

The theme of Nostalgia across the Thread Dreams

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Abstract

Story of a young migrant in a group of analytic psychotherapy carried out in a Mental Health Service.

The institutional context allows an original therapeutic setting that is not superimposable to others: the belonging to a public institution must be considered as a positive and powerful structural element in the institutional field.

The woman begins therapy with a serious anxious symptomatology of insomnia and the fear to be suffocated from whatever she swallows. The disorder began during a trip in her country of origin where she wanted to introduce her daughter to the family group. After a short period of defensive closure, the group can re-examine her history in a path of cultural and personal integration that allows nostalgia to emerge as well.

Keywords: public mental health service, group psychotherapy, migrant patients, nostalgia

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The arrival

The group of analytic psychotherapy is hosted by two therapists and takes place in the institutional context of a Mental Health Service. The group, that began about eight years before, is “half-open”: when a member finishes he leaves and is replaced by someone else. The sessions take place once a week and are one hour and fifteen minutes long. The setting implies that the patients shouldn’t meet outside sessions, if not all together for a reason agreed of within the group.

When Avelina enters the group, together with another patient, there already are five members: three men and two women between 40 and 55 years of age. The disorders

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are mainly “neurotic”: anxiety, depression, mild personality disorders. However, there’s an uneasiness that seems to permeate most statements: a kind of restlessness, a need to change one’s existential program, to reach a new balance and to transform mental contents that are perceived as a source of pain or boredom. An uneasiness that seems to belong to a “middle age band” (E.Jacques, 1993, “L’età di mezzo”, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino) that transits from one phase of existence to another.

The specificity of the institutional context allows an original therapeutic setting that is not superimposable to others: the belonging to public institution must be considered as a positive and powerful structural element of the field (A. Correale, 1991, “Il campo istituzionale”, Borla, Roma). The structural and qualitative characteristics of the context determine the basic climate in which the group can be then constituted. This can be considered as a psychotherapeutic function in the institutional field (G.Riefolo, 2001, “Psichiatria prossima. La psichiatria territoriale in un’epoca di crisi”, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino).

The choice to insert a migrant from Asian South-East in a group that is constituted of Italian patients is justified, on one hand, by the acknowledgment of her necessity to face emotions and conflicts that are beneath her anxious symptomatology in an adequate therapeutic context, without “pharmacological shortcuts”, and on the other hand by the opportunity to support her migratory project in a context of authentic integration. An experience of encounter and exchange on an emotional and phantasmal level, such as is possible in a group where listening is founded on an authentic and accepting asset, can offer a migrant the possibility to test himself/herself in a new context, that may be feared, experimenting it as a possibility of emotional tuning .

We also have to consider that, in previous years, both therapists were involved with immigrants in the Mental Health Institute, in a sort of spontaneous and informal observatory shared with other workers, finding this experience very stimulating both on a cultural and an emotional level.

Migrating means losing an identity covering made of places, colours, sounds, odours, contacts of origin (T.Nathan, Principi di Etnopsicoanalisi, 1996 Bollati Boringhieri, Torino); it means taking a distance from a specific objectual environment that guarantees the sense of psychic and cultural identity of an individual, founding his mental functioning (G. Amorfini et al, “Il migrante e i suoi nuovi contesti di cura”, in “Salute mentale, migrazione e pluralismo culturale” a cura di P. Bria, E. Caroppo, 2008, Alpes ed. Roma). Migrants are always suspended between two worlds and this state of suspension nourishes an identity fragility that can at times evolve in open pathology. They are, however, individuals that are often strong and fearless and that are able, as in the story we’re telling, to “cross the continents”.

We also think that, in cases of migrant patients, group context allows specific paths that are close to the migratory experience, such as the difficult integration and the

verification of losses that follow precisely the same experience of integration that is experimented by the group.

Avelina is small, graceful, has beautiful long black hair and the somatic traits of the oriental populations. She's the eldest of a sister and a brother, her mother suffers of rheumatoid arthritis since she was 35; she was 17 when Avelina was born.

She's in Italy since the 90's. She arrived after a trip through Europe with some German friends she'd met at the University in her country, where she studied Agriculture. She worked in the international cooperation, and stayed as a cook with the nuns that had hosted her.

She married a few years later with an Italian soldier, one year older than her. His parents and brothers were very loving and allowed her a fairly calm experience of acceptance and integration in a new family.

