

NEITHER LIBERTY NOR SAFETY: THE IMPACT OF FEAR ON INDIVIDUALS, INSTITUTIONS, AND SOCIETIES, PART III

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ABSTRACT The third in a series of four papers describing how minds and bodies of individuals are affected by severe stress. The purpose is to develop a deeper understanding of what happens to stressed individuals who come together to form stressed organizations and the impact of this stress on organizational leaders. The series also explores the parallel process that occurs when traumatized individuals and stressed organizations come together to form stressed societies. Part I focused on the basic human stress response. Part II explored the more extended impact of severe, chronic, and repetitive exposure to stress on the functioning of the emotional system and the ways in which human beings tend to adapt to adversity and thus come to normalize highly abnormal behavior. The focus in Part III is on the impact of chronic stress on memory, the ability to put words to feelings and the tendency to automatically repeat the past.

Key words: trauma, societal trauma, chronic stress, memory

AMNESIA, ALEXITHYMIA, AND AUTOMATIC REPETITION

Our very complex brains and powerful memories distinguish us as the most intelligent of all animals, and yet it is this very intelligence that leaves us vulnerable to the intrusive effects of trauma such as flashbacks, body memories, post-traumatic nightmares and behavioral re-enactments. Exposure to trauma alters people's memory, producing extremes of remembering too much and recalling too little. Exposure to trauma can alter memory in a number of ways. In fact, abuse and PTSD particularly are associated with a broad range of memory disturbances, first noted

by Pierre Janet in the nineteenth century (Van der Kolk et al., 1989). The result is that our method for remembering things, processing new memories, and accessing old memories is radically changed when under stress.

Unlike other memories, traumatic memories appear to become etched in the mind, unaltered by the passage of time or by subsequent experience (Cahill, 1997; Stein et al., 1997; Bremner and Narayan, 1998; Bremner, 1999). But although traumatic memories are more strongly engraved than other memories they can be altered or even distorted by what has been called a 'rehearsal effect' in which people tend to

talk later about what they have experienced on the day of the trauma (Bremner, 1999). Stress can also inhibit the laying down of memory involving a biased preference for recalling aspects of the experience that were the most threatening (Bremner, 1999).

A growing body of evidence indicates that the brain may process traumatic experiences in different ways. According to recent studies, the part or parts of the brain involved in categorizing and retrieving information are compromised (Van der Kolk et al., 1997). Stress appears to have a particularly negative impact on memory via its action on at least two critical brain structures – the amygdala and the hippocampus. The impact of stress hormones has been demonstrated in the amygdala, especially the right amygdala, indicating the importance of this structure in regulating memory storage, particularly for emotionally arousing events (Roosendaal et al., 1997). The hippocampus plays a vital role in integrating and binding together different components of a remembered experience and provides context for that experience. Disruptions in the functioning of the hippocampus appear to be intimately involved in the memory problems associated with traumatic experience, and changes in hippocampal volume have been demonstrated (McEwen and Magarinos, 1997; Bremner, 1999).

Researchers have described two different kinds of human memories, one defined as ‘verbally accessible memories’ and the other as ‘situationally accessible memories’. This division has also been connoted as ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ memories. Verbally accessible (explicit) memories mean a set of representations of a person’s conscious experience of the trauma that are autobiographical. Situationally accessible memories (implicit) are those that cannot be accessed deliberately but may be

accessed automatically when sufficient cues are present (Brewin et al., 1996; Hopper and van der Kolk, 2001). For simplicity’s sake, we can understand this as two different memory systems in the brain – one for verbal learning and remembering that is based on words, and another that is largely non-verbal (Van der Kolk, 1996).

The memory system that we normally refer to as our memory is the explicit memory system based on language. Under normal conditions, the two kinds of memory function in an integrated way. Our verbal and non-verbal memories are thus usually intertwined and complexly inter-related. Under conditions of extreme stress, however, there is reason to believe that this normal sequence is altered favoring a non-verbal mode of memory processing. The layperson may recognize this under the rubric of ‘speechless terror’. During an overwhelming event the brain does not stop taking in information but it does not fully encode the information as linguistic data. Without words, the mind shifts to a mode of thinking characterized by visual, affective, auditory, olfactory, and kinesthetic images, physical sensations, and strong feelings. This system of processing information is adequate under conditions of serious danger because it is a more rapid method for assimilating information. By quickly providing data about the circumstances surrounding the danger and making rapid implicit comparisons to previous experience, people may have a vastly increased possibility of survival in the face of threat. At the time of the emergency, the brain makes multiple implicit associations that form a network of interconnected data that are then ‘situationally accessible’ – they can be triggered later by any cue in the environment that sets off that associational network.

