Avoiding Emotions, Living Emotions

Sample Chapter

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Avoiding emotions, living emotions

One of our greatest difficulties as a species concerns our ability to experience emotions, a difficulty caused by defects in our mental development. The experiencing of emotions depends on a great deal of constant work, which in turn presupposes the integrity of the apparatus that allows them to be assimilated, managed and contained (Ferro 1999c, 2002h, 2006a).

Avoidance

We can compare protoemotions to ‘stocks of pinheads’ (I am referring to the sensoriality of which they are made) that have undergone various degrees of processing. Even in the best of situations (in the case of well-functioning minds) there is a superabundance of them, and extraordinary demonstrations of this can be found in group phenomena.

Without for the moment wanting to describe the various possible degrees of ‘cooking’, or of amalgability and containability, of protoemotional states, I would like to offer some reflections on how the AVOIDANCE of emotions is one of the main activities of our mind.

When one modality clearly prevails over the others, it becomes a symptom.

Generally we can say that we have evacuative mechanisms, the projection outwards of these ‘stocks of pinheads’, phenomena such as paranoia, schizophrenia, hallucinations, delusions, and then in some ways also different forms of autism.

We can evacuate into the body of the individual in the form of psychosomatic illnesses or into the social body in such forms as character disorders, criminality and collective stupidity.
Protoemotional states can be contained in spaces in the mind. Aggregates of compressed protoemotions form phobias if the strategy deployed is one of avoidance; obsessiveness, if the strategy is control; hypochondria, if the strategy involves confining it to one organ of the body; and so on.

It must be repeated that avoidance is at all events an attitude to be found in any mind. Certainly we need to reflect further on Bleger’s concept of the agglutinated nucleus and Ogden’s concept of the autistic–contiguous nucleus.

To exemplify this point further, let us look at some operating strategies deployed to avoid emotions (or rather their non-metabolized precursors) in various clinical situations.

One central modality is narcissism.

A patient with an extremely narcissistic structure who works as the manager of a finance group has two dreams.

In the first he covers the whole distance from his home to my studio, a mile or so, in a straight line following a rope stretched out along the road. He sees and watches everyone from above (his intelligence has always been his strong point).

However, the real reason he does this, he explains to me, is to avoid the cars that speed along the road and which could run him over. In other words, emotions have such a kinetic force that they could run him over. Keeping a safe distance from every protoemotion saves him from being hit and from losing the power of thought (keeping the thread).

The second dream is even more telling. He is the captain of a galleon where everything has to work perfectly. A team made up of members of the crew constantly does the rounds to make sure that the sails are immaculate, that there are absolutely no leaks, and so on.

In these conditions the ship sails on happily.

If even the slightest thing is found out of place, catastrophe will ensue. The sails will rip, a small leak will lead to the ship sinking. He would come up for court martial, followed by dishonourable discharge, and perhaps even a death sentence.

In Gigi’s life everything must be perfect: work, his children’s marks at school, invitations to dinner parties with friends. Even the slightest flaw forebodes catastrophe. But why?

Because – this is the reply we construct together – imperfection activates emotions and these are difficult to manage; that is to say, there is no team on board to manage and deal with emergencies and the emotional winds
or waves they generate. The effort Gigi makes to ensure that everything is perfect is truly enormous, but it is nothing compared to what he would have to do if new and unpredictable emotions were activated.

I think that autistic behaviour often also has the same root: the constancy of every detail, the repetition of every gesture in exactly the same way, the miniaturization of emotions (bonsai emotions, as one patient put it) all serve the avoidance of emotional impacts which would otherwise be impossible to manage.

More in general, why is it that often we do not live burning passions but we extinguish them in routine, weariness, repetition, boredom, the intellectualization of emotional lava? Simply to keep circulating emotions ticking over. Carmelo prefers the tired routine with a wife he has not been in love with for a long time rather than venturing past the Pillars of Hercules which appear in a dream at the moment he meets a female colleague who might interest him. Basically he prefers the known familiarity of domesticated aspects of himself rather than setting off in search of possible new emotional dimensions.

