

‘AND DEATH SHALL HAVE NO DOMINION’¹ ATTENDING TO THE SILENCE: A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON A WORK IN PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT *This paper is a preliminary report on the work with a psychotherapy group offered by two therapists, a German man and an Israeli woman, for the post-Holocaust generations, defined as the descendants of victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Reactions to the project are detailed as well as problems arising from the beginning of the ongoing group work. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The repressed problems and the suffering [. . .] fraudulently avoided secrete an insidious poison which seeps into the soul [. . .] through the thickest wall of silence and through the whitened sepulchres of deceit, complacency, and evasion.

(Jung, ‘Analytical psychology and education’, p. 154)

INTRODUCTION

In May last year, a colleague, Dr Elya Steinberg, invited me to co-organize and co-lead an ongoing psychotherapy group for second generation victims, perpetrators and bystanders of the Holocaust. We were thinking of a group in which the descendants of

survivors of the Shoah could meet with descendants of both German perpetrators and bystanders as well as those of the former Allied nations who had mostly stood by in passive silence whilst the atrocities were being committed (cf. Morse, 1968). The latter group would include nationals of all 33 countries of Western Europe, the Americas, and Australia whose representatives took part in the Evian (France) Conference in July 1938, convened by President Roosevelt, to internationally put strict limitations on immigration of Jewish refugees from Germany. Implicitly, the Nazis understood this as a tacit acceptance of their genocidal plans.

Our group would be led by two psychotherapists, one German (myself) and one

1. Thomas (1979).

Israeli. We see victims, perpetrators and bystanders, however different their roles, as being caught up 'in the same malignant cultural complex' (J. Beebe, personal communications, San Francisco, 7 November 2006, 9 March 2007). Understanding history as a current event (Clarke, 2007), we also intended the group to address the reverberations of the past not only in terms of the individual and collective traumas but as a way to understand one of the sources of the present Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is one of the major issues currently dividing our world. What follows is an initial report of the response we received and the start of the group.

BACKGROUND

Our project stands in the tradition of Dan Bar-On's work, an Israeli professor of psychology, who some 20 years ago initiated groups where descendants of Nazi perpetrators and Jewish survivors of the Shoah met to share their different truths, and who has gone on from there to facilitate similar groups of Israelis and Palestinians. In this work, Bar-On developed the format of what he called 'TRT-Groups' – 'To Reflect and Trust' (Bar-On, 2004) – where members from such diverse backgrounds could come together. He has published widely on his work (Bar-On, 1989, 1999; Toomey, 2004).

Another important piece of work on the same theme is Dr Vamik D. Volkan's facilitating of a series of meetings between German and Jewish psychotherapists in Germany in 1997/8 (Volkan et al., 2002), initially convened in response to the ongoing silence about the Shoah in Germany. This group struggled hard with 'speechlessness', the collective silence silencing the group members:

According to Dr Volkan, the struggle to establish genuine emotional (in contrast to intellectual) contact among the members of this group reac-

tivated *malignant but previously hidden German-Jewish interactions*. [...] Their contact with each other could induce a 'time collapse', a phenomenon where perceptions, feelings, deeds and defences against them would be condensed with current events, perceptions, feelings, deeds and defences pertaining to them. (Halasz, 2006, 107)

Following on from these experiences, our group, led by psychotherapists/analysts both trained in body psychotherapy and psychodynamics, would enable participants to work depth-psychologically as well as emotionally and cathartically towards inner healing. We were also intentionally invoking a spiritual dimension into our work, because I believe it to be vitally important in approaching the Shoah and its reverberations. This is common in the context of working with 'the impossible': it is a central aspect, for example, of work with all sorts of addictions. Also, although, of course, the roots of anti-Semitism cannot be seen in religious issues alone, it is nevertheless impossible to try fully to understand it separately from them. Hence any efforts towards healing need to include the spiritual realm.

