

Journal review

Gerson, Samuel. 'When the Third is Dead: Memory, Mourning, and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust'. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 2009, 90, pp. 1341-1357.

Samuel Gerson's absorbing and powerful article explores how Holocaust survivors and their children live with the 'presence of an absence', an absence experienced as a 'dead third'. He centralizes the import of André Green's concept of 'The Dead Mother' to describe this phenomenon, as well as the poetry of Primo Levi, the Holocaust survivor. His thesis is the possibility that, through the presence of the analyst as witness acknowledging the patient's reality, a reflecting and containing 'living third' may re-emerge in the patient's subjectivity. His paper extends far beyond the parameters of the Holocaust and its aftermath, revealing the most profound and enigmatic elements of trauma that clinicians face. The Holocaust and its aftermath invoke a strong demand that survivors and their following generations remember and 'bear witness', but, paradoxically, it frequently pushes them into the 'seductions of blind denial' (1341). The full meaning and impact of genocide, Gerson proposes, can never be known. In such extreme cases, the incursion of repetitive traumatic fragments of memory will be acted out in unconscious attempts to represent unimaginable experiences that can never, paradoxically, be forgotten or ever be told. In his carefully unfolding narrative he explains how this is so.

The gaps in the traumatized victim's memory and his stunted capacity for mourning are the consequence, he argues, of the victim's lost hope for the existence of a 'witness'—*a live third* (1342). Such a functioning, living third could take the form of a person, institution, or culture, who can respond with concern for the suffering human in the midst of murder and violence. This internal object is a 'third' that 'lives in the gaps, absorbs absence, and transforms our relation to loss' (Ibid). Without it, the trauma survivor is haunted throughout his life by a 'dead third' (1343), signifying an internalized world of inner deadness, a nihilistic world without meaning—an emptiness and numbness, that guards against the unbearable.

Gerson cites three major areas in which the concept of the 'third' is used: the developmental, relational, and cultural. The 'developmental third' is recognized in the movement of the child from dyadic relations of the mother/child to the triadic, most notably in the oedipal stage with the father. He speaks of the relational third as the intersubjective product of the relationship between self and other. One could see the 'cultural third' as relating to Lacan's world of the Symbolic and non-personal contexts, such as linguistic structures which precede the individual coming into life (Leader, 2000). The third is recognized in external or psychic realities, appearing in consciousness and the unconscious, and in objective and subjective forms.

Without the presence of this living third which mediates, reflects, and contains, the traumatized individual descends into hopelessness and meaningless suffering. Their horrific affects and memories become lost in the gaps, the 'presence of an absence' that remains their constant companion throughout life, due in part to their 'aversion to facing uncontainable pain' (1344). Gerson's view diverges here from Freud's earlier view of trauma as signified by the loss of memory and the repression of unacceptable wishes.

He extends André Green's concept of the 'Dead Mother', encompassing greater dimensions than the deeply depressed mother absorbed in her traumatic loss, who has contaminated her infant with her deadness, thereby constituting the imago of the Dead Mother at his core (Green, 1986). According to Gerson, the internal state of deadness at the heart of one's being can be occasioned by 'stand-ins' for the Dead Mother, such as a

government or a society that are psychically dead to the Holocaust survivor. These representatives are experienced as withdrawn and unmoved by the fate of the individual.

When perpetrator regimes carry out genocide, Gerson explains, all faith in a protecting world is often extinguished in the minds of its victims and survivors. When this faith is killed he speaks of a shocking obliteration of both the victim's capacity for representation in relationships as well as his network for signification in the face of severe trauma, as described by Kirshner (1994). Turning next to Winnicott's analysis of a child traumatized by war, he found that her symptom of amnesia for her parents signified the gap or the absence that was the only real thing in the child's mind; the negative became the last chance the child had to prevent the end of her world. In a sense the negative became the positive anchor of identity (Winnicott, 1971).

This betrayal of faith by humanity has a profound and destructive impact upon the mental structures of the survivors of genocide. They not only live with the unresolvable trauma of their own parents' and family's losses, but they often saturate their children with what they cannot bear. Their ghosts become their children's ghosts. Gerson cites Faimberg, who describes this as a 'telescoping of generations'—'the intergenerational transmission of trauma' that cannot be metabolized (Faimberg, 1988). This gap, the negative, the phantom, and the absence are the 'living experience of deadness, alive somewhere' between absence and presence in the child's subjective space (1348). It is not of the Symbolic order but of the Real in Lacanian terms—that which cannot be symbolized. One's achievements become hollow, desires, meaningless, and sense of self, false. The experience of this dead third in the form of the Dead Mother cannot be exorcised, becoming, ironically, the false self's lasting 'primary object(s) of identification'.(1347).

