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*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Making space for the adolescent unconscious: A case-based reflection on practice**

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**Community-based psychotherapists and school counsellors work to assist adolescents through sharing resources, building awareness of cognition and behavior, and skill development in communicative competence. However, adolescents, eager to delve deeper into the unknown territory of their being, also present us with speech and acts coming from the unconscious, in the form of metaphors, forgetting, behavioral excesses, mishaps, and physical symptoms. As adolescents search for ways to manage childhood trauma, find meaning and purpose in their lives, and clarify an aspirational direction that makes sense to them, they rarely have opportunities to work at a deeper level. In this article, psychoanalytically informed counselling is presented as a powerful and effective way to work with adolescents. The authors discuss what is at stake during adolescence and they consider the determined denunciation by the adolescent of the impositions of cultural and societal mandates. The call to “make space for the adolescent unconscious” is contextualized in an overview of the historical foundations of psychoanalysis with children and adolescents. The article analyzes two counseling sessions in which the adolescent works with a school-based counsellor to use dreams to “interact with” his unconscious. Drawing from their own counselling and educational experience with adolescents and emerging adults, the authors discuss the ethics upon which psychoanalytically informed work with adolescents must be grounded. The counselling vignettes are interpreted using the work of Freud, Klein, Lacan and the analysts of Groupe interdisciplinaire freudien de recherche et d’intervention clinique et culturelle (Gifric) of the Freudian School of Quebec.**

**Key words:** Adolescence, emerging adulthood, counselling adolescents, trauma, dream interpretation, Freud, psychoanalysis, unconscious.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Josh<sup>1</sup> frequented the school counseling office, often to seek solace from upsetting interactions with his peers. In the spring of eleventh grade, on his own initiative, he

brought Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* to his counselling session and suggested that he begin talking about his dreams. In subsequent sessions, he arrived

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with his dreams and with his curiosity, eager to see what he might learn about himself by engaging with what might be coming up from his unconscious. When asked how he knows that dreams can be helpful, he answered, “It allows you to interact with your subconscious, which is basically the best thing you can do. The subconscious knows what you are looking for.” (Josh used the word subconscious because that is the term he learned in his psychology class. We think he often meant “unconscious.”)

Indeed, we have found in our work with adolescents and emerging adults a similar resonance with the idea of something inside them—hidden from view, yet full of possibility—that can help them navigate toward the object of their search. Josh seemed to know that what he was “looking for” was much more than a job and a plan for higher education. He invited depth in counselling to explore what was operating in his excessive use of videogames, everyday conflicts, and his wish to “fix this broken world.” It also meant a return to the trauma-based terror of his childhood.

Counselling adolescents in schools is typically an academic and future-oriented process intended to set students on track toward specific social, vocational, and educational goals. Using assessments, questionnaires and brief activities, we train our attention toward helping adolescents clarify interests, establish priorities, and solve every day, tangible academic and interpersonal problems. The counsellor’s stance as mentor, guide, and witness is vital when working with adolescents. However, we make a case for questioning the widely practiced behavioral strategies typically in use when working with adolescents (Lin, 2016). By listening carefully to adolescents, we have come to appreciate what Josh himself told us: the counsellor’s well-intentioned behavior-oriented compass was out of step with what was troubling him. This reflection helped us to understand the power and urgency of Josh’s words and the dissonance between the structured, culturally-bound, future planning project and what was real for him.

### Adolescence and unbound drives

For psychoanalysis, which takes the unconscious as its *raison d’être*, what distinguishes adolescence from childhood is the reactivation of the drives which have rested dormant during the so-called “latency period.” In practical terms, this means adolescence is the moment in a person’s life during which they are pushed-driven-to break with norms, values, and ideals that constitute their social order. Whereas the child is at pains to discover, internalize, and navigate the demands imposed by culture and civilization—in other words, to *learn the rules* and how to abide by them—the adolescent realizes that these rules were not devised with them in mind, and that the world these rules supposedly safeguard therefore has been constructed without regard for, and is even against, everything about the adolescent that does not conform

with established expectations, codes of conduct, or parameters of possibility. Faced with the anguish of this realization, their dissatisfaction regarding the adult world they had hitherto been compelled to accept, and with a surge of energy (unbound or free drives) coming from the unconscious, adolescents seek to make a way for their own core truth, even as this truth remains obscure, hidden and mysterious, to them and others.