ADVERTISING

We introduced our project with the following flyer:

The Post-Holocaust Generations: Attending to the Silence

Although well over half a century ago, the trauma of the Shoah continues to affect our daily lives and our relationships – with ourselves, as well as with each other, both personal as well as collective. The wounds have not been able to heal, the terrors still too fresh for us to have been able to attend to them. Deep inside, we are still paralysed in shock – have been shocked into silence by the catastrophe. This seems to be true for *all* sides – victims as much as perpetrators, *and* bystanders – as well as their descendants, the second and the following generations. We understand this silence as a protective reaction to that

which is beyond comprehension. Yet, *this* kind of silence prevents healing. Building bridges together with hope for truth and reconciliation – internally as well as interpersonally! – we want to attend to the silence to further the capacity for pleasure and joy, happiness and love, in the words of the prophet, ‘*restore the years that the locust hath eaten*’ (Joel 2:25).

We are inviting all those with whom these thoughts resonate to an ongoing group. The group will be limited to 16 members and will meet for 3 hours on Thursday evenings at 7.15 p.m. starting on 25 January, followed by 22 February, 22 March, 3 May, 7 June, 21 June, 12 July, 20 Sept., 11 Oct., 1 Nov. The meeting venue is 855 Finchley Road, Golders Green, London NW11 8LX. Cost for the whole course is £375.00, single evenings £40.00.

The group shall be facilitated by two UKCP Registered Biodynamic Bodypsychotherapists, one Israeli and one German. For further information, please contact either Dr Elya Steinberg, MD (Integrative Medicine) at 0208-455 4542, elya.steinberg@virgin.net, or Dr Gottfried Heuer (Jungian Psychoanalyst) at 0208-749 4388, gottfried.heuer@virgin.net.

We planned to start with an open evening including a talk by my colleague and a discussion chaired by me. The ongoing evening group started in January.

This flyer was distributed in hard copy to bookshops and therapeutic and analytic organizations all over London and was also put on the Web sites of several of the latter, as well as being distributed by email via their respective email-lists. Holocaust organizations and Jewish schools, community centres and cultural institutions were informed, as well the embassies of Germany and Austria (a single nation at the time of the Shoah) and their respective cultural and trade organizations, the Goethe Institute, the Austrian Cultural Forum, the German-British Chamber of Industry and Commerce, as well as some two dozen German-language Churches, schools, banks and companies. The text also went out on the discussion lists of the International Association of Jungian

Studies (IAJS), an international association of analytic academics and clinical practitioners, as well as that of the members and friends of the International Otto Gross Society, an international interdisciplinary association dedicated to the life and work of the first analyst to link psychoanalysis and active revolutionary politics, and also that of *Das Werkblatt*, the only German-language journal for psychoanalysis and social critique (based in Austria). The editor of the newsletter of the PCSR (Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility) most generously published the text of our leaflet in full, and brief paid adverts were put into *The Jewish Chronicle*, London, and *Green Events*, ‘The Alternative Guide to London and Beyond’.

RESPONSE

To our considerable surprise, the predominant response to our call for ‘Attending to the Silence’ was – *silence*, yet again, and yet more of it. Some of the orthodox Jewish institutions refused to display our leaflet. Most noticeable, though, was and is the near total silence from the German side. In discussing the project, a German male friend recently explained: ‘For Germans the Holocaust no longer is an issue. We are looking *forward*, not backwards to the past!’ whilst noting as an aside – and almost literally in the same breath – that anti-Semitic crimes in Germany have risen by 26% in 2006 alone! He said this seemingly without any awareness whatsoever of the implicit paradoxical contradiction in his statement!