However, a memory that is not encoded in words, although actually recorded,

cannot be thought about or talked about. It cannot be shared with the self or shared with others. As a result, the victim may develop what has become known as ‘amnesia’ for the traumatic event – the memory is there, but there are no words attached to it, so it cannot be either talked about or even thought about. Instead, the memory presents itself as some form of flashback, non-verbal behavior, intense emotion, or a behavioral re-enactment of a previous event – the abovementioned ‘situationally accessible memory’ that can be cued by a reminder of the previous traumatic event.

This division into different kinds of memory processing helps to explain the common defense mechanism known as ‘dissociation’. Dissociation is defined as ‘a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment’ (APA, 1994). Dissociation buffers the central nervous system against life-threatening shock. Through the dissociation of affect we are able to cut off all our emotions and in extreme cases of repetitive and almost unendurable trauma this is known as ‘emotional numbing’. We can also dissociate from the overwhelming event itself so that there are no words available to even recall the event (amnesia). Psychogenic fainting, amnesia, multiple identities, emotional numbing, conversion symptoms are all indicators of an underlying dissociative process.

Dissociation at the time of trauma is a primary predictor for the later development of PTSD (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 1989). Individuals who actively dissociate at the time of a traumatic event are much more likely to develop subsequent symptoms of PTSD than those who do not (Bremner et al., 1992, Van der Kolk et al., 1996). Studies consistently find a high

degree of dissociation in patients who suffer from pathological forms of affect regulation (Van der Kolk et al., 1996). The failure to remember the events or to connect the emotions or sensations associated with the events with the memories of the events can doom the person to re-enact the traumatic events later in life (Van der Kolk, 1989; Terr, 1990).

A flashback is a particular kind of dissociative experience associated with trauma. It is a sudden intrusion of a fragment of past experience into present consciousness – one of those ‘situationally accessible memories’ that is cued by some internal or external environmental stimulus. A flashback may take the form of a visual image, a smell, a taste, some other physical sensation including severe pain, and is usually accompanied by powerful and noxious emotions. Even thinking of flashbacks as ‘memories’ is inaccurate and misleading. When someone experiences a flashback, he does not remember the experience, but instead relives it. Often the flashback is forgotten as quickly as it happens because the two memory systems are so disconnected from each other.

Our dependence on language means that wordless experiences cannot be integrated into consciousness and a coherent sense of identity, of autobiography. Nor will those experiences rest quietly. Instead, we become haunted by an unnarrated past. Our sense of ‘self’ refers to a verbally based identity, to a coherent autobiographical narrative, so experiences that have not been encoded in words are not recognized as a part of our ‘self’. We all have contrary, nasty, and violent impulses but we don’t act on them largely because of the ‘self-talk’ that we use for impulse control. Lacking an ability to talk to ourselves – an internal dialogue that is going on all the time – controlling impulses is exceedingly difficult.

Further complicating this is a condition known as 'alexithymia'.

Alexithymia is a word that refers to the inability to give words to feelings and implies a tendency to act out those feelings that cannot be verbally expressed. It refers to deficits in the identification, communication, cognitive processing, and elaboration of affect (Krystal, 1988). It is commonly found in severely traumatized people and was first discussed in reference to Holocaust survivors (Krystal, 1988). People with alexithymia have difficulty identifying their emotions and communicating emotions. Because of the overwhelming nature of a traumatic event, there is a rapid regression of affect to a pre-conceptual level of organization. At this level of functioning, there is impairment in the ability to tolerate affect and to make emotions useful as 'signals' for perceptions about the self and its surroundings (Zlotnick et al., 2001). In support of Krystal's view of a relationship between alexithymia and trauma, alexithymia has been demonstrated in association with PTSD and childhood abuse (Krystal et al., 1986; Hyer et al., 1990; Berenbaum and James, 1994).

Alexithymia is associated with many physical problems and it is becoming clear that, for many survivors, being able to talk about one's traumatic experiences is critical for emotional and physical wellbeing. People who are traumatized learn to inhibit their emotional experience, partly because emotional arousal is so disruptive of normal functioning, partly because other people are unwilling to deal with people who are emotionally upset. Such inhibition appears to be intimately related to stress-related illnesses. Short-term inhibition causes increased arousal of the autonomic nervous system and long-term inhibition serves as a low-level and cumulative

stressor. Inhibition is also associated with impairments in information processing. A body of research has demonstrated that suppressing emotional thoughts, particularly thoughts that arouse negative emotions, is bad for the individual's health, in part because emotional suppression appears to disrupt the immune system. Likewise, expressing powerful emotional experiences has been found to be of significant benefit (Harber and Pennebaker, 1992; Pennebaker, 1997; Petrie et al., 1998).

