

TIME OUT OF MIND

Dissociation in the Virtual World

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While greatly facilitating ease of interaction across time and geographic boundaries, the virtual world presents an unreal universe comprised of instant connection and gratification. Our culture has embraced this alternate reality in the form of online journals, chat rooms, and excessive involvement with video games, as well as Internet pornography and sexual solicitation. Psychoanalytic principles can greatly illuminate our understanding of individuals' involvement with virtual reality as it becomes disruptive to work and meaningful relationships. Two cases will be used to illustrate overinvolvement with the virtual world as a form of dissociation in which the individuals retreat from the painful memories, deficits, and helplessness they experience in the real world to a subjective state in which they can attempt to exercise control and aggressively capture the supplies they lack. In the course of treatment, the dissociated material must be invited into the therapeutic dyad so that it may become a conscious and accepted part of the self. The process involves both verbal interpretation and relational grounding in the person of the therapist.

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While greatly facilitating ease of interaction across time and geographic boundaries, the virtual world presents an unreal environment comprised of instant connection and gratification. Online encounters are employed as seemingly fulfilling alternatives to “live person” relationships. Our culture has enthusiastically embraced this surrogate reality in the form of online journals, chat rooms, and gaming, as well as Internet pornography and sexual solicitation. It has become a significant part of modern society and will undoubtedly continue to do so as new generations find ever-innovative ways to integrate it into daily life.

Yet we are already aware that excessive preoccupation with the virtual world may prove disruptive both to productive functioning and the development of satisfying relationships. Phrases such as “Internet addiction” have already entered the lexicon and refer to behaviors that are similar to addictions to drugs and alcohol, resulting in academic,

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social, and occupational impairment. Whether we, as psychoanalytic clinicians, are technophiles or troglodytes it is almost certain that excessive preoccupation with virtual reality will enter our consulting rooms along with our patients. As such, we must regard it as a significant aspect of mental functioning and then focus the powerful tools at our disposal in our attempt to understand it for ourselves and our patients.

An individual's overinvolvement with the Internet can, however, prove difficult to engage in the clinical setting. It may become sequestered, outside of time, intensely private, couched in shame, and underreported. It thus remains a personal space, the repository of dissociated thoughts and emotions, unlinked to the self-reflexive ebb and flow of feelings that foster awareness and change (Aron, 2000).

In addressing this new and puzzling phenomenon I will first briefly summarize the data on Internet abuse. I will then examine the concept of dissociation and apply it as a way of understanding those forays into the virtual world as time out of mind—experiences that are disconnected from thoughts and feelings that would assimilate them into ongoing biographical narrative. Finally, I will present two clinical vignettes that illustrate the variety of forms that Internet abuse may take. I will make the case that each of these illustrations, one involving a young boy and another, a woman in her mid-thirties, represent a manifestation of dissociative defenses. Although their use of the Internet is outwardly very different, it is similar in its function as a split-off and alien interpersonal world that provides protection for a fragile self state. I will discuss the need to invite the dissociated material into the therapeutic dyad so that it may become a conscious and integrated aspect of the self. I will examine the therapeutic process as one involving both verbal interpretation and relational grounding in the person of the therapist.

A Virtual Tsunami

Since the 1990s, the Internet has become a defining characteristic of our society, flooding the culture with revolutionary technology that has altered dramatically the way we do business, access information, maintain contact, and relate as human beings. A wave of technological advance that grows and changes almost daily, it is a vital part of the lives of young people who grew up in its wake even as older generations struggle to learn and keep up. It has opened a new universe of communication and worldwide contact, and its effects upon our culture are only beginning to be addressed. The positive consequences are easy and obvious, while the negative aspects remain subtle and insidious, placing, as perhaps never before, the control of such a powerful tool in the hands of an individual. The social impact of the virtual world is and will undoubtedly continue to be far-reaching. For the psychoanalytic clinician its force will be felt as it affects the individual, both in his or her psychological functioning and in the authenticity of relationships that he or she is able to achieve. We might well ask whether or not our interface with the virtual world has the potential to change what it means to be human.

Phenomena such as MySpace (*Time*, July 3, 2006) or Second Life allow users to create whole new people with different careers, social status, age, and gender. Second Life mimics real life in every way (*Ann Arbor News*, November 6, 2006). Users meet other people, throw parties, attend church, and even open businesses where they sell virtual goods. Some users begin by treating it as a game but quickly realize that it is real. Some say it has changed their lives by allowing them to create a whole new identity or overcome social anxiety. Its dark side involves those who spend 40 to 100 hours per week at their computers or hide their excessive involvement from others.

Social networking sites such as MySpace have become extremely popular ways for teenagers to meet and interact. As documented in the news, security issues have become a nightmare as in the well-publicized case of the 16-year-old girl who secretly flew to the Middle East to marry a man she met there. While the site has protective measures in place, such as prohibitions against posting last names, street addresses, and phone numbers, it is difficult to check the accuracy of required data such as name, gender, and date of birth.

In some instances, it appears that users are attaching to the virtual world as if it were a “real” relationship. In fact, it has many of the dimensions of human interaction. It can occur in real time. People may reveal private thoughts and feelings in ways that allow them to become better acquainted. They work, play, fight enemies, initiate romance, and accomplish a multitude of other activities in interactive ever-changing modes that closely approximate real life.

