

Compulsive Personalities and Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*

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When I was a student in a prestigious medical school known for its cut-throat competition among clinicians and researchers, there was a (hopefully apocryphal) story that went around about a leading medical subspecialist I'll call Dr. Smith. Allegedly, one Sunday noon as Dr. Smith's family sat down to dinner during one of his rare appearances, his young son said, "Mommy, why does Dr. Smith always have to come to dinner on Sundays?" As ambitious young medical students not immune to competitive strivings ourselves, we pondered the risk that we could suffer a similar fate.

Wild Strawberries

The story came to mind as I viewed Ingmar Bergman's classic 1957 movie, *Wild Strawberries*, in preparation for leading a psychoanalytically oriented discussion after a showing at the Cleveland Institute of Art. An aging, widowed scholar on the eve of being bestowed a prestigious honor at a university convocation, Professor Isak Borg opens the movie with a soliloquy: "In our relations with other people we mainly criticize them. That is why I have withdrawn from nearly all social intercourse... This has made my old age rather lonely... full of hard work... It began as toil for bread and butter and ended with a love for science" (English translation in subtitles). After a lonely dinner served by his long-time devoted housekeeper, he retires and has a dream that evokes terrifying images of loneliness, sterility, dehumanization, and death. Among the shocking images are a clock with no hands and his own corpse trying to pull him into a coffin. The next morning, he impulsively changes his plans, driving 400 miles instead of flying. There ensues a series of adventures, fantasies, more dreams, and encounters with people that illuminate Borg's character and life history.

A bleak picture emerges. Professor Borg quarrels with his crabby housekeeper, who is upset by his change of plans. He is joined on the trip by his daughter-in-law, Marianne, who has been visiting and is now returning to her husband, Evald. Early in the trip, the professor refuses her request to forgive a loan to his son and she confesses her dislike for the professor and her husband's hatred of his father. Both men are physicians, emotionally constricted. We get the impression that Evald is

cold and harsh, and Marianne has left him because of trouble between them. Yet, despite her hurt, she listens respectfully to Professor Borg with a kind of human presence that begins to resemble a good therapist.

The film becomes a road epic. The first stop is the family summer home, near which lies a patch of wild strawberries. In a dream-like sequence, Isak relives his failed romance with his cousin, Sara, who admires Isak but finds his wild brother much more exciting. Adolescent Sara reveals inner conflict over choosing between the brother's sensuality and Isak's lofty, sterile morality and intellect.

A vivacious, saucy girl also named Sara (played by the same actress) awakens Borg. With two young men (who argue constantly), she hitches a ride in the doctor's spacious touring car, bringing great warmth, music, and flirtatious teasing into the car. They are off to Italy. Sara announces she is a virgin, which is how she can get away with the teasing. A sadomasochistic couple, given a ride after a road accident, fight so savagely that Marianne asks them to leave the car.

A stop for gasoline in the village where Borg began his career as a primary care physician precipitates an outpouring of warmth and appreciation for his work there from the villagers. He murmurs, "Maybe I should have stayed there." Wine and song over lunch then turn into an argument between the boys about rationalism versus religion, which Isak quells by reciting a widely known inspirational poem that invokes the presence of the divine in the beautiful Swedish countryside.

In a side trip, Borg and Marianne visit his aged mother, who greets them austere, with little obvious warmth or enthusiasm. She is initially hostile to Marianne, confusing her with Isak's long-dead wife. She remarks that all her ten children but Isak are dead, and only one of her 20 grandchildren, Evald, visits her. She comments she has been cold all her life. She brings out a family watch—with no hands—and a toy she made for one of her daughters, who rejected it. Marianne holds it thoughtfully. Isak finds a childhood family picture and

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asks to keep it; his mother says yes, it is only trash. She delights in living to 96 and frustrating all her progeny who are waiting for her money.

