CONCERNING THE LIFE CYCLE
OF TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS

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I have introduced the terms "transitional objects" and "transitional phenomena" for designation of the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism and true object relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness ("Say: ta!")

D.W. Winnicott (1951)

Many years have passed since Winnicott (1951) introduced us to the concept "transitional objects," a concept that has become more and more alive for us as we learned to appreciate Winnicott’s contributions. They are themselves a transitional link between different psychoanalytic schools that have developed in central Europe, England, the United States and other parts of the world. I have in my possession a number of communications between Winnicott and myself; exchanges of reprints, the sharing of our work with children and adolescents and of our personal lives. It was back in 1965, a few months after one of the international psychoanalytic conferences, that he sent me "Miss Ekstein’s Glossary of Epithets" that he had collected while chairing a panel that, so he said, bored him. He compared the adjectives and adverbs of my then adolescent daughter (who would one day become a teacher) with expressions of young British people. While all of us at the party of Dr. DeMonchy tried to meet the analysts of different countries, he sat somewhere in a corner with the adolescent girl and they talked, while he was trying to form a link in his own mind between American and British youngsters. More than 20 years later, our daughter still speaks about her meeting with Winnicott, her transitional object of the time, away from the parental home and moving towards the profession of teaching. And of course, I felt a little jealous of the attention my daughter got from him, since he is, for those of us who remember him, an eternal transitional object. Except that transitional objects have a life cycle of their own, and this brings me to my considerations, stimulated as they are by Donald W. Winnicott.

The last letter that Winnicott sent me was to thank me for my support of the statue of Freud to be erected in Hampstead. This statue, to be sure, is a transitional object, but really an eternal one and is to secure the way back to Freud.
Perhaps I can make my thoughts about Winnicott's concept more alive if I tell about their origin, a kind of autobiographical comment, and have the reader accompany me for a few minutes into my very private world.

One night I did not sleep well, a rare occasion for me, and I found myself occupied with the trip that was to bring me back once more to Vienna, my native town where I would be guest professor once again at the medical school. My thoughts were concerned with the question as to what I would want to buy myself in Vienna, what I would bring home, moving as I would be from the home of origin to the home of choice, from Austria to America. Will it be a porcelain figure, such as Der Rosenkavalier or Mozart or Strauss? Will I bring home some old German novels of the 19th century? What will it be? Why should all that disturb my sleep? And suddenly, I thought of Winnicott's transitional objects. Are these momentos transitional objects like my teddy once was? And it struck me that the teddy bears of little children, their blankets or old toys they could not let go, have a different function than the momentos when we go visiting other countries and other cities. But what is really the difference? Who has ever forgotten his old teddy bear? I did not forget mine. The last time I remember having seen him as a little boy, he had already lost one leg and one arm, and I once played with the idea that even after these many, many years I might find him somewhere, such as the furniture, the photographs, the paintings, the old clock in our home, all that had been taken from us after the invasion.

The teddy bear of the little boy was to help him, having now "the first possession," as Winnicott puts it. That teddy would now be the infant's object, recognized as "not - me," and would help him to transit, to move away from the original oral erotism and thus move to true object relationships. For example, the transitional phenomena, the little songs and tunes which the infant sings, that help him to move towards a higher state of development away from autistic and symbiotic dilemmas to more mature object relationships. What then is the difference between these first possessions and the possessions that I want to acquire as I travel back to the original fatherland and to the original mother tongue?

The original transitional objects lead me forward. The new objects that I want to acquire — may I also call them transitional objects? — are leading me back to the past.

I want to come home again to the States where I have lived now for almost 50 years, but I want to have in my home objects and memories that lead back to the past.

If one were to go to the homes of one's friends, friends of different generations, one would learn a great deal about them, their character and their personal history. One need only to study what they collect, what they have brought back from different situations, what they have inherited and not thrown away. One could well, without ever talking to them, get a good psychological picture of them. True enough, much of what they may have
collected and now exhibit may simply be a mask, a pretense of what they want to appear to be to their friends, to the people who try to assess them. But behind the mask, the collected treasures, a partial picture of their past, a true picture, would be the truer self. We could observe the struggle between the original and the acquired, and we could then think of them as actors of the past in the classical Greek or Roman theater who wore masks and could not be themselves.

