

The Group, The Body and Dreaming with Eyes Wide Open

Andrea Giannelli

Abstract

The author describes a narration/dream narrated by a patient in a group of adolescents, with which she wants to communicate to all the members of the group her changes. The author shows the group can stimulate a real process of transformations, properly in the body, if it is conducted in an active way and he describes a particular method G.R.F., that he uses with adolescents groups.

Key words: adolescents, group, dream, change, active method

When we link up the words 'body' and 'group' we tend to think of the bodies of the people who make up the group, but above all, us therapists think of Anzieu's concept of the "groupal body": represented "as a mouth, as a breast, as a belly, and even as a sort of mechanical device belonging to the wide gamut of persecutory phantasies" (cf. Kaës).

The word body brings psychic symptoms that influence organic processes, or medical situations and traumatism to mind. Conversely I would like to bring attention to a sort of non-thought, that could be described as a magic thought, that is omnipotent and narcissistic: an autarchic thought that is uncommunicative and doesn't enter in relation with the other. This type of thought is typical of present day illnesses that more often than not have to do with narcissism and dependences, giving the conductor of the group the impression of being in a dimension where the omnipotent body annihilates the circularity and flow of associative ideas, the trans-individuality, and the mature Self of the group. <<...the psychic life is dead... the flesh has disappeared from its receptacle, only the scenario remains>> (Anzieu).

To speak about a group that presents this counter-transferential aspect is like speaking about dreams prevalently rich in symbols and poor in events or the preconscious creation: the manifest dream that is so prolific of images in groups. Thus in the manifest dream the whole relational power of the intersubjectivity of a person born into a group or to dreaming in a group, is expressed.. The group itself is founded on intersubjectivity. So we can see how important the manifest dream and the preconscious activities stimulated by group interaction is. Namely, that superior preconscious being a powerful creator of the manifest side to dreams and a fundamental element to creativity, for the artist, poet, writer or intuitive person.

Sometimes the reality enables us to moderate our defences that are usually hyper-controlled and hyper-critical induced by the vicissitudes of daily life. In those moments we are able to perceive meanings and listen to subliminal messages that come from all our perceptions. These moments seem to be particularly magic, when real life is like a dream, rather similar to those moments when we find it difficult to believe for many hours after we've woken up that certain dreams were actually dreamt by us.

They are states of wakefulness that Davide Lopez calls “attenuated dreams”, and can be attributed to moments of our awake life that can be retained as being “satisfying”. I believe the magic of these moments is due to all the components of our psychic apparatus being in perfect harmony. “It’s the flowing freely between the conscious and preconscious that makes a life healthy”, writes Davide Lopez often. He also reminds us of the importance of the preconscious in the psychic economy of the individual describing it as a sort of propulsive organizer.

The many illnesses belonging to the wide range of existing psychiatric pathologies today, made up prevalently of mental activities (e.g. obsessive, hypercritical thinking, narcissist-dependent thinking etc.) are responsible for the loss of the capacity to dream.

<<...since the dream is a supreme expression of the will to live, it is present not only during the sleeping state, but while we are awake>> (Lopez). Hence, the dream expresses the will power of the psychic structures of the individual. *<<...it is the ideal condition for gradually assimilating knowledge from the preconscious... for assimilating and getting closer to existential conflicts... it allows one not to be prevailed over, culminating in escape as often happens in real life>>* (Lopez).

Thus the attenuated dreaming state while we are awake can be a fulfilling condition, just as long as the preconscious is close in relationship to the conscience. The human being appears so powerful and capable of individuating affects, emotions, pleasure, joy and pain. In other words capable of living an emotive life.

It has been some time now since the importance of the manifest component in the dream has been acknowledged, and not only in groups. Even in a certain phase of Freud’s works we can observe an increase in the importance he attributes to it. Different authors many years back described the difference between dreams narrated by patients in groups compared to those observed in individual therapies. Archibald, Locke and Klein-Lipschutz speak about dreams in groups that reveal in the manifest content group dynamics, and they sustain that peers offer a support to remembering them, also because transference processes onto a single therapist occurs less in groups (Balestri, Borgogno).

Social Dreaming, a technique introduced in Italy recently by Gordon Lawrence and utilised mainly in training contexts, is further confirmation of the importance of the manifest dream, letting us into the perception that the subjects have of the environment and social conditions. I also believe that the dream as such, enables communication between subjects, by using the manifest dream filter, an associative and energetic circulation is opened up, that “starts the ball rolling”, and ‘defrosts the conscience on the hearth warmed by the preconscious’. In Samoa it is the custom to tell one’s dreams; sharing them with others becomes a way of finding creative solutions to social problems and increases social interaction. Goodall sees in this social functioning a possibility of *<<...integrating the activity of dreaming in the conscience and within the responsibilities of the group and the individual>>* (cf. Balestri, Borgogno).