Quite different and much more restless are her relationships with her family of origin: a father who is affectionate but fairly absent because of his work, a mother who had always been careless, probably due to her husband's absence and her illness, a brother and a sister who had been requesting and "needy". Avelina has two children: a girl, who is five years old when she enters the group, and a younger boy. Both pregnancies were complicated due to gestosis with premature births.

The woman turns to the Mental Health Institute following the advice of her family doctor after some serious episodes of anxiety and insomnia and the fear of suffocating when she eats; this prevents her at times from eating at all. The symptomatology began in September 2001, the day after that collapse of the Twin Towers, when she was in her country of origin where she'd gone to introduce her first child to the family. She had been scared, in that occasion, to be "stuck there...". She sees herself as a person who had been strong and able to face life but is now scared to even eat, who is ashamed of her symptom and is scared of the judgement of people around her.

A recurring dream disquiets her: she is followed by someone or something, she doesn't know whether a person or an animal; she runs, flies, hides, manages to find a hiding place and save herself from the pursuit.

The simultaneous arrival in the group of two new members (Avelina and another woman) seems to stimulate an attitude of closure: the "old" components tighten as almost to oppose them, they joke among themselves and nobody asks the two new women to talk. The memory of Carla is evoked : a girl who had participated to the group for a small period of time, years earlier, but who had soon left and, a year later, killed herself. Another patient, willingly ignoring Avelina's origins, underlines that if comparing "coming from Africa" to the situation of the hosting country it is so much better that one could already be satisfied...

With these words it appears that the group does not recognise to the two new participants the right to a cure. The experience of a difficult integration, however, specifically for Avelina, finds in the group a more intimate and less generic context:

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she isn't afraid of the unwelcoming atmosphere and the disquieting subjects that are evoked; with her "young", open and lively attitude she appears to conquer attention. She speaks fairly easily of the problem that led her to the group: the anxiety attacks and the difficulty with her children, especially with the eldest, whom she often shouts at and sometimes hits.

During the spring of the first year of therapy an important event of international stature takes place: the Pope dies, forcing in the group the subject of grief. Avelina cries for the Pope: his death reminds her of her grandfather, who had died a couple of year before, and introduces another grieving news from abroad: the death of a cousin, a policeman in a very dangerous area, who had died in a drug traffickers' ambush. The pain is strong and she tries to hide it from her daughter. Their relationship is, however, increasingly bitter due to the constant strictness and the expectation of a daughter who must always be obedient and perfect. The possibility of getting closer to the subjects of loss and grief allows Avelina to bring her migratory project into the group, projects that had arisen due to the difficult relationship with her mother rather than from economic necessities. This issue is close to Gilda's who, having had a loving mother that had nevertheless been absent for long periods of time due to a serious depressive illness, brings into the group the figure of an "unreliable mother" as an experience that inexorably affects a daughter's life.

Thanks to the experiences lived in the new country with her husband and her parents-in-law, Avelina can say, maybe too abruptly, that she and her mother had forgiven one another. She can express her desire to go back to her country so that her children can get to know it; but she also shares the desire to return Italy when she's there, mentioning nostalgia for the first time.

The theme immediately finds an echo in another member of the group, born in a town in Northern Italy, who recalls his childhood in a farm in the Padana Plain. The vision of a net of intertwining familiar and environmental relations in which his personality structured itself begins to arise, allowing a possible key to come closer to his suffering. In the group, Avelina can re-examine her mother-daughter relationship, sharing it in a reciprocal game of reflections with Gilda. She can also begin, together with Luca, the man from the North, to approach nostalgia.

The relationship of Avelina with the group changes drastically after the Summer Break that follows the first year of psychotherapy. At the beginning of autumn she skips many sessions, she tells of her journey to her land of origin, of a house that had been bought with money she had earned and that had now been sold to sustain her mother who is sick and needy. When the group asks her to think about the causes underlying the choice of renouncing to a "house in her homeland", she tells of another loss: a pregnancy that had begun during the summer and that spontaneously interrupted during the second month. She is once again angry with her husband who doesn't seem to share her suffering.

When she's back to the group after a long absence, or her final "entrance", she tells a *dream*: she is with her husband and they have to go to the centre, her husband tells her where to go, she looks: it's a sloping dirt road...

Someone in the group says that she may not yet be "inside" and that she is asking herself whether she is ready to begin such a difficult journey... But she has now abandoned her previous adhesion modalities, nice and formal, and began, touching the themes of family and nostalgia, to emotionally invest in the group as a place where to face difficult and painful subjects... The road of the dream takes her to the centre: she is in the Centre ("...of Mental Health"¹, as someone points out) and the group where, after the pregnancy interruption and after the interruption of therapy, she chooses to return and start over. (The group shows her that she is important to others, as others are important to her).