Because this truth inheres only at the margins of sense, in the inarticulate space of an unexplored desire, it can find no place in language and expresses itself instead through acts, sometimes creative sublimations, energetic investments in new activities, or revaluations of old ones, and other “socially acceptable” means. At other times, what cannot be spoken is expressed through behaviors that seem dangerously impulsive, reckless, and self-destructive. In any case, the adolescent’s acts are neither unmotivated nor reducible to the biological realities of puberty. They are motivated by the activation of the drive. And while puberty is indeed a fact of growing older, the notion that adolescence names merely a momentary surplus of hormones is a common cultural defense against, and a pejorative dismissal of, a wholly legitimate disaffection with the social order.

Small wonder, then, that many adolescents, in our experience, track toward the notion of the unconscious as a helpful source of knowledge and are drawn to Freudian insights and formulations despite their purported obsolescence with respect to more recent clinical orientations. As Freud wrote:

The liberation of an individual as he grows up from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur and...Indeed the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations (1909/1974:237).

Though his remarks are here confined to the family scene, Freud’s association between liberation from paternal authority and “the whole progress of society” draws a link to the wider frames of culture and civilization. Here, then, is a clinical orientation in which students’ anxieties and ambitions are recognized, legitimized, and even lauded as a painful but necessary step toward the full assumption of their unique place in the world and their responsibility to it.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### What is at stake during adolescence?

Klein (1932/1975) wrote that, in puberty, impulses are more powerful, fantasies are greater, and the more developed ego of the adolescent begins to search for aims with a different, and often defiant, relationship to ideals and norms. The adolescent develops, “... various

interests and activities (sports and so on), with the object of mastering anxiety, of overcompensating for it, and masking it from himself and others” (p. 80). Erikson (1968) wrote that adolescents experience a developmental impasse as they struggle with societal and cultural demands to conform to structures, rules, and institutions that they have come to see as deeply flawed. Importantly, Erikson (1975) described this crisis as a time of possibility when the adolescent might create a way to move beyond the internalization of prohibitions toward a subjective ethic—a commitment to learning what is at stake for his or her life, what is at the core of one’s being, and how to take responsibility for that, beyond the mandates and expectations of others (p. 206).

Psychoanalysis posits that an ethical position is to strive to know and to act upon true desire—in essence, to become the author of, and subject in, one’s own story. But the adolescent is particularly confined by “the hold of cultural constructs” (Cantin, 2017a) and the repression of the desire:

In such a structure of repression, what place remains for the real of the subject, for the particular sensibilities that experiences, which are fundamental and out-of-language, have inscribed in him or her, tracing the path of singular modalities of jouissance and anxiety that the family, the society, the culture, and the civilization are powerless to manage? (pp. 65-66).

Anxiety and symptoms arise when the adolescent persists in their pursuit of something that is out of the bounds of cultural constructs and they are met with the constraints of the montage—cultural ideals, societal norms, and prohibitions—that seek to moderate their drive (Blum, 2010). Child analyst Dolto (2013) explains: “Anxiety tries to liberate itself by producing a symptom, which will then allow an emotional discharge” (p. 7). And this excess of energy is aimed toward a yet-undiscovered desire.

Following Freud’s (1901) early and continuous work on *The psychopathology of everyday life*, Anna Freud (1935/1963), in *Psychoanalysis for teachers and parents*, characterized symptoms or acts arising out of the unconscious as follows: “It was psychoanalysis that succeeded in proving that there was always at the root of the little daily mistakes of human beings—such as forgetfulness, losing things, accidents, errors in reading, etc.—some purposive desire” (p. 24). She explained further, “...we forget nothing except what we wish to forget for good reason which may, however, be quite unknown to ourselves... people scarcely take so much trouble to lock up something worthless!” (p. 25).