The strategies people invent are extremely diverse. One need only think of anorexia, in which the split-off and intolerable parts (or protoemotions) are projected backwards, but are ‘seen’ with a kind of scanner that enables the anorexic to see behind her back ‘the weight’ of the split-off protoemotional states that present themselves as heavy and enormous (and the anorexic sees herself as fat because, considering the split-off functions she perceives, she is!).

I have always maintained that analysts, or psychoanalytic thinking, can only exist if there is a patient and a setting. However, allow me to contradict myself with allowance from Manzoni (who speaks generously of ‘that jumble of the human heart’): I believe that macro-social phenomena have the same function of ‘stopping’ intolerable emotional states.

One need only think of fanaticism, of all the guarantors of truth and certainty, and of the function of every religion: to think of ourselves as ‘ludus naturae’ without a why, without a before and without a where is too frightening, it activates too many emotions. Religion really is the opium of the people – but in the medical sense that opium is an antidote to intolerable pain, the realization namely that the meaning of life is just living it and nothing more, and that there is nothing in life that transcends it.
I could carry on talking about collective defences against emotions triggered by anything that disturbs the ‘minimal emotional regime’, and in this context one need only think of racism, dogmatism, the delusion of faith-based constructions, wars, and general stupidity, but I can only return to myself and to my specific situation: the consulting room.

A patient has not left the house for ten years and spends his time alone at his computer. He has a phobia of showing his face which is covered with hideous pimples and he avoids any contact or meeting anyone other than his parents.

Several attempts at therapy have been unsuccessful because of his immediate denial or perhaps because of the inability of some of the psychiatrists and psychoanalysts he has consulted to recognize the scale of the problem.

Then Fausto has the good fortune to meet a new analyst who reports the case to me in supervision. He addresses the problem in the right way, both with Fausto and with me: he gives no importance to the ‘fact’. Then, near the end of our meeting, he also gives me the telling piece of information: Fausto doesn’t have a face covered with pimples; in fact, he has a particularly smooth skin. I immediately think of the poster for the film *Lord of War*, where the protagonist’s face is partly made up of bullets, shells, cartridges. I imagine their tips ‘pressing’ under Fausto’s skin giving the impressions of pimples.

It would be easy to think of these ‘bullets’ in terms of aggressiveness, whereas to me they are explosive protoemotional states on the point of being evacuated, awaiting only the mental readiness of the other to find a place where they can be contained and transformed.

Some time later, during a second supervision of this case, Fausto is relieved to tell me that he had started to leave the house after his father had taken him rifle shooting in the woods. The mental apparatus of the analyst is the rifle which allows for the modulated explosion of emotions in a way that is all in all contained in a reliable ‘combustion chamber’.

Let me digress slightly here: transference can be understood as the opening of a channel of communication for the passage of bullets into the mind of the other, where the transformation process, the alphabetization of those ‘bullets’ and, if we want, also a contained explosion can be set off.

Needless to say, in this case the mind of the analyst will tend to boycott this infection, since it involves dealing with a more intense protoemotional level.
This boycott is mostly staged using inadequate theories that filter the reception and timing of what the patient wants to communicate: this I think is one of the reasons behind a certain inertia in psychoanalytic theories which Bion in the last seminars he held at Tavistock (Bion 2005) did not hesitate to describe as paraphrenia. The whole point of such theories is to allow us to hold on to something out of a fear that our knowledge is inadequate: they are a kind of raft that keeps us from drowning in anxiety.

Some simplifications are possible: one is the view present in many schools of thought that psychoanalysis is a therapy that is only suitable in cases of neurosis (the corollary being its alleged ineffectiveness in more severe pathologies); another is the fear that the ‘monster beneath’ many psychosomatic diseases might jump out and require the ‘face to face’ approach suggested by the otherwise brilliant school of French psychosomaticists, who seem not to realize that continuing to photograph Loch Ness (face to face) is the best way to avoid (or to ensure?) Nessie emerging from the depths of the loch and in fact the best way to secure protection from this fear.

