

IATROGENIC OBSESSION

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It all began one morning in mid-March. I received a telephone call from a high school teacher that had “adopted” me as for adolescentologist and advisor. There was an emerging problem: it was a week since one of the second grade boys was systematically late in getting to school in the morning, by one to two hours. Upon every enquiry for explanations on behalf of the teachers, the boy was evasive and non-cooperative. His family had been informed. The parents were surprised by this fact because the boy’s behaviour at home was never a problem. I was thus asked to meet the boy to clarify the situation and avoid disciplinary measures from the school.

An obsession was engendered by a wise crack during a sexual education program. How much can be said just to water down group-anxiety. Without thinking. Without thinking that traces can be left in a psychologically fragile subject, busy with the researching of his own identity. In the same way that a wisecrack was enough to engender a problem, a simple explanation was enough to smooth it out. Two actions that, taken individually appear trite, but still contain information, suffering, and identity problems. And two actions which were possible because Marco was considered as a person and not as a problem.

Key Words: obsession, identity problem.

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It all began one morning in mid-March. I received a telephone call from a high school teacher that had “adopted” me as for adolescentologist and advisor. There was an emerging problem: it was a week since one of the second grade boys was systematically late in getting to school in the morning, by one to two hours. Upon every enquiry for explanations on behalf of the teachers, the boy was evasive and non-cooperative. His family had been informed. The parents were surprised by this fact because the boy’s behaviour at home was never a problem. I was thus asked to meet the boy to clarify the situation and avoid disciplinary measures from the school.

The following morning I made my way to the School where, in a room near the secretariat, I met the boy. Marco, 15 years old, thin and tall, walked into the room wearing a serious expression behind which inched an angry attitude. He in fact started off by saying through clenched teeth: *“I’m here because I was forced to: otherwise, I wouldn’t have come”*. This was one of those conversational beginnings that I dislike because one has the net sensation of sitting in front of a wall purposely built up to avoid a relational contact other than a visual one, considering that Marco was avoiding my gaze. He was therefore putting himself on the defensive, and I was quite sure that it would be determinedly so up to the bitter end. On the other hand, we both were aware of the reason of the meeting. To avoid a confrontation I did not reply and limited myself to pointing out a chair. He provocatively took two chairs, one of which he used to prop his foot on. What now? Should the rude attitude be pointed out? Should I pretend nothing was wrong? A decision that had to be made in a few seconds. Although I don’t know if it were the right thing to do, to take the provocative meaning of his jest down a peg or two, I did the same thing. He then took his foot off the chair and decided to look me in the face. He was wearing a rather grim expression, daring, as if to say “let’s see what you’re going to do next”. I had put myself in a trap and couldn’t take my foot out now. This would have probably started up a chain of provocations and counter-provocations that would have hollowed out the conversation. I was to remove my foot ten minutes later.

I asked him what his favourite subject was. He put me immediately on guard by replying that he wanted to know the reason for my question. I

replied that I was curious to know what the preferences of an intelligent-looking person could be. He assailed: *“How do you know whether I’m intelligent or not?”*.

“If you aren’t, tell me right off so that I know how I can go about this”, I ventured. He didn’t reply but barely suppressed a smile. After a minute, I got a reply: *“It’s math, OK?”*.

“Now it’s my turn to ask you... why.”

“Because of the precision, it always adds up.”

“Are you also a precise type of person?”

“I’d say so, yes.”

“And does it always all add up to you?”

“In what way?” he asked with suspicion.

And here I made the mistake of treading ground that he didn’t want to tread: *“It’s a week now, that you’re late for school.”* He didn’t reply. I tried again: *“Could there be a problem?”*

He got angry at this and sitting up in his chair he said scornfully: *“There is no problem and if there were, it’s my business. OK?”* Stubbornly I went on: *“What is the reason behind your getting here late?”* He sat back into his chair without saying a word and kept his eyes down, gazing at the fingers of one of his hands. After two minutes of silence he suddenly jumped up and informed me he had to leave. With difficulty I managed to convince him to meet me again after three days. *“I don’t see any reason to,”* he kept repeating. Given my insistence, at the end he agreed he would.

Why had I been trying to clash with him? I asked myself this question later. His hostile attitude had undoubtedly annoyed me. *“How is it that I’m here especially to speak with you and you round in on me?”* This was, I realised later, the recurrent theme in the meeting. I had wanted to show that I could break down the wall by ramming against it with my head and had failed miserably. Now the building up of a therapeutic alliance would be more complicated. Furthermore the therapeutic setting was not the best one could come by. The teachers expected a “report” from the undersigned, a solution that would bring an end to all the various inferences made on Marco’s account. It seemed as though there was a prize contest under way. There were those who backed the theory of there

being a girl he was in love with, who even went on to say he could be involved with a “boyfriend” who envisaged possible drug abuse and so on. I was probably feeling the influence of this pressure: this and the anxiety to know the truth had in some way excessively roused my curiosity and the presumption that I was the one that would wave the winner’s ticket. There was also the pending threat of the disciplinary measures that would be taken against him that put me in a hurry. But, as they say, haste is a bad counsellor. I first had to get to know Marco, his environment and aspirations and only then could I stimulate his resources. The problems would have to be left to the end. We practically had to get started from the beginning again.

