

The psychoanalytic approach to adulthood, and this central aspect of it, gender identity, resides essentially in the developmental mode of "exploring the mystery". Laura's many attempts at "solving the riddle", or "unearthing the secrets", simply produced more and more objects for identification, ones which ultimately let her down or misled her. In the course of her painful struggles in therapy her infantile search for secrets gave way to a more adult sense of the mysterious process of introjective identification. The "Pilgrim's Progress" dream summed up the way in which her pseudo-maturity, in place from early years, had yielded to a capacity to experience her "storm-tossed" self as the self, too, of a needy infant. This infant-Laura's frozen development, as she "sailed", or perhaps skated, across the surface of life, was eventually able to begin to thaw and, in the pain of her depressive anxiety, to emerge into the light and sunshine of possible future growth.

Notes

1. Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode".
2. Roszika Parker, *Torn in Two*, *op. cit.*
3. I am drawing on the work of Meg Harris Williams who elaborates this distinction in the context of creative writers, "Knowing the mystery: against reductionism", *Encounter*, (1), June 1986.
4. The case material that follows is, in large part, drawn from an article of my own first published in 1989. "Gender identity fifty years on from Freud", *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 381-389.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"The later years"

"It is never too late to become the person you might have been"

George Eliot

George Eliot's optimistic words seem particularly fitting for the age group in question. "It is never too late ..." This concluding chapter will echo and reiterate the main themes of the book. The tune is essentially the same; only the key is different. Development, at whatever age, is founded in the capacity to go on engaging with the meaning of experience with imagination, courage and integrity. Freud's exhortation that "one must try to learn something from every experience" remains as true in the last part of life as it has ever been.¹

These pages have traced the extraordinarily complex tangle of threads or forces, internal and external, which bear on one person's capacity to develop and grow psychologically, or bear on another's to put development into abeyance, either arresting creative potential or diverting it to purposes that will run counter to the best interests of the personality as a whole. Turning now to the later

years, I want to pick up the same threads, to ravel them a little further, and then to weave them into a more complete picture which will take on its own distinctive shape and colouring.

By the age of fifty or so a person might be regarded, and be able to regard himself, as being "grown up". Yet it is often during the last decades of life that the capacity to sustain a mature state of mind is most severely tested. The question of whether or not it is possible to continue to develop remains as challenging as ever. But there is an essential difference between this period and the earlier phases of life. For the mental and emotional preoccupations related to physical decline, and to the fact that death itself is becoming more imminent, now have their own particular weighting. The extent to which these additional, and major, considerations spur, threaten or arrest emotional growth will very much depend on how securely an adult state of mind has been established in earlier decades. It will depend on the relative success or failure of previous struggles with separation and loss, in relation to mourning, absence, guilt or disappointment. It will depend, in other words, on a person's experience of bearing pain from the very first (see Chapter 4), and on the degree of integration already established between different parts of the self.

For at this point in life there may be many external losses to be faced: elderly parents may be ill or dying, and perhaps friends too. Children will be leaving home, or may already have left. For some redundancy can threaten. For others retirement will be in sight. But a fundamental psychic change, at once internal and also related to external circumstances, is beginning to occur: the contemplating of one's own death. Metaphorically, as literally, the prospect of death is the ultimate test of all efforts to come to terms with loss and to undergo the pain of experience—to suffer that experience rather than to evade it by defensive measures of conduct or of character. Here we are brought back full circle to the infant's early experience. The good, "thinking" breast can modulate the infant's primary fear that he is dying. It can modulate it if the infant feels sufficiently understood in the relationship with his mother/parents and, as a consequence, can take back into himself a tolerable and, as Bion put it, "growth-stimulating part of the personality" (1962b, p. 96). It is the "growth-stimulating" aspect of the experience which, if it is enjoyed sufficiently often, instils in the baby the sense of a self-that-

can-endure-setbacks-and-loss. This is someone who is not afraid to advance psychically, to let redundant parts of the self go, to be separate as well as dependent, to have the courage to be different and to be honestly himself or herself.

