

Therapeutic Reactivation of Arrested Mourning: The Serendipitous Confluence of Ancient and Contemporary Traumas in a 60 year old man

A bright 15 year old boy named Sam finishes his breakfast, takes his dish to the sink, and kisses his much loved mother goodbye as he leaves for school in the morning. His timid father sits quietly on a rickety chair in the corner, dressed in overalls, ready for work in the trainyards. A boarder, taken in to help the family meet expenses, sleeps upstairs.

The boy returns home from school later that day and sees a crowd milling about outside his house. Blue lights flash atop police cars. Red lights of an ambulance join the pulsating collection. The boy's heart drops. He knows something is wrong as he runs to see what. His father walks across the lawn to greet him. "Something's happened to your mother," he says. They go inside and father tells him his mother is dead. Murdered, strangled with her own stockings.

The police ask a few questions then take the boy and his father to the police station to ask some more. Neither has any useful information. The boarder is missing. Where could he be?

People come to pay their respects. They say stupid things. "She's in a better place." "It's God's design." "Who are we to question things we do not know?" None is helpful. All is upsetting. "It's best to be alone rather than to hear all this nonsense," the boy says to himself. "I'm alone. Father's too dumpy to help me. Besides, it's over. She's dead. All the talking with people won't bring her back. She was so good to me. I'll just have to go on by myself."

Later, after the boarder is found, he admits that he and the mother had a severe

argument. She found porno magazines under his bed and scolded him unrelentingly for exposing her angel son to such horrid things. The boarder left in anger but came back later. Enraged, he attacked the mother, and strangled her with her own stockings.

The boy, suddenly bereft of his wise and loving mother, develops an enduring sense that nothing matters. "It's over. Why cry over spilled milk? That won't bring her back. There's nothing I can do about it now. She's just gone." He can barely cry – over anything – for the rest of his life. And so he soldiers into what became the rest of his life, a life marked by loneliness, hard work, and quiet rage. A good student, the boy worked hard in school, impressed his teachers, and did well.

Sam's father continues his life of passivity and pessimism. Money is hard to come by. They live frugally. The boy yearns for life's simple delights, like an ice cream cone. Something to bring a bit of light into the darkness of his soul, but father says they have no money to buy one. The boy's silent rage deepens and as he places the blame for mother's death at his father's feet. "If he had earned enough money we would not have needed the money that from the boarder." Rather than live the sadness wrought by mother's tragic death, the boy focuses upon his woeful father and feels even more alone as he witnesses his dower nature.

Sam feels alone in the world. There's no one to help him. There are no coaches to befriend. There are no neighbors. The boy is alone except for his older sister who did come to be with him but then had to return to her own family. His hard work though brings him great reward. He becomes a star in high school and then in the business world as a man. Everyone likes him.

Sam rises quickly in the executive ranks of a large multi-national corporation. Yet, despite his great ability, Sam feels in constant danger of being fired. For him, he's always one step away from a pink slip. He eventually comes for treatment complaining that he lives his life in a prison of his own making. He is terrified of his bosses. He perpetually fears their scolding attitude, defensively anticipates their every need, and in so doing becomes their perfect assistant. He functions in their shadows, writes their speeches, hides his own ambition, and takes no credit for himself. Sam feels his life has been wasted since he lives in constant fear.

Time does not allow me to present evidence of our reconstruction which suggests Sam's fear of bosses is a transference memory of his sainted but actually demanding and bitterly disappointed mother. For example, Sam recalls that as a boy he anticipated his mother's wishes and vacuumed the house before she returned home so that she would be happy and not scold him.

Sam was 60 when he sought help for his life-long suffering. I'll present 5 sessions from Sam's analysis. We'll see both the impact his early mother loss had upon his personality as well as a mourning process that emerged during treatment. There is one special, probably never to be repeated, element in our work. Shortly after Sam began to mourn, our country suffered the catastrophe of September 11 which gives us the unique opportunity to witness how a newly engaged mourning process is serendipitously aided by massive communal trauma. The first two sessions I present occur the week before that attack and reveal the mourning process as it emerges of its own accord within the three session per week analysis. The next two sessions are from the two days immediately after the attack and show the how the psychologically ancient and

contemporary traumas facilitate and enhance each other. The last session is two weeks later and contains a dream that demonstrates Sam's newly developed capacity to experience and understand his loss.

