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THE THERAPEUTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF ANXIETY

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Introduction

THE theme of this paper is the therapeutic significance of the anxiety reaction. I shall submit and defend the proposition that anxiety is the awareness of some threat to the integrity of the personality and that as such it is not an evil but may be a pre-condition of growth. Using the term "anxiety" to denote fear, worry, sense of guilt, distress of mind which is due rather to deep-seated insecurity or to the operations of an uneasy conscience than to external danger, I shall try to show that even in extreme forms, such as acute psychosis, it may be analogous to fever or inflammation in the body and as such a manifestation of nature's power to heal.

I have selected this subject because it is close to the heart of my own philosophy of life and of my own theory of mental illness and because I find myself at variance with much of the current thinking on the subject.

The controversial character of the issues involved was brought home to me very sharply some twenty-three years ago at a meeting of the American Sociological Society when our project for the clinical training of theological students was presented by Dr. Hill before the section on the sociology of religion. In the discussion which followed the pre-

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sentation I gave utterance to the view that there was much to support the old theological doctrine that the conviction of sin was the first step in the process of salvation. Immediately a storm broke loose. A number of those present looked upon such a view as dangerous heresy. In the years that have followed I have had ample opportunity to observe how widespread is the view that conscience ought to be spanked or eliminated and that the church and its ministers are responsible for much unnecessary suffering in that they try to make people too good.

The recent book by Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*[1] has therefore been of great interest to me. His findings are quite in line with my own view, particularly his conclusion that anxiety is the awareness of a threat to some value which is regarded as vital, and that creativity results when one moves resolutely through the anxiety-creating situation.

While I am thus in whole-hearted agreement with May's general thesis, my attention has been drawn to a statement of his that *in severe clinical cases anxiety is often experienced as a dissolution of the self* (pp. 192-3). This statement seems at variance with his general conclusions and I question whether he would wish to defend it. Nonetheless it reflects a widespread view. I propose therefore to show that *the threat which arouses the anxiety in psychotic cases is precisely that of dissolution and that when dissolution has taken place, anxiety tends to disappear.*

I

A case of severe anxiety due to an uneasy conscience may help us to clarify the more important issues involved:

> The patient in question, John P., was a brick-mason of 38 years who was brought to the hospital in an extremely agitated condition. He was afraid something was going to happen to his wife and he would not allow her nor his children out of sight. He thought he was going to die and he read mysterious meanings into the most trivial happenings.
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> His history showed that he was an illegitimate child and had never known who his parents were. As a baby he was a ward of the state and at the age of two he was adopted by a childless couple. His foster-parents were good people in moderate circumstances. They gave him real affection and brought him up to go to Sunday School and Church. When he was twelve years of age both his foster-parents died and he went to live with a sister of his foster-mother.

[1] New York, Ronald Press, 1950.

In school he did good work, graduating with honors from a technical high school at the age of seventeen. He then got work as a brick-mason. He is said to be an excellent workman. He made good wages, but work was irregular and he has never known how to save money. During the war he served with the Navy.

In appearance he is short in stature but of athletic build and quick in action. He is said to have been a good ball-player and something of a singer, having a good baritone voice. Although he has shown little interest in religion he still accepts the ethical standards of the church as his own. He is a member of the Odd Fellows' Lodge. He is socially inclined, convivial, sentimental, and well-liked.

The chief maladjustment seems to lie in the sexual sphere. He reports promiscuous heterosexual relations, beginning in his fifteenth year, with regular prostitutes and with those of the clandestine variety. Upon his return from the Navy he went to live with a family with whom he had boarded before his enlistment. This family consisted of a man of sixty-five and his unmarried daughter, a woman of about thirty-five. They were very kind to him and the daughter performed all sorts of little services for him. Their relationship became intimate and the woman became pregnant. The situation was met by an operation for abortion. The relationship was not discontinued and again an operation was performed. A few years later the woman died of carcinoma.

In the meantime he became acquainted with the woman whom he later married. He met her at a dance and at once fell in love with her. It was not long before she also was in trouble. He offered to marry her and did so, but not before an abortion had been performed. At the time of admission they had been married three and a half years and had two small boys, one two and a half and the other one year old. Both were healthy and attractive children. The wife was of good middle-class family. She was a good house-keeper and in spite of the pre-marital episode she was a woman of good character.

