Narrative Lessons for the Psychotherapist

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Psychotherapists can learn a great deal about their craft from reading literary fiction. This paper will utilize Franz Kafka's short story, *The Metamorphosis*, to describe and discuss some of the parallels between the therapist-reader's relationship with a work of fiction and a therapist's psychotherapeutic relationship with his patient.

There are many parallels between a reader's relationship with a work of fiction and a therapist's psychotherapeutic relationship with his patient. To both encounters each party brings an inner world.1 The inner world of the author finds expression in the narrator and the interactions of the characters in the story. The reader brings his life experience and culture, present life situation, strengths and limitations, and idiosyncratic blind spots. The interaction between a great literary work and the almost infinite variety of human experience of its readership allows the story to be read at many different levels. Although the text, to a certain degree, will insure a commonality of experience, no two readers take away the exact same experience from a reading—and rereading—of a literary masterpiece. A very similar argument could be made regarding the treatment of a given patient. The same patient seeing five hypothetical therapists could conceivably undergo five very different treatments.

This report focuses on two dimensions of literary fiction that are instructive for the psychotherapist: how the story is told, and the effect of the telling on the therapist-reader. We will be looking at the effect the author's story has on the therapist-reader and comparing it to the effect that the patient's narrative has on the therapist.** It is the thesis of this paper that the limiting factors in both endeavors are the capacity for, and

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**The author is aware of but does not emphasize the many differences between the ways authors and patients tell their stories. Similarly, there are many differences between the written and spoken word, especially the context, tone, cadence, and unspoken dimension of the spoken word.

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openness to, introspection, self-confrontation, and emotional honesty that the therapist-reader and the therapist bring to their respective endeavors.

In particular, this report will utilize Franz Kafka’s short story, *The Metamorphosis,* to teach about narrative knowledge. As Charon, Banks et al. have stated:

Evaluating patients requires the skills that are exercised by the reader: to respect language, to adopt alien points of view, to integrate isolated phenomena (be they physical findings or metaphors) so that they suggest meaning . . . (p. 601).

Kafka, as omniscient narrator in *The Metamorphosis,* tells a tale that requires the reader’s dynamic involvement. The story abounds with misleading assumptions, perversion of traditional ideas, intricacies of deception, projective identification in families—all tinged with irony and paradox. Just as the therapist must listen to the patient’s story on its many reverberating levels, the therapist-reader of *The Metamorphosis* must constantly suspend judgment around “knowing,” question assumptions, confront inconsistencies, and welcome complexity. The purpose of this report is to assist in the clinician’s refinement of those skills in which the dynamic reading of fiction and competent patient evaluation, formulation, and treatment overlap.

*What Literature Offers the Psychotherapist*

The use of literature to heighten therapist sensitivity has a long history and has much to recommend it. Literary masterpieces defy pat answers and do not yield to facile psychiatric interpreting or superficial diagnosing. The provision of a compelling object of displacement for study and concern frees up the reader-therapist to disclose unself-consciously those same attitudes which, if elicited by a clinical situation, might be suppressed or, at least, not discussed as openly. Rereading the same story provides a sustained, contemplative opportunity to grasp elusive and complex intrapsychic and interpersonal experience—an opportunity that may realize greater significance in this era of shortened hospital stays, limited insurance payments for long-term therapy, and the ascendancy of the biological therapies. Through an appreciation of the craft of storytelling, psychotherapists can arrive at a deeper understanding of their patients’ narrative style and its effect on them. Patients, often unconsciously, mold the therapist’s attitudes toward the material they provide just as the author through selection, juxtaposition, timing, omission, irony, and other devices influences the reader’s reaction to the characters and events portrayed.

*A summary of *The Metamorphosis* is provided in the Appendix.*
And, finally, literature, through its rich rendering of the human condition, can replenish in its therapist-readers the nurturing they daily offer others.

