

Wild Things

Neil Altman

IN MY READING, *WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE*, IS, AMONG OTHER things, an illustration of what Bion called “alpha function” in action. Alpha function refers to the way in which experience is rendered thinkable. “Experience” in this context refers both unthinkably traumatic experience and more ordinary experience that can be overwhelming to the infant’s mind. Max’s monsters are an amalgam of the strange and the familiar, the scary and the benign. Their features are monstrous and wild, but their expressions are quite benign and humanly identifiable. That which is terrifying because rendered alien has been tamed through being humanized, as Max identifies with his monsters. In the cases we heard about today, and in our practices, the monsters are not always so tame.

I had a dream last night that I was amazed to realize was inspired by this conference and some of the themes I have just touched on. I dreamt there was a war going on, a real war with killing and dying. The feeling was awful. But at the same time, it was a Steven Spielberg movie, like *Saving Private Ryan*, with its realistic depiction of D-day. The war ended, as a movie would, and I watched a man in a wheel chair, I think he had lost his legs, and wondered how he would go on with his life after what he had seen.

In my view, this dream was about the interface between art and trauma, between art and real life. This was a real war, but it was also a movie, and it was somewhere between being truly horrifying and being thinkable, that is, representable in a work of art.

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As I said, in Bion's language we might say that *Where the Wild Things Are* catches alpha function in the act. Max tames his monsters while his mother outside the door calms herself down and sets dinner out for him as Sendak, I imagine, tames his monsters in the process of generating his stories and illustrations. Marsha's presentation raises the possibility, even the likelihood, that a modern-day Max would have gone to his room and turned on his video game to find monsters, the products of someone else's imagination, to manipulate, while his modern-day mother checked her e-mail on her Blackberry and got involved in some work-related matter.

So Sendak was a good observer of children and perhaps he had the gift and the burden of remembering, even staying in touch with, the world of unconscious fantasy, what Melanie Klein called "phantasy." At the same time, Sendak was born to an external world full of wild and monstrous things. Sendak was born in Brooklyn in 1928 into a Jewish family; they had immigrated from Poland before World War I; the family that was left behind was largely destroyed in the holocaust while Sendak was a teenager. He has described his childhood as "colored with memories of village life in Poland, never actually experienced but passed on to me as a persuasive reality by my immigrant parents." His latest book, a collaboration with Tony Kushner, is *Brundibar*, an adaptation of a Nazi-era opera written by a Czech Jew, an allegory of resistance to the Nazis. The wild things he knew about were in the external world as well as in the internal world. Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, of course, as well as most of the early analysts, had even closer contact with the world that produced the Nazis. These were people who had become familiar with the extremes of human monstrosity in the external world. As analysts, the early pioneers saw their task as the illumination of an inner world of love and hate, greed and envy, creativity and destructiveness that they tended to view as the wellspring of human behavior, good and bad. More recently, psychoanalysis has taken a more complex view of the relationship between the inner and outer worlds, that is, that they create and sustain each other. The inner world is a representation of real world experience, while the outer world is perceived through the lens of the inner world. This is the case whether the outer world in question is that of the family or the socio-economic political world. So, to answer to the question "where are the wild things today?" we must say that untamed wild things are on the loose, in families all around us, in Iraq and Afghanistan and Darfur and in innumerable other places around the world, including our own inner cities, just as they were in Nazi Germany and elsewhere in Europe and Asia in Sendak's early years. Now, as then, they are in our dreams and fantasies.

Too often, the outer world becomes the stage on which unprocessed destructiveness gets played out, a waking nightmare from which it is not possible to awake, traumatizing people and rendering their inner worlds rife with destructiveness and death.

Before turning to the specific papers, I want to add a note that our authors, and myself, use the term “wild things” to refer to a whole spectrum of unsettling experiences. There are wild things that are truly matters of life and death, and there are wild things that are as commonplace as an argument with one’s mother. I do not mean to conflate all these together. On the other hand, one of the things we learn from psychoanalysis is that in fantasy what might look commonplace from the outside can stir up quite extreme and terrifying fantasies. Sendak’s book gives us a best case scenario of mastery of wild things; our presenters today show us that in real life things can be much more complicated.