When he arrived for our second meeting he appeared meeck. He greeted me with a “Hail” and sat down. I waited for a few minutes thinking that he may have had something to say, but he did not. He kept sitting silently on his chair looking around impatiently. He was waiting for me to talk. During the three days, the late arrivals continued.

He was an only son with good academic efficiency. He considered his relationships with his schoolmates as being very strong and open. He described his relationship with his parents as being good: trust from both with no particular conflicts. In his free time, he enjoyed playing with adventure video games. On Saturday nights, he often met with a group of his friends, who were also keen on doing so, to play on computers together. One of his wishes was to become a computer programmer in the video game sector. It took me more than an hour to get to know this because, as the saying goes, I had to pry the words out of him. I asked him what his favourite games were: “*They’re adventure role games like Tomb Raider.*” The fact that I was acquainted with the game, as I too had played with it, allowed me to have an empathic link with Marco. “What is it that you like about Tomb Raider?” I asked. “*Above all, the curiosity of getting to know what happens on the next level and also because you really get to be part of the game*”. We spoke about video games for a good quarter of an hour. I noticed a great deal more spontaneity in his speech that was getting more fluid by and by. He now appeared to be a different boy, well adjusted to his environment. An overall normal boy. At this point I decided to face the matter that had brought both of us together in the first

place. To no avail, upon each of my even very subtle attempts of bringing up the subject, Marco would retreat into silence. I used Tomb Raider: “Why do you try to discover the secrets of a video game and then you make one up for yourself. Just try and think how you would feel if someone tried to stop you from getting to the end of the game”. I had finally made a dent in the armour: *“If I tell you about it you’d all think I’m crazy.”* “Who would think you’re crazy?” I asked. *“All of you would”*. “The all of us is me,” I added, “and as you know, I’m bound by professional secrecy. You can therefore really be sure that nobody else shall know anything about this.”

There was silence for a few minutes, but I felt that something inside Marco was stirring. *“I have to think about it,”* he said at a certain point and asked whether he could meet me again the following week. *“Can we make that three days?”* I replied. *“OK, we’ll make that three days”*.

I preferred not to insist so that he could have the time to think about it all. A week though might be excessive. I didn’t want to run the risk that time would work against us.

At the following meeting he appeared rather restless. He couldn’t keep still on his chair and appeared to be sitting on a bunch of thorns. He gave the impression of wanting to get rid of a load he couldn’t bear any longer.

There was no need for any preparation, he started speaking spontaneously without looking at me: *“It’s rather a silly issue,”* he said. After a few seconds, he went on: *“Each morning, before coming to school, I feel I’m forced to wait around at a road-crossing.”* He stopped and looked at me. I didn’t reply, but the curious expression on my face led him on. *“I place myself near a traffic light and I have to count fifteen cars.”* An obsession, I thought, but couldn’t understand all the same. I knew the road-crossing, it was quite a busy one. Fifteen cars went by in a minute whereas his delays in the morning at times went up to two hours. What went on in the remaining time?

I put my confusion to him: “It doesn’t add up to me. One or two hours for fifteen cars really sounds like a bit too much to me. It’s a busy road-crossing”.

“Yes” he continued, his head bent, “*but the cars all have to be of a certain model.*” I asked him what model it was. “*Lancia Y*” came his reply. I don’t recall my face expression, but he exclaimed: “*You see, didn’t I tell you it was silly?*” The matter was beginning to unravel but now other questions were beginning to take form. What meaning could that particular car-model have for Marco? I asked him, and he replied in a determined and definite way: “*I don’t know. I have no idea.*” Too determined for it to be true, I thought. He was still hiding something. The mystery was there, hidden in the car-model. I began with a series of different questions that I put to Marco. Had he been involved in an accident with that type of car or had he been a spectator to one? Did he fancy a girl that drove one? I didn’t know what else to think. Each supposition was systematically denied. We were both tired; the conversation had been going on for more than an hour and a half. Three days from then the schools would be closing for Easter holidays, I was due for a ten-day leave and would therefore not see him any more for at least fifteen days.

I therefore fixed an appointment for about twenty days from then, when I would also be returning to the Institute to teach a sexual education program for some of the classes.

