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"The (confused) history of an autobiographical beach": Complexity in a single case

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In this work, we present the autobiographical fragments that emerged in the course of psychotherapy with Viola, who is facing the consequences of a childhood trauma, and seeking help as a result of two recent experiences she suffered.

In the shared path with the therapist, the use of autobiographical reflections proved to be very useful and made it possible to explore themes such as shared commitment, the metaphor of the journey, the change of meaning about the aggressiveness she was experiencing, and openness to a new life in which she gives up suicidal thoughts.

Some reflections accompany the passages of the autobiography titled "History (confused) of an autobiographical beach".

Keywords: *autobiography*, *commitment*, *suicide*, *journey*

Introduction

The clinical case affords a privileged point of view from which to observe the development of life stories. At the same time, one can experience the patient's journey and that of his or her therapist, in a inextricable co-construction of shared meanings and systemic complexity (Veglia, 1999, Guidano, 2007, 2008). This paper illustrates some pieces of an autobiographical work of a 23 year old woman who needed to overcome the consequences of two dramatic and highly emotional events. Throughout the case, it is possible to discern the clinical process within the articulation and the different passages of the patient's narrative.

The psychotherapy began by Viola's request to learn to regulate a recently emerged aggressiveness that she felt was excessive.

The meaning of the autobiography

Viola is a woman full of energy who, during adolescence, poured part of this energy into writing diaries, focusing on the topics that she felt were emotionally relevant. When she met

with the therapist, she took a booklet full of autobiographic reflections of her infant memories, and also a self-reflection analysis about what was happening in this troubling period of her life.

Viola's natural tendency to tell about herself was focused on the containment of anxiety. In the course of the psychotherapy, these strong emotions were refocused and used in constructive ways to express her difficulties and to give meaning to her past experiences, in order to build a different and new vision of herself.

There are different suggestions and techniques for the use of these types of autobiographical materials (Demetrio, 2003). From this perspective, writing about ourselves is a way to give meaning to past experiences in order to build up our future: it can help us to think back on our history and our identity; it forces us to stop and consider where we are, recovering the pieces of meaning that are present in the experiences of a life story. It helps to feel ourselves as author, star and director of what we are writing, of what lives/emerges in this space that can be considered as a "truce" or a "secure base", built by us for ourselves, to re-weave the threads of our existence.

These writings are born from Viola's personal resilience, from their particular arrangement to the self-narrative that will find concreteness and application in psychotherapy through the use of targeted homework. For example, focusing on the memories of a dream has revealed that she – a strong dreamer - considers odd; that is, she notices a decoupling between images and emotions in her dreams: she is surprised not to remember her past emotions, and will return to relive them as therapy progresses. This aspect will hold a self-protective meaning in the face of dream suggestions with high emotional intensity.

This joint work of changes in the meanings given to events, feelings, consequences of actions etc., supported by autobiographical experience, enables the development of a different way to read the self and the world in a more serene and friendly way in the future (Rezzonico, Voltolini, 1999).

Let us turn to Viola's autobiography:

> *You thought to have produced ... generated ... built ... NO, you're wrong ...*

> *You have generated water, produced sand and built a castle that a thousand, a hundred thousand waves have already deleted ... shapeless mounds of sand ... vague confused memory...*

Viola has developed from childhood a very marked agonistic motivational system (Liotti, Monticelli, 2008) that has proven to be particularly effective in gaining respect and avoiding getting involved in the turbulences related to the disorganized attachment style of her parents (Liotti, Farina, 2011). This system was helpful until, as an adult, she had the desired opportunity to establish a stable and profound pair bond. With "the man of her life" she bought a home and went to live with him there. At the same time, she realized that the excessive activation of her agonistic system was becoming problematic; episodes of uncontrolled anger were starting to compromise the relationship. At this point, she asked for psychotherapy to address these issues.