There is also a censorial side to the preconscious that should be considered less important than the creative side, as Lopez sustains: (the preconscious)*<<is a creative*

organiser of the unconscious... it is a living self that organises the phantasies of life... and the phantasies in dreams...a preconscious conceived as such has therefore no need to sleep...>> (Lopez)

We can envisage ourselves at a group session that has difficulty in dreaming and thinking as a group, in other words in exercising that function that Corrao calls gamma drawing on Bion's alpha function, and can be compared to, as Corbella reminds us <<...*the reverie that ensures a continuity between the preconscious world and wakefulness*>>. According to Lopez, as already mentioned, the ideal state of wakefulness is the state of the attenuated dream. A state of well-being and creativity comes about from the oscillation between the dream and reality, resulting in a psyche not too dependent on hyper-reality, attentive to the quality of the internal world that makes the conscience aware, resulting in a person that is at peace in the environment without fear of splitting.

The importance of the function of the preconscious today is valorised by different authors, among whom Zucca Alessandrelli whose theories concern the importance of the period of latency in human development. His studies include the elaboration of therapeutic techniques that are efficacious in strengthening the psychic apparatus via stimulation from preconscious functions. This strengthening comes about during the period of psychic development called latency that precedes the re-sexualization. A good part of the patients who frequent mental health centres are affected by dependence pathologies, e.g. toxicomania, eating disorders, depressive apathy, particularly in young people. These illnesses <<... *belong to disorders the psychopathology of which has almost always to do with narcissistic problems and dependences. The subject develops a dependence on a substitute object that has become too important to be able to fill the discontinuity between the Self and the external world, ending up identifying him/herself in a sort of hunger and craving of the object that becomes evermore vital for survival. The object offers experiences that are founded more on sensorial aspects regarding the self than on relational exchanges. It is evident this type of situation arises from a childhood where there were too few introjections and many the incorporations. The introjection process seems to have been lacking caused by a scarcely delimited Self, an efficient protective barrier is denied, resulting in whatever comes from the external world is experienced as dangerous, being too stimulating and therefore intrusive. In this way, the body cannot but become a fundamental aspect for the identity*>> (Zucca Alessandrelli, 1999; Giannelli, Zucca Alessandrelli, 2001). It becomes the central pivot on which the entire person is balanced. It is often hyper-cured exaggeratedly, (fitness programmes, body clinics, gyms, diets etc.) or on the other hand harmed (doping, drugs, overabundance of food, self-destructive behaviour). The "body as the subject" as Zucca would put it.

On visiting these people one observes mainly autarchic thoughts that are incapable of exchange, and that I would define as organicistic.

For this reason one of the primary objectives of a group should be to discourage thought that concentrates on bodily symptoms, on the control of the emotions in the here and now, and the exasperating search for perceptive and sensorial gratifications,

in order to advance a process that gradually abandons the reference to the body as the only source of identity, and the clinging to an object that has become indispensable. This type of initial situation can always be found in drug-addiction and anorexic pathologies. If one observes the attention given to measuring the dose or weight, one immediately comprehends the centrality of the corporeal identity in the psyche of the person. The first sessions won't be pervaded by thinking and dreaming of, or in, the group; processes of thinking and dreaming that <<... *almost overlap*>> as Corbella reminds us. We often find patients with personalities "as if", who have the same difficulty in metabolising affects and developing an identity that's not based on looking for immediate answers to problems in the external world.

I distinctly remember a short term group I conducted, where the patients only talked about their symptoms, as if corporeal perceptions and the impression their appearance made on others were the only things that counted in everything that went on in their lives. Insight into a different emotive quality to life was very rare if not inexistent: for instance a patient accused an other of starting to have a panic attack owing to the fact he had become red in the face. That patient's 'Achilles' heel' was a fragile self, and he left the group for good. His body had become the receptacle of undigested psychic accumulation, but at the same time it was the only thing that made him feel credible. Fear of anxiety was secondary to his omnipotent psychic demand, the conflict of which was in his body, or rather in his organicist thought, which was the only possibility he had for symptomatic expression.

The above-mentioned shows us the importance of how the group in question can become a means of giving life and form to relational and communicative thought and to exchange. The groupal body can start to become less suffocating, the bodies that make up the group less static and the images that populate the internal world of the individual can become externalised and made more solid (Boria), as in a psychodrama, (action+drama). Thought can become less weighty and self-centred, enabling to free itself from the narcissistic constraints. Thinking is at everybody's reach at last. Dreaming can start again and cryptic symbols will be deciphered.

