

## Secret Agonies in Analytic Communities: Gossip, Envy, Secrecy, and Belonging

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### Abstract

While we tend to look at gossip as a superficial pastime, the word is etymologically rooted in the affinity between godparents and godchildren and among women attending childbirth. It is posited that gossip may have developed as a particularly feminine form of communication during the hunting and gathering phase of human development. Anthropologists speculate that during that period women gathered in groups to find edible plants, their conversation spurring the development and reinforcement of social mores through approbation or disapproval. In a process parallel to the desacralization of the Feminine, gossip has devolved from its original function in providing communal affirmation and a sense of belonging to a secretive sidestepping of direct confrontation and negotiation. The worst of gossip is driven by insecurity and envy, malice and spite, feeding off secrecy and shadow projection and damaging trust. Exploring what lies beneath the impulse to gossip can lead to deepened self-discovery and relatedness.

### Keywords

Gossip, envy, secrecy, belonging, shadow, projection, communication.

When Claire Allphin first asked me if I would join the panel, I hesitated. As I read her proposal, it seemed to me that she had the significant bases already covered. Then the word *gossip* popped up inside me. Gossip, I thought: that embarrassingly delicious and most superficial of all sins? Why would I want to associate myself with a topic that sells shabby magazines? But then I looked up the word's etymology and saw that it is derived from the expression "God's sibling," referring to the spiritual affinity between godparents and godchildren (Brown, 1993). I was hooked.

### Gossip and the Feminine

My first lesson in gossip took place on my parents' double bed. It was something of a ritual that on the evenings when my mother's best friend, Florence, came to visit, my mother would tuck me into her bed to fall asleep, while she and

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Florence sat beside me dissecting the character and relationships of everyone they knew. There was nothing more lulling and scrumptious than falling asleep to that intimate woman talk, what my friend Connie has called “back-fence news.”

While the anima guarantees that men can be just as avid gossips as women, gossip has traditionally been associated with females (Brown, 1993). The word gossip originally referred to any familiar acquaintance, especially to women friends “invited to attend to a birth.” It was only over time—we might even speculate parallel with the desacralization of the Feminine—that its meaning devolved from that profound and intimate connotation to “anyone engaging in trifling talk or groundless rumor” (Brown, 1993, p. 1121).

Many years after my heavenly evenings falling asleep to my mother and Florence gossiping, I would learn that for most of our history, the human race lingered in the hunting and gathering phase of development. In the early sixties, one of my cultural anthropology professors painted a vivid portrait of the gender-based socialization differences emerging from that latency period of human development, with men mastering the capacity for fast sprints, quick reflexes, and terse communication, all advantageous when surrounding some large animal in a hunt and organizing a group kill; whereas women, slowed by the demands of pregnancy and nursing babies, would have remained at the campsite or moseyed nearby in small groups, attending sufficiently to what plants grew best where and under what conditions to stimulate the inception of agriculture. As he pointed out, the women would have had lots of time for chat and chatter and the development and reinforcement of social mores through approbation or disapproval.

In Meredith Wilson’s 1957 musical *The Music Man*, the women gather to “Pick a little, talk a little, cheep, cheep, cheep, pick a lot, talk a little more.” That the early equivalents of “Really? . . . No! . . . She didn’t!” would have been the verbal accompaniment to the beginnings of conscious cultivation of the soil was probably something Wilson never considered. My fantasy is that women became the first analysts through their chin-wagging and gossip. By probing who did and felt what and why, their gossiping was linked to the eros function of the Feminine, which is something a traveling companion once noticed, in living color, at a train station. He pointed out that the men at the station tended to hold their heads and bodies still while conversing, whereas the women continually nodded their heads as they listened, affirming that they were taking the other in.

### Gossip and Belonging

The need to be affirmed and taken in links up with my second lesson in gossip, which occurred when I was in sixth grade. My parents were in the habit of moving our family to new locations on the average of once every year or so. As a result, making new friends was a perpetual challenge that I didn’t begin to master until I entered Clover Avenue Elementary in the middle of the school year. As usual, all the kids had pretty much formed their cliques by the time I arrived. But there were two girls, both outcasts, who fed their socially undernourished souls on a daily junk-food diet of spiteful gossip. I soon discovered I could have at least some companionship at lunchtime if I joined them in passing along malicious tidbits about the other girls in the class.

Besides giving me some uncomfortable sense of my own nastiness, the experience furthered something I had learned from my mother and her friend Florence about one of the functions of gossip, and that is the establishment of a sense of connection and belonging. Of course, the dark side of belonging is that it is often purchased at the price of someone else not belonging, or of some side of ourselves being sacrificed for the pleasure.