Later, asleep in the car with Marianne driving, Isak returns to the wild strawberries. Cousin Sara holds a mirror to him and scornfully tells him he is an old man about to die, who can't stand the truth it hurts so. His dream shifts to the summer house, where he impales his hand on a nail at the door, reminiscent of the stigmata of crucifixion. Let in, he is tested by an icy cold examiner (the same actor as the sadistic husband in the car), who presents impossible problems and an inscrutable text. The examiner interprets it when Isak fails: a doctor's first duty is to ask for forgiveness. He is "accused of guilt." His wife has made a charge of callousness, selfishness, ruthlessness. Found guilty and led by the examiner/judge to the now burned-out house, he is shown his wife cavorting in the woods with another man who sadistically seduces her. He vividly remembers the date of that event. After yielding to her seducer, she predicts Isak's response when she asks him to forgive her: he'll say yes but won't mean it because he is cold as ice, a hypocrite. In the dream Isak thinks "All gone. A perfect achievement—silence... the punishment: isolation... forgiveness? I don't know." On awakening he realizes, "I'm dead but I'm alive, just like Evald."

Marianne's eventual account of the events that led her to leave her husband depicts Evald as brutally cold and insensitive, melancholy and severe. Evald's obsession with death borders on the suicidal. He is totally controlling and will determine when he will die. Marianne has told him she is pregnant and he has totally rejected both the baby and her if she has it. She is determined to keep the baby but still loves her husband. Isak is sympathetic and concerned.

Finally they arrive at the convocation. Borg dispassionately receives his honorary degree in a state of total detachment, but there is a change in his melancholy state of mind. He remarks, "I seemed to discern an extraordinary logic." Afterwards there is a softening and reconciliation between Evald and Marianne. Borg expresses warmth to his crusty housekeeper, who bemusedly reaffirms the boundaries of their relationship. The young hitchhikers fondly serenade him outside his window before moving on. Borg goes to sleep, musing on a childhood memory, and again dreams of the family cottage where Sara consoles him and lovingly tends an infant. The dream ends with his father and mother peacefully fishing and picnicking at the pond—serene and beautiful, as Borg's radiant face turns to the idyllic scene.

The Pressures of Professional Responsibility

Much could be said about the dynamics of this story, the elements of therapeutic change, and the role of dreams and fantasy in bringing it about. In addition, there may be many parallels to these issues in our own lives. How much do many of us physicians resemble Isak Borg in our emotional state and our relationships? In my initial identification with Isak Borg, I recalled the many nights on call, hundreds of hours spent in psychoanalytic training, countless evenings and weekends devoted to studying, writing, communicating with colleagues, or attending meetings of professional organizations. It has been stimulating and gratifying, with many friendships across the continent, and much was accomplished for patients and my professions of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. But it undeniably took its toll on family life, reading for pleasure, sleep, exercise, and recreation.

Probably many physicians lean towards the compulsive side, as do many people in responsible professions requiring deep learning, hard work, orderliness, conscientiousness, attention to detail, and a sense of duty. But I know many high-achieving, conscientious physicians who are not so much like Professor Borg. They marry for love, enjoy their families, and have myriad interests in sports, the arts, nature, and political life. Missing for most of them are the rigidity, stubbornness, excessive controlling of others, perfectionism to the point of paralysis, hyper-morality, coldness, and detachment that are part of the DSM-IV-TR¹ diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. Just being a conscientious physician or a renowned scientist does not invariably lead to the outcome portrayed by Professor Isak Borg.

Compulsive Personality and Depression

So, what makes the difference? Borg's opening statement gives a clue: "In our relations with other people we mainly criticize them." The harshness and severity of his son, Evald, probably reflects Isak's own history, only hinted at in his recollection of how he and his wife fought like the sadomasochistic couple in the car. Conscientiousness and a sense of duty can become coldly cruel and judgmental, as did Isak's superego, the examiner in his dream. Wishes unacceptable to a strict morality can be enacted in disguise through excited invasion of others' private lives to condemn sexual behavior. The condemnation is not enacted in the movie but hinted at through the dreamed accusation of hypocritical, feigned forgiveness. Perhaps there is a secret, voyeuristic satisfaction in watching the adulterous couple cavorting in the woods—

enjoying a sexual abandon that Isak's own inhibitions of passion could not permit. Beyond that may lie traumatic, conflict-laden memories of seeing his own parents' sexual activities. Isak is "accused of guilt"—is there pride in his enormous sinfulness? Was his severe superego formed in reaction to Oedipal feelings about his parents?