SESSIONS

9/5/01

Sam: I think I have a sense of what it means to be frozen inside. I was 16 when my mother was killed. I've been locked into the emotional responses of a 16 year old. Why was I frozen? I create the structures of then with every person and thing in my life now. Parents who could have helped me were gone. So I create my own structure. I impose my assumptions on everything, like I do with you. "I'll be good. I won't be trouble. I won't ask for things. You'll know me by my good work." Why does it get frozen?

Allen: That's a good question.
I don't have a real answer. I do know that children can't mourn by themselves. They need help to do so.

Sam: Why did I shut everybody out? She was all I had.
(Sounding very sad, on the verge of tears)
It shouldn't have happened.

Allen: I think you have uncried tears about it.

Sam: It shouldn't have happened. It's not right. It wasn't right. (Quietly cries).

Allen: Share it with me.

Sam: I didn't want her to die. She was my mother. She was good. Hard, but good. I wasn't old enough to care for myself. I thought I was but I wasn't. I miss her.

Allen: Let yourself miss her.

Sam: (Cries)

It was a terrible way to die. Choke to death. She always took care of me. I couldn't take care of myself. She made sure everything was OK.

(Cries quietly and for a while).

Allen: This is what you couldn't do as a boy. My guess is this is why things got frozen. It was too much to handle by yourself.

Sam: She was a good mother. She took care of me.

9/6/01

Sam: I felt quite good the last 36 hours. Why is that? I think it was the purging effect of crying about my mother. It was positive. I think I cried when she died but I'm not sure. I know I didn't when I first walked into the house and my father told me. I didn't cry in the police car or at the station. I didn't cry at the funeral. Maybe I cried a little at the cemetery. There was such finality to it.

I remember picking out the casket. I was angry with my father. I thought, "This is stupid. What are we doing here?" Some idiot was pointing out feature of the caskets. Silk, brass. It was stupid. I was angry because my father couldn't decide and had to ask me. "What do you think?" I was angry because he was going for the cheaper one. He couldn't say "I want the best in the house." Instead, he said, "Why spend money? It only goes in the ground."

I didn't cry at the trial. Yet, somewhere I did. I had to. It was impossible not to. The open casket. There were scars on her neck. They covered them with her dress.

People didn't know what to say. "She looks so real." They did a nice job." All that was so stupid. She was dead. "It's God's plan." "We don't understand." I doubt that. I was mostly stoic. I wanted everybody to go away and stop comforting me. They didn't get it.

Allen: It wasn't possible to comfort you.

Sam: Why?

Allen: Because there is no comfort for that. There's only sadness. The only comfort is to be allowed to be sad.

Sam: No one wanted me to be sad. They wanted me to understand it was part of a plan. Or they said, I'd get over it. It made sense to me. I thought I had to grow up. Be tough. Put it behind me. Take care of me. She did take care of me. She was hard – no – she had hard standards. Expectations. She kept me under control but it was mixed with a very human sense of humor. It

was a human relationship. There was lots of baggage with her but also lots of great things. There probably was too much control. I was too fearful.

(Cries)

A mother and a son. It mattered to me a lot.

(Cries)

I'm sad she died. Sad seems like an inappropriate word. You're sad if your kitty dies. It's not strong enough.

9/12/01 (The day after the attack)

Sam: Yesterday I went home from work at 10:00AM and fell asleep for 2 hours. Either I needed the sleep or I was escaping from the horror of it all. I awoke early this morning, trying to imagine the terror of being in that building. The plane ripping through it. Awful. I had a headache all day yesterday. – It hasn't sunk in for everyone yet. Imagine what NYC is like. The personally touched. Thousands of people. It's very sad.

I was working out yesterday, watching TV. There was the picture of the first tower on fire. Then we see the plane hit the second tower. It was like a bad movie. I can't relate to it. Just a dull reaction. It's too tragic to grasp. It's so abstract. It's not just a single person one can connect to. It's a building and a plane. There's no human element to it. It makes me teary.

Allen: What's the feeling that comes with your tears?

Sam: Sad. Sad. Sad. Sad for the families, sad for the people. You know, because I'm here, with you, I wonder at this moment about whether there's a connection with my mother.

