

Children who dream in groups

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Abstract

Working with a group of children borders on an oneiric experience, a tale, a cloth so complex as to make it hard to pick out the warp and woof of the dream. The group and its members rarely "relate" the dream; they tend to "dream" the dream. What follows is drawn from an experiential group of eight children aged 8 to 10, lasting two years, in an elementary school.

Key words: groups, children, dreaming, school

"At first it was a river. Then the river turned into a road, and the road branched out all over the world. And since the road had once been a river, its hunger was insatiable. ... There was not one among us who was impatient to be born. We didn't like the toil of existence, the unfulfilled desires, the world's venerated injustices, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the reality of death, and the surprising indifference of the living to the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the cruelty of human beings, who are born blind and seldom learn to see." (Ben Okri)

Over the first year and part of the second, the experience of the group was marked by several symbolic-representative elements:

Space: Midway through the first year the group brings out the fantasy of a space-universe in which galactic battles are fought out. The planets represent worlds at war. In the upper right-hand corner of a drawing depicting this universe, there is a maze. You can enter only in one part of the maze, where there are monsters and ghosts, by putting back together the pieces of a shattered statue, as if it were a puzzle.

Time: Relations, affects, separations are conceived of by the group in terms of a "love dough", a sort of mish-mash of modelling clay, which is put in an hourglass.

The monstrous child: The group splits into subgroups. On the door there is an "Egyptian amulet". The new-born baby is painted half blue and half pink and beaten up all over. He is the monster! A drawing with concentric circles of different colors represents the nucleus of an atom, which can split in a nuclear explosion.

The Garden of Eden: At the start of the second year the children move around as in a labyrinthine video game. In the course of this game they play out the myth of Eden: God, Adam, Eve, the serpent-tempter, the apple. Roles are interchangeable. There is also a wolf who swallows people up: if you stay inside his belly for a year, you get stronger and can come back out as a chief.

What strikes me is the visionary aspect of these images, produced by advanced, creative children. The group's existence attains density precisely through these images, which may be fragmented like the pieces of the statue, or expressed in narrative form, or as a mythic tale, the Garden of Eden. At a certain point the children can say, or say to me, that the group has lost the earthly paradise's purity but also its sterility. The "tempter-serpent" has thrown the group into the belly of the wolf, into an indecipherable maze of emotional elements.

The experience is highly original; the psychoanalytical group generates a decomposition. The statue is in fragments, strewn around at the entrance to the maze, only part of which is accessible, and which contains monsters and ghosts. The rest is the "universe". In this way the group has founded a space (Ruberti, 1990): the space of the dream. The group itself will "be" the maze and will live its own dream, constructed through the succession of events. These events include the birth of the "monstrous baby" (Pallier, 1990), as a concentration of multiple phantasms that are present but in a sense invisible in the maze. A monstrous "enfant sauvage" within ourselves. The children are "savages", and like "savages" they twirl string against a bench to kindle a fire.

The "group that dreams" offers disquieting images, scattered, bizarre. It may explode, like an atom in which fission has been triggered.

To me, one may also read William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* as a kind of group dream. A group of children marooned on an uninhabited island cast off the vestments of "civilization" and thus find themselves "partly happy" and at the same time immersed in a dream: something akin to "barbarism".

Our psychoanalytical group, at the start of the second year, is also a kind of "island of happiness". The group's dream also involves the experience of being omnipotent, as in Golding's novel, yet at the same time having needs. The group can survive in a dream that alternates need with omnipotence.

In the book, Ralph is the positive leader of the marooned boys; he tends the fire that is kept constantly burning so that they can be sighted and rescued by grown-ups, on a passing ship. He represents the "need". Jack, the leader of an improvised group of hunters painted like violent "savages", stands on the side of omnipotence. Each of the two leaders administers a significant symbolic object: Ralph, a giant conch shell

which is sounded to call the boys to assembly; and Jack, the head of the dead boar, the "Lord of the Flies", as his group's fetish.

In our group, we have a kitty-cat, "Musetto", who is feeble, diseased, rheumy-eyed; and at the same time we have Supercat, drawn on a sheet of paper, armed with a potent sword and with a maze at his back. The possibility of having the "group dream" spreads through the space of the maze, whose twists and turns are traced out with everyday objects like the school desks. The children structure this representation as a video game, with its "lives", losses and gains of "energy", "perils" and "obstacles" to overcome.

It is in this maze that we can dream the myth of the Garden of Eden: the characters take on clearer form and sharper visibility (Lombardozzi, 1996), and they can switch roles. In the belly of the wolf, there is in gestation the idea of a chief, of which the group now feels the need only partially as "Musetto", the cat. The feeling of "need", in their relations with the group leader and among themselves, could now be acted out in the game of the mish-mash of modelling clay that turns into a "love dough" within the space of the hourglass. Being able to "feel" the feelings of fusion and separateness thus also has to do with the gradual emergence, in space, of the time dimension (the span of one hourglass equals a year in the belly of the wolf).

At this point, a group session seems to be a sort of caesure (Bion, 1980). I myself as group leader am portrayed as a labyrinthine intestine. At one point in the intestine a dog bites, cutting it, and it is as if the intestine gets everted, turned inside out. The group is possessed by a terror which, more than unnamed, represents the feeling of the danger that the "sense of existence" will vanish. Faced with this, the group still dreams, and in dreaming "invents" its own efficacy, similar to the healing process in an Amazonian tribal rite to assist in a difficult birth, as described by Lévi-Strauss (1958). In dreaming the myth of its fundamental "need" to survive, the group does not only (and perhaps not even primarily) regress; rather it appropriates the ability to handle "leaps in time". As in *Lord of the Flies*, the children are on their own, marooned. They crawl backwards into a corner and speak in baby voices; they are surrounded by natives, and the group leader is the chief of the natives, whom one of them engages in combat during the final battle in the "monster's den". The monster seems to represent a mixture, a fusion (Neri et al., 1990) of ambivalent feelings of confusion between the members of the group, who are all squashed together like a lump of dough in an intestine. When he kills the group leader the boy, the new leader, is not anti-leader (Bernabei, 1996); he is a co-leader who can regulate the absence and presence of the adult not mainly as an attack on emotions but as a way of connecting different emotional states; and he can thus make a temporal break with the group's "dream time" and its existence as a "group of brothers" (Neri, 1995) who can dream together. The process is thus directed away from the "group dream" to a condition of "children who dream in a group".