A gratifying early experience with the mother stands the baby in good stead for negotiating the first major developmental hurdle, described by Klein (1935, 1945) as the depressive position. As we have seen (Chapters 1 and 5), Klein suggested that in this state of mind the well-supported infant, despite feelings of abandonment and rage, is able to begin to integrate his hitherto split and polarized view of the world. The excesses of love and hate can be modified. The capacity for ambivalence can be achieved. The person towards whom the loving feelings are directed, and the person towards whom the hating feelings are directed are no longer experienced in extreme terms as two different people, as the wicked witch and the fairy godmother, but as the same person, one who sometimes fulfils and sometimes frustrates. That person can be seen as a bit more ordinary. She can be felt to be in proportion. Thereafter this cluster of relationships, anxieties and defences is encountered in a myriad of ways. All pose the same basic question: can emotional experience be engaged with or does it have to be fended off?

Klein (1940, 1955) saw this alternative as a matter of psychic life or of psychic death. Elliott Jaques (1965) sums up her position:

... under conditions of prevailing love, the good and bad objects can in some measure be synthesised, the ego becomes more integrated, and hope for the re-establishment of the good object is experienced; the accompanying overcoming of grief and regaining of security is the infantile equivalent of having a notion of life.

Under conditions of prevailing persecution, however, the working through of the depressive position will be to a greater or lesser extent, inhibited; reparation and synthesis fail; and the inner world is unconsciously felt to contain the persecuting and annihilating devoured and destroyed bad breast, the ego itself feeling in bits. The chaotic internal situation experienced is the infant's equivalent of the notion of death. [p. 507]

The capacity to develop is very much dependent, as we have seen, on the different degrees to which it is possible to tolerate frustration and absence. A person will be able to face up to, and undergo,

middle and old age in-so-far as it has been possible, all along, to embrace the complexity of his experience and to integrate the painful with the pleasurable, rather than to seek to avoid, or to deny the hard bits and to clutch onto the "right to be happy". "The right to be happy" echoes, faintly, the American Declaration of Independence, but it also expresses something very specific to the pressures of contemporary culture. Such pressures tend to militate against endurance and to encourage indulgence in its place, thus making it all the harder to struggle with the challenges of this period of life.

If a person lacks an internal container of feeling, one that is sturdy enough to withstand new or renewed challenges to his peace of mind and sense of self, he may have recourse to earlier patterns of functioning, ones mobilized in the service of avoiding pain. The pain may now be that of actual bereavement and loneliness, or it may be associated with the many losses that will, at this later stage, shadow normal life: loss of opportunities, for example, or of health and vigour, of political and professional ideals, of procreativity, sexual potency, marriage, physical prowess and appearance, the presence and support of parents, the presence and support of children.

In the face of these difficulties it is to be expected that people will seek ways of protecting themselves from the immediacy of the impact. They will take defensive measures in order to lessen their psychic and physical discomfort. Some will revert to behaviour which seems typically infantile or adolescent, altering their attitudes and activities in order to try to alleviate internal stresses and conflicts which are felt to be intolerable. Others will adopt modes of cautious withdrawal, or lapse into obsessional tendencies, apparently settling back into a state of mind more characteristic of the latency years than of adulthood, in the attempt to avoid further struggle. Under the new pressures of the particular problems of later life, a person may go back and take up permanent residence in one of these earlier states. Equally, he may move between one such state and the state which is more appropriate to his age. But there is one other possibility. He may be able to resist the pull of these earlier modes of functioning and find himself able to bear the emotional burdens and thus progress into some new, and perhaps as yet little-experienced, adult state of mind.

At this stage, as in earlier years, there is an intimate relationship

between the particular practical and emotional tasks which people are facing and the states of mind in which those tasks are being undertaken. Although, even now, the development of the personality is not in any simple way bound to chronology, there are, nonetheless, likely to be certain areas of responsibility which specifically belong to these years and which require a sustained capacity to maintain an adult view of the world, despite contending pressures. In the care of others, elderly parents may have started to take the place of young children. But the young children may simply have become old "children", and also still need care, especially when employment is hard to find and housing is limited. Or these children may now have their own children and look to grandparents for support. At the same time the work responsibilities of someone in these later years are likely to be especially arduous. These demands may mount even as social and family duties and ties become more exacting. All this is being undertaken as energy is beginning to diminish, enthusiasm possibly to wane, or illness to threaten.

