



## Usefulness of Uselessness

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### Opinion

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After the first months of analytical (Jungian) psychotherapy, when the patient and the therapist have already started building their mutual relationship and creating a safe space in which the hidden can be stored, seen, and used as a cure, the more profound contents from the unconsciousness or the deeper layer of consciousness begin to appear. Sooner or later, the question of nature and of the meaning of life approaches until it is finally verbalized. Why living? What is the meaning of life? Victor Frankl's writing or Camus's "Myth of Sisyphus" often arrive as the good resumes of these thoughts that have hunted humans for centuries. And then, the next question disturbs the fragile start of harmony: what is my life's mission? Am I useful? Is my being alive useful? Do I have my place here? Should I exist?

Working with suicidal patients obliged us to discuss these topics quite early in the therapy, sometimes even before the therapy, if we are emergency psychiatrists, for example. Then we do all to save a life. Nevertheless, these questions find their way to non-suicidal patients, those who have never considered death a solution to their problems. And then they find themselves surprised by their questioning their place in their own life. The question of being useful is not often tackled. In my clinical practice, I was surprised to realize that feeling of not being useful functions as taboo. It is rarely named as such. Patients express a whole spectrum of emotions when they are confronted with the lack of "their mission" or when they are afraid of not knowing where their life is guiding them. Anger, sadness, regrets, pessimism, compensating optimism, and indifference can be said (depending on personal history and context). However, being useless in this world is not the phrase we hear often. Relationships with parents, being an unwanted child or not, and possible parental regret of having them born are easier

to tackle in psychotherapy. A few times when our *temenos* (our protected therapeutical field) was contaminated by some other emotions that could not be verbalized, we proposed disgust and shame among all possible human emotions. These words served as a shortcut to the phrase of not having what to add to the future. Suddenly, from the past, we were catapulted into the future. "Maybe I was not meant to be in this world, and it is already tricky for me; I am surviving already, don't ask me for more". Soon, we switched to the well-known kingdom of anger or of defense. Shame is one of the therapy's most challenging emotions to recognize and welcome. Disgust, especially if we are disgusted with some of our facets, is equally, if not more, uncatchable.

There are two clinical situations to which we are mainly referring here, where years of meticulously constructed trust were shaken by the words shame and disgust. Both therapeutic relationships survived. However, it took lots of boundaries tested and efforts to contain the rage until both of our patients could express their fear of not being useful in this world. As such, they will be discarded one day in the next big crisis (wars, climate, pandemics). Interestingly, both expressed many doubts about the virus's existence (COVID19) and were interested in conspiracy theories. Patients are in their 50s, one is a woman of foreign origin but has fully integrated into Switzerland since her late youth, and the other is a Swiss resident. When we met them, they were both employed and self-named the victims of mobbing by their hierarchy. Their everyday interpersonal interactions were difficult. Both manifested defensive behavior, narcissist compensations, and light paranoid projections on their surroundings. Naturally, there are plenty of differences in their paths, family and love histories, and personality traits. The female patient does not fulfill the criteria for the

personality disorder, whereas the male patient corresponds to the mixed (predominately narcissistic-anankastic) personality disorder. There were never actively suicidal, and they had no psychotic symptoms. Nevertheless, they both found themselves socially isolated after the pandemic and deliberately left their jobs.

The most critical switch in the therapy for both was being able to name the feeling of being the Other to the world, which functions “fine without them”. They had no mission in life, and they felt guilty or handicapped about it. Saying out loud that they are maybe not useful, but still, they should exist (differently phrased, the male patient speaks French, and the female express herself best in English) was the crucial moment when they regained their control. Shame and disgust were less present (and less felt), and the concept of usefulness and uselessness got their place in the therapy.

Our interest in these precise feelings, which could appear independently within some emotional reactions or behavior patterns, has increased since then. We have been more cautious of their traces while learning the new psychotherapeutic situation better.

As Jungian psychotherapists, one of the first questions was if uselessness and usefulness are two different complexes or two names for different valence/parity of the same complex (being of use for something, going from not at all (useless) to a lot (useful)).

- The next one was what is the benefit of uselessness-is there some link between human resilience in the crisis and the expression of uselessness?
- If it is true, could the ongoing crises in the world potentiate the expression of these (this) complex(es)?