Allen: Yes, I found myself wondering whether the experience of watching the news and learning of the destruction is reminiscent, in any way, of what it was like for you when you came home to learn the shocking news about the destruction in your life.

(I felt my own pressing need to talk about the tragedy and had to make a concerted effort to keep my focus on the issues of mourning I thought the attack would catalyze in Sam).

Sam: Yes, I couldn't relate to that either. Police cars. People standing around. A policemen in the living room. My father meeting me, "Your mother has been killed. She's in the bedroom. You can't go in there."

That's personal and close. All this in New York is abstract. No matter how many are dead it will be fewer than traffic deaths each year.

(Sam's affect flattened and he began to feel distant to me. I wanted to keep him attached to the vitality of his mobilized sadness so I said:)

Allen: The impersonal nature of the attack feels abstract – but when you learned of your mother's death that felt abstract too. Even the death of 1 person – when she's your whole world, your single tower, – is too much to get your mind around.

Sam: Yes, that's true. I knew she was gone.

Allen: It was too much to feel when she died. Just like yesterday was too much to feel so you went to sleep.

Sam: I was a scared to death kid before she died and since she died I've refused to see her death as significant in my life. I keep remembering, I was unhappy, and frightened before she died. I was a shy kid, like my daughter. I've refused to think that my inability to feel her death is all that important.

Allen: That's a way of going to sleep.

Sam: I'm used to thinking "I was the way I was before my mother died." You know, I was afraid of getting in trouble, and then she died and I just continued to be the way I was. I treat her death as though it didn't really matter, as though it didn't impact me.

Allen: It's scary to know what it feels like to lose her. It's like that tower coming down – collapsing on itself. She was your tower. It's impossible to think it could happen --- in a second. It's just too much for a 16 year old boy to feel by himself, without anyone to help him.

Sam: It was unthinkable. It made the newspaper headlines. Thinkable things don't make the headlines. I tried to carry on as though it didn't happen. That's what you do.

Allen: Why?

Sam: Because you can't do anything about it. Can't change it. Can't go back.

Allen: When you say "Can't change it" I think you are telling me how horribly helpless it makes you feel. That's enough to give you a headache, or

make you want to go to sleep, or make you frozen for many years.

Sam: (Holds his head in both hands and quietly cries).

I can't change it.

Allen: (Speaking softly:)

That's true. You can't change it, but you can feel it.

(Anticipating Sam's question I said)

"Why's that important? Because so much effort goes into being frozen. It's exhausting.

9/13/01

Sam: I awoke this morning, went into the bathroom and just started sobbing. I couldn't stop crying. I've been teary all day.

(Quiet and drained)

It's triggered by what happened Tuesday but I suspect it's something else. I don't know anybody who died Tuesday. I read an article today about coping with the stress of what happened. They interviewed psychologists, grief counselors. They said that the trauma of a catastrophe like that is much more severe than a hurricane, a flood, or other understandable natural event. Nature is sad, but this is different. It's incomprehensible. Premeditated violence. It's more severe. I guess that's why – someone came and did that to me.

(Cries)

It came out of nowhere and killed somebody I knew. Evil.

I keep seeing that plane go into the building.

I didn't see my mother get killed. ---

I couldn't stop crying. Is it just the death? No – it's the violent, evil, painful death.
Terrorism.

She was terrified. It must have been like being caught on the top floor for her.
Terrified.

(Sam sighs from the depths of himself, a sigh I never heard from him before)

I can't imagine the terror of being choked to death.

Imagine what it must have been like to be in that building. You would wish you
were on the floor that got hit.

What did he say to her? "I'm going to kill you?" Did he chase her? Hit her?
Scream at her? Awful. I never thought about what he did. I just thought about
"She's gone."

(Cries)

What does it matter?

Was she terrified?

(Sobbing)

It's too hard to imagine. "I'm going to kill you!" Did she scream?

It's just like that plane going into the building. She was there and then she
wasn't. Somebody did a terrible thing. I can't understand it. I can't figure it out.
It just doesn't make sense. It's a different thing if someone has a heart attack –
or even an accident but someone purposely killed her. It doesn't make sense.
Over what? A word?

