Synchronicity and the Capacity to Think: A Clinical Exploration

Annie Reiner, LCSW

Synchronicity blurs the boundaries of psyche and physis. This invisible dance of mind and matter suggested to Jung an interconnection between physical and mental events reflecting a unified ‘psychophysical space-time continuum’. His idea of exteriorization put forth the notion that unconscious thoughts can manifest themselves in the external world. I have related this to Bion's theory of thinking, where thoughts, which should be a prelude to action, become actions in themselves, projections of unthought thoughts. Through detailed clinical work with dreams I will explore the effects of early trauma on the development of the capacity to think, and the way in which synchronistic events relate to projections of early traumatic experiences which have not been ‘mentalized’.

The following statement by prominent physicist, Brian Greene, describes the work of the analyst as much as the modern physicist.

To excel in physics is to embrace doubt while walking the winding road to clarity … But en route to explanation … theorists must tread with considered step through the jungle of bewilderment, guided mostly by hunches, inklings, clues and calculations … Nature does not give up her secrets lightly.

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Greene's words also bring to mind Keats's notion of Negative Capability — ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Keats 1966, p. 329). Wilfred Bion considered this capacity a standard of observation for any analytic session (Bion 1970, p. 124), but the need to embrace our questions and doubts is nowhere more apparent than when dealing with mysteries like synchronicity which blur the boundaries of psyche and physis. My aim in this paper is to explore synchronicity.
clinically in relation to the capacity to think, with reference to Jung's ideas as well as Bion's theories of thinking, and psychoanalytic theories of projective identification and primitive emotional states. Although I am not a Jungian I will presume to add my voice to the exploration of the enigma of synchronicity, certainly not expecting definitive answers but raising a few more questions which might shed some light at least on the clinical significance of this interplay of noumenon and phenomenon. The slow increase in communication between the sometimes warring ‘camps’ of depth psychology and psychoanalysis seems to indicate that those of us able to ponder synchronicity's fluid boundaries of space and time are also able to traverse theoretical boundaries between orientations, in recognition of the fact that deep truths about the psyche know no bounds.

Jung asked the intriguing question, ‘How does it come that even inanimate objects are capable of behaving as if they were acquainted with my thoughts?’ (Jung 1957, p. 344). His views about synchronicity gradually developed from a belief in its transcendental meaning independent of consciousness, to a more objective idea of a psychically related ‘acausal orderedness’. He defined synchronicity as ‘meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved’ (Jung 1951, para. 969). Seeing no possibility of a causal explanation, he provisionally assumed them to be of an acausal nature (ibid., para. 980). His patient's now famous scarab dream revealed ‘a simultaneous external event that corresponds to the psychic state … where there is no evidence of a causal connection’ (ibid., para. 984). It was a way for an archetype to break into consciousness from its originally unknowable psychoid unity, and become known (Jaffé 1970, pp. 151-52). Synchronicity suggested to Jung an interconnection between physical and mental events that reflected a unified ‘psychophysical space-time continuum’ (Main 1997, p. 36). This invisible dance of mind and matter was felt to be inexplicable, ‘not due to the fact that the cause is unknown, but to the fact that a cause is not even thinkable in intellectual terms’ (Jung 1960, para. 967). As he described with his patient, this kind of experience allowed one a sense of the wholeness of perception beyond our ordinary consciousness of discursive thought (von Franz 1975, p. 247).

Robertson contends that ‘synchronicities increase in intensity, frequency and clarity at special times … of transition, ceremony, crisis … and other exceptional times: birth, death, marriage, separation, changes’ (Robertson 2002, p. 98). As synchronicity emerged as an issue with one of my patients, I observed that primitive states of helplessness and fear of the unknown which accompany changes such as these may result in the urge to assign meaning to these coincidences. In early infancy, when virtually everything is unknown, feelings of helplessness abound and are defended against by omnipotent phantasies and hallucinatory wish fulfillment. As Bion's theory of the ‘nothing’ describes, if the infant can tolerate the frustration of these feelings of fear and helplessness, most notably caused by the mother's absence, a mental space is created where,
in place of phantasies of the mother, the space is available for the thought—'no mother'—to exist. Bion posits this as the origin of thinking (Bion 1962, p. 35). In cases of early trauma and lack of emotional containment, mental development is obstructed as unbearable frustration related to the mother's absence causes the infant to continue its reliance on phantasy.

In the clinical material presented below, I will explore the relationship between synchronicity and the capacity to think, and how synchronicity may at times be used as a substitute for thoughts which cannot yet be thought due to their entanglement with early emotional trauma. We might call these unthought thoughts ‘proto-thoughts’, from the Greek, protos, meaning before, beginning or tending toward, also denoting a source or parent. These proto-thoughts are then the source or ancestors of thoughts, which exist in or are peripheral to a mind yet unformed. These notions reflect some of the central ideas of Bion's theory of thinking. He postulates a ‘protomental’ level of mental functioning intimately related to bodily processes, where there is no individual mentality, no observation, thought or judgement. As Meltzer describes it, ‘These primitive parts of the personality do their thinking with the body and obey laws that are closer to neurophysiology than to psychology’ (Meltzer 1986, p. 38). The capacity to think is predicated on the capacity to contain and process emotion, developing in infancy through an emotionally containing relationship with the mother. Fonagy's work on attachment theory and his notion of ‘mentalized affectivity’ is a later development of Bion's idea, showing early attachment as preliminary to the capacity to regulate affects, from which is derived the capacity to think (Fonagy et al. 2002, p. 5).

Bion uses the term ‘beta elements’ to represent ‘the matrix from which thoughts can be supposed to arise’, a level of mental life where ‘thoughts are things, things are thoughts’. These raw emotional experiences cannot be used for thinking but rather are useful only for actions such as projection. He distinguishes them from ‘alpha elements’, the building blocks of thought which are the products of mental work done upon that primary experience (Bion 1963, p. 22). Through this process of mental digestion, experiences become ‘available either to the unconscious or the conscious’ (Bion 1992, p. 120).