In *Extra Life: Coming of Age in Cyberspace*, David Bennehum (1998) tells the story of his childhood experience with computers and describes his belief that emotional bonds are now related to technology. As an adolescent he had a self-described addiction to video games that he compares to an addiction to heroin. He expresses the feeling of comfort that he derived from playing old computer games like Donkey Kong, much as one might receive comfort from seeing one’s childhood home.

In some circles, interaction in the virtual world passes as a viable and even superior manner of human relating (Butler, 2007). An online discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of virtual communities indicates that some respondents believe that a more open and honest type of communication can develop online than in real life. Although participants note the absence of face-to-face interaction, that particular drawback is outweighed by the possibility of talking to a variety of people from all over the world.

Many of the respondents in the virtual discussion viewed as a strength the opportunity to play a different role than one does in real life. Instant prejudices based on physical characteristics do not exist. The computer network breaks down barriers of time and space and allows us to bring together a large pool of minds to share information, experience, and knowledge. While in real life individuals hesitate to communicate their true opinions, it is easier to do so online because they don’t ever have to meet the people they are talking with.

Some participants cite as an advantage the lack of physicality, allowing us to concentrate more on our words and what we are really trying to say than on how we say it. The leader of the discussion, Wayne Butler, asks whether indeed face-to-face interaction is the best way to build human relationships. He raises the question as to why the warm and emotional face-to-face contact is also the mode in which people clam up and become less than genuine. He concludes that we should go with the more “honest” mode that is available in virtual communities.

Some respondents, however, mourned the loss of face-to-face interaction, noting that participants seem uncomfortable talking to real people after conversing freely with strangers online. They pose the question as to whether we will lose the ability to communicate in physical ways. Others state that it may “cheapen” the culture by diminishing genuine human contact. The opinions of those who are less enthusiastic about online communication coincide with authors such as Winnicott (1974), Eigen (1993), and Beebe (2005) who consider face-to-face contact to be central in the development of deep mutual attachment between mother and infant and indeed throughout life.

Excessive Internet use has been called an addiction by authors such as O’Reilly (1996) and Young and Rodgers (1998). Recent reports have indicated that some online users are becoming addicted to the Internet in the same way that others have become addicted to

drugs or gambling. Such compulsive overuse has been linked to academic failure, reduced work performance, and marital discord. A study by Young (1996) has endeavored to develop a workable set of criteria that could be effective in diagnosing addictive Internet use. Gambling addiction was viewed as most akin to pathological Internet use because it is an impulse-control disorder that does not involve a substance or intoxicant.

Young employed questions such as the following to distinguish normal from dependent Internet users: Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use? Have you lied to family members, therapists, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet? Dependent users spent a mean of 38.5 hours per week “surfing the Web” in activities other than academic or employment-related purposes, while normal users spent an average of 4.9 hours per week. Thus, dependent users were spending nearly eight times the number of hours per week as normal users. Chat rooms and multiuser dungeons (MUDDS) were the media most frequently accessed by dependents.

Other researchers such as Grohol (1999) and King (1999) have, however, questioned the concept of addiction as an accurate description of Internet overuse. Grohol points out that there are people who read too much, work too much, or watch too much television. Yet we do not refer to their behavior as addictive. Grohol also suggests that many of the exploratory surveys have methodological weakness and theoretical inconsistencies. While they may describe a behavior, they are not able to ascertain the cause in any compelling manner. In his article “Is the Internet Addictive or Are Addicts Using the Internet?” King points out that research has frequently failed to address the nature of previously existing mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, or relationship issues.

Internet Use and the Development of the Self

The question of whether or not the Internet is addictive is beyond the scope of this article. From a psychoanalytic perspective it may be used, as Monder (2007) has pointed out, in a variety of ways, including forays into alternative experiences and lifestyles that facilitate beneficial changes in self-perception and ways of being. It is when the individual user is either unwilling or unable to integrate that vast array of information into his or her own real existence that it may become problematic. When it becomes a substitute interpersonal world, controlled by the click of a mouse and outside the demands of time, genuine emotion, and meaningful engagement, it has the potential to draw us away from the essential characteristics of social interaction, a 21st century manifestation of social alienation and anomie.

A humorous and graphic example of that kind of involvement comes to mind from the TV show *South Park* in which the participants become so engrossed that the real world, including the demands of the body, has no meaning. A group of children have vowed to rescue the father of one of the boys by slaughtering his enemies in a virtual game. To achieve their goal, they must sit in front of the computer for days on end. One of the boys even persuades his mother to bring food to the gaming area and, eventually, a chamber pot, so that he can take care of his bodily needs. In this extreme example, the virtual world has become paramount, and reality, an insignificant distraction.

The Internet has an astonishing capacity to create an interpersonal world that is *almost* real, and it presents the user with tantalizing and even seductive choices and experiences. One can be anyone, anywhere, and at anytime. A person has unlimited access to an infinite array of opportunities to fulfill every fantasy, grant every wish, or satisfy every desire. He or she can face any fear or conquer any enemy, all at the click of a mouse. In its various

manifestations, the Internet presents an unparalleled opportunity to create experiences that simulate one's fantasies and play them out with an endless supply of enthusiastic participants or vengeful opponents. It provides a form of entertainment that we have never known before and are unlikely to give up. If we leave it at that—an unprecedented and fascinating diversion as well as a unique way to access information and connect with people worldwide—we can appreciate its power and potential longevity. But as a satisfying and fulfilling manifestation of meaningful interpersonal experience and an avenue for healthy psychological development, it possesses subtle but important deficiencies.