'Traumatic re-enactment' is the term we use to describe the lingering enactment and automatic repetition of the past. It has long been recognized that 'history repeats itself', but never before have we so clearly understood why history does so. People who have been traumatized cannot heal themselves alone. It is one of the tragedies of human existence that what begin as life-saving coping skills end up delivering us into the hands of compulsive repetition. We are destined to re-enact what we cannot remember (Van der Kolk and Ducey, 1989).

The very nature of traumatic information processing determines the re-enactment behavior. As human beings, we are meant to function at our maximum level of integration and any barrier to this integration will produce some innate compensatory mechanism that allows us to overcome it. Splitting traumatic memories and feelings off into non-verbal images and sensations is life saving in the short term but prevents full integration in the long term. Every time a flashback occurs, the complex sequence of psychobiological events that characterize the 'fight-flight-freeze' response is triggered resulting in a terror reaction to the memories themselves. The result is a vicious cycle of flashback-hyperarousal-dissociation that further compromises function. As the survivor tries to cope with this radical departure from normal

experience, he or she will do anything to interrupt the vicious cycle – drugs, alcohol, violence, eating, sex, risk-taking behaviors, self-mutilation – all can temporarily produce an interruption. But each in its own way compounds the individual's growing problem.

Based on what we know about the split between verbal and non-verbal thought, it may be that the most useful way of understanding traumatic re-enactment is through the language of drama. For healing to occur, victims must give words and meaning to their overwhelming experiences. The traumatized person is cut off from language, deprived of the power of words, trapped in speechless terror. The only way that the non-verbal brain can 'speak' is through behaviors. This is the language of symptoms, of pathology, of deviant behavior in all its forms. Unfortunately, we have largely lost the capacity for non-verbal interpretation, and we have almost ceased to take the time to examine and understand repetitive patterns of behavior. As a result, most of these symptomatic 'cries for help' fall on deaf ears. Instead, we judge, condemn, exclude and alienate the person who is behaving in an asocial, self-destructive, or antisocial way without hearing the meaning in the message. Trapped in a room with no exit signs, they hunker down and adapt to ever-worsening conditions, unaware that there are many opportunities for change and terrified that taking any risk to get out of their dilemma could lead to something even worse.

AMNESIA, ALEXITHYMIA AND AUTOMATIC REPETITION IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Some modern philosophers believe that all memories are formed and organized within a collective context. According to them, society provides the framework for beliefs, behaviors, and the recollections of both

(Halbwachs, 1992). Later, present circumstances affect what events are remembered as significant. Much of the recording and recalling of memories occurs through social discussion. This shared cohesiveness of memories is part of what defines a culture over time. Shared language also helps a society organize and assimilate memories and, eventually, forget about the events. Similarly, there is reason to believe that maintaining silence about disturbing collective events may have the opposite effect of making the memory even more potent in its continuing influence on the organization or society, much as silent traumatic memories continue to haunt individuals (Pennebaker et al., 1997).

Organizations can forget the past just like individuals do, and the more traumatic the past the more likely it is that an organization will push memories out of conscious awareness. Despite the fact that organizations are legally established entities with clear identities and many legal rights, we fail to recognize that organizations must reckon with past failures and the fragmentation of meaning and purpose that accompanies these failures, much like individuals. Changing leaders, even changing the entire staff, does not erase the organizational memory, nor does it excavate and provide decent burial for the skeletons in the organizational closet. As one author puts it:

Pain is a fact of organizational life. Companies will merge, bosses will make unrealistic demands, people will lose their jobs. The pain that accompanies events like these isn't in itself toxic; rather, it's how that pain is handled throughout the organization that determines whether its long-term effects are positive or negative. (Frost, 2003, 12)

Corporate amnesia has been defined as the loss of collective experience and accumulated skills usually through the trauma

of excessive downsizing and layoffs (NewsBriefs, 2000). It is now more generally recognized that corporate layoffs can have devastating effects not just on individual but on corporate health as well, producing what has been termed 'survivor sickness' (Hazell, 2000). Analogous to the division in individual memory between verbal, explicit and situational implicit memory, literature in the corporate world refers to explicit and implicit or 'tacit' corporate memory, the latter referring to vital, organization-specific knowledge that is cumulative, slow to diffuse, and rooted in the human beings who comprise the organization in contrast with the explicit corporate memory that is embodied in written documents, policies and procedures. It is this valuable tacit memory that is profoundly disturbed by the loss of personnel in downsizing (Hazell, 2000).