Bion's concept of ‘thoughts without a thinker’ refers to truths which exist whether or not there is anyone to think them. They are reflections of absolute truth, ultimate reality, infinity or the godhead (Bion 1970, p. 102), a realm he denotes by the sign O, and like Jung's idea of the psychoid, it is unknown and unknowable. In Jung's earlier explorations about psyche and matter, he says they ‘may perhaps be qualities of one and the same existential being … The psyche is a quality of matter [and] matter the concrete aspect of the psyche’ (Main 1997, pp. 108-11). There is a difference, however, in that Bion sees these as unconscious phantasies of an infant not yet able to process experience into thought, while Jung addresses these unthought thoughts as energy, where psychic events could ‘influence material objects or create physical bodies in a place where no matter existed before’ (Main 1997, pp. 104-05).
Since this territory at the intersection of *physis* and psyche can never be observed, we cannot expect definitive answers, but these sessions over a period of two months may reveal some of the effects of feelings that are not contained by thought, to help us think further about the gap. I will explore clinical applications of the relationship between the unbound energy of unmentalized thoughts and the physical reality of certain synchronous events, and illustrate how thoughts about synchronistic events may reflect primitive mental states.

**Case example**

‘Laura’ is a sensitive, intelligent 53 year old divorced woman, a prolific painter whom I have treated for nine years, three or four sessions weekly. She endured a traumatic childhood with sexual abuse by her parents and brothers, and violent attacks from her two brothers. Her mother, a professional woman, was highly anxious, depressed and unable to provide emotional containment for her children. Her denial of the brothers' attacks contributed to Laura's suicidal feelings from a young age, and her intense anger at her family. When she began treatment she had virtually no relationship with them, and expressed her wish ‘not to die hating my mother’. This is significant in terms of the clinical material presented here, which centres on a specific period of Laura's treatment when a series of uncanny ‘coincidences’ began to occur. They led, seemingly inadvertently, to a rapprochement with her mother. My work with Laura at this time gave rise to my interest in synchronicity, as I felt I needed more understanding in my efforts to help her understand these events.

Robertson's contention about increases in frequency of synchronicities at times of transition and crisis (Robertson 2002, p. 98) was borne out when Laura's long anticipated move to a new house gave rise to striking synchronous events. For someone who had always lived in impoverished apartments, unable to afford better and never, until recently, feeling she deserved better, her serene little house was a dream come true. It was a rebirth for someone who had grown up in a violent household without beauty or order. However, upon moving in, profound feelings of helplessness, abandonment and despair arose, as this psychic rebirth activated the terror of her actual premature birth. Her dreams revealed the devastating feelings of her first days of life in an incubator, cut off from her mother before having established the attachment necessary to feel sufficiently safely contained to develop an incipient sense of self. Soon added to this were the traumas of early abuse.

When the bedroom of her new house was draped in plastic by the painters, Laura became terrified and her dream indicated to me that she felt trapped again in that incubator, lost and confused. As these feelings were made conscious she slowly regained some footing in the present. My mind served as the womb to contain her feelings of abysmal nothingness, and in a few weeks she felt sufficiently safe to resume creating a lovely space for herself externally, but also internally as she experienced deep gratitude and appreciation for me. She felt
genuine delight in her new home. However, I soon saw that it—and I—
began to be idealized as a perfect mother, a defence against the intolerable
helplessness. This defence was quickly worn down by outside events
revolving around her new neighbours, two young men whose penchant to play
loud music all day and night quickly became a menace. With her studio at
home, Laura needed peace and quiet to paint, but her reasoned request to
lower the volume was refused. Her landlord owned both properties [she
rented her house] but refused to intervene when the neighbours angrily refused
to negotiate possible solutions. Laura felt plunged back into her childhood
nightmare, the penetrating noise like her angry brothers, and a parent (the
landlord) oblivious to her suffering. Despite police assurances that the noise
was a city code violation, their directives to the neighbours to turn down the
music and limit it to certain hours were ignored; they turned it louder, in fact,
and soon began hurling insults at Laura whenever she came home. The police
and others soon came to represent the oblivious and impotent parents as well.
Frightened, Laura struggled to remain polite in her dealings with the
neighbours, but as she became a prisoner in her own home, and a prisoner of
the past, I wondered if she had somehow unconsciously recreated the
situation. As it turned out, this repetition of her past was just beginning.

Session no. 1

Laura said she had returned home the previous evening and ‘could sense
the neighbours’ rage. She turned on her own radio to drown out the noise,
both of their music and their hatred, and feeling unable to concentrate after
weeks of noise and harassment, she feared she would go mad. A moment later
her radio mysteriously changed stations, then went off. It soon came back on
again, then made a popping noise and ‘blew up’, the radio was dead. Laura
wondered if the energy of her neighbours' anger had caused her receiver to
blow.

Laura was at her wits' end, crying incessantly. Although her mother's
depression, anxiety and erratic behaviour had caused Laura to avoid contact
with her even as a child, knowing her mother (coincidentally) had
professional expertise in this area which might prove helpful, she called her.
She was surprised at her mother's eagerness to help, a moving rapprochement
with her mother which felt like a sort of silver lining to a particularly dark
cloud. It seemed as if an opportunity were being provided to experience
something she'd never felt in the relationship with her mother, or else had long
forgotten. Perhaps this accounted for my sense of something positive in this
material, despite Laura's feelings of hopelessness, even wishing to die. A
prolific dreamer, she was disturbed that for the first time in her lengthy
treatment she could not remember a dream. ‘I feel like a baby with that soft
spot in my head … like my dreams just escaped out of my head’. She then
recounted several dream fragments from the previous day.

