

**Trauma, Psychosis and American Apocalyptic Christianity:
Analysis in the Midst of
Spiritual Warfare**

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November 3 – 5, 2006

Pasadena, California

In the Beginning

First, there was only an envelope with two pages from an article. Page one in bold handwriting: “I Hate Myself” and page two as if in response read “Am I Crazy?” Both pages were taken from a diary of psychoanalysis. There was no name, not on the article and most importantly no name or address of the sender.

I was intrigued: “What is this?” There was nothing more for a month, then a phone call. I picked up: “Well...” was all that was said at first. Still intrigued, I responded on an intuition and said only two words, “yes” and “probably” (ok, technically three words). Silence, then “I’ll call for an appointment.” One month to the day, yes we were both counting, she called and one week later I met Evangeline,¹ or as she preferred, Vange, but in the waiting room only. She said she wasn’t ready and by this time I wasn’t sure I was either.

She did call back and we began a tumultuous, intense, frightening and ultimately disappointing course of analytic therapy. During this three year period I saw Vange through six hospitalizations, over twenty different medications, periods of cutting, substance abuse and dangerous sexual activity with violent drug dealers. What I couldn’t see her through was demonic possession for I became the devil himself. My work, my very person, became vile, evil and satanic as she stood united with her spiritual warfare brethren who, with a vengeful Jesus on their side, would exact retribution. Despite my furious attempts, and I use that adjective with all its various meanings, I could not reach her. She was seeking eternal salvation and I couldn’t even offer her peace on earth, or put another way, her Christian Rapture became our therapeutic rupture. Since only the

¹ To protect patient confidentiality I have altered some facts including names in this therapy process and its aftermath. None of these changes significantly misrepresent issues discussed in this paper.

born again will be spared you will be “left behind,” Vange told me with what I perceived as a mixture of righteousness and rage.

Vange’s History: Real, Imagined and Both

Vange was born into a family rife with conflict. Her mother was psychotic, prone to religious delusions and persecutions. She died in a psychiatric hospital when Vange was seven but not before she convinced Vange that she was a “bad seed” and demon possessed for what sounded like rather typical childhood mischief, like teasing her sister and not always completing household chores assigned. Vange described her mother as harsh, punitive, unavailable (due to frequent hospitalizations) and condemning.

Her father was passive with his wife but violent with the children, especially Vange and her older brother. After her mother’s death he would rape Vange and then beat her for “turning him on.” She believed she was crazy like her mother and Satan’s “fiery darts” infected her with sexual urges she couldn’t tame.

The shame and guilt Vange experienced over her sexuality was a major theme in her life and therapy. As a child, when she wasn’t being punished by others, she would punish herself with head banging. This led to more condemnation from her father: “You are as crazy as your mother and you’ll end up dead like her too.”

Despite this history Vange was intelligent enough to enter college and successfully complete an associate’s degree. She could be considerate, insightful, engaging and quite humorous, yet her self hatred was an almost constant companion. While she would, for brief periods, remember the traumas she suffered there were longer periods where she symbolically enacted them in the symptoms of cutting, “double-dosing” on medication, burning herself, and head banging. At such points in treatment

she was resistive, manipulative, and dramatic. Vange experienced a deep fear of trusting, becoming vulnerable, and being hurt. These fears would leave her feeling an unbearable helplessness once again. This helplessness would lead to inner chaos, heightened emotional volatility and masochistic enactments. Vange was trying to somehow live with what was intolerable.

