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About Losing and Being Lost

(1967 [1953])

INTERPRETATIONS OF LOSING: DYNAMIC AND LIBIDO-ECONOMIC

Losing and mislaying objects came under analytic scrutiny at an early date. In 1901, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, we find it mentioned for the first time, and, further, more explicitly in the chapters on "Parapraxes" of the *Introductory Lectures* (1916-1917). In both publications, Freud explained losing, as he did the other common

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errors such as forgetting, slips of the tongue, etc., on the basis of a conscious intention being interfered with by a wish which arises from the unconscious. In the case of losing this means that we have the unconscious desire to discard something which consciously we wish to retain. The unconscious tendency makes use of some favorable moment (when our attention is turned elsewhere, when we are tired, preoccupied, etc.) to have its own way. We then lose the object in question; i.e., we throw it away, or put it away, without realizing that we are doing so.

A number of examples of such happenings were collected in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, aiming, above all, "at paving the way for the necessary assumption of *unconscious yet operative* mental processes" (p. 272, n.).

For our metapsychological thinking, on the other hand, it is significant that Freud's interest in the phenomenon of losing went, as early as 1916, beyond the explanation of two forces interfering with each other as well as beyond the need to prove the existence of an operative unconscious. In the *Introductory Lectures* he wrote: "*Losing and mislaying* are of particular interest to us owing to the many meanings they may have—owing, that is, to the multiplicity of purposes which can be served by these parapraxes. All cases have in common the fact that there was a wish to lose something; they differ in the basis and aim of that wish. We lose a thing when it is worn out, when we intend to replace it by a better one, when we no longer like it, when it originates from someone with whom we are no longer on good terms or when we acquired it in circumstances we no longer want to recall. . . . The preserving of *things* may be subject to the same influences as that of children" (p. 77).

Insight into "the basis and aim" of losing led here from

the dynamics of mental life to the libido-economic aspects of it, with which we are equally familiar. As Freud did then, we now take it for granted that our material possessions are cathected with libido (and aggression) and that retaining, mislaying, losing, and rediscovering them are caused by either quantitative or qualitative alterations in this cathexis.

Our material possessions may represent for us parts of our own body, in which case we cathect them narcissistically; or they may represent human love objects, in which case they are cathected with object libido. We increase or decrease cathexis, or change it from positive to negative, from libido to aggression, according to the vicissitudes of our attitude to our own body on the one hand and to the objects in the external world on the other hand.

So far as the symbolic links between body parts and material possessions are concerned, these have been studied most closely with regard to the anal product. Here psychoanalysis has established a direct line leading from the high value attributed to excrements in infantile life to the value attributed to money in adulthood. Many attitudes of the adult which would otherwise remain puzzling are open to explanation on this basis, such as the urge to collect, miserliness, avariciousness, or their opposites.

A new chapter in the understanding of losing and retaining was opened when analysts began to concentrate their attention on the events of the first year of life and the earliest interactions between infants and their mothers. There is general agreement that the infant directs value cathexis to any object from which satisfaction can be obtained, irrespective of the object being animate or inanimate, part of the internal or of the external world: as observation confirms, the mother's breast, the bottle, the

child's own fingers, etc., are periodically searched for, found, lost, recaptured, etc.

On the other hand, it depends on the individual author's theoretical orientation whether the dawning differentiation between the self and the object world is conceived of as happening very early or comparatively late in infancy; and whether inanimate objects (such as the bottle) and body parts (such as fingers) are seen as objects in their own right or merely as derivatives of and substitutes for the mother. It seems to me that any decision in this respect (or the continuing indecision) needs to be based on the fact that we deal here with undifferentiated and unstructured human beings; that this is a period of life when there are no whole objects, only part objects; when there are only anaclitic, i.e., need-satisfying, object relationships; and when even external objects are included in the child's internal, narcissistic milieu.¹

We are greatly helped in our dilemma by the concept of the "transitional object" as it was introduced by D. W. Winnicott (1953). Winnicott traced the line which connects the mother's breast as a source of pleasure with the thumb which is sucked and the blanket, pillow, or soft, cuddly toy which is played with. He showed convincingly that all these early objects are cathected doubly, narcissistically and with object love, and that this enables the child to transfer his attachments gradually from the cathected figure of the mother to the external world in general.