I felt like a baby … lots of people around, lots of chaos … In
another dream I was in a hotel room with Kyle [a former
boyfriend], standing in front of a window. I was doing
a trick, making a blanket levitate, but I thought, I don't want to put on this show … Then I was with Sean [a friend]. He was trying to help me with something … maybe about my neighbours … I just wanted him to hug me … I looked at him thinking, he is too thin.

Through her tears Laura said she just wanted to be held. She wondered about the radio, about poltergeists and her fear that her house would be ‘filled with ghosts’. Laura had recounted childhood experiences of poltergeists shared by her entire family, which included lights turning on and off, cupboards opening by themselves and things inexplicably sailing to the floor. The levitating blanket brought to mind a time when Kyle, the old boyfriend, was dancing suggestively in front of a window. She declined his invitation to join him, feeling it was exhibitionistic and disgusting, and now associated it with the incest with her brothers. Sean, on the other hand, was described as a sensitive, helpful friend. Toward the end of the session, I asked Laura about the incident with the radio, feeling once again that it somehow had a positive aspect. Her response confirmed my impression, for she said, ‘Earlier that day I'd thought about wanting a new stereo system and I e-mailed my brother, James, for advice’. Since there had been virtually no contact between them for years, this call, like the one to her mother, was significant.

I addressed this material from the perspective of Laura's inner ghosts of her infancy and childhood which were filling her mind with fears of chaotic invasion from her family. I made it clear that I had no personal knowledge of poltergeists, the wires on her old radio may simply have short circuited, but that she was clearly experiencing a complex combination of emotions. Her anger at being that little baby, as we see in her dream, surrounded by and invaded by the chaos of violent anger and uncontained feelings, enragés her, and in that primitive state she is unable to tell the difference between her feelings and the reality outside. This is the nightmare she currently inhabits. The exhibitionistic ‘show’ she connects with the incest with her brother, a show she did not want to do. Whether these events of the past occurred or not, we do not know, but in any case, this sensitive baby felt ‘raped’ by the chaos around her at a time when she could not distinguish her internal world from that outside. Again, she ‘levitates’, a spiritual escape from the boundaries of her own mind which facilitate the split from her feelings.\(^1\) The tendency to idealize synchronistic phenomena also seemed related to this kind of ‘spiritual escape’. She cannot then understand the ‘show’ she is putting on for me as she relives these feelings in the treatment, and fears they are disgusting, even sexual.

Looked at symbolically, it was clear to me that her old ‘receiver’, her old state of mind filled only with hatred of her family, was exploding. She needed ‘a new system’ to think about their new relationship, a mental ‘stereo’ which must

\(^1\) A fuller explanation of this kind of mental escape to what Ferenczi called the astra is contained in a previous paper (Reiner 2004, pp. 321-22).
include both her emerging feelings of affection and need for her mother and brothers, as well as her hatred and disgust at what she'd experienced at their hands. This represented an explosive discovery, namely that despite their having done terrible things they were not all bad. Like Jung's union of opposites and Klein's theory of the depressive position, which allows the infant to view the mother as a whole object, good and bad (Klein 1946, p. 14), she is dealing with the resolution of duality. Asking her brother for help had precipitated in Laura what Bion described as a 'catastrophic change', a shift to depressive feelings of guilt about her hatred of her family that she now realizes has good as well as bad aspects. As Laura's rage at her brother collided with her positive feelings, it threatened to destroy a static mental equilibrium (Meltzer 1978, p. 110).

Since the brain consists of electrical impulses one might conjecture a relationship between the volatile internal situation and a volatile external situation of interference with the radio's electrical current, in an exteriorization phenomenon as hypothesized by Jung. But as Jung pointed out, any evidence of causality is beyond the limits of our knowledge. What I could do was help Laura understand that as her feelings of need erupted into consciousness, she'd also 'heard' internally the stereophonic sound of hatred and love for her brother, which felt to her like an emotional overload. ‘I don't know how to do that!’ she cried, ‘I can feel my mind exploding!’.

Discussion

The electrical mishap eloquently expressed Laura's internal world and, as Jung pointed out, because of the improbability of chance happenings there is an impulse to find meaning. ‘When an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate … when the individual … does not become conscious of his inner opposite, the world must perforce act out the conflict and be torn into opposing halves’ (Jung 1959, p. 71). However, he also found, ‘no proof whatever of the existence of real spirits’, rather considering such incidents as ‘the exteriorized effects of unconscious complexes’ (Jung 1960, para. 600). An exteriorized effect implies a cause, and though it cannot be known, the means by which these archetypal traces break into consciousness is never identified. However, these mysteries seem related to questions about the nature of intuition itself. The mother's capacity to receive her infant's emotional communications is based on projective identification, and while Bion stated that he saw no reason to hypothesize extra sensory perception, the means by which the child's projected feelings are received by the mother and how the energy of proto-thoughts is transmitted, remains a mystery.

There is psychoanalytic evidence, however, that Laura's assumption of a causal connection between anger and the physical demise of the radio, reflects her need to feel some control of emotional realities over which she in fact had no control. They are attempts to allay the helplessness accompanying the changes in her life, this mental birth which has brought her into contact with anxieties
in response to the violent projections of feelings are like words and actual
thrown objects which seemed to fly chaotically around her as a child. For a
small baby, these were overwhelming mental invasions, and her uncontained
fear and confusion deprived her of the mental digestion necessary for their
transformation into alpha elements. They cannot then be thought, but only
projected through phantasies, which she cannot distinguish from reality.

