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# FROM THE SHADOW OF THE OBJECT TO THE SHADOW OF THE ALMIGHTY: A STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

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As background for a case presentation, two primary sources are used, *The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known* by Christopher Bollas (1987) and Psalm 91 from the *New International Bible*. This story is about transformation, for the patient as well as for the therapist. The movement by the patient from a place of confusion, depression, anxiety and despair to a place of newfound, although not complete, freedom and clarity is detailed with reflections by the therapist who was both witness to and part of this transformation. The movement for the patient is described as transformation from living in the shadow of the object to the shadow of the almighty. For contextual purposes, a summary of some of Bollas' central theoretical ideas are presented as well as a brief exegesis of the biblical reference, Psalm 91. A background of the patient is presented and the history of the clinical journey is chronicled through excerpts from a memory book written by the patient and given to the therapist at the final session of treatment.

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I am pleased and honored to contribute to this special issue on psychoanalysis and religion/spirituality in memory of Randy Sorenson. Randy's book *Minding spirituality* (2004) and his other works are such a rich legacy in this area of discourse and clinical work. He contributed much to my life and work while I was a student at Rosemead and in the years since.

I've been carrying around the idea for this article for some time and am grateful for the occasion to

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The author would like to thank Dr. Beth Brokaw, Dr. Brad Strawn, and another anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful comments and critique of the manuscript. Deep appreciation goes to Barbara for graciously agreeing to allow her sacred story to be shared. All correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Theresa C. Tisdale, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Graduate Psychology, Azusa Pacific University, 701 E. Foothill Blvd., Azusa, CA 91702

put it into words. In reflecting on clinical encounters over the years, various ways of understanding the process have emerged, including the images depicted in the title of this article. For me, there is something profoundly compelling that is captured in the contrast, the concepts, the play on words. The contrast elucidates something of the significant shifts experienced through clinical encounters.

Until I began the research for this article I had no idea how well Christopher Bollas' (1987) conceptualization would fit the experience I had with this particular patient. I have experienced something of a parallel process between what Bollas describes happening with patients who move from aesthetic, wordless transformational experiences to finding language to articulate experience and what has happened in my own journey in writing this article. What I carried as wordless beliefs and realities (unthought knowns) about this patient's experience during the five years of treatment, found a voice through Bollas' work and through a closer look at Psalm 91.

The article is divided into two sections: the context and the case. In the context, relevant highlights of Bollas' (1987) work, particularly part I, are presented (all quotes and references are from this particular book). Because Bollas presents his ideas so eloquently, the most relevant excerpts have been quoted in their entirety. In this context section, an exegesis of the passage in Psalm 91 is also presented. Both of these frameworks contribute to understanding the transformational shift for this patient from a place of isolation to a new life-giving relational reality in therapy and beyond.

Section two of the article consists of the presentation of the Case of Barbara as well as the narrative of a memory book she gave me on the last day of our treatment. It is presented in its entirety, as it chronicles her tortuous journey from living exclusively in the shadow of the object (a place of torment, terror,

chaos and confusion), to an ever increasing life-giving space in the shadow of the almighty (a place of relative peace, safety, shade and rest). A signed release from Barbara granting permission to quote her experience is on file with the author.

It is important to clarify that in my presenting the case (and clinical work and experience in general), my understanding of religious experience is from the perspectives of psychoanalysis as well as religion. In other words, religious experience is not simply a matter of conservation or compensation for psychological purposes and needs, but of actual and real experience of the Divine, however that may occur. I realize this perspective differs with some major thinking in the field, but it locates me in a place of integrity as a person of belief in transcendent reality.

## THE CONTEXT

Christopher Bollas is a British psychoanalyst whose writing reflects significant influence from the British Middle School of Object Relations, associated with the most notable figures of Winnicott, Fairbairn and Guntrip (their major works dating from the 1940s-1960s). Bollas preserves the main tenants of these early object relations theorists who posited the shift from drive motivation to relational motivation as central to life. Bollas furthers this theory with his contribution regarding the nature and substance of internalizations of relational experiences that are known but not articulated, and the need for therapeutic understanding in the clinical relationship of these unthought realities as well as the potential to bring them into conscious experience and understanding as a means for transformation. Bollas states: "I think that in his discovery of psychoanalysis Freud created a situation, now with the person's adult mental faculties present and functioning, in which the individual could live through for the first time elements of psychic life that have not been previously thought" (p. 278).

Bollas' describes his book as intending to focus on "... the human subject's recording of his early experiences of the object. This is the shadow of the object as it falls on the ego, leaving some trace of its existence in the adult" (p. 3). For Bollas, the object can "cast its shadow" without a child being able to process the encounters through mental representations or language. The child lives out the reality of these internalizations without conscious awareness.

In the context of clinical encounters and dis-

course, these realities come to life through the transference and countertransference. Through therapy, these early memories of being and relating find their way into language and are "... the reliving through language of that which is known but not yet thought (what I term the unthought known)..." (p. 4).

## *General Overview of Bollas' Theory*

Part one of the book describes "the infant's experience of his first object," which for Bollas is the mother, but in current conceptualizations may include fathers or other significant caretakers. For Bollas, mother is "known less as a discrete object with particular qualities than as a process linked to the infant's being and the alteration of his being. For this reason I have termed the early mother a 'transformational object' and the adult's search for transformation constitutes in some respects a memory of this early relationship" (p. 4).

Part two of the book is focused on childhood and the way memories are stored, namely through 'self states,' due to an inability to store them through cognitive processes. These self states may evidence as moods and will be stored until they can be articulated and understood, which allows them to be woven into the patient's evolving narrative. This conservation of experience is also explored through the notion of "loving hate," where Bollas argues that only in hating the other can certain people discover a true relation to the object.

