

Traumas of the Unknown/Known Haunting the People and City

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For over thirty–five years I have worked the raw edges of trauma. In the quiet of my office, I have heard the previously unspeakable, seen the unimaginable and felt the unbearable. I have been taken to the dark side of humanity where souls fight for life and madness reigns unchecked. I have been wounded – sliced by projections and stabbed with my own words. I have questioned my sanity, lived with my helplessness and survived my rage.

Through my years of practice I have learned that some traumas are conscious, time and place are remembered – even if wickedly distorted. While the affect can be wildly volatile and deeply searing there is a story being told. But seldom is this story true, as it is pronounced in the register of the “perpetrator – still – there.” The therapeutic work with such trauma is emotional engagement with resignification of life experiences, wherein the victim becomes an active agent in rewriting a uniquely personal narrative.

There are other more elusive traumas that are intergenerational in nature and defy even a rudimentary story line. Instead they are unknown, unimagined, undefined and as a result unregulated. These are the unspeakable traumas Nicholas Rand refers to as “psychic aphasia” and are beyond memory or mourning. They are the holes torn in speech and

exist, more inaccessibly, in an unconscious void disturbing expressive language and meaning.

The language, of these incomprehensible traumas, is haunted by secrets, silences, and as Abraham and Torok describe, guarded by “preservative repression.” This mechanism of repression is specifically focused on words themselves. Abraham and Torok write: “It is not a situation *comprising* words that becomes repressed...Rather, the *words themselves...are deemed to be generators* of a situation that must be avoided and voided retroactively.” This language appears in narratives that expunge traces of trauma, absences vacated of emotion and marked by cold detachment.

My travels into both traumatic worlds have left me humble, pliable, and receptive to what some in my field find implausible or irrational. The second world of intergenerational trauma, though, has forced a new language upon me. I now speak of ghosts, phantoms, crypts and haunting. My lexicon also includes references to spirit possessions, vapors, and murmurs as I work in a world punctuated by silence or endless evasive chatter. I believe if we can explore the realms of the haunted we will acquire hospitality with the uncanny and rekindle mystery and wonder.

Perhaps Avery Gordon (1997) best describes this world when she writes:|

“... the ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or *knowledge* (italics mine). ... the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing.

. . . Finally, I have suggested that the ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice.*” (p. 63-64)

I have learned, perhaps too well, how trauma twists the soul, empties the mind and raises hell with the spirit. I have gone to emotionally haunted places with my patients I would not go alone. With candor and the beaded sweat of embarrassment, I can admit I enjoyed the shiny badge of expert. Then hubris, that insidious guardian against foreclosed knowledge, put me in my place. Painfully I came to realize the only traumas I truly understood had unfolded within my cloistered office walls.

A few years ago I picked up a book to browse entitled *The Ruins of Detroit (2010)*. Since I live in Michigan, the book was one about issues I had heard so much of in and around Detroit. Browsing the artful, glossy photos, I invented a little game for myself called “Name that Ruin.” At the time I had no strong feelings about what was becoming known as “ruin porn” and felt nothing other than curiosity and some excitement. I suspect that most other on-lookers experience these feelings in their first introduction to viewing Detroit’s decimated cityscape.

In my initial contact with these images, and before I had absorbed their true meaning, I actually thought that my mother-in-law, who grew up in the Corktown neighborhood of Detroit some 80 years ago, might enjoy reminiscing about her childhood days through photographs. So I was unprepared when, after thumbing through a few pages she stopped,

looked closely at one photo in particular and then suddenly left the room. Later I was to learn that she left so I would not see her crying over one of the photos that turned out to be her former dentist's office and to where, as a child, she was first permitted to ride the bus alone. Rather than promoting an enjoyable return to her childhood, I had inadvertently tarnished a cherished memory by showing her the ruined remains of that location. I was hit by the sad truth that outside of my office I was out of touch with the life traumas in all those whose lives were touched by Detroit. This realization of my insensitivity to the reality of someone else's vacancy of life, in my pursuit of the "fetish" that has grown around the ruins and photographing them, has led me to a reconsideration of urban trauma.

