Wade in the Water: Transference Actualization and the Ethics of Memory—Discussion of Bartlett’s “Time-Soaked”

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Wade in the Water: Transference Actualization and the Ethics of Memory—Discussion of Bartlett’s “Time-Soaked”

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In this discussion of Bob Bartlett’s compelling paper “Time-Soaked,” I shift attention away from the vivid account of the interpersonal dynamics between Bartlett and his patient to describe the perspectives offered by theories of social memory and transgenerational haunting. I attempt to speak for and convey the voices and vulnerabilities of previous generations that I argue—if heard within the analytic dyad—can further inform and deepen the therapeutic endeavors undertaken by Bartlett and his patient.

Bob Bartlett opens the discussion of his work with his deeply troubled and troubling patient, Adam, with the question “What Waters Are These?” He fills his opening paragraphs with compelling allusions to the force of water: enlivening, drowning, murky, translucent, engulfing, soaking, saturating, submerging. Early in treatment, Adam invites his analyst into these turbulent waters with a dream of being submerged in water, perhaps drowning, perhaps not, and memory of his near drowning at age four—rescued by his brother and apparently ignored by his mother. Bartlett invites the reader to enter these waters with him. “Time-Soaked” vividly maps the grievous and confusing collapse of time in the face of intergenerational trauma.

“What Wade in the Water” is a spiritual born through the struggles, despair, and faith of the American slaves (Jones, 2005). It served as a coded message to runaway slaves to walk in the streams, the waters troubling for the dogs of slave owners searching for runaways, where they would lose the scents of those they were seeking to recapture. It was also a prayer for redemption and a claim to God’s coming to trouble the waters of the Jordan River for the salvation of souls by the Holy Ghost. This song came immediately to mind as I began reading Bartlett’s paper the first time. “Time-Soaked” can be read as a clinical case study of the consequences of intergenerational trauma, on one hand, or on the other, as a “ghost story,” as a complex tale of the struggle between condemnation and redemption. A language of condemnation and redemption may be out of the ordinary in traditional psychoanalytic discourse but echo the violent internal discourse that rages within Adam and explodes between Adam and his
analyst. I wonder whether Adam’s parents or grandparents ever found redemption from all that they held in secrecy and silence.

In a discussion of the enlivening and deadening forces contained in transference relations, Gerson (2003) described the “haunting presence of ghosts” that can “never be banished” (p. 6) but rather are “infused with the unmetabolized traumas of those who brought them into life” (p. 7). In his afterword to Ghosts in the Consulting Room, Gerson (2016) asked us to consider both what the ghost wants from us and what we want from the ghosts. The ghosts to whom Gerson and the authors in these two volumes refer are by no means always “holy,” but still Gerson (2017) observed, “The ghosts that haunt also carry promise as they evoke both destruction and survival—they signal the impoverishments of traumatic loss as well as the sustenance of re-creation” (p. 200). These ghosts of previous generations haunt, but given space and voice in our therapeutic relations, they can also inform and transform.

Bartlett’s discussion of his work with Adam and their gradual (and I gather still ongoing) work to address the intrapsychic and interpersonal implications of three generations of trauma and secrets is focused primarily on their working dyad. But Bartlett (this issue) observes,

> What Adam identified with, or incorporated, was an unresponsive object at an object relational level but also at a socio-historical level. … We are anchored in the past, and may not be free to chart fundamentally new waters. The tenacity of hate and destructiveness is a formidable legacy, in treatments and sometimes across generations. (pp. 252–253)

This is the perspective that I seek to unpack and elaborate as my contribution to the discussion of “Time-Soaked,” and in so doing call into question what I see as an overemphasis on the dyadic dynamics over the course of Adam’s treatment.