In groups, dreams, true stories, thoughts and images can overlap in a state of calm oscillation between reality and phantasies, substituting the phantasms and past memories. The body seems to be inhabited once more. One of my patients always became hungry after a group session. I observed that less notice was taken of the body unless it had to do with pleasurable feelings linked to a relational life. The unconscious phantasy of the group seen as a body, or a receptacle, or a mechanical device is transformed into a personification of humbleness and agreeableness, perhaps a little shy, but full of humanity and unlimited will to live.

To this regard I wish to transcribe a story written by a patient at the end of a short term group that could be compared to a dream made with eyes wide open. She handed out a copy as a token to all the members of the group during the last session.

" A Heartfelt Goodbye to Giumà Bruviamino and Those Two" is the title. The strange name is composed of the abbreviations of all the members of the group's names (giu-ma-bru-via-mino), whilst "those two" are the two therapists. It is interesting to note how the group takes on the semblance of a character.

Giumà is in his room, sitting on the bed with his feet on the floor and his fists on the mattress. His eyes are looking around almost as if he is calculating the length of the walls. He's wearing his new pants for the first time and they are irritating him terribly, but the contact of his old T-shirt with its newly-launched fragrance comforts him somewhat. His shoes, perfect for standing up for long periods and for walking are comfortable on his feet. His gaze still moving, finally comes to a stop on a suitcase that seems to be waiting patiently on a chair. Giumà had already packed everything he needed for the trip. There was a green ribbon that he had bought at the local market that he could use as an injection of chlorophyll against the greyness that was always lying in wait. Then there was the piece of yellow material that he distinctly remembered the day the parachute had fallen from the sky last October, leaving that small piece among the branches of a tree. He had saved it as if it was an injured butterfly, hoping it would fly again one day. He had also put his elastic knee-band in, to keep his leg all in one piece, every now and then it tried to painfully break away, but he had to take care of it, and make sure that no harm could come to it. Then there was a small bottle of sea water (or were they tears?), that was transparent, or crystal-clear, as only the embrace of the sea-swell or tears can be.

Giumà counted out his beloved objects touching them one by one making sure they were all there. Where was his favourite comic Superfallix? At last he found it, he would never have been able to do without reading those pages drawn so meticulously by hand. The adventures of an out of luck hero, whose greatest misfortune was to be a hero...how much work he had put in to those pages. Lastly, a small musical instrument, that Giumà couldn't remember the name of, but he knew it is used by the Australian aborigines in their propitiatory rites. It's made from a bamboo cylinder on which small notches have been incised and produce sound vibrations when used. Nothing seems to be missing.

There's a label attached to the suitcase with his name in capital letters and underneath, his address in smaller type. It reassures him, these simple letters will save his suitcase from getting lost. Even if some incredible slip-up occurs, and it ends up on the other side of the world, that mere trace of ink like Arianna's thread or an umbilical cord will bring his precious belongings back.

And if it was Giumà himself to lose his suitcase? No problem, there will always be someone who will trace the bag back to its proprietor.

After these reflections everything should be ready, but he can't help thinking something is missing. Nevertheless, slightly perplexed he starts to close the zip, when all of a sudden he hears the noise of his mother's slippers announcing her arrival. "Have you taken your Lexotan", she asks anxiously? Impertinent as always, he answers, "Lexotan? No need. I'm immortal and omnipotent." She looks at him resigned and says, "You're lacking a Monday, my dear," and goes out followed by his gaze. For an instant he remains immobile, and then he remembers, jumping to his feet. He wasn't lacking Monday, but Wednesday, his Wednesday.

Ten months ago, the musty haberdashery with faded ribbons in its window in his street closed down, and in its place an ice-cream parlour opened, with freshly-painted

walls and aluminium containers like inviting cradles full of wonderful frozen ice-cream with labels that promised the discovery of delicious genuine flavours.

Giumà, who has a sweet-tooth but doesn't admit it, takes an hour off every Wednesday to have an ice-cream, and has done so since it opened.