But also the extreme use of theory in sessions, analysis as a package tour – as can often be seen at the point when an analyst becomes a member of the association – where everything is already known (the primal scene, castration anxieties, fantasies of exclusion, separation anxiety interpreted ad nauseam, filler reconstructions made in order to make ends meet, etc.) or bringing the patient back to the model clearly present in the mind of the analyst (whatever model it is) – these are all just various ways of staying this side of the Pillars of Hercules I mentioned earlier.

**The rumen**

Another central assertion for me is that if it is true that one of our mind’s activities (working downhill) is to protect ourselves from the emotions, it is also true that there is another function (working uphill) that tries to re-establish contact with what has been expelled or segregated or at any rate placed at a distance.

Often career choices, choices in love, sometimes entire threads of life have this rumen-like function, that is, their purpose is to restore contact with protoemotions, with the ‘stock of pinheads’ that have been evacuated, split off, made lethargic, isolated, or whatever.
A patient who has been suffering from serious constipation asks for an analysis. Her condition has also meant that she has been hospitalized repeatedly for ‘intestinal blockage’.

She also describes a family situation made up of ‘emotional tsunamis’, of violent accusations and quarrels. She has a depressed sister who hardly ever speaks, except during periods of manic verbosity.

The father seems to have led a double life: an irreproachable family man, he was discovered to have been a regular participant at orgies involving high-class call-girls and drugs.

It seems clear that Laura’s world is split between two modes: on the one hand, hypercontinence that paralizes all emotion, and on the other, total evacuative incontinence of all kinds of emotion.

When Laura began planning her analysis she gave up her idea of following in her grandfather’s footsteps as a notary, choosing instead to become a criminal lawyer.

This career choice becomes the ‘rumen’ which allows her to come closer to discrete quanta of protoemotions through her profession: her job brings her into constant contact with young offenders, drug addicts, immigrants, thieves, blackmailers, all of whom share a basic sense of desperation that is acted out in various ways. The work carried out in the analysis – containing, judging, condemning, understanding and defending these ‘characters’ – is narrated through her career choice, which becomes a way of taking back through the window what had been driven out through the door.

Although Martha could have had a satisfactory relationship with her husband, sexual frigidity was her way of freezing primitive states of wild protoemotions. She froze them in the same way as she froze her ‘sexual’ relationship with that area of her mind. The alternative would have been to be abused and ‘raped’ by these uncontrollable emotions.

At some point during her analysis Martha decides, after years away from the subject, to put her degree in psychology to proper use and to work with abused children who were the victims of all kinds of violence. Again, for Martha the ‘professional’ choice becomes ‘the rumen’ which enables her to re-appropriate her frozen sensory stocks.

A point I shall never tire of making is that the violence, the explosiveness, the uncontainability of emotions should never be confused with aggression. Aggression is a normal faculty of the species which in my view can as such never be in excess. What is in excess is the pressure coming from protoemotional states that plead to be collected, contained and transformed.
One day a patient told me a story which I think expresses this notion very well. He even provided me with a drawing of the location to make it easier to understand.

He was on holiday in Spain with a couple of friends and his girlfriend. The only place they had found to stay was beside a beach some distance from the nearest town in a large farmhouse that was being developed into a hotel complex. They were taken to a small flat in one wing of the complex. There was a door (A) leading to a long corridor off which were the doors to a kitchen (B) and a bathroom (C). There was also a door (D) which no one told them about and then door (E), which gave access to a room with two beds, and then a door (F) to another room with two beds (Figure 1.1).

Tired out after a long day and an evening in a nearby country inn, they went back to spend the night in the flat. They closed door A, securing it with a metal bar because they were aware they were in a very isolated spot.