**SOCIAL MEMORY/SOCIAL FORGETTING**

In a recent paper, also saturated with three haunted generations, Guralnik (2014) argued that “events of history become appropriated in communities of memory” through which we come to narrate histories and collective stories that “interpellate us as individuals” (p. 129, italics in original). Communities of memory are communities of selective memory, of dissociation, disavowal, and forgetting, imbedded within the collective remembering. In her account of the analysis with Nyx, Guralnik speaks of redemption that requires “grief, guilt and mourning … breaking the seal on collective mourning, [as] the task of our generation” (p. 138). She then asks, “HOW? How does an individual process collective grief? How do an individual patient and analyst find a language for events that wipe out collective history in their horror?” (p. 138). I would add an additional question as to how the analytic dyad opens the space for witnessing the collective griefs and grievances of previous generations.

In the study of social memory, anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989) observed, “It is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory” (p. 3). His account has keen relevance for the therapeutic work done with individuals, families, and groups—especially in countries and cultures that have been ripped asunder through war, ethnic and political violence, or totalitarian states. Of the various forms of forgetting he described, two have particular relevance to the issues I want to address here: “repressive erasure” (Connerton, 2008, p. 60) and “humiliated silence” (2008, p. 67). Although Connerton was writing primarily in the context of totalitarian regimes and their efforts to
rewrite and control history, repressive erasure is also characteristic of communal reactions during periods of profound societal violence and failure. It represents a collective turning of the back in a determined effort to eliminate any evidence and reference to that which the social structure cannot bear. These erasures form a coerced social amnesia.

Connerton described forgetting as humiliated silence as a product of societies that have endured politically motivated repressive erasures enforced by the state and examines the more personal impact on the individual psyche. The impact of such collective silence that can permeate an entire generation, bound together in powerlessness and shame.

Lifton’s (1979, 1986) work has examined societal violence and trauma within a multiplicity of historical contexts but, although often referenced, has seemed to have had little influence on analytic practice and technique. In a recent interview (Goren & Alpert, 2017), Lifton confronted the historic tendency of psychoanalysis to “fall into some of the problems of other intense institutional structures that came from religion or other aspects of society” (p. 177). Writing in the context of sexual boundary violations in psychoanalysis, Dimen (2016) addressed a collective silence that she argued has all too often been indulged within psychoanalysis, which she observed, “like any other social unit, has a structure, history, rules, and beliefs” (p. 361). She called into question “the conventional psychoanalytic view that ascribes suffering only to interior processes” and challenged “the way psychoanalysis tends to erase the cultural roots of individual difficulty” (p. 362). Bohleber (2010) brought a critical assessment of psychoanalysis as a field to its failure to recognize and work effectively with trauma: “For a long time, trauma and its consequences, political and social violence, was not accorded that it should have been in psychoanalysis. … Clinical theory in psychoanalysis increasingly focused on the here and now of the transference–countertransference relationship” (pp. 75–76).

Psychoanalysts and psychotherapists are coming to recognize the profound, though so often unspoken, psychic consequences of poverty, racism, war, hatred, genocide, and political violence that live on from one generation within the next (Alpert & Goren, 2017; Apprey, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2014; Aron & Starr, 2013; Bohleber, 2010; Caruth, 2014; Fromm, 2012; Guralnik, 2014; Harris, Kalb, & Klebanoff, 2016, 2017; Salberg, 2015). Salberg (2015) suggested that the emergent literature may represent “the transgenerational turn—as a kind of paradigm shift” (p. 25).

TRANSGENERATIONAL HAUNTING

What does it mean to work with clients in whose families the previous generations have acted as though their tragic histories do not exist or have no meaning of significance? How do we construct a sense of individual or social authenticity in the face of such erasures of memory and meaning? Deaconu (2016) described “the dirty job of staying alive” (p. 304) when faced with the depth of a young client’s emptiness and profound lack of curiosity about her internal life. Deaconu often felt as though she were holding her client hostage, controlling and intruding upon her. In Deaconu’s efforts to grasp the meaning of this lack (almost threat) of curiosity and of her own countertransference, she came to recognize “a particular fact of collective [Romanian] history” (p. 306): that of the 25-year period of Communist Romania in which the state controlled childbirth and abortion so that “generally women were forced to give birth” (p. 306), often in the face of extreme poverty and horrid life circumstances. The result for many Romanian women, and very likely her client’s mother, as Deaconu came to understand it, was that
mothers-to-be would often significantly sever their capacity for concern and thinking about their baby. ... The fundamental pleasure and curiosity involved in a mother discovering her baby’s world and letting herself (her body) be known by the baby would have been deadened. (p. 306)

