

LIFE AND MOURNING

Shahid Najeeb



*“What is the heart of this old monk like?
A gentle wind
Beneath the vast sky.” Ryokanⁱ*

First, a disclaimer. What I have to say about mourning is not the standard psychoanalytic position, if indeed there be such a thing. It is a very personal opinion which these days, as you will see, I try not to take too seriously.

I am at a stage of life when my parents, my analyst, my supervisors, and my teachers have all died. In the last 3-4 years the Sydney Institute has lost 6 people, all of whom I knew quite well and some of whom I went through their dying process with. They remain with us. I am deeply grateful for being given the opportunity to make this contribution, the writing of which, has facilitated my grieving process. You may well ask, what is the heart of this old psychoanalyst like? Maybe not dissimilar to the heart of Ryokan, an extremely unconventional Japanese Zen monk, in the opening quote. That in essence is all I have to say. But I think you, and the organisers of this conference, would feel truly short changed, if all you got from me were the three lines of that haiku. So, I will spend the rest of this presentation, fleshing it out. I will do so by a few digressions, that will hopefully wend their way to elucidating the lines of this haiku, the first of which is the Paranoid-Schizoid and Depressive Positions.

P-S D

The Paranoid-Schizoid and Depressive positions are familiar terms. They are often regarded as being developmental, which is always reassuring, if we use the terms to describe ourselves as being more developed than those we don't like! But Bion put a spanner in our complacency when he depicted these positions with the letters PS and D with arrows pointing both ways, suggesting that these positions are interchangeable or unstable, possibly in constant dynamic tension with each other. What we know about these positions is that when love is in ascendance, we have the Depressive Position and when hate is in ascendance, we have the P-S position. So, to put it simply, we could say that these positions represent the broader principles of love and hate or life and death. Let me clarify. When I say love, I do not mean personal possessive love, but love as a broader inclusive, accepting, compassionate, principle. When we talk of love in this wider, inclusive perspective, it carries within it, an appreciation of something bigger and more valuable than us. It suggests emotions that could be called gentle, generous, mellow, and pleasant. Hate or fear, by comparison, tends to be exclusive, rejecting, destructive. Our perspective becomes narrow, intolerant, one-eyed and we are filled with anxiety, frustration, anger, and a sense of persecution and dread. Even when hate is satisfied, it is inevitably painful, for it leads to fear or anxiety. Love and compassion on the other hand are never painful, for as I will show, they express the natural order of things and are hence necessarily harmonious.

The broader principles of life and death also carry similar connotations. For life essentially means bringing together all the elements of which we are composed, often in creative ways, sometimes in the very act of creation. The broader principle of death, on the other hand, means the breaking up, fragmentation and dissolution of those very same elements that had been brought together.

LIES, TRUTH AND 'O'

First, something about Lies and Truth, and then 'O'. Of the many things that Bion has written about, his statements about Lies, are amongst the most significant, yet they are largely ignored, possibly because of their enormous implications for everything that has been, or ever will be, written. He says, *"Provisionally, we may consider that the difference between a true thought and a lie consists in the fact that a thinker is logically necessary for*

the lie but not for the true thought. Nobody needs think the true thought: it awaits the advent of the thinker who achieves significance through the true thought. The lie and its thinker are inseparable. The thinker is of no consequence to the truth ... (and the true) thought remains unaltered. ... The only thoughts to which a thinker is absolutely essential are lies, ... which gain significance through him.”ⁱⁱ

What I wish to take from this quote is that we attach enormous emphasis to the thoughts that are generated within us, yet sadly, as Bion suggests, they are Lies for we are essential for their generation. An example is this paper, which comes from me, is personal to me and because of which, I as the Liar, gain significance. Morning birdsong, on the other hand is independent of me and so is an example of Bion’s Truth. It awaits to be discovered, and when it is and we open ourselves to it and its many mercies, the effect might be enormously transformative, but birdsong remains unaltered, utterly indifferent to any effect on us. As I now talk **about** birdsong, it becomes a concept, generated by me, giving me importance and as such is another instance of Bion’s Lie, which like a door photograph, is incapable of being opened. However, if my words inspire you to seek out birdsong for yourself, then it becomes a real door, and you could step through it and become one with it, as Keats did, in his *“Ode to a Nightingale”*. Then the effect could be just as transformational, and you too could –

*“Cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!”*

This brings us to ‘O’. ‘O’ is not an idea or a concept. It is a profound experience, that most of us have only rarely. Bion says *“It stands for the absolute truth in and of any object; it is assumed that this cannot be known by any human being; it can be known about, its presence can be recognised and felt, but it cannot be known. It is possible to be at one with it. ... The religious mystics have probably approximated most closely to expression of experience of it.”ⁱⁱⁱ* What I am wanting to communicate is that ‘O’ is a special kind of experience, which cannot be understood, for it stands outside knowledge. It can only be experienced by a process of being one with it. So, from Bion’s perspective, Truth is not the impersonal knowledge we assume it to mean, but a very personal experience that incorporates something vital of our world in it.