I say then that the objects we bring from our trips serve a similar purpose. But usually as we get older they lead not forward but back into the past. What we find in the home of our parents and treasure is the tradition, and what we hold onto as our first possessions, the transitional objects of early childhood are to serve adaptation.

I suggest then that all through life transitional objects will change as they either serve us in moving towards the future, towards adaptation and towards liberation, or they serve to return to the past, to holding on to the tradition.

It seems to me an interesting task to think of transitional objects in terms of representing the ever changing life cycle.

In the beginning of life transitional objects are offered to the child and they are merely passive acquisitions. But later in life, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, mature adulthood, old age, the transitional objects are now active acquisitions. And they have a different meaning in the process of development, of maturation, and the processing of aging, of letting go.

Perhaps I can illustrate this if I describe the changing toys and acquisitions of one of my children. For years, as a little boy my son went out for Halloween. He would go with friends or with his parents from door to door to acquire candy and apples and little gifts in the ever recurring ritual of "tricks or treats." One day when he was about thirteen years old, friends of his had not come and he did not want to go out. I was willing to accompany him. He went to one or two doors, got some candy and came to me crying and said, "it's no fun any longer." For years he had enjoyed all these candies and this time he wanted to go home. I realized that for him childhood was over. As we went back into our house, he went to his room where he had all kinds of little cars displayed on a bookcase, all kinds of memorabilia acquired on some of our trips. He started to take them from the shelves and put them into a big box. He put everything away that he had proudly displayed in years gone by. I wondered how he could destroy this beautiful collection and he got angry with me. He told me that he was not a little boy any longer, that all his friends laughed about all these objects. Also, toys are transitional objects that permit the child to weave fantasies around them which lead to growth, to the solution of conflicts, to that moment when he puts them all into a big box out of sight from his comrades. But he left a few posters that he had acquired, colorful posters of music stars and movie stars of the kind adolescents collect and exhibit. Of course, they were also transitional objects, but they were the transitional objects of adolescence, not the objects that lead away from the
pretense of what they want to try to assess them. But picture of their past, a true the struggle between the of them as of actors of the wore masks and could not serve a similar purpose. But rack into the past. What we the tradition, and what we d objects of early childhood objects will change as theyards adaptation and towards holding on to the tradition. nsional objects in terms offfered to the child and they hildhood, adolescence, early ional objects are now active ming in the process of ; of aging, of letting go. ging toys and acquisitions of on went out for Halloween. rom door to door to acquire xcring ritual of “tricks or rs old, friends of his had not to accompany him. He went me crying and said, “it’s no ese candies and this time he hold was over. As we went he had all kinds of little car lia acquired on some of our and put them into a big bo played in years gone by. I lection and he got angry with y longer, that all his friends nsional objects that permit rich lead to growth, to the puts them all into a big box posters that he had acquired, f the kind adolescents collect objects, but they were the acts that lead away from the mother as did the teddy bear. The objects had changed.

As I look at the home of the young man, now in his thirties, I find none of these old posters. The taste and the expectations have changed and much of what was once important he has given away or keeps somewhere in a dark closer.

There are now some objects that we have given him, small pieces of art that make his home start to look a little bit like the home of his parents. He moves back to the family tradition.

I have often listened to people who are on the move, who give up an apartment, a home, move elsewhere and who then have to make decisions as to what they will want to take along and what they want to give up. It is not only their own moving day, but also the moving day of transitional objects. I think of old people who have to give up their homes, moving to a smaller apartment, or moving to an old age home and having perhaps but one room. I see how they must struggle with what they must choose to give up, what they can leave behind, sell, destroy, give away, and what they want to keep. What keeps them together? Usually transitional objects allow them to maintain continuity between today and yesterday. Transitional objects are to maintain continuity. What will people save first of their possessions as they escape the inferno of a burning home? Will it be the pictures of the family, the documents, the money, and what loss will be most painful for them that they can never replace?