9/25/01

Sam: I had a terrible dream last night. It was about my son being killed by traffic on the road along the lake. He was on his bike. I was waiting to hear about him and when they told me I was devastated. I began crying but I had no tears. Others had known, I didn't. It felt awful. I don't usually recall my dreams. This one was so vivid. I woke up exhausted. It was so real. I experienced the death, the sadness of his death. So sad. What do we make of this?

Allen: Do you have any thoughts about the dream?

Sam: Yes, it's my way of coping with Sept 11. I know I'm troubled by it. It continues to haunt me. My lingering sadness seems different from other people's sadness. It's hard to relate the enormity of the event to the mundane aspects of my life. Why my son? I don't know. Why'd people keep it from me? I was sobbing quietly, crying almost without tears.

Of course, this is about the sudden terror attack on my mother. An innocent caught in a bizarre random act by a guy who got pissed. Whoosh. Gone. Life is normal one second and then life is tragically cut off.

I assume our dreams are a way to help us deal with that part of our emotional inner life that's not readily manifest. It seems to be a way to work through things in a safer place.

Allen: That's exactly right. Before Sept 11 your experience of your mother's death began to open. The trauma of 9/11 opened the door wider. You've begun to live through the sudden loss of your mother, allowing yourself to drink – as it were- at the well of your uncried tears.

Sam: Yes, I can see that my tears have more to do with my mother than with 9/11.

(In jest)

Do you think not talking of this for 50 years is a form of denial?

Allen: We could write a paper.

Sam: Well, it won't bring her back.

Allen: That's how you protect yourself,

Sam: It's true. It won't.

Allen: It's not entirely true.

Sam: Hmm.

(Reflecting):

She's buried in a small town of 250 people, where she grew up. She's in a rural cemetery. There's a simple headstone. My father is buried there too. (Quiet)
After she died my grandmother and her sister lived on a farm there. When I'd go to visit twice a year my Grandmother would ask if I'd like to go to the cemetery. I always went. My Grandmother would cry. I'd just stand there. It's a long time since I've been there. My grandmother is dead, her sister is dead, the farm has been sold. Nothing is left. It's 200 miles from here. The last time I was there was 20 years ago when I was on my way to somewhere else.

It doesn't bring her back --- well, maybe it does.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND DISCUSSION

Sam presents us with many psychoanalytic questions that have implications for treatment. For example, how do we understand Sam's boyhood experience of deadness? What is the psychoanalytic understanding of parent loss in childhood? Does it differ from the experience of loss for an adult? Can children mourn? If they can, how do we understand their process? Further, how do we understand the lifelong feeling of deadened aloneness Sam carried forward into his adult life? Finally, can new theories add anything to our study of mourning in childhood and to mourning in general? In response to these questions I will briefly review the literature about mourning in general, and early parent loss in particular, as well as add my own thoughts about working with people who experience difficulty in their mourning.

In *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) Freud describes mourning as a: "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, and inhibition of all activity...This inhibition and circumspection of the ego is the expression of an exclusive devotion to mourning which leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests." Freud asks, "In what, now, does the work which mourning performs consist? I do not think there is anything far-fetched in presenting it in the following way. Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that **all libido** shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition...Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless, its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out **bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy**... It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is

taken as a matter of course by us. The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.”

Joan Fleming and Sol Altshul (1963), both former Deans of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis studied parent loss in childhood. Their work suggests that a child who loses a parent prematurely will suffer in its emotional development. They assert that a child becomes emotionally arrested at the phase in which it was engaged when they lost their parent. Fleming and Altshul suggest that the arrest grows out of the child's disavowal of the reality of his or her loss. The child then represses the powerful affects of loss which, in turn, interferes with the full experience of grief. In this way, the mourning process is aborted and can advance, incomplete, into adulthood. Fleming and Altshul find that the disavowal of loss and grief can be undone in the process of a psychoanalytic treatment. The affects can be freed from the bonds of repression, mourning can be reactivated, and the developmental derailment can return to its normal track.