Organizations can also distort memories of the past as individuals can. Organizations may selectively omit disagreeable facts, may exaggerate or embellish positive deeds, may deny the truth. They may manipulate linkages by focusing on one cause of an event while ignoring or denying other causes. They may exaggerate the misdeeds of an enemy or competitor and minimize the group's own misdeeds toward that very competitor, or simply blame 'circumstances' and thereby minimize their own responsibility (Baumeister and Hastings, 1997). Organizations may engage in what has been termed 'organizational nostalgia' for a golden past that is highly selective and idealized and, when compared to the present state of affairs, surpassingly better. It is a world that is irretrievably lost, with all of the sense of inexpressible grief associated with such loss and the present is always comparably poorer, less sustaining, less fruitful, less promising. In this way the organizational past – whether accurately

remembered or not – can continue to exert a powerful influence on the present. In fact, one author has noted that 'Nostalgia is not a way of coming to terms with the past (as mourning or grief are) but an attempt to come to terms with the present' (Gabriel, 1993, 132).

Critical events and organizational failure change us and change our organizations, but without memory we lose the context. Studies have shown that institutions do have memory and that once interaction patterns have been disrupted these patterns can be transmitted through an organization so that one 'generation' unconsciously passes on to the next norms that alter the system and every member of the system. But without a conscious memory of events also being passed on, organizational members in the present cannot make adequate judgments about whether the strategy, policy, or norm is still appropriate and useful in the present (Menzies, 1975). This process can be an extraordinary resistance to healthy organizational change.

An organization that cannot change, like an individual, will develop patterns of reenactment, repeating the past strategies over and over without recognizing that these strategies are no longer effective. This can easily lead to organizational patterns that become overtly abusive. Corporate abuse comes in many forms including discrimination, demotion without cause, withholding of resources, financial manipulation, overwork, harassment, systematic humiliation and arbitrary dismissal (Wright and Smye, 1996). With every repetition there is instead further deterioration in functioning. Knowledge about this failing is available but it tends to be felt before it is cognitively appreciated, but without the capacity to put words to feelings, a great deal of deterioration may occur before the repetitive and destructive

patterns are recognized. Healthier and potentially healing individuals enter the organization but are rapidly extruded as they fail to adjust to the re-enactment role that is being demanded of them. Less autonomous individuals may also enter the organization and are drawn into the re-enactment pattern. In this way, one autocratic and abusive leader leaves or is thrown out only to be succeeded by another, while those who have been involved in the hiring process remain bewildered by this outcome.

Re-enactment patterns are especially likely to occur when events in the past have resulted in behavior that arouses shame or guilt in the organization's representatives. Shame and guilt for past misdeeds are especially difficult for individuals and organizations to work through. The way an organization talks to itself is via communication between various 'voices' of the organization. If these voices are silenced or ignored, communication breaks down and is more likely to be acted out through impulse-ridden and destructive behavior.

AMNESIA, ALEXITHYMIA AND AUTOMATIC REPETITION IN SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

For history is surely to the nation rather as memory is to the individual. As individuals deprived of memory become disoriented and lost, not knowing where they have been or where they are going, so a nation denied a conception of its past is disabled in dealing with its present and its future. Yet history is subject to the same liabilities as memory – to the same whims, distortions, and corruptions that make memory self-serving, misleading and unreliable. (Schlesinger, 2004, 121)