The third part of the book examines how people remember and relive early life experiences through transference and countertransference. In Bollas' view, "the analysand compels the analyst to experience the patient's inner object world. He often does this by means of projective identification: by inspiring in the analyst a feeling, thought or self state that hitherto has only remained within himself. In doing this the analysand might also represent an internal object which is fundamentally based on a part of the mother's or father's personality, in such a way that in addition to being compelled to experience one of the analysand's inner objects, the analyst might also be an object of one feature of the mother's mothering." (p. 5)

For Bollas, the ego plays an essential role in the essence and expression of the unthought known. As a result of profound internalizations of experience and relations, we are in possession of complex rules for being and relating, processes that reflect the

dialectic of the inherited and the acquired. In the primary repressed unconscious we know these rules, but as yet only some of them have been thought. A very significant portion of our existence is predetermined by this unthought known, and through the therapeutic relationship, psychoanalysis will bring the unthought known into thought, through the experience and the interpretation of the transference and countertransference.

### *Theoretical application*

Part I of Bollas' book is titled "The shadow of the object" and most of the clinical conceptual material for understanding the case is found here. This is attributed to the nature of this particular patient's (whom I call Barbara) experience of profound emotional and relational poverty in early life, which was evident in her presenting circumstances of a life in shambles, an unmanageable affective world, and an almost complete inability to translate her experience into words.

Drawing from Winnicott's (1963; as cited in Bollas, 1987) notion of the facilitating environment provided by the mother, in the first chapter interestingly entitled "the transformational object" Bollas asserts that "the mother is less significant and identifiable as an object than as a process that is identified with cumulative internal and external transformations" (p. 14). Bollas is here describing the infant's subjective experience of mother in a way that is dynamic rather than static. This is more an existential knowing (an essence) than a representational knowing (an object). The experience of mother facilitates integration of instinct, cognition, affect and the environment; a dynamic object relation is formed rather than a static object representation. In this dynamic, symbiotic relation the infant associates the mother with formation and transformation; a source of integration of fragmented aspects of experience.

Bollas asserts that this transformative, integrative process lives on in certain forms of object seeking in adult life, when the object is sought for its function as a signifier of transformation. The other (whether a person, place, event or ideology) is sought out of a hope that through connection (often through surrender), the self can be transformed. Bollas thinks that we have failed to take notice of this phenomenon in adult life and that there exists a "wide-ranging collective search for an object that is identified with the metamorphosis of the self." (p. 15). Interestingly,

Bollas relates this to belief by saying: "In many religious faiths, for example, when the subject believes in the deity's actual potential to transform the total environment, he sustains the terms of the earliest object tie within a mythic structure." (p. 16).

For Bollas, transformation does not mean gratification. In the spirit of other post-Freudian analytic thinkers such as Winnicott and Kohut, growth is only partially promoted by gratification; frustration is also necessary to stimulate and facilitate healthy development. This frustration and disillusionment allows the infant to increasingly meet his or her own needs and thereby release the other as the sole preserver of his or her world.

In chapter two, again with an interesting title: "The spirit of the object as the hand of fate" Bollas describes what he terms "the aesthetic moment," an experience when "the subject feels held in symmetry and solitude by the spirit of the object" (p. 31). Bollas makes it clear to the reader that he is not talking specifically about religious belief; he is articulating a moment when a person is profoundly affected by being "cradled by" the spirit of the object (the other). Although he declares he is not speaking specifically about belief, Bollas uses an unbeliever's conversion to Christ as an example of this type of timeless moment, when "the person usually feels the sudden enclosure of the self by a sacred presence" (p. 30). That the aesthetic moment might be occasioned by a wordless profound encounter with the Divine, with a therapist or analyst, or with experience of a poem, a symphony or a work of art reflects an inherent sacredness in creative processes that are outside cognitive coherence because they echo a time when the essence of life predated words. The aesthetic moments with mother become part of the infant's unthought known. This being-with allows the infant to process his or her existence prior to the ability to process it with words. Through these wordless encounters the shadow of the object is cast on the subject.

Self fragmentation is integrated through processing during these aesthetic moments. In development, the processing and integration that occurs as a result of these aesthetic moments yields to the structure of language. "The mother's facilitation of the word-forming experience, together with the infant's grasp of grammatical structure, is the most significant transformation of the infant's encoded utterance. Until the grasp of the word, the infant's meaning resides primarily within the mother's psyche-soma. With the word, the infant has found a new transformational

object, which facilitates the transition from deep enigmatic privacy towards the culture of the human village” (p. 35). Language creates the possibility for the child to articulate experience and to connect with the world outside the dyad.

Consistent with other theorists such as Fairbairn, Guntrip and Rizzuto, Bollas addresses the importance of acknowledging spiritual experiences. “It is possible to see how the reduction of spiritual experiences to the discrete administration of the mother always strikes us as somehow an insult to the integrity of uncanny experience, as the sacred precedes the maternal” (p. 39).

In chapter three, “The self as object,” Bollas explores how we come to understand our patients’ early life experience by how they relate to themselves. What the infant internalizes from the maternal care system is transferred to the self care system, expressed in a myriad of ways such as how the patient refers to and treats him or her self, how affect is managed, as well as through the choice of occupation, friends, partners and colleagues. Bollas suggested that the influence of the maternal care system on the self care system may begin in utero, an idea ahead of its time and subsequently supported through infant observational and developmental research.