The first indications of trouble noticed by his friends was heavy drinking. He had for some time been a moderate drinker, drinking always in company, but now at times he drank alone and heavily enough to lose his job. He then became depressed. He soon got another job and the depression cleared up. Meanwhile he stopped drinking. This sudden reform was associated with some ideas regarding the Odd Fellows. He began thinking that he was in ill favor with them for having been untrue to the pledge he took when he joined them. They were therefore watching him. He finally applied to the police for permission to carry a gun to protect himself from his enemies. He then became more and more tense until finally with great emotion he confessed to his wife the promiscuous sex relations, which, it seems, had con-

tinued even after marriage. The wife took the confession in good part. Following this he became more and more agitated and the idea came that something was going to happen to her.

Throughout his stay in the hospital he was in full contact with his surroundings and talked freely and objectively of his difficulties. His mood was predominantly one of anxiety. While at times cheerful, he was constantly on the look-out for something to worry about and he saw dire possibilities in the merest trifle.

His social attitude was frank and co-operative. He preferred to be with others rather than by himself. He took part in the ward activities and attended the dances and movie shows. Not long after admission he was assigned to the carpenter shop. He did good work there. He was also given a ground parole and did not abuse it. He was eager to talk of his problems and came frequently of his own accord to the Chaplain's office, often asking for prayer.

He had never been a man to think seriously or to try to interpret and organize his experiences, but had taken things much as they came. Now, however, his conventional world was smashed to bits and he was trying hard to understand.

Prominent among his ideas is that of an impending world war.

Asked what part he was to have in this war, he replied, "Well, it's written in the Bible that a little child shall lead them." The most striking feature of this disturbance is his perplexity and his tendency to see hidden meanings in everything that happens.

He feels that he is in a strange and mysterious universe and he is sure only of one thing, that things are not what they seem.

Central in his world are the lodges and the churches. "Lodges," he explains, "are very sacred institutions. If you are in trouble you need the help they can give you." He has not lived up to their rules. They are aware of that fact and have, apparently by the use of occult forces, brought the present disturbance upon him. On one occasion he brought the chaplain a card which he had just received from his lodge. This card contained a telegraph code designed to cover situations with which Odd Fellows frequently have to deal. *Purple* thus meant, "Bury him where he is."

He was greatly troubled by the fact that in the room where he slept there was a flower-pot covered with purple crepe paper.

These fears were greatly augmented by the arrival the next morning of a purple neck-tie, a gift from his wife. He has also found great significance in the number *five*. On one occasion in his presence another patient had been informed of a gift of five dollars. This patient had said, "Go to hell." A little later he had been visited by five friends in one day. Again he had asked for a match and had been given five matches. These things seemed to him most ominous.

Very striking is his tendency to blame himself. He is sure he is responsible for the death of the mistress upon whom the illegal operation was performed; and since his wife had had a similar operation, he fears that she also will die of carcinoma. He feels that the lodges are fully justified in singling him out for disciplinary action. This self-blame stands in marked contrast to the persecutory trends so prominent at the beginning of the disturbed period.

II

This case is a striking example of an anxiety reaction carried to the point of severe psychosis. Here is a man who was outwardly well-adjusted and successful. Although an illegitimate child who had never known who his parents were and who had been adopted only at the age of two, his social attitude was friendly and there was no evidence of hostility, either manifest or repressed. He had been successful in school-room and on the play-ground, in the shop and in the drawing room. He was well-liked by his associates of both sexes. He had done well at his trade and was married to an intelligent and devoted wife. Their sex relations were satisfactory, the home was neatly kept and there were two healthy and attractive children.

And yet this man develops acute anxiety for which, in the eyes of an on-looker, there is no apparent reason. He believes that something is going to happen to himself, to his wife, to his children and he finds direct meanings in every trivial happening.