The most problematic symptom, which entered the consultation room, was the cutting which followed sexual thoughts, activity, or discussion of her past sexual behavior that had led to an abortion. Vange would, in psychotic confusion, see herself lost to the devil with no God to save her. Her cutting was compulsive and ritualistic: even numbers of precise horizontal lines on her breasts, across her pubic and genital areas and her stomach. On one occasion she sliced her abdomen multiple times and brought the razor blade with dried blood into the session. She threatened to cut herself open in my presence, and only after a firm confrontation did she throw away the blade. We were then able to talk briefly about how she saw the blood as a purification and an indication that “God would be pleased enough to visit the neighborhood.” Vange was edging ever more closely to her mother. She was starting to live her mother’s life with psychosis, radical fundamentalist religion and alternating states of sadism and masochism. She would kick and scratch her husband and either neglect or condemn her daughter, whose abuse brought Vange into treatment in the first place. Waiting patiently was an evangelical church group, The Spiritual Warfare Soldiers for Christ.² Their objectives were simple: free Vange from demonic possession and destroy my satanic practice.

² A local, mainline Christian Reform minister has described this movement as an “ecclesiastical Al-Qaeda.”

What's the Devil got to do with it?

Edward Murphy, writing for Global Harvest Ministries, concludes: that

“Primary Sin Areas of Demonized Christians” are among the following:

One – illicit sexual practices or fantasies

Two – deep-seated anger, bitterness, hatred, rage

and rebellion, often leading to destructive and/or

self-destructive impulses

Three – a sense of rejection, guilt, poor self esteem,

unworthiness and shame. (p. 5)

Murphy again: “Fortunately, most demonized believers do not need dramatic, spectacular, prolonged deliverance sessions. They often need only to be counseled by believers who know the spirit world and can help set them free, teaching them spiritual warfare and self-deliverance” (p. 6).

Easy enough; no more struggles with traumatic, painful memories, no more terrible freedom to chart one's own life, responsibility for choices is surrendered, and sexuality, desires, and passion are denied or excused as the devil's workings. Vange was back in the fold. She was “born again, again.” She was saved and ready for the Rapture. While non-believers were to be bathed in blood, violence, and cruelty by a vengeful God, she would rise up, her suffering over. She would now have a ring side seat for the world's end. The Apocalypse would pass her by as the Book of Revelations exploded not in imagery but actual sadistic retribution for those with the sign of the beast.

Rather than merely waiting for “end times” many Christians of this extreme orientation have turned to the active and controversial measures of Spiritual Warfare.

Developed by Peter Wagner of Fuller Seminary (Gary, p. 2), such warfare is conducted through seminars, workshops and “commando” prayer groups with the aim of taking offensive action against satanic forces. Not surprisingly psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, which are not Christian based (can they ever be?), poses a grave threat to those on the Christian Right.

Born-again apocalyptic Christians are at war with evil supernaturalism. They are to resist, die if necessary, before allowing sin to infiltrate their Christian lives. This war, with reference to dying, shedding blood, resisting, is real to such fundamentalists. There is no metaphor allowed in the language of certainty so sin is everywhere and must be rooted out, confronted, challenged in all its various forms, and defeated. By definition all the “non-born again” are living in sin: well, because they are not fundamentalists.

Psychotherapy during the End Times

There were times during Vange’s therapy with me where she was thoughtful, engaged and reflective. We could approach emotionally laden material and consider the effects of these experiences on her current life. At such times she could remember scenes of sexual and physical abuse without enacting these events in or out of sessions. She could function well enough to earn the respect of other aids at a pre-school where she worked. Then there were other times where suddenly and unexpectedly, at least to me, Vange would fragment or to put it more graphically seemingly explode. Those explosions would leave Vange broken like so many shards of glass strewn about my office: jagged, dangerous, and brittle. Mollon (2006) describes an “alien self” which develops from abusive trauma. With Vange in these broken states, there was no self,

alien or otherwise. There were instead pieces of self warring with each other and me; full of rage, psychotically mixing fantasy with memory, and paranoid and violent to her.

In such states she would engage in provocative behaviors; i.e. loudly singing nonsense rhymes that were sexually tinged, slapping herself in the face with hands open and closed, frequently leaving intense red hand prints and on one occasion taking off a high heeled shoe to strike herself on the head before I could firmly grab hold of her wrist and direct her to stop, which after some argument she agreed to put her shoe back on her foot.