All of the experiences that contribute to the unthought known constitute a set of basic laws that govern the infant and later the child’s experiences and expectations of the world. In the analytic setting, this system of laws is revealed and open to deformation and reformation. “As the patient becomes aware of this process of deformation of the other and the self as objects, and as the analyst speaks up for that object *whom he is made to be*, the patient gradually hears news of himself through the experience of the other” (p. 61, emphasis added).

These three chapters (1-3) of part I of Bollas’ book form the theoretical backdrop for understanding the case of Barbara and how the shadow of the object fell over the first 40 years of her life.

### *Biblical Exegesis and Application of Psalm 91*

Psalm 91, particularly verse 1 provides a context for articulating Barbara’s shift from the shadow of the object to the shadow of the almighty. This shift was not immediate (therapy took place twice a week over a 5 year period); it was a very painstakingly gradual shift, often experienced by both Barbara and myself as tortuous and tedious.

This psalm begins with the verse: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalm 91:1, New International Version). For purposes of application to this article, the key words in this verse are *dwells*, *shelter*, *rest* and *shadow*; translations are taken from Strong’s Concordance (1980). The Hebrew word for dwells means to remain, to abide or to tarry. Shelter refers to a hiding place or a place of protection (cf. Tate, 1990). Rest has a similar meaning to the word dwells, and is interpreted as to remain or to tarry. Tate (1990) extends the meaning to include making a home. Shadow refers to shade, whether literal or figurative. Tate (1990) translates this as “under the protection/security of” (p. 447). Kidner (1975) describes Psalm 91 as “a psalm for danger: for times of exposure and encirclement or of challenging the power of evil” (p. 331).

These exegetical elucidations convey a picture of a place of safety, rest, protection and shade, a place where one can tarry or linger. The psalm also relates the shadow of the almighty as a place where the grip of evil is challenged. It is also a place where challenge and growth can occur. Curiously, the reference for this psalm, 91:1, can be read 911, the number one calls for help in an emergency. Also, curiously (and tragically) it is a reference in our culture to 9/11, a day of untold destruction and devastation. In the case of Barbara, these are all apt reflections on her therapy experience.

In the case of Barbara, she describes therapy as a painful and difficult journey that challenged all of her beliefs about herself and the world. Eventually she was able to experience therapy as a place of safety, but this was not the case in the beginning as the background and narrative will show. These comparisons and contrasts fit with Barbara’s faith experience as well, for in the beginning she was not sure whether God was a source of destruction or protection for her.

### **FROM SHADOW TO SHADE: THE CASE OF BARBARA**

Barbara (not her real name) is a 40-year-old single Catholic Caucasian female who I began seeing in 1996. We met for analytically-oriented psychotherapy twice a week for just short of 5 years. She is the oldest of five siblings, having one sister and three brothers. Her father is an airplane mechanic and her mother is an aide in a nursing home.

When she presented for therapy Barbara was in crisis due to several recent events. She was in a doctoral program in education, and she had recently failed her comprehensive exams. She was also on the verge of being fired from her job for poor performance and for conflicts with her supervisor. Additionally, she had been asked to leave her parents' home where she had been living and had recently moved into an apartment with one of her younger brothers. Due to this constellation of crises, Barbara was suffering from anxiety, depression and migraine headaches.

In the course of our work it became clear that Barbara suffered from a profound lack of positive and nurturing experiences within her family (historically and currently), particularly with her parents. She described her father as an angry, violent man and often stated how much she hated him. In our first session, Barbara relayed an incident that occurred when she was about 7 years old. She had been caught playing a game called "Strip Tease" with neighborhood children, during which some older boys had coaxed her and another girl into removing their shirts. By Barbara's report, when the children were discovered and the incident reported to her parents, Barbara was forced by her father to strip naked and was taken to the home of each of the children and forced to apologize to them and their parents. Barbara also reported that when her mother was pregnant with her last child, her father beat her and she nearly lost the baby. When this particular incident occurred, Barbara's mother took Barbara and her siblings to another state to live for the summer, but to Barbara's dismay the family reunited just before school began.

Barbara described her mother as passive and disorganized. Barbara often felt that she needed to take care of her mother and was frequently put in a position of having to defend her mother against the assaults of her father. Barbara's maternal grandmother was a significant positive influence in Barbara's life and although she often needed to care for her because her grandmother was in poor health, Barbara felt a particular fondness for her and enjoyed going to visit her at her home near a lake.

Because of her early experiences with her parents as being consumed with animosity for one another and inattentive to the children, Barbara felt that as the oldest, she was the one needed to hold her family together. She was often an intermediary between her parents, whose communication was very poor, and she felt responsible to care for her younger siblings as well. This role in her family created in Bar-

bara a paradoxical sense of being both powerful and powerless. She felt very powerful in being able to manage and control her family's lives and very powerless in being able to manage and control her own. In terms of her faith, she acknowledged being a Catholic, and had attended a Catholic college, but did not practice currently in any obvious way.

A few years into our work I began using theological language to describe Barbara's role in her family. In all honesty, I do not recall what prompted me to introduce this; typically I follow the patient's lead on addressing religious or spiritual issues (as with other issues). Perhaps there was something of her unconscious experience that was evoked in me. On occasion, I referred to her dilemma in her family as her having felt responsible to "save" her family from themselves and each other. Barbara resonated with this conceptualization and one day several months after my making that statement, she came in and plopped down in the chair and blurted out, "If I am not the family savior, then who am I?"

