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Unconscious Motivation as a Source of Creative Expression

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In every cry of every Man
In every Infant's cry of fear
In every voice, in every ban
The mind forg'd manacles I hear.

With these words out of one of his "Songs of Experience," William Blake, the mystic, the poet, the artist, expressed his anguish for his city of London, for his humanity, bent to suffer.

William Blake, labeled by his contemporaries as mad and as an ingenious eccentric, was actually ahead of his time. He was a particularly disturbed prophet of the condition of the modern man in search of his soul; he was the poetical surveyor of those social "evils" that promoted by some, spread havoc in bountiful waves from generation to generation, as we, students of human nature, so well know. Blake was essentially a rebel of human bondage imposed by society, the "mind forg'd manacles," that he and we could hear, day after day, encrusted by moral laws and emblazoned by the social underwritings of puritanic acceptability.

William Blake was primarily concerned with the defense of human integrity and its strivings. He knew too well the frightening experience of fear, insecurity, resentment. He was too well acquainted with the innocence of the inner human soul which, contrived by an overdemanding society, is compelled too often to withdraw into a state of loneliness.

Blake spoke of childhood experience and celebrated it as the nucleus of a long theme that, unfolded, could produce the whole human symphony. He was afraid for the child and he felt pity for the "chained man." He felt and, hence, knew that the need for certainty compelling human beings to express themselves, was of paramount importance in a society whose materialism slowly grinds the individual to seek refuge in expressions of symbolic value, in order to survive within the pressing walls of a disciplinarian enclosure.

This symbolic expression of anxiety, well defined by various schools of psychology of the twentieth century, is illustrated by the following cases.

One patient, a 34-year-old woman, and a man, not a patient, aged 53, had a trait in common—they are artists. Whereas the girl, a commercial designer, has received academic training in her field since her 11th year, the man has "suddenly" and haphazardly started his career as a painter following a series of traumatic experiences which catapulted him to recognition and unwittingly to fame.

The woman came to me because of depression, occasional nervousness, inability to concentrate and exploit in a financially rewarding fashion her artistic potentialities. Her art, "too arty" for every day living purposes increased her already lingering frustration and her disappointment. Disappointment and frustration were known to her since her early childhood. They were the gargoyles which stood by her throughout the first 20 years of her life. She is the product of narrow, self-limiting Italian background, and sought refuge in a marriage, which interspersed with increasing misunderstandings and marred by constant strivings, finally ended in divorce. A child, now 7 years old, was born out of this union.

The patient has always been a shy, retiring, self-deprecating type, who longed for artistic expression since puberty when the first bouts of anxiety and doubts became obvious to her. She began to produce illustrations for fairy tale books, and manneristic drawings of soul searching quality; they were praised, but at the same time rejected because they were non-commercial. Since her divorce sh has led a retiring, almost asocial life, limited to boundless artistic expressions produced at night in her attic.

One day, at the beginning of a session, she brought me a drawing "for you to have" (Fig. 1).

It was the drawing of a face, whose sex was questionable and whose features were of a romantic, delicate, somewhat dream-like quality. When asked about the identity of the person and the reason for giving this drawing to me, she finally admitted that on leaving my office after the previous session, she had caught a glimpse of the patient ahead of her. Actually she "bumped" into him, she said, and looking into his face she was startled and bewildered by the fact that such a beautiful looking boy could be in need of psychiatric attention. Later at home, she went to the attic and tried to "immortalize" the outline of the face thad had kindled the fire of her imagery.

I framed the drawing and hung it in my office. When the "model" of the "portrait" came back, and casually turned his head toward the wall, where the drawing was now showing, he jumped to his feet. "Who is he?" he cried. "I don't know," I answered. "Just a drawing."

Figure 1.

The patient, who was seeking my help because of homosexual trends fell in love with the image; phantasy after phantasy began to emerge out of this stimulus, that in Narcissus like style had made him the executioner and at the same time the victim of this fatal encounter.

The second case is a 53 year old lawyer, Florentine by birth, who immigrated to this country 20 years ago, at the outbreak of war. I have known him as a resourceful and talented personality, a jazz composer as well as a writer. In this country he began to broadcast across the waves to his native land, through the "Voice of America," where he found employment. Many years later he was appointed political correspondent for one of the Italian daily papers.

A bachelor until then, he met a young English girl whom he married. Called by his activities to Italy, his wife accompanied him to spend a vacation in Florence.

