

Peter Weir's *Fearless*: Understanding the Manic Defense

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will use Peter Weir's 1993 film *Fearless* to illustrate the manic defense as described by Melanie Klein in two classic papers, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States" (1934) and "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States" (1940). *Fearless*, based on the novel of the same name by Rafael Yglesias, follows the life of Max Klein, a San Francisco based architect after he survives a plane crash in which his partner and best friend Jeff dies. My comments will focus on the initial and final scenes of the film: first, how Max uses manic defenses to temporarily help him deal with psychic trauma and, then, how these defenses are eventually overcome. I will end with an example in which mourning is accomplished without regression to the manic defense.

FILM SUMMARY

The film *Fearless* starts with the low, whirring sound of a plane engine that gradually becomes louder. The first image is a close-up of corn stalks misted with fog or smoke, and we become aware of a man carrying a baby, with a boy walking beside him. The man is Max, pushing his way through the thick stalks and looking back to motion others to follow. The camera then shifts to a group of workers standing on a roadway littered with pieces of metal. One of the workers kneels and makes the sign of the cross and, as the camera pulls back, we're aware that the people emerging through the cornfield are exiting the site of a deadly plane crash. Are these figures dead or alive? Are they survivors or ghostly apparitions?

After Max reunites the baby with its mother, he hails a cab and requests to be taken to the nearest motel where he showers and examines his naked body. Reassured, and seeming to discover his viscera for the first time, Max murmurs to himself "You're not dead." While it's true that Max isn't dead, neither does he seem quite alive.

The rest of the film follows Max's journey back to his family in San Francisco where he is simultaneously disengaged from his life and manically reckless. Whenever the visual memories from the crash intrude, he responds by engaging in omnipotently suicidal behavior—walking across multiple lanes of oncoming traffic or balancing precariously on a high roof ledge, musing about whether or not he should “let it go.” Max barely goes through the motions with his wife Laura and preadolescent son, instead spending more and more time with a fellow survivor, Carla, who lost her toddler son in the crash. Towards the end of the film, Max is hospitalized briefly after crashing his car at high speed into a brick wall in an attempt to show Carla that she couldn't have held onto her son in the plane crash. When he returns home from the hospital, Max stops by his son's room and leafs through a scrapbook his son has assembled with newspaper clippings about Max's experience. Now better able to bear reality, Max reconnects with his son and we see Laura, no longer frightened of Max, able to embrace him when he says, “I want you to save me.”

Weir introduces the metonymic device of Max being allergic to strawberries early in the film and then returns to it at the end. Shortly after Max leaves the motel where he has showered, he stops by to visit an old girlfriend and they go out to breakfast. He orders a bowl of fresh strawberries and bites into one, stating to her that they are “the forbidden fruit.” She recalls that he had once told her that he was allergic to strawberries and she becomes concerned, challenging him. Max retorts triumphantly, “See, no reaction. No reaction at all.” We could say that Max is temporarily immune to the strawberries' toxicity because he has encapsulated himself within the manic defense.

During the last twelve minutes of the film, we see Max overcome his use of manic defenses and integrate the psychic pain of witnessing his friend die by decapitation while nearly dying himself. Weir's portrayal of this process is powerful and evocative, made all the more so because of his use of music and editing—rather than dialogue—for effect.

The last scene involves a late night visit by Max's lawyer to celebrate their win of several million dollars from a suit against the airline. While Laura goes to the kitchen to get champagne glasses, Max picks up a large strawberry and takes a bite, falling almost

immediately onto the floor in anaphylactic shock. At this point, Weir introduces the first movement of Henryk Górecki's Third Symphony as Max replays in his mind the entire sequence of the crash, allowing us to take part in the choice he has been contemplating throughout the film—whether or not to let go. What makes this sequence both transcendent and unforgettable is the juxtaposition of the lyrical, slow-building music with the violently fragmented images of the crash scene, enabling us to relive with Max the explosive experience he had heretofore split off and denied.