Lacan (1992) calls this precious thing *das Ding*, The Thing, the “beyond-of-the-signified” which functions to provide the subject an uncertain destination for her desire (p. 54). According to psychoanalytic experience, Lacan asserts, “it is this object, *das Ding*, as the absolute other of the subject, that one is supposed to find again” (p. 52).

It is the “first stranger” in relation to which the subject is oriented, the germ of the unconscious. Apropos of what we have established concerning the psychoanalytic treatment of adolescence, for the analysts at Gifric, this Thing is the origin and cause of the human’s quest to carve out a space in the world, to find new modes of expression for what otherwise would not exist except in the singular domain of unconscious fantasy.

The task of the subject, in this view, is to machinate a way to translate this radical, thus untranslatable, singularity from the subjective to the social, to accept the impossibility of this task and to take it on, not despite, but precisely because of the impossibility of its fulfillment. This is why the quest of the unconscious, for patients or practitioners, must be an *ethical*, not merely utilitarian, endeavor (Cantin, 2017b; Apollon, 2006, 2010). That collection of constraints the analysts at Gifric call the “cultural montage”—censorship of the ego and the social link, mechanisms of repression, normative injunctions, and, most importantly, the way in which this is all knitted together within the identity of the subject—is from its foundations constituted to the exclusion of the singular humanity at work in every person, every instance of the human. With this, we therefore can say that adolescence is the moment of the discovery of one’s own humanity, and the impulse to make a way for this precious thing in a world which wants to either resist it or channel it according to the world’s own insufficient terms.<sup>2</sup>

### Foundations of psychoanalysis with children and adolescents

Holding space for the unconscious through psychoanalytic work with children and adolescents is, of course, not new. Sigmund Freud learned a great deal from his failed analysis with 18-year-old Dora (Freud, 1905; Gorelick, 2016). His daughter, Anna, like Melanie Klein, was deeply invested in promoting psychoanalytic treatment with vulnerable and traumatized children (Aldridge et al., 2014). In 1927, Anna Freud explained the purpose and power of psychoanalysis with children in *Introduction to the technique of child analysis*. As a former school teacher herself, she gave four lectures on psychoanalysis to teachers at the Children’s Centers of the City of Vienna in 1935. In these published lectures, she stressed the dangers of parents and teachers colluding with the ideals of the superego to install conformity, submission, and repression, in other words, pressing the child “to fulfill the demands of the adult world” (p. 96). Anna Freud believed that the “adolescent upset” is inevitable and developmentally necessary. She proposed a position in schools that would be on the side of adolescent insight, agency, and desire, rather than on the side of conformity.

With the rise of short-term cognitive behavioral therapies and the demand for evidence-based practices, clinicians grew more ambivalent about psychoanalysis after 1970. More recently, however, there is renewed interest in

outcome research and case studies in psychoanalytically informed strategies with children and young adults (Werbart et al., 2016; Rogers, 2015). Anzieu-Premmeur et al. (2016) introduced a volume of articles on psychoanalytic work with children by encouraging “analysts to look again at the dreams of their child and adolescent patients and see their potential as the proverbial royal road leading to the unconscious conflicts of their patients” (p. 197).