For my part I would sit quietly, express my sadness and concern with her self injurious actions and listen for some point of entry, some island of health, to help me organize my various and conflicting associations and to calm myself. When Vange's behavior became dangerous enough to pose potential real harm, I would intervene interpretively at first with various degrees of directness: "I wonder why you pay me to watch you abuse yourself. Why do you insist on sabotaging the therapy you sought out and realize, at times, that you so badly need? Why are you forcing me to end this session and put your therapy at risk?" There were many more I tried, all of which were of only limited value. There was no talking when Vange was in such psychotic states. The best I felt I could do was to contain the most dangerous bizarre behavior and hang in there until the episode passed by itself, through medication changes, hospitalization or as I hoped with the relationship that was building some history.

Despite an often stated wish to end her therapy Vange very seldom missed appointments, yet an insidious threat to Vange's emotional health was forming outside the office. Growing from a simple "hello" by a former church member, Vange was now

being “courted” by a radical fundamental prayer group. At first they seemed to offer her some much needed social support and encouragement. They would take turns calling and inquiring about her health; pick her up for church services, and take her to dinner. Vange seemed to grow steadily more involved. Then during one session she launched into a series of accusations that I was planting memories of abuse to keep her dependent on me and apart from her church. I was also told I didn’t understand her or her problems because they were not psychological. She went on to say she was possessed by demons. Now I live in a religiously conservative area but I was unprepared for this explanation of her problems. I hesitated, probably blanched, and sat momentarily speechless. In response, Vange finished off her tirade by saying she didn’t expect I would agree with her, I couldn’t, for much to my surprise I was Satan’s deceiver.

This session was to set the tone for the next few months before Vange terminated her therapy. Increasingly I was offered various biblical texts; diagrams describing Christian armor needed for battle; books and videos. She still could not leave just yet. Vange had to try and save me. When she failed, her “demon group,” as she so aptly described them, entered the scene; although they were not interested in my eternal salvation. Their intentions were more nefarious; they wanted to ruin my practice or as one stated “put the devil out of business.” I must admit they came with a vengeance that was initially deeply unsettling to me. First, one or two would accompany Vange to sessions and when I refused to let them enter my consultation room they sat in the waiting room and prayed for her safety. Since I was in a small group practice this was especially disruptive but small in comparison to an escalation when three or four members of this group would occupy the waiting room and pray with increasing volume

for Christ to expel the “higher evil spirits” gathering around Vange. They would also call as many as ten times a day attempting to fill my answering machine with scripture passages so patients and colleagues would be prevented from contacting me.

I was growing weary, increasingly doubtful about my effectiveness and coming to realize the relationship was irrevocably compromised. I finally reached the point where I said to Vange, “You must choose. It is either therapy or ‘demonic release’. You can’t have it both ways. Our relationship and our work together are being destroyed. I know this is difficult but I hope you will choose wisely. I will add only that no one owns God.” Although I said this early in the session and with what I thought was gentle firmness, Vange silently left just moments later. It was over.

Evolution to Fundamentalism: From Sinner to the Anointed

I hesitate to generalize about essential mechanisms that serve as a foundation for Fundamental Apocalyptic Christianity, especially when psychosis is so prominently on display. Yet, in this case, Vange’s instability provides a potentially clear lens to identify the dynamics so prevalent and predictable in many fundamental conversions across the psychological/emotional spectrum. Strozier (1994), for example, after concluding a five year study of fundamentalists wrote: “Apocalyptic myths are necessarily rooted in private dramas of great significance and pain. In various ways, death and its equivalent, along with constant efforts to hold off fragmentation, play a central role in the self experiences of fundamentalists” (p. 3). These dynamics and myths compose a progression concluding in immersion which envelopes the totality of the believer’s life. They are as follows: Toxic Shame > Persecution > Righteousness > Rage > Ecstasy/Salvation.

