

Refinding the Object and Reclaiming the Self

ADAM

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ADAM

In the middle of his first session, Adam reported a dream from the night before:

The Los Angeles Dodgers asked me to play right field because they were a player short. What would the pitchers think of me? How should I bat against them? I tried to keep from dreaming what I would do when at the plate. I said, "Why not wait until you're up at bat?" I worried that I'd drop the ball in right field.

Adam had come to me for treatment because he found himself still out of work a year after finishing graduate school in engineering, and because he was alarmed to find himself completely dependent on his fiancée for

financial support, as he had been previously on the wife he had recently divorced.

During the session, Adam told me about the resentment he felt toward his father, who taught him to play baseball from the age of 4. He said his father's impatient criticism was the reason he had worried about his sexual performance since he was a teenager. Then he thought of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Adam said that although the relationship in that book between the patient and the doctor was homosexually consuming, it did not produce a cure.

THE DREAM AS TRANSFERENCE

I found Adam's dream arresting. I was drawn to his vivid baseball imagery and his boyishly grand role. I liked the dream, and thought it

conveyed his fears about beginning psychoanalysis, about facing me as he had faced his father, wanting help but fearing a contest between us. I thought of his father, trying to teach him something but being seen as threatening and disapproving. And I thought of a father, proud of his son, wanting to help him. I said to Adam, "You're worried about how well you'll perform here in treatment."

"Yes," he said. "I'm not sure that I'm going to be able to do what I should in here. There are so many places right now I don't feel I can."

"There's something else in the dream," I said. "You may be worried about what I'll think about you. Will analysis be like things with your dad? Did you feel you never lived up to his expectations?"

"He would watch at practice or Little League games and I'd just feel I never did

play well enough. I remember dropping the ball once in right field to lose a game, and I couldn't face him. I was so mad at him for wanting me to do well."

"You were mad at him for wanting you to do well when you felt you couldn't measure up," I said. "But you also were afraid you didn't play as well. Here you're afraid of that, too. I'm like the pitchers; you're worried what I'll think of you, but you are also playing against me, throwing balls you have to hit."

"I think you'll be trying to get me out. Or that you'll be a much better player than I am. After all, this is your sport. You're the one who is supposed to know how to play."

"So you're trying not to worry about it, to see if you can hit the ball. But you're worried that even if I hit it to you, you'll drop the ball."

"Yeah, then there's nothing you could do to help me."

"Then it would be like the relationship between the doctor and patient in *The Magic Mountain*. Consuming but it won't cure."

I noticed something more in this hour, something that felt threateningly close in to me: the homosexual allusion to the relationship between the doctor and patient, and the question of whether I would exploit him. Consciously, I decided to comment on his anxiety about starting treatment, but I was aware of the question of "what sort of balls I would throw at him." I decided that it would be too much, too intense, too soon to comment on the aspects of his worries that involved fears of a homosexual relationship. I filed them away for future consideration. Once I had addressed his concerns about beginning the work, he settled down and began to tell me about himself,

focusing often on his relationship with his father, a doctor to whom he had looked for help but from whom he feared quackery.

THE DREAM'S COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE ANALYST

Consciously, I took Adam's dream to be about him as he faced me. I assigned myself the role of the transference father and helped him to understand his fear of facing me, wishing to please me and himself, but in the context of wanting to compete with me. Considering my own discomfort, it was a pretty reasonable effort for me, a good at bat for my first time at the plate.

I did not recognize it at the time, but the dream could just as easily have been mine.

Adam was, for all practical purposes, my first analytic patient. A lot was riding on my efforts with Adam, and I was easily as worried as he was. As my first patient in psychoanalysis, Adam offered me my own chance to play with the Dodgers, the big leagues, to realize the ambitions of my own adolescence. He was my pitcher! What would he and the other pitchers—my teachers and supervisors—think of me? Would I drop the ball? Would I be able to interpret with the right speed, flick of the wrists, over the heads of the waiting resistance arrayed around the infield? I certainly worried I'd drop the ball. An earlier attempt at getting a patient going in analysis had failed. The patient had left after a month, feeling that analysis would impose too much and delve too deeply.

My supervisor was the late kind and wise Lucie Jessner, who did all she could to make me comfortable and to reinforce the understanding I brought from my previous experience conducting psychotherapy and my own analysis to my encounter with Adam. I have no doubt that she understood the worries I brought to the situation and to my own training. But looking back, I see that the material of my own anxieties was specifically in the field of interplay of this first hour. I was more identified with Adam than with his physician-father. I was never a good athlete myself, so I could understand his dream anxiety about performance all too well. How would I do, pitching, catching, and batting? Would my efforts be any better than Thomas Mann's description of the all-consuming relationship that did not cure? Would I drop the

ball or strike out again? What would Dr. Jessner —and the patient —think of me?!

And in that denied homosexual reference? That business that I rationally decided was too hot to handle in that first session?

I can see now that I was not sure Adam was safe with me. He was too important to me and my training. I needed him too much, as every trainee does. And alongside my need was my fear that it would not work out, for him, for me. I could not face the way I needed him and that my need held the dangers of the doctor in *The Magic Mountain*, empty promises about an incurable disease. I worried, at that stage of my inexperience, that homosexual issues were beyond the scope of any help I could offer, that they were themselves the "incurable disease."

And if they were treatable, I was worried that I lacked the skill to make it in the Big Leagues in which they might be treatable. And as for Adam's being out of work even after prolonged graduate training, who was I to talk while just embarking, at the age of 37, on a long and perhaps endless training in analysis?

As I look back, Adam's dream not only told us about him. It could have told us about both of us, if I had but known. In other places I could talk about my own anxieties —in my own analysis, in supervision with Dr. Jessner, with my wife, and with colleagues. But I could not use them and my identification with Adam to make sense of his dilemma, to use the resonance between us fully to explore the depth of his concerns and difficulties. Did Adam know about my own anxieties? Only vaguely, I think. But

what he sensed and the resonance between us gradually did take form as an undercurrent for the duration of our work.

The field of interaction between Adam and me was a rich one from which we both learned a great deal. But, as I look back, the field was richer than I knew, one in which the resonance between us offered more than we could use. It was a field in which the depth of both our personalities was fully involved, not only the depth of his unconscious as understood by analytic or therapeutic technique. This interplay between two human beings in the therapeutic situation, or between several people and a fully involved therapist in family and couple therapy, is the subject of this book.

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