In our opinion and based on the ongoing evaluations and analyses of the patients in psychotherapy who verbalized their fears of not having any mission in their life, we hypothesize that feeling useful or useless in human society is standing at the crossroad between feelings of being abandoned (not needed anymore) and being humiliated (not having any value). On a more profound level, these feelings are connected to the primary emotions of disgust, shame, and sadness. Shame and self-disgust inhibited sadness from being clearly expressed without anger compensation and activating the victim-aggressor-savior triangle. Being abandoned and humiliated simultaneously is too hard to be confronted and accepted without years of psychotherapy or some numinous experience. To survive the danger of their cumulative effect on the psyche, a person has other, less mature choices: to compensate, to use projective defense mechanisms to protect/attack, to devalue the concept of usefulness/mission, to isolate, or to enquire on the alternative explanations (like complot theories).

The complex of usefulness, and the complex of uselessness are, therefore, not of the exact origin. The archetypal core is different; it is energy that gives the strength of expression and its ability to impose on the Ego in some specific situations when Ego boundaries are porous. The complex of usefulness is linked to solidarity, to being connected to build something bigger, stronger, or better probability to last. Its archetypal core is togetherness. It is like cell organelles that are part of cell machinery, each separated by their own membrane or different localization within the cell. Uselessness is not simple deconstruction or dismemberment - it is the combination of being discarded (apoptosis “of useless cells in tissues”) and being remembered not to be adequate (being shamed). Its core is in the realm of esteem and value.

One person can be useful as a society member (her or his profession, activities, voluntary work, a critical moment in the fight against climate change) but not at all useful as a parent and *vice versa*. There are no useless people. However, people are overwhelmed by the hypertrophied complex of uselessness that is unspeakable. It is hidden behind other everyday problems, complaints, or strong emotions. They feel useless, and for them, any Other capable of sensing the shame and disgust inside of them is a threat.

Why are there people feeling as such? If we analyze profoundly, we usually find the early attachment difficulties, the family context in pre-peri and postnatal periods, and, sometimes, transgenerational elements. It goes without saying that it is relieving for the patient to address these factors, independent of her or his actual life, to put the chronological order and to open the possibility to re-identify her or his identity independently on the burden. Let's go more largely and wonder what the evolutionary use of this trait is. We can quickly get stuck in the discussion of deconstruction, its energy, strength, and capacity to resuscitate itself and re-nurture a new life cycle or human behavior. This is often the case.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that humans can build resilience by keeping this complex activated. The strongest fear of people feeling useless and without any objective mission in their life (such as to love or to work, as Freud called the road to happiness) is to be discarded in the critical situation, to be the first that society will sacrifice to survive. Without going further into the psycho-developmental origins of these profound and self-hidden thoughts, we can empathize with this imposter-like pattern. We all feel that we are not needed sometimes, and, in general, it is a big truth. Earth will continue rotating even without us. We fight against oblivion through relationships, achievements, or anecdotes. We doubt if we are in the correct position from time to time, privately or professionally. However, those feeling like

imposters have an impression of not being good enough, that they will be discovered for presenting themselves better than they are, and that their previous education, relationships, and words were overestimated. Those feeling useless are not concerned about the past. They are imposters of the future. They do not feel there will be a place for them. Therefore, they need to disqualify the future.

This hostile relationship with the future is the main reason for the persistence of this human trait. To imagine for the future, especially in crisis situations, where separation, rivalry, and ambivalence are joint, it is necessary to be well prepared. It is important to count on all. All means all spectrum of human reactions in the crisis. Planning the future only with the “useful ones” is an incomplete vision. People react

differently when they feel threatened, and new traumatizations revive differently from the old ones. Big groups can fit into the statistical analyses, but human society is composed of individuals. Those with an activated uselessness complex are also part of society, no matter how much it is hurtful for them. Ironically, the more they run away from society, the more they are needed as such in society. Naming, surviving this naming, and giving a choice without shaming it is probably, the only way to get some use of uselessness. This gives one possible answer to the last question: we could expect the rise of this combination of primary emotions (notably, shame and disgust) and in the near future. The future will bring us new challenges in ethics, solidarity, and defense-ours is to remain a whole spectrum of human beings.