**Misleading Assumptions and Metaphorical Possibility**

Kafka brilliantly camouflages from the reader’s attention two facts of the story that the reader comes to take for granted: the fact that Gregor’s bedroom door is locked and the fact that Gregor works for his father’s creditor. Because the drama builds around whether Gregor can open the door himself and the family’s potential humiliation in front of the chief clerk, the fact that the door is locked gets lost as a focus for curiosity and inquiry. Why, one might wonder, would a man in his late twenties lock his bedroom door while sleeping in his parents’ home? The narrator suggests that in his job as a traveling salesman, Gregor had routinely locked his door in the various hotels he frequented and that he carried this habit over to home. Although the narrator provides this explanation, the therapist-reader, as elaborated below, has the opportunity, supplied by other data the narrator provides, to consider other explanations.

Similarly, patients tell their stories hoping, often unconsciously, to achieve a particular effect on the therapist. Wishing to be liked by the therapist, the patients portray themselves in a less than objective fashion. Less frequently, but with no less persistence, other patients dedicate themselves to proving their worthlessness. Similarly, Kafka, as narrator, selectively introduces information that permits the reader to evolve an ever-deepening grasp—emotionally and cognitively—of the Samsa household. For example, the reader learns that Gregor works for the man to whom Gregor’s father owes large sums of money (after his father’s bankruptcy several years earlier). Furthermore, the reader is informed that Gregor intensely dislikes his father’s ex-boss and can not wait for the day when he has paid off the debt and can, finally, pursue his own interests. Kafka further enlists the reader’s sympathy for Gregor by juxtaposing two events: the chief clerk’s vicious denigration of Gregor’s work performance in front of his family and Gregor’s monstrous metamorphosis. However, the reader, similar to the therapist who is persuaded that the account given can be understood only as the patient renders it, has the opportunity to ask other questions, form other hypotheses.

Is it possible, for example, that Gregor is not simply the victim of his family’s unfortunate circumstances? Nowhere in the story is the reader told that Gregor, in order to pay off his family’s debt, has to work for this very same creditor. Certainly Gregor could find any job he liked to pay off the debt. Consideration of this possibility leads the reader to entertain other
Questions. What interests does Gregor have? Why is his most prized possession a framed picture of a woman with a fur muffler? Gradually the reader comes to question whether in fact Gregor is a passive victim of his family’s unfortunate circumstances or, more probably, someone who blames the world for his own unacknowledged inadequacies.

As the reader begins to question misleading assumptions, deeper realities emerge. Could it be, for example, that Gregor locks his bedroom door at home just as he does in the hotel when he is on the road as a traveling salesman because to him his home does not feel any safer than the hotel? Or, conversely, could Gregor’s locking his hotel door have been not merely a “habit” but, more tellingly, a sign of how unsafe he felt wherever he was, a feeling that his upbringing has firmly implanted? Has Gregor replicated in the dog-eat-dog world of his workplace the predatory dynamics that characterized his household while growing up? Just as a person does not have to be an orphan to feel parentless, a person can live at home and still feel homeless.

Thoughts about the locked door generate new possibilities. At the beginning of the story, Gregor struggles to turn the key to open his bedroom door. Later, as his sister Grete leaves his bedroom, we learn that she locks the door. Gregor’s door, the reader now has the opportunity to appreciate, has been locked from both sides. Additional questions present themselves. Is there more than one key to Gregor’s room? If there is, was the outside key in the door all the time or does only Grete have possession of it? If the key was in the door all the time, why did the family not see it? If it was not, why did Grete not tell her parents she had the key? If, on the other hand, there is only one key, then Grete has taken Gregor’s key and used it to lock his door from the outside. Metaphorical possibilities now abound. Who controls access to Gregor or Gregor’s access to a free world? Does Gregor deny others access to him? Are his inner doors locked no matter what attempts others make? Are others forced, or do they choose to violate him to make contact? How is the locked door at home connected to the “consideration” that Mr. Samsa continually demands and Gregor provides?