MOURNING

In case you feel we have completely lost our way, let us come back to something a bit more familiar – mourning. In the introduction to his paper “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud describes mourning in this way *“In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty”*^{iv} So we can take it that mourning means the loss of someone or something that makes our world poor and empty. Let us understand this a bit more deeply. It seems quite simple; we have lost someone that we love. But who is that person? You will say it is a parent, sibling, child, partner, friend and so on. We need to understand why this person is so important and this is where it becomes extremely complicated, for we discover that what makes them important is what they mean to us. They could stand for prominent figures in our childhood, or they could symbolise relationships that we never had but yearned for. They are often associated with the past and when they are, they are inevitably imbued with our associations to that past, how we thought of ourselves, who we thought we were and the significance of that period in relation to where we are now. So basically, it is not just the person that is lost that makes the loss so painful, it is the enormous complexity of what that person has come to represent for us. In much the same way, when we grieve something, such as the loss of our careers, capacities, capabilities, it is because of how we understand those functions and what they mean to us. So, in mourning we are seemingly talking about an external loss, but really, it is what that external loss means to us internally. Our minds tell us someone or something has been lost but it is our inner world that experiences that loss painfully.

THE TRUTH ABOUT OURSELVES

Now that we have oriented ourselves, another digression. Have you ever wondered about how a shoal of fish moves in complex patterns, without any of the fish ever colliding with any other? The hard-core biologists amongst us easily understand this, saying that the fish somehow sense the presence and movement of the others, because each has a fully formed highly developed central nervous system, which through subliminal communication, allows them to move as a single organism. Now let us come to the human organism. Floating in our blood stream are individual red and white blood cells, that don't have highly sophisticated central nervous systems, yet these individual red and white blood cells work in concert with

each other, as if they were a single tissue or organ, much like a shoal of fish in the inland sea of our blood. Or, have you ever pondered over the fact that every moment as I talk and you listen, there are thousands of biochemical reactions taking place in our bodies, each generating heat, yet that generated heat and the loss to the environment, is collectively and precisely calibrated at exactly 37 degrees centigrade as if every single reaction knew about every other? Whatever ideas we have of our intelligence, they do not even begin to touch the amazing brilliance of us as interdependent coherent micro-systems.

There are two further dimensions to the truth about us, that come from psychoanalysis. The first is that you might have noticed that the inherent coherence of the natural systems just described, mirrors the coming together and coherence of the Depressive Position. All that I have described is, I believe, biologically factual, but, and here's the rub – it can only be so seen and appreciated when we ourselves are in the Depressive Position. When we are, we are not only able to see it as it is, but we are filled with a sense of wonder, awe, and gratitude. It is then, and only then, that we, the star dust that we are, truly become the universe that is aware of itself, in all its grandeur. Please notice the experiential dimension of this truth, the 'O' of it. When we are in the P-S position, we are unable to see that coherence and magnificence, and instead experience all elements of our environment as irrelevant, or trivial, or incomprehensible or dangerous, for instance, even this presentation could be seen as being subversive.

The second dimension is that we learn from psychoanalysis that we are not the masters of our destiny as we assume ourselves to be. Our so called "free will" is usually a rationalisation, for as Freud conclusively demonstrated, we are driven by enormously complex unconscious forces that we neither understand nor have much control over. We also learn from psychoanalysis, there is no single cause for anything that happens in our emotional lives. Every event is an intricate mosaic from other preceding events. If you put these facts together with the facts of our biological existence, you will come to the sobering conclusion, that who we are and what we do, is not because we are the authors of our lives, or that our world is as we imagine it to be, but it is simply a unique, highly complex, evolving, concatenation of events taking place in the only place it ever can, here and now.