Yet now, as ever, for those who have the capacity to learn, the passing of years certainly grants more time further to integrate their life experiences. For those who have not found it easy to let their experience teach them, the many regressive possibilities may beckon. Wordsworth's poem, "We Are Seven", contrasts the "wisdom" of the young child with the bewilderment of the adult:

A simple child, dear brother Jim,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death? [ll. 1-4]

The source of wisdom in the eight-year-old cottage girl is expressed through a touching simplicity of language and rhyme in the few stanzas of the narrative. She is quite unlike her literal-minded interlocutor, who cannot understand how this child can maintain that she is still one of seven siblings, despite the deaths of her other six brothers and sisters. He cannot comprehend her capacity to keep these little friends alive in her mind, as internal presences to whom she sings and with whom she holds conversation. She keeps the lost figures alive internally as continuing sources of strength and comfort:

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
 Their spirits are in heaven!"
 Twas throwing words away; for still
 The little Maid would have her will,
 And said, "Nay, we are seven!" [ll. 65-69]

The Wordsworth character, stuck in a pedantic, quantifying state of mind, was neither able to grasp the nature of psychic reality, nor to open himself to the unfamiliar nature of another's internal experience: in this case, what, to him, might have been the unthinkable grief of the kinds of losses which this little girl had already sustained. And yet the very writing of the poem is an expression of an acknowledgement of intimations and aspirations towards a way of being and understanding becoming available to the poet/self.

By this stage the various individual ways of evading pain which have been adopted in the past will, with the passing of time, have taken on the appearance of character. It may become tempting to describe a person, in broad terms as, for example, shallowing-out, or as giving-up, or giving-in; as trying to bypass the ageing process, or even to deny it. Each of these responses may give sad testimony to how much more has been learnt from the forces which impede development than from those which promote it. They may point to a predominantly passive and depressed mood in some people, one of feeling that life has let them down, or has disappointed them; that circumstances have defeated them. Yet these same responses may also describe something else, something which is clear in the examples which follow: that is, that early unresolved experiences of loss may have cast a long shadow over the development of the personality. The sense of failure, or the fear of failure, may stretch far across the years, but the underlying anxieties and inhibitions can, with courage, still become available to be thought about. The fear of suffering may be worse than the suffering itself. If sadness and loss overwhelm, the older personality finds its own ways of managing. They may, perhaps, be different ways from those of earlier years, but nonetheless be ones that are related to the same psychic choice, namely, whether the pain is to be evaded, or whether it can be modified, or modulated; whether the primary impulse is to try to get rid of the pain and avoid engaging with it, or to hold it mentally and to try to process it internally.

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Two brief examples clarify the links between early difficulties and the very diverse ways in which they may be engaged with many years later. Mr Smith and Mrs Crawford both came for psychotherapy in their sixties. The reasons for referral were superficially very different but there turned out to be some important features in common, relating to early bereavement. Mr Smith was feeling guilty and demoralized. As he approached retirement, he was finding himself to be uncharacteristically irascible, indecisive, anxious and, to him more worrying, sexually interested in younger women. For the first time, he found himself preoccupied by his own fitness and physical appearance. He had spent a not very successful working life in middle-management and had always felt a "bit of a failure". He had left school with few qualifications, having always found it hard, as he put it, to "take anything in". He had joined a gang of "bad boys" and had been drawn into delinquent activities (mainly minor arson and car theft) and had wasted many hours of study-time in slot-machine arcades. His work life, too, had involved a series of minor deceits and "scams", but he had managed not to be found out.

It is not unusual for retirement to raise a degree of depressive anxiety, and with it a risk of character deterioration as if, without the routine of work to provide some kind of external, holding structure, internal integration is threatened. For those who lack their own internal sources of creative and imaginative activity, the pattern of the work-world may long have provided a serviceable carapace. But when well-established habits have to be broken, and the companionship of fellow-workers is not available, the absence of any other direction or meaning may become painfully evident.

The measures taken to evade the unwanted feelings, whether ones of demoralization, failure, emptiness, pointlessness, envy, or meaninglessness, are also familiar. In a culture where the young and beautiful are so highly valued and the old are accorded so little interest or respect, many, like Mr Smith, succumb to the impulse to join the race against time, seeking to beat the ageing body by trying to remain young and vigorous.