Total silence from the politically oriented interdisciplinary and psychoanalytic scholars and clinicians and colleagues – with barely a handful exceptions, all female – as well as from all firms, companies and institutions with the exception of the German Embassy, London. Initially their response was one of regret: they saw themselves

unable to support our project because it pursued 'commercial' as well as therapeutic interests, and suggested further that we turn to the Israeli Embassy and Jewish organisations. I emailed back that we were in a rather awkward position insofar as we were indeed unable to offer our group free of charge because we had no financial backing from anybody and it was, apparently, hard to get financial support because we did not offer the group for free. As to the suggestion to turn for support to the Israeli Embassy and Jewish organisations, I wrote that it reminded me of a certain previous German government that forced the Jewish community, at the time, to pay reparations caused by the so-called '*Kristallnacht*' (usually translated as 'night of broken glass', the Nazi-term for the first nationwide pogrom in Germany/Austria in November 1938) . . .

Overall, the only great exception from the resounding silence was from the IAJS. In their email discussion group the circulation of our leaflet caused a considerable stir and ignited a discussion – heated at times! – that continued for nearly a whole month. (My heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed on as well as off list!)

On the whole, there was a marked difference according to gender in the responses, with female respondents in general writing more from a perspective of positive empathy and the male voices both more intellectualizing as well as attacking. The very first response was movingly encouraging, from a Jewish American woman, writing that the project sounded absolutely fantastic and continuing to say that whenever she read of those times, her heart broke; concluding that she felt the group would be most important for those in it – and regretting that she could not be in it. (Obviously, in this context, cultural/racial affiliations – Jewish American – are important. This and the following definitions are from how the respondents identi-

fied themselves. In the following, authors anonymously quoted have been asked for and given their permission to be quoted.)

Strong criticism came from an American male Jewish academic, stating that to declare the Holocaust 'beyond comprehension' was the standard way of absolving Germans of responsibility (R. Segal, personal communication, Aberdeen, 6 November 2006.). He found comparison of the shock endured by victims with that endured by perpetrators and bystanders shameful, and thought the charging of 'a hefty fee' disgraceful. He felt it was insulting to try and bring together the kin of Jews and Germans to share their pain, and asked, 'Are you saying that if Jews and Nazis had gathered for coffee and Danish, they could have come to feel each other's pain?' (R. Segal, personal communications, Aberdeen, 11 November 2006). (I responded by saying that indeed I believed that.) He declined my invitation to join the group, writing that he did 'not plan to come to London to hold hands with the progeny of Nazis' (R. Segal, personal communications, Aberdeen, 6 November 2006).

A British woman academic appealed to the members of the discussion list to discuss 'what is most sublimely terrible in a way that cares for this present, and for our future.' A male academic identifying as half-Jewish thought it 'a bit creepy' for a German to take part in this project for payment. 'Germans [. . .] can only really validly apologise for what took place, and, yes, contribute their scientific expertise to understanding something that shouldn't be too incomprehensible to anyone' (B. Gaist, personal communication, Nicosia, Cyprus, 7 November 2006). He later clarified 'that the German input to the study of the holocaust and to the process of healing should respectively involve both the offering of German scientific expertise to understanding what falsely appears incomprehensible, and the offering of

German remorse for what took place on an emotional level' (B. Gaist, personal communication, Nicosia, Cyprus, 8 March 2007). The money issue raised considerable, often angry concern particularly focusing on my being German – the fact that my co-therapist is Jewish was overlooked in this argument. A Jewish woman spoke of the flourishing 'Holocaust industry', which, she believed, was like 'dancing on the graves of the victims'. This prompted a Jewish clinician/academic to ask 'What's the Holocaust Industry, please?' (A. Samuels, personal communication, London, 7 November 2006). It was suggested that we should work for free or just ask for donations. (Although this certainly is a problematic issue, where am I to draw the line? *Always*, history is in the consulting room. As a white northern European man, should I therefore not charge black patients? Should I not charge women patients because of millennia of male abuse? Should I, as a grown-up, treat children or should a heterosexual therapist treat members of the gay and lesbian community for free for the same reason?)