We know that across the centuries human beings have found a myriad of ways to create rich and varied fantasy worlds. The embodiment of imagination is present in all the art forms: drama, literature, music, dance, and the visual arts, beginning with the paintings found on the walls of ancient cave dwellers. Such expression in any form allows us to project our inner world in a way that permits others to perceive it and resonate with it as some approximation of their own experience. Isn't that what the Internet is all about—a venue that allows millions of users to engage with each other within an ever-changing dream world? I would suggest that the answer is both yes and no. While it permits the user to interface with an infinite variety of imaginative expression, it forecloses, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the crucial interchange between fantasy and reality.

When the world of fantasy in any form becomes a seductive alternative that breaks with ongoing experience, it disrupts the biographical narrative that is critical to the development of agency and the functioning of the relational self. It is no longer part of the vital and continuing perception and processing that moves freely between observation and experience even as the individual operates both intellectually and emotionally. A number of theorists have discussed this function and its impairment in those who have suffered early trauma.

Ogden (1990) would portray such an adaptation as an impairment in symbolic thinking, a concretization of fantasy such that it loses the “as if” quality. He might describe it as a dissociation of fantasy and reality, a state in which one no longer informs the other. The mind loses its capacity to move freely among affective and intellectual elements. The individual has the potential to become lost in fantasy in a way that destroys its possibility for modifying and enlarging reality. In Ogden's view, those individuals that are particularly susceptible to this kind of impairment have suffered early trauma such that they have failed to give personal meaning to real life experiences that have been too terrible to feel.

As Fonagy and Target (1995) point out, in the presence of unbearable trauma, the psychic contents split, cordoning off the intolerable affect or memory. The person is able to go on even while suffering a reduction in awareness of surroundings, thus becoming numb or detached. He or she is no longer able to construct a continuous biographical narrative, one that moves comfortably and freely within the mind and has the ability to access feeling, fantasy, and memory, as it relates to the interpersonal world of the present. Such an adaptation embodies a loss of what Lewis Aron (2000) calls self-reflexivity or the reflexive function of the mind. In Aron's terminology, self-reflexivity involves the capability of moving back and forth between observation and experience while being able to function both intellectually and emotionally. It is an essential self-function that allows the integration of mind and body, thought and affect, observation and experience and, in my opinion, is an aspect of mental operation that is particularly vulnerable to excessive Internet involvement.

In the absence of that critical self-function one's ability to act from a cohesive sense of agency is not destroyed but “repackaged” in unlinked states of mind (Bromberg, 1994)

Impairment in symbolic thinking occurs so that reality and fantasy are experienced as parallel but disconnected phenomena. Relationships are possible but highly regulated and lacking in spontaneity. Adaptations may take place that require a modification of self-structure in the form of guilt, shame and low self-esteem so that the individual takes on responsibility for wrongs committed by others. Intimate needs remain alive but sequestered, carefully insulated and ready for danger, so that trauma can never again arrive unanticipated.

Time Out of Mind

In the presence of ongoing trauma and in the absence of predictable human relatedness, the individual may begin to cope by means of dissociative defenses. He or she may not develop a full-blown dissociative identity disorder but may nevertheless exhibit dissociative features, defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* as breaks in the normally integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual (PDM Task Force, 2006) characterizes such an adaptation as a diminution or lack of the ability to synthesize information from the various senses (sight, sound, smell, touch) into an integrated experience of what is happening. Complex social experiences and their associated affective states cannot be taken for granted, but may be split off or perceived as alien.

A multiplicity of definitions exists regarding dissociative phenomena. Wilkinson (2005) suggests that it reflects the complexity of what analysts may experience as they work with patients who dissociate. Fonagy and Target (1995) also note the complexity of psychological states one may encounter in working with dissociative disorders. For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to stress the view of dissociation expressed by Schore (2001); Siegel (2003) and others as a disruption in the development of agency or self, that is, a relational, intersubjective self that has emerged from the earliest and most fundamental experiences of relating. When that early experience supports the infant in the management of physiologic and affective states, minimizes unsettling ruptures and provides an option for the reparability of inevitable failures, he or she is able to construct a more or less continuous biographical narrative. In the absence of secure human relatedness (Bromberg, 1994) and a stable, though largely nonverbal and unconscious, foundation for internal affect-regulation, the individual splits off intolerable feeling states, giving up an experience of wholeness in order to go on. The ability to act from a cohesive sense of agency is not destroyed but repackaged in unlinked states as “time out of mind.”

Individuals may exhibit a diversity of symptoms as they attempt to cope with dissociative states, including cutting, addictions, and other types of enactments. The virtual world with its myriad of personae and infinite variety of props, settings, and storylines appears, in fact, tailor-made for someone who, although able to function, does so by means of dissociative defenses. Unable to hold in conscious thought the intolerable and conflicting feelings of love and hate, guilt and reparation, the person functions by splitting off unmet needs or unmanageable affect, defining it as “out there,” a part of the not-me experience. The individual may be able to maintain contact with reality but does so by severely distorting a sense of self, agency, and relationships with others. In Kleinian terms (Klein, 1980), he or she occupies the paranoid-schizoid position in which projected parts of the self can be managed by controlling another person or another action figure in a video game. Aggressive impulses are assigned to someone else. The individual becomes

the object of projected persecution and feels justified in seeking revenge for injustices. It becomes a narcissistic adjustment in which the normal give-and-take of relationships is minimized or, shall we say, deleted.