In the middle of the night they are awakened by screams, shouts and banging on door A. They are very scared; they approach the door, which is evidently on the point of giving way under the pressure of what appears to be a rowdy horde of people. Frightened, they try to say something, but their words are met with more screaming; various incomprehensible languages resound. In panic they lock themselves in the bedroom and barricade door E, moments before door A is broken down by the howling mass. This ‘mass’ bursts in furiously like a river in flood that sweeps away everything in its path. Screaming and shouting, they try to break down the second door but eventually give up.
Only the next morning do they learn that door D was the entrance to the home of the last farmers still living on the farm who had left their children asleep at home while they went to a party in the nearby village. On finding door A closed they were seized by panic, fearing that someone wanted to harm their children. Terrified, they had broken down every obstacle that stood between them and their children.

Independently of how the story was worked through in the session, it seems to show how emotional urgency lies behind much behaviour that may on the surface appear aggressive.

Protoemotional or emotional forces are often like tsunamis; they cause destruction but are not aggressive, nor I would say are they even destructive. Their effects come from the uncontainability of the forces involved and sometimes because of inadequate embankments or insufficient storm drains or the erosion of coral reefs (defence?).

Transferring emotions

One possible way of working is to ask oneself the question, after a patient has spoken: to which internal object projected on to the analyst is he talking. A very clear example is provided by Guignard (2006), who tells of one of her Russian supervisees to whom a patient from a different ethnic group said ‘Russian cow!’ Guignard asked the supervisee what object she thought the patient was talking to. Her reply was: to the mother.

Then it was clear that by talking to the object mother projected on to the analyst and giving the cow milk, the patient was expressing her envy and hatred towards a nourishing mother. Guignard then went on to explain the similarities and differences between objects and people.

That would not be the way I see it; I would ask to look at the previous session to find out why the patient is angry with her analyst, what happened, what happened there, which makes sense of her anger – without any ready answers, simply based on what we know about cows, milk, mothers, and objects.

I would act like Isabella in the fable by Carla Muschio (2005); I wouldn’t just go down to the cellar, but would look in the cellar for the door that opens up new and unexpected worlds. I am speaking
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of an analysis that looks to the future, focusing not on the past and on content, but on the transformation of the patient’s apparatus for thinking (I care little about what).

At the first session after two days missed because of national holidays, Marina recounts a dream in which there was a door or rather two doors that opened and there stood Mr Lanti, who could easily break into her house. She was terrified. But her husband was there, too, and much to her relief he closed two other doors.

She then tells me what an enormous effort it is for her to come to Pavia because her older sister lives here. Her sister tells her things that she finds intolerable; every time it is a bad experience, the sister recounts memories of their childhood, things that should remain unsaid.

I keep to the manifest text and say that she seems to be afraid of her incontinent sister who instead of receiving her and her concerns swamps her with her own.

She says this was her experience of her older sister as a child (the sister performed the role of mother after her real mother had suddenly fallen in love with a wealthy ship-owner and abandoned husband and children) who used to tell her that . . . . But even more it was the experience of her husband, who had been abused by his grandfather, or at least that is what he fears may have happened. (Of course I think of all these communications as relevant to my contributions, which are perceived by various characters in the field as incontinence.)

I tell her that I fully understand the suffering that this adult incontinence produces in her and her husband. It is like putting dirty laundry in a washing machine which rather than cleaning it makes it even dirtier. That’s precisely what happens, she adds.

At this point I think I can venture an interpretation. It seem to me that now, unlike in the early days of analysis when the sessions missed were a source of suffering, it is the other way round: the sessions that take place are a source of suffering and I am the ‘anti’ person who says things against her, things that rob her of her well-being.

A sense of well-being was what I gave her when I closed the door of my studio on official holidays. She confirms this intervention in full, adding however that she still thinks it’s worth coming.

I want to say at this point that in my view things are not getting worse. On the contrary, I now feel that I can touch some nodal points. But I make a slip and say: ‘Certainly things are not any better . . . no, no, I mean worse!’ ‘There we are, with your slip you have ruined my day, my week.'
I will be tormented thinking that things are getting worse than before, that I am making no progress, that I am going backwards.’ I say: ‘Here I am, the “anti” person, I’ve flooded you with anguish, I am a presence that makes you feel bad.’