Back in his native land, this dynamic and restless personality who for twenty years dreamt nostalgically of his birthplace, found himself again basked by the climate of his land, surrounded by the masterpieces of the Renaissance, that his mind had learned to appreciate since his school days. His eyes are again roving around, embracing and reabsorbing all. Compressed for 20 years in a medium of steel, aluminum, smoke and tall concrete, hard-looking skyscrapers, he finds the suave rotundity of a church cupola, the gentle architecture of a Gothic or a Romanesque campanile very soothing. He anxiously searches for a satisfying response to his turbulent soul.

His late marriage, which should have placated some of his "impulses" becomes a responsibility that he can control to a certain extent by demanding as much attention as possible and by making as little change as possible in the routine of his habits and in the disarray of his strivings. He tries to incorporate his wife into his emotionally charged life. Transferred to Rome, he acquires an apartment overlooking one of the most beautiful squares in the world: Piazza Navona. One year after his marriage, his wife notifies him that he is going to be a father. The restless, inquisitive child who attempted maturity in the bondage of a marital tie, rebels to the idea of a newcomer, who will steal the niche that his demanding Id has created. Paying almost no attention to his oncoming increased responsibilities, this man, who had never received any formal or academic training, grabs a palette, a brush, and few tubes of color and in a state of enraged frenzy, almost like a fugue—begins to paint. He paints by day, by night, sleepless, without food, without rest. He paints one theme only—churches, with one emphasis on details—the cupola and the bell tower (Fig. 2).

In an élan vital of exceptional breath the artist leaps from one medium into another. Oblivious of everybody and everything, he rushes bodily everywhere he finds a church or a steeple or a dome.

His home begins to fill with hundreds of canvasses; in this tremendous abreaction of polychromy he paints relentlessly. He paints as if his hands were not his own. Shyly, first, he begins to show his paintings to a few friends; and is invited to participate in a show in a small town. His paintings are received with gusto and approval. From the little town, he reaches Venice, Lucca, Florence, Rome. One exhibit after another, 345 paintings in one year, all sold. He is invited to a one man show in New York, where he is at the moment, loved and acclaimed again.

What provoked these outbursts out of the creative unconscious? Says the girl in the first case: "If I had seen that boy out on the street and not here I would not have looked at him twice, but meeting him in your office, I began to wonder about him."

Says the man in the second case: "Had I remained in New York I would probably never have been a painter. Here in Rome, surrounded by my beautiful landscapes, I had an impulse; the moment I learned that I was going to be a father, I felt almost a need to express my joy on the canvas, through the physiognomy of colors."

These are their words, and through their experiences I have given to you an outline of two cases, where artistic expression was born out of an emotional impact.

I have cited William Blake who shows himself as a precursor of the scientific approach. One century later, science came to know how to discriminate between guilt and self assertion, between Man and Society.

Let us theorize briefly on this emotional urge that spurs civilized as well as primitive men to express and create. This creation may be provoked by the lofty and spiritual, oriental meaning of introspection in search

of an inner psychic beauty or it may result from the superstitious fear that leads the primitive man to create symbols to placate mysterious hostile powers of nature which he is unable to identify.

The question of mental health of the artist has always seduced the attention of the cultured man. Much literature has been written about great names of the past, and great works have been dissected to explore the motivating sources of their origin and structure.

It is a popular assumption that a person endowed with artistic capacities is neurotically ill. But neurosis is not simply an unhealing wound, it is a dynamic activity of the psyche. It is a conflict between forces which causes a dissension within oneself, which may be resolved, but often, if unrecognized, leads to a lingering disturbance which ultimately causes defeat of the total personality.

In order to be creative one does not have to be neurotic; many artists, however, try to protect their neurosis, living out their symptoms and establishing for themselves an abnormal axiom: No neurosis = no creative ability. In doing so, they are resourceful but they do not protect their creativity. They shield their abnormalities in fixed patterns, which are their particular artistic expressions, and in the last analysis, are nothing but gratifying symptoms. Every psychiatrist is aware of this type of particular resistance of the artist.

About the relation of neurosis to creativity Lawrence Kubie says in his book, "Neurotic Distortion of the Creative Process":

". . . in a variety of ways the infant slowly learns to use whole patterns of behavior. At first this is an automatic process. Later these patterns are organized into integrated and purposeful constellations, which return to partially automatic controls. Similarly, thought and feeling develop through comparable stages: i.e., first groping, random, automatic ("preconscious") imitative fragments, then integrated configurations under some degree of voluntary and purposeful control and finally a partial return to more automatic usage.

Both creativity and neurosis are linked to this progression from automatic fragments of behavior to purposeful and synthesized acts and then back again to a more automatic use of these syntheses; . . ."

