

Museum of Jewish Heritage: 17th Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Teachers' Conference

Good afternoon family, friends, educators, distinguished speakers, and of course, my mother. I am very honored to be here.

Broadly speaking today's conference delineates the intergenerational epigenetic inheritance of trauma. Epigenome means above the genome. Chemical markers bind to DNA and can promote or demote genes by turning them on or off, respectively. Gene expression is controlled by this micromanager of sorts that mediates between the environment and the genes. Dr. Rachel Yehuda and Helen Epstein- a second generation kindred spirit-in discussion with Gary Rosenblatt will illuminate the ways in which severe trauma can cause changes to the gene that might be passed through generations. Dr. Yehuda and her colleagues discovered that children of Holocaust survivors who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (especially when it is the mother) have a much higher incidence of PTSD themselves as well as other anxiety and neurological disorders.

Allow me say a bit about being a child of Holocaust survivors. Possessing an otherwise cheery and easy temperament I was an anxious child appropriately dubbed a "worry-wart" by my well-intentioned third-grade teacher. I asked her to define this and she said it was a nervous Nellie. I did not understand since I was a Greenhorn by proxy and lacked knowledge of idiomatic English. Now I was more worried. Earlier during that school year she informed me that I was misspelling my first name, Jacqueline- spelling it with a QUA instead of QUE. "There is no name like that" she said. Embarrassed and indignant I said this was impossible. Later, I confirmed with my mother that Mrs. Fisher was correct. I was crestfallen. What self-respecting eight year-old 3rd grader doesn't know how to spell her name? Why had I not learned my name? An unexplainable feeling of terror washed over me that years later I came to understand. I imagine that unconsciously my parents didn't want me to have a name or know my name – that being anomic had survival value. I became a typical second-generation overachieving nail-biting, compliant, perfectionistic worrier.

Whether or not excessive worry in children of survivors is an inherited trait or is a learned identification with parents is a question that is now legitimately up for scientific investigation. I believe, physiologic underpinnings notwithstanding, we share our parents weltanschauung with respect to fear of persecution. For example, we must be off the grid and under the radar, no publicity or public displays. Belonging to clubs and organizations, attending rallies, participating in the census, even becoming a registered voter is anathema because these activities are viewed as dangerously exposing. One false move will lead to being identified, counted, god-forbid Googled, ultimately perhaps hunted, maybe even exterminated. Given the history of trauma, automatic avoidance, escape and safety hatches are understandable adaptations given the constant reactivation of perceived impending annihilation. The operative principle and resultant message from survivor to child be it tacit or outspoken is: Being anonymous is necessary. Being invisible is ideal. But always be prepared to run. Now.

A consistent extrapolation of this message and mindset follows: We descendants are expected to heal our parents, justify our parents' survival and alleviate survivor guilt. We are, in fact, destined to fulfill all aborted hopes and dreams. It is imperative that we become highly educated with marketable, professions that are mobile and indispensable so we can purchase portable

goods and have liquid assets with which to escape. Medicine is the ideal example. Medicine has always been permissible to Jews in the Diaspora.

Historically doctors could barter their services for goods. We doctors bring purpose and meaning to our parents survival. Best, of course is that it is an indispensable, portable profession that ensures our safety because doctors are needed the world over -even the enemy will benefit from our skill and expertise. It is a noble profession that mitigates survivor guilt since we save lives. The Talmud, states that he who saves a life saves the universe. Alas, each survivor "needs" at least one doctor in the family. With misty eyes gazing at me ever so lovingly my late father , Joseph Heller of blessed memory, told me I would become a fantastic pediatrician. I was five years old when I first received the assignation. The first American and the first doctor in our family. America, where all dreams come true...but not necessarily your own. I knew that compliance with the designated role was nonnegotiable. Consider the inherent paradox of being simultaneously invisible and wildly successful - a stressful predicament worthy of examination by Woody Allen. No matter how brilliant or successful you become even a Nobel Laureate is not exempt from sewing a stash of cash and diamonds into the lining of his or her escape jacket. (This really does make sense -1 million in hundred dollar bills weighs 23 pounds but \$1 million of flawless diamonds-a third of an ounce LOL).

My mother, Fanya Gottesfeld Heller has actually come out of hiding in every way. Her descendants, myself included, follow in her footsteps.

My mother was a small town Jewish girl from eastern Poland. Bookish and brilliant she was encouraged in her studies by her modern, freethinking, Esperanto speaking father. He had no qualms about his bright daughter being well educated. Birds of a feather, they shared a bond of hope and expectation that soon she would go to Paris to study medicine.

In 1941 when Fanya was only 17 years old her love of learning coalesced into a tangible endeavor. When Jewish children were prohibited from going to school she created one for small children that convened in the basement of her home. The school operated on days when local warnings of pogroms were absent. All children were welcome to this forbidden haven where she was the principal teacher. They had no books- just memories, knowledge and dreams. Here her love of learning and teaching blossomed.

Jewish life continued to disintegrate. While the sun eclipsed and darkness descended, her personal god vanished, his memory banished. Her dreams of studying Medicine were left behind. Body and soul went underground as survival became paramount.

Following the war, my parents, the living dead, wandered nomadically through Europe for almost two decades before settling in New York. Mom, you are a restless person bedeviled by painful memories, wrestling fitfully toward some understanding of how what you lived through could have been.

Remaining small and invisible, Fanya Heller audited classes at Columbia University for years and could have amassed credit worthy of two PhDs. Ultimately, the desire for the diploma

outweighed her fear of matriculation and she earned two degrees. (In fact, we graduated from grad school on the same day). These diplomas emboldened her to not only embrace, but to share the absolute truth of her story in her now famous memoir, *Love in a World of Sorrow*.

Since that publication my mother's mission has been to broaden minds and to bear witness, thereby creating more witnesses. Her bravery and vulnerability when speaking at once captivates and disarms audiences. We emerge from her presence knowing that by taking an active stand against evil, ONE act of human kindness can save lives.

On a decaying earth that lay fallow during days that were dark with the stench of death, you lovingly planted seedlings of hope. Mom, you survived and the fruits of your labor multiplied in Every way. Seventy five years have passed since your secret little basement school. Look around you!! This is astounding! No amount of daydreaming could have conjured such a vision. The successful creation and sponsorship of this very program sprung from those kernels of hope and so we have come full circle from the days of your makeshift classroom. T.S. Elliot said:(*Little Gidding, Four Quartets*): "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes you emerged a most visible and mighty force of nature. Your influence and your strength enabled you to reinvent yourself and validate your own survival. And I grew up alongside your dynamic unfoldment. Now, I am often reminded of Faye Moskowitz's book "*Her Face in the Mirror*". As I look in the mirror each day, more and more, I see you in me and me in you and it IS GOOD.

Your children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren are the shining stars in your life. We embody yours and dad's spirit, celebrating within ourselves all that is resilient and good as do the many thousands of men and women including the participants here, who are profoundly impacted by your wisdom and kindness. Always prepared to offer your message of hope and redemption, your legacy of teaching us to keep hope alive will sustain generations to come.

Mom, as you say to me I will love you till my last breath.

Whether by Nature or nurture, I trust that our family, our children will continue your work towards living in a more human and humane world.

Thank you.

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