Relevant to the case at hand, peer group and familial violence have significant consequences in the formation of self-concept (Gesinde, 2013) and the lack of parental nurturance can set a course toward struggle and distress during adolescence (Ijeoma et al., 2016; Afolabi, 2014). Parental support can moderate hopelessness and increase optimism in pursuing a future life plan (Sumer et al., 2009); however, we know that, frequently, childhood trauma reaches deep into a person’s life, troubling relationships, employment, and mental health (Connolly, 2014). Importantly, there are efforts to integrate psychoanalytically informed techniques in K-12 schools. For example, motivated by the unmet mental health needs of students, a schoolwide, classroom-based intervention was designed to provide creative, psychoanalytically informed interventions to respond to the disturbances of adolescence (Ansari, 2015). There is much promise in the collaboration between psychoanalysts and school-based counsellors, as shown in efforts to integrate psychoanalytically informed trauma responsive interventions in elementary schools (Waterson, 2018).

In our work, we have consistently been moved by how readily adolescents—wanting to be seen, heard, and believed—lean into a process that is a journey of self-discovery and an opportunity to name something that agitates from the core of their being. In the following sections, we describe what we learned from one adolescent’s search for a shape and a place for that “purposive desire.”

## METHODS AND PURPOSE

In this case-based reflection, we welcomed iterative reframing, based on the dynamic situation of the counselling process and what we were hearing and experiencing in counselling sessions. In *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*, Schon (1984) argued for practice-based knowledge as a corrective to institutional predilection to constrain knowledge toward “...a particular epistemology, a view of knowledge that fosters selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry” (p. vii). In the complexity and uncertainty of constructing meaning out of everyday life experience, there is “a problem in finding the problem” (p. 129). Reflection-in-action is the stance of a practitioner attuned to new words and situations that call for constant reframing: “The situation talks back, the practitioner listens, and as he appreciates what he hears, he reframes the situation once again” (pp. 131-132).

For this article, we used the specific methodology outlined by Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) in *Matters of interpretation: Reciprocal transformation in therapeutic and developmental relationships with youth*. This methodology compels counsellors to consider the ethics

of interpretation—the ways that interpretation is pre-determined by the demands of context, culture, discipline, and identity. They propose a case-based reflection—a “phenomenological investigation”—grounded in a rigorous process of note-taking, reading, iterative interpretation based on searching for what is missing in our understanding, acknowledging and challenging our assumptions, and, at last, examining how perspective and stance change over time. This is a never-ending process and, even in the preparation of this article, new questions emerged that begged for further examination.

In the case discussion, we draw from the work of Jacques Lacan and the analysts of *Groupe interdisciplinaire freudien de recherche et d'intervention clinique et culturelle* (Gifric) of the Freudian School of Quebec. We pose these questions: How might the adolescent unconscious come into the counselling room and what is the adolescent asking for? How might counsellors shift their stance to listen differently without prescriptions and preconceived interpretations of the meaning and significance of an adolescent’s struggle? How can we make space for the unconscious, and, consequently, respond to trauma memories that emerge? What ethics ground psychoanalytically-informed work with adolescents?

We analyze two counselling sessions in which the adolescent works to “interact with” the unconscious and we discuss what might be gained in psychoanalytically informed work. During counselling sessions, the counsellor wrote down dream narrations word for word, and also jotted words, phrases, and sentences during the entire session. After each session, the counsellor wrote up extensive notes, including observations, interpretations, and reflections. Notes about Josh were written over a period of two years, and these notes, along with session notes and email exchanges, are used for this article. The Institutional Review Board of Lesley University approved this study.

## RESULTS

### Counseling practice vignettes

#### *Ethics in the face of the adolescent quest*

The student we refer to as Josh, a thin, pale, distracted high school student, came to the counselling office often. He had itchy red blotches of eczema on his arms and face; the dandruff on his clothes drew negative attention from his peers. He was first referred to counselling in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, at the age of fourteen, because he was having a hard time adjusting to high school and had difficult relationships with others, at school and at home. Josh grew up in a small factory town where, after the mills closed, his family had a hard time making ends meet. During his childhood, his family was evicted from their home twice. Josh is the oldest of four children and, on at least one occasion, he showed up after school as the “parent” for his younger brother’s parent-teacher conference. He spoke of his dad, a man diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, with disdain for being harsh and judgmental, and about his mom with indifference, saying she spent most of her time watching TV in her bedroom. He often described being the target of bullying at school and in the community. While school served as an anchor, and he did well academically, he was socially isolated and lacked a sense of connection at home. After two years, he began to speak about early traumas: a car