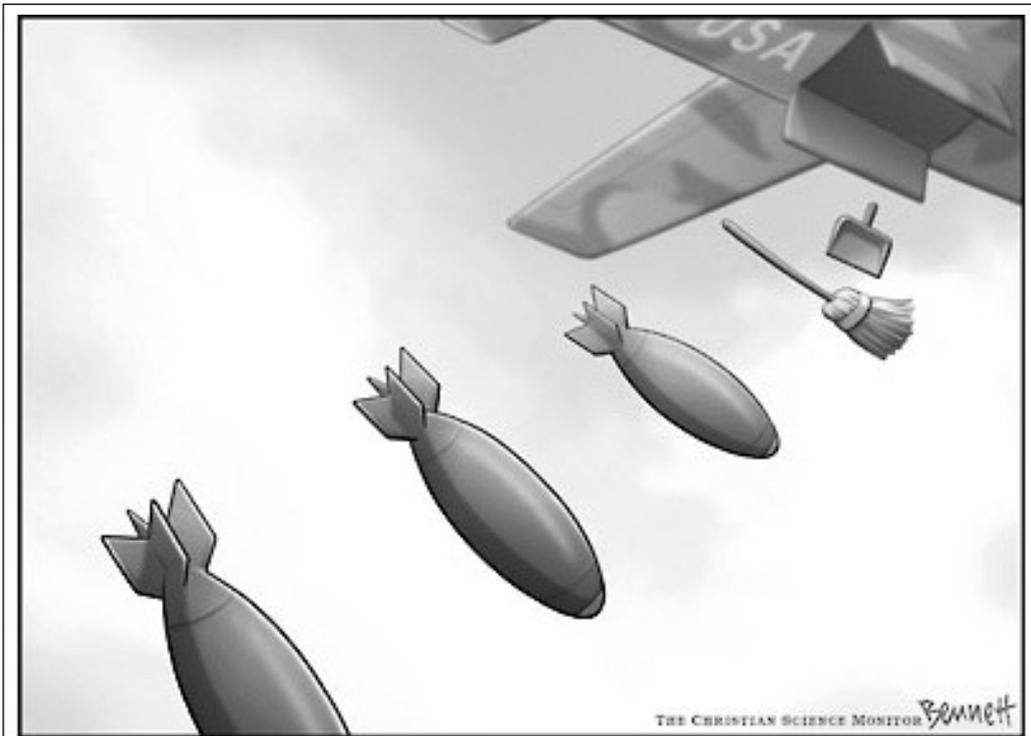
The pervasiveness of nostalgic yearnings, the peculiarity of disremembering amidst pride in the past, an expanded role for the media in presenting 'memories', and the commercialization of tradition supply some of the central themes that have

characterized our own time with its strangely superficial sense of history as heritage – a commodity to be packaged in hundreds of ways ranging from docudramas to 'collectibles' at flea markets. (Kammen, 1991, 535–6)

It is the shared collective memories that comprise the context for culture. Like individual memory, cultural memory is subject to distortions from many sources – conscious intent, the exclusion of multiple voices, repression, the passing on of entire generations, and perhaps even dissociation, particularly around experiences that were traumatic for the culture, and especially those that place a not-so-kind light on that culture. In the individual, the inability to resolve traumatic memory leads to a haunting, the intrusion of the past into the present. But Americans are said to have an inclination to depoliticize the past in order to minimize memories of and causes of conflict. According to historians, that is what we did following the Civil War in order to heal the wounds of national division (Kammen, 1991). Author Studs Terkel has documented life during the Depression and describes how people repressed or genuinely forgot particulars of that time to insulate themselves against painful or shameful recollections (Kammen, 1991).

Refusal to deal with the events of the past, particularly those associated with guilt or shame, can have a corrosive and even debilitating effect on an individual trauma survivor. It is possible that shameful 'family' secrets residing within a national past continue to play a debilitating role in the national 'psyche'. As in families, so too in societies, past traumas are frequently known and not-known – historically recognized but never really talked about, mourned, or resolved (Bloom, 1996).

When guilt is involved, it is common to find a projection and displacement of unpleasant realities onto an external enemy.



‘The refusal to take responsibility means a forgetting, a loss of the sense of history itself . . . Historical amnesia is part of the American way. The aggravated desire to believe in national goodness and innocence entails the need to forget.’ (Kovel, 1994)

The continued use of projection over time causes increased internal societal splitting and a further loss of societal integration. The suppressed guilt of the perpetrators is conveyed, often in subtle ways and through social institutions to the offspring of the perpetrators, while the suppressed shame of the victims is transmitted in the same way. In this way, past massacres, genocides, enslavements and acts committed during wars can continue to determine the past for hundreds of years past the actual events. It is typical for only one voice in any historical event to have a voice that is heard, which becomes the voice of history, and therefore the societal narrative cannot be complete. Absent a language that engages feeling and the multiple narratives of

history, a society cannot heal from past traumatic events and is therefore compelled in overt or symbolized ways, to repeat those events.

No nation is innocent of past misdeeds. The human species is still evolving the means of living in peace while we simultaneously develop ever more sophisticated means for doing each other in. However, the US is burdened by the need to believe itself to be utterly good, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. To do this, the nation must maintain a certain level of defensive maneuvers that include denial, rationalization, and social amnesia for events that do not fit into a view of the world that paints us as always right and our actions always justified. We hear – and



'We're building a missile defense system to protect us from countries that are threatened by us building a missile defense system.'

