

Trauma and Time: Returning to what was never left

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Epigraph: "The wound that never heals meets the fire that never goes out.

It's a lifelong process of recovery"

Michael Eigen

I will begin this presentation with just a few but still awful questions that will quickly take us to the heart of what I want to consider today.

What cultures of trauma lead children to murder? What are some of the conditions that make such killing normal, even applauded? What binds victims and murderers in separate yet shared dances of hell?

These questions are useful because they disrupt our moral balance and drop our veneers of civility and us into jagged holes of blindness. From here, this pale place, we again feel our tragic humanity - our capacity to harm as well as heal.

Trauma's Timeless Shadow

Trauma is always with us. We were born in it, through it, no matter how gentle or antiseptic the setting. Trauma is our first experience in the world, it is in our tissues, lungs and wrapped around our skin. Trauma is a felt experience jolting us into life; we cry out, scream and announce our presence, hopefully to a receptive audience.

If all goes well enough we survive our Kleinian fantasies and receive support for both our aloneness and attachments. We grow in-between the two; sliding into one side,

then the other and back. We suffer our losses, grow independent or rather interdependent and develop some mastery and resilience. We come to know, over time, our shifting but familiar “selves“ as they congeal into a recognizable “I.” In another context, Alberto Manguel has poetically describes this process suggesting:

“So it is with our myriad identities. They change and dissolve in our eye and the eyes of others, until the moment when we are suddenly able to pronounce the word *I*. Then they cease to be illusions, hallucinations, guesswork and become, with astonishing conviction, an epiphany.”

With traumatic suffering of neglect, harm and soulful murderousness, a grossly distorted self-portrait and culture develops where language further separates self from experience. The victim becomes the “other” as defined by those imposing their will and their stories of ”truth.” These stories cause a corrosive hole in the psyche. The scream of life, that both Winnicott and Eigen describe, dies out and victims of trauma become animated ghosts in the service of wounded, terrified, indifferent or cruel figures known ironically as “care-takers.” These are adults who can insist on self-immolating love while meting out hatred through elusive attachments.

Deceit, Hatred and Killing

Sometimes it is not what traumatizing adults actually do but rather what is inferred - a crude drama, a play of mime infuses the spirit. Accompanied by unnamed helplessness and living in a shadow world, with or without words, the traumatized become what is expected, sculpted or programmed.

To return now to one of my opening questions: How can children kill? ... They are taught to by implication, experience or instruction. Some kill for survival, some

because they are so shattered by life collapsing that even death loses meaning, some for a prize, a trinket, even a moment of praise (as in the film, *Five Minutes of Heaven*) to fill the gnawing psychic deadness and come to be different than whom they are. Such children are soldiers for demagogues, zealots, tyrants or political psychopaths. No society, no country is immune.

Adults of influence: parents, teachers, preachers and “talking heads” terrify vulnerable young with pictures and stories of hatred. Susan Sontag has eloquently named and warned us of the damage inherent in war photos when they can be so easily manipulated to inflame emotions or numb them out. As rage engulfs dichotomies reign: “I am good,” “You are bad,” and “If you think like them you betray your people and become a traitor.” Hate destroys all but gives the illusion that the hearts of believers are pure, righteous and valiant. Such purity is dangerous to all as such unleavened violence finds its’ own course, energy and aim.

Children are accepted as part of the fold until or unless they act on their own. This is violence by permission. With no conscious to guide them they spew mimicked hatred as their diseased “heroes” drain their pints of brew with hands of Pilate.

Five Minutes of Heaven depicts a mad world stuffed into innocents like Alistair Little (Liam Neeson) until revenge as murder is prized, honored, and celebrated. The terrible emotional toll on such young followers is never accounted for, as they are once again abandoned when their purpose is served like puppets cut loose from their strings.

Innocents on the other side are foreigners, not us, not for who they are but what they represent. They, like 11-year-old Joe Griffin (James Nesbitt) are erased as children remaining only as cutouts upon whom to heap bitterness and blame. Terribly this happens

even from their own “side” as with Joe’s family when his brother was murdered.