The treatment process begins in April, and immediately Viola shows her determination to face the heart of the problem. At this stage, she reaffirms that she has never wanted children in order to protect them from how she has lived; however, in August, during the last session before the holidays, she says she is changing her mind in this regard and does not rule out possible motherhood in the future.

In early September, after returning from her holiday, she reports that her partner has left her for another woman: she has to move house. Strong emotions of despair and anger emerge. This situation is accompanied by the clear conviction that the loss of the loving relationship means she will fall into a survival condition, almost a gray area. So the only alternative is to live, but

for her to live means to resume a full relationship with her former partner. She does not want merely to survive but to live; the only alternative is suicide, and she communicates this intention to the therapist and close friends.

She is experiencing a condition of emotional turbulence, making brief attempts to get out from this situation by writing self-critical notes intermingled with flights of imagination.

> *... Adrenaline ... ... traveling... state of maximum activation ... brilliant thoughts swirling around... head ... muscles ... enthusiasm ...*

Her need for systemic coherence emerges strongly: as said before, Viola does not accept merely surviving, but she wants to live; if this is not possible, she believes the only solution is suicide.

Suicide and *commitment*

An interesting key to understanding and managing suicidal ideation comes from social psychology and the science of communication, in particular in relation to the theme of commitment. In the literature, we found evidence of four different levels of commitment, based on two dimensions, the first public-private, the second individual-social (Carassa, Colombetti, 2009; Clark, 2006; Gilbert, 2013).

Private self-commitment is when a person has committed with him or herself to achieving certain objectives and does not share this with anyone else; suicide is a very critical commitment when the patient feels driven to bring to an end the goal without obstacles or external connections. A sudden, seemingly unmotivated, suicidal action may result; only then it turns out to have been carefully prepared (for example, it may be discovered that life insurance has been taken out in favor of people who were not aware of it).

Public self-commitment is when a person engages him or herself to reach a goal and informs another person as a witness; in this case, the other person is not directly involved, but is simply a spectator with no direct interest. In relation to a commitment to suicide, while there is still a marked level of risk, there is also has a greater chance that the suicide can be avoided. The other person - for example, the therapist - perceives the intention although he or she is still not directly involved but is only a witness to the commitment. However, the therapist can play an important role in reducing the suicidal commitment, such as facilitating the emergence of critical thoughts or providing information and relevant reflections aimed at modulating the intensity of ideation, while maintaining a role not directly involved. However, devaluing the threat - "you are exaggerating, you will never do it" – carries the risk that the person will be indirectly induced towards suicide if he or she feels that this uncomfortable condition has not been adequately considered and recognized.

Social commitment occurs when a person undertakes a commitment unilaterally to someone who is directly involved in the promise. In relation to suicide, the commitment may be entered into if the therapist asks to the patient not to carry out the suicide and thus binds him or her to a commitment that would result in the breaking of the covenant if the patient proceeded with the suicide.

Joint commitment is when each party engages in a reciprocal manner in achieving one or more objectives: for example, in the case of end of life care in a hospice or following the path that leads to euthanasia.

We found the agonistic motivational system to be Viola's strength; this system is also activated when the person challenges him or herself, so it becomes public. Since suicide appears to be a completely anti-evolutionary act it is justified to ask whether it is possible - and if so, under what conditions – to commit suicide to defend one's own honor or reputation.

In the case of a public declaration of the decision to commit suicide, it is essential to identify alternatives that can take an evolutionary meaning, which then opens up new opportunities. As mentioned earlier, at a relational level it is important not to minimize the suicide intention, because the person may feel obliged to accept the challenge and to act the suicide as in a sort of social trap. It should be kept in mind that a metaphorical reading of the duel with oneself does not necessarily lead to personal death; however, overcoming the main initial turbulence may save the patient's honor and reputation and allow him or her to begin to glimpse a new lease of life.

Viola, emerging in this climate, had the idea to test herself in a long and dangerous undertaking, and began to shape plans of travelling alone as a backpacker in India; everyone, except the therapist, discouraged her from doing this.