May I recall an unforgettable experience? It was the time when, as a refugee in 1938, I sailed on a ship from England to America. There were four of us, four young men who did not know each other. We were together deep in the hold of the ship in a small cabin, having attained tickets from a refugee organization. Each of us had something among his meager possessions that he would not let go. I recall that having otherwise no more than one suit, I had taken along two suitcases with German books: novels, philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis. One of the other young men had a Mesusa, the Old Testament, which he carried around his neck. The third one showed us how he had some money that he brought to the new world and had it also around his neck so that he would not lose it and no one could take it from him. And the fourth young man had a little booklet around his neck filled with addresses of friends and acquaintances all over the world so that in case he might have to leave the States, another upheaval expected, he could use these contacts. I often wondered why each of us had selected completely different objects in the transit from Europe to America. Each of us trusted something different that would help him to move into the future. Each had another teddy bear. If only I could find these other men. I am sure that each made his particular teddy bear work for him. We see then that the selection of transitional objects is a very personal one and has deep meaning in the forming of personalities, in the formation of goals and finding a meaning for one’s life.
Each of these four young men took his own transitional objects in giving up Europe and moving towards America. Each had a way of his own, his belief in books, religious commitment, the protection through money, or the protection of human contacts. What will their transitional objects be when they become old? And what will finally happen to the objects they collected later in life and will occupy their minds when they move towards old age and must think of the end of the life cycle? What kind of monument, what kind of memory would they want to plant into the minds of those dear to them, the memories of them they want their children, the survivors, to maintain? What do they want to stand for? In other words, what kind of monument will they want for themselves as transit moves towards exit? What is it that they once inherited from their own parents, from the past, and what would they want to be the inheritance of those who will survive them? Each of them, I suppose, if these young men turned out the way I imagined they would, will want their values to be written into their testament. What can they do to maintain tradition? Thus I am occasionally occupied now, when I don't sleep well, with my books. Of course, I do not think just of their physical existence, but whether they will play a role in the minds of those whom I love.

Goethe’s word: “What thou hast inherited from your fathers, acquire it and make it thine and thee”, is the demand for those of us who are young and transit towards the future. The demand of the older people, the inheritance that they leave to their successors, an appeal to conscience, to self and to desire, is concerned with the question as to whether they have done enough to make the younger world capable of using this inheritance. This is the eternal question of education and — if education fails — of the psychotherapeutic, the psychoanalytic process.

This process, a play between identification and counteridentification, between transference and countertransference, between regression and adaptation, is reflected in the fate of transitional objects during the psychotherapeutic process.

These transitional objects, be it now the love for the teddy bear or the love for a psychotherapist need further discussion.

Winnicott hints at this when he says:

*Following this, we can allow the transitional object to be potentially a maternal phallus but originally the breast, that is to say, the thing created by the infant and at the same time provided from the environment. In this way I think that a study of the infant’s use of the transitional object and of transitional phenomena in general may throw light on the origin of the fetish object and of fetishism. There is something to be lost, however, in working backwards from the psychopathology of fetishism to the transitional phenomena which belong to the beginnings of experience and which are inherent in healthy emotional development.* (p. 241-242)
The patient, child, adolescent or adult, whether play, acting out, or free association, creates then a transference to the therapist, provided from the environment, a transitional object that he is, and that allows us to transit towards healthy emotional development.

I hope my daughter, one of the other teachers in my family, will forgive me if I quote her. She told me after she met Winnicott when she was a young adolescent that he's lovable, that he is a teddy bear. Little did she know then that it was Winnicott who wrote about the transitional object, or perhaps, indeed, she did know.

For me he is an eternal object of great admiration, that gave me the strength to travel forward to new experience and discovery. I was able to move forward to America, to new ways of thinking, and also back to my homeland, to Vienna, back to Freud. And with new strength and possessions, I was ready to maintain the dialectic struggle between yesterday and tomorrow, mirrored in the private life cycle and the coming and going of generations.

REFERENCES