Helplessness is intolerable: “Why didn’t you stop him? You could have stopped him,” his mother screeches.

As such children grow up what are they to do, how do they go past what they were taught and believe they are? I believe they can recover their humanity, scarred though it may be and this film, while bleak, offers direction. Although unfashionable to believe perhaps, and I’ve had my share of professional disagreements on this subject, moving beyond trauma does not usually entail forgiveness, apology, reconciliation reparation and the like. It is to be recalled that “acts of forgiveness” by transgressors are often quite different than genuine internal heart wrenching transformations. With complex trauma these tropes, are to me, often easy and cheap. They can be no more than empty self-serving gestures often devoid of empathy or at least pathos.

As an addendum, however, I would suggest authentic forgiveness is possible but only when initiated by the “survivor.” A request for forgiveness by anyone else carries the weight of a further intrusion or demand. Forgiveness, if meaningful is gifted, offered; for the purpose of healing the victim’s own pernicious injury. Still, it is more likely that moving on is moving into the trauma with honesty, cold and harsh as it may be, to find healing space through a process I identify as nonforgiveness.

Should time preclude a full discussion today I want to say a few words to distinguish unforgiving from nonforgiving. Many times in my long work with trauma survivors, there comes a point where the fear, rage and numbing sorrow of loss begins to fade. I have great respect for the resiliency and courage of these wise and weathered souls. They have lived through both the violence and in re-telling, often re-living, the

very destructiveness they seek to heal from in therapy. This healing, this discovery of an internal, resilient sense of self beyond the attribution of victim, to whatever degree possible, is not often accomplished by forgiveness. It is just too much to expect of those who have sacrificed so much of their lives. The options then are unforgiveness or nonforgiveness.

I distinguish the two in the following ways. Unforgiveness is about holding on to, a grasping, grabbing, swallowing, biting into experiences with will and hardness. This is an active, albeit unconscious resistance; justification is infused with vengeful fantasies memories, wishes, dreams and often actions. Still it remains an infected, dangling attachment to the transgressor: “I keep us alive by punishing you. Punishing you I undo the past. I am you; my pain is your encrusted being, all of you. You will not escape. You are all I suffer and exist beyond redemption.” Identification and infusion darken the soul and mourning is sacrificed.

Unforgiveness, however, may serve us an initial gateway, not necessarily to forgiveness, but to nonforgiveness as I am defining it here. Akhtar wisely notes revenge can impart a sense of mastery and a loss of innocence as the victim can, perhaps for the first time, “taste the pleasure of sadism.” Safer goes further in positing a legitimate, healthy, willful unforgiving if to forgive is to condone violence. Such a decisive action reflects a developing sense of self externally focused on such social issues as justice and accountability.

Nonforgiveness is different. It is letting go, being fed up with, moving elsewhere, beyond restraint, filling in life, redirection emerges as memories become washed out, fading into a muted background again mostly unconscious. Time has been run through in

acts of psychic survival. The transgressor is crowded out, choked off by different transitional experiences (Winnicott), vitalization of imagination and fantasy, and the gentle shiver of physical awakening. It happens quite suddenly - a “gone-ness”- or as one patient put it to me, “a sacred emptiness.” Nonforgiveness is outside the black hole, outside the teratoma, as Vida has pointed out in a personal communication. Memories remain, we never forget, but they are distant, humbled, although potentially activated in some lesser form by other transgressions, trauma or new losses. The healthy tissue cannot evade or avoid what used to be there, but what used to be there is no longer active.

Most significantly, there is no internal conversation of blame, defense or justification. “It’s gone.” Often surprisingly so. The squawking shadow haunting life disappears around a mind’s corner, turned many times before but now inexplicitly the landscape is different. Mystery and grueling hard work come together in one last alchemistic transmutation: a rusty uneven gate, wobbly on its hinges closes and the worn latch drops loosely into place.

And now the final scene in *Five Minutes of Heaven* that will, I hope, provide the visual context for my remarks today.

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