

AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ASSOCIATION

Winter 2008, Waldorf Astoria, New York

Transcending Loss through Creative Action

I'll start with a disclaimer of sorts. I would have preferred to speak informally tonight rather than to give a paper, but I'm much more comfortable reading something (and you'll see why, as I get into the text) so I've prepared a paper that's conversational rather than academic. It's a very personal account of the subject; there are no references and there isn't much attempt to be scholarly or theoretical. Just the same I hope you'll find it interesting and meaningful.

I'll begin with a poem written by Yannis Ritsos, one of the great Modern Greek poets. It's titled *Healing*.

Healing

The nights passed very darkly,
Great cries ran in the wind.
The next day we didn't remember a thing.
There was a deep hole left in time.

There where the wolf had nestled in,
A pothole remained, spread with warm wolf hair.
Now a sheep could lie down there.

This short poem was the epigraph to my memoir. Serendipitously I came across this relatively unknown poem that seemed to capture so well the experience of the trauma of war and its aftermath. In only seven lines the poet describes the experience that is familiar to me as a survivor of the Holocaust. Lines like "The next day we didn't remember a thing" and "there was a deep hole left in time" capture so well the experience of dissociation and the fragmentation that often follow in the wake of trauma. "A pothole

remained” describes the reverberations of the event for years to come. The paradox of recovery is also addressed in the recognition of the potential creation of a new space so that what was once associated with terror (a wolf) is now a holding place for a gentle creature (a sheep).

The poem embodies the essence of my experience as I have written about it in my memoir - the trauma, the dissociation that followed, the permanent yet invisible scars, and the ultimate transformation of what had been threatening into something hopeful and meaningful. But even more striking is the metaphor that Ritsos chose to represent a threatening force, namely the wolf.

To understand this connection you need to know something about my childhood experience during the Nazi Holocaust. In April of 1942, when I was fifteen months old, I went into hiding with my mother in a small village near Lwow the city where I was born located in what was then part of Poland. With the help of Christian friends my mother obtained false identity papers that enabled us to pass as Catholics and we found lodging in the upstairs apartment of a two family house. The landlady and her husband had no knowledge that they were harboring a Jew and her child. By December of the same year, their home became shelter to my father as well after he escaped from a concentration camp. My mother hid him in the attic space adjacent to our apartment and he remained hidden out of sight until we were liberated by the Russians in 1944. In order to keep me away from my father’s hiding place my mother warned me that there was a wolf in the attic. Eventually after I discovered him I had to keep his existence a secret from the rest of the world.

These experiences and many others are described in my memoir which explores the long term impact of childhood trauma on my life and choices. When my memoir was completed in 1999, I set about to find a title. An established writer acquaintance said to me “To have a successful book you must have a great title.” So for months I agonized. Then one day, it suddenly came to me. I had been brainstorming with friends for hours trying to come up with the perfect title, and nothing had felt right. Then later that same night, in the privacy of my home while brushing my teeth, suddenly I thought of my mother’s words of warning *A Wolf in the Attic*. Those words had great resonance and meaning for me. I knew then that I had found the right title. The creative process is mysterious; it seems to come on its own, you can’t force it; you can only create the space for it and recognize it and welcome it when it appears.

I was pleased that I finally found the title, until I spoke with my literary agent who announced in no uncertain terms that she hated it. She suggested that I search books of poetry for inspiration to come up with an alternative. So one day, I picked up a little book of poetry on my husband’s night table. Ritsos had always been one of his favorite Greek poets. Imagine my surprise when I discovered this little gem of a poem. It was uncanny that Ritsos, coming from a different world had found the wolf to be an apt metaphor for his poem about trauma and healing. It was one of those strange moments of synchronicity that leaves one filled with awe. Whether coincidence or an act of fate it seemed to be a sign. And so the book became *A Wolf in the Attic*.

As is true of so many creative artists, Ritsos was a man who had known adversity. In his youth he had lost his mother and his eldest brother. His father suffered from mental illness and he himself had a long bout with tuberculosis for which he was banished to a

sanitarium at the age of eighteen. Later in his life, his dedication to communism brought him into direct conflict with the ruling fascist government of his country and resulted in imprisonment in a number of concentration camps. The poem *Healing* was written during a time of forced exile.

The renowned Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis has used the poetry of Ritsos and other poets as text for his songs. Theodorakis' life and work is a testament to the capacity for music to transform trauma not only for the individual creator but for his listeners as well. A survivor of physical and emotional abuse for political reasons, he has created exquisite music for over fifty years giving expression to pain and suffering as well as to hope and healing. Through his musical creations, Theodorakis has given the Greek nation the opportunity to mourn the numerous losses they experienced in the second half of the 20th century. This octogenarian is still composing meaningful music and helping his country men cope with tragedy. This past Fall he organized a concert in Athens to benefit the victims of the fires in Greece. The star studded event was held at the ancient amphitheater at the southern slope of the Acropolis and my husband and I were honored to be there. Our 27 year old daughter Lina who is an accomplished Soprano was invited to sing one of Theodorakis' best known and loved pieces, *the Song of Songs* from the *Ballad of Mauthausen* based on the poetry of Iakovos Kambanellis, another concentration camp survivor. Lina sang *the Song of Songs* in Greek and in Hebrew to an enthusiastic audience of 5000 Greeks and countless others watching her on live TV. Someone in Israel recorded her performance and put it on YouTube. I will show you the clip because it illustrates so well the transformation of trauma into something beautiful and powerful that can evoke intense emotions in the viewer through identification. {Author's note: the

video clip is no longer on Youtube.com but can be found on her website:

www.linaorfanos.com}

For Lina and our family, this memorable event represented a coming together of many different strands in our lives. Lina is the product of both her Greek heritage on her father's side and her mother's Holocaust history. Her hauntingly beautiful voice is part of a legacy of loss and resilience. She inherited her talent from my aunt Jadzia, my mother's sister who was murdered with her child when they were discovered in their hiding place. It is a triumph to know that Jadzia's beautiful voice silenced by the Nazis during the war continues to live on in Lina.