Consideration

In his writings on contextual therapy, Boszormenyi-Nagy emphasizes that relationships between parents and children are like no other relations. Parents provide for their children biologically, emotionally, materially, and in the kinds of responsibilities they assume. If parental functions have been dispatched in a fashion that merits trust, provides fairness, and accepts
“personal accountability for relational consequences,” then these parents have earned the right to expect certain considerations (loyalties) from their children. These expectations are not to be equated or confused with the “tyrannical shoulds” of enmeshed or controlling families. Conversely, in those instances where parents have abandoned, betrayed, exploited, or hated their offspring, they forfeit some measure of expectable filial consideration and loyalty.

Like some of our patients, Kafka appears to tell a story about filial devotion and family gratitude. A young man postpones his own career to support his family that has been beset by financial misfortune and wracked by physical illness. Above and beyond the call of duty, this considerate son pays off family debts, sets aside additional savings, and even plans to pay for his sister to study music the following year at the conservatory. Or, does Kafka wish to convey an entirely different message?

Some might argue that Kafka actually depicts in *The Metamorphosis* the perversion of Boszormenyi-Nagy’s concept of trustworthy relationships. Consideration as demanded by Mr. Samsa from his family does not represent a justified parental request for filial repayment. Exploitation, coercion, and deception masquerade as consideration. The reader learns that although Mr. Samsa’s business went bankrupt, some money survived the bankruptcy; that Mr. Samsa is capable of working, as is his asthmatic wife; that the household still maintains a large apartment and employs a maid and a cook; that Gregor’s sister appears to have little musical ability. Kafka, gradually and strategically, provides information that reveals how warped is the Samsa notion of consideration. Because Gregor shares in these basic familial assumptions, the reader forms a different conception of Gregor than Gregor has of himself. The reader’s experience with reference to Gregor and his family is quite similar to the process that takes place as a therapist listens to the patient’s narrative. The therapist gradually forms perceptions of the patient’s family and the patient’s place in it that differ from the patient’s view of these matters.

Great literature though, like the stories our patient tells us, presents situations that, at different junctures, yield different meanings. The enlightened reader, like the astute therapist, constantly entertains provisional hypotheses about what events may mean. For example, in the beginning of the story, before the reader comes to question Gregor’s unmitigated goodness, there seems little reason to doubt the assertion that his sister has musical talent. Gregor’s wish to contribute financially to her musical education seems both benevolent and admirable. However, as the reader begins to appreciate Gregor’s capacity for self-deception, the fact of Grete’s
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musical talent comes into question. On the one hand, the lodgers seem eager to hear Grete's performance but, judging from their negative reactions, she plays abysmally. On the other hand, the lodgers appear to be crass and opportunistic and the reader may hesitate to give too much credence to their reactions. The reader, like the clinician, must once again readjust perspective: Gregor's capacity for distortion does not necessarily mean he is wrong about everything. Perhaps Grete does have some talent. The lodgers may be poor judges of musical ability; and on this particular issue, Gregor's judgment may be accurate. The skillful reader, like the astute clinician, must be able to form provisional hypotheses, evaluate all the data in context, and not become so wedded to one point of view that it precludes the consideration of others.

**Personal Space**

*The Metamorphosis* depicts the progressive constriction of Gregor's space. Cut off from his family, he remains isolated in his room. As his space constricts even further, his structure and function change. In the first part of the story he cannot stand on his own feet. He becomes encased in a brittle body, easily bruised, upended, and crushed. He begins to lose his human qualities so that others treat his space differently. Those entering his room leave his window open to dissipate his foul odor. The family uses newspaper, that symbol of one's connection to the events of the external world, as a placemat for yesterday's garbage which is now Gregor's food. Feelings, such as shame, disgust, and loathing, impel this family to constrict Gregor's space further. Repeatedly, the reader learns of doors being shut to contain him in his own room or of doors being left insufficiently open so that he cannot get out.

