

Learning About The Effects Of A Tragedy In Early Childhood

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The genius of Freud led to his discovering that what we are conscious of is only the tip of the iceberg. Through his analyses of adults we learn about the limitless unconscious area in all humans, which has a profound influence on our development and our lives.

However, Freud never directly analysed children. It was only later, through direct clinical observation of children that much more was learnt about the processes of the human mind from very early on.

Particularly, it was Melanie Klein who discovered unconscious phantasies in very young children through direct analytic work. With the analysis of children, our learning of the processes of the mind deepened further.

We learn through Wilfred Bion's observations that the mother's capacity to understand her child's communications of fear and distress is vital for his development. A warm, loving and understanding mother is what the child expects and relies on. If that fails, there is a risk of future mental illness.

But what happens if the mother not only fails; what happens if she dies?

I wish to describe the analysis of a 10-year-old boy whose mother died giving birth to his sister, when he was 5 years old. I'll call him Raj.

Raj was referred for school problems. He was unable to concentrate on studies. Since he failed in all subjects the school threatened to expel him. But they gave his father the option of therapy for the child, after which they would review his situation.

Raj was a slightly built, pleasant looking boy. At the beginning he was enthusiastic about therapy, although he did wonder a bit anxiously whether it would include 'shock treatment'. Initially, he referred to recurring dreams about murderous ghosts and in one of these dreams he was a ghost who murdered his father and sister; he had cut off their heads. He relayed this very casually, the implication being that they were only dreams.

Just before my last vacation he showed me a picture on the back cover of MAD magazine. It looked deadly serious. It was a picture of a young man, long hair, head bowed, hanging from a cross, which was actually a huge hypodermic syringe with the needle plunged into a grave. The title was '20th Century Crucifixion' and it showed the dangers of drug addiction. I thought it showed his terrible grief about his mother's death along with the fear that he might become addicted to therapy, which would arouse painful feelings (I did not then know what this portended for his future).

Raj was with me for a year and for a while had been treating me most cruelly. I was dismissed and depicted as pathetic, mad, something to be scraped off the bottom of his shoe, which he often literally demonstrated. I tried hard not to react to his cruelty. I tried to understand from where it came: how much of what he was making me experience was something he had gone through himself, and how much was out of necessity to protect himself against the same cruelty coming from me. Then a dramatic and worrying incident took place.

Raj and a couple of friends tried to break the lock of a cold drinks icebox in school and were caught by a teacher. Raj mistakenly thought that he was singled out for punishment. He ran away from school. I received a desperate telephone call from his panic-stricken father informing me that the headmistress had requested him to see her immediately. It transpired that Raj had left a note in a code that could be understood only by one of his friends. When decoded, the note said that his father did not deserve a son like him, and that he was going away and would never be a burden to him again. It also said that if ever his father saw him, it would be as a dead boy washed up on a sea shore.

However, Raj returned home late at night to tell his father that he had finally realised how worried and distressed his father must have been.

In his session immediately after this, we were able to talk a bit about his persecutory feelings about my constantly trying to find the key to break into his mind and how he protected himself by being tough with me. We also spoke of a side of him that saw me as understanding him, like his friend who understood the coded message. I reminded him that a few months ago he had written out this same code for me, which was really reversing all the letters of the word. At that he got agitated and frantically searched for that particular paper in his file. He couldn't find it and he wailed loudly: "You have lost it!" But his anger also implied that if he found it he would tear it up.

Soon after this he had a session with me which was quite different from usual. He was now facing my two week holiday. He asked me to write the holiday dates again since he had misplaced the copy I had given him. He put the note in his pocket and my phone rang, so he jumped up and lowered the volume, explaining that he wanted it to be quiet. He began drawing again (he had not drawn for a long period). He drew a skull and crossbones with a cloud on either side, with electrical disturbances like lightening emanating from them. I remembered aloud that before my last holiday he had drawn a similar skull and crossbones and had written "one trillion volts", depicting his anger. He nodded. I said to him: "Right now there seems to be a sense of danger in the atmosphere and we have to be very careful." He nodded and said, "It's only fun". I said that he knew I took him very seriously. He replied solemnly, "I know you do."