As we think about these feelings, Laura can entertain the thought that her
mother and brothers weren't all bad, but this upsets the foundation of beliefs
upon which her life has been built. Bion's theory of container and contained
describes the relationship between mental contents of feelings and thoughts,
and the container, the mind itself capable of thinking them. The danger of new
thought which threatens to destroy the containing function of the mind (Bion
1970, p. 95), is a mental dilemma also expressed metaphorically in the New
Testament. ‘You cannot put new wine into old skins’, Jesus warns, ‘for the
[fermenting] wine will explode the skins and the wine is lost’ (Matthew
9:17). Laura's old divided mind cannot contain the ferment and foment of
conflicting thoughts and feelings, and like her dreams, those old dream-like or
unmentalized feelings toward her family, like the wine, felt as though they had
‘run out of her head’. A new mind with dual channels of ‘stereophonic sound’
is required, which can bear the pain inherent in the containment of opposites.
For Jung the union of opposites is characterized as the annihilation of both
(Jung 1959, para. 124), giving rise to a new, third state—the self, mind or
soul.

Laura's emotional split is evident in her dream, where Sean—trying to help
— represented the good James, the brother whose help she solicited,
while Kyle and his exhibitionism reflected the bad James who had molested
her. Since she is the exhibitionistic one in the dream, however, we are also
seeing her struggle with the bad internal brother carried in her personality,
with whom she participated in incest, and in feelings of rage.

I have found that if an interpretation is accurate, all aspects of the dream
support its meaning in a cohesive story that emerges from the apparent chaos
of its symbols. So why, I asked myself later, is Sean represented as ‘too thin’?
I felt we could understand this in terms of the preceding ideas, for without the
union of good and bad aspects of the mother or the self, the personality feels
partial and without substance, ‘thin’ rather than fleshed out as a whole person.
As Laura becomes more real through consciousness of the duality of her
conflicting feelings toward her family, they become real people as well.

Session no. 2

Laura's search for a solution to the noise and harassment dragged on for
months and led her to numerous attorneys, city attorneys, mediators, etc., from
which the following startling synchronistic events emerged. She soon noticed
that all the players in this re-enactment of the past bore the same names as the
people in
her family. The neighbours' names, like her brothers, were James and Tom; her angry dismissive landlord, like her father, was named Doug, and the mediator had the same name as her mother. This was startling enough but as her contacts grew so did the coincidences, till it became clear that each name of each player was repeated twice, i.e., there was a ‘good’ James (the city attorney) and a ‘bad’ James (the neighbour), a ‘good’ Doug (her personal attorney) and a ‘bad’ Douglas (her landlord), etc. Some universal force seemed to have written and directed this scenario and cast all the characters to replicate the original cast. The difference was that a new ending was being written for this drama, as if to correct the original trauma. And so in this new version of the ‘play’ her mother's ‘lines’ were eerily like what she should have said years ago, had she been a protective mother. She had always vehemently denied James and Tom's violence against Laura, turning a blind eye, but she now stated, in reference to the neighbours, ‘James and Tom are being unreasonable … they're just petty little boys!’ Realizing how precisely this expressed the supportive words she'd longed for as a child, Laura felt chilled. ‘It's not the same, of course’, she said to me, for her mother was unconscious of the historical implications of her words. I pointed out that on an emotional level where some aspect of this is being played out, it feels the same to Laura. She did feel comforted by her mother's comments as a kind of reparation—a good enough reparation anyway, to paraphrase Winnicott's term. As if present reality were reaching a helping hand back into the past contained in Laura's mind, Laura heard her hardened mother, who had always adamantly refused to talk of feelings, say, ‘I know you're hurting but you need to be strong so we can fight this. It's not in your nature to let this get you down’. Never before had her mother indicated that she'd recognized Laura had a nature, or that they could fight something together, and for the first time Laura felt seen by her. These were synchronistic events separated by 50 years, for Jung's idea of synchronicity is not necessarily bound by the clock. ‘The inner image and outer event [may be] connected together by an objective, clock-time simultaneity, but that is not the decisive factor. The decisive factor lies in a subjectively experienced, relative simultaneity’ (Jaffé 1972, p. 20).

My interest in synchronicity, as I mentioned earlier, grew from my need for more understanding of these coincidences in Laura's treatment. At times, her idealization of them served as resistance against the underlying feelings, but she was also perplexed and tormented by these odd occurrences which gave the strange impression that Laura was living inside a poem. In fact, she was living the old nightmare in which external and internal reality was indistinguishable. I also found myself perplexed by this elaborate convergence, described by Jung as an expression of the upper reaches of the archetype—the psychoid—its transcendent or spiritual aspect where it ceases to be psychic (Totton 2003, p. 124). Jung conceived of the psychoid as a unitary background to existence where psyche, matter and time merge into a psychophysical space-time continuum, the realm from which synchronicity was felt to derive (Main 1997, p. 36).
One morning Laura called her mother sobbing. This in itself was a momentous change, as she had tried, even in childhood, to remain aloof and controlled in her mother's presence. ‘James won't stop screaming at me!’, she cried, to which her mother replied, ‘That bastard! But you've been screamed at a lot in your life and it hasn't killed you’. For Laura, this simple interchange carried the weight of fifty years, for she was again shocked and moved by her mother’s simple acknowledgment of what she had endured as a child. Time had collapsed, Laura's past felt to her simultaneous with the present, which seemed to provide the opportunity to become conscious now of what she couldn't learn then. The healing effects of these events became evident as Laura made plans to visit her family for Christmas, after years of estrangement. However, as we see in the next session, any danger of becoming transfixed by synchronicity's odd melding of space and time which unknown forces seem to conspire to bring into play, is avoided by remaining focused on the emotional meaning.

Session no. 3

Just prior to her trip home, another reunion evolved out of this situation when her brother, James, called to visit. He had never visited before but reconnecting over the stereo had opened the door. Laura's fear of activating memories of his violent abuse had kept her away from him for years, but now feeling so much in need she dared to have him over, and to admit that she needed his help.