CONCLUSION

Let us now try and draw together these seemingly divergent strands. First, there is the axis of Lies/Truth or if you prefer, Fantasy/Reality, Fiction/Fact, which is a spectrum structured across our lifespan. When we are younger, we tend to be more embedded in the world of ideas and in fantasy, which are essentially lies because they are not factual. We love to read fiction, fantasise a lot, undertake risky adventures, live largely in our heads. Death is accepted intellectually, but not really believed. We are largely dependent and so are not unduly worried with the external world, other than when it intrudes upon our fantasied world. As we progress through our middle years, this fantasy gives way to reality. We start engaging with a reality that lies not so much in our heads, but externally, that we become increasingly involved in. We realise the importance of this external reality in making our living or surviving in. Our readings and interests change to biographies, documentaries, and current affairs. We lose loved ones and start to think a bit more seriously about what it all means. This merges into our latter years. We start looking not so much to the horizon, but what lies beyond it. Our increasing disabilities force attention on our fragility and impending death. Grappling with these realities, former myths of our importance and invincibility keep dwindling. For some, they proliferate to deny the reality of death.

This brings us to the axis of the P-S D Positions. As we have seen, if we are in the narrow spaces of suspicion and fear our world fractures into either feelings of dread and a sense of persecution, or loneliness and despair. If on the other hand we find ourselves in the wider spaces of love and acceptance, our perception opens, and we experience ourselves as being part of something much bigger and more valuable than us. We realise what's been lost, was never really possessed by us, because possession was, and always is, a myth of the P-S Position.

Finally, I want to bring in the wider perspective of who we are in relation to the truth as it exists. This may be cause for mourning or celebration, depending on where we lie on the two axes of Lies-Truth and P-S D. The truth of our existence is that individually we have an unconscious inkling of our utter insignificance. We rail against this by insisting on our

significance by proving how powerful, how clever, how important, how popular we are. We try to immortalise ourselves by writing wonderful books and papers, occupying positions of influence and importance, producing famous architecture, works of art etc. This is completely understandable, but it interferes with our real significance, which is that we are an inherent part of something enormous, not because of us, but in concert with us. It is hard for us to understand that this awareness exceeds by far all the success, fame, and importance we might have accumulated or seek. If we could deeply experience this, by being one with it, our fears of insignificance would disappear. What would there be to mourn? What had we lost but our myths about ourselves and the world we live in? We would be filled with feelings of love and wonder towards all beings and the whole of creation. I believe all of us have such experiences, usually fleetingly. We then separate ourselves from these experiences, largely because we can't take them seriously and regard them as being fantasies or myths. The strange irony of this is the fact that these experiences are really the truth, and our supposed separation, through the myths of our individual importance, the complete fantasy. Once we have separated ourselves, we then experience our familiar fear and dread, because of our separation. Our separate minds are dimensions of that fragmentation, as indeed are of course the fragmentations within our minds. As Bion astutely depicted, these two states of mind are in dynamic and unstable relationship to each other, fluctuating between the inherent pain of the Depressive Position and the escape to fragmentation of the P-S Position. It is very difficult for us to accept our painful human predicament that sometimes our mourning will be filled with fear, despair, and loneliness. Equally there will be moments, when from within the pain of our mourning we will experience a sense of gratitude, for we know that what is lost remains an integral part of that great ocean of life, within which individual waves rise, crest and then quietly return to.

We are now in a better position to understand the quote from Ryokan -

*“What is the heart of this old monk like?
A gentle wind
Beneath the vast sky.”*

It might be Ryokan's heart stands for that expression of ourselves, which when it loses its sense of insistent individuality and importance, becomes what we essentially are, an

indivisible, ever so brief and transparent part of the landscape, as insubstantial as a gentle breeze. Then the vastness of the sky expresses our grateful appreciation of the infinite complexity of this all-encompassing, magnificent and many splendored thing called life.

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Stevens, John 1977 "One Robe, One Bowl: The Zen Poetry of Ryokan" Weatherhill New York, Tokyo, Page 77.
- ⁱⁱ Bion, Wilfred R. 1977 "Attention and Interpretation" in "Seven Servants" Jason Aronson, New York, N.Y. Page 102-3
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bion, Wilfred R. 1977 "Attention and Interpretation" in "Seven Servants" Jason Aronson, New York, N.Y. Page 30.
- ^{iv} Freud, S 1915 "Mourning and Melancholia" SE Vol 14, page 246.