On A Clear Day. . . You Can See Ghosts

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On a beautiful, pre-autumnal day in late September I attended a workshop in New York City entitled, “Ghosts in the Consulting Room,” presented by Adrienne Harris, PhD. Dr. Harris began by wondering aloud to the several dozen gathered psychotherapists, “Why aren’t you all playing in Central Park?” Recalling my husband’s quizzical look when I told him the workshop title, I indeed wondered, “What possessed me to come?”

Interestingly, “possessed” is a word used to refer to that part of oneself reacting unconsciously to past traumatic experience. “I don’t know what possessed me . . .” or, “I don’t know what the devil got into me . . .” or, “That was not me!” are all expressions

we've heard or used ourselves. They are often associated with blocked access to unmetabolized mourning or shame. Dr. Harris' workshop focused on the "uncanny" and "haunted" moments of impasse and enactment in the therapy that are disorderly, ethereal and difficult to make sense of. These uncanny moments in the therapy are akin to standing at the border of the known and the unknown. The workshop also explored the baffling and enigmatic elements that haunt the transference and countertransference.

Neither the patient nor the therapist can escape the ghosts each brings to the treatment. Ghosts transgress time, distance and rationality. They are passed intergenerationally, from parent to child, and may be historically significant, as for example, the psychological effects of war and genocide. I will attempt to share some of what I learned at the workshop and subsequent reading.

Freud had an interest in occultism and maintained an extended correspondence with Ferenczi and Jung about it. He even joked about ghosts in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious:* A man supremely confident in his rationality was asked, "Do you believe in ghosts?" The man replies, "Not only do I disbelieve in ghosts, I am not even frightened by them!" The zeitgeist of post-World War I European society preferred to deny the extraordinary and instead exalt respectability. As a result, Freud more or less abandoned his pursuit of the occult.

Psychoanalytic ghosts travel through generations by internalization and most tenaciously through the parent-child relationship. Selma Fraiberg, author of *Ghosts in the Nursery: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Problems of Impaired Infant-Mother*

Relationships, argues that ghosts in the nursery are the uninvited guests from the past experiences of the parents. These intruders bully their way into the present parent-child relationship by means of unresolved parental feelings, such as shame, envy and guilt, and by traumatic memories. They leave the parent feeling re-traumatized in the parenting role, who then passes this trauma onto the child.

Sometimes the trauma is of a “missing” parent whose emotional absence leaves a black hole of despair. I am reminded of a patient who poignantly described her connection to her mother as, “She was there, but not really.” My patient’s internal organization was haunted by this absentee connection. She was unable to know her own self without first having another – her therapist - experience the feeling and meaning of the deadness.

The goal of therapy is not exorcism but, instead, an invitation to the ghost. “Why are you here? What do you want?” This difficult therapeutic task involves hospitality not only to the patient’s ghost but also to those of the therapist. The therapist thus in effect is conducting a sort of group therapy among the patient, the therapist and their respective ghosts. Hopefully, this work leads the patient and therapist to a new matrix, what Thomas Ogden refers to as “the third.”

In literature and movies, ghosts are depicted as purgatorial phantoms outside of the person, who arrive unexpectedly to pursue unfinished emotional business related to rage, love, shame, revenge, or another unresolved emotional conflict. Ghosts portrayed in the arts can walk through walls, are heard without being seen, can be felt without being present and even can inhabit another’s body.

For example, in the popular movie, “Ghost,” Whoopi Goldberg stars as Oda Mae Brown, a quack psychic, and Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore portray Sam and Molly, a young unmarried couple setting up their New York City loft. While walking home with Molly one evening, Sam is murdered in a mugging gone too far. It is later revealed that his competitive business “buddy” set it up. Sam’s ghost returns by inhabiting the body of Oda Mae to see that the truth of his murder is revealed and justice is done, and to tell Molly explicitly that he loves her, as he was unable to do while alive.

