Going away

John Denford

John Denford, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst.

Early life: medical education and country general practice in Dunedin, New Zealand. Later training in London, England. Experience in general psychiatric and psychotherapeutic hospitals in London and Dunedin. Particular interests: inpatient psychotherapy, group teaching and therapy, psychotherapy in general practice and hospital practice. Consultant psychotherapist, Shenley Hospital, and The Cassel hospital, Richmond, where later, Medical Director. Medical Co-ordinator, Medical Foundation for the Care of Torture Victims, for two years after leaving the N.H.S. Trustee, Refugee Therapy Centre.

At first after a man has left his home, the old places and people continue to be more active in his mind than the new, often accompanied by intense longings to be reunited with them. But sooner or later he makes friends and becomes involved with the new place. Gradually his interests and preoccupations come to differ from those of the people he left behind. Nevertheless he remains himself – at his mind's core he depends still on the people, experiences and features of his home and of his belonging there, to sustain a secure sense of who and what he is.

After the move, the exile and the people at home continue to develop and change independently, and in time become somewhat disconnected, slightly strange to each other in the same way as happens when a language is transplanted. Such changes occur far less with a place. The hills and countryside and coast remain as before. It is therefore easier for the exile to rely on his memories of place than of people for his emotional sustenance, and as a consequence he becomes more aware of the other-than-human aspects of his earlier world.

But places can differ so profoundly that it is no longer possible to have certain sorts of experiences of place at all. Such deprivations and losses inevitably increase awareness of the non-human world, both the old and the new. Finally, the exile's memories of home, people and places come into relation with the new. Going away then is an important act in relation to both people and place but it often results in one's becoming more aware of the country left behind, and subsequent personality development may increase awareness of, and dependence on, the non-human aspects of earlier life for a significant part of one's continuing sense of identity. Exile tends to increase consciousness of relationships with that environment having developed in parallel with those with people, and having been an equally important, though perhaps unrecognised, aspect of experience, from earliest years.

When he was 36, 10 years earlier, X had left the at the time still rather remote Commonwealth country where he had been born, and had come to London to further his academic career. Until then he had lived in the town where he was born and educated, in close association with a large well-

established gregarious family in which he was an admired only son. His father was a lovable but domineering man who had seemed fearsome to X as a small child, but had later shared many of his interests. Mother was a warm person, but anxious, and submissive to father. X felt he had learned to be mildly apprehensive in practical situations and to be dependent on, and wary of, authority figures. In his late twenties he married a wife who was emotionally strong and reliable and they had had two children. Living in a foreign country had brought them closer to each other. Some years later father died suddenly. Mother came to live with them until she too died, several years before X's analysis began.

Although he felt permantely settled in Britain, X thought of himself still as belonging to his country of origin and much of his imaginative and dream life as well as waking thoughts referred to his home country and people. He thought of present experiences 'reaching him through a thick layer of memories'. He said he lived in London in fact, but in his mind, mostly in his home country. Nevertheless he considered himself contented, he was reasonably successful in his teaching and had a small income from writing stories which were always set in his home place.

His father's death saddened and upset him very much. He would have travelled home *for the funeral but could not afford it. He* was surprised by how much he missed him then and was still deeply moved when he thought of him. He had been sad but not as upset when mother died. Since then his feelings about his home country had changed. Although he still felt he belonged there he did not wish to return even to visit. The town where they had lived seemed an empty place with his parents no longer in it. He felt much more about the country than when he had lived there and regretted

chances he had wasted of knowing it better. He tried to do similar things here but the places were second best.

It was in his imaginative life, reflected in his writing and in his day and night dreams that his preoccupations were most obvious. In his analysis he examined in detail memories of the town where he had lived and the beach where his family had a cottage. He was convinced these researches would help him understand better his experience of living. It seemed plain that the feelings he attached to his earlier world had their origins in his family life, in the conflicts and difficulties he had felt there, and that this protracted working over of his memories of places was an integral part of his grieving for the loss of both parents. Although he accepted this interpretation, it seemed easier for him to do it this way. Had he long before acquired the habit of working out his feelings about people in this way, and was there an advantage for him in being able to think in relation to such concrete objective and graspable things? Though he had lost the places, they existed still in his home country and could be regained if he chose, something he could not do with his parents.