After acting out the state of the marooned children, which does at least permit them to express their needs, though, the group evolves with a rich, suggestive "session of dreams".

A girl, V., begins the session by saying "You know, I had a really strange dream". It was as if she was two people: one who was the protagonist of the dream and the other watching it like a film. She recounts: "I dreamed I was in a hospital with other children (three girl cousins of mine), because we had a sore throat. There were doctors, and instead of giving us medicine they threatened us, pointing fake pistols at us behind our backs. ... They took us to the edge of a high, deep swimming pool, like the analysis room, and if we fell in we would have died. They pushed us and we went down the slide, but it had a curve so that we didn't fall into the deep pool but into a shallow, baby pool. This pool was full of chocolate, dense liquid chocolate. All around were little houses for children."

At this point I get the feeling that in recounting their dreams the children make them up, constructing them together. V. sketches a drawing to show me herself and the other girls in a boat in the pool, approaching the edge where the ladders to go down are. V. says that among the little houses there is P.'s big house with all the animals inside. P. says "I like that. What animals are there?" and V. answers "All the animals of the Ark". P. then tells a dream of his: "I'm with a friend of mine and we hear a buzzing noise; we turn around and realize we're surrounded by giant wasps. Me and my friend run away and hide in a beehive, and my friend steals the bees' honey. The bees get mad, and they have really poisonous stingers. One of them attacks my friend, who dodges, then he dodges another, but the bees form a group, attack him and kill him."

F. also tells us a dream: "I'm in a jungle. I'm a scientist. First I realize there's a lion behind me and I manage to run away, then I'm being chased by the blacks, who bury me and I turn into Robocop. Then the lions come back and eat Robocop's insides."

It is almost astonishing to me to see how each member presents different facets of the group, in a process that is multifocal, multivocal, plurilogical (F. Corrao, 1995). Part of the group seems to be able to navigate in a more affective element, the children's swimming pool full of liquid chocolate, and arrive at a big house with all the animals of Noah's Ark. Another part seems to slip into deep water, into the jungle of Lord of the Flies at the mercy of giant wasps, angry bees, lions, black savages. The killer wasps and bees seem to represent a hive-like group that is complex but "primitive", like the lions who, however, feed on the organic substance of the group (Robocop's insides).

In *Lord of the Flies*, the violent group of hunters kills Piggy, who in sense is the scientist of the group, the keeper of the reasonable leader's conch; first, they break his glasses, which can be likened in a way to Robocop's external instruments.

The children in this psychoanalytical group dream their dreams together, displaying some of the still scattered fragments of the statue but also the possibility of putting them together in the Ark, and that is exactly what eventually happens.

The session ends, after a series of mimed battles, with a sophisticated linguistic game (Wittgenstein, 1953). This was during the Gulf War. Someone mentions Saudi Arabia (in Italian: Arabia Saudita), and V. says "satisfied Arabia" (L'Arabia esaudita); I convert this into "satisfied rage" (la rabbia esaudita), and V. says "Yes. They really are making war. But what is this rage that they're always talking about?"

In the novel *Ralph*, the leader with the conch, has a hard time keeping the fire burning to produce enough smoke to be sighted by the adults on a ship. Meanwhile, he is at war with Jack's hunters, who kill and destroy; and though they are indifferent, indeed hostile, to Ralph's fire, they put the entire island to the fire and the sword. At this point the island is sighted and the grown-ups finally arrive.

I believe the group's anger is the counterpart to the fear of the group-island of burning up, i.e. precipitating into a state of non-existence (Palmieri, 1988).

In the last part of the group experience, at the end of the second year, a big paper boat is built. The memory function is activated with a return to the previous year's games. All together they help to re-create, on a large sheet of drawing paper, the war of the worlds, the space-universe with its maze.

The explicit function of dreaming enabled the group, with the sharpening of the common memory, to share, in the "togetherness" of the group experience (F. Corrao, 1995), their "domesticated objects" (the common boat, the universe that each can carry with him).

"Becoming domestic", says Claudio Neri, "implies establishing a relationship between objects and worlds. It entails, above all, a process involving the a-verbal, the intra-verbal, and the ultra-verbal: their entry into a 'network of domestic relations', their joining with 'latent cultural memories'.

"This process permits 'domesticated objects' to remain within 'obvious spheres'. ... The relationship with latent cultural memories and the remaining in the realm of the obvious confers upon the objects a 'secret warmth' that makes them animated and usable. This warmth, in turn, enables the domestic objects to remain within the sphere of 'what has just been noted', in the realm of the obvious" (Neri, 1998).

The group concludes with a procreation fantasy, and what is engendered is the individual identity of each member; they can now mirror themselves in one another in the group, in what we can call a human, "domesticated" form. P. says "We were all spermatazoa once; we don't know whether we were handsome or ugly." Now, they can know.

Explicitly dreaming together, these children learned to appropriate the "latent culture" of oneiric images, to go from the state of terror of the shattered statue at the entry to the maze to the "domestication" of the images belonging to an affective memory. Within the group of children dreaming, you can learn to see.

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