Thus, human beings are flexible where their attachments are concerned. Narcissistically colored ties alternate with object ties proper; libidinal with aggressive cathexis; ani-

¹ According to a term introduced by W. Hoffer (1952).

mate with inanimate objects. This creates multiple possibilities for discharge, which remain important far beyond childhood. Children who are frustrated, dissatisfied, jealous, etc., but unable for internal or external reasons to react aggressively to their parents, may turn this same aggression toward material things and become destructive of their toys, their clothing, the furniture, etc. In a temper or rage individuals of all ages may choose as their point of attack either their own bodies, or other people, or any objects within their reach. Children in separation distress may cling to any of their possessions which they invest, for the time being, with cathexis displaced from their human objects. When we analyze adolescents who pass through a phase of withdrawal from the object world, or who suffer from the aftereffects of an unhappy love affair, we often find that they are obsessed with holding on to what is left, in the form of compiling lists either of their remaining friends or of their valuables. People with obsessional characters are well known to displace the reaction formations against their hostile impulses and death wishes from human beings to material things, thereby becoming unable to discard anything, down to the most valueless, useless, and superfluous matters.

There is no doubt in our mind that the libido-economic aspects of the interpretation of losing add considerably to its dynamic explanation and that, on this basis, we advance from the mere understanding of phenomena such as losing, mislaying, discarding, destroying, recapturing, etc., to some theory concerning the attitude of human beings to their possessions. We begin to understand, further, why losing things is the exception rather than the rule, in spite of

the multitude of items which we own. Obviously, it is the distribution of our libido between the animate and the inanimate world and the resulting positive cathexis of material objects which assures that our possessions remain tied to us, or, rather, we to them.

We understand, further, why some people become chronic losers. If their libidinal processes are seriously altered, they cease to have a hold on their possessions, without the latter having changed for the worse in any respect. We see this happen, for example, in individuals whose whole interest is concentrated on one particular subject (such as a scientific inquiry) and who become "abstracted" as a result; or in states of high emotional involvement such as mourning, or being in love, when cathexis is similarly sent out in one particular direction only and withdrawn from other uses.

Certain other phenomena may be mentioned in the same connection. We are familiar with the *fear of impoverishment* which appears as a symptom in a number of pre-psychotic states, and we understand it, on the basis of the foregoing, as the result of the individual's libidinal withdrawal from his material possessions and the ensuing fear of losing hold of them; obviously, this is not unlike the graver psychotic delusion of the destruction of the world, which we interpret as a reflection in consciousness of the withdrawal of libido from the object world in general. We know severe states of *negativism* in which the individual withdraws cathexis not only from material possessions but also from his body, which as a consequence is utterly neglected (dirty, unkempt, starved, etc.). We are familiar, further, with the concept of *voluntary poverty*, an attitude which

is practiced by many religious, political, and social bodies where it is meant to assure that their members will cathect only ideals and not waste cathexis on material matters. Also, we expect poets, writers, members of the medical profession, and others to be "*high-minded*," i.e., at least to be partially uninterested in material reward.

SOME REACTIONS TO LOSING: IDENTIFICATION WITH THE LOST OBJECT

We take it for granted that we feel unhappy and miserable after losing one of our possessions, even if these moods are hardly justified by the circumstances themselves.

We feel *deprived*, in the first instance, not necessarily because of the objective value of the lost item but more frequently because of its subjective value, as representative of an important body part (penis symbol) or an important love object (the giver of it). On this basis we go through a period of detaching ourselves from it, almost as we do when *mourning* a dead person. Also, we feel *guilty*, as if we had not lost the thing unintentionally but discarded it in full consciousness.

Nevertheless, this accumulation of castration distress, mourning, and guilt still does not suffice to explain all of the loser's distress. There are further elements involved which originate in deeper layers of the mind and become visible only where losing occurs either during an analysis, or at least in full view of an analyst. When this happens, we notice, first, that the loser seems to ascribe some independent action to the lost object. He can be heard to say not only, "I have lost something, mislaid it, forgotten where I put it," etc., but equally often: "It got lost," or "It is

gone," or "It has come back." Obviously this signifies a displacement: the libidinal withdrawal responsible for the loss is shifted from the inner world of the loser to the item which has been lost, personifying the latter in the process. We notice, secondly, that the loser's emotions do not confine themselves to his own regrets about the loss, but extend to feelings which allegedly belong to the lost object. Here, projection has led to personification, which in its turn is followed by identification.²

I remember in this connection an early observation of my own which left me with a lasting impression of the processes concerned. The central figure of the incident was a young girl, an ardent mountaineer, whose walking trip had taken her high into the Alps. Resting near a waterfall, she had forgotten her cap in the camping area. The loss was insignificant in itself and did not seem to concern her much in the beginning. But this changed during the night which followed the excursion. Lying sleepless in her bed, she was suddenly compelled to imagine the lost cap, exposed and deserted in the dark solitude of the mountain scenery. The misery created by this picture became extreme and intolerable until she sobbed herself to sleep.