But the particularity of any single experience is in danger of getting lost in these generalizations. In Mr Smith, for example, there

seemed to be an area of pain beyond the recognizable ones of ageing, a pain which was very hard to reach. His therapist at times glimpsed a quality of intensity and passion which stood out from his more usual flat and somewhat clichéd presentation of himself and of his life. There was a sense, which began to gather definition especially in his dreams, that somehow his personality had "thinned out", as if, early in life, he had settled for a safe and rather dull way of being, perhaps in order to avoid something that might otherwise have been experienced as too disruptive, something which could not be integrated into his personality as he knew it.

When Mr Smith was a child his father had died in an accident and he, the son, could remember very little about him. However, he conveyed a feeling to his therapist of something akin to irreparable loss. As time went on and Mr Smith established an increasingly trusting relationship with his therapist, he began to remember more details of his childhood. His father had been a garage mechanic and, as a boy of seven or eight, Mr Smith used to go to watch him mend the cars. He also spoke of an old shed in his parents' garden at home, a shed full of tools and old bits of engine, where he and his father used to potter together at weekends for hours on end. There were two other intensely shared joys: lighting and stoking bonfires, and playing on the old slot-machines which were collected in his father's attic. As more details emerged and the accounts acquired texture, colour and specificity, the sense of the passion of this shared intimacy between father and son was very palpable. Mr Smith's demeanour changed, and his language took on life and vigour as he remembered more and more of these happy times, a sort of Garden of Eden, from which he had found himself forever banished.

One day a piece of heavy lifting-equipment had failed and his father had been crushed. A few weeks later his mother had married his father's partner from the garage, and a few months after that a baby sister was born. It was many years before Mr Smith allowed himself to take in the possibility that his mother might have been having an affair with his father's partner before the death. With that marriage everything changed. The garden shed was locked and pronounced "out of bounds", as was the attic. The bonfire site was turfed over. Mr Smith was not taken to the funeral nor was he allowed to speak of his father thereafter. Not surprisingly, it was then that trouble started at school. His main memory of his mother

at that time, was of being nagged about his poor performance, of being told that he used to be such a bright little boy, top of the class; why didn't he try anymore? Why had he gone so stupid?

Though extreme, Mr Smith's suffering is on a continuum with that of many children whose experiences of loss or bereavement, whether apparently trivial or obviously catastrophic, have not been properly registered or, worse, have been denied or ignored. The inability to attend to her son's pain by Mr Smith's mother may well have been rooted in her own, unspoken, unhappiness. But it also suggests that there may have been little opportunity, even before the accident, for him to share, and, in the process, to understand, the reality of his own emotional life, at least in relation to his mother.

It seemed that the intensity of his grief at his father's death, and of his rage at his mother and the new family, had necessitated his turning away from life, suspending his feeling and receptive self, and giving up on the robust and lively little boy. He remembered overhearing his mother saying to a neighbour that her son had "got over the death quite well". The only obvious and eloquent clues to the contrary were manifest in the particularity of his delinquent enterprises: arson, car theft and the near-addiction to slot-machines. Later he had settled into an unimaginative, hum-drum routine which passed for a life: getting through the years with no particular intimacy, joy or interest; on the whole disengaged. He had supported a wife and children but they seemed to have afforded him little real pleasure. It was family "life" only in the most empty and conventional sense.

What now began to emerge was the extent of his guilt: both irrational guilt about his father's actual death ("I used to think, 'If I'd been there I might have saved him'"), and also intense remorse about having allowed his father's memory to have been excised quite so swiftly and comprehensively from the family narrative, and, albeit more slowly, from his own mind and heart. Why had he colluded with the deceit and denial on which the new marriage had seemed to be based? He even began to wonder about whether the "accident" was more sinister than it had appeared. A further source of guilt also emerged: that his hunger for his father's time might have separated his parents, thereby bringing about what he was convinced was the "extra-marital affair" in the first place.

It became clear that the prospect of retirement, and all the

attendant losses, was again stirring these old, unresolved issues. It was confronting Mr Smith not only with the reality of his own death, but also with some of the hating and destructive feelings which, hitherto, he had hardly recognized in himself. This crisis required emotional capacities which he had never had the opportunity to develop. He had spent his life making sure that he did not encounter the rage, despair and chaos within. Mentally and emotionally he had hardly developed beyond the latency boy he was when his father had died. As the "amnesia" slowly lifted and some of these feelings were thought about and engaged with in the sessions, Mr Smith, with enormous pain, embarked on a major, and long-postponed, task.