The journey metaphor

You can run and escape to India... even on Mars... but what is inside you will always stay with you.

What is within you is YOU, it's more than your body... thought... soul... remembrance... consciousness... it's exactly you.

Tangled skein that you cannot throw... I am my skein... and no one is able to make me sure of a re-birth.

Viola then goes on the journey, against the advice of friends and family, but with the understanding and sharing of the therapist. The trip in India would last a few months, in areas considered unsafe. Through this process, she builds a progressive self-knowledge and a knowledge of her mechanisms of functioning in the gradual transition from her stabilization towards the exploration and discovery of new, unknown lands. In the journey - which is both metaphorical and real - a young and inexperienced woman facing loneliness and the complexity of life discovers in herself the ability and the resources to cope with difficulties.

Never trust the experience. The experience deceives, the experience is old, has passed. The experience is the nonsense of the re-start...

The curiosity and the urge to explore a distant and foreign land is transformed into an inside personal job thanks to the long email exchanges with the therapist sent in the rarely encountered internet cafés. The driving force generated by the experiences lived through in the journey and, in return, the subsequent re-elaboration gone through with the therapist, encourages the building of a different vision of self and of the world, and a new opening.

RE-starts, RE-taking, RE-draw...

The RE and the absolute FOREVER clash.

With the therapist, Viola explores the painful separations of the recent past from her father and former companion, a childhood trauma, and also aspects of herself that she had suppressed or suspended until then, such as the exploration of motherhood, considering that she had decid-

ed not to have children. In this context of change, there also emerges a new career choice, more complex and with more responsibility.

After returning from the trip Viola begins a new friendship with a person who will live with her and with whom a sympathy is born that develops into a love affair.

The suicidal idea remains in her painful memories but is no longer active. However, when her new boyfriend leaves her for returning to their home country in an apparently permanently way, Viola is able to "survive" the new abandonment and to regulate her emotions, unlike in her previous experiences (Leahy et al., 2011). In this second mourning there is a huge sadness, but no dysregulated destructive emotions. After the separation, Viola has been able to turn an unexpected event into a positive experience; she happens to find two injured kittens and decides to take care of them despite two veterinarians saying that at least one of them would die: Viola does not give in and both kittens survive. In this way, the anger of competitive challenge becomes a confirmation of her parental ability for caring.

Unexpectedly, the partner returns to Italy and asks Viola to resume the relationship. Viola agrees and becomes pregnant; despite the fear of a new abandonment, she decides to carry the pregnancy to term by accepting the risk as she feels able to tackle motherhood, even alone. Viola discovers that her partner, after the initial shock, is pleased to assume his paternal role in a responsible way, thus promoting a balanced stabilization and a validation of Viola's ability to build and maintain a good and satisfying relationship.

The journey and return metaphor is widely used in fiction, and also in psychotherapy; here is not the place for further discussion of this but we can remember the work of Campbell (1949-58). At the same time, we can refer to the theme of the fairy tale and the mechanisms that emerge in the tales (Propp, 2000). They are issues that have to do with destabilization, the concept of the hero, change, initiation rites, conduct and resolution with the return and happy ending.

Mainly, the imagination is a tool for the construction of hypothetical scenarios of life, both good and bad; and also scenarios that are co-constructed with the therapist using imaginative techniques (Hackmann et al., 2011). In this case, Viola, in her autobiography confirms that she no longer wants merely to survive, but to live, and achieves this by facing her significant issues of self and the world. She writes:

> *It is on the same beach… the same sand...*
>
> *much more similar to my project.*
>
> *This castle is more beautiful than the others, it seems to me it will be taken away by the waves. Like the others. To build this castle I enjoyed more.*
>
> *There are four ways to die... A unique way to survive: to adapt and make do*
>
> *A unique way to live: to build their dreams and never settle for less.*

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Reference (APA)