This launched us into a new dimension of our work in being able to dialogue openly about her experience of her parents, her experience of God and her relationship to her own life (namely that she had been focused on living other people's lives rather than her own). Because of her role as family savior, Barbara was left with little energy or resources to make a life for herself. Her primary coping strategy to manage her rage, anger and frustration was to smoke pot. She also began cutting herself to relieve her rage and anxiety. With regard to her spiritual life, Barbara acknowledged that because of her painful experiences with her parents, particularly with her father, it was very difficult for her to fully trust God. Consistent with Rizzuto's (1979) conceptualization, Barbara's concept of God did not match her image of God. For example, from her Catholic upbringing she was taught that God is loving, but she could not validate this from her life.

Over time, Barbara began to pray more, and when her grandmother died she wanted to spend some time in therapy talking about what she could do at the memorial service. She decided to write a prayer/poem and to read Psalm 23 and 116. Barbara indicated in one of our final sessions that she appreciated our being able to talk openly about her faith and her struggles with God. She felt God had brought us together for her to be able to achieve a measure of healing from the painful and difficult experiences she had faced.



Barbara's experience of me was also conflicted and ambivalent. She initially described me as "the dungeon master" and my office as "the torture chamber." During our sessions I could sense her rage and frustration. At times when she became suicidal, Barbara would threaten to harm herself and not tell me. I interpreted this as perhaps her wanting me to feel as helpless as she did and she agreed. She wanted me to experience what it was like to be hostage to her chaotic internal world.

Barbara had profound difficulty putting her experience and feelings into words, so many of our sessions were filled with silence and space; which at times created anxiety for her and other times helped her to relax. As a positive shift in her internal experience progressed and her experience of me in therapy grew more consistent and life-giving, the dissonance between her inner and outer life grew. One day in the middle phase of treatment she stated, "I don't know if the world I experience outside of here is real or if life in here is real." This confusion led to her asking me to physically accompany her on a walk outside the building. Understanding what I believed to be the nature of her struggle connecting inside to outside, I agreed.

In Bollas' words, our work was filled with many aesthetic moments that enabled Barbara to internalize a different maternal process that could then translate to better self care and more positive relationships with others. As her internal world became more clear and ordered she became able to successfully focus on life goals. During the course of our work, she completed an advanced degree and secured a position teaching college. She was transferred to another therapist shortly before I left the area and in our final session she presented me with a memory book of our years together in treatment. Following is the narrative of that book. Commentary and application are interspersed throughout the narrative; Barbara's words are in italics.

### *Together we Walked*

*October 1996 – July 2001*

*I recall the first day we spoke. I was at work—a job I had held for only 6 months. I was in the process of being fired, I had failed my comprehensive exams, my migraines were unmanageable—I felt overwhelmed, lost, scared, and sick.*

*We started at XXXX (the first location of treatment). [On this page is a drawing of a set of black*

*stairs with the words] DOWN TO THE TORTURE CHAMBER*

*THE DUNGEON MASTER you one were—lending me a healing hand in the place of the whips and chains. It took me so long to understand, to believe. I was living in a cloud of despair. The physical pain I felt was piercing through my body.*

[I remember the first time Barbara referred to me as the dungeon master and my office as the torture chamber. I felt shocked by this association because I had come to view myself as an empathic person who desired to create a safe and sacred space in therapy. Barbara's words were a profound revelation to me about her internal world.]

*My anxiety—lightening bolts of electrical current—riddled any inner peace I may have known. The disorder of my emotions confused me, frustrated me, angered me! I felt like Christmas tree lights [on this page is a drawing of lights all in a tangle]. My emotions were all scrambled in a knotted mess. You said we would take a look at my emotions—one strand at a time. You made me angrier.*

[This was one of many times that I made an intervention thinking it would be experienced as empathic and helpful, but Barbara's reaction was opposite. The thought of looking at her emotions "one strand at a time" was excruciating for her and evoked rage, not comfort. The fragmentation of her internal world was unbearable for Barbara.]

*I was so frustrated that first year, trying to tell you who I was and where I had been. We were learning about my feelings and how to speak of them. I remember how saying each word was excruciating. Slowly, I would say one word at a time. Eventually, I would put a sentence together then a paragraph. I appreciated and greatly valued your patience with me. You gave me the quiet time and confidence to challenge my fears, change my ways, and learn how to speak. I learned to feel safe with your guidance.*

[This connects powerfully with Bollas' notion of the unthought known and the need for a caring relationship—a process more than an object—in which experience can be integrated and put to words. Translating experience to words allows the patient to transcend the dyad for meaning and existence. Prior to treatment, Barbara had never had this experience or opportunity.]

*Once I started to tell you about my experiences, my need to share grew greater. I wanted to*

tell you what had happened. I needed you to understand. I needed you to confirm that there were wrongs done. I needed you to be with me in experiencing the scary crazy past. I didn't want to be alone.

TODAY [our final day in therapy]—I give you some of these stories. They are for you to keep alive. They are for you use, to understand me and others. [I believe that writing this article is one way of keeping Barbara's stories alive.] I give them to you so that I may let them go. Please teach others not to inflict pain in this manner. Please teach others not to accept relationships that inflict such pain. Please draw upon the bad for some GOOD.