1. TOXIC SHAME

This toxic shame for a budding apocalyptic fundamentalist, such as Vange, includes feelings of essential badness, impurity and evil especially of a sexual nature which are accompanied by a raw pervasive introjected hatred of self. Feeling unredeemable and beyond forgiveness, Vange engaged in enactments of mutilations that confirmed her shame and led to further humiliation which she expected and unconsciously sought out as confirmation of her estrangement from God. Depression, anxiety, and social isolation ensued, leaving Vange paranoid. No one who accepted her or offered moments of attachment could be trusted; positive regard, compassion, and empathy were lies representing what did not and could not exist.

2. FEELINGS OF PERSECUTION

Convinced she deserved judgment for her lack of faith, Vange's despair and self loathing grew beyond what was tolerable; thus a compromise which would allow her to continue to live was sought. For the fallen away or soon to be Christian Fundamentalist, self harm now takes on new meaning. Punishment becomes a purifying and necessary penance to return to God. Vange could not continue to survive alone or in therapy, which she experienced as so threatening, so she welcomed participation in a fundamental group. Since they presented themselves as hated by secular society, they had credibility. To a "lost soul" this meant no longer hating one's self alone, since membership in a hated group was now offered. This we might call "identification with

the aggressed against” which eased feelings of abandonment. “We” are hated, also marks the projection of hatred and rage: what was in, now is out.

3. RIGHTEOUSNESS

Conversion or being born again (and if need be again and again) dramatically eases toxic shame and evil as the fundamentalist is relieved of responsibility for previous actions. For Vange this was heaven. Self exploration, i.e. therapy or analysis is seen as opposing God’s plan and must be devalued. For many like Vange, there is also an active disavowal of painful affect replaced instead by a reaction formation expressed through evangelism: “save the sinner who once was us;” share our goodness and bring them to the light so we may remain there.

Manichean thinking is activated: absolute, simplistic, black or white: a separation (or rather re-separation) of good and evil into two separate forces which renders evil harmless. Purity of faith led Vange and her fellow believers to feel beyond reproach and as experiencing a unique status with God.

4. RAGE

For those unwilling to accept the righteous message of Vange’s true believers there follows sanctification of violence against them, real, actual or in fantasy, (Jones 2006). There is a furious lack of empathy that develops, Eigen (2002) writes: “Rage is always incorporated into one’s Vision of the Good, my or our Good vs. yours. One of the terrible facts of rage is its intimate allegiance with the sense of righteousness.” (p.4) Such rage is given justification, purpose and direction by the belief of a wrathful God.

The Book of Revelations is elevated in status to justify extreme forms of rage and hatred, directed at rational discourse or liberty of thought.

Splitting, as a prominent defense, plays a central role. Those who question the infallibility of the Bible risk hatred or rage because to do so potentially undermines the “Christian” self, i.e. the need for certainty and the core identity for the fundamentalists. No interpretation is allowed, only belief in the selected inerrant truth and indeed it is selected. Biblical passages that confuse or contradict the radical fundamentalist message are ignored or seen as trickery used by non-believers.

Psychologically and analytically this kind of rage bears a strong resemblance to the narcissistic rage which according to Terman (2006) arises from . . . “damage to one’s sense of power or competence, for the perception of power, is an important source of self esteem.” (p.8) What is crucial here is the felt sense of efficacy, to be able to act as one’s own agent and exert an influence and effect on others (or self objects in the language of Self Psychology). Failure to experience such efficacy leads to helplessness coupled with intense feelings of humiliation at being defeated.

When a fundamentalist like Vange suffers severe, unrelenting humiliation and physical brutality, a profound sense of helpless rage develops. Since there is no real solid sense of competency, rage serves to fill this void especially against those seen as both more powerful and, excuse the term, “lording” this power over them.

Vange’s self harm revealed intense ambivalence and confusion about helplessness and power. If she could not experience enough efficacies in her daily interactions, she could attempt, and with some success, to engender helplessness in me by placing the hated moniker of Satan on me to humble, disgrace and humiliate. My

suggestion that ambivalence is a part of this equation is revealed by use of the same reference to me as Satan. In discussing this designation with a local biblical scholar, I was informed: “You obviously mattered a great deal to her to achieve a level of Satan or devil. Such a designation would not be given to someone she took lightly. In a sense, there is a compliment in her words: you held a high degree of value and power in her life.”