There are two people who serve behind the counter, Gianni and Carla. Gianni is tall and thin and smiles when you're least expecting it. Carla is small and has tawny hair, she quietly sings songs from the Andes that often reach a high pitch. After all these Wednesdays a sort of complicity had arisen between Giumà and the two ice-cream servers, specially in the long grey winter afternoons, (who said that ice-cream is only good in summer?) Giumà would go in, choose the flavours that went well with his mood and sit down opposite the counter. The conversation always touched on travelling and they had often imagined many trips to far-away countries together. For instance to Norway, where the fear of losing oneself in the vast frozen forests inhabited by the spirits of the Trolls, and where The Cry is materialized in a terrifying painting, was evoked by them. Their imaginations had also visited Finland with its calm and quieter Great Lakes but where trekking is difficult due to the squelchy ground underfoot. They had also explored the Tropics. They found Jamaica a land of vibrant colours, pulsating rhythms, gigantic and tasty fruit, but where the intensity of the different sensations is closer to pain than to pleasure. In Yucatan and Guatemala they visited the ancient stones where foreboding and undecipherable messages are engraved in the form of signs that nobody can interpret.

Giumà looks at his watch, it's quarter to two, the plane leaves at half past three, perhaps there's time for one last ice-cream. He quickly picks up his suitcase, says good-bye to his mother and runs down the stairs out into the street. He reaches the ice-cream parlour and sees Those Two sitting calmly as always, smiling complacently at his suitcase. "What shall we give you today? Lemon and chocolate?" "Yes", he nodded. Carla stands up, chooses a flowery cup and fills it carefully, puts in a spoon and hands it to Giumà.

The bitter taste of icy lemon fills his mouth. Now it's the chocolate's turn to give him energy. As the ice-cream goes down inside him, Giumà thinks of how it becomes part of his blood and will stay with him even when he is far away. What alchemy! What biology! He looks at his watch. Gianni gets up at this cue and comes over and sits next to Giumà on a stool, with his feet on the ground he moves his long legs back and forth in a sort of a dance, yawning, he passes his long fingers through his thick hair. Carla comes out from behind the counter too, she puts on a tiny pair of glasses as if she wanted to focus on something. She takes a small English dictionary from her apron pocket and hands it to Giumà. Suddenly Gianni asks, "So you're leaving?" But it seems more of an affirmation than a question. Giumà replies "Yes", while he takes the dictionary, and adds, "Perhaps someone is about to be born in some other place, I want to go and see what's going on". "That's fine", they reply approvingly.

Now they remain in silence. Giumà fidgets with the dictionary. He wants to say something. His heart is beating rapidly. He can't find the right words, he opens the dictionary, but his eyes fail him so he closes it.

Something's moving inside him, pushing clumsily to get free. Finally his soul encounters his voice and like a breeze passing through the rocks he says, "We have to give a rooster to Esculapio". Gianni and Carla look at him perplexed. Gianni's furrowing brow disappears when he says, "Are you Socrates or the old rooster?" The tension is gone.

"I'm not sure", replies Giumà, "Perhaps I'm a bit of one and a bit of the other", they all laugh. Carla and Gianni accompany Giumà to the door almost pushing him out. They solemnly indicate the clock, "Big Ben said stop". Giumà opens the dictionary at the letter T, here's an appropriate word, "Thanks"*. He gives a wave with his hand and goes out, leaving the door half-open since its 22rd March and spring has arrived.*

In this tale the main character's body is 're-inhabited' by the psychic Self, capable of symbolizing, reflecting on itself with irony and humour and introjecting the experience by substituting a drug of the senses with a "drug" that 'makes sense', in other words, the therapy on Wednesdays. Giumà's young body chooses a better "drug" and when necessary uses the senses, he makes use of the flavours in order to introject rather than incorporate, because, as stated the ice-cream melts in his mouth and becomes "part of his blood", but with pleasure and awareness.

It's the story of Giumà's trip towards an emotive life and adulthood. It's possible to perceive in this story the different members of the group and what makes them unique. However, in this paper it's not my intention to analyse every phrase of this story dreamt with eyes wide open. Nor is it possible to interpret the many symbols it contains without drawing on the life-story of the author. My wish to who reads, or listens to it with closed eyes, is that he or she is affected by the creative force, the vital power and the tension of a project in the act of being realised.

The mind starts to function again, the body has renewed vitality without Lexotan, and is re-inhabited rather than re-habilitated. It experiences the emotions of change and perceives the fear involved. But it is not prepared to give up.

Humour, irony and play are pleasures that can thrive once more.

So it's really true that a preconscious conceived as such doesn't need to sleep....

The group in question was conducted by the author of this paper with the participation of Dr.C.Gallinoni, using the G.R.F. Method ideated by Zucca Alessandrelli.

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Andrea Giannelli, psychiatrist, Group Psychotherapist. CART Study Centre-
Via Montepulciano 13-20124-Milan- Italy
E-mail: cartonlus@libero.it

Carlo Zucca Alessandrelli is a Psychoanalyst (SPI), Group Psychotherapist; a Member with Training functions of the APG; President of CART-Centro Studi; and the Co-director of the Journal "Gli Argonauti".