Identification of the loser with the lost object, as demonstrated by the above example, can be confirmed by us on the basis of numerous other observations. In child analysis we are struck by the fact that certain children—especially those with increased ambivalence and strong defenses against aggression—cling to their possessions, not only to collect and amass them, but because they fear to hurt the imagined feelings of the toys if they consent to their being

² "Projective identification," a concept introduced by Melanie Klein (1932).

given away or thrown away. There are many dolls and teddy bears which are preserved in this manner until adolescence or even adulthood, not because their owners have remained "childish" in this respect, but because they have remained too identified with these former transitional objects to withdraw feeling from them altogether.

Such displacements of affect from the loser to the lost become still more obvious when the lost object is a human one. In our work with separated children during wartime, we had many occasions to observe those who experienced not their own, very real separation distress but the imagined distress, loneliness, and longing of the mother whom they had left behind. "I have to telephone my Mummy, she will feel so lonely," was a frequent wish, expressed especially in the evening. Children who went home on short holidays from the residential institution used to try and diminish the imagined distress of their nurses by promising to "send them parcels," as their mothers did to comfort them when they left home. Nursery schoolchildren often ask their teacher after a weekend or holiday what she has done "all alone," whether she has "missed" them. Patients in analysis confirm this attitude in the transference when they experience the imagined distress of the analyst in place of their own during a break in treatment.

It is not difficult in analysis to understand and interpret such displacements of feeling. When traced back to their source, they reveal themselves as based on early childhood events when the loser was himself "lost," that is, felt deserted, rejected, alone, and experienced in full force as his own all the painful emotions which he later ascribes to the objects lost by him.

THE CHILD AS LOST OBJECT AND AS LOSER OF OBJECTS

We remember the hint given by Freud in the *Introductory Lectures* with regard to children, and we understand that their protection from danger, or exposure to danger, proceeds on lines similar to the preservation or losing of material things. The parents, as owners of the children, cathect them with libido or aggression. We assume that the younger the child, the greater is the part played by narcissistic libido in this respect; as the child grows older, he becomes increasingly part of his parents' object world, cathected with object libido proper. There is a gap in our theoretical understanding when we try to imagine the ways and means by which this cathexis, of whichever kind, reaches its object. We fall back here on the practical experience that children feel secure, happy, and content while they are loved by their parents, and that they become insecure, unhappy, and hurt in their narcissism if this love is withdrawn, or diminished, or changed into aggression.

As in the case of material objects, for a child to get lost is the exception rather than the rule, which is surprising in view of the lack of reality orientation in our toddlers and under-fives, and of the boisterousness and adventurous spirit of those who are slightly older. Here the children's urge to cling seems to unite with the parents' high valuation of their offspring and, combined, to set limits to the area in which the latter roam freely.

It is only when parental feelings are ineffective or too ambivalent, or when their aggression is more effective than their love, or when the mother's emotions are temporarily engaged elsewhere, that children not only feel lost but, in

fact, get lost. This usually happens under conditions which make rationalization easy, but which, on the other hand, are much too common to explain the specific event: such as crowds, a full department store, etc. It is interesting that children usually do not blame themselves for getting lost but instead blame the mother who lost them. An example of this was a little boy, lost in a store, who, after being reunited with his mother, accused her tearfully. "You losted me!" (not "I lost you!").

Matters are different when the looseness and breaking of the emotional tie originate with the child, not with the parents. We know children of all ages whose capacity for object love is underdeveloped for either internal or external, innate or acquired reasons. This defect may become manifest in the symptoms of early wandering, frequently getting lost, truanting, etc. In these instances, the children do not accuse other people, nor do they feel guilty themselves.

It is a fact, well known especially to schoolteachers, that children become chronic losers if they feel unloved at home or are unloved in fact. They do not turn to possessions to compensate themselves for what they miss in their lives. On the contrary, they are singularly unable to establish or to retain ownership. They come to school without the necessary implements, and they forget in the classroom the items which should be taken home. They forget and mislay their money, their caps and articles of clothing wherever they are. We feel tempted to say that not only are their possessions strewn around, but they actually run away from the children. What we discover in their analyses first is an inability to cathect the inanimate, owing to the general damage done to their capacity for involvement with objects; next, that they direct to their possessions the whole hostility

aroused by the frustrations and disappointments imposed on them by their parents. It is only behind these fairly obvious causes that a further, even more far-reaching motive comes into view: by being chronic losers, they live out a double identification, passively with the lost objects which symbolize themselves, actively with the parents whom they experience to be as neglectful, indifferent, and unconcerned toward them as they themselves are toward their possessions.