This past summer I visited Kronborg Castle in Denmark, immortalized in *Hamlet* as Elsinore Castle. Ghosts during the Renaissance were restless spirits roaming between the lands of the living and the dead, unable to rest in peace because of improper burial or some unpunished misdeed. In the play, the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the late King Hamlet, returns to enlist Hamlet in avenging his murder by his brother. Hamlet is torn by his own sense of morality vs. his love for and allegiance to his father, which is further complicated by the marriage between his uncle and mother and by the fact that his uncle usurped the throne that was rightly his.

In his paper, *A Brief History of Ghosts: Commentary on Paper by Laurel Moldawsky Silber,* Gary Schlesinger, PhD, makes the case that Hamlet is locked in his father’s unresolved trauma and wish for revenge, which the father has imposed on his son. Had Hamlet consulted a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, the job of the therapist would have been to uncover the forces of the ghost driving Hamlet’s indecision and to help him integrate his feelings so that he could consciously decide upon a course of action that felt right to him.

I was fortunate also to have been in Norway this summer during the 150th Year Retrospective of Edvard Munch at the Munch Museum and National Museum in Oslo. No painting depicts inner trauma more acutely than “The Scream.” The ghost-likeness in the painting is a self-portrait of Munch’s emotional state while on a walk in south Oslo. Munch wrote, “. . . I stood there trembling with anxiety - and I sensed an endless scream passing through nature.” From early childhood, Munch’s life was organized around sickness and death. As he said, “Without illness and anxiety, I would have been a rudderless ship.” This began with his mother’s death from tuberculosis when he was five and was compounded by his older sister’s death, also of tuberculosis, when he was thirteen. His father gradually became unemotionally unavailable during this period and suffered from agitated periodic depression. Throughout Munch’s life there were frequent failed attempts at attachment ending always in separation. Later in life, Munch’s paintings served as substitutes for his treasured past relationships and in effect as transitional objects between his lost loves and his reclusive reality.

Dr. Harris also addressed psychological ghosts born of societal atrocities. In this context, she recommended Samuel Gerson’s award-winning paper, *“When The Third Is Dead: Memory, Mourning and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust.”* Reading Gerson took me to a heartfelt space of what it must feel like when, as in genocide, no one is there to contain the other and to help integrate one’s sense of self.

Much has been written about the psychological ghosts of holocaust camp survivors. Until recently, however, virtually no mention was made of the Danish Jewish children whose parents left them in Denmark while they were ferried at night across the Oresund Sound to Sweden, to wait out the war. In 2009, a Danish historian, Lene Bak,

appealed to hidden children to come forward. Many did and disclosed the taboo about asking their parents what had happened, why they had been left behind and how their parents could have done this. In her book, *Nothing to Speak Of, Wartime Experiences of the Danish Jews 1943-1945,* Bak makes an important distinction between how society may collectively remember an event (i.e. the "collective memory") and the actual memories of the individuals involved. Many parents were unable to discuss these events with their children because of the guilt they felt in leaving them and the hardships they faced upon returning to Denmark. To many, speaking of their experiences would have seemed ungrateful since so many others had been killed.

Sylvie was eleven when she hugged her parents and sister good-bye at the Berlin railway station and began the first leg of a journey bound for England. As part of the Kindertransport, a rescue mission for European Jewish children, she would become a foster child with an English family. Miraculously, in 1945, Sylvie was reunited with her family in Brooklyn. Sylvie's childhood experience left her with an inner moral resolve to champion social justice and help those less fortunate. Her internal world was organized around the belief that her life was spared in order to make a difference in the lives of others.

Sylvie fell in love and married a survivor from Poland who had lost his entire family during the war. Martin became prone to manic–depressive episodes and was at times hospitalized. An atheist, he nonetheless railed against God and the Nazi murderers, often wearing himself to exhaustion. Notwithstanding, Sylvie remained grounded in her devotion to him.

Their only child, Adam, a highly regarded academician and writer, spent many years struggling with his parental legacies, alternating between devoted caretaker and at times dependency and depression. He has said, “It took me a very long time to get over the subtle message that you have no right to be happy when everyone else died.”

In conclusion, ghosts are not excisable. We must give them a place at our table and help our patients invite them to theirs. Not to do so fosters the continuation of intergenerational trauma. As Bak writes in her book, “Every one of the hidden children thought that they were the only child that was left behind. They never told their stories and nobody asked.” (Berger).

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