Closer examination, however, shows that his anxiety was not uncalled for. He was a well-meaning chap who had made a mess of his relationships with the significant persons in his life. It it not necessary to lay overmuch stress upon his sexual promiscuity. He was indeed a product of American Protestant culture. He had accepted the standards of the church in which he had been reared, and by those standards he had been weighed and found wanting. Even though he had never taken his religion very seriously, he could hardly avoid a considerable sense of guilt. But back of any such sense of guilt were the personal relationships of which his ethical standards were merely functions. First of all there would be the relationship to his pious foster-parents, who had given him real affection and from whom his ideas of right and wrong had been derived. He would be keenly aware of the fact that his foster-mother would not approve of his style of life. Most important in this disturbance, however, was the mistress, a woman older than himself, who had apparently played a mother's role in his later adolescence. This woman had twice become pregnant by him and on both occasions operations for abortion were performed. The circumstances under which he had got married were also irregular. He had got his wife in trouble before their marriage and again an abortion had been performed. We do not know how the other woman

felt about this marriage. What we do know is that about the time the disturbance began, this other woman died of carcinoma and that he held himself responsible for her death. This means that he had been in his own eyes disloyal to the "mother figure." He was also much concerned over the fact that he had been responsible for snuffing out the lives of three unborn children. He had thus been disloyal in the relationships which were nuclear in his personality organization, relationships which had to do with his biological role as son and father, and were associated with his idea of God.

He had thus reason to be anxious. To feel oneself cut off from the inwardly conceived fellowship of the best involves the threat of spiritual death and dissolution. To find a rational, healthy-minded solution for such a situation is no easy matter. What was called for was a change in his way of life, and that required heroic measures. What he actually did was to pass through a whole gamut of pathological reactions.

First of all we see him trying to escape from his torturing conscience by resorting to alcohol. This solution would of course have provided an open road to oblivion, but also to destruction and dissolution. It would have meant release from anxiety by throwing in the sponge and refusing to fight. This drinking continued for a number of months until he lost his job.

The loss of the job has a sobering effect. He goes into a depression. He begins now to face reality. He blames himself and he stops drinking.

He then finds another job and the depression disappears. His conscience, however, is still inflamed, still very troublesome, and he resorts to another escape device. He develops the idea that the Odd Fellows are after him because he was untrue to the oath he took when he joined their order. We notice that this idea served a useful purpose. It helped to keep him away from alcohol, but it did not free him from inner tension. It meant that his conscience had become externalized. He had built within himself a face-to-face community in which Mrs. Grundy ruled supreme. But it was control from without, control by fear, and the anxiety kept mounting until he finally went to the police asking for a permit to carry a gun in order to protect himself from his enemies. He was thus seeking to escape self-blame by disowning the group with which he had identified himself. But the disowned conscience came back at him in the form of accusing voices and ideas of reference. Such a solution lessens the danger of dissolution, but it involves profound isolation.

The next step was a confession to his wife. He tells her of his sexual promiscuity, something which had continued even after their marriage. Probably she knew something about it already. In any case she took it in good part.

Following the confession the agitation did not abate. On the contrary it increased to the point where commitment became necessary. There was, however, a significant change of attitude. He began to worry about his wife and he became very much concerned about religion. It seemed that a great war was impending and that in this war he was to have a very important role. A striking feature of his condition at this time was the tendency to see hidden meanings in trivial happenings.

At the time of admission to the hospital his anxiety was so great and his thinking so distorted that most of the staff thought the prognosis poor. He cleared up, however, inside of three months and during the four years in which I followed the case the home adjustments were excellent.

III

It is important to recognize that the turning point in this man's recovery is to be found in the confession to his wife. Before that his reactions had been of the malignant type. He had sought escape in drink. He had refused to listen to the promptings of his conscience and had developed ideas of persecution. With the confession the entire picture changed and the reaction became a benign one.

But why this change? Most of those who try to drown their troubles in alcohol do not get well. So also the paranoics. Their delusional systems become increasingly hard to change. Why should this man develop the benign reaction of self-blame and confession? The explanation is to be found in the character of the man. He was an out-going, frank, friendly fellow with many real assets and it was not natural for him to throw in the sponge or to resort to concealment.

A second question has to do with the increased emotional disturbance which followed his confession. Inasmuch as confession is basic in all psychotherapy it might be assumed that it would lessen the emotional tensions. The answer is that it was the increased emotional pressure which forced the confession, and it took time for this emotion to subside. The process may be compared with that in the development of an abscess, where the poisonous matter is gathered together into a "head" which then breaks open and lets the poisons out.