Jaques (1965) described such a task as "Working through again the infantile experience of loss and of grief [which] gives an increase in confidence in one's capacity to love and mourn what has been lost and what is past, rather than to hate and feel persecuted about it. We can begin to mourn our own eventual death" (p. 512). In so doing, one may truly establish a capacity to tolerate one's shortcomings and destructiveness. In Mrs Crawford's early childhood there was a not dissimilar tragedy, although she had found very different ways to manage it. She had always been aware that her life had been fundamentally affected by the death of her older brother, when she herself was eight. This brother had, apparently, been a golden boy, the sort of child whom Wordsworth describes in the poem "Michael" as one who,

more than other gifts,
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts. [ll. 54-55]

This child died under anaesthetic in the course of a minor operation. His parents' grief was irrecoverable. The father became alcoholic and the mother manic and brittle, forever preoccupied with minor and imagined illnesses, suffering constant migraines and filling her life with meaningless tasks. Mrs Crawford, the only remaining child, felt that despite being doomed to fail, she must somehow try to live up to her brother's memory. The parents had removed all traces of their son's existence from the house, and never spoke of him. Their experience had been, literally, unbearable.

As so often in families where a child has died, as a little girl Mrs Crawford's response to her sense of her parents' grief was to try to fulfil what she took to be their wishes. Ever aware of her brother's

"ghost", she had vainly sought to measure up to what she imagined he was in her parents' minds. Subsequently, as an adult, she had quite consciously become as successful as she could possibly be. She had supported her husband and run "a very nice and efficient home", as she put it. She had brought up four children while working as a ward-sister in a busy local hospital. She conducted an extremely full and committed life, constantly "on the go", and preoccupied with a number of "lame ducks", as well as charitable works which extended well beyond her professional role. She had little time for reflection and none for any more challenging concern about her life's predicament. It was her hypochondria which finally prompted her doctor to suggest that she seek psychotherapeutic help. The recurrent bouts of acute fear of life-threatening disease (usually cancer) were of many years standing. At sixty she found herself unhappily married, increasingly anxious and suffering from a number of quite worrying symptoms, none of which turned out to have any organic foundation. If anything, she was now busier than ever and it was hard for her to contemplate making the time for the psychotherapy sessions which were suggested to her.

To begin with, in the therapy sessions, her manner was very matter-of-fact, brusque, a little hard and rather superficial. But as time went on what emerged, with unexpected ferocity, was the extent of her rage with a mother who had not been able to cope with her son's death. With that calamity Mrs Crawford felt that she herself had lost not only her brother, but her parents too. She described how insidiously her mother's incapacity to recover from the death had also infected her, as a little girl, indeed how it had blighted her whole life. The hypochondria had become her problem too. Without the opportunity to engage, at the time, with what this actual death had meant, she had busied herself with "managing" illness and death elsewhere, defensively, in order to avoid engaging with the impossible task that needed to be undertaken within.

In one session she recounted a childhood fear, dating from around the age of eight, when she had seen the film *King Kong*. She had long after remained terrified lest King Kong come and take her in his grip and carry her away. On one level this memory would seem to describe anxieties, unmodified by parental understanding, about being "carried away" like her brother. But in the session it immediately evoked a recent dream:

she was employed in the hospital, not as a nurse, but as some kind of engineer whose job it was to manage the gas leaks. One day there seemed to be a danger of a terrible explosion taking place. She was very worried that such an explosion would ruin the paintwork.

In discussion of the dream it became clear that Mrs Crawford felt that her "life's job" had been one of "managing the leaks", keeping the lid on everything lest any real (that is potentially destructive) emotion escape, or be recognized for what it really was. It was as if a rather tyrannical and controlling part of herself had gripped her more vulnerable "victim" self (King Kong's fair maiden, perhaps) and made off with it, leaving her personality bereft of any capacity to take in grief, terror and rage, and to understand their magnitude and their sources. In the dream she did not register the actual danger of mayhem nor of the mutilation of others. She was preoccupied by her concern with the superficialities—"the paintwork". The consequence was that the real impact of catastrophe, in terms of loss of life (dreamt or real) could not be metabolized. Instead, attention to, and concern about, the surfaces—"getting-on", respectability, good-deedishness—had prevailed.