Meira and Spyros open up windows for us onto interfaces between external trauma and its representation in the internal world, then how the internal world spills out back into the external world creating the potential for healing and disaster. In both cases, the trauma has to do with death, a still-born baby in Meira’s case, and a murderous attack on baby Luis in Spyros’ case. In the case of Kevin, the process of spilling out occurs in the space provided by a therapy session, and clearly Kevin senses the opportunity therein. The therapist, supported by her group, is able to move from destabilization and panic to thoughtfulness as she makes meaning of the enactment drawing on knowledge of the child’s history and a cooperative mother who provides the relevant context for understanding. There is a basis for hope in the anticipation that this therapist will be able to help Kevin understand what drives his behavior, but also in the fact that when Kevin falls he avoids actually injuring himself. Does it play out this way by chance, or is the fall unconsciously calculated to communicate without causing physical damage? Perhaps Kevin’s ability to enact in a playful-enough way has to do with the fact that his mother is thoughtful and concerned enough to know that Kevin has been affected by the environment into which he was born and that he needs help. She can bear to know and to think about how Kevin has been affected by her states of mind; he responds with an enactment that can be thought about.

Luis, on the other hand, was subject to an actual physically murderous attack that may be the tip of the iceberg of the violence to which he was subjected during his first two years. There were completely untamed wild things on the loose when Luis was being introduced to the world, imprinting him in a way that neither good foster homes nor good therapists could

alter in a fundamental way. One is called on to bear the pain of receiving Luis' efforts to connect to good caregivers in the face of the self-murder that was unfolding. In many cases, we do not know in advance, or sometimes ever, whether a space for communication and for reflection can be established in relation to the monstrous forces at work unconsciously in some of our patients. Spyros, like Marsha, generously shares with us the fears that this produces in him, as in all of us, in the face of the uncertainty about whether we can help our patients, or whether our own demons will be brought to life and energized when our efforts at reparation fail. We need clinical presentations of this type, in which senior clinicians share the experience of being unable to avert disaster, so that the rest of us will not be left alone with our bad objects when that occurs in our practice. One way we therapists can come to terms with and channel our own wild things is to create that sort of group with each other.

Marsha notes that there is a limit to how much we can generalize about what will become a nightmare for each of us. She goes on generously to share with us some of her personal ones involving the fragmentation of treatment efforts, simple-minded pigeon-holing of patients into categories of permanent deficit, and the way in which the fast-paced action orientation of modern life joins up with adolescent impulsivity and need for immediacy to limit or close down reflective space. What fascinates me about her vignette with Alou, though, is the way in which e-mail and cell phone communication becomes the medium through which he actually demonstrates his frantic, driven, *inner* state. Alou's difficulty suspending immediate gratification in favor of reflection is reinforced by contemporary forms of instantaneous global communication. Marsha gets pulled toward this whirlwind; her resistance to getting entirely sucked into it becomes the negotiation that will, I think, become a defining feature of this therapy. Marsha's old-fashioned values of reflection and thoughtfulness are both culturally out of synch and crucial for someone such as Alou to get a handle on himself. Alou's confusion, that Marsha so clearly evokes, reflects an outer situation as well, a culturally pervasive state of rapid flux that unsettles relatively static concepts such as identity or an external world with stable characteristics. For generations, adolescents have had to deal with the need for stability in the face of rapid flux in their bodies and minds. Now, we are all in the adolescent situation, in the sense that the world around us is changing faster than we can keep up with; it is hard to be thoughtful under these conditions. In a sense, we are, individually and collectively, forced into a kind of manic state in which we must act while thought struggles to keep up. This is not an entirely novel situation, of course; back in the early 1960s

Winnicott, in a paper called *Struggling through the Doldrums*, pointed out how contraception, treatments for venereal disease, and an “end to fighting,” that is, the way nuclear weapons had made it unfeasible to “deal with our difficult adolescents by preparing them to fight for their king and country,” had quickly changed the traditional ways in which we dealt with adolescent sex and aggression. Long before that, the invention of gunpowder had similarly turned the world upside down by giving “reality to magic.” Perhaps more than ever, we must work harder and faster to bring thought to bear on our situations as therapists and human beings and to put our heads together about where the wild things are now.

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