The therapeutic task requires that patient and therapist coconstruct a transitional reality within which faith in the reliability of human relatedness can be restored. It requires interpersonal engagement that combines affective honesty and safety. The goal is to provide a foundation of reparability that allows for successful negotiation of interpersonal transactions that are essential to the rebuilding of trust. We may explore the destructive or addictive behavior but we also seek to disengage it from the underlying self-state that has had to be preserved in the interests of psychic survival (Bromberg, 1995; Davies & Frawley, 1994). The therapeutic aim is to search for the relational bind embedded in the computer use, formulate it as a conflict in symbolic terms, and explore it within the new relationship developed in the transference (Director, 2005).

Such a task is not easily accomplished. The behavior may remain heavily guarded in a conscious way so as to protect vulnerable self-states. Once it is addressed, it must be recognized as a psychic achievement, a coping mechanism that has assured that parts of the self can go on in spite of unbearable trauma. As treatment progresses, the patient may reveal an inner life dominated by a never-ending war between parts of the self, that is, internal voices, sadistic and unrelenting, that the patient needs to still by giving each one some of what it wants but never satisfying all (Bromberg, 1994). One may encounter separate centers of attention that communicate with and control the total personality. Although they may not be so extreme as to be called a dissociative identity disorder, they may be distinct in their views of reality and in their inability to communicate with each other.

The undoing of frozen and sequestered self states entails recognition both of the coping mechanisms that have protected them, however destructive they may be in the present, and, ultimately, a revisiting of the trauma that brought them into being. When trauma has been experienced in the context of earliest relationships, verbal and symbolic interpretation may be insufficient to capture and redefine those basic experiences (Beebe, 2005; Wilkinson, 2005). Early processing is very much limited to the right brain, given that the left brain capacity for verbal memory and expression is not yet fully developed. The analyst must recognize the presence of the terrified child within the functioning adult and address communication in ways that will reach both.

Timmy—The Boy Who Lived in Toontown

Timmy is an angel-faced boy of 10 who was caught in the middle of a custody battle between his parents who had separated when he was one and a half and divorced when he was four. Initially, the parenting arrangement had been amicable. The parents had lived close enough that Timmy was able to spend part of the day with each parent. When the father remarried and moved farther away, the daily schedule became much more difficult to maintain, particularly since the mother was unwilling to do any of the driving. Alternating weeks with each parent made public schooling problematic. When I saw Timmy he was being homeschooled by his mother. His father objected to this arrangement, however, because he felt that his son spent too much time playing on the computer and lacked social contact with other children. He was suing for full custody so that his son could live with him during the week and attend the public schools.

The choices for Timmy were bleak. When he was with his mother he did indeed spend a great deal of time playing on the computer. A weekly schedule of homeschooling activities as provided by his mother indicated the following:

August 28th: A few hours on the Toontown website; August 29th: Corrected spelling on Toontown site and added additional toon tips; Timmy created a back button in his gif animator. Text was not displaying properly. Suspect syntax error but could not find it; Toontown with Sarah in the evening; August 30th: Toontown with Sarah in the morning; August 31st: Toontown with Sarah in the evening; September 1st: Toontown with Nathan; Timmy read to me for ½ hour from Toontown's maintenance and update logs. He has a tendency to substitute similar-looking words for each other, but he understands what he reads and is interested in the history and development of the game. Read more of *Mansions of the Gods* while Timmy was playing Toontown and waiting for his father to come. Timmy's comment: "Whenever anyone says they see dragons in a book and they take someone else to see them, the dragons are always gone."

In addition to grave emotional problems, Timmy's mother has been diagnosed with serious immune-related disorders. She has been in chronic pain and finds it difficult to keep up with the demands of work and housework. When Timmy was small she acknowledged that her housekeeping was unacceptable. At the time of the evaluation she kept the home rigidly immaculate. She is a writer and writes literary erotica, including rape fantasies and descriptions of actual rapes, though she assured me that Timmy has his own computer and does not have access to this material. Her mother has a PhD in computer engineering and both her mother and brother write video games. For these reasons, she stated that she felt comfortable with the amount of time that her son spends playing on the computer.

Timmy's father is a maintenance engineer and at the time of the evaluation was living with his second wife and her two children, a son who is 11 years old and a daughter who is nine years old. The son has a mild but observable physical handicap and the daughter has been diagnosed as bipolar. When I observed Timmy with his father and stepfamily, the parents described the difficulty of the daily transitions and the problem of integrating Timmy into the ongoing schedule of homework, chores, and bedtime routine. They stated that when Timmy first arrives at their home he is "hyper and crazy." He plays with his stepsister, and they amplify each other's energy levels. His older stepbrother views Timmy as something of a rival and emphasized that, in spite of his limitation, he could swim more laps than Timmy. During the family interview, Timmy appeared very quiet and said nothing unless asked a direct question. This was in contrast to his animated behavior with his mother and, eventually as he became more comfortable, with me.

In my evaluation of Timmy, I would describe him as mystified both by his own feelings and the emotions of those around him. He acknowledged to me that he gets "hyper," more so at his dad's house than his mom's. He said that he doesn't say a lot at his dad's house and that it is hard to think of much to say when everyone is talking. He feels a "whole bunch of anger" inside sometimes but he is not allowed to express it to either parent. He gets mad at his mom when she wakes up crabby in the morning and gets tense about something small that he has done. He gets upset with his father when his father makes him do a lot of chores. He is aware that his parents are fighting about him, and he is puzzled by it. "Why can't they stop fighting and work it out so everybody's happy?" he says. I asked him whether he felt sad when his parents fought. He replied that he didn't but that he usually just stayed away to give them "their space."