“The past is never dead”, William Faulkner said. “It isn’t even past.” How Americans remember their country’s use of terror bombing affects how they think of terrorism; how they remember the first use of nuclear weapons has profound relevance for how the United States behaves in relation to nuclear weapons today. If the long American embrace of nuclear “mutual assured destruction” is unexamined; if the Pentagon’s treaty-violating rejection of the ideal of eventual nuclear abolition is unquestioned – then the Bush administration’s embrace of nukes as normal, usable weapons will not seem offensive.’ (Carroll, 2004, 13)

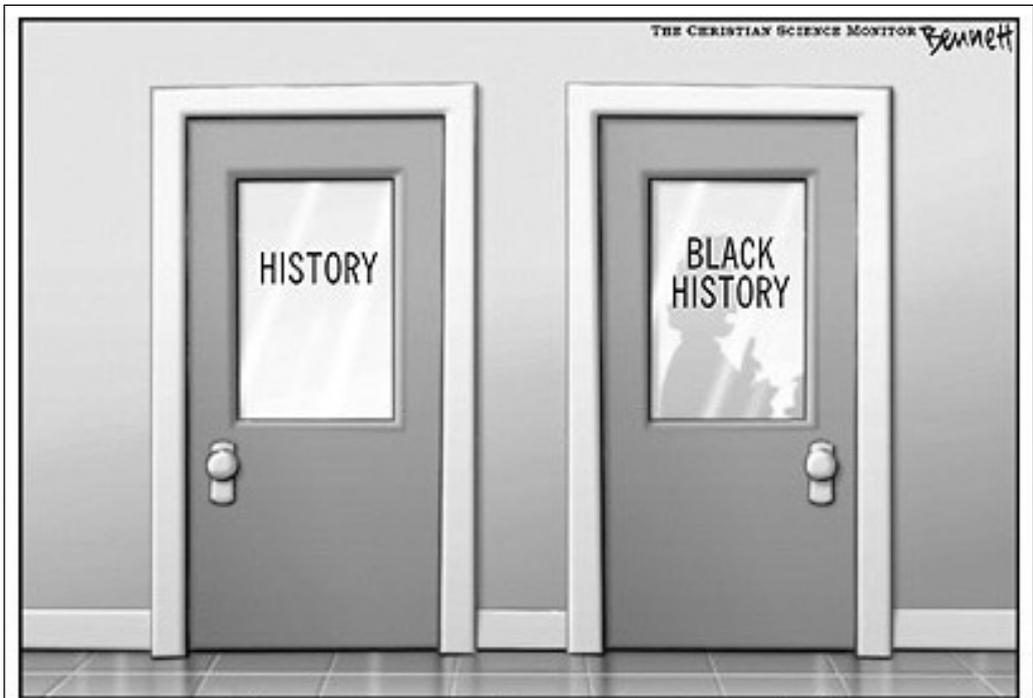
deny – and forget – and then hear again – stories of our government’s illegal involvement in atrocities committed around the world, all in the name of freedom and democracy, and we shut it out, we forget. The scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison is only the latest example of US involvement in torture that spans many countries over several decades. As one survivor of torture in Chile is quoted as saying, ‘The United States likes to see itself with a halo on its head, and whenever a revelation like Abu

Ghraib or My Lai surfaces, US citizens tend to shrug it off as an anomaly. When you look at the last fifty years of US history, it is anything but’ (Rothschild, 2004).

We pretend that it is not us, it doesn’t mean anything, it didn’t really happen, or if it did, it was for a good reason that we can’t really be expected to understand. These kinds of rationalizations on a national scale are reminiscent of the same rationalizations you can hear every day should you overhear

the conversation in a therapist's office when a patient vehemently denies that her parents did anything wrong, even while revealing the daily beatings or the nightly bedroom visits for sexual gratification. Likewise visit a criminal court proceeding and you are likely to hear some version of 'I didn't do it, but if I did do it I didn't really mean it, because I didn't know what I was doing, and besides he/she/it deserved it, and everyone knows that it didn't happen anyway.'

As a result, such past crimes as the genocide of the Native Americans (that includes an early account of US government use of biological warfare), the enslavement of African Americans, our more recent anti-democratic incursions into south-east Asia and Latin America, and now our unprecedented militaristic venture into Iraq, cannot be fully incorporated into our understanding of our own national identity. As in the individual trauma survivor who has dissociated the memories – or the feelings



'Today we'll learn about segregation in America.'