A third question has to do with the ideation which characterizes the acute disturbances of the type represented in this case. He thought he was about to die. He believed that enormously important issues were at stake. A great war was impending. When asked regarding his role in this war, he replied, "A little child shall lead them." Clearly he had the same constellation of ideas which characterize so many acutely disturbed schizophrenics. What do these ideas mean?

An explanation of the ideas of world disaster was offered years ago by Professor Freud in his famous discussion of the Schreber Case[2]. Such ideas, he said, are the projection of the inner catastrophe. They betoken the going to pieces of the patient's own inner organization. Following such a catastrophe, he holds, this inner world may be re-built. In that case we have a paranoic formation. If it is not re-built, if the victory goes to the segmental tendencies and fragmentation continues, then we have dementia praexcox of the hebephrenic type. In this interpretation Freud assumes that the re-built world will be inferior to the original one. He does not go on to suggest that it may be superior. But that, according to my observation, does happen, and therein we may find the significance of disturbances of this type. They are desperate attempts at re-organization which may be and sometimes are successful.

The usual explanation of the ideas of grandeur is that of wishful thinking. In some cases this explanation has elements of truth. I am, however, convinced through the careful study of a large number of these cases that in most of them such an explanation is shallow and misleading and that actually such patients are groping after a true insight of tremendous import[3]. Certainly religion all through the ages has taught that the human soul is infinite in value; and what is nuclear science telling us today but that each individual person, no matter how commonplace, is literally a galaxy of solar systems? Our patient would then have had his eyes opened to a staggering new concept of himself, one that upset the foundations of all his judgments and called for a thorough-going re-organization beginning with the very core of his being. It was an experience which left nim sure of only one thing, that things were not what they seemed to be. Hence his attempt to read hidden meanings into every trivial happening.

In explaining his final recovery, it is important to notice the change of attitude which followed his confession. He begins now to worry about his wife. This is of course a most favorable development. The fact that she took the confession in good part meant that the emotional strain was shared and he identified himself with her.

We have now seen that this man in spite of an anxiety reaction which was carried to the point of severe psychosis, made an excellent recovery. This case may therefore serve to exemplify my thesis that anxiety is not in itself an evil but may instead give evidence that the healing forces are at work.

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[2] *Collected Papers,* Tr. by Alex and James Strachey, London, Hogarth Press, 1949. Vol. III, p. 387 ff.

[3] Cf. "Form and Content of Schizophrenic Thinking," *Psychiatry,* 1942. "Onset in Acute Schizophrenia", *Psychiatry,* 1947.

IV

I have not thus far submitted evidence in support of the converse proposition that when dissolution takes place anxiety tends to disappear. Perhaps it may be sufficient for our purpose to refer to the many psychiatric text-books which tell us that dementia praecox is characterized by *lack of affect*. As applied to the acute phases of schizophrenia nothing could be more misleading than such a statement. But as applied to those who have thrown in the sponge, to those who have made and accepted some adaptation to defeat and failure, it does hold. When dissolution is an accomplished fact, anxiety and suffering tend to cease.

V

The case of John P. was selected for our consideration as one which can best be explained in terms of an uneasy conscience. It is not to be assumed that all anxiety can be so explained. The threat may be to some cause or value with which the sufferer has identified himself. Such was the case with some of the Hebrew prophets, who took the sufferings of their people so much to heart that they developed a severe psychosis. A mother may feel profound anxiety because of a wayward son; or a young man confronted with a major decision and standing face to face with the unknown may pass through a period of soul-searching anxiety. Every crisis period is a period of opportunity and also of danger. It may result in religious quickening or it may eventuate in mental illness. Nonetheless this case is representative in that the locus of the disturbance in most cases of functional mental illness is to be found in an uneasy conscience. It follows, therefore, that not only in this case but in most other cases of "neurotic" difficulty true understa ıding is dependent upon a correct concept of conscience. It is here that I find so much that is confusing and misleading in present-day psychoanalytic thinking.