In her making space and establishing a relationship to this fact of history embedded in the bodies of many Romanian mothers, Deaconu brought a different meaning to client’s intrapsychic struggles and the pressures she felt in her countertransference. For Deaconu’s client there was to be no place for an interior life, and the “dirty job” of coming to and staying alive was profoundly threatening. We witness a similar level of threat repeated whenever Bartlett’s work with Adam threatened his “idealized persona of being a hardened, angry man” (p. 247), such that “together we named Adam’s derisive tendency instantly to transform closeness into distance ‘the assassin’” (p. 250). Adam fills innumerable hours with his unmanageable and inconsolable furies, thereby obscuring his unbearable vulnerabilities.

The writings of Apprey (1999, 2003, 2006) are filled with images and tales of familial and cultural phantoms. He has written extensively about transgenerational haunting, which he defined as “the transfer of destructive aggression from one generation to the next” (Apprey, 1999, p. 134). Apprey (1999) argued,

In short, one may house in one generation the phantom of another generation. With treatment, a third generation may transform the amovable into a symbolic structure of behavior where there are choices, flexible modes of situating oneself in the world and multiple ways of overturning the received “poison” of history, as it were (p. 139)

As I read Bartlett’s account of this often harrowing therapy with Adam, I was “visited” by memories of a patient of my own and a treatment that nearly drowned. Unlike the explosive rages that dominated and threatened the analysis with Adam, my work with my patient was more like a slow, unyielding death spiral. Hers was a rage that was cold—witheringly, contemptuously cold. There was a relentless, psychotic quality to her rage. In desperation, I, like Bartlett, sought supervision; I turned to Apprey. With his characteristic directness, Apprey told me (I am paraphrasing here from my notes at the time):

You are acting as though there are only two people in the room, you and your patient. Her voice, her attacks, her despair are not hers alone. She speaks for others. Others are speaking through her. You must listen to the others—perhaps her mother, her father, grandparents, all—who have been overwhelmed by death and despair. They are threatened by the work you are doing. They wish to protect your patient from the despair that nearly destroyed them. There are others, besides your patient, who do not like the work you are doing. They have not been considered. They will not cooperate unless they have been heard. Until their voices are heard, treatment will remain at an impasse.

This, I would suggest, speaks to a crucial aspect of the therapeutic tasks faced by Bartlett and his patient. There were life experiences, life choices, and survival necessities of Adam’s predecessors that were unbearable and had to be hidden away. Yet, I would argue, they demand to be known and to finally become bearable. These are not simply acts of intergenerational cruelty. This sealing off of trauma by one generation is consciously deemed to protect their children. Nevertheless, these tragedies remain alive in the familial unconscious, like desperate shards cutting into the psyches of those that follow. These shards create unconscious pressures for recognition, mourning, and reparation, even after decades of being disavowed and sealed away.

Bartlett’s paper, to my mind, underscores a limit of the relational perspective with its intense focus on the intersubjective dynamics of the analytic dyad. There were three silenced and
haunted generations in treatment with Bartlett, simultaneously and by no means cooperatively. How, I wondered, could the hate, terror, and shame endured by Adam’s parents and grandparents been brought more directly into the treatment and given voice?

As I read of the terrors and secrets that pervaded the lives of Adam’s parents and grandparents, I felt an empathy for them that created, for me, a wish to know more about their own deep, psychic injuries that rendered them far less than perfect parental figures for Adam.