'Racial profiling is only the tip of the wedge of race-freighted issues that threaten to drive Americans apart on homeland security questions today and on who knows what tomorrow. What does it take to generate a cloud of suspicion over an individual, a community, a foreign nation? When, if ever, are color and religion proper elements in generating that suspicion? And if our diversity does indeed divide us in our perceptions of security risks and responses, what are the implications for creating the healthy civic engagement and discourse that must provide the ultimate check on the power of the state?' (Edley, 2003)

related to – the past traumatic incidents, the nation refuses to deal with the long-term consequences of a failure to fully claim responsibility for the criminal acts of our ancestors and this failure compels us to repeat similar acts in the present. We no longer actively kill Native Americans – we just let them die off through poverty, alcoholism, and cultural disintegration. We no longer openly enslave African-Americans – we just create the circumstances that will guarantee that due to felony convictions, 1.46 million African American men out of a total voting population of 10.4 million will be unable to vote (Thomas, 1997). Slavery as a formal institution has been abolished but nonetheless, one in three black men between the ages of 20 and 29 lives under some form of correctional supervision or control (Maurer and Hurling, 1995).

There is a cost for the amnesia that propels re-enactment of individual and social events. But sometimes even more costly is the partial retrieval of memory, what Holocaust researcher and psychoanalyst Dori Laub has termed ‘knowing and not knowing’ (Laub and Auerhahn, 1993). The rape victim knows she was raped but misidentifies the rapist. The organization recalls the repeated betrayal of various staff but fails to remember what circumstances led to the whistle blowing, and the whistle blowers are condemned more harshly than the actual perpetrators. Forty years after the release of the Warren Report on the assassination of President Kennedy, the majority of Americans still do not believe the conclusions of the report that the murder was accomplished by a lone gunman (Talbot, 2004) and yet half the population continues to accept blindly government reports that appear to hold authorities guiltless for what many insist is yet another coverup (Jacoby, 2004).

This year – and this Presidential election – provides a pageant of re-enactment, played out on the national stage. The wounds of Vietnam have never healed. Vietnam haunts this country just as the chronically wounded Vietnam veterans haunt our streets and homeless shelters. In a pure example of memory distortion, the US recalls the wounded and shamed soldiers of Vietnam by suppressing as unpatriotic any protest against a war that has been proven to be based on false premises while simultaneously failing to remember – and therefore repeating – the precipitous political miscalculations that led to those soldiers being maimed and the country split, the shame of atrocities committed, the lingering guilt of an unjust and futile war that killed thousands of civilians and left a country devastated that we were supposed to ‘make safe for democracy’. Meanwhile a critical political election focuses more attention on the war in Vietnam of 40 years ago than on the war in Iraq being fought in the present. Arrows are slung across the divide of decades as one candidate – a decorated Vietnam War veteran turned Vietnam War protestor – verbally slugs it out with a President accused of shirking his duty during that very war. And a nation more divided than in any other election in recent memory soon goes to the polls, voting simultaneously for the past as well as the present.

There are, of course, wide disparities between the war in Vietnam and the Iraq War of 2003. However, there are also uncanny similarities. In Vietnam, as in Iraq, the engagement of the US military in a civil war on the other side of the globe was sold to the American public as necessary, relatively simple, and success was guaranteed. In both conflicts, presidents have been accused of creating deceitful premises for entering into war. Many would assert that

the grounds for whipping up public support for war – in Vietnam the domino effect that was to lead to the communist defeat of the West, and in Iraq, weapons of mass destruction – were greatly exaggerated either deliberately for nefarious reasons or because of an out-of-control paranoia. On both occasions, dissent has been actively silenced under the name of a fervent patriotism. Both arenas of conflict have begun with declarations of the ease within which success was virtually guaranteed, and both have led to a prolonged, daily recitation of military and non-military personnel killed as a result of guerrilla actions. In this way, the Iraqi war presents a social example of a partially recovered but distorted memory of the Vietnam era in the massive outpouring of support for the present-day troops inspired by the recall of the US civilian response to the soldiers who fought in Vietnam. However, that anyone would question the basic premises for having to send these soldiers into combat in the first place – the very complaint launched against sending men into combat in south-east Asia – has been dismissed as unpatriotic and undermining to the soldiers. As a society, we appeared to learn nothing from the mistakes of the past – a national reaction that in an individual is a sign of traumatic reenactment – the tendency to repeat in the present an unresolved and overwhelming experience from the past.