The primitive psyche must find its way to kinship libido through the thorny maze of psyche's habit of polarization. I am thinking now of the account of my parents' membership in the Communist Party that was published as gossip in the local newspaper in 1951, resulting in my popular older brother being shamed by classmates at Redondo High.

The popular kids and the unpopular ones. The right-thinkers and the wrong-thinkers. The sought-after analysts and the unsung ones. Us and them. How much of the split of the Los Angeles Institute into two separate societies was fed, not just by aborted dialogue over how we approach our work with the psyche, but by personal bad faith and betrayal, including the betrayals of mean-spirited gossip? Part of what felt so hurtful to the rest of us was the discovery that some of our members had been meeting in secret to plan their departure. But how much gossip on each side—and not only about colleagues' theoretical leanings—had led up to that? How much gossip, often inaccurate, about their level of independent wealth and what that said about the quality of their practice, about their psychological pathology, their personal allegiances and their relationships with their significant others?

During my time in training, when I was already feeling like a bit of an outsider in my training group for being of a more classical bent, I had one analyst tell me that he was surprised by the content of *The Child Within/The Child Without*, the special issue of the journal *Psychological Perspectives* that I had edited. He had assumed, based on the class I was in at the Los Angeles Institute, that I was "a developmentalist." Yet another analyst told me, in the middle of a class on alchemy, that she had assumed from my friendships that I was a Kleinian. As what later came to be called my position as a "tweenie," one who was identified with neither the developmental nor classical point of view and who strove to hold the two polarizing sides of our institute together, I cannot tell you how many times I heard from each side that someone at the other end of the spectrum didn't really practice analysis, as if there were but one way to approach the largeness of the psyche. Might we think of this as the skewing of that original function of gossip in developing and reinforcing social mores? Like the rejected Feminine turning dark and demonic, gossip has moved from something shared in a birthing, something creative and dialogical, to a cowardly avoidance of the bloody mess of conflict and open negotiation.

### Gossip and Secrecy

The worst of gossip is driven by insecurity and envy, malice and spite, and it flourishes in secrecy and feeds off it. Secrecy and privacy are fodder for projection, often of darker elements of the shadow. The shadow of our community's institutionalization of the therapeutic bond of confidentiality to cover so much of how we deal with communal issues is that not enough of what takes place in our

institutes' lives is open to dialogue and humanization. It is a virtual invitation to gossip—if issues can't be processed consciously, they will be metabolized via that more primitive food processor, the rumor mill.

During my first year in training, I heard that one of the members of the class ahead of mine was asked to leave the training program during his meeting to be advanced to candidacy. That prompted a regular orgy of rumors about people who'd been asked to leave at every stage of training, and filled me with terror as I approached my own first evaluative meeting. Talk about putting the fear of God into you. If family is the place where no one can turn you away in need, this community certainly wasn't it.

As it happens, like the distortions in the childhood "Telephone" game, what I'd been told about the candidate who was asked to leave the training program turned out to be completely inaccurate—only one instance of the instability and unreliability of gossip as our sole source of news.

That's the damned thing about gossip. It can seem as harmless as a white lie, a small out-of-faith indulgence, but it can do tremendous damage to trust. I experienced this several years ago in an episode with a fellow analyst with whom I went out for a first attempt to forge a collegial friendship who flung a nasty story about my analyst onto the table. Once again, it was secrecy, in this case the secrecy of my analysis, that was a perfect petri dish for the shadow to grow. The person seemed to want to ingratiate herself with me by a mutual putdown of another, perhaps to test if we were on the same wavelength in how we saw things. Except in this instance I was convinced that the conclusion she had drawn about my analyst was untrue and I felt repelled rather than drawn closer.

How did I handle it at the time? I defended my analyst, but without stating our relationship; I did not trust this person, so I felt a reluctance to tell her in what fashion her comment was hurtful to me. But I did not say, "Have you confronted this person with this?" Nor, "Why would you take the risk of gossiping with me about this?" Instead, I gossiped about it to my analyst and to one of my closest friends at the institute. And will those of you close to the L.A. Institute try to guess who my analyst was? Who the impugner was? If so, will you conjecture with a colleague or ask me directly? And what would be moving you in each of those possible instances?

### **Is Gossip Ever Harmless? (The Deliciousness of Gossip)**

But is gossip ever just plain harmless? And how, if at all, can it be restored to its original meaning and value, the support of new birth, and coexist alongside the quest for less polarization and projection of shadow?

Certainly, some gossip might be classified as well-intended back-fence news. Like an ancient drumbeat indicating someone's in trouble, we might even feel positively benevolent for passing along a piece of information about one of our colleagues being sick or going through a painful divorce and perhaps needing some communal TLC. But even well-intentioned gossip can be intrusive; not everyone wants their private woes broadcast.

