

Personal Reflections on Object Loss

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Object loss, along with trauma, are concepts dear to us as psychoanalysts. My own work with these topics, and my experience of great losses early in life, make me something of an expert, but I rarely find *myself* in the literature on the subject. This reaction has given me cause for the reflections that are the subject of this essay. A previous reflection called "The Babel of Trauma," in which I examined the current literature on the subject, ended up in the proverbial drawer, forgotten, partly out of doubts that my criticism of well-established theories could be justified.

Recently, however, I was encouraged to re-examine my response to the theories of trauma in general and object loss specifically. I had the unforgettable experience of recounting the losses I suffered during World War II in an address to a large audience at the International Psychoanalytical Association Congress in Berlin, where I was accorded the warmest reception imaginable.

My story told of hardships during World War II as my family and I tried to evade deportation and death, followed by the gradual loss of everything and everyone I knew. I told of the massive struggle for me, born in Germany, to reconnect, after years of analysis, with the love for the only identity I knew before coming to the United States. In my presentation, I tried to portray events in the light of the knowledge available to the people I described when they were in that situation. My story pales in comparison to other stories told by survivors of concentration camps, yet it moved the audience to tears.

There were two striking aspects to this presentation that continue to preoccupy me and that I want to examine more closely: my unusual reaction to writing the presentation and the reactions of the listeners. By the time I had written it and guarded against all the foreseeable traumas, such as an empty room (I could not guard against harsh critics), I felt an uncharacteristic and unprecedented confidence in the finished product. I believe that stemmed from the conviction of having told the truth as I see it, while accepting and stating all the possible distortions and uncertainties that accompany a personal history. It was clearly subjective but true nevertheless. It is still hard to grasp the reaction of the listeners. The audience seemed to be grateful, personally touched, as if my story of wartime experiences and object losses had personal relevance for them, and my sharing it was a most precious gift.

In trying to understand this unexpected but most welcome reaction, I have thought, as I often do, that my trauma could not possibly be compared to those who have truly suffered, and I suspect that this made it easy for me and the audience. This thinking, reminiscent of Primo Levi's attitude toward his experiences, is contrary to fact: I am among those who know about loss and the impact of persecution because by age thirteen I had lost my birthplace, my nationality, my language, my possessions, my parents, and basic trust. How is it that the audience was so moved? Some of the answer is clear. My presentation conveyed the experiences that I remember with clarity, but also acknowledged uncertainty around specific emotional responses to the events when they occurred.

The facts of the immediacy, the vividness, the uncertainty, and the nature of my memories connect to my feeling that well-accepted theories do not reflect my experience. Especially fruitless is the notion that the essence of trauma consists in a breach in the stimulus barrier or excitement that overwhelms the defenses. The theory, based on the quantitative, economic approach that has otherwise been eclipsed, presumes that the victim was helpless and unprepared for the traumatogenic event. It describes a situation of utter passivity that has become one of the prototypes for understanding trauma and traumatic stress disorders (Freud, 1920, p. 29), and accounts only for trauma leading to the flooding of PTSD and flashbacks. We know now that this paradigm does not cover many experiences generally accepted as traumatic, including mine. The much maligned defenses serve

important functions in allowing loss to penetrate gradually, either when part of it becomes unavoidable or when the person is ready to face a portion of it.

A more encompassing formulation for the dynamics of trauma suggests that the prototype for a traumatic event is one that is structured entirely by the demands of external reality, eliminating the operation of the pleasure principle and unconscious fantasy either temporarily or throughout most of life. It comes closer to most situations in which victims of traumatic loss have defenses at their disposal that enable them to remain conscious of their surroundings, at a very restricted level of functioning: diminished in some respects and heightened in others, such as perception. The recognition of this diminishment informed my presentation, and clearly moved the audience.

The puzzle regarding the popularity of an earlier model that has such restricted application might be solved to some degree if we consider that the listener, whether or not an analyst, who hears a story of trauma or object loss is not prepared against it. In a sense the listeners confront a traumatic history from a wider perspective than the person who is experiencing it. The defensive narrowing of consciousness and perception does not set in for the witness as it does for the person living through a calamity. We could speculate that the temporarily "defenseless" witness takes in the totality of the situation, and can accept the explanation of a breach in the stimulus barrier, whereas most victims experience trauma piecemeal. I do not want to be misunderstood nor make light of the cataclysmic events, such as September 11, 2001, that can and do befall people, and for which the victims are unprepared. This classic theory may apply to such situations, but cannot define all trauma.