- I. When I was about eight years old I shared a bedroom with my sister. She had a problem with bedwetting. My father rigged up a catheter with a garden hose, rubber pants, and an apple juice jar. The scare tactic worked on me. [Barbara included a drawing of this apparatus.]
- II. When I was in second grade, the neighborhood kids had a strip tease club. I was so happy I could participate in a neighborhood game. Unfortunately, parents didn't approve. My punishment for belonging has haunted me and angered me forever. I was paraded around the neighborhood naked. I was forced to apologize to the boy's parents for getting their sons in trouble. I was humiliated. The anger and hatred inside me GREW.
- III. At the age of fifteen my mother was pregnant with my brother XXXX. Apparently my father did not know. When he did find out, he went ballistic. The fight that ensued was awful. My parents said terrible things to each other. My father tried to hurt the baby by kicking and hitting my mother. I was paralyzed with such fear. My father had my mother call the police because he didn't know how to stop. The police took him to jail under protective custody. We left that night to my grandparent's house in XXXX. Two months later, in September school started. We returned home with nothing being said. My brother was born and life just resumed. I didn't know how to deal with such secrecy and silence. I found a coping mechanism by smoking pot. My parents

thought I was going through a phase. I knew smoking was a way of life for me.

All that took place some 25 [now 30] years ago and I thank you for being there with me so many times. But enough is enough and it's time to move on and beyond. It is my hope to be able to leave such fears and anger behind. Since sharing these stories, I have not felt so alone. Having you confirm the wrongness of my parents, I have not felt as blameful. Thank you for letting me cry!

[These stories are among the most compelling and life defining for Barbara. As Bollas notes, putting experience into words allows the patient to move on from being held in the grip of the unthought known and the concomitant unconscious laws and ways of life formerly internalized through experience.]

#### NOW WHAT?

[A question, frequently asked by Barbara over our years together, is placed on a page by itself.]

Oh—we must not forget GROUP. I remember being so wound up. I had a lot of time on my hands and I didn't know what I was doing with my life. I asked if we could meet more often. Your reply was something like group would be more beneficial to me. I hated having to hear this. I knew you were right but I did not want you to be. I tried not to fight you or the idea. To this day, even though I did make the decision myself, I hold you responsible for getting me involved and I don't necessarily view this positively. But, I do have a great amount of respect for you as a therapist in regards to how you handled me and the situation. But, I'm still not happy about going. (I still have to get that last word in).

[Because Barbara had been so isolated and alienated from others, I felt she would benefit from group therapy; she remained ambivalent about the experience. This may have been due in part to the need to further communicate her experience in words to others, not just me. This would require even more from her; in Bollas' terms "to enter the human village." Barbara was not at all sure she wanted to do this.]

I do continue to wonder if you'll remember me. I guess that is why I feel so compelled to write this book. So think of me when . . .

- a client takes off their shoes,
- a client asks you to darken the room because of a migraine

- a client gives you a razor blade
- or a client asks you to go for a walk

[When I contacted Barbara to ask her permission to talk about our work in this article, she was surprised I remembered her and even more surprised that the single focus of the article was our work together. She indicated that she struggled to believe she had an impact on me in a lasting, positive way. When I explored this, she stated “it would mean I have something to offer ... I would have something positive ... that really gets to the core of all of it” (personal communication September 5, 2006)]

*Then somewhere in all of this, you did your post-doc at XXXX. I appreciated your making arrangements so that we could continue working together. This meant a lot to me—in a number of ways. 1. I wouldn't have to start over again with a new therapist. 2. (I know I still struggle with this) That you would even want to continue working with me. I guess over the past 5 years you've had plenty of times to bail out and haven't. Does that mean I'm a life worth saving and that you would want to? (maybe someday I'll be able to give the obvious answers)*

*And once again, we had to go down the steps to the 'Dungeon.'* [My office was again on the lower level of the building.] *But, this time, there was a trick door. Do you remember that it would get stuck? I was so amazed at how easily you could get it fixed. This was so far from my experiences. My father would make such a huge ordeal out of something so minor. Moreover, you responded to me and a need of mine.* [On this page the patient drew a door at the top of a set of stairs. At the bottom of the set of stairs was another door, heavily outlined, and below it the words *fixed door*. [The metaphor of a door is a fascinating one. In Bollas' notion of the transformational (process) object, Barbara identified me as someone who was able to free the stuck door into her experience. By contrast, her father made a huge deal (metaphorically) out of such things.]

[The next two pages face each other, on the left are the words *LEFT SIDE*, surrounded by a mass of colors all running together. On the right are the words *RIGHT SIDE* with colored lines all drawn with great precision of width and depth. Along the upper edge of the right side of the page are measurement marks, much like a ruler. Below the words *RIGHT SIDE* are some mathematical equations.

One equation is preceded by the words *the answer is*. In the center of the book (spanning both pages) is a blackened area identified as *WAR ZONE*. Along the outer edges of the left and right pages are the words *There use to be quite a distinct* with arrows pointing to the words *LEFT SIDE* and *RIGHT SIDE*. It is curious to me that in the memory book, Barbara identified the area in black as a war zone; I recalled in an earlier similar drawing she had given me during the third year of treatment this area was identified as *THE DEAD ZONE*.]

*I hated my left side. There was so much darkness, despair, anger, depression, suicide, punishment, hatred, ANGER ANGER ANGER ANGER! (Got it?)* [Anger was a complex emotion for Barbara and posed a challenge for me to understand. At times, her anger seemed to be a response to relational wounding; to be an expression of rage and frustration at inadequate nurturing. At other times, it came across as an expression of some innate aggressive impulse (in a Kleinian sense). Still other times, her anger seemed to reflect a healthy developmental accomplishment of finding her own voice (vis-a-vis individuation) and also growing in her capacity to know when her boundaries had been violated and to be able to acknowledge that to herself and to others and find affirmation and understanding of her subjective realities. These various expressions of Barbara's anger were not as discreet as just noted, but due to the prominence of anger as an emotion for her I wanted to try to articulate what I sensed as possible sources.]

