This commentary relates to my experience in Medjugorje, in Yugoslavia on 26, 27, and 28 April, 1985. The young people, the ‘visionaries’ whom I got to know were Vicka, Marija, Ivanka, Ivan and Jakov.

At the meeting which took place in Jakov’s house as well as one in the presbytery, where the visionaries go through their supernatural experience, I tried to draw on, as much as possible, my experience and knowledge as psychiatrist to observe the circumstances which I shall describe in a simple, clinical perspective, which will have nothing savoring of magic or any special emotional conditioning. I believe that, without too much difficulty, I succeeded in that.

The first thing to strike me both after individual conversations which I had with these young boys and girls, the ‘visionaries’, and after observing them continuously before, during and after their ‘vision’, was that I did not find anything psychopathological of a delirious, hallucinatory or hysterical kind in their gestures, their behaviors or their words. In cases of delirium, a syndrome which I know very well because of the numerous paranoid delirious people with a mystical bent seen at the Clinic, there always follows, though in different ways, a surge of ‘omnipotence’, not necessarily expressed with noisy insistence or displayed fanatically, but coming across with a quiet, complacent silence: this hides the sense of triumph through a privileged relationship with the transcendent: an illusion. Besides that, a mystical delirious idea is a constant conviction of these patients. It distorts their critical attitude to reality, tainting it with subjective interpretation, with religious practices that are often incongruous, irrational, of a rigid pattern. This conviction is accompanied by a
scarcely veiled aggressiveness, distrust and proneness to irritability and it is sustained by a rigid, one-track thought process.

Generally, the relationship of a delirious person towards others is altered, with no genuine ability for spontaneous communication; the interests of such a person are paltry or non-existent, since his whole being hinges on an imperative and overwhelming sense of religious mission and a relationship with the supernatural. Although these individuals declare themselves in different ways to be God’s servants, it seems that, with an apparent show of humility, they identify themselves with God. If their delirious state is criticized or called in question they react resentfully and without restraint, intolerant of any contradiction. Their expression is never calm but shows either an emotional state of tense anxiety and aggressiveness, or in the ecstasy of delirium, a lifeless immobility, which reminds one of a doll’s eyes.

A person who manifests a conviction (which he himself considers more or less real) of a privileged relationship with the transcendent, as a defense or compensatory mechanism, hysterical in nature, is not such a clear-cut pathological case. In these cases a mystical conviction appears to be less rigid and less cohesive and it is easily intensified by the presence and participation of others. The person could then adopt extravagant behavior as of mystical fervor, with theatrical gestures. These phenomenon can be displayed, even when the person is alone, but there may be a secret intention of attracting other people’s attention. If such a person is asked about his mystical experience, he will strive to heighten curiosity in the person making the inquiry or in the public, either by giving a loquacious account of the facts, or by taking on an ecstatic and dreamy pose, or again by withdrawal and capricious silence.

Such a person will however, give expression to an emotional state that is incongruous: either supreme joy or over-emphatically expressed suffering, or again a slightly snobbish detachment from the mystical experience. He certainly fails on the other hand by a too marked emotional vacuum about the events which he is experiencing. We must remember that mystical exaltation of a hysterical nature can easily be induced by an individual to whom the patient attributes a certain authority, and who exploits the deep suggestibility of the hysterical person. This suggestibility, which is found to some extent in all of us but especially
in the immature and in those particularly sensitive to highly emotional stimuli, can induce collective hysteria, wherein, through mutual conditioning, the whole group passes into a state of mystical exaltation; this ends in their having perceptual experience which is hallucinatory.

Here I consider it of fundamental importance to emphasize that in all my contacts with the you ‘visionaries’ in Medjugorje I have never discovered, on any occasion, any thought, look, conversation, attitude or behavior similar to these pathological states which I have listed.

First of all it must be made clear that the ‘visionaries’ live a normal life; they are integrated in their community and in their families and are treated by others, relatives, friends, priests, as if they were not visionaries; they themselves relate to others as if they were no different from other people, or from themselves before they became ‘visionaries’. The phenomenon of collective suggestion which I mentioned earlier is not present. They differ from others only in the time they give to the practice of religion and to the visions; all this is done in a very natural way, without piosity, meaning apparent fervor, or complacency; their behavior is by preference discreet and, politely, they try to shield themselves from the overpowering pressure of pilgrims, when this is possible. They are quite open to conversation and seem patiently resigned to always having to answer the same questions; in this they are not effusive, nor are they withdrawn or exhibitionist. On the contrary they look calm and peaceful and gentle. They do not try to convince one, and they do not exceed what is asked of them; their smile is not smug or malicious, and it is not artificial. Their movements reflect only kindness and good will. They certainly are not looking for attention or for an audience; they do not offer interpretations or personal opinions about their mystical experiences; all they want to do is to report the facts and admit that they are happy.

At the time of the ‘vision’ they gather in one room in the presbytery, which is filled with a variety of object. It serves as a bedroom and study for one of the Friars. On one wall there are several religious pictures—not very remarkable. By this I mean that even the environment where the ‘visions’ take place is free of all decorative elements which could favor a special feeling of religiosity. Anyone there with the ‘visionaries’ finds that he has only the company of a Friar; I found him serious and taciturn, a little abrupt, very much against anything that would tend towards magic or the supernatural. Others present can be
admitted for the purpose of research or scientific assessment, but the number is limited, in
my case three people.

The Friar and the ‘visionaries’ sit down on little stools, and recite the Rosary in a thoughtful,
recollected manner. Suddenly, at exactly the same time, which is amazing, the young people
stand up and line up in front of one of the walls of the room. All of them gaze upwards at the
same time, without ever looking at each other, and they seem to stare intensely at
something that is outside the room and very far away. They keep their hands joined in
prayer, and some of them move their lips, but their voice cannot be heard. After
approximately one minute of time, on the occasion I was there, and again, amazingly all
together, they give signs of a fleeting bodily tremor, and all withdraw from the place where
they were standing. The expression on their faces becomes like ours. Behaving quite
normally and with no haste, but deliberately, they go towards a table, do not speak to each
other and each taking a pen and a notebook wherein their names are written, they sit down,
and again without talking to each other, write down quickly, without pausing, the message
which was given to them during the ‘vision’. The length of the text differs from one to
another. When they have finished, they leave the notebook and the pen, and with a quick
handshake they greet us and leave the room, each going about his or her own business.

I know that this description of the ‘vision’ has already been given by other witnesses;
however, I considered it useful to describe it after I had sketched pathological mystical
behavior so that the reader can compare these and take account of the psychic normality of
the young ‘visionaries’.

Something usual, extra-ordinary exists but it seems to be strictly limited to the short period
of the ‘vision’. However, nothing authorizes us to say that the ‘visionaries’, because of this
experience, manifest any personality disorders. They seem to be in a world beyond the
perception of others and, for what concerns them, to have left our sphere of perception.

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