Raj asked if he could take a look at a big stapler lying on my table. He held it with awe, caressed it lovingly and said, "It's a beautiful piece, you can't get it here, it must be from abroad". I reminded him that he had once felt I was from abroad and he replied, "No, but I know you have trained abroad". He tore a piece of paper and clipped it together. He called the stapler special and unique and said, "You can't get this sort of thing just anywhere". I said "This therapy is special to you, and although we had some difficult times you admire my capacity to keep us together". He said, "I do".

He then imagined the stapler to be a gun and the staples bullets, and shot at everything in the room. I said that although he admired my capacity to keep things together, he also got excited at the idea of destroying everything in the therapy room. He said, "Yes I am excited and if I was offered a stapler or a gun, I would take the gun. Or I would take the stapler, sell it and buy a cheap gun".

Let us pause for a moment and think about his drawing: the skull and crossbones with lightening; and combine it with my comment about danger, which was certainly part of the atmosphere in the session. One is reminded here of his anxiety about shock treatment at the start of the therapy. Consider the situation: his mother goes to hospital to deliver a child and the expectation is that she will return. But he never saw her again. This must have been an unbearable shock. At the end of the session and my

imminent break, the shock and panic was triggered again.

In the last session before my break, Raj sat in his chair and rocked himself backwards and forwards. Then he crushed his hands between the table and the chair. He winced at the pain but continued crushing his hands. I said, "What you are doing must be painful". He replied, "It's not painful, it's a relief". Then he said, "You know why I'm so happy, I'll tell you, no I won't. Ok, it's because this is my last session with you, didn't dad phone and tell you?"

I told him that since he was talking in a reverse way the pain was placed in me and I had to wonder why was I being left. He said, "You're worse than school, this place is worse than any punishment in school". He picked out pages from his file and began tearing them. He said, "Now tell me I'm crushing you, tell me I'm destroying you and the therapy, go on tell me". I said that he wanted me to say nasty, cruel things to him, which would be a relief to him. He preferred this — like physical pain — to keep out the pain of my leaving which reminded him of his mother going away and never returning.

He continued to tear up his drawings and I stopped him. He angrily said, "Why can't I do what I want with my things? I can kill myself if I want. You do what you want so why can't I?" He brought in a *Newsweek* magazine from the waiting area, placed his chair far from me and began reading. The cover facing me read: 'Terror, Mines Everywhere, Should be Banned, Why are They Not?' I spoke about his cutting off all connection with me. He lost his balance and fell off the chair. He sprawled half on the couch, and reached for the cushion, pressing it and feeling it with his hands. He quickly withdrew his hands in disgust as if he'd touched something dirty. I said the cushion felt soft and warm to him, which are feelings that he must avoid with me that day, since the loss would then be too painful. He said, "You think I don't realise that? I'm not mentally demented like you". He resumed pressing the pillow but in a rough way. At the end he left saying, "I'll never see you again".

We see this child desperately trying to keep away from any pain of loss that this last session is threatening to arouse. He started by giving himself physical pain as well as trying to provoke me into being cross and to punish me. By trying to tear up all his drawings (work) with me, he was cutting off all connection with me; as he stated he could also kill himself, thereby cutting off all connections to life itself.

Later, his father informed me that he was stopping the therapy. I asked him the reason. He said therapy was not helping. His comment was upsetting and I felt unable to say anything. I casually asked how Raj was faring in school. His father said he had done extremely well in all his subjects, getting As in most. Then he added, "But that could be because he's older and more mature now". He said that Raj was also participating in other activities. He had recently entered a debating contest on the topic 'Are Single Fathers Capable of Looking After Their Children?' Raj spoke for fathers being capable. My attempts at making Raj's father understand that Raj needed much more work fell on deaf ears, and the therapy ended.

Ten years later I got the very sad news that Raj had overdosed on drugs and died. One wonders: if the therapy was not stopped, would it have saved his life? We will never know.

Conclusion

It is mainly insights derived from the analysis of children that give a wider learning about childhood experiences. The aims of analysis combines research and therapy. There is no contradiction in this, since one of Freud's greatest discoveries was that insight is therapeutic. It is in childhood and early childhood that character is formed, and one can observe the interplay of relationships, anxieties and

defences being organised into what later become personality and character.

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