Timmy also related that he spends a lot of time being bored and lonely. He gets bored at his father's house when everyone but him is doing something else and he is not allowed

to play computer games. He finds public school boring because they do the same things over and over and he doesn't have time to spend on his own creative projects. His computer world provides the stimulation he is seeking, but even there he can feel unhappy and lonely. He feels sad when he loses a fight on a video game and knows that he will have to "fight all over again." Even on Toontown people seem to hate him. He tries to put it out of his mind but then he remembers it again.

As part of the evaluation I asked Timmy to draw a self-portrait. He drew a roomful of toys and computer games—including a game cube and controller, a bucket of Leggos, and his computer. He showed it to me and then said, "I forgot to draw myself." It was as if his own person had become lost in a world of cartoons and computer games, an escape from the real world in which he is constantly disrupted and moving between two very different households. Although his parents appear to be interested in his welfare, they are, in fact, more interested in their ongoing controversy than in their child. He finds them too often preoccupied with other things: his mother with the computer, and his father "hanging out" with his present wife.

Toontown (Toontown, 2005) provides a refuge for Timmy: a safe place where he can act out angry feelings and exercise control over what happens to him. It is a multiplayer online game that lets you "live the life of a Toon." You can create your own character, build an estate, play games with friends, and explore amazing places. It is advertised as "always growing, always changing, and as wild as your imagination." But we learn that there are evil forces at work in the form of Cogs—evil robot business types who have arrived to take over the town. Cogs can't take a joke so the one way to defeat them is to crack them up with an arsenal of gags—seltzer bottles, cream pies in the face, anything that makes them laugh. Each player earns laugh points by completing certain tasks. The more laugh points, the stronger your Toon will become.

Need friends? It's easy. Simply click on the Toon you would like to make friends with and a message will pop up telling you if that person is interested in being your friend. Is your Toon sad? No problem. Fill up your "laff" meter with more gags and your Toon will be happy again. It's a cartoon world where friends appear at the click of a mouse and evil Cogs are defeated in Punchline Place, Loopy Lane, or Silly Street.

Toontown sounds harmless enough and even entertaining. It provides an alternative from the extremely violent video games in which the primary task is to hunt down enemies with an ever-increasing array of brutal weaponry. As an occasional distraction and outlet for imaginative play it seems ideal. But Timmy is not engaging with it in that way. For him it has become an alternate world—a safe space in which he can exercise a measure of control away from the chaos and unpredictability of his real life. He can make friends and defeat enemies, gain power by filling up his "laff" meter, and provide some measure of stimulation and engagement that he is unable to experience with his parents and family.

Casey and the House People

Casey is a single professional woman in her mid-thirties whose work involves apprehending Internet sexual predators. She came into treatment feeling that she was underperforming at work and socially isolated. She wanted to be in a long-term relationship with a man and eventually marry and have a family. She had to force herself to go out and meet men and she didn't understand why.

Early in treatment Casey expressed unremitting anger toward her mother from whom she is partially estranged. She described her mother as a self-centered woman who was

seldom able to focus on her daughter's feelings without making her aware of what a burden she was. The father left their family when the patient was two years old and after that her mother dated a number of men. Casey recalls instances in which the mother would bring men home and engage in sexual activity so that the patient could hear them from a nearby bedroom. The mother married two more times, with the second husband being an alcoholic. She is currently living with her third husband.

Casey portrays her father as a childlike man who married too young and was unprepared to be a parent. She visited her father sporadically throughout her childhood but does not regard him as a father figure. She has memories of waiting for him by the window and then having him not show up. He didn't pay child support on a regular basis so her mother was compelled to support the children on her own as best she could. Casey also has an older sister who is married with two children. She has a half-sister who is her mother's child and a half-brother who is her father's child. Her half-brother is also married with two children. The patient maintains close relationships with all of her siblings.

In many ways Casey presents as an ideal patient. She appears cooperative and cordial and is intelligent, psychological-minded, and insightful. Though moderately overweight she is attractive and well groomed. She pays her bill on time, seldom cancels, and consistently greets me pleasantly at the beginning and end of each session. She began treatment with once weekly sessions and quickly agreed to meet twice weekly. She has been on the couch at three times a week for about three years. Her productions are colorful, humorous, and sometimes brilliant but progress has been slow. She will characteristically assent to an interpretation but then meticulously dissect every word of it. She has actually asked for a dictionary to check on the specific meaning of words. If one is not available she tells me that she goes home to look up a word if she is not exactly certain of its meaning. My response has been to allow her the absolute freedom to explore every nuance of every word and to resist the impulse to force an interpretation on her. I consider her careful reactions to be a protection of an extremely vulnerable self state of which we have been able to catch only brief glimpses.