‘It’s just that there is always another side that comes out,’ Marina replies, ‘just like with the “anti” person and her husband.’ I say in my turn: ‘It is even more true that I feel bad if you say you are even happier when we do not meet, but apart from my regret, it is much better now that you can express this discomfort about the meeting, meeting with me, with another human being.’

‘But don’t you understand that we are here now?’ Marina continues. ‘It’s as if you now had had the courage to act like a heart surgeon, you took my heart in your hand; or like a pulmonologist who finally manages to drain through a tube a mediastinal or subphrenic abscess which had caused incredibly high fever, seemingly without cause.’

The session continues, touching on different scenes involving parents and children from the present and from the ‘past’.

I conclude the session by saying that now the problem of ‘influence’ seemed clearer. This was the problem that had long haunted her in her life, that is, not knowing to what extent her decisions were hers and to what extent they were induced.

Analytic sessions appear to me to be like a dream of the mind where different stories from different times and places of the field land, are diffracted, overlap. The shared experience is where circular emotional states, feelings and thoughts are allowed to circulate with the analyst (also a place in the field) in the dual polarity described by Riolo (1983), namely guaranteeing and safeguarding the setting and the exchanges, and promoting a dream-like activity on the part of the pair. The session becomes a shared, co-narrated, co-acted dream where stories, transformations, insights come to life – but also above all aptitudes, aptitudes to dream, to transform into reverie, into emotion, into image, into the ability to dream what has taken the pressing form of an abscess of sensoriality to which there was no access.

Each session is a pearl, a bead on the necklace/rosary that paves the way through all the various mysteries not to contents but to the ability to go on the journey back and forth which is the Star Trek of our lives. Or to put it another way, analysis leads to the development of the mind, the ability to dream, to feel, to think. Then content is totally free.
It makes little difference to me whether a patient goes through his entire analysis deploying an infantile scenario or Westerns or science fiction or his ‘workplace’. The driving force of the story is the need to find a space-time in which to develop the capacity to think and say that which cannot be said.

In this sense transference is also the transference of these skills from the analyst to the field and from the field to the patient, who in turn brings along the fuel and the equipment for this process.

At the session after the one described above, Marina starts off by talking about a patient of hers who has great emotional outbursts that are like oscillations and are often indistinguishable from incontinent outbursts.

She goes on talking about her patient, about the fact that for him ‘the death of his parents’ was a traumatic event and that similarly for his wife, ‘her sister’s death’ was like being hit and run over by a train.

Then she continues talking about her own experience of not being understood and the feeling that this is enough to rob her of joy and sometimes even of the will to live. Now I feel I can say that perhaps when she feels not understood, it is precisely there that she feels overwhelmed by emotions she cannot contain, it is there that she is a desperate orphan.

She fully agrees on this point and then tells me that near my studio she had seen posters for a film version of *Oliver Twist* which she decided to go and see because that’s how she feels when her husband does not understand her. How can she fix it? How can she cope with these frustrations without being overwhelmed?

I say that with time we will have some larger pots which will enable us to contain the emotional ingredients that are now brimming over. She says: ‘There you go again. You’ve ruined my day! You shouldn’t give me culinary examples, I hate culinary examples, only my mother knew how to cook. I cannot cook, I hate cooking.’ But maybe, I add, ‘the mother who ran away’ who we have spoken about so often is saying something not only about the tragic loss of her mother as a child but also about all the feminine aspects of herself she felt she had to abandon because they were connected to her mother. She had had to avoid all rivalry with her because otherwise she would have felt guilty about her mother’s flight (in this way I implicitly interpret her difficulty in carrying out her work plans, which she fears set off rivalry with me, by postdating it in history and putting it in a setting different from the current one).
She is touched by this intervention; she says that she may not know how to cook but she can knit, she is a dab hand with a knitting needle. On the other hand, however, it might also be nice to cook.

At this point she tells me that the house next door to hers is being sold and that she and her husband have decided to buy it. It is expensive but worth it: it will allow them to expand their house from 100 to 160 square metres and there will be room for everyone.