crash, falling down the stairs, and falling off the playground slide. In the fall of his senior year he began speaking with more urgency about his memories of his father's anger. One day, he paced around the counselling room and, with his voice stifled in his throat, he spoke about how making a big breakfast with his father could turn dangerous. He remembered a scene when he and his younger brother were helping with breakfast. They knew their father needed things to be "perfect," but the bacon burnt, his father raged, Josh hid, and his father beat his little brother instead. His mother was rarely part of his narrative.

Josh was particularly competent in computer technology; he eventually graduated in the top quartile of his class. In 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, life after high school and future plans became a more urgent topic, perhaps for the counsellor more than for Josh himself. He spoke passionately about video games, but by 16-years-old, he was sensing that video games were a waste of time—he wanted to do something more purposeful: "I want to fix this broken world," he said. A year after graduating from high school, the counsellor received an email note from Josh. His experience of impasse was tangible:

*Part of my problem I think is that I have no life goals or goals of any type at all. Well I guess I do kind of want to fix this crazy government we have, but not through political means. I thought making games...would help me achieve that by getting other people to think about it. Game programming. I am not sure that I want to do that anymore. Actually, I am not even sure I want to be around computers... Video games at least I think have destroyed my life more than anything and for one reason or another (probably the no goals) I can't escape, I can't remove them or lessen the amount I play them... It is too bad that goals don't define themselves or I might be fine. But, yes, this year contains something good possibly, but as of this moment I only see a brewing storm.*

It is clear, then, that for Josh his trouble is an impasse of desire. On one hand, he acknowledges the need to intervene in the world and to improve it; on the other hand, he is dissatisfied with the available means to do so. In this, he is not unlike young Rasselas, the title character in Samuel Johnson's classic novel about the unbreakable link between desire and dissatisfaction, who wanders through the world trying and failing to make his "choice of life." At the origin of his adventure, Rasselas characterizes his trouble in terms that resonate startlingly with Josh's: "I have already enjoyed too much," he laments, "give me something to desire" (2009:13). As with Johnson's fictional adolescent, Josh is confined within a prison of pleasure from which, as he says, he "can't escape." While Josh considers the possibility of designing videogames that get people to think about "the crazy government we have," he is left with a sense of being untethered, without goals or pathways.

It is tempting here to impose a psychoanalytic inter-

pretation concerning Josh's childhood memories of his tyrannical father and their relation to the other scenes of infantile trauma—the playground slide, the car accident, and so on—as well as his early knack for computers. Indeed, this knot of associations begs to be unwound. The properly ethical point, however, is that no such unknotting is possible unless Josh himself takes the lead. Here, we must resist the counsellor's impulse, perhaps even her professional expectation, to clear things up for her subject, to explain his own psychic complexity to him, in short, to help him feel better. For what Josh was asking for was not help in any pedestrian sense of the term, but an ear to which he could address his inner anguish without having to subordinate it to any predetermined objective. The Thing which sets the subject on its quest, which orients the subject toward the other, is not looking for a job or a college major or any object that can be held or named. If Josh says he does not know what he wants, our task is not to tell him what he wants or should want, not to enumerate a list of vocational options that would only augment his sense of entrapment within the strictures of the social link, not to proffer some bauble that would satisfy his frustration but, instead, to honor his uncertainty and recognize it as a totally valid protest against a "broken world." Whether the counsellor succeeded in providing such recognition may be seen in what follows.

Two segments from counselling notes will illustrate what we learned from Josh about the persistent way the unconscious is present in our counselling sessions. By speaking and interpreting his dreams, Josh made it clear that dreams can be a way for adolescents to visit primal fears, grapple with interpersonal conflicts, and confront the demands of the other. In the first dream, while there were important insights, the counsellor did not sustain an open space for the unconscious. In the second example, there was more space provided for uncensored speech and Josh used his dream to hold space for himself as a subject of the unconscious.