My story was a cumulative trauma in which hope and expectations gradually diminish, in which an unconscious omnipotence clung to the small victories we won over an inevitable fate, and where the situation of total helplessness in which we found ourselves was mostly kept out of awareness. Even if one attempts to comprehend trauma by identifying with a situation with all one's knowledge and faculties, one does not know it the way most victims experience it. It is difficult or impossible to be empathic unless it is clear that the person caught in an extreme situation is not the same as the listener nor, for that matter, the one who tells the tale as it is remembered. I recounted experiences that were not known to me in their full extent until later.

The narrowed focus of the victim's knowledge is illustrated by a joke: Two policemen ring the doorbell and a woman opens the door. "Are you the widow Brown?" they ask. "No, I am Mrs. Brown" is her answer. Whereupon they respond with: "Want to bet?" An observer would grasp the poor woman's plight immediately, but not someone who has to postpone the knowledge of loss signified by the appearance of policemen at the door.

This thinking recalls Henry Krystal's formulations in a 1985 article on "Trauma and the Stimulus Barrier" (Krystal, 1985). According to him, in the aftermath of trauma "the moment of survival is one of triumph" but that moment does not take into account the damage suffered.¹ Krystal avoids the quantitative approach by assessing trauma in terms of its meaning and the resulting affective response, not according to the intensity of the stimulus. Some of his formulations correspond to my understanding, as when he explains that "...a tendency to suppress perception, to become "insensitive" or dull, derives from a primary disturbance in the affective sphere and is often posttraumatic" (p. 142). Further, "Modifications of consciousness can serve to permit the conscious registration of perception or impulse without provoking a dangerous response" (p. 151). Importantly for my understanding, he states that "most of the clinical syndromes that would commonly be considered of traumatic origin (e.g., neuroses) are not aftereffects of psychic trauma but consequences of autoplasmic changes developed in the process of trauma prevention" (Krystal, 1978, cited on 1985, p. 152). As a consequence, victims defend themselves by means of a particularly effective "stimulus barrier," not responding emotionally to threatening situations. This blocking of affect or numbness makes them "cold," aloof or lacking in empathy. Krystal quotes G. Klein (1970) who said: "The price we pay for efficient perception is partial blindness."²

My presentation in Berlin focused on my perception as I recalled the time of the events. I believe that recounting the experiences, as I remember them, made them more accessible and less strange. It emphasized how victims too have defenses that work to prevent psychic catastrophe. I believe that the audience was moved, even to tears, because it was not overwhelming, just as I was not shattered as much as I was seriously diminished. The story I told included massive defenses that enabled me to survive without such symptoms as overwhelming emotions, so often cited in the literature as constituting trauma by causing a breach in the stimulus barrier. In emphasizing the defenses against the impact of the loss, I did not minimize the lasting damage caused by the experience, but made it more specific. The audience apparently knew that to undo some of the consequences many years of analysis were needed. The pathology caused by the losses and the defenses against the awareness of their magnitude led not to flashback memories but rather to emotional constriction and depression.

I wanted a family, and like most survivors of object loss I was eager to have children and to provide them with what I had missed. Unfortunately, the very desire to make one's children happy and give them good lives may seriously interfere with accomplishing that goal. Children want the right to be unhappy, as I found out. The current literature refers to that interference as the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next, as if "trauma" were a meaningful term for the painful interaction that results in the second generation's identifying with the parents. I object to an undynamic way of describing "transmission of trauma" concretely, as if events themselves could fully account for complex reactions between parents and children. I would like to illustrate the difficulties of the concept with a small vignette about my daughter, an incident in which it became clear that I wanted her to feel that I was able to provide her with a substitute for a grandmother she did not have. After meeting a neighbor of my grandmother in Germany, my daughter surprised me when she said that she could pretend that this was her German grandmother, whom she had never known. I asked her why she would choose this stranger as her pretend grandmother, rather than my mother's sister, who lived in the United States and whom she knew well. I forget her answer, but what was clear was that she needed the substitute for her dead grandmother to be far away and almost unknown in order to have her fulfill the function of a lost object, refound. The wish for a shared loss makes itself felt, and the identification with the previous generation appears to be unavoidable. It creates difficulties precisely because those having actually suffered have frequently set out to parent children who do not have to suffer.