It’s the working together on the emotions present in the field, weaving and re-weaving them, which fosters the development of the container/contained through reverie, through unison. That is, all the transformative transitions made session after session lead to an enlargement of the house and the ability to knit and weave the protoemotions into pictures, stories, namely the development of a range of skills, not least the ability to contain and to dream. Transference is what continually brings with it protoemotions, the protocontents that will be the raw materials of such transformations.

One thing I would like to stress is that it is not easy to be in a position of PS without persecution, that is, to draw on one’s own negative capability before interpreting. Having to wait calmly can be made easier by connecting up with the manifest content, inwardly formulating unspoken trial transference interpretations, making connections with the countertransference and having confidence in one’s method.

**Living emotions**

Experiencing emotions is the culmination of a series of operations. Sometimes the first step is when a story starts to take shape in the mind of the analyst, who begins to create broader scenes in which previously split-off functions can come to life again, at least somewhere in the field. As it happens, the field is always highly contagious; there is nowhere in the field that does not end up infecting all the others.

**There’s no gazelle without a tiger: shyness and persecution**

Louise is a lovely girl with a meek and slightly jaded air about her.

She studies Italian and is very fond of detective stories, especially of the Agatha Christie type where the culprit is found out after a process of investigation.
For years she has suffered from agoraphobia and social phobia; she can’t appear in a bathing costume, always puts on two pairs of underpants, sweats excessively and has a thrusting jaw. She also suffers from panic attacks. She displays a number of obsessive symptoms, such as repeated checking of doors and windows out of fear of intrusion by strangers.

She has cleaning rituals that involve having repeated baths and showers every day. She washes her hair daily and is always applying deodorant.

She prefers vegetarian food and never eats ‘meat on the bone or entrails’.

At night she must always sleep alone ‘because she is afraid she opens her mouth in a strange way’.

There are enough indications here to suggest to me the existence of a split-off part, which I think of as a panther, a tiger, a wolf. I am reminded of the film *The Tiger Woman* and then of Verga’s short story ‘The She-Wolf’.

I think I can already suggest a hypothesis at this point: Louise is persecuted by her split-off part, or rather by the emotions that come together in the split-off part that seems to refer to the image of a wild beast, where emotions are not manageable. Louise is afraid that her ‘secret’ would be found out; hence the showers, the cleaning habits that purge her of these continually re-forming emotions. They keep these emotions away from the door, emotions which if they were scattered and sprayed outwards would say something about her and pollute an outside world which takes on tiger-like qualities and becomes dangerous, threatening.

The gazelle must keep running to escape the tiger. She does this by trying to appear perfect, but it makes her sweat!

Louise tells me that she has found a man she likes but who causes her many problems. I cannot believe my ears when I learn that his name is ‘Leo’.

Poirot might consider himself lucky at this point: the case, at least in terms of knowledge, is resolved. However, this is where further work has to start, which involves untangling the threads that are woven together to form Leo and weaving them with the threads that make up the fabric of Louise.

In Louise’s story, Leo has a little dog with sharp teeth that she learns to trust and not be afraid of.

I’ll stop here, but the work with Louise went on to become a matter of complementing the genetic heritage of a gazelle with the genetic heritage of a lioness, which was to happen when a ‘Darix Togni’ function came to life in the field through the introjection of the analytic function capable of metabolizing the jungle emotions that terrorized the patient so much. This allowed her to combine
tenderness and passion under the watchful eyes of the ‘lion-tamer’ – the weaving/narrating function of the mind.

I do not believe in generalizations, but in my view many cases of shyness, pathological shyness, the paranoia of the shy, social and relational phobias (fear of answering the phone, for example) have this common root. There is one part, or rather several split-off functions, that arouse fear and must be continuously monitored, avoided and washed away. And if they are sprayed around they become the root of persecution.

Depending on their degree of alphabetization, these protoemotions may have a defective alpha function or an insufficient container.