*I wanted you to know. I wanted to get it out of me. I needed to express it—so I painted. This is a portion of my art work.* [On the left facing page, Barbara pasted a portion of an abstract painting that is dark shades of green, brown, purple and black.] *I felt so much gloom and doom. I wondered how could you have put up with me.* [Barbara's internal world was so intolerable to her, she assumed it was for me as well.]

*Then you ask for me to find one little bit of something positive. I'm not sure if this is what you asked. But I painted a little white spot on my 'black' painting. At the time, I felt a need to have my innocence back.* [On the left facing page is pasted a round painting. The background is dark brown tones with two concentric sets of hatch marks—one inner, one outer—done is a mix of red and beige. In the center is a yellow stand with two legs, holding what looks like a tomb, in white, with the word



INNOCENCE painted on it.] *As such, that white part is my innocence. I brought the painting to you and asked you to paint with me. I was embarrassed to ask you. I thought maybe you would think this was a stupid thing to do. But—you didn't laugh at me, you didn't tease me, you didn't hold it up to ridicule me, you didn't save that experience only to hurt me days, months, or years later. Actually, you did much, much more than not hurting me. You got down on the floor, carefully thought about what you were going to do, selected a color, and proceeded to draw an object that translated the meaning of our relationship. That is, you were here to support me and to allow me to grow infinitely outward. THANK YOU FOR PAINTING WITH ME!* [Integrating and articulating her experience was so key for Barbara during our work. I am struck by how clearly she articulated the left and right "sides" of her experience in ways that reflect newer clinical theories such as interpersonal neurobiology. Barbara's request for me to paint with her illustrates Bollas' notion of the need by the infant for a transforming presence to facilitate the integration of fragments of experience. These aesthetic moments lead to the capacity for articulating experience through language; the unthought known becomes known and expressed.]

*I drew the magic wand so you would know what one looks like.* [On the right facing page was a wand drawn in a rainbow of colors with what appeared to be streamers or ribbons extending from the handle. The wand was surrounded by a yellow background. This had significance in our work because Barbara would often inquire about whether I had a magic wand and couldn't I just wave it over her and make her better? In Bollas' theory, this represents Barbara's continued search for a transformational object; some relational process that could integrate her fragmented self and bring meaning to her experience.]

*I suppose you would like to know what the red marks are on the previous painting. I believe I was angry with you. I wanted to cut that part out and to throw it away. I believe it had to do with my smoking pot and having the cognitive testing done. You said I needed to call the Dr. and the assessment would most likely be postponed. I didn't want to face reality.* [Due to some of Barbara's struggles with school, I suggested she be tested for a learning disability. A few days prior to her testing she revealed to me that she had been smok-

ing pot heavily, which I indicated would compromise the testing results and suggested she reveal it to the testing psychologist. This was one of many experiences of disappointment and anger with me that, in Bollas' terms, facilitated change.]

*I have gotten out of chronological order. Backing up a bit, I can't forget failing my comprehensive exams a second time. I felt so stupid. I was useless—worthless. I had opened the letter at home by myself. I felt like I was having an instant replay of the 2 years before. But this time, I called you and I called my sister. And, my brother came home from work. I was not alone. I felt fortunate that you had time to see me. XXXX [her brother] drove me and waited while we spoke. I felt so devastated. During the next few months, I had many decisions to make regarding taking exams for a third time. Thank you for being by my side during this process.*

*You said, 'Third time's a Charm'*

*I said, 'Three strikes you are out'*

*I failed the third taking of comprehensive exams.*

[It is interesting to me that at this point in her narrative Barbara clearly articulates how each of us framed this third attempt at passing her exams. I was clearly wrong about the outcome and yet she follows this declaration with an expression of my support and faith in her. This may reflect a defensive maneuver on her part, grace for my empathic failure, or some capacity to experience me as caring even though I was wrong.]

*I will always remember your support and faith in me. You called the day before. I saw you during the time. I knew you were there. I did wish that you'd take the exam for me. I figured you might have a better chance of passing. But I did do it. I took the exam for a third time. I faced the embarrassment of failing. I was visible in front of my peers and professors. I did not run & hide like I have done in the past. I learned a new found respect for myself. I didn't give up—what then? Persevered? I know I did what I was able. Unfortunately, the meaning I gain is that I wasn't good enough. (I vow to continue to work on changing those bad thoughts & beliefs.) I felt so totally devastated by the whole graduate experience. I was angry, angry, angry. I was frustrated.* [Two pages, left and right facing, are completely colored in red.]

*I didn't know how to change things. I had been trying hard but everything got out of control. Life*

was bad and it got worse. I was scared, lost, insecure. Depression, anxiety, and migraines were inseparable from 'me.' [This is a compelling reflection of what Bollas describes as self states that are stored memories and experiences expressed often as enduring moods.]

Then there is (I inadvertently wrote present tense is when I thought I was going to write 'was') such a great amount of self-hatred. I hate myself for failing. And of course, punishment soon follows.

I'm not sure when I started to cut myself. I'm not sure how I thought about cutting myself. But I did start and it did provide me with a certain amount of comfort—release. Or escape?

Thank you for letting it be okay to talk about it. I felt safe in your presence.

When we were meeting in XXXX (third location), I brought the blade in with me to give to you. I'm not sure what to say about this but I feel a need to make note of it. I know I needed to have you closer to me in my actions. I needed to have cutting be a real thing in our session. And, I needed to give you the whole cutting thing. I didn't want to have the blade.

