Images of the Lost Mother

Ann Gillespie

As an art therapist working with children who have been taken from abusive situations into local authority care, I am constantly struck by the recurring images of the 'lost mother' that these children produce. The unit in which I work is part of a special project which prepares children for the transition into a new and hopefully permanent family. Often the children have been beaten, sexually abused, left alone and without food, and kept in filthy conditions. All have been severely emotionally abused, yet for many the hope of being magically re-united with their mother some day is never quite extinguished.

All these children have a 'lost' mother. They have to deal not only with her loss, but also with their perceived guilt at being the cause of the separation and the fact that in the eyes of the world she was a bad mother. Some have a small store of realistic memories of her, but many dream of an idol who can do no wrong, and long for the state of blissful union with her which they imagine existed before conflict and deprivation brought about their present misery.

The problems these children are struggling with are expressed in extremely low self-esteem, behaviour which suggests a much older age than their chronological age and, in many, the sense of being shut off, 'frozen' emotionally, empty inside. They are often described as having 'no sense of self'. If these issues are not addressed, future adoptive parents will have to struggle with a desperately unrewarding emptiness, if not an outright rejection of the new 'mother'.

Because of the poor quality of their early relationships, these children usually have a very limited capacity to think and feel about events in their lives, let alone 'come to terms' with the catastrophe of abandonment and the loss of their birth mother.

Art therapy offers an excellent way of helping these children begin to think and feel about their experience of life. Working with visual images, their experiences are allowed to emerge in a spontaneous flow that seems mysteriously unguided by conscious intent. Censorship operates less keenly in image formation than in verbalization, and words are often unsuitable for the complex and ambivalent feelings that stem from experiences which are too painful to describe, or which may have occurred before the child was able to verbalise at all.

Because paint, clay, sand and water are used with the hands, the children are literally 'in touch' with materials which can evoke bodily responses and memories not available to the more conscious forms

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of recall. Playing, painting and creating objects with these materials in the presence of the art therapist can reveal, to them as well as to her, some of the images they hold inside themselves of their lost mother. The lost mother is rarely referred to directly, yet her presence is felt in the many and varied symbols of mother: caves, lakes, boats, containers, houses, furnaces and ovens. In the process of art therapy these images are made, and often destroyed, over and over again, as the children explore this vital issue. In doing so they come closer to an acceptance of the real woman who was their mother, and of themselves as separate and worthwhile.

In the following two accounts, I have chosen contrasting examples of the way children have presented multiple images of their lost mother to me.

Mary

Mary, a tall, thin girl of 13 had not seen her mother since she was 5 years old. Her paintings and clay work reflected the sad and 'messy' fantasy world she lived in. After working with me for 9 months, Mary one day wanted to paint 'something good' to cover up what she thought was an ugly thing she had painted on the wall. She produced a life-size painting of a yellow haired female with pink flesh, a strapless blue party dress and no legs. The picture, although ostensibly of a rag doll she often played with, reminded me of a small picture done at the beginning of her therapy which she had titled 'my real mum going to a party'. Mary accepted my association quite naturally.

As we talked about the dancing, happy party girl and how she 'always' wore a lovely shiny blue dress, Mary began to glimpse the difference between what she had done with her hands and what she knew in her head about her mother. For instance, she knew from a photograph that her mother's hair was brown, not blond, but we both knew that bright yellow, for Mary, meant unqualified 'good'. I was also able to take note of the lifeless appearance and the revealing style of dress, which nevertheless concealed the legs and therefore masked the sexuality which had been the cause of the messy disruption of the family. Because Mary was not asked and did not consciously choose to paint her mother, she did not censor herself, and an image emerged which revealed to her some of her entrenched ideas about her lost mother. I thought she had learnt something of the contradictions when at last she picked up the rag doll and said rather sadly that the painting hadn't quite come out as she had meant it to.

Following this, at my suggestion she made a painting of herself on a piece of paper the same size and pinned it next to the first one. I was surprised when she turned out a painting that was almost a

copy of the first one — except for the colour of the dress. Mary and mother were practically indistinguishable: both looked like rag dolls, legless and lifeless. Mary had all but eliminated the features on this self-portrait, and her own comment was 'She can't breathe, she is dead'.