The same tension between love and fear in his feelings about father seemed implicit in his behaviour towards his country, both in that he had left it while still insisting he loved it, and in that he had been better able to *feel that love once away. Although he had* come to love his father before he grew up, his death had diminished the force of his ambivalence enough to allow a moderate idealisation to cover it, just as had happened with the country. His fears of authorities came to awareness with other situations and people, but only in dreams could he directly experience the terror that lurked behind his love of his father. For instance, he dreamt that father was hugging him, but his gladness turned to panic as he realized that a pressure

he felt his back was a knife that was being forced into his chest. He struggled desperately awake.

This scene seemed to take place in the dark back room of the cottage where he had slept as a boy, separated from his parents' bedroom only by a thin partition. Aspects of his sexual fantasies in relation to both parents are obvious. He was able to connect such a betrayal or punishment with what he feared from his country and countrymen should he dare to expose himself to their criticism through his writing.

London is a large and stimulating place and offers good opportunities for advancement, but it emerged that he also hoped to escape from inhibiting and threatening influences that originated in his earlier relationships, and from particular responses of compliance and non-assertion that he had used to try to solve the problems created by father, as well as his underlying aggressive reaction to him. Throughout his life, projection of this aggression had caused mildly irrational persecuted responses at times. Such feelings came to the surface in a dramatic way in a series of attacks of uncontrolled anxiety during the course of the analysis. He had quarrels with authorities at his work, with his wife, and was dissatisfied with his analyst. These feelings seemed to reflect reactivated fears about the loss of his father's support by his death. He had feelings of rage for which he could find no reasonable expression. This period of disturbance was brief but proved to be a nodal point in his treatment. Afterwards he appeared to have a better control of his aggression and to be more effectively assertive in his relationship and work.

These episodes of anxiety led to an examination of his dependence on people and things. Everything in England seemed foreign, without the warm home quality that he believed would satisfy and calm him. He began a detailed evocation of those home places, which led to an understanding of their function in his life. In particular the beach holidays, and all that derived from them, had served as an alternative away-from-father world from early childhood, partly because father took some of his holidays elsewhere, partly because everything was freer there. The activities that slowly developed out of that life were a love of energetic sports, of literature and of music. The romanticism in his feelings for the women he had loved also had many connexions with these experiences. The drives towards these activities derived partly from the need to find alternative fields of action in which he could be free of father's influence, but also from the need to express the strong feelings of affection that life with his parents and family generated.

A secure connexion with mother had made these manoeuvres possible in childhood and adolescence, and the basic reliability of her holding seemed the ultimate source of this quality in the country. In adolescence, father's intellectual and musical interests allowed an apparent reconciliation, which continued till his death. Understanding these things led to grieving in which guilt and sadness for having deserted his family and homeland centred on his father's having died without their meeting again. Such feelings and their partial resolution led him to return to his early home for several months. Examination of his experiences there formed the main part of the last year of his analysis.

Connections between people and places

The land of one's birth and early years can play an important role in enabling people to deal constructively with the inevitable generation of negative as well as positive

feelings in early life. Struggles to integrate these feelings – to achieve the translation from the paranoid-schizoid to depressive position (Klein 1952), are central to development in childhood and adolescence. Throughout this time the world apart from people presents itself as a relatively neutral alternative area of action and reaction where all the problems of the human world can be expressed, experienced and worked on in relative freedom; where the consequences are less than real (in the human sense), where one's childish or adolescent weaknesses or limitation do not matter, and where skills of all kinds can be slowly matured. The non-human world can serve this purpose at any stage of a person's development and remains permanently available for 'relief of tension, the fostering of self-realisation, increasing feelings of reality, and as a place for experimentation' (Searles, 1960).

This parallel development through projection, integration and separation as it involves the non-human environment, has been considered in detail by Searles (1960), and can be summarised as follows:

Intimations of meaningfulness investing self or others with intentions and activities in the self towards others, and vice versa, are generated in early relationships and projected onto the non-human world. Such learning initiates processes of psychological separation in conceptions of the world – separation of self from others, people from things, and self from things. An individual's sense of separateness develops in parallel with the increasing complexity of his personality development, as does his sense of individual identity.

Where an individual's maturing is reasonably unfettered, developments in either areas complement, reinforce and enrich each other. If there are serious difficulties or blocks to development in one area, the other may be turned to as an alternative, allowing some satisfactory life but not the mutual enrichment that is normally possible.