THE LOST OBJECT IN DREAMS AND FOLKLORE

The significance of losing some items which may be of some value in itself differs greatly from that of losing through death a person who plays an important role in our lives such as a parent, a marital partner, a child. Such differences in the magnitude of an event may altogether change the quality of the accompanying emotions, and therefore should not be taken lightly. Nevertheless, certain similarities or even identities between the two types of happenings are open to view in the specific case of losing.

We assume that the process of mourning for a loved person will last while the emotions of the mourner are concentrated on the loss, as well as on the necessity of withdrawing feeling from the inner image of the dead. So far as this means withdrawing from the external world, the task of mourning interferes with life itself. So far as it signifies a reunion with the dead by means of reviving and reliving the memories concerning him, mourning is known to be as absorbing and fulfilling as it is painful.

In analysis, we have occasion to notice that in some persons the later stages of mourning are characterized by a

series of typical dreams, the latent content of which is fairly easy to interpret. In these dreams the dead person appears, either manifestly or slightly disguised, and makes every effort to bring himself to the notice of the survivor. He searches for him, or pleads with him, or beseeches him to come and stay; he expresses longing, or complains about being alone and deserted. The dreamer feels in the grip of conflicting emotions and alternates between pure joy about the reunion and remorse and guilt for having stayed away from the dead, neglected him, etc. He wakes up, usually, with anxiety and finds it difficult to realize that the whole experience has "only been a dream."

It seems to me that the latent content of these dreams has much in common with the mental processes ascribed above to the person who loses a material possession. Here too a part is played by the interference of two opposite tendencies with each other, the simultaneous wishes to retain and to discard being replaced in this instance by the simultaneous urges to remain loyal to the dead and to turn toward new ties with the living. Here, as in the former examples, the survivor's desolation, longing, loneliness are not acknowledged as his own feelings, but displaced onto the dream image of the dead, where they are experienced in identification with the dead. As above, it can be shown here, when the dream is submitted to interpretation, that identification with the "lost object," the deserted person, is derived from specific infantile experiences when the dreamer, as a child, felt unloved, rejected, and neglected.

There is no doubt about the dream wish here, of course, since its fulfillment is brought about openly by the reappearance of the dead and accompanied by the positive emotions which characterized the lost relationship. The

painful accusations, regrets, etc., in the manifest content correspond to the dreamer's realization that he is on the point of becoming disloyal to the dead and his guilt about this. The anxiety which interrupts the dream corresponds to the defense against the opposite wish: to yield to the dream image's invitation, turn away from life altogether, and follow the lost object into death.

Loyalty conflicts with regard to the dead are frequent motifs, not only in dream life but equally in fairy tales, myths, and folklore in general.

Many popular beliefs, for example, are concerned with the figure of a dead person who reappears, usually at nighttime, and beckons to the living. Such figures are invested with dread, obviously to the degree to which the survivor has to ward off the wish to accept the invitation.

Further, we are familiar with innumerable ghost stories, which have a different origin. In these tales, the spirit of the dead person appears in the role of avenger, threatening punishment. Analytic interpretation suggests that tales of this kind are based on the survivor's ambivalence and that such large measures of anxiety are aroused by them because this corresponds to the intensity of the warded-off death wishes which had been directed toward the former love object in life.

The connection is still closer between our subject of losing and another common myth, that of the "lost," "poor," or "wandering" soul. Such lost souls are depicted as being unable to rest in their burial places and condemned instead to wander aimlessly, especially at nighttime, when they moan, sigh, and complain, and beseech the living to

help them find release. Some act—often left indefinite—needs to be performed to bring this about.

“Lost souls” are pitiable rather than threatening and uncanny rather than outrightly frightening. They are “poor,” since they symbolize the emotional impoverishment felt by the survivor. They are “lost” as symbols of object loss. That they are compelled to “wander” reflects the wandering and searching of the survivor’s libidinal strivings which have been rendered aimless, i.e., deprived of their former goal. And, finally, we understand that their “eternal rest” can be achieved only after the survivors have performed the difficult task of dealing with their bereavement and of detaching their hopes, demands, and expectations from the image of the dead.

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Psychoanalysis and Education

(1954)

In this paper, the term education is used in its widest sense, comprising all types of interference with the spontaneous processes of development as they exist in the childish organism. I shall attempt to describe in detail the links between the following fields of work: psychoanalytic investigation proper; analytic child psychology as its most important by-product; the application of this new child psychology, on the one hand, to the upbringing of children

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