Just as the reader of *The Metamorphosis* is invited to consider when exactly it was that Gregor's transmutation began, so too is the therapist called upon to appreciate which came first: the feeling or the behavior (did the person feel guilt as a result of stealing, or was it the pre-existing feeling of guilt and the consequent need for punishment that impelled the person to steal and get caught)? Gregor's space, it seems, does not become constricted as a result of his transformation into a bug; rather, his transformation into a bug captures the sense of constrictedness, brittleness, vulnerability, and loathing which have characterized his long-standing feeling about himself. The paradox of Gregor's monstrous metamorphosis is that he occupies no less of a compromised place in the life of the family after his metamorphosis than he did before it. In Part II of the story, his family contends over his space in a most self-revealing manner.
The Rendering of Character through Situation

Experienced clinicians know that asking their patients direct questions often does not yield the truth about their emotional lives. Instead, these therapists remind themselves: get the patient to tell a story. Ask questions in a way that facilitates the telling of the story. Become unobtrusive so that the storyteller becomes less and less aware of, or concerned about, the listener’s presence and presumed judgments. As the patient becomes totally absorbed in telling the story, which is now “up on the screen,” the listener becomes a therapeutic onlooker, privileged to “see” the patient in his/her natural state. The therapist gets to see the patient driving, as it were, instead of relying on answers to questions such as, “What are you like when you are driving?”

Kafka brilliantly reveals different dimensions of the character, motivation, and family position of Gregor’s mother and sister as they disagree over what to do about the furniture in Gregor’s room. Gregor’s mother wishes to keep Gregor’s furniture undisturbed and in his room. Part of her preference derives from her concern that if the furniture were removed it will give Gregor the impression that the family has given up hope for him. She is also concerned that if they move the chest away from the wall to the middle of the room, there will be less space for Gregor to move about. Her predominant motivations, however, are based on considerations other than Gregor’s real needs. First, the furniture is too heavy to move. Second, her husband might come home during the moving process, become upset and disruptive. And third, if they do not move the furniture, when Gregor finally returns to normal, he would “find everything unchanged and be able all the more easily to forget what has happened in between” (p. 116). Gregor’s sister’s motivations are equally complex. Having filled the vacuum left by their mother concerning the care of Gregor, Grete enjoys her status as the expert on Gregor’s needs. Combining childish recalcitrance and adolescent self-indulgence, Grete emphasizes Gregor’s need for space in a way that confirms her importance as his advocate. Grete clearly enjoys her adolescent triumph over her mother who, having abdicated her maternal responsibility, has lost credibility. Perhaps Grete’s intense interest in her brother’s welfare also serves to neutralize her envy of his status as the son in the family.

Kafka renders this struggle between mother and daughter with emotional complexity and irony. In interceding on her brother’s behalf, Grete actually separates Gregor from his remaining attachments:

They were clearing his room out; taking away everything he loved; the chest in which he had kept his fretsaw and other tools was already dragged off; they
were now loosening the writing desk which had almost sunk into the floor, the
desk at which he had done all his homework when he was at the commercial
academy, at the grammar school before that and, yes, even at the primary
school . . . (p. 118).

Gregor’s mother argues for giving him more space but her position is not to
be confused with genuine regard for her son. True, she did instinctively call
for a doctor when her husband called for a locksmith upon the first inkling
that something was amiss with Gregor. And yet, Gregor’s mother never
directly confronts her son’s dilemma or the family’s part in promoting it. It
is two months into his metamorphosis before Gregor hears his mother’s
voice, even though she is constantly in the same apartment with him.

**Story as Dream**

The school of object relations theory\(^{11}\) has lent a dynamic dimension to
the way we listen to our patients’ stories. By noting the invisible but
ever-present activity of the mental mechanisms of projection, introjection,
and reproj ection, we realize that there are no completely objective data in
interpersonal relations. The accounts our patients tell us of their emotion-
ally laden interactions with others are neither random nor unbiased. A
substantial degree of identification frequently characterizes these relation-
ships with others who represent externalized part-objects of our patients.
The more obvious workings of such mental mechanisms appear in
dreams. Here, projections of the dreamer, rather than simply coloring their
perception of others, populate the dream as other people or parts of other
people. Like puppets in a puppet show who initially seem autonomous but
who actually are creations of the puppeteer, characters in a dream, regard-
less of their existence in reality, are also productions of the dreamer.