Such opportunities are essential if full developments of creative, aesthetic and loving abilities are to be achieved. It is not possible to separate the two (human and non-human) developments. At the very time of adolescence when sexual capacities and the ability to love people are maturing, awareness of the natural world increases, and one begins to love those things in it that were not previously consciously perceived. The complete evolution of these parallel developments is their eventual integration into one coherent whole, where love of things contributes as much to love of people as the reverse. Searles defines a continuing *relatedness* to the non-human environment as the distinguishing characteristic of a mature individual's behaviour. By this he means a proper awareness not only of that environment and of one's connections with it, but of one's own human separateness and differences from it.

Separation

Going away may actually facilitate the experiencing of one's original objects of affection, human or otherwise, as one's possessions and subject to one's own needs. This illusion (because that is what it is), may be reinforced by being the only possessor, the only knower, in the new place, of the old people and things.

William Wordworth (1798), returning to the Wye Valley after a long absence, was able to achieve a synthesis of his love for the place and his love of a woman. Henceforth the natural world is imbued with his feelings about people.

...I have learned to look on nature, not as in the hour of thoughtless youth; but

hearing often times the still sad music of
humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample
power
To chasten and subdue.

But despite all the positive features of such moves it seems likely that there will remain in everyone some awareness of inhibitions deriving from experiences with parents and a wish to escape from them. If any positive going away implies the valuing of the objects that are being abandoned, then as well as a gain to be welcomed, living brings losses that must be borne. In an important sense, the objects are made as if dead, and all the work of grieving first described by Freud (1917) must be done before and after leaving. Like other grieving it is never complete. However long one is away, from time to time, in response to this or that, the process is revived with sadness, regret and feelings of emptiness, and longing for the earlier place and people.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF

EMIGRANTS

It is a common observation that emigrants, particularly those who left to further their careers, often display more than average energy and confidence. Factors contributing to that greater confidence may be:

• Escape from the inhibitions of parents and their derivatives that operated at home. For example the difficulty in being effective as a person where one has been a helpless child, and having to contend with memories of that relative insufficiency. Also the unconscious sexual meanings of being potent where one's parents were before.

• The change of the primary objects to being wholly internal, wholly possessed and integratable and with which one can wholly identify. Because one is the only possessor of them one is imbued with the power and excitement of such possession.

• The rich possibilities of cross-fertilization at abstract or imaginative levels between the original now wholly internalised objects, and the fresh objects of the new world using capacities from the original world, with no inhibiting parental presence.

• One is released to react to the excitement and interests evoked by new people and places, the novelty that stimulates curiosity and the challenges that demand an energetic response. The act of emigration might be understood as having converted the individual's whole world into a privileged 'transitional space' (Winnicott, 1971), where the freedom to be and to develop is not inhibited by the unconscious elements derived from primary experience associated with the incompleteness of the years of childhood.

In London, X had felt some loss of inhibition in that he was somewhat more effective in work and had begun to write, but as an attempted solution of his difficulties, going away had needed to be reinforced by some resolution of his dependency that derived from the non-recognition of his anger. Although he felt easier in his marriage and work after that, it was in his writing that greater freedom was most apparent. There he felt able to join the personal qualities of his memories of his country of origin with the intellectual vigour, sophistication and long literary tradition that exists in England. He combined ideas of his own that were fresh and vigorous with elements that were mature and developed in this culture. He thought that this often happened with creative people.

But on what a delicate tissue of remembered relationships the coherence and effective functioning of the personality depends! The

innocent abroad has launched himself with very slender means. If the attitudes he meets in the new place are merely indifferent then he must, and can, depend upon the warmth of his home objects. But if he is shown hostility, his links with them are severely tested. Indescribably disturbing feelings can be the result of such experiences.

Returning

Coming home after many years, there are many temptations to steer between: to sentimentality – an unreal expectation of reunion with an ideal; to arrogance – to boast of the new place and what one has done there; to regression – so that one becomes as a child again. The returning exile realises how much he denied so that he could leave, and how difficult it was. To return inevitably sets the grieving in motion again, the old tensions arising from his ambivalence, the old hurts; his parents dead now, so no reparation possible there; the failures, shames, embarrassments and trivialities of his past that inevitably attach to the place. There are so many different ways of returning. James Baxter (1958) the New Zealand poet, 'came to the Rock, asking forgiveness', and joined the miseries of his northern experiences with the homely familiars of his Otago life. In his poem 'The Return' he contrasts losing his way 'up North' with the real losses he can experience at home so that he can be 'delivered from a false season, To the natural winter of the heart….' That is, if he has to accept the wastage of his life, it can become bearable if felt alongside the loved things of his childhood places. Then he might feel whole again.

