

The Impossible Toilet

A conversation

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The impossible toilet unfolds as a creative train of thought in a conversation between myself and Debbie. I have known Debbie since we were teenagers at school together and have loved her since I first met her. We are similar in some ways and different like versions of a design. We both grew up in Jewish, academic families, her father a psychoanalyst, mine a medical scientist. We both grew up in London: she in Hampstead, I in the West End. We both work as psychotherapists, however, I trained in Gestalt trained and she in Psychosynthesis. We both lived in Cornwall and London, following each other there and back. When I was twenty I lived in a flat with her and her boyfriend, where we practiced yoga and meditation at half past six every morning. We have always talked well together and meet to enjoy our friendship, finding ourselves able to support each other professionally as well as emotionally.

On this day, we were sitting in the autumn sun at Hampstead Heath engaged in a roving conversation about therapy, Masterson's theories of self, ourselves and the symbolic language of dreams. I had recently been excited by something I discovered in my own dreaming and relayed it to Debbie.

'I was in a room. The room was like a meeting room in a prison; a sort of uncared for institutional room, with greasy grey walls, a table with a cracked grey formica surface and dirty wooden chairs. I and another woman were sitting at the table. There was a man there like a prison guard in a uniform with a peaked cap. He was being mean I felt, because when I asked him if I could go to the toilet, which was through a door behind him, he refused to let me. I was angry with him and felt punished.'

'At that point' I said 'I woke up to find that I really did need the toilet. It then seemed that the man rather than being punitive had been looking after me, not allowing me to do what I wanted in order to protect me from wetting the bed.'

Debbie said *'Quite often something similar happens to me and I dream about toilets. In my dream I need go to the toilet and when I get there am unable to use it for a variety of reasons. I've been through various scenarios from Philippe Starke modernism where I couldn't find the toilet door, to the plushest most gothic environments with huge swathes of red velvet curtain in my search for a functioning toilet. In each case the toilet is impossible to use as it may be too dirty or smelly, already full, leaking dangerously, too tall, or too deep. Last time I tried to go to the toilet in a dream, the toilet was full and overflowing. I tried to go because I needed to and I just couldn't manage it, it was too disgusting. After these dreams I always wake up finding that I really do need to go to the toilet. It seems that I have managed to control myself by creating something impossible.'*

As we talked, Debbie and I felt amazed at the language of our unconscious minds. We considered that the task of stopping ourselves from going to the toilet when asleep involves a physical skill that was learnt at some point in our lives. We thought that each of us in our dreams had created symbols for the parts of ourselves that enabled us to fulfil this task; in my case, a bullying guard and, in Debbie's case, an impossible-to-use toilet. How clever our minds are (we said), creating such pertinent images to represent this function. We surmised

that our individual styles of self-control went beyond toilet functions and that we controlled our impulses in regard to other aspects of our lives in equivalent ways.

Debbie asked *'How does my dreaming of these toilets translate into my life?'* I said *'Gestalt theory considers each aspect of the dream as being a part of the self and has techniques to explore this. You could talk about yourself as a toilet.'*

'Oh, I don't know about that, some of those toilets are revolting, some of them are too disgusting to use.'

"You can start with that: 'I am too disgusting to use.'

"I am too disgusting to use -you can't pee here. I am impossible." And I do try to use them. Last time I tried but the toilet really was too high. Another time, it was so messy, with shit slopping everywhere, I just gave up.'

'Try starting with "I am an impossible toilet."'

We both laughed. *"I am an impossible toilet. I am impossible, so that you don't do something that isn't safe. I stop you from getting into situations you wouldn't want like wetting your bed. I exist to protect you". You know, I think that does apply. I am like that, surrounded by impossible situations that stop me. It's alright for some things where I need to stop myself; however, there are times when I can't take risks because of that. Things just look impossible to me, so I don't try.'*

I said *'I can see that I have surrounded myself with authority figures that stop me and keep me in order. I project my control outside of me and then I resent the controlling figure, just like in the dream. This is also about responsibility and how we manage that.'*

Debbie who had known my parents said that she could see how controlling authority figures were important in my life. She remembered me as a teenager and said that my father fitted this description and it seemed clear why the function of self-regulation became a prison guard for me.

The conversation then went further. We both started to talk about the development of the authentic self and the void; the empty space of life, full of potential. The void can only be filled through our own self-support, our creative and aggressive selves but we have ways of putting the responsibility for doing that elsewhere. Sometimes, rather than being active and responsible I find myself depressed, unmotivated and blaming; wanting someone else to come and get me moving. I behave in a way so that will encourage another person to respond by controlling me, giving me a boundary or spurring and inspiring me to action. It was someone else in my dream who would not let me pee, and I resented them for it and felt that I was being punished; yet what they did was necessary. It was useful to me.

Debbie said that she creates impossible situations which save her from being impulsive and thereby making painful mistakes. Her way of sidestepping the issue of self-responsibility is to be stopped by impossibility and apparently impossible situations beyond her control outside of herself. I noted that in our dreams neither of us had decided by ourselves, that it was not a good idea to go to the toilet then and there. Both of us put the responsibility for self-control outside of ourselves: Debbie created the impossible situation and I created punitive authority.

I said *'Just think, you are so creative and imaginative, if you took this ability back and harnessed it in a different unimaginable way, how wonderful that could be; it could open things up for you.'*

And Debbie said *'if you were to become your own authority and provide your own self-discipline and restraint, according to the needs of your own self, you would own that authority. It would transform your life.'*

The thought of re-identifying these qualities was stimulating.

'So then' we said to each other, *'what is the significance of bladder control and toilet training?'* We imagined that it was at the time in our lives when we learnt how to be responsible for our own excretions that we had developed our methods of control. I wondered whether I had internalised a tyrant because I was smacked or shouted at. Debbie wondered whether she was told that she could not do what she wanted, when she wanted to, so that she faced the dilemma of wanting to pee; if she did she would displease someone important, something she dared not risk as a child. We both wondered whether toilet training was a crucial developmental stage in terms of self-responsibility.

'There is so much in the dreams' we told each other *'it would be interesting to know about others' toilet dreams'*. We said that we could write about this and the idea seemed exciting. We both thought that the layers of personality that can be deduced and uncovered from the simple act of toilet control were endless.

We then lay back and looked at the blue Autumn sky. It was peaceful on Hampstead Heath. People were murmuring in the background; little dogs were playing, children were splashing in the mud, Kenwood house looked as if it was built with icing sugar, and two beautiful swans swam on the lake. All was fine in the world and we were in Utopia.

Later, over a cup of tea, Debbie said *"I could never fly at the moment, now that America is planning invasive action on Afghanistan. It's not safe, the sky is full of missiles and objects flying all over the place; they may bump into each other.'*

I said *'That's not true, the sky is a huge place. Planes aren't going to bump into each other, things aren't just hurtling around like that; it's a big bit of space up there. That's an unreal image you've got.'*

'Yes, and that's how I imagine it. I won't fly now.'

I said *'I think you've just created an impossible-toilet situation'*.

We laughed and drank our tea.

(Edited August 2016)