I had to first, however, recognize that buildings, the concrete, metal and glass, compose a book of humanity. They have been mediators of the past with their powerful presence and turbulent histories. Memories, imaginations and experiences, collectively shared or individual, are encased in these spaces. In *The American Scene*, Henry James refers to them as "memory traps." Entering a building leaves a memory behind and leaving a building means taking a memory away. This is not a passive act if we acknowledge memories are representations, dreams, longings and wishes as well as associations, fantasies and fears. Memory and imagination comeingle and, as Aristotle suggested, belong to the same part of the soul.

We invent as much as we remember our history. Buildings and homes, as well as factories, hold our stories both known and unknown. These structures can bring unbidden tears, a burning flash of shame, a sudden bone-rattling shudder or a cracked smile of

surprise. They can possess undigested mysteries of our past: our own and often those of our ancestors. Perhaps most troubling, these spaces can also be filled with disruptive, unacknowledged secret traumas passed down intergenerationally. Such traumas are so potentially devastating emotionally that they must be silenced and yet since they cannot be erased these secrets become hauntings.

A possible example might help here: seeing a stain on a kitchen wall, suddenly hearing “you didn’t see that...” while there is no one else in the room, could indicate an act of bloody violence that was never spoken about or acknowledged. There are other specific detailed experiences, like one offered by Sonya McCoy Wilson (2008), that are particularly pertinent: “Close proximity to federal court buildings and prisons provoke unimaginable terror in me; me a person who does not break the law.” She goes on to wonder: “Do prisons frighten me because my ancestors were enslaved? Do I remember, somehow, that feeling of insurmountable captivity?” (p. 31)

These examples reveal the indelible traces of traumas seeping from one generation into another. Such psychic aphasias take up spectral residence similar in function to those I see in my clinical work. Experiences such as these require attention as we seek to learn “from whence we came,” although these transmissions of our heritage need to be painstakingly assembled. Integration of these unknown ghostly traumas requires the delicate, intricate construction, of what Marianne Hirsch (1997) defines as “postmemories” - through available patches of history using props such as photographs, stories, letters, and also unexplainable shifts in mood and physical sensations in going

from room to room or one person to another (rage, despair grief, silence) when no specific memories are passed down.

Buildings are not immune to the ravages of time, neglect, vandalism, societal shifts, forces of God or whims of the economy. Living rooms, family rooms and dining rooms that, by their very names, evoke memory spots can disappear. Waiting rooms, conference rooms and lunchrooms, the industrial/commercial gathering places, are swept away as well. And what is left? Ruins, the scattered bones of buildings and vapors of memory, are what remain.

Dylan Trigg (2012) asks a pertinent question in addressing such urban ruination:

“How does a ruin... the remains of an industrial factory... fit into the landscape of a city? Beyond its warped mass of broken materiality, a ruin is also a disordering of time. It maligns time, dissolving boundaries between past and present. Not in the present, but neither in the past. Time out of joint...”

Ruins defy time. They exist only after their original purpose has passed. They offer none of the value for which they were conceived, but that does not mean they are without value. Urban ruins by their otherworldly nature become objects for projections, memories, dreams and especially for anxieties and the restimulation of trauma. They offer a “living–dead” replica of history – of what they once were compared to what they are now. Ruins beg us to complete them, as only our fantasies will make them whole again, for good or for ill. And yet, since they exist, they are also real. Decay and negligence with ties to both past and future induce reactions ranging from dread to

nostalgia. Ruins provoke revenant hauntings that establish a disoriented atmosphere, estrangement, and a turn to the uncanny. Jervis (2008) succinctly notes that, “ the uncanny has become a widely used figure for the simultaneous homelessness of the present, and the haunting of the past” (p.12). Royle (2003) offers more detail in summarizing Freud’s 1919 paper, *The Uncanny*, he writes:

“The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of... what is being experienced... The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper... But the uncanny is not simply an experience of strangeness or alienation. More specifically, it is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar.” (p.1)

When viewing the urban ruins of recent times, there is the experience of “familiar and unfamiliar,” or as Freud put it, “homely” or “unhomely,” but there is more. A legitimate question then arises as to whether what is being viewed is real – in this case, can a mile-long factory that made cars only thirty years ago really look like it has been bombed repeatedly and left standing, gutted, for what might seem like eons? Is it really possible that the very neighborhoods in which my wife grew up as a child are completely gone and wiped from memory? How can it be that entire neighborhoods, estimated up to 40 square miles of them in all, one after another, now be reduced to stubborn prairies and fallen down homes? Can this really be what I am seeing in Detroit?