5. ECSTASY/SALVATION

The Rapture, as identified by fundamentalists, is literally a rising up above and looking down on the destruction of the world. If Revelations is an accurate prophesy, as Vange claimed, then the Rapture entails sadistic passivity as the saved are aligned with wrathful vengeance. The saved are the witnesses and give credence to God’s ferocity toward those that displease Him. They are on the right side of this almighty invincible power. They are victims no more. Such believers relish their grandiosity and narcissism for being chosen by God for their goodness, purity and faith. Salvation is the wished for denial of the damaged self. They are saved from all they were and toxic shame is erased.

There is now a blissful seeking of end times to be with God. Still it is often confusing as to which God apocalyptic fundamentalists seek to be with: a reunion with an omnipotent, idealized God offering the blessings of eternal life or in what Stein (2006) describes as a “vertical desire” . . . a mystical longing for merger with the idealized abjecting Other.” (p.5) Since, as I have noted, splitting is a hallmark for fundamentalism, it is likely even God is halved. The merciful God is consciously described and wished for while the vengeful God remains in the unconscious as almighty,

to be both feared and obeyed so as not to offend. Strangely enough perhaps, both sides of the split provide salvation. Fundamental believers are either saved or spared.

Reflections

Some time has passed since I last saw Vange in therapy. Enough I suppose to gain some emotional distance, collect my thoughts and reflect clinically on what I did and why.

Practically, I continued the treatment for too long. At least the last year was more crisis management than psychotherapy. I think I helped her stay alive during this time but I, we, can't be sure of such statements. I can say I overestimated her emotional and intellectual resources, rather than islands of health, if I may be allowed to mix my metaphors, her strengths were more like so many summer morning mists hanging over low lying meadows burned off by the heat of the day.

And in the heat of the transference – countertransference mix I may have tried to save her from my own religious upbringing. Being raised Catholic in the 1950's I knew about abusive authority swaddled in righteousness and blessed as the one true religion. I knew sin and according to the nuns who “taught” me (which is really stretching the definition of that word) I was far too friendly with falls from Grace. “Hell awaits you” could have been our school slogan unless we were right with Jesus. Jesus always said with a slight bow of the head which I still find myself reflexively doing on occasion when I pass a Catholic Church.

Yes, I was going to save her, maybe just like the fundamentalist church intended, from the other side. In my abstract I used the phrase, *furor sandani*, a rage to cure;

Freud's dismissal of Ferenczi's later work. It did seem like a fight. When I asked my dear friend, Michael Lariviere, to read my first draft of this paper he said he was surprised I let the "demon group" into my waiting room. I have thought about that, why did I? I'm not sure still, but I think I would not allow them to see how they affected me. I attempted to erase them; they were so many empty spirits devoid of life and unable to hurt me. I had won my fight with fundamentalism, first with the Catholic Church and then with a cultish psychotherapy training group. No, do what they would; they could only serve as a nuisance not a real threat. Such fundamentalism puts the mind asleep and so much speculation of a Rapture would not deter me. If this was indeed what I was thinking then I was wrong.

In my own righteousness I failed to see the demon group's stealth weapon, far more powerful than selective interpretations taken from Revelations, Vange. I did not see, did not want to see, that the woman I was trying to "save," was no mere victim. As psychotic as she was, she was still managing, manipulating and fueling this spiritual/psychological enactment. I was a sacrifice of sorts like she had been (although not nearly so extreme), so that she might be taken up, raptured if you will, into the loving/hating-accepting/rejecting aura of her God. Peace gained through destruction. I survived, though humbled, wiser I hope, but I survived. I doubt very much that Vange did, then again maybe that was, after all, her intent.

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