The film then continues, alternating between the details of the crash and Max lying on the floor with Laura frantically administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while screaming for him not to let go. Ultimately she succeeds in “saving him” and he lurches back into the present—choking, then laughing with relief, exclaiming “I’m alive. I’m alive.” In being able to acknowledge and survive the reality of the strawberries’ toxicity, Max no longer needs to defend himself manically. He has moved from a place of being “not dead” to the more integrated place of feeling fully and painfully alive.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

In Melanie Klein's classic 1940 paper, “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” she proposes a close connection between the testing of reality in normal mourning and certain early processes of the mind. She says:

My contention is that the child goes through states of mind comparable to the mourning of the adult, or rather, that this early mourning is revived whenever grief is experienced in later life.

How successfully this process is resolved then determines the transition to the early Oedipal situation with its increased capacity for belief and trust in a good inner world.

In her 1952 paper “Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant,” Klein says:

These first methods of defence (splitting, omnipotence, idealization, denial and control of internal and external objects) are of an extreme nature, in

keeping with the intensity of early emotions and the limited capacity of the ego to bear acute anxiety. While in some ways these defences impede the path of integration, they are essential for the whole development of the ego, for they again and again relieve the young infant's anxieties...As the ego becomes increasingly able to sustain anxiety, the methods of defence alter correspondingly. (p. 209-210)

The manic defenses temporarily protect the fragile ego in times of peril and only become pathological when they are not worked through and relinquished. Klein emphasized that the capacity to symbolize and the acceptance of psychic reality and emotional pain are necessary for the development of reparation, which in turn makes negotiating the anxieties associated with the depressive position possible. Then, the depressive position, too, must be overcome for normal development and, as the anxieties from various sources are relieved and aggression diminished, the ego can emerge more fully integrated. The ultimate goal of this process—the resolution of the infantile neurosis—is achieved through the reinstatement of internalized good objects, a process not possible while the infant (or later adult) is under sway of the manic defenses.

As a counterpoint to the dilemma faced by the character Max in *Fearless*, I will end by presenting an excerpt from a piece by Adam Bellow, son of the late Nobel laureate Saul Bellow, recently published in the *New York Times*. This piece struck me as being an excellent example of what Freud described as the testing of reality which is part of normal mourning, a process greatly inhibited when manic defenses are active. Freud said that during normal mourning, the ego is able to sever its attachment to the non-existent object because the object—with both its good and bad aspects—has been hyper-catheted and then introjected into the subject's internal world.

Mr. Bellow begins the piece by describing his estranged relationship with his father: the elder Bellow had had four children with each of his first four wives and had left Adam's mother when Adam was two years of age. On the occasion of what would have been his father's 90th birthday, Adam Bellow reflected on

their relationship and his own mourning process by focusing on a dream he had had a month after his father's death in April 2005. I won't recount the dream here but have condensed Adam Bellow's associations to it:

I love this dream, because, first of all, my physical impressions of him were so vivid and lifelike that it made me see how deeply I have taken him in. I have ingested him, heart, lungs and spleen. He lives inside me, at the very core of my being, and I can summon him up any time... I felt happy because I was able to speak up for myself in real time and refused to be paved over or ignored. And I did it with not with anger, but with love...How can I maintain my connection with a father who is not just geographically distant, as in life, but really gone? ...It seems fitting on his birthday to affirm my belief in this improbable connection, a bond that transcends time and space, and even death, because my father, though absent, is deeply, unpredictably, stubbornly present in me.

What struck me about this piece by Bellow is the way he speaks about having come to terms with the man his father was long before he died. As a result, after his father's passing, the younger Bellow could mourn him without the need to either idealize or denounce. Unlike the character Max in *Fearless*, Adam Bellow was able to maintain contact with the painful reality of his loss, as well as to the reality of their relationship, without resorting to manic defenses.

SUMMARY

Using the film *Fearless*, I hope to have illustrated how the manic defenses interfere with the mourning process by denying psychic reality. These defenses are necessary during normal infant development—or when the adult ego is overwhelmed by trauma—because they protect the fragile self from becoming overwhelmed. Manic defenses become pathological when they are not worked through, impeding normal infant development by holding the immature ego hostage in a part-object dominated, paranoid-schizoid position. This process was contrasted with an example of mourning in which the lost object was introjected after the psychic reality of its loss could be acknowledged.

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