". . . during these transitions . . . we dissociate the various ingredients of affects, thoughts, behavior . . . Such dissociations become manifest in obligatory repetitions of various fragments of behavior which are uniquely characteristic of all manifestations of the neurotic process . . ."

For the neurotic and creative process he says: "A comparable dissociation among these basic ingredients of behavior occurs in the creative process as well. Consequently that which is common to both is also something which is uniquely human, i.e., a disturbance in the relation of the symbolic process to whatever it represents."

Summarizing his concept: "in the differentiation of psychological processes, these levels of functioning are accepted: conscious, preconscious and unconscious, operating concurrently; normality exists when these three processes operate in an alliance; whereas illness sets in whenever a preponderance of unconscious processes dominates.

It is necessary, however, that a preconscious system of operation freely flows, in order to obtain true creativity. This preconscious system is bound and subjected to the distorting influence of two other systems of symbolic function, both anchored and rigid.

Conscious function : anchorage in reality
Unconscious function : anchorage in stereotyped and repetitive symbol

At one end of the spectrum we find conscious processes: relation between symbol and what it represents is in tact. The knowledge of what a symbol represents is the basis for communication.

At the other end of the spectrum there are symbolic processes which we call unconscious: Symbol is conscious, but most of what it stands for is both unknown and inaccessible (repression).

But if in the creative process we search for new connections, for new relationships in time and space, then, this capacity of doing so must be unanchored. This is the basis for successful strivings.

Preconscious psychological functions stand on the fringes of consciousness but they are the greatest economizing device that we possess.

In summary it is not that which is unconscious in us which makes us creative, inasmuch as the unconscious is our strait jacket, rendering us as stereotyped and as repetitive as is the neurosis. Where unconscious influences play a dominant role, the creative

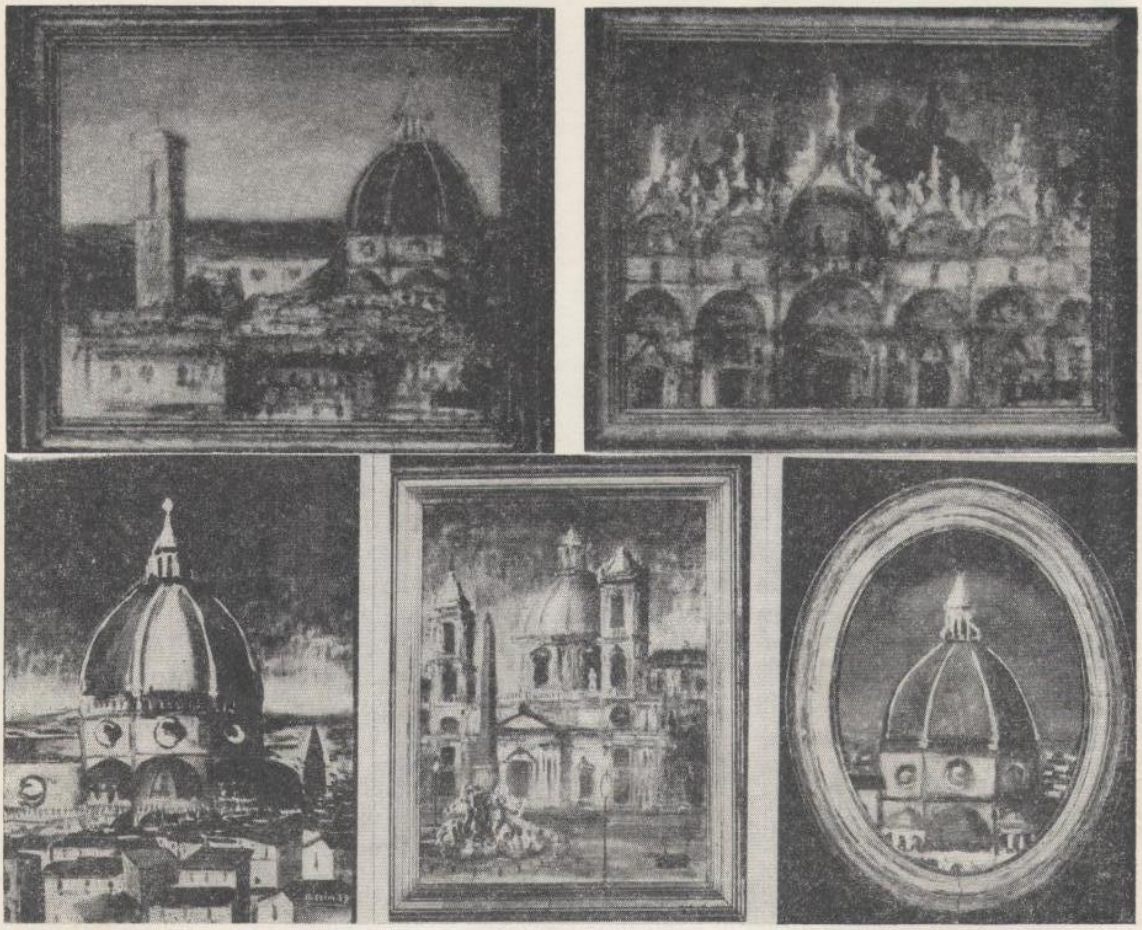

Figure 2.

process in art or science becomes almost identical with the neurotic process. We must turn unconscious conflicts into socially and artistically accepted symbolic form.