### ***"I am always looking through another person's eyes"***

In the spring of his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, the counsellor started a meeting with an interest survey that Josh completed. For the counsellor, there was a sense of urgency about developing future goals and plans and an eagerness to help him interpret the survey and give him some ideas that might foster positive future orientation. For example, the counsellor asked, "You answered several questions in a way that suggests you have a big heart. Have you ever thought of yourself that way?" "No," he said, "I avoid people." The counsellor's future planning project was not going well.

As often happened when talking about the future, the conversation turned toward traumatizing events. Josh spoke about bullying incidents and said his goal was to make these experiences "mean nothing." Were his video-

games serving as a distraction, a way to alleviate anxiety, a way to play out a successful end by fighting back against aggression? Then, he said, "I'm caught up in video games that I don't care about. The experience playing them is hollow." And because we had been talking about his interest survey and what his career aspiration might be, he said he thinks a college program in computers would be "hollow."

Picking up on his words, "making it mean nothing" and "hollow," the counsellor asked, "You've used the word 'hollow' twice, why is that word coming up for you right now?" "Without meaning; not much there; just a shell—like a hollowed tree trunk," he said. Again, the counsellor asked, "Why is 'hollow' coming up for you right now?" He said he did not know but if he could tell a dream it might help him understand. Then, after asking to leave for a few minutes, he went to the school library and returned to the counselling room with *Freud's Interpretation of Dreams* (1899/2010). The counsellor had never spoken about psychoanalysis, but, somehow, Josh knew that he had to find a way to help the counsellor tend to what was most important to him. Unprompted, he began to tell a dream that he said was a recurring dream:

*I'm at the JHS. There are doors one on either side of the office and one straight ahead. There's a big glass window in the stairwell—a spiral stairway down to a cement floor. Three doors open to a wide area. It is grassy and peaceful. There is a student reading a book.*

Counsellor: You spoke about reading earlier today. Might the student in the dream represent you?

Josh: No but in the first grade I won a reading award.

Counsellor: Why are there three doors?

Josh: Many directions to go.

Counsellor: Does this have something to do with your life right now?

Josh: I can learn a new program language or keep doing what I am doing.

Counsellor: But you said there are many directions... what does that mean?

Josh: So many ways.

Counsellor: Like what?

Josh: Accountant, Chef...

Counsellor: You said there are three doors opening up to a wide area?

Josh: The paths all go to the same place but then they diverge. (He showed with his hands how paths get further and further apart as they go.) You can get off the path at any time.

Counsellor: How so?

Josh: You can always change direction in life. I am in this dream going by myself, going through the building like in a video game. I am always looking through another person's eyes.

(Counselling notes reveal a bit of a panic—this is deep but what to do with it?!)

Counsellor: You can always change your path in life?

Josh: When you follow one path it gets farther away from the other path. The longer you wait the harder it is to change but it doesn't mean you can't.

Counsellor: Away from what?

Josh: Home and my dog Coco. (Then he spoke about no one being able to care for his old dog if he were to leave).

This was the first time Josh spoke about possibilities other than building computer games, and it was the first time he spoke about the pull toward home even as he also said he couldn't wait to get away from home. This dream opened possibilities for continuing discussions in the coming weeks about choosing different paths, diverging paths, and concerns about distance from home and his dog. He had been stuck about his future plans, worried about money—a very real constraint—but now it was clear that there were other worries as well.

However, after reading session notes many times, it became clear that the counsellor wanted to make the interpretation of this dream go in a positive direction—a wish he surely picked up on. The counsellor avoided the reason he brought the dream in the first place—when he said that hollow meant, "Without meaning; not much there; just a shell—like a hollowed tree trunk." The counsellor tried to attend to the dream, but worry for him, the urge to help him identify barriers and possibilities, and the counsellor's wish for a good future for Josh, interrupted the work of the unconscious. In this session, the counsellor took up the position of other adults who press with their own expectations and hopes. "Always looking through another person's eyes"—Josh said what he thought the counsellor wanted to hear.