This was certainly true in my own case, but once more, I failed, according to some of the literature, because I kept most of the horrible events a secret. So much is written about the need to share with children what preoccupies the parent, but it is still not clear to me how one tells children about concentration camps. When my son, age six, asked about my parents, I told him that my parents were killed by the Germans and then the Americans came and killed the Germans who did this. He got the message—he never asked again. Someone must have passed the word along to my daughter because she did not ask questions until at sixteen she wanted to know the whole story. At that point, in 1976, I welcomed her curiosity and we took our first trip to Germany. By then I was equipped with emotional armor, as much against hate as against nostalgia for what was lost.

As adults, however, my children have kept their distance from conversations with me about the Holocaust. Their attitude has undoubtedly been colored by my wish to spare them the task of integrating the knowledge of the history before their birth, the knowledge it has taken me a lifetime to assimilate. It appears as if my children were the exception, judging by the great number of authors of psychoanalytic studies on World War II who are children of survivors. These accounts probe the experiences of their parents or their own in direct relation to the influence exerted by the devastation in their parents' lives. Rather than accept this preoccupation with the past as an inevitable sequelae of trauma, I question its inevitability. Underlying it are dynamic conflicts suffused with strong components of Oedipal rivalry and other multiple personal conflicts.

“Children of survivors” has almost become a diagnostic group, but I wonder if there is a confusion about whose trauma it is. I believe that the transmission must be understood at the level of personal motivation, rather than treating historic facts as the cause for the identification. I made this point in a paper “Hysterical Features Among Children of Survivors” (Oliner, 1982). Nevertheless I have questioned my attitude: am I insinuating some degree of ownership? I have joked with fellow panelists, all of them children of survivors, about the possibility that my disagreement with some of their premises might be based on my need to exercise a proprietary interest, as against others “borrowing.” In a more serious vein, the fascination with catastrophe is remarkable, especially for the next generation who could conceivably wish to move on with their lives. ³ Why the identification with the suffering and not with the triumph inherent in survival?

The answer undoubtedly lies in the connection between victimization and aggression, whereby the children of victims avoid being cast in the role of the aggressors. Interestingly, what is true of the children of victims is equally true of the children of perpetrators. My friend Christian Schneider, a German social scientist, has remarked on the way the descendants of the generation of perpetrators automatically identify with their former victims to a degree that sometimes deprives them of good judgment.⁴ Needless to say, the solution does not lie in their identifying with ruthless killers or being overwhelmed by guilt, but in a greater capacity for measured responses to the issues that confront them instead of an unthinking identification with whomever they deem to be a victim.⁵

My reflections on object loss, meant to include not only the loss of persons but also of the very important objects constituted by language, home and nationality, have taken in a wide field, including some of my views on the inheritance of object loss through the children’s identification with the loss suffered by parents. I have also referred to the defenses against the experience of loss and their long term consequences. I did not mention how loss hardens the personality to the point at which practice has made perfect. One is always ready to lose. Separations are extremely painful, and the refinding afterwards fraught with anxiety. The question always looms: am I still able to reconnect? In a complex way, this fear may be a living out of the early experience that Winnicott speaks of as the use and destruction of the object. In the case of object loss, there may be confusion for the child between the internal and external source of the attack on the object, which did not survive this necessary step, and is no longer there to be used. My retelling in Berlin, with its unexpected consequences in response to witnessing the tale, brought up these multivaried aspects of human experience, which, when simplified, are too often falsified.

¹ Krystal is careful to differentiate between adult and infantile trauma. In the latter case affective development is as yet incomplete and therefore cannot lead to modulated responses to stress.

² Klein, G. S. (1970). *Perception, Motives and Personality*. New York: Knopf, p. 218.

³ This was the official attitude of the first post-war generation in Israel. Subsequently it became evident that this reaction was based on denial and led to manic reactions. It resulted in Hillel Klein referring to survivor guilt in positive terms because it acknowledged the reality of the losses.

⁴ “The so-called second generations suffer... from the stigma of inauthenticity in their experience of themselves. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche expressed this brilliantly, in that he imputes to second generations a collective feeling of dependence on the first, including the tortured anxiety of a possible constitutional weakness of descendents.

“Since these collective disruptions of the historical continuum, from which the first generations are formed, are always a matter of violent events revolving around guilt, the following generation, questioning its own lack of substance, is given the duty of dealing critically with the guilt of their ancestors, that is, of judging them. Second generations are formed in the shadow of breaks in history, which imposes a double role on them in the interest of their self preservation: simultaneously guardians of the event and judges, they

are accusers or defenders of the historic actors, whose heirs they are. This problem of ambivalence belongs to the logic of second generations, a logic which becomes the central focus of the psychoanalytic history of generations." (author's translation)

⁵ This trend is apparent in the many Hiroshima streets or squares I have encountered in Germany.

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