The wounds

Another dream, a little time after the first one, recalls once again the environment of the group and the ancestors. She's in a dimly lit room, with her grandparents that are dead and other two people from her family, dead as well; they're eating all together... The group tunes on her associations. Valentina says that she also dreamt a dimly lit room with other people, someone points out that the room where the sessions take place is dimly lit... Avelina says that the anxiety attacks are getting better, but she's still scared she'll choke when she eats Oriental food... Then she's back on a subject that is recurring in this phase: she sold her house in her country of origin to buy a new one registered in her and her sister's names. To this same sister she had given all the jewels ("her gold") she had received from her grandmother. When she'd left she had also left behind all the family gold.

She lightens up when the group evokes the image of a gold Buddha, that same gold that arose greed in conquerors and inspired legends of fabulous treasures. In her everyday life she dresses in a masculine fashion and, even though good looking, doesn't give away to feminine vanity. She's beginning to deal with her past, the difficult relationship with her mother, maybe depressed - as the group suggests - who acted against her, hitting her and shouting at her, the anger that derived from the loneliness caused by her husband's absence, as he worked in far and dangerous areas.

The abandonment of defensive attitudes of security and self-control is shown by a *dream*: she enters a jeweller and notices her wedding ring is ugly and flaking. The jeweller explains that it's only losing its superficial golden covering, underneath there's white gold, but she cannot see it: she only sees the black of the flaked part. Avelina is scared for her marriage, as if the loss of certain learned comportamental schemes towards her husband and sons (maybe "mechanical" subconscious repetitions of maternal behaviours) could leave her naked, prey to huge anxieties, scared of a possible abandonment. Her family of origin is requesting, greedy and

¹ "Centro di Salute Mentale" (T.N.)

unthankful if compared to her husband's family that is good and generous, and he is also always patient and available...

The news brought into the group by Franco concerning the death of his father-in-law, who had often flooded the group with his persecutory figure, causes a sort of catharsis, a blossoming of *dreams* in various participants in one session. Three come from Avelina. The most colourful one shows a big red comic-like heart, but the red is flaked and she can see green and yellow underneath... The group speaks of India's colours, country of origin of her father's family.

The subjects that arise, ancient vitality, origins, ancestors, blood bonds and wounds to the body due to her mother's violence, constitute a powerful condensation of contents that peek to Avelina's mind in an uncommon and painful way.

The fever returns, her somatic symptoms will now also include rheumatism with pain and swelling to her junctures, giving voice to a pain that cannot express itself fully through the use of language and symbolisation. "Psychosomatic disorders are often the only form of expression of a loss. One could say that the migrant feels he should suffer a punishment for having refused his homeland and abandoned his family, as if he should pay a price for differentiating." (P.Greve, 2009, "Emigrazione, multiculturalità e psicoanalisi: il punto di vista di una psicoanalista", *Psicoanalisi*, vol.13, num. 1).

At the same time, the body offers a "buffer" function, with the somatic illness (J. Bleger, 1967, "Simbiosis y ambigüedad, estudio psicoanalítico", Paidós, Buenos Aires) as to the anxieties connected with the process of emancipation and differentiation of parts in symbiosis with maternal figure until then.

In another *dream* Avelina sees some blood drops falling from an elevated piece of wood. She doesn't know where they come from. The group reminds her that in a previous session she had described her daughter, in whom she sees herself and takes as a model of autonomy, as a "piece of wood", just like her mother-in-law of Austrian origin...

Her migratory project, that seems to have worked socially, must now deal with the true reasons of her departure and the crossing of continents. They are related to a need of distancing, of recognising and affirming herself, and not to material necessities.

The passage

In the meantime a rotation has occurred in the group; a young woman and two young men have joined. The mean age of the group is now lower, around forty years of age. Gilda is "the eldest" of the ones that stayed but she's doing well and will soon have to leave. The "young" members introduce instances related to the release from their families of origin, to the need of an emotional and economic independence, to the fear related to the difficult work conditions, to the trials that being part of the world imposes, to falling in love, to relationships and to sexuality.