Mary pointed out that she had made herself look fatter than her mother. She explained that this was not true, for her mother was fatter than her, so she determined to swop over the two persons, changing the names on the top so that she became her mother and her mother became her. Through the months, I had learnt that Mary's perception of fatness was that it was bad — it was the worst insult she could apply. Once she saw she had inadvertently painted herself fat, she transferred it to her mother, who was then no longer the good, dancing idol.

For Mary, this was the first small move away from complete idealisation of her lost mother. However, the changeover of names intensified the impression that Mary's self-representation and that of her mother were enmeshed, and suggested that she had not achieved the establishment of firm self boundaries which should be a part of normal development.

Matt

Matt, who was rejected by his mother immediately he was born and who was eight when we started work, shows that images of the lost mother can take unexpected and unconventional forms. Matt did not produce large numbers of pictures, models and play scenes as Mary did, but endless mess and destruction, loud and aggressive behaviour, and a sure-fire ability to make me want to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

The din created by an angry and frustrated child is not called an image, nor is the time taken to deliberately destroy something, nor are the feelings projected into the therapist. Yet this is what Matt presented to me week after week. At the time it seemed hard to understand them as representing his idea of his lost, rejecting mother. Matt never mentioned her, and it seemed she had hardly existed for him. Any concept of a mother which Matt might hold inside himself must be formed of undifferentiated and unconscious memories centred around need and lack of containment.

In Matt's sessions he burnt things — anything that I would let him and some that I did not. If the chosen object was not destroyed it would be blackened and spoilt. He smashed things, sometimes in pure vandalistic style, sometimes 'by accident': jam jars became fragments in the sandtray, a hammer was wrenched apart, a telephone reduced to splinters. There was no remorse, no fear, not even anger, and each week the room became a disaster zone.

Matt delighted in the fact that I would have to clear up his mess, but he also wanted me to keep the burnt and broken pieces for him, so we accumulated a shelf full of such 'rubbish'. It was obvious that he saw himself as hateful rubbish, but what of his unknown mother? Gradually it became clearer that the growing pile of blackened and broken pieces were adding up to an image that represented not only himself but her too. I was the the receiver of the strongest 'image' of all, as he deposited in me all the feelings of hate, disgust, despair, exhaustion and rejection

that were the main components of his representation of his lost mother.

In this state Matt had almost no chance of relating to a potentially adoptive mother in the future, but the sand, water, candles and other materials which were available within the free but protected therapeutic space made it possible for him to explore these negative states bodily and non-verbally.

It was three years before he was able to begin to let go of this horrifying imagery, to throw away some of the burnt remnants, and at last start to create instead of destroy.

Rebuilding self-esteem

These examples show that, even at a late stage of childhood, the inner representation of the lost mother can still be merged with that of the self. When this is the case children are not able to distinguish themselves as separate entities with firm boundaries, or to develop emotionally with any degree of normality. The fantasised or 'ghost' mother dominates by her absence, and children have no sense of individual worth. Any attempt to rebuild or re-create a sense of self is crucial if there is to be a 'real' child for the adoptive parents to relate to.

Emily is Seven

A Story by Gaie Houston

What is it Desmond Morris said about baboons? They rule by a system of frowns and grimaces. Something like that. Well that's how she's ruled this household, for seven years. And I never saw how I was letting her, even encouraging her. Then one morning, no-one could say why, the fog cleared, the light shone, and I did what in a way you might say she'd been asking for all along. Or did I go too far?

I was sitting there at the table eating my breakfast. The sun was catching my tea where I'd stirred it, and a little jellyfish of light was wobbling from it, up and down the wall. I thought how I could show it to her when she came down. There was a chaffinch on the windowsill, head on one side, trying to browbeat Grandma into putting out the bacon rinds as usual. There was a smell of toast, and soap from morning-washed faces and necks, detergent from clean clothes. John Humphries was turned quite low, telling cheerfully of blockages on the M6. Uncle was rustling a susurrus of corn flakes out of the packet into his bowl. You could not ask for a safer, a friendlier place anywhere on earth.

Then there's this crashing of feet down the stairs. You understand. Nobody has ticked her off or snubbed her, kept her out of the bathroom, done one single thing that might justify a mood. But here she comes, thump against the kitchen door, doing what she does even when she's in a good humour, trying to get the door open before she's turned the door-handle. A sort of tchah and hiss from her; a squeal