### ***The unconscious persists***

Some months later, Josh joined his counsellor and a few other seniors to visit a couple of colleges. He was excited about going but during the day he became more and more withdrawn until, by the end of the day, his anger was palpable. At one point, he was zig-zagging down the hall of a classroom building from one wall to the other and, when the counsellor attempted to joke with him, saying, "Josh is creating a new video game," he became angry and was brooding during the 90-minute ride back to school. Two weeks later, Josh brought a dream and during this session he was sometimes teary-eyed:

*There is a very tall building, a skyscraper in NY. A lot of windows; it looks pretty nice. I'm standing on the stove reaching into the ceiling, trying to reach for a box of Hamburger Helper. One of the boxes says, "Cooking with President Obama." There is a golden helicopter partially made of cardboard.*

Counsellor: Reaching into the ceiling?

Josh: Barely out of my reach; a hidden supply.

The counsellor asked what part of the dream made the

least amount of sense—"the navel" of the dream (Freud, 1899). He said the helicopter that is partly cardboard, and he explained, "The building is under attack." The counsellor remembered that in a previous session Josh said one of his earliest memories was being injured on the playground the day of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. He was sent home where he watched TV all day.

Counsellor: Under attack?

Josh: Under attack by what seems of worth to everyone else but has no importance to I.

This prompted the memory of the college visit when he became upset with the counsellor for joking with him about making a videogame.

Counsellor: What happened during our college visit?

Josh (very directly): I was angry that you were making fun of something that is important to me. He continued to express his anger while the counsellor listened quietly. As the intensity of his words lessened, he said to the counsellor, "I was especially angry because you are someone I care about."

The dream, with its language of being under attack, helped Josh to confront the counsellor who perhaps was, during the college trip, the "helper out of reach." His early trauma comes forward in the 9/11-type catastrophe and the construction of an impractical cardboard helicopter. We wonder if this dream expresses his childhood effort to be the "good child" in order to elicit the "good father"—he replaced his father with President Obama ("cooking with President Obama"), whom he admired. He also spoke about reaching for something, "barely out of reach; a hidden supply"—a profound way to speak about his own unnamable desire and the *savoir* of the unconscious. Reflecting on this dream, the counsellor grasped the rupture he experienced while visiting colleges. He was literally "under attack by what seems of worth to everyone else but has no importance to I." In this session, the counsellor knows she must hold space for his sense of being "under attack" and she does not steer away from anger or trauma. This session proved to deepen Josh's faith in his own ability to walk into painful territory, hold ground for his unconscious, and explore using his own compass.

## DISCUSSION

Adolescents often bring to counselling their concerns about how to negotiate new settings, future transitions, and the relationships that trouble them with peers, teachers, family members, and employers. Community-based psychotherapists and school counsellors work to assist adolescents through sharing resources, building awareness of cognition and behavior, and skill development in communicative competence. However, adolescents, eager to delve deeper into the unknown territory of their being, often present us with speech and

acts coming from the unconscious, in the form of metaphors, forgetting, behavioral excesses, mishaps, and physical symptoms.

Common narratives of adolescents as "impulsive" and "self-centered" reduce what is at work in the adolescent to caricature; likewise, societal demands often reduce the role of counsellors and psychotherapists to instrumental, rather than insight-oriented, purposes. In such a structure, we can easily miss the adolescent's layered and encoded search for a singular meaning for their lives, and instead feel compelled to "fix" rather than hold space for the creative, disruptive quest of the adolescent. In so doing, and however well-meaning our interventions, we risk contributing to the conservative tendencies of culture and society by buttressing their censorship of adolescent drives.