These harsh and critical qualities are most severe when turned against the self, a major element in depression. The hallmarks of depression are more evident in Borg's suicidal son, Evald—so darkly obsessed with the evil of the world and inevitability of death that he cannot accept his wife's warm love or the promise of his own child, a link with the future. The narcissistic side of obsessive-compulsive traits stands out starkly in his total self-centeredness and the grandeur of his rejection of a despised world. Isak himself seems more apathetic, isolated, cold, and withdrawn, parsimonious (he can't forgive the loan to his son), troubled in his dreams, unable to enjoy everyday life or the fruits of his illustrious career in the honor bestowed by his peers. He seems to have lost hope. He leads a solitary, joyless existence, his penance. The first real emotion he expresses is terror in response to the dream portraying isolation, facelessness, forces beyond human control, and death. This turns out to be the harbinger of change.

Healing

In psychotherapeutic work with patients with obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, we do not have the luxury of a 90-minute movie, replete with dreams and transpiring in little more than 1 day in the life of our patient. Recommended therapy is primarily psychodynamic psychotherapy or psychoanalysis.² Rigid defenses of intellectualization, isolation of affect, reaction formation, undoing, regression, and displacement present a challenge, as one works to free up access to underlying emotional life and more adventuresome thought processes. A harsh and punitive conscience with moralistic judgment of self and others, along with impossible, perfectionistic self-demands enshrined in the ego ideal, must be gradually understood and adapted to a more realistic view of oneself and one's life situation. Patients eventually must encounter the anxiety they feel about what is sensed (based on childhood perceptions) as immense aggression and dangerous sexuality, in order to have freer access to positive expressions of these drives in adult life. Hopefully, patients will come to experience diminished anxiety about their thoughts and feelings, permitting awareness of impulses and novel connections

between ideas, fantasy, and use of dreams as a window on deeper mental life. They may find the the origin of their anxieties and defenses in childhood, when anal-phase defenses of reaction formation, over-control, and isolation of affect were reinforced in a regression from the dangers of oedipal attachment, excitement, rivalry, and aggression. Underlying this may be deficits in early parental affection and empathy, as implied in the depiction of Professor Borg's mother.

Without close attention to transference, which can bring the conflicts into the treatment setting with live immediacy, psychotherapy with these patients risks becoming mired in superficial intellectualization and detachment. Psychoanalysis when feasible is thus deemed the optimal mode of treatment.² In any case, therapists must be aware of counter-transference, which can be considerable in treating challenging patients who may share many characteristics with the therapist. The therapeutic situation may elicit boredom, remoteness, discouragement, or unconscious sadism through arguing or impatience, which the therapist must recognize and work through to advance the treatment.

Professor Borg went through a healing process in the movie. Revisiting the past by seeing his mother and resting at the family homestead, learning about his son and daughter-in-law's suffering, made him keenly aware of the relation of his present state to his past and future. Marianne, truthful and open, plays a therapeutic role, respectfully listening, setting boundaries on the fighting of their passengers, and eventually coming to understand, accept, and even like Isak. His loving and tender side emerges—he can accept the villagers' gratitude and can soften and enjoy himself with the young people who are so full of life. Through the dreamed examination that becomes a trial, he encounters his guilt and is able to forgive the injury done him by his wife—while facing the effects of his own subtly sadistic, moralistic inhibitions of warmth and sexuality that led the women he loved to seek love elsewhere. The end of the movie necessarily seems too tidy, but it does portray, in a release of love and acceptance, a kind of redemption.

References

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