I accompanied him to the door. While I was opening it, he suddenly told me that they had also had one of them in their class. “Of what?” I asked, a little carried away by my own thoughts. “*The program*”, he responded.

With the door still half-open, I asked him who had taught it and what had been discussed. It was simply professional curiosity.

“A psychologist was here and she spoke to us of the many aspects of sexuality and also of what happens when the male sexual chromosome is missing.”

It suddenly struck me: “Could it be that?....”

I re-closed the door and asked him exactly what the psychologist had said about the chromosome: “*You get to be a bit effeminate,*” he said with a serious expression. “What do you think about it?” I pressed on. “*It could be that one of my chromosomes is missing.*”

“What makes you think that?”.

“I don’t know, but two of my classmates made a crack saying that maybe the Y chromosome was missing in me. Everybody laughed. I felt pointed out. Maybe they really think so and maybe I look as though it is so as well.”

I invited him to sit down again. I took a piece of paper and giving my notions on genetics a general going-over, I illustrated Turner’s Syndrome so that he could understand that it was impossible that his Y chromosome was missing. It could either be missing in females or in Turner, but certainly not in him. He asked for other explanations that I supplied him with and at the end of it all he appeared cheerful. I re-accompanied him to the door and ensuring him again, I bid him goodbye. In the next few days he stopped being late for school just as suddenly as he had started. After twenty days, a greeting in the hallway was enough to understand that he was well. There were no further meetings. No explanation was given to the teachers and by his choice, neither to his parents that were also reassured on my part.

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A wisecrack, strengthened by the attitude of his classmates, had led Marco to believe that he was missing the Y chromosome. The same chromosome that was fed back into his mind with the passing-by of the Lancia Y by which it was represented. A semantic association had developed into an obsession. Fifteen cars, as was his age. To reveal it all would have perhaps exposed him to ridicule. Why then did he, at a certain point, decide to tell his secret? Obsessions sooner or later become unbearable in that they condition daily life. Marco would not have been able to bear his obsession any longer. He was beginning to be too much at the centre of his schoolmates’, teachers’, and parents’ attention. Would he have been able to keep the tormenting secret up in the face of a disciplinary measure? And what would have come of his parents’ trust in him? These are probably the considerations that led him to confide it all and, by doing so, also taking the opportunity that he would not be made a

fool of owing to professional secrecy.

In the same way that a wisecrack was enough to engender a problem, a simple explanation was enough to smooth it out. Two actions that, taken individually appear trite, but still contain information, suffering, and identity problems.

Riassunto

Iniziò una mattina della metà di Marzo. Ricevetti una telefonata da parte di un professore di una scuola superiore che mi aveva “adottato” come consulente adolescentologo. C’era un problema emergente: un ragazzo di una classe seconda da circa una settimana giungeva a scuola con un sistematico ritardo, a volte un’ora, a volte due ore o poco meno. Ad ogni richiesta dei docenti di spiegazioni il ragazzo si mostrava evasivo e non collaborante. La famiglia era stata informata. I genitori si mostrarono stupiti del fatto anche perché il ragazzo in casa aveva un comportamento che non dava adito a preoccupazioni. Mi venne dunque chiesto di incontrare il ragazzo per chiarire questa situazione anche al fine di evitare provvedimenti disciplinari da parte della scuola.

La mattina seguente dunque mi recai all’istituto dove in un locale attiguo alla segreteria incontrai il ragazzo.

Marco, 15 anni, magro e slanciato entrò nella stanza con un’espressione seria dietro la quale si celava un sentimento di rabbia. Infatti, esordì dicendo a denti stretti “*Sono qui perché mi hanno costretto, altrimenti non sarei venuto*”.

Qui inizia la conoscenza di Marco e della sua storia. La storia di un’osessione ingenerata da una banale battuta durante un corso di educazione sessuale. Un’osessione singolare che però consentiva a Marco di riappropriarsi di un’identità sessuale che stava smarrendo.

Dopo un primo colloquio iniziato in modo sbagliato, essendomi irritato per il suo atteggiamento, in un setting non certo favorevole, stante le pressioni provenienti dai docenti e dai genitori, in seguito l’aver dato spazio a Marco, al suo mondo, ai suoi sogni e valori, accogliendolo come persona e non come un problema, mi consentiva di trovare un canale comunicativo nella sua passione per i videogames e, al tempo stesso, dava a Marco la possibilità di acquistare fiducia nel counsellor e lo portava a rivelare quel segreto che da tempo lo opprimeva e che per vergogna teneva dentro di sé pur pagandone un prezzo elevato in termini di sofferenza.

Come fu sufficiente una battuta ad ingenerare il problema, allo stesso modo una semplice spiegazione lo risolse.

Due atti di per se banali che però racchiudono una persona, una storia, una sofferenza, un lavoro d’identità.

Parole chiave: osessione, identità.