In an atmosphere in which her autonomy has been acknowledged and respected, the patient has come to know that her verbal productions and outer air of congeniality are only a small part of her total being. Over time she has introduced me to a whole internal cast of characters whom we have named the "house people." There is the "housekeeper" who is the administrator and most closely aligned with the patient, the "me that is me." There is the "pathetic one," whining and complaining and barely able to get anything done. There is the "smart aleck," a domineering, aggressive, and somewhat sadistic character who constantly berates the pathetic one. There is a little girl who sits quietly and says nothing but watches. Later, we have learned of a little boy who hides behind the couch and is bad and angry. This motley crew maintained an ongoing conversation/argument in Casey's head in a way that tortured her. The smart aleck continually nagged the pathetic one. The housekeeper tried to maintain order. The little girl watched, seemingly stunned into silence, and the little boy, who only occasionally made an appearance, disrupted the whole proceeding. When Casey was at work or with people she could keep the conversations at bay. But when she was alone they dominated her life. In fact she had to be alone some portion of the time to satisfy them and let them out. They could communicate with each other but not directly with her and not with me. So she could not be with other people and in their presence at the same time.

Casey and I have spent many sessions discussing reports of the house people. Although she cannot speak with them directly she can tell me what they are saying and what they want. As we have listened to their conflicting demands with understanding and

patience, she has been able to redefine them as three-dimensional beings with complex needs that are intertwined with one another. The smart aleck has become more understanding of the excuses of the pathetic one and she, in turn, has been able to stand up for herself and explain her reasoning. Through that process the patient has become more accepting of her limitations and not so harshly critical of her failings.

She has in fact begun dating again, meeting men through an online dating service. This is after a hiatus of many years in which she had few, if any, dates and fended off efforts of friends and family to “fix her up.” Yet dating itself has proved problematic. We have come to realize that she reacts in a nearly phobic manner when she is anticipating the prospect of meeting someone new. We have explored her responses in terms of her fears of men seeing her as overweight. The prospect of spending long periods of time in intimate contact with a man also appears frightening, both because of the physical closeness and the psychological openness it would require. Yet these explanations do not appear sufficient to explain the extreme nature of her reactions at the prospect of being with a man.

In her professional life Casey is required to review hundreds of pages of pornographic material written by sexual predators who are attempting to solicit sexual contact online. These men are apprehended when law officers posing as teenagers agree to meet them. In order to prosecute offenders the state must prove that the Internet material is designed to solicit an actual meeting with the victim and that the perpetrator believed that the victim was under age but wanted to meet him or her anyway. The material is often incredibly graphic such that, during a trial, the prosecutor may warn a jury of its salacious nature in order to prepare them. The offenders can be well known and respected members of the community or the lowest dregs of society, but they are typically in denial and unrepentant as to the harm they may be inflicting on their victims. Casey took great satisfaction in helping gather material that would implicate those she believes to be guilty, but expressed only appropriate and professionally modulated “outrage” at the heinous acts that they had committed or were attempting to commit.

It became apparent, however, that her associations would frequently travel from a potential meeting with a new online acquaintance to her indignation at the behavior of an accused sexual predator. In the same session she might express her carefully regulated disgust at the conduct of a perpetrator and then, her anxiety, which she fully acknowledged, at the possibility of a date with a new acquaintance. This pattern appeared often enough that we began to explore the connections. The question of whether the patient had herself been sexually abused came to the fore. The impact of her father’s abandonment of her and her family became relevant. She had never acknowledged its effect, assuming that, since she had been “too young to remember,” it hadn’t been important in her life.

Although these questions have yet to be answered, it remains clear that her involvement with online predators and perpetrators of sexual solicitation is more than a professional activity for Casey. It is a world populated with males who commit monstrous acts and exploit children for their own purposes and without regrets. In that world Casey can express justifiable and regulated outrage and can act out her anger in a way that brings the perpetrators to justice and punishment. She may even meet these individuals face to face along with their families, as well as the victims and their families. She is invariably able to maintain her composure though she expresses her disgust privately to me.

Although she is underutilizing her capabilities, Casey is functioning successfully in her professional life. She works in a difficult profession and acknowledges that it can be stressful but she is proud of her ability to tolerate the challenging material that she encounters. Indeed when we were talking about the “house people” Casey described her

professional self as living outside the house and being dismissive, even scornful, of those inside. Yet it is within her professional world that she has sequestered her most intense and irretrievable feelings of rage, revulsion, hurt, and exploitation. Here she can keep them neatly packaged, carefully regulated and, most importantly, far away from her personal relationships with men, her mother, her father, and anyone who has the power to hurt her.

In a recent session, Casey expressed the following:

Well, okay. I was reading 30 pages of blog. There were e-mails from a perpetrator to a cop posing as a 13-year-old girl. I felt nausea. Like not in your mouth. But it was nausea. I couldn't continue. I was crying. But I had to do it. He said, "Masturbate and rub your fingers in it. Then rub it on paper and draw a heart around it and send it to me." I've read worse. I've been disgusted. But it was not at the deep visceral level.

I asked why now? "I don't know. I am meeting a date tonight. Maybe I am anxious about that and don't have the energy to hold the feelings down."

I said that the feelings seem to be connected, at least in time. She said that she was not aware of it. She said, "Ellen, I don't like having feelings. It's upsetting."

At the next session she said that she didn't have much to say. She had nothing to say about the date. I said, "Follow your thoughts. They may be in disguise."

She said that she couldn't get to them. "It's like a table with things on it that I can't reach." I asked what might be on the table. She said that it might be a pepper shaker or a newspaper. I asked her what made it so she couldn't reach them. She answered that it was like fog but not exactly. It was "swarmy," like a swarm of gnats. "It's like a swarm that you bat away. It's a swarm. It's a psychological phenomenon. Swarm is no longer a word. Swarm. Swarm. It has lost its meaning. It's like when you say a word over and over and it is just a bunch of letters with no meaning."