Lina is no stranger to tragedy; she is a survivor in her own right. As a young girl of fourteen she was diagnosed with a brain tumor and underwent a series of harrowing surgeries. She was robbed of her adolescence and continues to live with the emotional and physical scars of her illness. One can speculate that the suffering she has endured has found its way into her deeply moving voice and has enriched it. Her art has been the medium for the expression of her deepest emotions, a source of gratification and self-esteem; I am convinced that it has helped her heal. Her life is a living example of what I write about here, namely the capacity of creative expression to transform traumatic experience.

Lina's voice is the vehicle through which she expresses her emotions about the tragedies that have happened to her and to her people, and she communicates them to her audience. This evokes parallel emotions in her listeners and aids them in their own mourning process. The capacity to mourn which is a prerequisite to healing is sometimes blocked particularly in those of us who are prone to dissociation in the wake of trauma.

Merciful numbness helps us cope but at the same time it makes it more difficult for us to experience life fully.

Like talented analysts, artists can help us remember the past and mourn. They are witnesses to trauma and by sharing their creations with us they allow us to become their witnesses in turn. These levels of witnessing serve a number of crucial functions – memorializing what has been lost, validating individual experiences of grief and fostering a sense of connection to counter feelings of isolation, so common to trauma survivors. Although they themselves may not be fully conscious of their intentions as they create, artists transform their experiences into a product that gives form to unarticulated feelings and thoughts.

I have written elsewhere about the creative transformation of trauma. I conceptualize it as a working through process. Regardless of the medium used, artistic expression allows for the release of intense emotions in a contained and controlled way. It provides a way to make sense of what trauma has rendered incomprehensible and to reintegrate what trauma has fragmented. There is an opportunity to repair the very same functions that trauma destroyed. Through the action of creation, a sense of helplessness and passivity in the face of the assault on the self is replaced by a feeling of control and mastery. What was originally overwhelming can now be revisited from a position of strength and faced on one's own terms. What was once a source of shame can now become a source of pride in the creation of a beautiful work of art, a haunting melody, or an inspired piece of writing.

The need for self-expression is a universal phenomenon. Irrespective of whether or not we have an artistic talent we long to express our feelings, ideas and wishes and to use our

capacities to communicate what is deep within us. Despite our ambivalence about exposing ourselves, ultimately we desire to be known and to be understood, to have an impact on others and to be recognized. It is these desires that were most frustrated in those of us who were hidden as children. We were carefully taught to be as invisible as possible, to be silent, to be cautious, and to suppress our needs or desires. Compliant children who did not express emotions had a much better chance of survival.

In my own case this injunction to inhibit was heightened by an incident that is etched forever in my memory. It took place while I was in hiding at about three years of age. By that time I had been aware of my father's presence in the attic and had been warned to keep his existence a secret. One day, my mother had stepped out and my father had come out of the attic to sit with me in the kitchen. Suddenly we were surprised by the landlady's voice from behind the apartment door. She must have heard us talking and wondered who was there with me. Terror was clear on my father's face as he motioned to me to keep the secret. I told the landlady I was alone. Speaking was fraught with danger and has remained a source of anxiety in my life.

Strategies learned in hiding became second nature, so that even when the external danger was past, most of us continued to keep a low profile and hide our history. For me, as for many others, a consequence of a life in hiding was inhibition and constriction, an impaired freedom to express myself as freely as I would have liked.

In my childhood, drawing was my one avenue to self-expression. It did not involve other people it was safe and it brought me great pleasure. Later I also found writing to be a great source of satisfaction. With both painting and writing I felt fully in control of what I exposed and therefore I could enjoy these activities without feeling threatened. Yet

even there, the freedom to express myself was limited. For instance, my painting style tended to be realistic and its focus was on replicating objects in the environment rather than allowing my imagination free reign. Only now, at this point in my life, am I drawn to a looser style – one aptly enough called Expressionism.

It was not until the last decade that I began to use creative arts in the service of emerging from hiding. My journey out of hiding began slowly about thirty years ago and gained momentum over the years, culminating in the writing and publishing of my memoir. The timing was fortuitous; my longing to be authentic has taken root in a climate receptive to self-revelation. In a striking reversal, those of us who had kept our Holocaust past hidden were now urged to share it with others by giving testimony, writing autobiographical narratives or participating in groups like this one. The dwindling population of living witnesses to the Shoah, coupled with the murmur of voices of Holocaust deniers has brought a certain urgency to tell our stories for future generations. We the survivors are fortunate indeed that what is healing for us is at the same time considered to be a valuable and significant contribution.

Biographical Sketch

Sophia Richman, Ph.D., ABPP is a psychologist licensed in New York and in New Jersey. She holds a Diplomate in Psychoanalysis from the American Board of Professional Psychology. In addition to her full time private practice, Dr. Richman is a Supervisor at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy in New York, and a Training Analyst and Supervisor at the Contemporary Center for Advanced Psychoanalytic Studies in New Jersey.

Dr. Richman is a child survivor of the Nazi Holocaust and has written and lectured extensively about its long term psychological impact. She is the author of *A Wolf in the Attic: The Legacy of a Hidden Child of the Holocaust* (The Haworth Press, 2002). The memoir, currently in its third printing, has received the 2003 Award for Scholarship from the Jewish Women's Caucus of the Association for Women in Psychology and has been translated into several languages.