And what of sociopolitical alexithymia? As of this writing, few words appear to reach across the great divide of left and right, Democrat and Republican, ‘progressive’ and ‘neocon’. There is little common ground available between those who support the war in Iraq and those who consider it to be both illegal and unjust. Communication has broken down and we listen to separate radio stations, get our news from different sources, attend differ-

ent churches, and read different books. There is another war waging in this country besides the war for oil and it is a war of ideas. In many ways the war in Iraq serves as an unfortunate externalization and projection of our own civil war. Will we decide, as a species, that survival requires us to lay down our arms, curb our aggression, tame our belief systems and honor the interconnected nature of all reality? Or will we continue to re-enact an ever more apocalyptic alternative?

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESPONSE: AMNESIA, ALEXITHYMIA AND AUTOMATIC REPETITION

Nations, like individuals, need to face up to and understand traumatic past events before they can put them aside and move on to normal life. (Rosenberg, 1995)

Healing from trauma requires reclaiming and assuming responsibility for the past. Only in fully integrating the entire narrative of history and the feelings associated with that history can the past be truly assigned to the past and the present freed from carrying that past into the future. But how is this to be done? In trauma treatment, significant efforts are underway to find creative methods to help people integrate the fragments of their verbal and non-verbal experiences into a cohesive whole.

For many survivors the arts play a vital role in that process and so too can the arts play a vital role in sociocultural healing. Through fiction and historical research from non-dominant perspectives, the voices of women, Native Americans, African-Americans, and many immigrant voices are gradually being incorporated into the national historical narrative. One scholar argues that literature can help, in the case of historical events that are insufficiently documented, to fill in silences in the historical record by imaginatively recreating

them. She believes that American ideology works to silence incidents in our past that reflect great trauma and wounds and that contemporary writers therefore must serve as witnesses to those wounds (Peterson, 2001).

Similarly, another critic has looked at the recent spate of amnesia movies and concludes

that indefinable sense of not-quite-reality is, it seems to me, the anxiety that our latter-day amnesia movies are tapping into the distant suspicion that in some way our day-to-day lives, our very identities, have been constructed for us, with wholly synthetic materials. Political leaders have always been happy to cultivate historical amnesia, and popular culture, itself fundamentally amnesiac its survival depends on persuading

consumers that every new product is absolutely unprecedented has always been eager to help. This is the downside, I suppose, of one of the most unshakable American values: our conviction that we should be free to invent and reinvent ourselves at will. (Rafferty, 2003)

The memory problems resulting from overwhelming stress imply that environments designed to intervene in the lives of suffering people must provide an abundance of opportunities for people to talk about their experiences. But traumatized people, organizations and nations are frequently reluctant to do so. They do not want to trigger painful memories, an experience that feels like it is opening Pandora's box. But without that opening, that lancing of a



‘Our failure to confront the pain and evil within us, individual and in our national history, guarantees that we will whitewash our motives and justify our actions by vilifying “the enemy”. And we will act out the violence and tragedy all over again – or do nothing to stop it.’ (Milburn and Conrad, 1996, p. 2)

psychic abscess, the wounds of trauma can create increasing dysfunction and disability. Given this reluctance it means that we need a changed social norm for rehabilitation after any overwhelming experience or loss. The ancient Greeks used drama and many societies build memorials after tragedy (Shay, 1995; Pennebaker et al., 1997). The International Criminal Court and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission are examples of international and national efforts in the struggle of memory against forgetting. It also means that programs focusing on non-verbal expression (including art, music, movement, and drama, as well as sports) are vital adjuncts to healing efforts and should be funded, not eliminated, in treatment settings, in schools and in the community.

Organizations and entire societies need to reclaim the full narrative of past experience and integrate it with the present if they are to stop repeating the past and continue to grow and prosper. That requires being able to manage and contain feelings of shame and guilt that may be generations old. It means resolving the past sins in the way similar to the way that individuals do – through testimony and confession, accusation and apology, restitution and atonement, and finally forgiveness as processes that can be engaged in not just by individuals but by extended groups, even entire societies. The arts can play a central role in community healing, serving as a ‘bridge across the black hole of trauma’ (Bloom, 2003). Spiritual and religious paths can provide the opportunities, methods, and framework for healing responses that are ages old. Unfortunately, fully integrating the painful past so that it usefully informs – rather than haunts – the present and thus determines the future is a difficult process. Individuals usually only engage in that

process when they have ‘bottomed out’ – when nothing else they try effectively assuages the pain and facing reality is the only option left. Organizations and societies, presumably, can bottom out as well, but the toll is inevitably a terrible one.

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