Coincidentally in his book *Nausea* (1969), the great existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre describes a similar experience in response to his observation of a man molesting a young boy in a park. In his discussion of Sartre, Toronto (1999) states that the hero of the book, Antoine, is totally cut off from society. He lives alone, speaks to no one, and neither gives nor receives from anyone. His deprivation is such that he has lost the ability to give meaning to events. Sartre describes his protagonist as "a teller of tales . . . surrounded by his stories and the stories of others . . . he sees everything that happens to him through them and he tries to live his life as if he were telling a story" (p. 39).

Before long Sartre's hero, Antoine, not only lacks the ability to relate stories and events but also loses the ability to label simple objects and ideas in a meaningful way. He recounts several nauseating experiences in which objects—including a doorknob, a beer glass, and trees—lose their definition. He can't describe what they really are because he realizes that "we have so much difficulty imagining nothingness. . . things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind them there is nothing" (p. 96). He also observes that "the words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their method of use and, the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface" (p. 127). Ultimately, Antoine experiences these realizations both as freedom and, simultaneously, as a kind of death. All reasons for living have been extinguished. He poignantly describes a kind of psychological abyss, a terrifying space without attachments or connections that might constrain and at the same time support his existence.

This literary example comes to mind because it seems quite possible that Casey, in the course of her treatment, has also come to the edge of her own psychological abyss and has, indeed, peeked over its perimeter. It is no surprise that once she has done so she would

recoil in horror and return to the safety of her considerable intellectual defenses. There she can live in relative security among the house people and thus avoid encounters with the emptiness around that highly restricted internal environment.

But fortunately Casey seems to possess a quality that Sartre's hero does not and that is a desire to "go on being." She retains a measure of hope based on some positive attachments in her early life, and, quite possibly, in the connection and grounding that she has experienced in her relationship with me. She is tempted to turn and run but she does not. She is committed to her treatment and understands, intellectually at least, that painful emotions lurk in and around the "nothingness." In a recent session, for example, she described having a massage to alleviate the knotted muscles in her neck. Toward the end of the massage session she felt something release and everything turned "pink." She got out as fast as she could because she felt that she was going to cry.

In recent weeks reported external events have conspired to make Casey's work undeniably personal. In the session following a session that was cancelled for the July 4th holiday, the patient reported that it has been a "terrible" few days. A male in-law of her closest friend was about to be arrested on a charge of participating in Internet child pornography. At first the patient was struggling with the ethical issue of whether or not she should warn her friend that the arrest was about to take place. Then she began to describe her reaction at work and when she was on the phone with her friend. She had cried hard on both occasions and was surprised that she had reacted so intensely. She was quietly shedding tears as she talked about it with me, an extremely rare occurrence in the years that I have been treating her.

She then said that her work had finally become personal. She could see and feel the tragic impact on the victims and the families of both victims and perpetrators. She said that it was like she had been working in a slaughter house, slaughtering cattle. She had been able to do her work by remaining comfortably detached. Then without warning one of the cows looked up at her before she slit its throat and she had to run out screaming. We puzzled about whether her feelings about her work had been there all the time or whether they were situational, only in response to the arrest of her friend's in-law.

One might imagine that Casey's reaction to these recent events and the ties to her own past would now become obvious, a slam-dunk. But that has not been the case. She has neither recollection nor reason to believe that she was sexually abused as a child. We are still in the early stages of exploring the impact that her father's abandonment has had on her. She is well aware that her mother's self-centered preoccupations have had a devastating effect but has only begun to touch the hurt that has resulted from that relationship. At a conscious level she acknowledges me as a benign facilitator in her quest, but I am still only beginning to be allowed to communicate with the people who inhabit her inner world. We continue, slowly and patiently, to untangle those threads that are connected to emotional "hot spots" that alert us to a bubbling cauldron surrounding the unbearable pain she has experienced.

Discussion

Let us now consider the very different examples of Internet use provided by Timmy and Casey. Timmy is a child who, under the guise of homeschooling, spends many unsupervised hours in an interactive world of cartoon figures. It is a place in which he can make things happen, influence the story line, and manipulate characters in amazing ways that have never been possible before now. Casey is a productive adult who uses the Internet

to accomplish work-related goals in a manner that most of us would find laudable. Yet for both of these individuals their use of the Internet has become a repository of thoughts, feelings, and encounters that are disconnected from their real life experience. Infinitely repeatable, the Internet encounters are immune to the self-reflexive capabilities that would allow them to be accessible to memory, emotion, and fantasy and thus integrated into an ongoing biographical narrative.

According to the homeschooling logs provided by Timmy's mother is it likely to assume that he is spending 30 to 35 hours on the Internet. By definition (Young, 1996), this amount of involvement would constitute an addiction. His mother writes Internet erotica. His grandmother and uncle design video games. Without some major intervention it is likely that this will be Timmy's life. His father appears to be attempting to extricate his son from this world but provides a stressful and chaotic alternative that would only magnify the anxiety of this already fearful young boy. The fighting between his parents is unrelenting, and Timmy finds his solace in the illusory world of Toontown. There he can express anger, fight bad guys, make friends, and have a sense of agency that is so lacking in his real life.