Although Jung and Freud parted ways in a painful and public split over some of Freud's most fundamental thoughts especially concerning the definition of *libido* (Bettelheim, 1991), Jung's own brand of psychoanalysis nevertheless clarifies the function of dreams in helpful ways. In his seminars from 1936-1940, he delineates four ways to understand dreams: (1) an unconscious reaction to a conscious situation that occurred in the previous day or two; (2) a way to introduce conflict into a conscious situation that seems settled; (3) a counterposition or alternative attitude introduced to the dreamer that might bring change if the person understands there is an alternative; and (4) "great dreams," or *somnia a deo missa* [dreams sent by God], having no relation to the conscious situation or a conflict but still holding great power (Jung, 1987/2008: 4-5). It is clear that Josh used dreams to accomplish the first three purposes described by Jung. It is interesting to note that Jung's fourth point is relevant in cultures where "dreams are valued as another way of knowing"—a way to offer useful guidance and direction in life (Kelly, 2018: 37).

We find that many adolescents, regardless of social class, race, parenting, or religion, are fervent in their pursuit of personal meaning—to uncover what is "hidden away." When we make room for the unconscious, they often lean in with curiosity and a yearning to know. But most adolescents have very little opportunity for exploration and uncensored speech. Josh invites us to listen differently—to shift stance in order to probe deeper in counselling using psychoanalytic approaches.

Psychoanalytic strategies can include paying attention to lapses like missing or "forgetting" deadlines, asking about sickness and symptoms, picking up on repeated words, slips, losing things, and excesses, like many hours a day of videogames, which elicits both pleasure and anxiety. When adolescents speak in socially acceptable platitudes (how wonderful everything/everyone is), we should wonder out loud about the opposite. We now work hard to be aware of the way our own ego pulls us toward comfort or conforming talk, reinforcing societal and cultural ideals, and constraining the

individual toward goals that would fulfill the wishes of others coming from parents, teachers, and even peers. We try more often to listen in silence as a way to sustain the hard emotions that are the birthplace of creativity, imagination, and possibility. We try to move from, “*I know, and I will tell you,*” to “*You know, you tell me.*” We have become suspicious of narratives that are shaped by superego ideals and we work to support the dislocation of these old narratives in order to make a place for new narratives that confront constraints and provide creative alternatives.

## Conclusion

If for psychoanalysis “adolescence,” like the unconscious, is a universal property of the human condition, then, also like the unconscious, its manifestations are necessarily specific to the terms and conditions of its historical circumstances. It is true to the point of cliché that adolescents today are compelled to negotiate an increasingly media-saturated world, one in which the vectors for the transmission of social norms, cultural expectations, and civilizational ideals continue to multiply. This proliferation of mechanisms of conformity—mechanisms which nefariously posit themselves as avenues of self-expression—brings with it new or differently configured possibilities for resistance, self-discovery, and, of course, failure.

In addition, the sad amalgam of political polarization, environmental devastation, and economic and social injustice has offered young adults little reason to accept—to say nothing of their being comfortable with—the reality they have been given, or to trust older generations to know what is best for them. These circumstances demand that we vitalize our attunement to their triumphs and frustrations, desires and anxieties, against our impulses to repair the rift in the social link that their experiences represent, and toward an ethical fidelity to what is working in the adolescent, driving them, from the position of the unsaid, the unheard—in short, from the position of the unconscious.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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<sup>1</sup> The name "Josh" is a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> On the topic of adolescence, also see the June 2017 issue of *Correspondances*, including, "Adolescence, masculine, and feminine," by Apollon, and "Adolescence, the moment to center everything on humanity despite the siren-song lure of the sexual montage," by Bergeron. Also see, "The borderline or the impossibility of producing a negotiable form in the social bond for the return of the censored," by Cantin (2010); "Four seasons in femininity or four men in a woman's life," by Apollon (1993); and "The discourse of gangs in the stake of male repression and narcissism" by Apollon, 1994. *After Lacan* (2002) by Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin is also recommended.