*The Metamorphosis* can be read as a dream—Gregor is not quite sure
when he awakens whether he is still dreaming—in which Gregor’s family
members can be thought of as externalized parts of Gregor. The absolute
validity of such a reading is less important than the potential for new
meanings and connections that such a reading can generate. For example,
Gregor can experience himself as earnest, well-meaning, and straightfor-
ward as long as disowned parts of himself reside in the motivations of
others. He can think of himself as charitable and self-sacrificing so long as
his father lives out Gregor’s exploitative impulses. In less obvious ways,
Gregor’s mother, despite her initial call for medical help, also takes
advantage of him. She appears to collude in keeping from Gregor the true
state of the family’s finances. She is willing to occupy the sick role while
Gregor works, although when she has to work she does. She abdicates the

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care of her son to her daughter. Her hysterical attempt to restrain her husband from further injuring Gregor achieves little credibility: she already has passively participated in the destruction of her son’s spirit.

Reading the story as a dream makes a powerful point. If the assignment of one’s feelings to others can appear to motivate and characterize their existence, such a process must involve massive self-depletion. Gregor’s spiritual and physical death does not result from the existence in himself of hateful and destructive feelings; rather his self-annihilation comes from his unwillingness—some might argue inability—to acknowledge, own, and take responsibility for the existence of such feelings in himself. If Gregor could own up to his wishes to exploit, sacrifice, and annihilate others, he could empathically identify similar tendencies in others. Accepting these impulses as human, not demonic, he could control the expression of these impulses in himself and set limits on others who might wish to violate him.

The massive projection Gregor unconsciously employs leaves him defenseless and exhausted and consumed by his increasing inward fury. Since his destructive urges have been denied or projected, he can retaliate only indirectly. His moment comes when his sister is in the limelight, playing the violin in front of the lodgers with their parents looking on. Gregor inflicts his appearance upon the gaze of the lodgers in a scene calculated to disgrace his sister, humiliate his parents, and disgust the lodgers. Unable to secure genuine attention and recognition from his family, Gregor uses his physical deterioration both to command their attention and to retaliate. Out of touch with his murderous feeling up until the very end of his life, Gregor thinks of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible (p. 135).

The Phenomenology of Evil

Near the end of the story, Grete, Gregor’s sister says:

“My dear parents . . . things can’t go on like this . . . I won’t utter my brother’s name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it” (my italics) (p. 133).

Grete has opened up a Pandora’s box of unspeakable possibilities by dehumanizing her brother. Once Gregor is seen as no longer human, then it is possible to do monstrous things to him. This fact becomes clearer as Grete’s logic hurdles toward its inevitable conclusion:

“He must go . . . that’s the only solution, Father. You must just try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. . . . If this were Gregor, he would have realized long
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ago that human beings can’t live with such a creature, and he’d have gone away of his own accord (p. 134).

Repeatedly in the story, Kafka invites the reader, just as many patients invite their therapists, to consider questions about evil. Why are Gregor’s parents willing to exploit him? Why is Gregor willing to be a sacrificial lamb? Why is Grete, the person in the family rendered most sympathetic to Gregor, willing to dehumanize him and advocate for getting rid of him? Why does his own mother wait until two months after his metamorphosis to speak to him by name? If his sister has a key to his room why doesn’t she produce it and unlock the door?

These minidecisions, and the feelings that underlie them, incrementally combine to produce what might be called evil. Perhaps our patients’ parents, like Gregor’s, experienced sufficient deprivation to cause them to make decisions at their own children’s expense. Perhaps Grete senses her parents’ willingness to sacrifice her brother, and she unconsciously identifies with their aggression. And perhaps Gregor senses his parents’ wishes to be rid of him but finds it unbearably painful to acknowledge; instead he turns them into their opposite and sacrifices himself for their welfare. Underlying all of these decisions is a refusal of each person to acknowledge his/her own destructive impulses. Without such acknowledgment, however, there can be no responsibility for behaviors that emanate from such feelings. And with no responsibility, the door is open for evil to enter. As Eigen noted:

> If I feel you are the cause of my pain, I may find ways of justifying my wish to be rid of you, to treat you as an annoying bug and stamp you out. . . . The urge to make the irritating or tormenting other or self disappear can be lethal. . . . An individual or group may surrender to the idea that annihilation is how to get rid of what is bugging one (p. 20).