Often the less serious cases are the result of children being treated too well, leaving them no way of trying out primitive emotions like anger, jealousy and rivalry. They thus become gazelles, shy and introverted, and the emotions they are not given the opportunity to experience remain split off for a long time, generating fear, insecurity and a sense of persecution.

Often behind this lie parents who have pacified their emotions too much, who have not allowed themselves to inflict that quantity of inevitable frustration which would foster the development of the apparatus for metabolizing and containing emotions. Often these are people with an inadequate alpha function or with an insufficiently robust container. They establish ‘pacified’ relationships with their children, which I would term of the female homosexual type ♂♀, which leave ♂ emotional hypercontents split off outside.

Of course, depending on the intensity of these processes we may face ever more serious disorders, involving ever more primitive defence mechanisms, all the way up to the many possible different ways of evacuation.

The syndromes of children that are treated too well are, accordingly, no less serious than those of overly abused children (Borgogno 1994).

Other times, after a long period of analytic work that has developed the weaving and containing qualities of the mind, the emotions can live vividly in the consulting room and be shared.

Underwear or Red Cross?

After years of analysis, one day Nando begins to talk to me about something when I feel myself slipping into a state of drowsiness from which I

http://www.psychoanalysisarena.com/avoiding-emotions-living-emotions-9780415555036
later awake, suddenly aware that I have missed part of what he has been saying.

I try to intervene by using something that I had heard earlier, but Nando seems unconvinced. Suddenly he says: ‘I felt that your breathing was regular, too regular.’ I don’t know what to do; the simple fact is that I had fallen asleep. At this point I tell him that perhaps he was afraid of my absence and my inability to recall the important events we were working on and to pick up the threads of all the main themes of the recent period. Nando seems to me absent.

After the session I am unhappy. I feel I wasn’t honest. At the same time I realize that I had fallen asleep, as if I had received an injection of thiopental (Pentothal) to cope with something painful, a life-saver in the face of excessive tension.

I had then done the same thing, giving an over-interpretation that caused Nando to withdraw.

I say to myself, ‘perhaps the real problem is not the negative quality of the emotions (jealousy, anger, envy) but their intensity’.

The following day Nando is reluctant to talk. He says that at yesterday’s session an image had come into his head that had tormented him. He had seen a man with his genitals exposed, an exhibitionist, and he had tried to move away. It is clear, I tell him, that yesterday that is exactly what happened. I had been excessive in the second part of the session; in telling him all the things I had said I had been an exhibitionist. I add that it was true that at the beginning of the session I was a bit drowsy and had briefly fallen asleep, as if I had received an injection of thiopental. Perhaps the same thing had happened to him when I had gone too far in what I said: he had withdrawn. Surely it was an excess of emotion that had caused both of us to withdraw?

Nando is relieved. He tells me that at the moment when he had perceived me as being absent the day before he had been telling me about the intense emotion he had felt at meeting an old girlfriend again (the analysis had been interrupted for a week). He had almost run away, he had turned red . . . this was the part I had not heard. The scene had taken place on an ice rink.

I ask, ‘Why didn’t you ask me whether I was awake when you heard my breathing becoming regular?’ Nando said he had been afraid that he was being boring and that was why I was so distant.

I say it is as if his wife had fallen asleep next to him and instead of getting angry, he had said, ‘I must be rather uninteresting’.

During the rest of the session we speak explicitly and directly about what happened to him and to me in the face of strong emotions, when the ice seemed to melt.
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The day after, Nando recounts two dreams. In the first he has an experience of utter exclusion, in the second he is with a very attractive woman doctor who speaks to him in a very frank and sincere way. He catches a glimpse of her red panties, she puts him on the couch and gives him a proper check-up.

The red underwear also reminded him of the Red Cross.

Then the doctor came up to him and gave him a very beneficial massage.

**Luciana and the speech therapist**

Ever since our first meeting Luciana has indicated that closeness and contact cause her great agitation and anxiety. She is seeing a married man, although their relationship is not very close.

The topic she dwells on most is that of her ‘niece’, who has speech problems and who she is worried may be autistic.