The next day she reported to me with disbelief, ‘My brother was here!’, clearly savouring the sweet feeling that he had provided a protective presence against the neighbours’ hatred. With some irony she added, ‘James (the brother) was protecting me from James (the neighbour)!’ Intrapsychically, she made further progress toward resolving the split, as she allowed James, her good internal brother, to protect her from James, her violent brother. On her visit home, she slept in her childhood bedroom, ‘in the same bed where the incest took place’. At this site of countless nights of restless fearful sleep, Laura, now feeling safer with her mother, and with her internal mother, slept like a baby.

That night Laura remembered a dream image—she was gazing into my eyes. She had an association to sitting with her mother at Christmas, feeling uncharacteristically safe in her presence. It was the first time they'd discussed her brothers’ violence, which her mother now acknowledged, even admitting to having felt frightened herself. ‘She still can't understand my feelings’, Laura said, ‘but I knew I had you for that’. With a mother/me now inside her mind who can understand what she feels, she was able to make a healthy split between the good and bad mother, a beginning development toward integration. I considered that Laura may be splitting the transference, with me as good and her mother as bad (and as we'll see later, to some extent this proved to be true); however, she was able both to appreciate her mother's helpfulness and recognize her 'craziness and hysteria'.
Schore describes the significance of the infant's gaze as a primary factor in the development of healthy attachment. ‘It is hypothesized that maternal regulated high intensity socioaffective stimulation … particularly occurring in … face-to-face reciprocal gaze transactions, generates and sustains positive affect in the dyad. These transactions induce particular neuroendocrine changes which facilitate the expansive innervation of deep sites in orbitofrontal areas’ (Schore 1994, p. 65). Laura's dream was evidence of her increasing ability for attachment and affect regulation, also indicated by her ability to feel safe sleeping at her mother's home where she'd spend so many sleepless nights.

I wondered how to understand this dramatic change in their relationship. It seemed evident that positive aspects of her relationship with her mother which had been split off had been reintegrated. However, in addition to this change in Laura's perception, her own contact with feelings of need and vulnerability may have allowed her mother to soften her defences against such feelings as well. She seemed pleased now to have got her child back, albeit one with far more conscious knowledge than her mother. Having experienced her primitive states of terror and rage had allowed Laura to navigate this current ‘breakdown’, a break through of those primitive states which she could now begin to feel rather than project back into her mother.

Session no. 4

Laura's legal efforts required the landlord to be more attentive to her needs, but the neighbours became more vindictive, creating new disturbances. Helpless, she felt her mind exploding with rage, and she couldn't think. ‘But then I thought about what you said yesterday …’ [I had connected her inability to think with feelings of emptiness and isolation in the incubator], ‘… and I tried to think about what I really wanted. I realized I wanted to talk to my Mom … so I called her. It felt good to be able to call, and by the time we hung up, the neighbours were quiet’.

Since the neighbours usually continued their attacks all evening, she wondered whether releasing her anger had somehow allowed them to let go of theirs. I told her that we were not in a position to know whether or not her shift from divisive anger at the neighbours to a loving connection of need for her mother had affected the external situation, but what I could say was that it had affected her internal situation. Her rage at her raging internal brothers was transformed by her capacity for emotional attachment. Her ability to think about her need for a good mother had helped Laura get out of the helpless terror of the incubator state of mind, substituting a conscious thought for the mental ‘act’ of rage. She then told me that she had asked her mother last night about her birth and her time in the incubator.

Laura's question about whether her call to her mother caused the neighbours’ hatred to abate again raised the question about whether and how an unconscious internal conflict can be acted out in the external world, to ‘happen outside, as fate’ (Jung 1959, p. 71). It reflects Jung's perspective of a psychophysical
space-time continuum, where the energy of a thought or feeling, like Einstein's notion of the equivalence of matter and energy, may be transformed and given mass. From this perspective, a projection might be seen not just as phantasy but as capable of affecting a real event. Klein defines projective identification as an unconscious phantasy. Bion adds to this the notion of projective identification as a means of communication between mother and infant facilitated by the mother's capacity for 'reverie', but does not make the link between mind and matter expressed in Jung's idea of a 'catalytic exteriorization phenomena', where unconscious thought may take material form (Main 1997, p. 72).

On a primitive level, Laura's feelings of helplessness as she finds that she cannot control her objects with her thoughts, may stimulate the belief in the causal factor of synchronicity. This gives power to the illusion of omnipotent control where there is no space for the thought, ‘Where is mother’, and no need for it, for there is no separateness. Nor can there be any attachment. Fonagy describes how the mother's capacity to contain emotion ‘[provides] empirical support for the notion that an infant's sense of self emerges from the affective quality of the relationship with the primary caregiver’ (Fonagy et al. 2002, p. 2). Affect regulation, the product of that primary relationship, is a prelude to mentalization (ibid., p. 5) defined as ‘the process by which one realizes that having a mind mediates our experience of the world’ (ibid., p. 3). Although Laura still wants to believe in the magic of her thoughts, her capacity to regulate her rage revealed a greater capacity for attachment.

The next session—a Monday—offers another look at the energy of unmentalized proto-thoughts, with particular reference to problems of attachment.

**Session no. 5**

A woman was nursing her baby. The way she held it I was worried the baby would get crushed. Then the mother held the baby above her - the mother had something on her chest, like a metal bar, and the milk was squirting up and pouring into the baby's mouth. I thought, isn't it too fast, too much? How does it connect with its Mom that way?