In this brief paper I have neither time nor space to deal with the differing views now current. I shall merely point out that Freud and his associates have made a most important contribution in their recognition of intra-psychic conflict between the social self and instinctual desires as a major factor in functional mental illness. In doing so, however, they have failed to do justice to the role of conscience in the development of the individual and of the group. They have seen it rather in its negative aspects as a factor in mental illness. They agree in stressing its origin in the authoritarian teaching of parents and early guides. They hold tht the "superego" must be broken up and replaced by a rational "ego" before an individual is mature. They also stress the danger of perfectionism. And there is to-day a tendency to see in hostility the mainspring of all neurotic character formation instead of a protective device against the sense of personal failure.

What is lacking in most of the current psychoanalytic thinking is the recognition of the social basis of the personality as set forth by such thinkers as Mead and Dewey. According to this view, the personality is the internalization of the socially accepted beliefs and attitudes in the form of conscience. Functional mental illness is thus the price we have to pay for being men and having the power of choice and the capacity for growth. The lower orders of the animal creation do the right thing automatically. They co-operate because of the way they are built. In the case of human beings, however, it is necessary to learn to do the right thing through inner self-direction and failure to do so results in anxiety and inner distress. The process thus involved is described by Professor Dewey in the following words:

> When a child acts, those about him react. They either encourage upon him, visit him with approval, or they bestow frowns and rebukes. What others do to us when we act is as natural a consequence of our action as what fire does to us when we plunge our hands in it. . . . In language and imagination we rehearse the responses of others just as we dramatically enact other consequences. We foreknow how others will act and the foreknowledge is the beginning of judgment passed on the action. We know with them; there is conscience. An assembly is formed within the breast which discusses and appraises proposed and performed acts. The community without becomes a forum and tribunal within, a judgment-seat of charges, assessments and exculpations. Our thoughts and our actions are saturated with the ideas others entertain about them, ideas which have been expressed not only in explicit instruction but still more effectively in reaction to our acts"[4].

The point to stress here is that according to Dewey, who expresses also Mead's view, the personality is a social product. We incorporate within ourselves the attitudes of others and judge ourselves through their eyes, particularly those whom we love and whose authority we accept. From this there is no escape. For all of us there must be some inwardly accepted representative of authority whose love and fellowship is necessary to us, and our ideas of right and wrong are functions of these relationships. Herein we may find the significance of the idea of God. It is a symbol of that fellowship without which we cannot live; and since all of us are social beings, the idea of God represents something which is operative in all men whether they recognize it or not. There seems to be a law within which forbids us to be satisfied with any fellowship save that of the best, and to be cut off from that fellowship is dissolution and death. Banishment from that fellowship is then the anxiety-producing threat in the acute forms of functional mental illness.

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[4] *Human Nature and Conduct*. New York, Holt, 1922. p. 315.

A consequence of this view would be a reversal of the Freudian doctrine that conscience and religion are derived from the parental relationships. It would follow that the parents themselves derive their significance to the young child from the fact that they are representatives of that in the Universe upon which he is dependent for love and for protection. Maturity then requires not just release from parental apron-strings but learning to see the parents as representative of something beyond. It calls for the transfer of loyalty from the finite to the infinite.

Professor Hocking, who approaches the problem from a somewhat different standpoint, offers an illuminating suggestion. Instead of magnifying the authoritarian aspects of conscience, he places it upon the *growing edge* of human nature. Conscience for him is the artistic sense in the field of interpersonal relations which tells us of our success or failure in maintaining our status and our growth[5].

IV

It follows from this study that mental illness of the non-organic type is not only associated with a function of greatest social significance, but in certain of its forms it is a manifestation of nature's power to heal. This applies particularly to those forms which are characterized by acute anxiety and in which no adaptation to defeat and failure has been made and accepted. Such a type is represented by John P. The principle involved is of far-reaching import and should receive more attention from those who are approaching the problems of the mentally ill from the standpoint of the minister of religion. This principle has been stated by Professor Hocking in words with which I shall bring this paper to a close:

> Religion has constantly reminded man how hardly he may earn immortality. It has made him pray with a touch of fear, "Take not thy Holy Spirit from me." There are those who refer to this state of mind as "anxiety neurosis." It may become such, but in substance it is simply the original man in his wholeness facing the reality of his sinful status. Others have called it "the divine spark which somehow disturbs our clod." Names matter little, but the disturbed state is one of increased, not lessened awareness of truth[6].

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[5] *Human Nature and Its Re-making.* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1923. Pp. 123-124.

[6] Ibid., p. 186.

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