REFERENCE TO THE FATHER:

A DREAM AND A LETTER

Nikos Marketos, Psychiatrist-Psychotherapist

nmarketos@gmail.com

Periklis Antoniou photo

As I looked into the void
I saw myself from across the street.
And then I saw in my face
my father
twisted and in despair.

Prologue

The present paper addresses two issues that have long preoccupied psychotherapists of various disciplines. The first is a well-known dream that Freud mentions in the Interpretation of Dreams, entitled "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" The second is a letter written by the writer Franz Kafka, to his father, which never reached its recipient. By retelling the dream and reading the "letter to the father," we focus

on the question of what awakens the dreamer, and on the always-lost encounter with the significant person. The common element of both is that they linger on the father's failure to see or hear what is crucial and fatal for his child. The reference to these two documents is made mainly because of the emotive charge they hold, which might trigger the emergence and exploration of repressed experiences.

"Father, don't you see I'm burning?"

The "*dream of the burning child*," which Freud mentions in his book "Interpretation of Dreams," is one of the most discussed dreams. A heartbreaking dream about paternity, unjust death, oblivion, guilt, and mental survival. This dream invokes the father who is absent and depicts the breakdown of parental functioning.

> *A father had been watching beside his sick child's bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went to the next room to lie down but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it and sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that his child was standing besides his bed, caught him by the arm, and whispered to him reproachfully: "Father, don't you see I am burning?" He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them (Freud, S. 1900).*

There are various interpretations of this dream. According to Freud's earlier theory, dreams are fulfillments of wishes, so the purpose of the dream was to prolong the father's sleep a little more because in the dream his child was still alive.

The dream depicts the fragile father-son bond, the father's responsibility, care, anguish, and pain for every calamity and failure his child suffers while he is absent. When and wherever the father tragically experiences his limit, the son no longer expects his father to support him and realizes that from now on he will expect nothing from him.

Remorse undoubtedly weighs heavily on the father's conscience. Perhaps he did not do enough to prevent the adverse outcome of the illness. We are told that the child had a fever. The old man, whom the father

has engaged to stand at the child's side, is incapable of performing his duty and falls asleep. Could it be that the old man represents the father, who did not rise to the occasion and did not do everything necessary to avoid the inevitable? The appeal, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" might indicate that the child was burning up with fever and that the father could, perhaps, have done something to prevent it.

This ordinary, everyday father who does not see, who never "lives up to the expectations of his work," who lets his child burn, is confronted with the child's burning question, which scorches everything in sight. It reflects the vain human appeal to the Father and even refers to Jesus' cry on the Cross: *Father, why have you abandoned me?* ("*Eli Eli lama savachthani";*).

The primary responsibility of the father is to generously offer his protection to the child.

Aside from the responsibility of the parent, this dream raises other issues for psychotherapy. What is important is for the therapist to rise to the occasion, in order to perceive the client's real trauma and anguish. And what can be the therapist's response to this call, to this despair, to these reproaches that may be valid to a greater or lesser extent? It will be that of a father who **is alert**, who hears the anguish and records it while in the fire.

After all, the dream's purpose is to rise, to awaken. How many times after a session have I been concerned with questions such as: "Did I miss anything really fundamental?" "Did I comprehend the patient's true anguish?" "Am I not good enough for this part of the problem?"

Even if our senses record the burning, we are all in a dream and are hesitant to wake up. The phrase "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" as something that appeals to all of us, connects us to the ineffable character of human coexistence and wakes us. Our responsibility should always be personal (Aser, 2018).

A Letter to the father

Could the "*letter to the father*" be a continuation of the dream, in the sense of the son's reference to a father who did not respond to his emotional needs, who was absent in moments of severe anguish, or, even worse, was critical? A repeated experience of this kind will scar the life of the son, prompting him to turn down his father. A son who has internally turned down the father carries a void that he tries to fill with sublimations and cultivation. The void, however, is never filled. Identity remains suspended and the subject cannot perform his symbolic role.

The Jewish writer Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883[3]. His surname, which means "jackdaw" in Czech, was imposed on the family in the 18th century when it was required by law for all Jewish families to change their Jewish surnames. Franz was the eldest of six children. His two brothers died at a young age, while his three sisters died later in concentration camps.

Franz's father, Hermann, was an affluent textile merchant. He was the son of a poor butcher with six children. He faced many hardships in his early years, but he overcame them through hard work and, most importantly, by having a strong will and desire. As a result, he was able to enter Prague's good society. He never stopped reminding his family of his difficult past, contrasting it to Franz's life. The difficulties he encountered served as his motivation to fight and climb both the financial and social ladder. Using his own suffering as a benchmark for comparison, he believed that his children should be happy. His hard background shaped a tyrannical and irritable character that had an impact on his son's upbringing, which Franz attempted to manage throughout his life with his writings. Franz's father often referred to Franz's inclination towards literature in a dismissive manner.

Franz's mother, Julie, was bourgeois, from a family of textile producers and brewers. She was a loving mother who had grown up surrounded by highly educated people. In her family circle, there were intellectuals, dreamers, and eccentrics, with an inclination toward the adventurous, the exotic, or the strange. Franz found this family to be more appealing. In fact, his father would often remark, "*You are just like Rudolph*," referring to Julie's eccentric brother, who had converted to Catholicism. Although Franz did not recognize any similarity with his uncle, he thought that after having heard it so many times, he had begun resembling him.

At the age of 36, Frans Kafka, who is living alone, writes his father a 103-page letter. The letter opens with the address "Dearest Father" and ends with "Franz". The recipient of this letter never received it.