[The cumulative effect of aesthetic moments in therapy allowed Barbara to bring me deeper and deeper into her experience. As Bollas notes, early life experiences are revealed by how patients treat themselves. In Barbara's life, her self destructive habits revealed the poverty and internalized rejection of herself.]

#### ON CUTTING

I felt compelled to hurt myself. I needed and wanted to see blood. I wanted the bad stuff to leave my body and thought the bleeding would help. (I try to donate blood during these times.)

The last time I cut myself, I was scared. I didn't want to stop. I wanted to cut deeper. I wanted to bleed more and more. As it was, I smeared the blood all over. I reveled in it.

I finally called you. We talked. I was able to stop.

When I saw you next—we were walking outside. I had shown you my arm. You touched me in such a healing way that I thought the cut would heal and the scar would disappear. None the less, the scars still remain. I had and have to have them there on my body. It has been such a traumatic time in my life. I don't want to forget the pain of my depression and despair—in hopes of not going there again.

I read a quote from Oprah Winfrey

'Failure is an opportunity to change direction'

I think ...

This rings true with me.

MY IMAGINARY BOOK on how to do everything that EVERYONE (but me) HAS READ!

[On the opposite page of these words was a drawing of a yellow book. The title was THE HOW TO BOOK\*]

At the bottom of the cover the asterisk notation was don't give to XXXX (Barbara's name)].

[In Barbara's experience, her internal laws were chaotic and confusing. She believed that others had a rule book about how to live life that was cruelly withheld from her. Her treatment of herself was self-destructive and self-sabotaging. She gravitated toward people and situations that replayed the sad drama of her early life and family experience and confirmed her internal laws.]

[One blank page followed, then]

THANK YOU FOR BEING WITH ME when I opened the results of my third exam!

I have been inspired—to continue asking questions, to continue seeking something better, to continue asking for help. I prayed 5 years ago and you were delivered to me. Luke 11:9. And I say unto you,

ASK,

and it shall be given you;

SEEK,

And ye shall find;

KNOCK,

And it shall be opened unto you.

For everyone that asketh receiveth;

And he that seeketh findeth;

And to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

[This was the first time Barbara had used this type of explicitly religious reference to frame her experience. Bollas relates the aesthetic moment and transformational objects to experiences of the Divine. This connection between healing encounters with others, self concept, and image of God has a growing body of theoretical and empirical support.]  
Another Inspiration ...

#### The Wizard of Oz

[On this page was a color drawing with the words Follow the Yellow Brick Road. The yellow road crosses over to the page on the opposite side. The

narrative followed] *The Scarecrow was intelligent & had a brain. The Wizard of Oz was hiding behind a curtain* [Above was a drawing of the Emerald City.] *The Tin man had a heart. The Lion had courage. The wicked witch wasn't as scary or powerful as thought* [above these words were a witch hat and broom.]

MORE MAGIC (*I think I see big lottery winnings for me in the future.*) [These words were on the left page and a drawing of a crystal ball was on the right page. These images of the wizard of Oz, the crystal ball, and the magic wand described earlier, reflect again Barbara's desire for a powerful other who could (even magically) transform her.]

*I felt so ridiculous asking you to shake my hand. Then, I felt even more stupid asking you to go for a walk with me. First, I wasn't sure if it was appropriate for me to ask. Second, I didn't know if you would do it. I guess that's the risk one takes in a relationship.*

*And then you walked with me. Not once, but several times. You didn't disappear. You didn't change into a scary monster. I didn't die.*

[I remember having a sense of these actions being very important for Barbara but feeling uncertain about bending the frame of therapy. Shaking her hand and going for a walk seemed to be crucial bridge experiences that would link Barbara's internal world, the therapeutic process and relationship, and the external world.]

*Now, I can barely remember what I was thinking about before we walked. I know I didn't think I could do it. I thought I'd be so overwhelmed by feelings and VOICES. But we did it.*

*First, it was to the corner. We sat on the bench. Unfortunately, there was a lot of noise and a lot of people around. It was very chaotic.*

*Next, we walked on the bridge to get to the other side.—Both figuratively and literally.*

*I felt anxious walking so far with you. I tried very hard not be overwhelmed. I know I am safe with you and knew that I'd be safe 'outside' walking with you. And each time we walked, it got easier. So much so that we walked when I was 'blinded'* [Barbara had asked to be blindfolded for one of our walks. This reminded me of trust exercises I had learned years earlier. When being in the outside world grew easier and Barbara felt safe, she was willing to bring the blinded part of herself into life beyond therapy. She grew to appreciate and embrace

the importance of putting her experience into words, even though the process was excruciating more often than not.]

*I find it difficult to put into words what the experience was like (I guess that's not a revelation.) Of course, I'll try to explain because it is important.*

*Because of all we have been through, I knew I would be alright. I knew you would keep me as safe as possible. I have always had the utmost respect for who you are as a person and a therapist. You made the walk so much easier.*

*Even within the walk itself, you were so protective, so caring. I appreciated learning to be close & safe with someone.*

#### SO—NOW WHAT?

[Large words on a single page; Barbara often asked me this question.]

[On the next page was a door. When opened, on the other side were the bands of color of a rainbow. Barbara had said to me at one point in our work that she felt her world was changing from black and white to color and she used the image of when Dorothy opens the door in OZ and the world is in color.]

*As I write, I'm reminded of the ending of the movie 'Back to the Future Part III.' The characters have been going back to the Past and forward to the future.* [Interesting parallel as Barbara had been moving between past, present and future in the course of therapy.] Of course there are consequences to their time travels but the Dr. sums it all up saying ...

*'Your future hasn't been written yet and no one's has. Your future is whatever you make it so make it a Good One.'*

[A postcard of the city where we were meeting was on the following page.]