But this adaptation is, at best, marginal (Ainslie, 2007). It is plausible, for example, that the anxiety Timmy experiences at his father's house stems from a confrontation with real and unpredictable human interaction that threatens his omnipotent and grandiose self, a self that he can more easily maintain on the Internet. Does that mean that his self-representation is an assemblage of computer parts and games? Do computer games serve as a transitional object for Timmy? Or, more ominously, do they function as a soothing primary attachment, a "cyborg-mother?" While Toontown may be a reliable, predictable place, it is not real in any way that would allow this young boy to accommodate his "finely textured" human needs.

In many ways Timmy is fighting for his psychic existence. In the drawing of his room he forgets to draw himself. Like the imaginary dragons one encounters in a book, when someone tries to prove his reality, he disappears. His parents profess to care for him but their commitment to their ongoing battle too often takes precedence over Timmy's welfare. For him the Internet is a survival tool. He can "live" there and until someone is able to acknowledge and contain his fear, his anger, his fragility and his longing, he will most likely continue to do so.

For Casey the use of the Internet is a much more circumscribed part of her life and, as such, could easily go unnoticed as a barrier to healthy functioning. It was not mentioned as a presenting problem. It is certainly justifiable as part of her work and it is not something she does in her leisure time. Yet over time it has become clear that her investment with it serves to bind aggression, fear, revulsion and powerlessness. It perpetuates her view of men in general as untrustworthy predators in ways that permit no modification from real life encounters. It is a fixed part of her experience to which she reacts with only measured professional disgust. It also allows her to maintain appropriate distance from the as yet undetermined experiences of her own life that were too horrific to contemplate.

This carefully contained experience with Internet predators and her participation in seeing that justice is done has allowed Casey to master again and again her fear and powerlessness in relation to men. One might consider it a successful adaptation were it not for her relative social isolation and conflicted anguish about dating. Rather her use of the Internet represents an escape hatch, very much like an addiction of any kind, in which unacceptable feelings and memories are sequestered outside of time and inaccessible to healthy modification and integration. While recognizing its necessity as an escape mech-

anism, we have begun to disentangle and support the vulnerable and fragmented self state that it protects.

In addition to traditional interpretation much of our work together involves, of necessity, a focus on the nature of our “here-and-now” communication. As I have indicated it includes careful attention to the way in which words are used as well as to the “unintentional” silences that are becoming more frequent or, at least, more obvious. We stay with words that eventually lose their meanings and the colorful sensations that surround their loss. I share with her that I understand this to be a kind of detachment from the reality that words impose and, quite possibly, a retreat to the mind and experience of the silent little girl who remains yet to be engaged.

This emotionally neglected woman basks in the focused concentration we give to every expression and turn of phrase and, indeed, to every aspect of her life. We talk about absences and breaks in the treatment and, although she continues to deny that they have meaning to her, we joke about the inevitable fact that either I will bring them up or she will second guess me and do so first. In contrast to her father I have become a benign and highly reliable figure in her life. Of late we have developed a light-hearted banter with which we address our ever-deepening exploration of the intricate layers of camouflage that surround a self state that is largely unprotected and unexplored. In this process the barriers around the circumscribed piece of her life on the Internet have begun to crack. In the session noted above, she was able to express the nausea she felt as she read 30 pages of pornographic blog. She was able to allow herself to feel the devastation when her best friend’s in-law was apprehended as an Internet predator.

We hope eventually to gain access to the little girl who, indeed, most closely parallels what Casey does on the Internet, that is, the silent observer, much as she was in relation to her mother’s sexual activity. (Ainslie, 2007) The adult Casey has retreated from the toxic relationship with her mother into a defensive attempt at mastery, proud of her ability to tolerate the material she must read every day. Like Sartre’s tragic character, Antoine, that 20th century exemplar of social alienation, she disassembles the noxious material and drains it of meaning so that she can hold it. But, as does Antoine, Casey pays a heavy price in terms of her relationships to the object world and her relatively schizoid existence.

So it will continue to be a struggle for Casey and I to remain engaged when we are both convinced that boredom and detachment are greatly to be preferred to the intensity and unpredictability of genuine emotion. We will spend time on treacherous paths where the road is “swarmy” and covered in fog, where emotions are pink and unintentional silences abound. With luck and perseverance we will find our way to those experiences wherein Casey’s life broke down and the hurt became too horrible to bear alone.

In conclusion, I believe it is safe to say that the Internet and the virtual world it presents have changed our lives forever. It has and will continue to be a significant part of our culture and a defining aspect of human interaction. As with any other change of this magnitude its effects will be both positive and negative. Its positive impact is phenomenal with the capability to connect and integrate the human family in ways that we have never dreamed possible. It can, however, become a substitute world, controlled by the click of a mouse and outside the demands of real time, genuine emotion and meaningful engagement. To that extent it has the potential to draw us away from the essential characteristics of human development, a 21st century equivalent of social alienation. It is at this juncture that psychoanalysis, with its wealth of understanding of individual and interpersonal functioning, can make a significant contribution, placing the engagement with the virtual

world in an appropriate perspective and reminding us yet again of the amazing and timeless capabilities of mind and imagination.

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Correction to Cancelmo (2009)

In the article “The Role of the Transitional Realm as an Organizer of Analytic Process: Transitional Organizing Experience” by Joe Cancelmo (*Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 2009, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 2-25), the author’s name was incorrectly printed in the toc and in the author byline. The author’s name should read Joseph A. Cancelmo, PsyD, FIPA, Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR).

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