Avelina *dreams* of being under a flyover on a road very close to the Institute. There's a huge lorry with a trailer that manoeuvres and steers. She has to cross but is afraid to be run over. She thinks that if she runs she might make it and tries. The truck crushes only half of her and she manages to pass anyway. Her associations focus on her two halves: the Italian and the Asian one. She is in her third year of therapy. The presence of another woman of about her age introduces dialogues that touch feminine subjects: skirts, to the knee or shorter?; heels; trousers or skirts?... The femininity of the adolescent daughter of another member brings to consider the first period and the "right of the mother to be close to her daughter in that moment" - as Avelina says - not like her mother that didn't say her anything and she was scared when she first saw blood!...

She arrives one day wearing a beautiful long light-blue skirt that recalls the Indian costumes... She is also wearing a coloured strap on her head... She often has a "ethnic trace" in her clothes, a colour that is "hers", strong and lively like a mark of belonging integrated with conventional European clothes. The dialogues between the women seem to have a nourishing effect.

That year Avelina leaves for her country before the group's Summer Break. When she's back, in September, she has a lot of things to tell. She was a tourist and went to beautiful places with her husband and children, she walked through mountain paths up to 5000 metres. At her parents house everything appeared to be still, there hadn't been the changes she had expected considering the money she had sent over. She felt her mother as scarcely affectionate, especially during the first few days: she had been complaining of her pain without showing any sort of joy for the arrival of her daughter and grandchildren. Avelina had been sick three times; at the E.R. they had found her with a very high blood pressure. A doctor told her that it was "a nervous matter" and that such a high blood pressure is of the elderly and that she must be treated!

Since her return she has been feeling depressed, anxious, she bursts into tears, she is scared of death and would like to die not to suffer anymore, but then she thinks of her children... The night before the session she had a *dream*: she was in her country, on the bank of a river, there were many people. She had to cross it to reach the other side but she didn't know how. Everyone else was taking a cableway, typical in her country where people have to stand, but she didn't. She didn't want to take it because it wasn't good for her, because it wasn't the right way... The group tunes in and Michela speaks for everyone, telling her that she'll manage to find her own cableway.

Feeling in between two worlds, at the junction, without the tools to complete this work of *passseur*, ferryman (N. Losi, 2000, "Vite altrove. Migrazione e disagio psichico", Feltrinelli, Milano) is a problem that often recalls in the mind of the migrant in a therapeutic context.

In her dream Avelina is on the bank of a river, but is also between two worlds, two cultures, two generations, two places. In this case it is the group that loads itself with

the function of *porteur* through Michela's words, lightening her of a very heavy burden.

In the following months she once again *dreams* of crossing a river and of finding herself in the middle of the ford, with her feet on floating wooden beams. The water is dark and muddy. She feels the urge of cleaning it. In the group associations emerge, her previous dream is evoked and Gilda insists on the possibility of passing; one must not be afraid of pain because it is possible to get better. Avelina says that the relationship with her daughter has improved and that they are both more willing to show affection to one another.

Nostalgia

During the following sessions Avelina is always very sad. Since her return to Rome she's in pain; her mother's coldness is a constant subject, as well as the difficulty of confronting her husband, regardless of Gilda's and Michela's encouragement. The subject of nostalgia becomes more and more explicit. For the first time she felt she didn't want to come back to Italy; other times, after ten days in her homeland, she had always felt the urge to come back. She remembers that when she left the first time her mother went with her to the airport without shedding a tear. An aunt then told her that, when she had returned home, she had cried for three days. Maybe, the group suggests, her mother was suffering but cared about her and wanted a better life for her in another country.

Avelina's tears continue for more sessions, but she's always relieved at the end of each one. She is experiencing nostalgia and the awareness of having left her country; she hadn't wanted to think about it before but now the tears can finally come out.

After leaving her home, places and people, nostalgia can represent an emotion that is so intense that it can manifest itself as a painful and "inaccessible" experience, from which to escape in every possible way, like in the *recurring dream* that Liliana spoke about during the first sessions.

In the group it's possible that pain doesn't become melancholy (F.Corrao, 1998, "Orme", Cortina, Milano) and a path of sharing and symbolisation can be reactivated, allowing a differentiation from the world of origin and belonging and leading to a transformation of the personal world and to a new identity redefinition (A. Lombardozzi, 2006, "Figure del dialogo. Tra antropologia e psicoanalisi", Borla, Roma).

Only through the mediation of the therapeutic group Avelina was able to follow the path back to her country, experience the pull to her origins. This, in the existential route of a migrant, can constitute an answer to the impending peril on her identity (G. Cardamone, in "Vite altrove", N. Losi, Feltrinelli, Milano).

Nostalgia can become a source of transforming energy that enables her to conquer a meaning to her life in her new country and a project to build with her own will and possibilities.

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