘You cut my words like the queen of swords.’ He was protesting being put in the same position as his mother. He needed a position from which he could be similar but not exactly the same, because without that he could not feel his agency. In such situations, the communication between mother and son takes place in whatever ways they can find. This mother fought to give her children a better life than she had with her own parents. Her success as a mother seemed to depend on accomplishing this goal. She tried to help her son be a different kind of man than those who had failed her miserably in the past. She had a wish to reverse a problem she faced in her childhood and was trying to interrupt the transmission of a generational pattern. She wanted to create in her son a “new other”, a utopian solution in which he was to become a different kind of man. Her motherhood was devoted to this aim.”

“You, and they, came to see this in the family work?” “

In a family meeting, a link presented itself between his delusion of being the king after the apocalypse and the family process. This link included the embodiment in his delusion of his mother’s deeply felt wishes for his future—that is, as an agent of transformation of a catastrophic situation. In the meeting, the boy and his mother were fighting over their different views of the reality of something that had happened. He spoke of his fear that her reaction to his saying what he felt would be ‘apocalyptic’. From the role of therapist, I noticed the use of this word and wondered out loud if there might be a link between the apocalypse of the delusion and this moment in the meeting. If he injured his mother, the effect seemed apocalyptic. In a parallel fashion, his delusion was that after the apocalypse he would become a utopian figure who would be able to save people and create a new world. This was similar to the utopian ambitions evident in the way his mother took up her maternal role—that is, in her hope to raise him to be a better and different kind of man.”

“There is something very real that the psychotic carries in the family?” I ask. “Yes, I see

psychosis as containing a kind of expert knowledge that I can try to learn something about. This is a foundational principle I have in mind when I am sitting with a psychotic patient.

My goal is not to get rid of symptoms. Symptoms say something that can't be said any other way in the moment and context of role relationships that create them.

Psychoanalytic listening provides a structured context that supports the thinking through and practising of these transformational steps.