There were also frequent challenging relativizations, as in 'why the Jews? What about the Blacks, the Armenians, the genocide of the North American Indians, and those in China, Rwanda?' etc., etc., including long lists of numerical comparisons, 'USSR: Stalin's terror, 20 Million plus', Korean War . . . , Eritrea . . . , Vietnam . . . , Cambodia . . . , etc., etc., as well as analyses of the roots of anti-Semitism. A Jewish clinician/academic spoke in defence of our project by writing, 'I perceive an assumptive bias against political action and in favour of reflection' because

political action merely makes those involved feel good, or political action involves taking sides which is in itself politically shallow, [. . .] or that those who propose political action just want to take over, [. . .] or that political action crowds out

psychology (as it were). All of these points, though well taken, lack something in terms of morality and integrity. [. . .] I want to say that, without the always ready availability of political action, things in our world might be MUCH worse and those who take a supercilious, pseudo-mature, disengaged, 'academic' sceptical line need to be challenged either on their own terms (as I do here) or with more combative energy (which I am not indulging in). [. . .] This kind of 'seeing-through', this clever idealisation of rupture and lack as the default positions, is itself extremely sentimental and self-congratulatory – and cruel, as well, when used as a cool way to 'smear' [. . .] the creative work of others. (A. Samuels, personal communication, London, 9 November 2006)

Only women respondents, both Jewish and Gentile, expressed feelings of grief and shock in terms of how they continued to be affected by the aftermath of the Shoah. It was rare for a man to write that 'spirituality and politics not being separate, this kind of work touches so much on the spiritual and the future of humanity' (B. Gaist, personal communication, Nicosia, Cyprus, 10 November 2006).

THE GROUP

Only a good dozen people turned up to the opening evening, predominantly Israeli women but also one British woman, one American Jewish woman and a woman from one of the countries occupied by Germany during WWII, whose grandparents had been in the resistance. There were two Polish men and one British Jewish. It was not easy, in the discussion, to get away from the intellectualizations and historical analysing that, again, seemed to originate more strongly with the men, and to reach a deeper level of emotional engagement and affectedness.

Barely a handful of members signed up for the ongoing group – all women, mostly Israeli, one overseas Jewish woman, one German woman. Interestingly, several of the

Israeli women said that their families had not directly suffered from the Holocaust but the families of their husbands had – but the husbands had not come to the group. Were these women, as an Israeli woman suggested, ‘doing the feelings *for* their husbands’? Our professional experience with a considerable number of clients had led us to assume that our project is a burning issue and we had expected many more people to turn up in response to our proposal. Hence we were disappointed by what we felt was a poor attendance and we came close to admitting failure of our project. Where were the men, the Germans, the British Jews, the follow-up generations from the bystanding nations? A good friend and colleague commented helpfully, ‘Of course it would have been nice if you’d got a male/female-balance in the group, if you had equal proportions of descendants of victims, perpetrators and bystanders – but that is not the reality. The reality is what you’ve got. *That’s* what you have to work with!’ (J. Encke, personal communication, London, December 2006). And that is what we are doing now. We have decided to leave the group an open one until we have enough members to continue as a closed group, and we are determined to continue the group, regardless of the number of participants.

The ongoing group has barely started and at this point in time it would be premature to describe in greater length the therapeutic process that has begun very promisingly. One important theme that has emerged after the first two meetings, though, seems to be a difficulty in acknowledging the suffering of those who survived, rather than seeing their survival in an heroic light only. We have only tentatively been able to – conversely – look at how surviving the Holocaust might have had an influence on the attitude towards the Palestinians, i.e. it seems hard to see the previous generations

in the role of certain or even potential perpetrators. (Bar-On, 2004, suggests that internalized aggressions found an outlet in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He also speaks of the difficulties of seeing previous generations as potential perpetrators). This may well be one of the main reasons for the silence from the German side. I found this confirmed in several conversations outside of the group with Germans whose fathers had taken part in the German assault on the Soviet Union: none of them were able to conceive of their fathers as perpetrators of atrocities against civilians and/or Jews, but only as victims.