Laura felt terribly frightened and confused. She imagined the hard bar like the tubes and needles and machines of the incubator. Her experience in the incubator in the absence of an attachment to her mother reflects the foetal state of mind described by McCaig ‘… in the gap between birth and life, womb and world … a netherworld existence filled with danger, isolation, uncertainty …’ (McCaig 1997, p. 59). The issues of attachment in this dream seemed related to that neonatal experience where she is left with unanswered questions—how does she bear the feelings of need for a now separate mother? How does she connect with her mother in order to get fed? And she becomes curious about what it means to be connected to me. At this level, my absence over weekend breaks causes intense terror, helplessness and yearning, for catapulted back to that gap between womb and world, she feels she has lost all connection with
me. These profound feelings are difficult to bear for us both, and I felt the frustration about how to connect with this little incubator baby, lost and alone, who is not yet mentally born. To that baby between womb and world, my words felt like too much, too fast, and in later sessions we saw that for that incubator baby, any words feel like the mechanical probings of well-meaning doctors she had to endure at that time. Dealing with this in the transference helped her to differentiate my words from painful actions, yielding some relief from those persecutory feelings.

Session no. 6
A few sessions later, there was finally evidence of Laura's anger. She dreamt that her friend, Jill, was eating an ugli fruit, pulling out pieces of the flesh from the peel like an orange. ‘I had one too but I wasn't eating it’.

Laura had never eaten an ugli fruit, she said, then added, ‘Jill has been very angry lately … those are ugly feelings’. I pointed out to Laura that she has not yet really become aware of her own anger and destructiveness toward me, which she finds terrifying and ugly. Her need to idealize me was a necessary defence which, despite interpretations of the negative transference, she had clung to. Once she saw me as separate, these ‘ugly’, primitive feelings began to emerge. In response to overwhelming feelings of vulnerability, cruel aspects of herself, identified with her brothers, came painfully to the fore.

Duality and the capacity to think

Session no. 7
Although still bedevilled by her neighbours, Laura felt less broken. She was feeling sad that day to be losing a much appreciated assistant, and was also anticipating missing me during our upcoming weekend break. She dreamt she had two wedding rings on her hand. She tried to get them off but couldn't. In another dream fragment there was a woman designer in a beautiful house. She had a big inverted bell in the middle of the house, sort of like a womb, which she could ring with this big stick. You could reach down into the middle of the house and ring it.

Laura thought the house looked like hers. She said she often has a similar image of ringing a big bell at the centre of the earth which causes ‘all the ghosts to come out of the earth—I guess like bringing the ghosts into harmony so the disharmony goes elsewhere’. She does have a bell with a beautiful sound which makes her feel centred, ‘as if everything lines up in my head’. She described the stick in the earth as ‘a kind of tap root seeking water’. This reminded her of a fleeting feeling she sometimes has in our sessions of a root going down the centre of her brain, and she feels connected and centred. The woman in the dream reminded her of an interior designer she admires, someone ‘with a clear vision, rigorous in her work’.
The *rings*, she said, were plain gold bands. Laura has been divorced for twenty years but said she would like to get married again. She feels perhaps she sabotages herself, having internalized her family's view of her as crazy, and then wondered if the rings meant she is married to her parents (the two rings). This brought to her mind the incest.

There was a feeling of confusion in this session, and I was having great difficulty understanding the dreams. Toward the end of the session Laura said, ‘One of the rings was on my ring finger, the other on my middle finger’. Together with her associations and the feeling in the room, this gave me a sense that the issue in this very condensed dream was duality. Her first comment about losing her assistant indicated feelings of loss and abandonment, implicit in which were feelings of attachment, also reflected in the wedding rings. However, while the ring finger symbolized marriage, love and connection, I felt that the ring on the middle finger stood for the hostile gesture—‘giving the finger’—with its aggressive sexual significance. Her sense of attachment then is tainted, confused by these conflicting feelings, so to whom is she really married—love or hate, attachment or detachment from life? The inverted bell, which I agreed represented a womb, was touched by the same conflict, with the stick or ‘tap root’ as a kind of ambiguous penis of creation and destruction. While I might be the ‘interior designer with clear vision’ to see into her ‘interior’ world, on a primitive level where she feels such terror of abandonment, the ‘tap root’, like an umbilicus, connects her like a foetus to *my* interior, where she feels safe from separateness, loss and weekend breaks. Her feelings of terror and need, however, become indistinguishable from her rage, which is felt to invade me like an aggressive penis, to ream me out of any babies or patients she fears are inside me when she isn't there. In this phantasy that we are one, she imagines a sense of harmony between us. Awareness of our separateness, on the other hand, arouses all the ‘ugly’ and unharmonious feelings of jealousy, loss, sadness and rage.

There were double meanings to ‘ring’ as well—not just the rings worn on the fingers but the ringing sound of the bell. I felt there was evidence here of many splits, including two internal sounds she hears but cannot distinguish—one of beautiful harmony or love toward me and the other of unharmonious hatred for an absent mother/me, a kind of echo of the imagery in *Session no. 1* of Laura's emerging stereophonic feelings. I felt that my confusion in the session had to do with my pain at having to contain such powerful projections of need, terror and vulnerability, as well as the confusion of these multiple splits in consciousness.

These complex dualities served as background to my understanding, but I did not, of course, go into all these details with the patient. I interpreted Laura's dilemma at having such disparate feelings, and her belief that a harmonious feeling between us can exist only if she destroys all awareness of our separateness and all rivals inside of me—as she said, the disharmony ‘goes somewhere else’. But the apparent harmony that results from such projections actually precludes any real harmony, as her feelings of envy, loss or jealousy become unavailable to

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thought. She expresses the idea of integration in her association to the tap root in the centre of her brain when she feels connected to herself, like a kind of corpus callosum uniting the dual hemispheres of the brain. The problem is she has no way of distinguishing feelings which have been projected, and her ‘harmonious ghosts’ are still ghosts, her internal objects which she believes she can control through projection. This can be seen more clearly in the next session.

