

**Ghosts In The Consulting Room:
Echoes of Trauma in Psychoanalysis**

An Introduction To Trans-Generational Haunting

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Ghosts emerge in and as unwitnessed silences. The term 'ghost' captures the sense of a presence that is not solely internal, and not solely external, that might disturb the atmosphere, the body, the mind, and the sense of time.

The 'presence of absence' is what happens culturally as well as personally when there is no registration of a catastrophe that has happened, is happening, seems always already to be happening.

What happens when witnessing fails, when registering a traumatic event becomes beyond the capacity of an individual or the collective?

This lack of registration produces the 'presence of absences' – this phrase will be a guiding force in our exploration together as a group.

These are absences that:

- *Can be emotionally, viscerally, or even unconsciously felt in the patient, in the therapist, and in their interactions.*
- *Grow from overwhelming but under-processed feelings about loss.*
- *Often emerge in the gaps in factual information, narrative or affect – things mysteriously missing.*

*This 'un-knowing' is a perpetual struggle between mourning and melancholy. (Freud)
Something is under wraps, is a secret too dangerous to be disturbed – and often times, it can be discovered in the peculiarities of the transference/countertransference dynamics in session work.*

We want to be able to track the power of hidden and often shame-laden family histories that lie in the background of depth work.

We can think of the ghostly world as the place to manage excess, to find a skin of strangeness and uncertainty in which to embed things hard to bear or hard to fathom.

When working with trans-generational transmission of trauma, the client and therapist are always at the edge of an abyss, and there is a terror to be felt at the moment of a profound transition.

Fascinating psychic processes underlie the deeply committed attempts that clients make to keep the dead alive.

- *One of the primary therapeutic tasks is the transformation of melancholy into mourning, and this will always be an incomplete task.*
- *Embodiment is essential for working through what has been unconsciously 'encrypted' into an individual, from the unprocessed losses of previous generations.*

An individual's body image, somatic illnesses, affect storms, gait, posture, the set of their face and their gaze, the ways they experience the weather, how they orient to space and time – all become saturated with meanings that feel ghostly, spectral and ambiguous.

The long shadow of war contributes greatly to the trans-generational transfer of trauma. Some research done in 2004 determined that it takes 50 years to process a war.

- *Unprocessed historical trauma is a prime engine for psychotic functioning.*

The Viet Nam memorial in Wash DC has a powerful presence. Perhaps our need for memorials intensifies as our media-fueled barrage of trauma – which is absent of any space for genuine containment or witnessing – intensifies. These memorials help to counteract absences.

But memorials are no substitute for the necessary language and affect accessed through private, personal, internal mourning.

- *Ghosts signify unburied, unmourned losses.*

What makes our contemporary culture pulled towards the world of ghosts, of haunting? Mass traumas and losses from modern day warfare, in concert with the fact that these events are no longer reported in a contained way – on the news at 6:00pm, and in the morning paper.

Today we can broadcast information incessantly, and on the internet 24/7.

It is harder, for better and for worse, to shut out what is going on in the world. But it is also harder to metabolize the abundant and raw exposure.

- *The ghostliness of present absences vs. the demonic feel of absent presences.*

There is a power in the melancholic state that is pervasive and overwhelming to abide in, and it requires witnessing as a tremendous aid in bearing silences and aloneness.

- *Absence and silence are at the heart of clinical trauma.*
- *Narrative and witnessing are the antidote to haunting.*

The healing task for inter-generational trauma seeks/ to have ghostly presences re-admitted and integrated into the whole, and not expelled.

We want to be mindful of the residue of trauma that is held unconsciously, often over several generations.

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Unprocessed gaps, breaches, breaks, ruptures, disruptions, present absences/absent presences, whether actual, fantasized or inherited – lodged in our hearts, bodies, and minds – results in unmetabolized ghosts that haunt our lives and our therapy relationships.

It is our human challenge to therapeutic endeavor to strive to witness, contain, hold, grow from, and try to mourn these ghosts.

Active Witnessing

- *Provides an attunement that has the potency of contained witnessing.*
- *Is a witnessing that allows for reflection and linkage.*
- *Can facilitate the transformation of present absences.*

In Conclusion

Absence and silence are the forms in which ghosts – the wistful, the desperate, and the grotesque may proliferate. Narrative and witnessing are possibly the antidote to haunting.

There are places, situations, persons and families where knowledge of trauma is refused, where the questions of what happened are turned back unanswered. Perhaps it is here where the spirits howl loudest.