As she began to take in the extent to which, by occupying the role of the perfect wife, worker and mother, she had removed herself from really engaging with the world, Mrs Crawford began to suffer deeply, both in relation to her own life and to her mother's. She allowed herself to be more understanding of her mother's early difficulties and to begin to realize that she could love as well as hate her; that she could appreciate her mother for what she had managed to do, rather than feel constantly aggrieved about what she had not managed to do. What she had not been able to bear in her mother, not surprisingly, were precisely those aspects of herself which she had been trying so hard not to recognize: constant somatic complaints, unnecessary busyness, do-gooding, and the general avoidance of genuine emotional contact. In recognizing some of these characteristics as being part of her own personality, Mrs Crawford was able to develop feelings of sympathy and warmth for her mother and an intense wish to repair their relationship, a wish which she said she could never previously have imagined could be possible.

In each of these two cases an actual bereavement had occurred,

one which, in not having been emotionally digested at the time, had left a dark legacy, stretching far into the lives of the individuals concerned. The suggestion is not that therapy would always necessarily be required to gather up such hidden and unaddressed thoughts and feelings; but more that these cases exemplify the possibility of personality development continuing, or even beginning, in an emotionally containing environment, however late in life. The hardenings and softenings of age may become distinct, but, as these examples show, they are not necessarily irreversible.

A third case, drawing on a single session in the analysis of a sixty-year-old man, offers a more detailed account of how, even in later years, it may be possible for someone to be enabled to begin experiencing himself, and his life, in more meaningful and imaginative ways. Mr Williamson had come to analysis late in life, with a long and successful legal career behind him. He was deliberate in air and, to start with, somewhat formal in thought and bearing. He had always had difficulty in knowing what he felt. He described an emotionally deprived childhood. There seemed to have been little genuine family contact or warmth, rather a series of nannies followed by boarding school at seven. There were only sparse memories of this unhappy time. Mr Williamson's sense of his mother was very vague. There were few recollections of his childhood relationship with her, or of her early decline and death. "I think she just faded out." Nothing seemed to link up. Thoughts did not open the usual doors. Interpretations led nowhere. Lines of enquiry tended to be truncated. Everything, at this point, felt rather stuck.

In the early days of the analysis Mr Williamson struggled to find some point of contact. For a long time he could remember no dreams. But eventually he brought the first of what came to be referred to as "fragment" dreams. They constituted single images, visually vivid and sometimes with a clear "feeling" or "tone" attached. Yet they were puzzling and frustrating for they yielded few associations or reflections.

After many such dreams he brought one particular "fragment" which characteristically constituted a very simple visual statement.

There were a number of pillars of bricks, each about four foot high and very neatly stacked.

The precision of the stacking was the only point of focus or emphasis in the dream. The bricks were of no special *use* like that, it seemed, but so it was—they were arranged in separate piles, very *methodically*; carefully and perfectly stacked. He mentioned the fact that some landscape gardening was in progress at his home at the time, and that there were bricks lying around the garden to build walls which had been designed to “frame” the house. The purpose, he said, was aesthetic rather than practical.

These associative details, albeit very slight, made it possible to reflect on the “fragment” dream in the following way. The brick-stacks could be thought of as over-rigid aspects of mental processes which were not, in that form, available for any lively emotional or practical purpose. As it stood the arrangement was one of apparently pointless precision. The remoteness of the bricks from any useful or aesthetic function was reproduced in the dream-form’s remoteness from any linkage to meaningful thought. Something was missing—the bricks could not, in their present shape and position, be employed in the service of construction—the construction of meaning.

The dream situation perfectly described Mr Williamson’s personal predicament at the time. The brick/thoughts needed to be brought to the analyst in their detached and fragmented form in order for some preliminary shaping to occur so that they could be used for their proper task: a framing of the house/mind such that it could be better “seen”. The sense was that the aesthetic and the functional aspects of the construction of those walls needed to be established as a different *kind* of creative process, before the house itself could be framed, observed, and therefore analytically thought about.

The very fragmentariness of the dream described the process of which it was a part. It initiated the dismantling of the rather rigid and “proper” thought/pillars which had hitherto been useless for any creative linking between the split-off parts of Mr Williamson’s personality. This kind of dismantling made the real difficulties more available for thought. In order to engage with the meaning of the symbolic representations (those of the house/mind) a prior process had to have occurred. That is, a much more rudimentary ordering was necessary on the part of a mind (his analyst’s) which was able to gather up the piecemeal bits, to hold them, and to think about

them in such a way that the bricks were no longer statically fixed in their existing structures. As a result of being internally processed in this way, the bricks could begin to be used for building something useful, of a kind which could become a container of meaning; something which could then become *built into* the structure of his developing personality.