**Session no. 8**

Laura sounded overwhelmed. She recounted her latest efforts to get justice in a way which aroused feelings in me of being overwhelmed as well. She poured out the details till I felt I was being subjected to the same noise to which she has been subjected all these months. The confusion about her feelings which we saw in the last session, left her able only to project them, as she did here with me.

I was at the courthouse and saw all these files of people who need help. My mother was there and she said, ‘I've read hundreds of files like this’. I felt some comfort knowing that.

Her dream and my countertransference led me to think that despite all her knowledge, intuition, legal and psychoanalytic thoughts about her neighbours, she has no way at the moment to think about or organize it, no ‘files’. The neighbours' loud music represents the ‘noise’ of her own uncontained feelings flooding her mind with anxiety, anger, helplessness, which she again projects into her neighbours, or into me. She is then always in danger of their being violently projected back into her. At this primitive protomental level she cannot think, but wants to rely on an idealized mother who is felt to have all the answers. The idea in the dream that her mother has read ‘hundreds of files’ seemed like a comforting reassurance, as if all the feelings were contained. She is not really comforted by this, however, for despite her mother's professional experience, or mine, she knows that she herself cannot think about what she has filed away. She fears too that I am unable to contain this flood of anger and anxiety to help her out of her morass. It was disturbing for her to see that the noise of her brothers' violence is part of her inner world, and that it is this loud internal music which she needs to turn off so she can begin to think about her feelings. When I pointed this out she calmed down, for there was relief in the awareness of her need to take responsibility for her feelings. This provided enough space in her mind for her to resume her creative work.

**Session no. 9**

There were repercussions to her efforts to think about rather than project her anger, for she then began to feel frustrated and anxious, as well as angry at me. She raged again about the neighbours, and I interpreted that in a way she
has come to ‘enjoy’ her rage, as it appears to make her powerful and rid her of painful feelings. At first this made her even more angry—‘It doesn't feel like enjoyment!’ But she then became thoughtful and said, ‘But I guess I like it more than thinking’.

There were two unopened boxes in a closet and I had to take them out. One was good and one was in some way bad or dangerous, so I was opening them carefully. You were there to help me.

She does in fact have two unopened boxes at home. ‘One is a new fax machine which copies and scans and does everything … the smaller box is a stand for my computer, to put the screen on to take it to eye level’. She thinks in the dream that the smaller box is the most dangerous, though she doesn't know what the danger was.

I felt that the ‘stand’, which holds and supports her computer represented the support or container for her mind, i.e., a foundation on which to stand that might enable her to see, to think rather than collapsing into mindless rage. Rage destroys both the container—her mind—and its contents, in this case feelings of jealousy, helplessness, sadness, etc., leaving her empty of all but her anxiety about the damage done by her unconscious attacks. I pointed out that since the computer stand seemed the more dangerous of the two, that thinking and feeling appear more dangerous to her than mindlessness. The other box—the fax machine—represents the kind of mind that is only a facsimile of her mother, or of me, whom she can copy, but without any separateness or real emotional connection. Like her dream about the files, information may be collected or even filed away in separate boxes, but not thought about in an integrated way.

Laura responded to this interpretation by telling me that a friend had come home with her last night and saw Laura's fear as she entered her house. ‘Stand up’, her friend said, ‘you have to stand up and walk in with your strength’. I pointed out that it is her ability to think which gives her strength, while raging at the neighbours results in further fear of inciting their rage. After a moment she said, ‘I just realized something … thinking is different from acting’.

Laura's realization was a profound one, and reflects Bion's idea of thinking as a difficult, often hated task. He writes, ‘The human animal has not ceased to be persecuted by his mind and the thoughts usually associated with it … Refuge is sure to be sought in mindlessness, sexualization, acting out, and degrees of stupor’ (Bion 1970, p. 126). Intense resistance to the pain of mental development may be one factor in the receptivity to synchronicity, as feelings are projected and split from consciousness. This may relate to Jung's statement that when the energy of consciousness is lowered through activation of an archetype, energy of the unconscious is heightened and unconscious contents flow more readily into consciousness' (Main 1997, p. 18). At the same time, however, heightened consciousness of unconscious contents might also facilitate awareness of an underlying unity of which we are generally unaware, except, as
Jung said, ‘in acute psychological states (emotionality, depression, shock, etc.) or, more frequently, with individuals characterized by a peculiar or pathological personality structure, where the threshold to the collective unconscious is habitually lowered. People with creative genius also belong to this type’ (ibid., p. 107). If sufficient mental development has taken place one may be better able to tolerate a transcendent experience such as this without seeking refuge in primitive defences.

We are dealing with the borders of the mind in the balance between consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and insanity. Like Laura, some individuals seem to be lightning rods for synchronistic events, which draw them inexorably into their orbit. Her sensitivity as an artist includes an ability to be in touch with transcendent aspects of experience simultaneously, and the relationship to synchronicity seems difficult to ignore. However, on a primitive level she was caught in a complex maelstrom of violent projections, introjections and re-projections, which early on proliferated into the need to split and project, sometimes into far-reaching planes of existence. Because of the traumas she endured in early childhood, her family had served as apt receptacles for her projections of anger and control. When her own feelings of anger, vengeance and desire to control others emerged more overtly in the transference, she could begin to take back some of these projections and see these darker aspects of herself as well.

**Summary**

We are often impressed by the uncanny coincidences of synchronistic events and the capacity of sensitive individuals to enter what Jung called ‘a unified psychophysical space-time continuum’ (Jaffé 1970, pp. 151-52). It may give them, and us, the sense of their being one with the universe and balanced within themselves. The preceding clinical material illustrates that underlying this apparent oneness with the external world may also be a mind divided from itself.