Gerson describes Fonagy's work with the children of Holocaust survivors. He found that the parents' traumatic dissociation is connected to unmetabolized loss, and that there is transmission of this experience of profound emotional alienation to subsequent generations (Fonagy, 2002). These enigmatic contents are the basis for phantoms that can migrate through the generations.

The Jewish author, poet, and chemist, Primo Levi, composed the poem *Unfinished business* (Levi, 1981) six years before his suicide, and thirty-six years after his release from Auschwitz. Gerson describes Levi's incomplete mourning and his recognition of the impossibility of ever adequately translating his—to use Laplanche's terms—overwhelming enigmatic affects (Hinton, 2009). In the following excerpt from the poem Levi laments his incomplete achievements—the creation of a lasting testament that could touch people and confirm that his life had meaning.

Above all, dear sir, I had in mind
A marvelous book that would have
Revealed innumerable secrets,
Alleviated pain and fear,
Dissolved doubts, given to many people
The boon of tears and laughter.
... Too bad.

It would have been a fundamental work. (Levi, p. 47)

As Gerson eloquently writes, this unmet striving, from Levi's perspective, 'illustrates that emotional survival requires that the impossibility of life be spoken' (1351). Levi's work illustrates that creativity often cannot erase destruction or bring an end to grieving. Integrity resides in 'courageously living with the enduring deadliness'. (Ibid). It is not the renouncing of one's mourning that will guarantee life. What is asked of us instead is the commitment to face our losses, death, and the enigma of life, and not seek the illusion of 'working through' but rather 'the . . . challenge of living with' (Ibid). This leads Gerson to question whether there can ever be a completion of mourning in trauma survivors and full recovery from loss.

Gerson returns to the patient's world of trauma which the analyst in turn must

enter. As an enduring presence 'who can bear living with that which cannot be represented in words' (1353), the analyst must welcome the unseen phantoms that inhabit their patient's psychic void. In doing so he/she may provide a container for the absent--yet always there--unspeakable horror, from which a 'new third [may be] constituted' one that may provide a sense of continuity and the experience of the meaning of life (1354).

He cautions against our wish as analysts to hold fast to those glimpses of rebirth and moments of optimism in the lives of our severely traumatized patients. Their inner experience of the deadness, of being 'stillborn' remains their deepest truth. We are wise to reflect on our own need to be relieved of the burden of enormous pain we carry while accompanying our patients on their journey.

In what was for me the most moving recollection of the paper, Gerson cites the young aid worker who volunteered in Bergen-Belsen after its liberation, a woman who embodied the very essence of the containing witness. The survivors would sit for hours on end silently rocking, the silent pain, humiliation, and sense of contamination for their violated bodies and minds embedded in their ceaseless movements. There were no words to say, no consolation. To bear witness to the naked truth of their experience—without recoil—the young woman would simply rock along with them, their hands holding fast to her, nails digging into her flesh as they rocked in unison.

There is very little that I can add to Samuel Gerson's compelling and compassionate work. It does seem to me that the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas might have deepened his perspective on the possibilities for the 'transcendence' of trauma. For Levinas 'transcendence' does not imply freeing ourselves of suffering. The finite freedom such as we have lies in the recognition of our infinite responsibility to the other (Peperzak & Levinas, 1993). Levinas, who lost his entire family to the Holocaust, richly mirrors Gerson's concept of the living third, in his description of the one who stands witness to the sheer nakedness of the other suffering before him, in whom we recognize a 'trace of the Infinite'. Like Levi, several noted Jews such as Polish novelists Jerzy Kosinski and Piotr Rawicz, and poet Paul Celan survived the Holocaust and were very creative, only to choose suicide in midlife. I can only wonder if their art was compelled by the need to express a nameless, living-deadness that they ultimately grew weary of bearing. It might be useful to consider how the lives of individuals like Levinas and Elie Wiesel took different trajectories. They are the exceptions. Their long, creative lives seem to have thrived in the face of their traumatic suffering—not by healing their wounds, but perhaps by finding meaning and usefulness in their suffering. Perhaps they somehow found a reflecting, living third that sustained them.

References

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