Earlier on, I suggested a link between gossip and nourishment with my sad duo of sixth-grade friends. I believe there is a reason why gossip is often associat-

ed with the coagulatio of eating. We speak of juicy tidbits and morsels, of gossip's deliciousness. Certainly some of that pleasure is the pleasure of sinning, but it is also the recognition of our messy, imperfect humanity.

Jung once commented that in individuation one works to become more and more conscious until that point where, in order to be able to continue to belong to the human race and bond with others, one must remain "decently unconscious." To commit no shadow enactment at all would deny our common humanity, our three-dimensional wholeness; in painting and drawing, it is the shadow that conveys the third dimension. For a community devoted to consciousness, what sweeter morsel of chocolate could there be than indulging in some sinful piece of gossip with a friend? Like chocolate, too, gossip has its sexual side. We speak of the titillation of gossip, which ranges from the seductive power of knowing and outing someone else's smaller secrets to true *schadenfreude*, the perverse pleasure of envious sadism.

Like our sexual urges and secret hungers, what else are we to do with our hatreds? What a pleasure it is to discharge them with a close and complicit friend! But there is, of course, a terrible price to pay for that easy evacuation. Part of the price is what it does to our sisters and brothers and to our shared human ground. To paraphrase Jung, "One *may* love gossip, but one *must* fear it." But it is not solely in the destruction of the other that gossip threatens us. Many years ago I heard Bhagwan Rajneesh comment to an interviewer that people in the West have this terrible problem of flinging their valuable fertilizer into their neighbor's back gardens. On the whole, not a bad description of projection. Unfortunately, he was wrong in one regard; we in the West have no monopoly on the condition.

It is the psyche itself that is the ultimate projector and the ultimate gossip; how else but through our destructiveness as well as our creativity are we God's siblings? How many dreams have I had of colleagues carrying pieces of my own shadow? When I was beginning to stew with this topic, a deceased friend and colleague came to me in a dream. She was alive in the dream, but of the two of us only I seemed to know that it would not be for long. Unsurprisingly, she was full of ambitious plans for things she wanted to accomplish, and with my awareness of the limitation of her time, I suggested she take on the simpler task—remember, this is a dream!—of organizing a college mentoring program by retired seniors in their respective fields. Before parting from her, I realized I had to pee. Entering the bathroom, I stepped on what looked to be a pile of hastily cast-off children's clothes. I heard an affronted yowl and saw that my friend's dog Helen had been constrained under the clothes. It took a lot of apologetic petting to finally win back Helen's trust enough to have her roll onto her back and have her belly rubbed.

Now, I should tell you that Helen is not just any dog. My friend referred to her as "Helen, the God dog," and made a great story of the multiple synchronicities that brought Helen into her life.

My association to the mission I suggest to my friend in the dream, the organizing of a community of aging mentors, is the Women Analysts' Meeting that we hold every few months in Los Angeles. Over the years, the Women's Meeting has deepened in intimacy, moving from a kind of group kvetch about the institute to a profoundly vulnerable sharing of our most personal terrors, despairs, longings, and victories. During the time I've attended, I've found myself less eager to gos-

sip about my Women's Meeting colleagues because they make themselves seen; their sharing of the difficult challenges of their journeys humanizes the projection machine. But for an insecure soul, it takes a lot to neutralize envy.

So, back to my dream of my friend. I think of something that has been attributed to Maya Angelou: that when we die, our friends remember us not for our great works but for how they felt in our presence. The woman I had dreamed about was a rather daunting friend to have, far more scholarly than I. I could not help but envy her brilliance and the scope of her knowledge. But the woman I miss is the one who commiserated with me over the trials of our adult kids, the difficulties of trying to nurture a love relationship, our struggles to give birth to our creative babies, our unrealized dreams, nostalgias, and regrets. Though she wasn't much for the kinds of mushy "I love you's" and hugs that I, as a feeling type, am given to in close friendship, she carved out time for me in an extraordinarily ambitious schedule and rooted for me to express myself more visibly in the professional community. As it happens, I was on the phone with my friend when she died, and in the realization that she'd unconsciously chosen me to be the aural witness to her final moments, I came to curse that awful envy of mine that prevented me when she was alive from appreciating how deeply she'd let me into her heart.

So why has she gifted me with Helen, the God dog, in my dream? I think Helen appeared to remind me that there is gold in the shit of gossip. That hidden in the childishness of gossip is something precious linked to our instinct for relationship and relatedness. What would it be like if, when the impulse to gossip comes upon us, we were to dip into the ancient tradition of our gathering ancestresses, those birth-assisting God's siblings, and ask ourselves, "Why are we gossiping? What is the longing buried in this moment? What intimacy with you do I still crave, what loneliness am I seeking to vanquish, what is it that I can't bear about myself that I need you to help me discover and express?"

## References

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