

By Force Of Fantasy (How We Make Our Lives)

Ethel S. Person, MD

Basic Books -1995

PP 276 \$24.00

“It is not the voice that commands the story but the ear” the novelist Italo Calvino wrote. And what we hear depends more on our expectations, our wishes, our ideals, our hopes than it does on a particular frequency of sound waves. Dr. Ethel Person, our Amagansett neighbor, has written of that hearing in her literate book on the formative role of fantasy in human life. Dr. Person is a prolific writer, having co-edited a number of other works, addressing man’s passions, their vicissitudes and their role in love, romance and sexuality -- texts that bring an intelligent psychoanalytic understanding to these issues. The present text attempts to reintegrate personal fantasy life into its rightful place as one important source of personal identity. Not interested in a simplistic reading, Dr. Person covers such topics as: “The Fantasies of Everyday Life” -- “Erotic, Self-Soothing and Other Repeating Fantasies” -- to, “Fantasy and Cultural Change.” Although the text is meant to be read sequentially, many of the chapters can be read individually. As I read the text, I felt that it took Dr. Person the first few chapters to clearly identify the audience she wished to address, that is, primarily her professional colleagues or the interested reflective laymen. In my judgment, luckily, the lay audience won out. Most of Dr. Person’s formulations are couched in what is know as the drive-model theory of the psyche, they are,

nevertheless, helpful in aiding the reader to understand, value and explore their fantasies, free from the dismissive popular attitude of “its just a fantasy”.

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on” -- the Bard wrote. Although Dr. Person is seemingly unaware of another English writer/ poet/ psychoanalyst, -- namely Dr. Donald Winnicott, whose most famous work: “Playing And Reality” addresses similar themes, Dr. Person does value, and helps the reader to value, the dreams of our life; notwithstanding her somewhat dated notions of “play” - its psychological meaning and its role in both life and in fantasy.

Despite this absence of Dr. Person is familiar with a broad body of western literature as well as current with much contemporary research, particularly in the area of gender identity and sexual preferences. For example Dr. Person avoids a reductionistic psychologizing when she writes “this self designation (core gender identity) arises in agreement with sex assignment; core gender is the child’s resulting sense, unconscious as well as conscious of belonging to one sex or the other. Gender differentiation is observable by the end of the first year of life and under normal circumstances, immutable by the third.” Although Dr. Persons is a committed and dedicated psychoanalyst there are no claims that such treatment can modify biology or disregard cultural pressure to gender conformity. Dr. Persons understands personal fantasy as arising from and being responsive to many sources.

In the course of her studies Dr. Person is particularly generous in acknowledging other authors who have touched on her themes; particularly noted in her informative reflections on the poet Sylvia Platt’s life and

subsequent suicide. She discusses fantasy contagion particularly in a culture, like our own, whose mass media is so pervasive. The power of fantasy to lead to social change is exemplified in her treatment of Theodore L. E. Herzl, a major nineteenth century writer and the spark that lit Zionism. It is particularly in these discussions that the author understands fantasies in terms of their “bridge” functions, that is modeled more on a dialogue between inner and outer worlds than a idiosyncratic soliloquy. An understanding embryonic in Freud, greatly developed in the works of Dr. Donald Winnicott and elaborated, in a serious mode, in the present text.