THE ETHICS OF MEMORY

Bartlett (this issue) describes Adam as having “been born into a family profoundly marked by the sweep of history” (p. 242). His paternal grandfather, the son of a rabbi, made his fortune with the Germans and a collaborationist government. During the war his father was hidden away with a Catholic family. Adam’s mother, too, had been hidden under the floor when German soldiers searched the house. As adults, once married to each other, Adam’s parents “erased many traces of their Jewishness” (p. 243). Bartlett recognizes how Adam’s parents “likely were compelled to disavow their own longings,” such that “disavowal and disorganization seeped across generations” (p. 248), saturating and nearly drowning the analytic work between Bartlett and Adam. But overall, Adam’s parents, in spite of their known histories (and I wonder how much history remained unknown, unspoken, held in shame and secrecy), come across in this article as two-dimensional characters. They are described throughout the text as neglectful, selfish, shockingly uncaring, abusive, intrusive, controlling, humiliating, unwelcoming of his feelings or neediness. They are presented only in relation to Adam’s experience of them as his parents, rarely in relation to their own histories or internal struggles.

Within the metaphor of water—“‘currents and cross currents swirling … immersed in histories’”—as Bartlett observes, “we were historical subjects cast within larger familial and historical narratives that shared various points of conjunction” (p. 245). He goes on to focus on the bidirectional play and enactments that permeated their work together. I see deeper, equally urgent currents that were coursing not only between analyst and patient but backward in time calling for attention. I think that an overemphasis on the intersubjective forces of the here and now dynamics deafens the therapeutic dyad to the voices of previous generations still awaiting a hearing and a witnessed mourning, a wading into the troubled waters of times past. Apprey (1999) argued, “I want to suggest that the fact of history has an urgency; it cries out for recognition and meaning” (p. 135). The urgency of the unconscious, received injuries and “errands” (p. 136) are conveyed from one generation to the next. He suggested,

by considering the wounds of the living, as it were, together with the will and responsibility to transform the received injury, one gets to transform the toxic errand of extinction, humiliation, massacre, a legacy of ashes, and so on, into a positive errand. (p. 136)

“Time-Soaked” vividly illustrates the collapse of history. In my reading of this paper, I see another therapeutic task at hand, that of the reestablishment of the order of time, so as to face and experience (as much as possible) the impact and affects of history as they belonged to the previous generations.

Apprey (2003, 2006, personal communication, April 2010) offers a model that facilitates an exploration of the order of time:
1. **Sedimentation** refers to the silent, often unconscious, psychic debris, the unmetabolized traumas of the grandparents and parents lives that are banished into silence and secrecy in service of survival. These are the possibly significant events of history and environmental circumstances that live on from one generation to the next as points of silenced significance. These are the grounds from which the ghosts come to haunt and warp the next generation.

2. **Appropriation and transference actualization** are the unconscious, psychic mechanisms through which the grievances of history begin to emerge. Appropriation is Apprey’s term for the process in which an individual takes up the foundations laid by the sedimentations of the earlier generations and build with it to create a psychic structure. A personal psychology is built, but built upon the unknown and unstable debris of the previous generations. Apprey argued that within this level of appropriation is contained the urgent, unconscious errand of the past that presses on, demanding recognition. This errand most often emerges as a transference actualization, usually in the form of negative transfers, which must be received not only as a form of communication between patient and analyst but also as messages/demands from past generations.

3. **Intentionality and extension** are understood as the unconscious, libidinal forces that seek a future. In this third order of time there emerges the possibility of a different future, that which Gerson (2016) called “the sustenance for re-creation” (p. 200). The analyst is unconsciously called upon to recognize this transferential wish/plea and facilitate its emergence into life.

Adam kept catalogues of how he had been wronged in past and present. How might those catalogues have morphed into new narratives were he and his analyst to bring empathic wonderings to the wrongs his grandparents and parents had suffered? What might have changed had Bartlett and his patient opened their work to the pain and suffering of his parents that had marked their lives and scarred their psyches? Adam’s grandparents hid their son away with a Catholic family for the duration of the war and for an additional year after the war, a decision described as “shockingly uncaring” (p. 242). I wondered if this judgment was accepted at face value by Bartlett. **What if the grandparents’ decision was protective in its intention?** What if it were an expression of guilt or shame? What might shift in meaning if we imagine/consider the possibilities that these postwar parents felt that it was still too risky or that there was simply not enough food to feed the whole family? What if Adam and Bartlett could have found a way to set aside the catalogue of his personal wrongs and sat together with the facts of the history in which the grandparents were struggling to survive, imagining the complexity, the risks, and the potential shame of reestablishing a family life? To challenge the collapse of time and reestablish the order of time would be to imagine together in the analytic dyad the possible nodal points in the sedimentary debris of the previous generations, thereby developing a narrative of broader reach than that of the intersubjective relationship between analyst and patient.