As an adolescent Luciana had a number of ‘phobic problems’: she felt compelled to clean everywhere, she saw risks and possibilities of infection, she spent hours disinfecting the bathroom, kitchen, door handles, etc. Sometimes she would even wear the kind of protective mask used by hospital staff.

After she began her relationship with Mario, the married man, she often stalked him to check up on him.

She is a nurse and has worked for a long time in the burns department. She also checks the gas all the time, as well as locks on doors and windows, often to the accompaniment of magical thoughts and long-drawn-out rituals.

She says that as a child her biggest problem was with ‘colour’ rather than form.

Up to this point it seemed to me that more protoemotions were activated in Luciana than she could cope with: contact and closeness are the situations that most ignited protoemotional states that ‘burned’ if they were not treated and processed.

The long story about her little niece seems to be a way of speaking about her inability to put into words what she feels in sensorial/protoemotional terms.

Essentially, her phobic avoidance issues and her obsessive control issues are a way of defending her alpha function that would otherwise be swamped.

The constant cleaning seems to refer to the way in which she cleanses herself of all protoemotions that are aroused in her which she must then also hypercontrol because she fears they are dangerous, polluting and
explosive. After all, unrefined oil pollutes; so too do protoemotions which are not refined and processed.

After a period of therapy, a cat comes to her house who was to become the protagonist of many sessions. Subsequently, Luciana begins to recount long stories of books and films she has seen.

Meanwhile, the ‘niece’ is going to a new speech therapist who is very good. Luciana also begins to describe her dreams: in one she picks up a lizard, in another she sees a python, and in a third a baby appears in her arms.

It would seem then that our work is making strides: there is the arrival of something more lively (starting with the cat) and the fact that she can now activate a narrator/dreamer function that is freer and less controlling and is expressed in books and films and then finally in dreams. The emotions seem to be getting more accessible, even to the point of becoming children that can be looked after (after moving through the lizard and python stage).

She then adopts – albeit at a distance – an Indian girl and they start up a prolific correspondence.

As a final step she goes to work in the sterilization department of the burns unit whose task it is to ensure that everything is aseptic and safe throughout the hospital.

However aseptic the place is, stories of several male and female colleagues start to come to life. They each have their own specific characteristics, and almost turn into Fellinesque characters. We have the ‘insane Nurse’, the ‘touchy Dwarf’, the ‘Drunkard’, the ‘Sex Bomb’, the ‘Gay’, the ‘Astrologist’, the ‘Cripple’. So the film of the analysis truly becomes the shared story of these characters, each of whom embodies aspects of Luciana that at first had been silent and now that she had been to the speech therapist have found expression and words.

The crucial point seems to be not so much a question of which defences the patient adopts (phobic, obsessive), but his or her ability to develop an alpha function that weaves and dreams what had once been silent and inexpressible.

### Required evacuation

I trust I have not given the impression that I believe that all sensori-ality can be transformed into alpha elements, or into – to put it in one word – creativity. There is a physiological and necessary quota not only of beta elements but I would also say of catabolites of alpha...
elements which otherwise would become toxic and prevent the cycle of transformations.

There are a number of evacuative or para-evacuative activities of our mind that are vital. These are motor, protoemotional evacuations and discharges of various kinds. They can be seen in the consulting room, even in those dreams that some people call evacuative and which we have all come across in our own psychic life as in those restless nights when our first dreams fail in their task and only those that follow are able at that moment to metabolize and create a fresco of our mental life. I think there is a whole series of small ‘manias’, rituals and perversions that function precisely in this way.

I have always been struck by an episode described in the biography of Georges Simenon, an author who was able to weave extraordinary plots not only in his Maigret books but even more so in his other novels. After finishing a book he would allow himself hours of pure relief of tension, getting his faithful driver to bring him prostitutes so that he could abreact/celebrate the completed creative act. I remember a colleague at a Congress on Sublimation who quoted Balzac’s comment that ‘a night of love’ costs ‘half a volume’. All the same, though, you’ve got to live!