The quality of containment which the analytic process made available to Mr Williamson arose from the unconscious processes underlying the analyst’s capacity to understand his rather fragmentary and formal communications. It is difficult to describe such processes in conceptual language but one way of putting it would be that the dream, and the interpretation of it, occurred within a therapeutic relationship in which hitherto unthinkable aspects of Mr Williamson’s experience had begun to be shaped. In this session, his unconscious experience having been worked upon in the analyst’s mind, he was provided with the wherewithal to “think about” that experience, first of all in the unconscious symbols of the dream thoughts, and then in the more conscious verbalization of those thoughts. As time went on his formality began to slacken, his hard emotional surfaces to soften, and genuine interest, humour and warmth began to come into the sessions and into his life.

In this same way the baby who has had an experience, enough of the time, of a mother who has the internal resources to contain his feelings in this active way, not only has the sense of being integrated and understood, but slowly himself acquires this very capacity to hold, albeit at first temporarily, his own mental state. The exchange between Mr Williamson and his analyst offers a description of what Bion refers to as “container/contained” taking place within the analytic space. It is an example of the mysterious process of symbol-formation, or alpha-function, as it occurs between patient and analyst, and the way in which that process may be re-evoked whatever the chronological age may be. Such processes are those very ones described in the earliest mother/baby encounters.

As a person moves into the later years of his life he may become softer, more forgiving, less envious, more appreciative, better able to accept life, children, job, for what it is, or they are, rather than what they “should”, or “could”, or even “might have been”. “If onlys . . .” can be let go. But he may, by contrast, become increasingly exacting, pompous, ruthless, aggrieved, intellectually dishonest.

These characteristics may all start out as defensive measures, possibly against pangs of envy, or against fear of loss. But they can also present themselves as increasingly unmodifiable and deeply ingrained habits of mind, ones which circumscribe or constrain the likelihood of any further emotional growth. The mechanisms that sustain these respective states of mind remain those which have been discussed all along, projection and introjection. Depending on the balance in any single person between these two tendencies, on their respective strength and intensity in earlier years, and on the nature of past and current pressures, each individual will approach this last part of life very differently equipped to encounter both the inevitable losses involved, and a conception of life to be lived in the setting of approaching death. Some will tend to close themselves off from unfamiliar ways of seeing things, others will embrace new experiences with a willingness to go on learning.

After a long conversation about the importance for children of being helped to mourn the loss of a sibling, one grandmother, speaking on behalf of her recently bereaved little grand-daughter, said, "Well, I still don't think she should be involved in the funeral." The other grandmother responded "Is that what is thought to be best? Tell me more about it." Simple though this latter remark may be, it represents a continuing curiosity, an ongoing quest for knowledge and understanding. Such qualities are powerfully embodied in the poetry of W. B. Yeats's middle and later years. "The Spur", a poem in his last collection, *The Winding Stair*, states the source of the lasting energy in his writing.

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attendance upon my old age,
They were not such a plague when I was young:
What else have I to spur me into song?

For some the "lust and rage" of youth become quiescent, as if a kind of middle-aged "latency" period has set in. But for others, as for Yeats, the ongoing vitality of the personality seems to reside in being able to continue, with honesty and with zest, to acknowledge and address more basic passions, in however different a key. For some, whether it is felt to be infantile or adult, necessary or unseemly, the potential for engagement with such emotions and impulses remains available and contributes further to a still developing sense of self.

