

Death, Egyptian style

The following is a short vignette of a young man who had been delusional from the age of ten. It was a short therapy, perhaps a year and a half, punctuated with hospitalisations of several days' duration when the patient was seriously suicidal, but it does provide a look at the emotions and psychological anguish that can lead to delusion formation.

Some people live to be dead. Such was the case with Daniel, a thin, pinched, blond, sad looking young man in his early twenties who was preoccupied by the desire to die. He had a traumatic upbringing in a small town, had been molested at a young age, and was felt to be "queer" by the local townspeople. He had made several suicide attempts in his adolescence, had a number of psychiatric hospitalisations, and was given shock treatment at the age of sixteen to try to rid him of his homosexual urges. Needless to say, by the time he moved to San Francisco he was in terrible shape. Even though he was accepted by the gay community, Daniel could never accept himself. He was preoccupied with death, wanting to kill himself. And try suicide he did, numerous times, numerous ways. Towards the end of my psychiatric training, we met in a crisis clinic after one of his many overdoses.

We came to that interview from opposite poles and vantage points. He was dressed in purple, with a long sash dangling from his waist and a necklace portraying (he told me) Nekhbet, the winged Vulture Goddess, the Lady of Heaven; a scarab ring was on one finger. He spoke most deferentially, always calling me Sir. But I quickly found that his mind was keen and active.

I asked what he was preoccupied with, for he seemed to be looking off into space. Daniel was delighted that I asked, told me no one had inquired before, and proceeded there and over a number of sessions in my office to tell me in his clipped drawl of his cosmology. He was an Egyptian, not a present-day one but an ancient one. His name was Merit, formerly a princess in the reign of King Amenemhet III. He had returned from the land of the dead to inhabit this "poor boy" I saw in front of me. He had come to help the boy in need, in early grammar school. He had come back from the land of the dead where he had rested for thirty seven hundred years to help this "poor tormented soul".

I listened and asked exploratory questions, trying to get Daniel to flesh out what he was talking about. For it was Daniel talking, but talking as "Merit", in a deep sibilant voice, as one would expect a princess from the underworld to talk, especially if she were long dead. It all made perfect sense to me, confusing as it appears. It was comprehensible to me because it seemed likely that this was a way that Daniel, with my questioning and listening, could explain who he was and what he thought and how he had developed such ideas. This was even more likely, since Daniel had never talked about his certainty of the existence of "Merit" within him; now he was telling me his deepest beliefs.

In the afterlife, "Merit" was a spirit, feasting on the offerings that had been given her centuries before. Life was blissful, with many other souls who were friends and confidants. Before her death "Merit" had been a princess, much loved and courted, but she had died in her early twenties of some disease. Even though "Merit" had been a woman, she referred to herself as he throughout our acquaintance.

"Why do you refer to yourself as he?" I asked, quick to follow the lines "Merit" fed me. "I'm he because I am a spirit, neither he nor she; I'm he because I inhabit this poor boy," he replied. If that was good enough for Daniel and "Merit", it was good enough for me. I listened. Daniel, as "Merit", then proceeded to regale me with par-

particulars about the court of the pharaoh and the nature of his life and death thousands of years before.

One day, while enjoying himself in the Egyptian equivalent of Valhalla, a spirit came to “Merit”, telling him that this “poor boy sitting in front of us”, a lad from another time, was praying to Isis and Horus. He, the spirit of “Merit”, returned from the afterlife, for this was a unique event, a youth praying to gods long considered dead. There he found Daniel all rolled up into a ball, lying on his bed, sobbing with his eyes closed, praying to and invoking the gods “Merit” had known for many centuries.

“Merit” took pity on Daniel and infused himself, as all shades can, into the living boy—about ten years old, he responded to my question—and the rest was history. For the last eleven years, “Merit” had helped Daniel further his study of “Merit’s” gods and goddesses. No matter what Daniel’s parents did to him, no matter how cruel the other schoolchildren or townspeople were to him, no matter what drugs or somatic therapies—including insulin shock and aversive conditioning—were given to Daniel by ostensibly well-meaning mental health professionals, “Merit” was there to ease his distress.

It was a sad tale, with much embellishment, told in a voice that might best be called rural sepulchral. As the tale unfolded, there were many suicide attempts and a few short hospitalisations, for Daniel was trying, with “Merit’s” help, to get to “Merit’s” promised land, a place of peace and blissfulness where Daniel would no longer have to feel himself the “queer” and “faggot” he had been labelled in childhood.

Drama was Daniel’s middle name. Repeated phone calls, overdoses and threats to harm himself were usual for him. Sessions were chaotic, with frequent races to the door to prevent Daniel dashing out to harm himself, and several episodes of taking sharp implements away from him. The goal was to keep him contained enough so that he could talk about and work through the underlying delusions that were both so understandable and so destructive. When Daniel wasn’t trying to kill himself, he retreated to the afterlife. He would spend many hours a day in a foetal position, certain that he was with the Egyptian pantheon. There he was accepted in a way he hadn’t felt accepted whilst growing up, and couldn’t feel accepted and acceptable in the gay community.

As I began to interpret to him the benefit of his belief in “Merit”, I knew I was embarking on a dangerous task. If Daniel too quickly

gave up "Merit", who consoled him, there was the strong possibility that one of his suicide attempts might prove to be more serious. If he didn't recognise that "Merit" was the concretisation of an imaginary construct created unwittingly to help the ten-year-old boy out of a very painful situation, he might stay preoccupied with death and the afterlife and repeatedly try to harm himself.

Within several weeks of talking about the defensive and consolingly protective nature of his belief in "Merit", Daniel began to let "Merit" go. He began to recognise what he had done to comfort himself, cried a great deal, and began raging at the various people who had been so cruel to him. Gradually, over a number of months, he came to see himself as a phenomenally creative young man with sexual identity issues who had never been accepted. He became an integral part of the gay community, and very productive.

During the course of his treatment he began to do serious work in his chosen field. Towards the end of his treatment, he crocheted a beautiful wall hanging on the motif of his Egyptian cosmology. It still hangs in my office, a reminder of his working his way out of a pernicious delusional system that seemed to have him fixated on the world of death.

Several years ago, nearly twenty five years after I last saw him, I received a letter from him. It was the nicest letter, detailing the work we did together. For me it was a pleasure to realise the treatment had helped and that he was still alive after all this time. From the letter it sounds as if my "deeply resonant voice, guiding him" may have replaced "Merit's" sibilant tones; perhaps he consults his version of my voice when unsure of the direction in which he wants to go. If so, it's not a bad way out of delusions, even if it's somewhat incomplete.

Here too, an intensive, psychodynamically oriented psychotherapy freed a young man who was apparently "untreatable". Years of delusions, constant suicidality and repeated hospitalisations faded and ceased as Daniel talked about his beliefs in the container of psychotherapy. The lasting benefits of taking a history from the delusional figure couldn't be clearer.