Detroit, as “the mecca of ruins,” started to gain notoriety through the work of the Chilean photographer Camilo Jose Vergara. In 1995 he went so far as to suggest Detroit “place a

moratorium on razing skyscrapers, our most sublime ruins,” and proposed instead a downtown “urban Monument Valley.” This ten to twelve block radius would become a “memorial to our throwaway cities,” an “American Acropolis.” On a more somber note Vergara has, more recently, processed and tempered his tone in suggesting: “The ruins are the future. I’ve internalized what I have seen. It has energized my life, but it isn’t positive. The experience of those desolate places has marked me.” Indeed, one does not come to capture urban ghosts without swallowing some darkness.

I doubt Vergara knew he would be haunted by his exposure to death and destruction in such large doses. Most other purveyors of “post-apocalyptic Detroit,” countless numbers by now, aren’t or won’t acknowledge similar affects. Many, it would seem, have become so infatuated by their urban “autopsy art” that they became blind to the grievous wounds inflicted by trauma, or became deaf to the rhetoric of hatred and the practice of cruel neglect toward the ghosts of the disenfranchised and vulnerable. Such recorders are both creators and consumers of our media addicted disconnections. Image saturation keeps attention relatively indifferent to content. Susan Sontag (2003) nails this callowness with articulate ferocity when she writes:

“Consumers droop. They need to be stimulated, jump started, again and again. Content is no more than one of these stimulants. A more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness – just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media whose leaching out of content contributes most to the deadening of feeling”

(p. 106)

I would like to note there is a much different way to photograph urban images – a way to capture emotional truth that is genuine and deeply felt. Roland Barthes (1980) in his remarkable eulogy to his mother described *punctum* as details or points of singularity that puncture the surface of a reproduction and establishes a personal relationship with an object or person within the photograph. Such photos wound, pierce and bruise as they display what can be felt as unexpected emotional truth and fidelity. Even if they portray images that are unrecognized, they can unsettle assumptions, open space for traces of memories and provide at least fractured emotional resonance with the often unarticulated and haunting past.

Hauntings come through on many channels and frequencies. Some of these are viciously present but distorted by decades that were lived in the static of racism, hopelessness, despair and the annihilation of subjectivity. Others are present yet tuned out by defenses such as denial or projection. By any realistic measure, Detroit is a traumatized, and in the new vernacular, a post-industrial city. These traumas are woven into the fabric of those who live here but cannot leave (as opposed to those who chose not to leave). The intergenerational nature of the trauma was clearly expressed to me by one Detroiter whom I interviewed for my film, *Detroit: Living in Between* (2013):

“You have a man who worked every day with a good hard work ethic and put decades of his life into a plant. How do you go from that to the next generation who gets laid off constantly...working sporadically...to the next who find work

where and when they have transportation for jobs further and further from their homes? And then to this last generation who have never really worked?"

In Detroit there are still too many ghostly muted voices of men pushed out of factories because they were expendable, distressed whispers of families turned out of homes for too little money or too many crimes of arson, and hoarse rantings of those excluded who turned to drugs or violence in order to deny the crushing history of trauma. These ghosts, acknowledged or not, will continue haunting until their messages are heard. Phantoms cannot be met with indifference, puffed up toughness, rancid prejudice or surrendered in a pool of denial. Rituals of recovery are required. Ceremonies and vessels that will honor the cycle of transience and permanence need creative acts that engage with specters in an effort to recognize them and offer reparation. I don't know what these ceremonial acts are and neither does Lansing or Washington. Corporations think they do but the only real acts of consequence will come from the people of this city. Some, no doubt, have already begun.

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