In writing of the relationship between poetry and the poet in old age, T. S. Eliot quotes "The Spur" and describes with great clarity a more general distinction between the "man who's capable of experience", and the man who lacks the exceptional "honesty and courage" to be, or to become so. He notes the consequences of that distinction as determining whether a person is able, or unable, to sustain a creative old age. He stresses the importance of continuity between youth and age: if growth is to carry on, experiences of youth have to remain alive. Of certain other poems in *The Winding Stair* Eliot writes that in them

one feels that the most lively and desirable emotions of youth have been preserved to receive their full and due expression in retrospect. For the interesting feelings of age are not just different feelings; they are feelings into which the feelings of youth are integrated. [pp. 258-259]

Eliot has a very acute sense of the hazards, for the creative individual, of growing old. His picture is a stark one. But the dangers he describes—of slipping away from sincerity and into mere respectability, or worse, dishonesty—are ones which are recognizable to many, indeed to anyone who is struggling to preserve his ordinarily creative self:

For a man who is capable of experience finds himself in a different world in every decade of his life; as he sees it with different eyes, the material of his art is continually renewed. But in fact, very few poets have shown this capacity of adaptation to the years. It requires, indeed, an exceptional honesty and courage to face the change. Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity. There is another and even worse temptation: that of becoming dignified, of becoming public figures with only a public existence—coat-racks hung with decorations and distinctions, doing, saying, and even thinking and feeling what they believe the public expects of them. Yeats was not that kind of poet . . . For the young can see him as a poet who in his work remained in the best sense always young, who even in one sense became young as he aged. But the old, unless they are stirred to something of the honesty with oneself expressed in the poetry, will be shocked by the

revelation of what man really is and remains. They will refuse to believe that *they* are like that. [p. 257]

Here, as everywhere in this book, the emphasis is on the capacity, and on the opportunity, to be honest with oneself. In thinking about the later years, the focus has been on whether or not a person can face death as an external fact and destructiveness as an internal one. The reality of actual death throws into sharp perspective the different ways in which someone may have "really" grown up, or may only look as if he has done so. For death also stands as a metaphor for all the other losses in life, ones which may have been feared as seeming too final or too catastrophic and, as a consequence, have been insistently shied away from. (Freud spoke of Life losing "in interest, when the highest stake in the game, life itself, may not be risked".²) Properly engaging with life involves a readiness to face not only mortality itself but the reality of death-dealing blows, both those internal to the self and those which threaten from the external "world of Circumstances", "the Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression" which Keats described (*Letters*, p. 95). The kind of thinking which contributes to someone becoming a person who is "capable of experience", is mind-building. The process involves a struggle between the forces in the self which promote life and hope, ones which enable the personality to find its own shape and to develop and grow, and those forces which pull the self back, out of fear of pain and of the unknown. Even late in life some will still be pushing further open the doorways to new experience; others will be easing those doors shut.

The wonder and infinite complexity of the interlocking of a person's internal and external lives is captured by Keats in the image of the spider's web, and the exquisite ordinariness of the spider spinning:

Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel—the points of leaves or twigs on which the Spider begins her work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting: man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Webb of his Soul and weave a tapestry empyrean. [*Letters*, p. 66]

Keats's image lends metaphorical expression to a number of thoughts—those underlying the ideas which have traced their

way through these pages. The image evokes the sense of freedom and open-mindedness, the capacity not to be bound to the "fine-points" of things but to build on them from inner resources. For each person carries within the potential to develop a personality of richness and depth, the potential to draw from his own experience the essential elements for further growth. Anyone can be distracted from his authentic self. Anyone, too, can construct a unique personal structure of great beauty.

This book has been about the rewards of understanding the meaning of one's experience and about the difficulties of so doing; the difficulties of developing a mind of one's own, of becoming oneself. The process of finding one's own place in the world from one generation to the next needs constant mental and emotional work, from the earliest struggles of the unborn child to those of the final years of life. It involves learning from others without merely becoming like them, and imparting to others without seeking to bind them. It involves conflict, but also opens limitless possibilities. For life need not be a vale of tears but rather is a vale of Soul-making, the process on which is founded the growth of the mind, the development of the personality.

Notes

1. There has been so little published from a psychoanalytic point of view on these later years, that it seems important to point out a few significant texts:
Cohen, N. A. (1982) "On loneliness and the ageing process", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 63: 149–155.
Davenhill, R. (1989) "Working psychotherapeutically with older people", in *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 27–30.
Hildebrand, P. (1982) "Psychotherapy with older patients", *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 55: 19–28.
King, P. H. M. (1980) "The life cycle as indicated by the nature of the transference in the psychoanalysis of the middle-aged and elderly", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 61: 153–160.
Limentani, A. (1995) "Creativity and the third age", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 76: (4) 825–883.
Murray-Parkes, C. (1972) *Bereavement*, London: Tavistock Press.