An elaborate web of synchronistic experiences in Laura's life raised questions about their possible meaning. So many aspects of her past were replayed that questions as to the origin or meaning of these synchronous events were difficult to dismiss, despite my ignorance of what that meaning might be. Ultimately, left with the question of how to deal clinically with these ‘numinous phenomena’, I observed how assignments of causal meaning may reflect infantile feelings of helplessness and dread of the unknown, which give rise to primitive beliefs in omnipotent control of one's objects. Laura's realization in Session no. 9 that ‘thoughts are different from actions’ reflects the need for conscious awareness of unmentalized thoughts. In the absence of an emotional container to hold and mirror the infant's internal experience, the child can only project these unmentalized thoughts. Consistent with Jung's view of exteriorization
phenomena, the question was raised of whether the energy of these projected thoughts can affect physical reality and influence matter, where ‘problems of which people are unconscious can give rise to exteriorization … manifest[ing] themselves outwardly one way or another’ (Jung 1950, para. 769). However, this remains a speculative notion and the means by which these projections might manifest themselves also remains unanswerable. Jung's statement in 1919, that he saw ‘no proof of real spirits’ (Jung 1960, para. 600), was later amended when he wrote, ‘I no longer feel as certain as I did in 1919 when I wrote this sentence … To put it bluntly, I doubt whether an exclusively psychological approach can do justice to the phenomena in question’. Postulates of quantum physics and a space-time continuum had opened up for him ‘an idea of transpsychic reality underlying the psyche’ (Main 1997, p. 71).

There are realms beyond our knowledge whose existence we can at times like these get a glimpse of, glimpses which provide the creative source of artistic endeavours of all kinds. As I have attempted to show through these sessions, in order to obey the laws of nature, and human nature, to which we as physical beings are subject, awareness of emotional life as a precondition of thought is critical, for it provides a foundation from which these higher states of mind can be contemplated while preserving the capacity to distinguish reality from phantasy.

Jung saw the psychoid, the transcendent aspect of the archetype, as the source of synchronicity. Bion's own transcendent view is apparent in his statement that what passes as ‘improvement’ in a patient, ‘may be a denial of mystical qualities in the individual’, but he also notes, ‘The opposite error sees deep mental disturbance as evidence of genius’ (Bion 1967, p. 157). This seems relevant to some of the questions raised here if we consider Bion's simple description of mental development as ‘an increased capacity to grasp reality and a decrease in the obstructive force of illusions’ (Bion 1963, p. 51). We can see in the clinical material presented here that the assignment of causal connections to synchronous events may at times obscure or deny awareness of painful primitive feelings, thereby interfering with thinking and mental development.

Jung's view of synchronicity as an acausal phenomenon does not preclude what we can know of its effects on us as it provides a glimpse into mystery and our own elusive wholeness. It allows us access we do not normally have to the union of mind and matter where we as psychical beings are part of the fabric of the world in which we live. This, as Jung noted in his patient's dream of the scarab, provides a valuable tool, for by opening a window into that unknown realm we are given an opportunity to contemplate these mysteries of a universe beyond understanding. We are thereby also afforded an opportunity to attend to and experience whatever profound early feelings this evokes about this ultimate reality, and to translate them into thought as a means of facilitating mental growth.
La synchronicité rend floue les détails de la psyché et du physis. Cette danse invisible de la matière et de l'esprit suggéra à Jung l'idée d'une interconnexion entre les événements physiques et ceux de l'esprit réfléchissant un 'continuum d'espace-temps psychophysique' unifié. Son idée d'extériorisation met en avant la notion selon laquelle les pensées inconscientes peuvent se manifester dans le monde extérieur. J'ai mis cela en relation avec la théorie de Bion sur la pensée, dans laquelle les pensées qui devraient être un prélude à l'action deviennent actions par elles-mêmes, projections de pensées non penses. A partir d'un travail clinique exposé en détail avec des rêves, j'explore ensuite les effets d'un traumatisme précoce sur le développement de la capacité à penser, et la façon dont la synchronicité est liée à des projections de vécus traumatiques de la petite enfance qui n'ont pas été 'mentalisées'.


La sincronicità rende indistinti i confini tra psiche e physis. L'invisibile danza tra mente e materia suggerì a Jung un'interconnessione tra eventi mentali e fisici riflettenti ‘un continuum spazio-tempo psicofisico unificato’. La sua idea di exteriorizzazione generò la nozione che pensieri inconsci possano manifestarsi nel mondo esterno. Io ho connesso ciò alla teoria bioniana sul pensare, dove i pensieri, che dovrebbero essere un preludio all'azione, divengono essi stessi azione, proiezione di pensieri non pensati. Attraverso un dettagliato lavoro clinico con i sogni vorrei esplorare gli effetti di un trauma precoce sulla capacità di pensare, e il modo in cui gli eventi sincronici si relazionano alle proiezioni di esperienze traumatiche precoci che non sono state mentalizzate.

La sincronicidad difumina los límites entre la psique y la physis. Esta danza invisible de mente y materia sugirió a Jung la interconexión entre los eventos físicos y los mentales, ella refleja un ‘espacio-tiempo psicofísico continuon’ unificado. Su idea de externalización adelantó la noción de que los pensamientos inconscientes pueden manifestarse en el mundo exterior. He relacionado esto con la teoría del pensamiento de Bion, donde los pensamientos, que deben ser un preludio para la acción, se transforman en actos en si...
mismos, proyecciones de pensamientos no pensados. A través de un detallado trabajo clínico con sueños exploraré los efectos de traumas tempranos en el desarrollo de la capacidad de pensar, y la manera en la cual los eventos sincronísticos se relacionan con las proyecciones de las experiencias traumáticas tempranas que no han sido mentalizadas.

**References**


**In memoriam: Dr. Barbara Stephens**

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Barbara Stephens (1940-2004), a gifted Jungian analyst whom I was lucky to count as a friend.

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