To free preconscious processes from distortion and obstruction by unconscious and conscious process is the goal to seek in creative ability. This is the concept expressed by Lawrence Kubie which is at the basis of dynamic interpretation of unconscious expressions.

On the basis of these assumptions, we find that the commercial designer rejects the idea that any man can look at her or even harbor any desire for companionship. The rigid upbringing forbids such a possible reality. However, the image of a man that she meets in my office is acceptable to her unconscious because he appears under the shelter of a protective father, the psychiatrist. To a protective and approving father, the image of her "lustful desire" is returned under disguised symbolism.

The painter is haunted all his life by an obsessive dream of Oedipal character. In a repetitive, almost compulsive pattern he dreams of maternal embraces, which the father supervises and at times approves. At the birth of his child, his unconscious floods the field of his affects. A mother-wife figure suddenly threatens him with annihilation. From now on she will divide her attention between him and a newcomer. He feels that the newcomer is going to take the lion's share. In a rapid, even for him, too quick dive, he withdraws into a search for an early maternal figure. His own mother is represented symbolically by cupolas (breast symbol?) while the threatening abdominal growth of his wife is a reminder that keeps pressing and hammering at his unconscious. His anxiety-laden fears, his guilt-ridden con-

flicts find expression in a new medium: color, form, structure.

The final answer to a series of a long range stimuli, accentuated by a superimposed new stimulus threat is the need to reestablish his identity out of the old family circle. The new family circle is represented by society. Society is quite willing to accept him in this new role, on the strength of the universal symbol that he waves. The symbol not only is socially acceptable, but is shared by the community, which responds to the same stimulus.

The loneliness of the "abandoned child" finds a new pair of supporting arms. His guilt-laden feelings are alleviated by the anonymous crowd which recognizes his guilt, and dilutes it by paying for the joy of sharing it and making it acceptable. What was a daydream of a single individual becomes the collective one, and the basic conflict is "duly" repressed by a society, that links hands together and sings again "Ring around the rosie" to him. The wife and child are then sent to England and he travels with its symbols, forever, like a successful minstrel, whose voice is belatedly but finally welcome.

As this was a theoretical excursion into the dynamics of these two personalities, I wish to add a few words from an esthetic point of view. We have seen that society does not gratify the girl with reward because her creative, expression is too personal and too close to her subjective daydream fantasies; hence isolation and rejection. In the case of the man he is not indicted by the world at large, but on the contrary he is gratified because of the universality of his symbolization. There is, however, a little more to this.

The function of an artistic expression is the creation of beauty but since there is nothing in nature beautiful or ugly, because these are not positive attributes of matter, one must be concerned with the emotional reaction of the interpreter. One seeks no longer a representation of beauty, but its interpretation. Interpretation which is based on three factors: emotion, expression and rhythm. By accepting and evaluating these three elements, one might reach a concept of an artistic expression.

William Blake, the artist, the poet, was concerned with the certainty of man, as a little world in himself, matched and measured against the whole of the creation which was not made for man alone.

It seems almost teleological that man, a finite being, whose life passes on, lends the most unscrutable part of himself to the service of art, since art is an expression of life and civilization; life passes but art remains and the only knowledge that we have of certain lived civilization is through the vestiges of this art.

If we ask ourselves: are the stars beautiful? The answer is "Yes." If we ask why, the answer is much more complicated.

We have learned to partake of a pleasurable excitement of beauty inasmuch as we are, ourselves, things of nature and thus reproducible and extolled and, "if a fool there was, who made his prayer, even as you and I, to a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair . . ." and out of these stimuli "he made his lady fair," we know that this symbolic representation is the essence of escape, at times, from the drudgery of this human finality.

We scientists should remember an old chinese story: "Once upon a time, I, Chwang Tse, dreamt that I was a butterfly fluttering hither and thither to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was aware only of following my fancy as a butterfly, and unconscious of my human individuality. Suddenly I awoke and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man," even, as some times, you and I.