In this letter, he assigns blame to the person he feels is accountable for his life's course[4]. He states that he has never fully recovered from the fear complexes instilled in him by his father. He can recall certain events from his childhood and adolescence. Franz condemns the father but manages to also defend him

[3]Biographical information and citations from Franz Kafka Letter to the father - Presentation georgia Karvounaki| Literary Circle of Heraklion (logoteckyklos.blogspot.com)

[4] Theodora Scali presents a thorough psychological analysis of the Letter to the Father" in the book presentation, in Issue 18 so that readers may study it.

since, despite his father being authoritarian, he believes that his failure to get over the complexes the father instilled is a result of his own vulnerability.

I am quoting excerpts from the letter here[5].

"Dearest father,

"You asked me recently why I claim to be afraid of you. I did not know as usual, how to answer."

He directs his initial accusation against himself:

"You had worked hard your whole life, sacrificed everything for your children, particularly for me, as a result I lived "like a lord", had complete freedom to study whatever I wanted, knew where my next meal was coming from and therefore had no reason to worry about anything; for this you asked no gratitude, you know how your children show their gratitude, but at least some kind of cooperation, a sign of sympathy.

Instead I would always hide away from you in my room, buried in books, with crazy friends and eccentric ideas.

[...] I put all the responsibilities on you [...] I didn't do anything for you. "

.....

"I was never able to understand your complete obliviousness to the kind of grief and shame you could inflict on me with your words and judgments."

In his letter, he remembers an incident from the first years of his life:

"I was whining persistently for water one night, certainly not because I was thirsty, but in all probability partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself. After a number of fierce threats had

[5]Franz Kafka: Dearest Father Translated by Hannah and Richard Stokes.

failed, you lifted me out of my bed, carried me out onto the pavlache (the Czech word for the long balcony in the inner courtyard of old Prague houses) and left me awhile all alone, standing outside the locked door in my nightshirt. I do not mean to say that this was wrong of you, perhaps at the time there really was no other way of having a peaceful night, but I mention it as a characteristic example of the way you brought me up and the effect it had on me.

This incident almost certainly made me obedient for a time, but it damaged me on the inside.

Years later it still tormented me that this giant man, my father, the ultimate authority, could enter my room at any time and, almost unprovoked, carry me from my bed out to the pavlache, and that I meant so little to him."

.....

"In your armchair, you ruled the world. Your opinion was right, any other was eccentric, meshugge (Yiddish slang for mad), not normal. In fact your self-confidence was so great that you did not even have to be at all consistent, and could still never be wrong. [...] You took on, for me, that enigmatic quality of all tyrants whose right to rule is founded on their identity rather than on reason."

Elsewhere in the letter, he attributes to the father some degree of manipulativeness.

"Your heart condition is at the very least a means by which you dominate more absolutely, as the mere thought of it is enough to stifle any contradiction."

Later in his letter, Kafka describes how he internalized the dynastic father...

"Not even your mistrust of others is as great as my own self-mistrust instilled in me by you."

As he puts it, Kafka turns to writing endlessly to fill the void of his identity. He says "*I am made up of literature. I am nothing else*. *I cannot be anything else*". Kafka uses his father in this text as a standard to evaluate himself, and he consistently finds him to be worthless. To some extent, his fear of his father prevented him from respecting himself and his work and from believing that it was valuable enough to be shared with the rest of the world.

Although, according to his letter, the things that Franz suffered from his father are experiences that several sons have had — and while these gaps or traumas can be overcome to some extent, and even forgiveness can sometimes be achieved so that life can be lived without significant handicaps, Kafka remains stuck on them, as his life and work attest. Perhaps it is because the pain caused by his father was the source of his inspiration and, ultimately, what Kafka became he owed to his father. The world, as presented in his work, is nightmarish, closed, cruel, and irrational. People are subjugated without a defined identity. The subjugation, crushing, and terror of his heroes is the externalization of his own inner world (Karvounaki G. 2020) The person does not have access to any meaning. Heroes become entangled in the cogwheels of authority and are crushed.

The normal developmental trajectory towards autonomy and adulthood is the transition from the idealization of the father to the stage of de-idealization, then to reconciliation, and, finally, to the peer adult relationship, so that one may define his own route in the world. Despite the indictment, the letter demonstrates that Kafka remains trapped in his father's shadow. As an adult, Kafka is tormented by his father's harsh and irritable presence in his mind (Skali T., 2019). But he adds that the hostility directed by his father towards him as a child is now directed by him against himself.

The basic stratagem of an internalized harsh father—when the subject has internalized a hard and demanding ethical code—is to accuse oneself of failing to satisfy the high demands. Here we have evidence that Kafka was struggling with his own demons.

Thus, the letter to the father reached its destination—because the real recipient was the author himself.

I shall go with the self I have.

I have no other self.

Epilogue

In light of the successive crises that the world is going through today, the dream of the child being burned and the letter to the father is an urgent invocation for a world that is in an utter state of slumber, to listen, but also an indictment of the father's mistakes and, at the same time, of a society that was formed on the foundation of competitiveness and relations of power/subordination.

References

Freud, S. (1900), The Interpretation of Dreams Plethron Publications

Asher Ariela (2018), "Father, don't you see that I am burning?" - THE NEWS (tanea.gr)

Georgia Karvounaki, Franz Kafka Letter to the father - Presentation Georgia Karvounaki | Literary Circle of Heraklion (logoteckyklos.blogspot.c

Kafka Franz: Dearest Father Translated by Hannah and Richard Stokes Oneworld Classics LTD -U.K. (2008)

Skali Theodora About Father- Letter to the Father, Franz Kafka “Systemic Thinking & Psychotherapy" issue 18