Imagine a mother, herself still suspended between life and death going through the motions of motherhood, who might have found it impossible to engage fully, with pleasure and care, in her own life or that of her son. Perhaps there was a girl/woman/mother who needed someone to see her before she could truly see her children. I imagined a mother, once hidden under floorboards, now hiding in the costumes of couture and assimilation. What is real, what is deceptive? What is living, what is deadening and dying?
I was struck by Bartlett’s (to my mind unusual) intervention of threatening a report to Adolescent and Children’s Services when hearing of Adam’s harsh treatment of one of his children, as well as his emphasis on the “‘down-regulation’” (p. 248) of Adam’s anger and aggressive presentations. What if he had engaged some of Adam’s rage as something that needed to be received rather than regulated, that perhaps this rage was not Adam’s alone but was carrying the aggrieved and enraged voices of those who had gone before him?

In delineating these questions with regard to Adam’s grandparents, mother, and father, I am seeking to convey an attitude and perspective that I have learned in my studies with Apprey. I cannot tell from this article if Adam’s parents are still alive, but if so there could be the opportunity to bring these questions in real life to those so deeply affected. Lifton (Goren & Alpert, 2017), among others who have studied the consequences of intergenerational trauma outside of analytic consulting rooms, stresses, “there has developed more recognition of the need for dialogue between generations” (p. 179). Salberg (2015) offered a discussion of transgenerational transmission of traumatic loss through the perspective of attachment theory, drawing upon the histories of traumatic losses over three generations of her own family. In preparation for writing the paper, she talked with her mother about the events surrounding her birth in 1952, learning for the first time that the nanny who had cared for her during her mother’s severe postpartum depression. Her nanny was a Polish refugee who had lost her own child during a forced death march to escape the Nazis.

Salberg (2015) begins the article with her own recurrent childhood dream in which a witch carries a brown paper bag filled with shit; “if she put it under your chair, you would die” (p. 21). This dream was a subject of attention in her first analysis, a classical training analysis, in which the dream was explored and interpreted for its Oedipal implications in Salberg’s nuclear family. It was in a second analysis many years later that the dream “resurfaced and allowed me to see it as a focal point of transgenerational transmission work yet to be done” (p. 38). She then devotes several pages to describe the unfolding of this work. While it is outside the bounds of this paper to discuss Salberg’s article in detail, she describes a process of inquiry and imagination that mirror that developed by Apprey that I have attempted to describe in relation to Bartlett’s work with Adam. In her second analysis she was able to face and feel the intergenerational impact of parental deaths and depressions. Salberg’s recurring childhood dream conveyed the urgent unconscious errands of “generations of death in a paper bag … delivered to me in my infancy” (p. 40).

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Abraham’s (1975/1994) work foreshadowed the growing analytic interest and comprehension of intergenerational trauma: “To be sure, all the departed may return, but some are destined to haunt: the dead who were ashamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave” (p. 171). Abraham’s words capture succinctly and powerfully the unconscious agonies that can come to haunt, warp, deaden, and drown our patients when the shame and secrets of past generations remain in lost in shadows and silence. It has been my intent in this discussion of “Time-Soaked” to convey my clinical experience of the profound psychic release and generativity that can be fostered when therapist and patient create space in the consulting room for the voices of the dead.

Bartlett’s paper offers us a compelling, deeply personal example of the force of transgenerational trauma as it is enacted within the therapeutic dyad. His is an important addition to the growing analytic literature working with these complex therapeutic tasks. I have argued here that in working
therapeutically with intergenerational issues we need to expand our analytic frame beyond the exploration of dyadic dynamics and challenge our capacities to welcome and listen to the voices and hearts of the dead and wounded who have preceded us.

REFERENCES


CONTRIBUTOR

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