**The Vicissitudes of Empathy**

The reader who struggles with the text of *The Metamorphosis* soon realizes that achieving an empathic stance toward Gregor—or his family—is not easy. At first, the reader might feel sorry for Gregor, just as one feels sorry for any victim of a catastrophe. But sympathy is not empathy. When the chief clerk shows up at the Samsa household and harshly criticizes Gregor and his work, Gregor’s family oscillates between concern for their son’s predicament and the fear that Gregor will lose his job and they, in the process, their financial support. Given the apparent disabilities of the various family members, their concerns seem natural. As the story progresses and their exploitation of Gregor becomes more obvious, the reader may again feel sorry for him. But, as the story further reveals his
capacity for self-deception, the reader becomes first impatient with Gregor and then repelled. His metamorphosis into a bug, and a debilitated one at that, captures his essential characteristics that existed before the metamorphosis: annoying, loathsome, brittle, and easily crushed. At this point in the story, the reader’s empathy for him is at an all-time low. His family’s attitudes and behavior, however, become even more offensive and then more appalling than Gregor himself. It is bad enough when his father hits him with an apple and paralyzes him. But when Grete insists that Gregor is not Gregor but an It, the family becomes downright terrifying if not demonic. The reader now has a better appreciation of how Gregor may have become the human equivalent of a bug. As a result, the reader’s empathic connection to Gregor may again rise. At the same time, the reader is invited to imagine how he/she might respond in times of emotional despair and physical exhaustion, states that the Samsa family has been experiencing in the context of Gregor’s metamorphosis:

“We must try to get rid of it,” his sister now said explicitly to her father, since her mother was coughing too much to hear a word, “it will be the death of both of you, I can see that coming. When one has to work as hard as we do, all of us, one can’t stand this continual torment at home on top of it. At least I can’t stand it any longer” (p. 133).

The honest reader has to admit to the possibility, under such dire circumstances, of having feelings similar to the Samsas’—although most readers probably take comfort in the hope that they would act more humanely. It is the capacity of these readers of the story to locate such uncivilized impulses in themselves that permits some measure of empathy for the Samsa family.

A similar struggle takes place in the therapist who is involved in a treatment that plumbs the very depths of the patient’s destructive capacities. The therapist must find a way to love the most unlovable parts of the patient. To do so, therapists, like the therapist-readers of The Metamorphosis, must face in themselves the feelings of disgust and loathing, and the impulses to degrade, hold hostage, cannibalize, and annihilate the other.

In depicting such horrific arrangements that human beings make with each other, Kafka offers some important lessons for the clinician. Apparently, for many people, these pernicious arrangements are preferable to remaining unattached or disconnected. Sometimes, it appears, human attachment is even more important, or seems more necessary, than being true to oneself. In selecting for Gregor’s metamorphosis a creature as loathsome as a cockroach, Kafka captures the human tendency to avoid, judge, or even retaliate against human behavior that disgusts, that borders on evil.
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The therapist-reader’s struggle to achieve and retain empathy for the Samsas takes the story to its deepest level. Therapists’ capacity and relentless determination to do the same with the most intolerable parts of each patient—and with themselves—approximates the sufficient provision of love that such patients have missed.