REFLECTION

How are we to understand the multi-faceted responses to our proposal both in terms of the email discussion and attendance? Although, of course, we are dealing with too small a number of people to make valid general statements, why the silence? What does the gender difference mean? Why did so many Israelis respond? Might our own initial impulse to give up in response to what felt like an overwhelming lack of interest be understood from a countertransference perspective? Then, in part, it would point to a continuing frozenness in reaction to the immense trauma of the Shoah – a fear of reapproaching the black hole of both the individual and the collective psyche for fear of being sucked into it, a fear, as Volkan describes, of ‘that hidden dynamic being reactivated’ (Halasz, 2006)? This would mean resigning to ‘death’s indeed *having* a dominion’ (to use the words from the title of this contribution – taken from a poem by Dylan Thomas, written in the spring of 1933, when Hitler had just come to power.) In a way, this would be akin to colluding with the dark. Two kinds of silence may clearly need to be distinguished: a nourishing meditative one, and the toxic silence Jung speaks about

(cf. the epigraph below the title) – that is a form of paralysis in which feelings need to be frozen and split off. This kind of silence is like an unattended cancer poisoning our lives. The intellectualization and the bias in favour of reflection as observed by Samuels may also be understood as efforts towards continuing repression. The outright and, at times, offensive condemnations of our project similarly seem to originate in an ongoing depression in which there is no space to hope for change or healing. Here, there is nothing but a Cold War-like continuation of the racist divisions in a repetition compulsion of the atrocious past – and present. Yet continuing to follow the talion-law of ‘an eye for eye’ would ultimately render everyone blind.

With regard to the attempted relativizations, where both Jewish as well as non-Jewish respondents have indignantly pointed to *other* genocidal catastrophes past and present in response to our project: the industrialization of mass murder, sustained over years, at times going to the extreme of even using the bodies of the victims as industrial raw material, make the Shoah a unique event in my understanding.

Why the predominance of female response and attendance of our group? Does this continue to reflect the traditional gender imbalance, where feelings – our main focus – continue to be ‘women’s stuff’, also implying that *women* are supposed to deal with them, and *not men*? Might men, because of their historical record, also more likely to be perceived as perpetrators both by others and themselves, and might that make it harder for them to join the group than for women?

Might the fact that the strongest positive responses come from Israeli women – Dr Steinberg herself, who initiated the project, being one of them – mean that there, where a whole country and its population are under threat for their existence, the shadow of the

Shoah is most painfully felt – and hence the urge greatest to try and work on a solution via relating instead of the traditionally male way of cutting off from feelings and resorting to either silence or/and violence?

CONCLUSION

I have presented a preliminary account of the attempt by an Israeli and a German psychotherapist to offer a therapy group for descendants of the Holocaust generations, defined as second-and further generations of victims, perpetrators and bystanders, the latter, in turn, defined as nationals of the former Allied Forces as well those of the Nazi-occupied countries during WWII (unless they were actively involved in resisting the occupation). Although clearly one of the sources of the split in current global East/West-relations, due to Israel’s position in this conflict and the way this nation rose mostly from the ashes of the Shoah, the engagement to deal with this legacy in a way that links the past with the present, the personal with the collective, and politics with the sacred, has – so far – exclusively attracted women, predominantly from Israel.

In the light of the poor response it would be easy to conclude that the idea for our project was wrong and that there is no need, at present, for the kind of work we envisaged. So it may well seem paradoxical but for me the echo we have had as well as a wealth of circumstantial evidence does indeed confirm that work towards a mutual understanding and respect between the different groups and generations is, after all, urgently needed, if there is to be any real hope for a restoration ‘of the years that the locust hath eaten’ (Joel 2:25) in a peace where we may all learn to ‘love our neighbours as we love ourselves’ – the tenet that stands at the very heart of all those three world religions that originated from the deserts of the Middle East.

Note: There is a dilemma with the term 'Holocaust' for the attempted genocide of the Jews by the Nazis, as biblically it refers to a burnt sacrifice of a whole animal. In this context it is thus actually highly inappropriate. Yet it is this term that is most often used, in favour of 'Shoah' which translates as 'catastrophe'. The best solution I have found for the present text is to use both terms interchangeably.

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