*Well? What else can I say?*

*Thank you for the years of support. Thank you for being with me and helping me feel safe. Thank you for helping me to feel and to cry when I needed. Thank you for being positive when it was the last thing in the world I wanted to hear. Thank you for putting it back on me when I wanted you to give me the answer. Thank you for working so hard. Thank you for the quietness. Thank you for*

*being so patient, understanding, caring and soft.*  
 [Interesting associations here as Bollas notes the psyche and soma experiences of mother that help to integrate the self.] *Thank you for not letting me get away with anything. Thank you for being clear and direct. Thank you for being there so many times when I needed you. Thank you for—letting me talk about my left/right side.*

*letting me speak in terms of pictures.*

*not laughing at my drawings.*

*proof reading my stuff (I was so scared to let you.)* [She asked me to proofread some letters she had written when applying for a job.]

*reminding me of God when I've been so angry.*

*Thank you for—*

*touching me.*

*Trying to understand me & what I'm all about.*

*making me use words* [She crossed out this phrase and wrote] *I mean encouraging me to put words to my feelings in order to get them out.* [The contrast between the characterization of making her and encouraging her reflects some of the ambivalence of her experience of me and herself in the process of therapy.]

*Thank you for accepting and respecting who I was, who I am, and who I will be. Especially, the many many times I could not, and will not be able to. I have experienced such a great relief being in your company. No Judgment Just Understanding.*

*I don't want to stop writing because that would mean I'd have to face*

THE END

*But not just yet. I am having a difficult time with this. Most of all—I thank you for helping me to save my life. The journey has been most treacherous and as you know, at times, unbearable.*

*I am sad that you are leaving.*

*I will miss you.*

*I thank God for the time we shared.*

*I thank you for walking with me!*

GOODBYE

## EPILOGUE

Barbara's experience of transformation was unique to her, but the echoes of the background narrative are familiar to all who struggle in the journey toward wholeness. I was and am very moved by Barbara's courage, perseverance, and belief that a more whole, full life was possible for her and was worth the pain of getting there. As a result of living in a fallen,

broken world, we all begin life in the shadow of the object, as the influence of early experiences is internalized. Through internalized early life experiences, the unthought known is expressed as a wordless set of internal laws that govern and color our expectations and experiences of the world. The unthought known is also expressed through self states, how we treat ourselves, and in important life choices we make. We continue to long for and seek transformation as time goes on. Bollas states: "Transformational-object-seeking is an endless memorial search for something in the future that resides in the past. I believe that if we investigate many types of object relating we will discover that the subject is seeking the *Transformational Object* and aspiring to be matched in symbiotic harmony within an aesthetic frame that promises to metamorphose the self" (p. 40, capitalization and emphasis added).

I believe that the search for transformation, whether through therapy or other relational encounters, is the search for the Divine. The experience of mother or significant caretakers can foreshadow or overshadow who we were created to be, who we are, and who we will become. As empirical data suggests, our image and experience of God is shaped by early life experience (Brokaw & Edwards, 1994; Hall, Brokaw, Edwards & Pike, 1998; Rizzuto, 1979; Tisdale et al., 1997), but we need not be held hostage to these early images. We, and they, can be transformed. This is the hope and promise of faith.

Transformation happens through encounter. Benner (1998) relates the work of Buber (1970) in his classic *I and Thou* to the experience in analytic psychotherapy. The analyst has the opportunity to enter into a dialogue, an encounter, with the patient in such a way that transformation occurs for both people. Embracing the reality of the healing presence and nature of God, the mystical nature of the healing moment (referred to by Stern and others as the moment of meeting and by Bollas as the aesthetic moment), patient and analyst collaborate with God in the healing, redemptive process. The analyst is only a faint echo, a glimmer, of the true Transformational Object; but as harm and healing are both relationally mediated, the analyst can choose to be a humble and willing participant in the healing encounter. Through healing encounters, the shadow of the almighty falls on the analyst as well as the patient and transforms the wordless, though powerful, imprint left by the shadow of the object. During the time of our work together, Barbara's views of



herself, of God and others made significant shifts to more life-giving images and experiences (although not entirely transformed as the narrative attests.)

In describing his analytic work, Bollas stated, "My daily frame of mind is akin to a meditative state" (p. 10). I believe he did not mean a contemplatively religious meditative state, but this particular application can be made. The opportunity for the analyst to perceive and move in harmony with the Divine spirit (an extension of what Bollas calls the spirit of the object) opens up new vistas of healing for both analyst and patient. Although my work with Barbara began 10 and ended 5 years ago, memories of our work evoke in me a sense of awe at God's mercy, of deep respect for Barbara, and a profound belief in the sacred ground and space of the consulting room.

This reflection of transformation seems to be evident in Barbara's journey. Although painstakingly slow and excruciating at times, she was able to experience aesthetic moments, internalize a transformational process, translate her experience into words and transcend the therapeutic dyad and join the human village. She emerged from the process no longer a prisoner of the wordless internal set of laws laid down from her early life experiences. Along the way, God became identified as a source of her answered prayers for help. The human and the Divine were made more real through encounter.

This intermingling of the secular and sacred theoretical and theological considerations is a new and different type of conversation that has emerged in the last several years in this area of the literature. Hopefully the opportunity for this dialogue will continue to grow. Black's (2006) recent work suggests significant promise for the future as he envisions a collaborative rather than a competitive relationship between psychoanalysis and religious experience. Perhaps in the future, the long shadow cast over religious experience by Freud may be lifted to reveal a place of shade.

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