**SUMMARY**

Literature has much to offer the psychotherapist. This paper has discussed some lessons for the psychotherapist contained in Franz Kafka’s short story, *The Metamorphosis*. The therapist, like the therapist-reader of this story, can empathize with Gregor’s monstrous change but still must hold him personally accountable. At the same time, the therapist-reader becomes increasingly impressed with the malignant nature of the Samsa household, and its role in generating Gregor’s capacity for self-deception. The story also instructs about the paradox of catastrophe: Gregor is treated no less respectfully after his metamorphosis than he was before it. The therapist is thereby reminded of the centrality of feelings in human affairs. The constriction of Gregor’s space does not cut him off from human feeling; rather, Gregor’s inability to access, know, and take responsibility for his own feelings, especially his destructive ones, results in his constrictedness and detachment. In thinking about the story as dream, or in imagining a patient’s account of a reality situation as if it were a dream, unseen mental process and content become more apparent. The disgusting, loathsome arrangements that people make with each other can evoke, be it in the therapist-reader or the therapist, reactions of aversion or hate. Such arrangements become more understandable when the importance, sometimes the necessity, of human attachment is appreciated. And finally, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* alerts us to a sometimes but powerful preference and countertransference pitfall: we don’t want to be bugged.

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**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX

Gregor Samsa, a young commercial traveler, wakes up early one rainy morning in his room in his parents’ apartment, transformed into a large bug. Unsure whether his metamorphosis is real or a bad dream, Gregor reflects on his dissatisfaction with his present employer. As a result of the collapse of his father’s business five years earlier, Gregor’s father is in debt to the man for whom Gregor is working. Gregor, now the sole support of his family, is working to pay off the debt which he estimates will take about five years. Gregor’s bedroom door is locked and he struggles to get out of bed. His parents, unaware of his metamorphosis, knock on his door and urge him to get up and out to work. A representative from work appears at the apartment to inquire after Gregor’s whereabouts. An awkward situation ensues: Gregor’s family’s loyalty oscillates between concern for their son’s predicament (which is still unknown to them) and fear that he will lose his job and they, in the process, their financial support. The company representative harshly criticizes Gregor and states that his work has been poor. From behind the door, Gregor makes an ineffectual verbal defense. Gregor’s mother, Anna, sends his sister, Grete, for a doctor. Gregor’s father, who remains nameless, calls for a locksmith.

Gregor agonizingly turns the key and opens the locked door. His parents and the work representative are horror stricken at his appearance. Gregor tries to defend with speech, which proves unintelligible. The work representative flees. Gregor’s father, filled with frenzy and repulsion, brandishing newspaper and cane, forces Gregor back into his bedroom.

Gregor is back in his room, cut off from the family, apprehensive, and concerned about the inconvenience he is causing them. Grete sets food out for him daily, although no family member talks to him or mentions him by name. The family is overcome with shame. The household cook asks to leave. The reader learns of Gregor’s generous support of his family at the expense of developing his own career. It also comes to light that some investments had survived the bankruptcy, some dividends had accrued, and some of Gregor’s earning exceeded expenses and were left over. Nevertheless, his father, mother, and sister must find jobs and they all do return to work.

For two months Grete takes most responsibility for Gregor’s care, but eventually his mother wishes to be more involved. Grete and her mother take Gregor’s furniture and belongings out of his room. His mother finally sees him and faints. Gregor’s father arrives home and, furious at Gregor, begins throwing apples at him and virtually paralyzes him the process.

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The family struggles to maintain and support itself; they are physically drained and emotionally in despair. They argue among themselves. A char-woman employed by the family treats Gregor matter-of-factly. The Samsas rent out a room to three lodgers who take their meals in the living room, displacing parent and sister to the kitchen. Grete plays the violin for the lodgers; the music lures Gregor into the living room and into the gaze of the lodgers. Gregor’s father, embarrassed by this, tries to corral the lodgers back into their room. Offended and indignant, they give notice, refuse to pay any rent, and prepare to leave. Grete suggests getting rid of “this creature.” Gregor dies in his locked room in March, about one-half year after his metamorphosis and is disposed of by the char-woman. Gregor’s father becomes more assertive and insists that the lodgers leave at once. Father, mother, and daughter leave the apartment for the first time in several months and take a train ride to the countryside. Surveying its future, the family decides its prospects are good.