Discussion of Dr. Roussillon’s Keynote Presentation:

An Introduction to the Work on Primary Symbolization

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Primary symbols, or as Freud referred to them, “thing presentations”, can exist in the unconscious mind with no connection to words or language: called secondary symbolization. This absence of a link between things and words represents a deficit, a missing link, not the repression of a conflict. So of course a patient cannot think or speak of such things. They exist in the unconscious mind, unassociated to words, but associated to each other by primary processes, in a dream like state, with no portal to rational, conscious awareness and thought; yet they are quite active and a potential source of much suffering.

But these are theoretical ideas. Where can we look for more direct observation of the realities of such primary symbols? We know that a positive analytic outcome doesn’t conclusively validate a theoretical model. Still, the analytic work of Dr. Roussillon is quite compelling. On the other hand, such analytic evidence is embedded in subjective encounters that cannot possibly be free of all inference and supposition.

Fortunately, I believe we do have an example of more direct access to this world of primary symbolization that Dr. Roussillon describes; direct access to the subjective realities of a mind without symbolic language, and how that mind is transformed when the primary symbols are linked with the secondary symbols of language. It is just such
an example I wish to share with you today, in support of Dr. Roussillon’s conceptualization and his clinical work.

According to her biography, Helen Keller, born in 1880, contracted an illness at 18 months old (perhaps scarlet fever or meningitis), leaving her deaf, blind and unable to speak (even though she had begun to acquire a few words before the illness). Over the next 5 and ½ years she learned about 60 concrete signs, associated with things, but no symbolic language made up of letters that formed words. At best these were concrete, conditioned responses, as they did not promote the capacity for thinking. Then at age 7, with the help of her teacher, Annie Sullivan, she learned the sign language of letters and words, the world of secondary symbolization. While infants and toddlers are too young to tell us about the subjective transformation from primary symbols to the acquisition of language, at age 7, Helen Keller was indeed old enough to remember and describe it.

In her biography, she offers a moving narrative of how her world changed when she was finally able to associate primary symbols with the secondary symbols of sign language. What it was like to live in a world limited to primary symbols, and how secondary symbols allowed her to think, to remember, to feel, and to plan. I believe that Helen Keller describes first hand the same acquisition of secondary symbolization that Dr. Roussillon describes in his analytic work.

Here I quote from her biography. “The most important day in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Sullivan, came to me. On that afternoon, I stood on the porch: dumb and expectant. I guessed vaguely from my mother’s hurrying in the house that something was about to happen, so I waited on the steps. Anger and bitterness had preyed upon me continually for weeks. I felt approaching footsteps, and stretched out
my hand, expecting my mother. Someone else took it, and I was lifted up and held close in the arms of the woman who would reveal all things to me, and, more than all else, who would love me.

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore by a compass, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without a compass, and I had no way of knowing how near the harbor was. *Give me light* was the wordless cry of my soul.

The morning after my teacher came she gave me a doll. When I had played with it a little while, Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word ‘d-o-l-l.’ I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it. When I finally succeeded in making the letters correctly, with childish pride I ran to my mother and made the letters for the doll. I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed; I was simply making my fingers go in monkey-like imitation. In the days that followed I learned to spell many words in this uncomprehending way. But it took several weeks before I came to understand that everything has a name.

Then one day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan gave me another doll, and spelled ‘d-o-l-l’ for both. Earlier in the day she had tried to impress upon me that ‘m-u-g’ is *mug* and ‘w-a-t-e-r’ is *water*, but I kept confusing the two. Now I became impatient, and threw the new doll on the floor. I was delighted feeling the broken pieces of the doll at my feet. I felt no sorrow or regret. I did not love the doll. In my still, dark world there was no strong sentiment of tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the broken pieces to one side, satisfied that the cause of my immediate
discomfort was removed. She brought my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down to the well to get water. My teacher placed one of my hands under the pouring cool water, while she spelled the word water into my other hand, first slowly, then quickly. My whole attention fixed on the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness—a thrill of thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, giving it light, hope, joy, and setting it free!

I was eager to learn. Everything had a name; each name giving birth to new thoughts. Every object that I touched came to life, as I saw with this strange, new kind of sight. Back at home; I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way and picked up the pieces. Then, my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

I learned many words that day and afterwards—words that were to make the world blossom. It would have been hard to find a happier child as I went to sleep at the close of this eventful day, and lived over the joys it had brought me. For the first time, I longed for a new day to come.” End quotation.

So...from Helen Keller we get a first-hand description of the profound changes in mental life made possible by the transformation of primary symbols into secondary symbols, of thing presentations into word presentations: a sense of time, a complex world of attachments linked to feelings, and a capacity for abstract thinking, to name a
few. From Dr. Roussillon we get a description of the process of this transformation in analytic treatment. To quote from Dr. Roussillon, “I have maintained that symbolization, and the processes of psychic transformation that this implies, rest upon the thing-presentation of a malleable-medium object, derived from the encounter with a sufficiently adaptable and transformable maternal environment to adjust to the psychic needs of the newborn.” End quote. In other words, the mother (or the psychoanalyst) tunes into the baby (or the patient), on a primary symbolic, empathic level.

Anne Sullivan was much more than a teacher to Helen; she was a “malleable-medium primary symbolic object.” Anne Sullivan loved and adapted to Helen, whereas Helen’s previous teachers focused on helping her be more polite and comply with external reality. And even as Helen Keller describes this process of transformation, we see it is difficult to put into words, so she merely says, “Somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me.”

In his presentation, however, Dr. Roussillon tells us quite clearly how he works with dreams to reveal primary symbols, and then links them to secondary symbols, making it possible for his patients to consciously think and feel about that which was previously inaccessible. In the words of Helen Keller, Dr. Roussillon helps his patients emerge from “that dense white fog into the light”.......thank you.