Creating an internal presence of the absent father

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Abstract

My patient Anna had lost her father when she was only six months old. Her mother became depressed after the death of her husband and could not mourn herself nor to help her children to mourn the father. Anna was the youngest of four children, the oldest a boy was nine and the two older sisters were six and four years older than Anna.

During her childhood Anna had always thought that she could not have lost her father, because she did not have any memories of him and thus did not have a father. She had negated the absence of the father and to strengthen her negative belief created a fantasy that she can never be abandoned because she is the smallest in her family. This fantasy had helped her through life until at the age of forty her husband threatened to divorce her. Then she was confronted with reality which she was not able to master or to work through psychologically and she became both anxious and depressed. The negation did not work as a defence anymore and she decided to begin psycho-analysis with me.

Veikko Tähkä says that a child needs an adult’s help to mourn its losses. Tähkä describes the mourning process in which one gives up the lost person memory by memory and thus internalizes the relationship to the lost person. Anna could not have explicit memories of her father, because she was only half a year old, when the father died. We know, however, that a child of that age can already have implicit memories. Like Anna’s memory of strong hands throwing a child into the air.

Anna would have needed her mother’s assistance to be able to mourn the loss of the father later. Had that been possible, she would have been able to share mother’s memories of the dead father and thus identify with a lost father in the mother’s mind. The work of mourning would have been done then with the help of the mother. That had not been done in Anna’s case.

I asked myself. when Anna started her analysis, whether she could with my help mourn her father in the analysis and thus gradually create an internal father. Could the absence be presence in analysis? The search for a father reminded me of the game fort-da, away and here again, that Freud’s grandson played when his mother was away from him.

Bion describes how the mother by containing the sensoriality of the child gradually forms it into alfa-elements, psychic representations, which are returned to the child. Thus, the child’s own alfa-function develops and the child will be able to deal with its sensoriality and feelings itself. One could also say that the child gradually starts dreaming its own thoughts.

What happened in Anna’s analysis was that she instead of living her loss, which she did in the beginning, was able to dream it, to think about it in our analytic relationship. The absent father became represented in psychoanalytic work in the beginning in metaphors and later as the experience of loss and fantasies of father images and the father. The absence became finally presence.