Delivered from a false season
To the natural winter of the heart
One may set foot with the full weight of
man
On shell and stone and seabird's
skeleton

This is a fine statement of the achievement through return, of an integration of the self with the natural world.

Being away had eventually led to an almost complete separation of X's images and memories of home from their origins. They had become 'pure thought' it seemed to him, as a result of grieving. Returning allowed the re-experiencing of these elements in the external world, by their re-projection. The experience of returning was heightened by these projected elements now imbued with the energy of the grieving, i.e. by the complexity of meaning and significance that had come to be attached to them in his thoughts.

X had come to a full awareness of his depressive guilt for having abandoned his objects, so that returning was a reparative act. Reparation consisted of a reunion of himself (and what he felt he contained, now confidently his own), with the representations of the original objects – his remaining family, friends and colleagues, and the place. Here was a symbolic restitution of what he had originally lost but now felt able to relocate with the parents and their derivatives without fear of damage. It was an act of gratitude that in its integrative quality represented a considerable development in his capacity to love.

If going away for good is a manoeuvre whereby the objects become as if dead to one, then returning is in some way cheating. If a grieving process preceded and followed the departure and has apparently reached some sort of end-point of acceptance of the rupture and of a proper taking up of a new life, what are the implications of later re-visits? Psychologically surely, one cannot reverse a death that has been mourned?

The objects have been given up, allowed to be dead. Though such a process of grieving can never be complete and will be revived to

some extent on returning, the return of someone who has really gone for good must be mostly a new departure, a new start and the making of new relationships. He is now mostly an 'away' people coming to a new place though still in part a home person returning. The two must be combined, but now with the objects and experiences of the distant place to link with the home people and places. However, the fact that the objects have been resurrected from a dead place in one's imagination may explain the intense quality of their perception and that their comtemplation is such a moving experience. Such a time may be a period of maximum creative energy. In T.S Eliot's (1948) 'Marina', a father is reunited with a long lost daughter.

> What seas what shores what grey rocks
> and what islands
> What water lapping the bow
> And scent of pine and the wood thrush
> singing through the fog
> What images return
> Oh my daughter.

Fully developed aesthetic responses, which combine formal appreciation of what is beautiful with a realization of the relationship of the loved object to the whole created world must include awareness of one's ambivalence, of one's capacity to harm what one loves and how one has done so. To abandon the people and places one loves, so that they become as if dead, is surely an act for which there will afterwards be

sadness and remorse. The tension between such loving and unloving is a main ingredient of the mature emotional responses to things or people and is especially active on returning.

It is a fundamental feature of the development of one's personality then, gradually to increase the separation of self from objects of all sorts, and movements away from any place where one has settled are important events in that change. But it is also true that the more one separates from the subjects of one's feeling, the more they can become one's own, incorporated in the self but distinct, able to be perceived and loved for themselves, but also more definitely possessions and sources of strength.

Again from Eliot's 'Marina':

> What is this face, less clear and clearer
> The pulse in the arm, less strong and
> stronger–
> Given or lent? More distant than stars
> and
> nearer than the eye...

There is a vast circular movement to be understood; that after long journeys, voyages of separation, one comes back to the original objects, more individual now in oneself, greatly changed but better able to love what was given in the beginning.

Further Reading

Baxter, J.K (1958). The return. In In Fires of no Return. London: Oxford Univ. Press.

Eliot, T.S. (1948). Marina. In Collected poems. London Faber and Faber.

Freud, S. (1917). Mourning and melancholia. S.E. 14.

Klein, M. (1952). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. In Developments in Psycho-Analystis. London: Hogarth, pp. 292-320.

Searles, H. G. (1960). The Non-Human Environment. New York: Int. Univ. Press.

Winnicott, DW (1971). Transitional objects and

Transitional phenonema. In Playing and Reality. London: Tavistock, pp 1-25.

Wordsworth, W. (1798). Lines...above Tintern Abbey. In Poetical Works of Wordworth, ed. Thomas Huntchinson. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950.