Michael Basch (1983), also of Chicago, studied the mechanism of disavowal, first described by Freud (1927) in his paper on fetishism and later described by Kohut (1971) as a vertical split in the ego that disconnects intellectual knowing from emotional knowing. According to Basch disavowal is not an unconscious process; it is a process of not conceiving that which is perceived. Through the mechanism of disavowal it is possible to pretend and then to believe the pretense. Disavowal makes it possible to not know something that another part of one's self does know. Disavowal is employed to fend off disturbing elements of the external world that one prefers did not exist such as troubling events, implications of those troubling events, illnesses, threats to job, health, love, etc. Frequently, disavowal is employed to fend off difficult affects related to the external world.

Denial, on the other hand, is an unconscious process. Theoretically it “occurs” below the repression barrier. It is employed to obliterate the awareness of deeply unconscious issues such as forbidden oedipal wishes and affects or humiliating and shameful selfobject wishes and needs (Kohut 1971). Because that which is unconscious, and denied, is never known directly it can only be known by inference.

Altshul (1968) suggests that the technical task in working with adults who lost a parent in childhood is to heal the vertical split. This enables access to the previously disavowed affects that now can be lived through as they gradually come into awareness. The emotional energy previously consumed in the effort to keep the traumatic affects at bay diminishes and becomes available to the personality for growth and development.

For many years it was generally felt that children could not mourn. They were thought to have defended themselves against the powerful affects associated with their loss and lived a deadened life, forever searching for the lost parent. Mort and Estelle Shane ((1990) acknowledge that the loss of parent in childhood is unquestionably a traumatic experience. They suggest, however, that such a loss is complicated and is not simply the loss of an object. From their self psychological perspective the Shanes see that the child does not exist on its own. Instead, the child is living in a complex, interactive milieu with caretakers who, ideally, provide essential psychological functions for the child that the child cannot provide for herself. When a child loses a parent she also suffers the loss of the essential psychological functions that parent performed for her. These essential psychological functions include, but are not limited to, tension and affect regulation, a sense of emotional and environmental predictability, a sense

of safety and security, and a capacity to sooth and calm the child.

The Shanes assert that the ability of a child to mourn is directly related to the capacity of the remaining adults to help the child “metabolize” her affects regarding the loss. When emotionally available adults are present to help the child experience these affects, she will be able to mourn. When absent, the she is likely to suffer an abnormal mourning process.

While Freud asserts that mourning consists of the bit by bit de-cathexis of the object, I suggest that therapeutic work with people who suffer from aborted mourning involves an initial phase in which the lost object is re-cathected. Because one cannot mourn what isn't there, this type of preparatory work is essential before aborted mourning can be reactivated. Re-engagement of feelings about the lost person, especially feelings of love for that person, is necessary.

In my work with Sam I encouraged him to recall his affects for his mother. I supported his efforts in this direction and interfered with his movement away. The product of this work was his recall of both his love for her as well as his ambivalence about her, especially in relation to her controlling, demanding ways.

Children cannot do this work without the aid of an attuned adult. The power and intensity of the affects threaten to overwhelm the self and are, therefore, frightening. To protect himself, the child creates a split in which affect is separated from fact and that split is carried into adulthood.

I find that much of the therapeutic work with people who can not mourn, either a childhood loss or even a current loss, involves a disavowal of the frightening

affects. In the therapeutic work, these affects become increasingly tolerable as the split heals and the affects are slowly and gently presented to the self. I have noticed that when people are able to engage the full range of affects associated with their loss they, nevertheless, feel whole even though they are remarkably sad.

I suggest that, when healed, the psychic energy involved in the formation of the split, which is designed to protect the self from the flood of powerful affect, becomes available to strengthen a previously threatened and shaky self. This notion differs from Freud's suggestion that it is the bit by bit decathexis of the lost object that makes energy available for reinvestment in the ego and in the world

We tend to create a special category for children who lose parents and treat them as though they represent a unique situation. Actually, I believe children of early parent loss present us with a general model for our therapeutic work. Their inability to manage powerful, scary affect and their defensive creation of a split-off sector of their personality is similar to the way many children attempt to manage their affective lives. Childhood disavowal of painful affect or reality develops as a major protective maneuver for those who lack attuned caretakers in their childhood milieu. Attuned caretakers might otherwise have aided them in the management of the whole gamut of powerful affective experience. The ability to function in the face of powerful affect is a central psychological task, not limited to children of parent loss, that so often is compromised and in need of repair through psychoanalytic treatment.

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