

CONVERSATIONS WITH MOTHER: HEALING THE WOUNDS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

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The author maintains a clinical practice composed primarily of homeless Veterans diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He recalls a childhood rife with tensions and insecurities, particularly in regard to his struggles with academic performance and the reactions of his parents. As an adult, he developed a deepening appreciation and understanding of the traumas suffered by his parents in Eastern Europe during World War II, and their direct impact on his personal and professional life. A signal event—his attendance of a workshop focused on the transgenerational aspects of the Holocaust—prompts an intimate, revealing, and ultimately healing dialogue with his mother.

Part One

My story begins before my birth – as do the similar stories of thousands of others. I was the first among my siblings to be born in the United States. My birth came less than six months after my family arrived from a refugee camp in Germany, their last European home, after having spent most of World War II in Hitler's work camps. After Hitler's armies invaded, political chaos was rampant in their native Poland and my parents were fearful for their lives. They feared they would be killed by the *partisanca*, a Ukrainian faction with territorial acquisition and political control as their goals. They witnessed murders and the destruction of property and livestock, forcing them to take refuge in the church at night until that too became unsafe. Their quiet lives had suddenly been thrown into the turmoil and trauma of war.

Not knowing what to do, they were eventually told by the German army that things were so unstable that they would be moved to a safer place in Central Poland. The continuing nightmare and a "promise" of safety by the Germans only served to awaken a deeper fear, mistrust and a more profound sense of helplessness. Leaving everything behind and accompanied by three very young daughters, an uncle and a grandmother, they

were packed into cattle cars with no food, water or sanitation facilities, nearly smothered by other people. A constant fear that the wrong word or gesture would bring instant death marked the beginning of a journey that would forever change their lives, destinies and family history. When treated in such degrading and threatening ways, all experiences are forever changed, unleashing the beast of chaos, confusion, anger, fear and instability that haunts those involved as well as those close to them for life.

My family didn't know at the time that they boarded the *last* train from their community to the work camps. It is impossible to say what might have happened had they not done so, but I can imagine that I likely would not have had an opportunity to learn of these events. However, my family was resilient and – like many others – survived the Holocaust that Hitler and his army perpetrated on millions of people. I had learned much about this massive trauma and felt obligated to not forget. For years I thought how lucky I was to have been born in the United States, escaping all those overwhelming and dreadful experiences. Indeed I was lucky, but being born in the United States didn't mean that I was spared the wrath of this trauma. I came to learn how

the beast of Trauma endures and continues to grow long after its insult ends, indiscriminately victimizing those who get close to it.

Part Two

I most vividly recall her displeasure—the facial expressions, the words, the actions that my schoolwork, each project, each essay, each assignment would elicit from my mother. I never seemed to match the success of my brothers and sisters, causing what felt like a very different light to be cast on me within the household. While my siblings excelled in numerous ways, I struggled, assuming a persona of “the dumb one,” an unsought role that I would live out over time. So profound was this role that I later realized that it had followed me into adulthood and was the subconscious (and at times very conscious) self-image I carried. The differences between my achievements and those of my siblings often incurred Mother’s displeasure.

It was easy to remember her tenderness as well as her sternness, wanting to *forget* the sternness—that not uncommonly became anger—and striving always to be pleasing in order to attract that tenderness. I too often attracted only her wrath. Yet somewhere inside was a determination and a belief that I had much more to offer, challenging my “assignment” as dumb and problematic. Little did I know the struggle that waited and how hard I would have to work; all the while feeling that it wasn’t hard enough.

After completing high school—which at times entailed great struggle both academically and emotionally—I wanted to go to college, and felt deeply that I could succeed in doing so. But I knew that my high school performance and my financial situation limited my options to a community college. I also knew that if I were going to pursue any academic goals, I would be on my own. My parents thought I was wasting my time. They discouraged me, and offered no financial

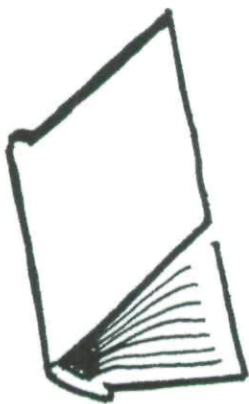
support whatsoever. My high school academic history certainly didn’t merit any support and likely prompted the judgment that I was an unfit candidate for a higher education.

Accepting the reality of this predicament, I did the only thing I *could* do: work and pay my own way. Fortunately, I was allowed to live at home at no expense and had a car to get around. And although it was difficult to carry on in an environment that was not always supportive, my belief and faith proved to be invaluable allies. My first quarter grades earned a place on the President’s List for the first time in my life. I actually didn’t know how to react. When my mother saw the certificate, she didn’t appreciate its meaning and told me that I should do something more practical in life, like being a mechanic. Undeterred, my faith and belief grew. In time, I completed two years of community college studies, enrolled at the University (after initially being turned away) and earned two degrees, a Bachelors and a Masters, proving wrong every aptitude test I ever took.

With time and achievement, I sensed that my mother was coming to appreciate me in a new light, and I in turn came to appreciate her importance to me at a deeper level. Although she didn’t completely understand what my education and chosen life’s work was about—her life experience had not exposed her to anything like it—she developed a healthy curiosity about it. After my father’s long, difficult illness and death, my relationship with my mother began to refocus; it shifted from caring for an ailing husband and father to our own lives, including the experiences my mother had endured before, during and after World War II. Conversations—true, revealing conversations—began between us, affording an awakening of the legacy of our family.

Part Three

Mothers hold a very special, well-deserved place of esteem in our culture. It is



Mother who has the honor and distinction of bringing us into existence, nurturing us and ensuring that we thrive, ideally with Father, as we grow and develop. Our experiences with Mother and Father (or the lack thereof) influence our identities, our values, our sense of purpose and the essence of who we become in life.

Mother, like Father, also always entails a dual identity. Mother, the bearer of life, the nurturer, the caregiver, the supporter, the giver and teacher of love, versus Mother, the person, frail, needy, vulnerable and insecure. Clearly, the latter is not the image we revere or want to accept as it conflicts with our need for an unassailable mother.

Healthy mothers foster healthy lives for their children and contribute in turn to a healthy society. However, the experience of Mother can also wound, confuse, cause distress and create chaos that is life-long, with implications far beyond the person directly touched. Frequently, it is not the intent of Mother to wound; often, Mother is the victim of overwhelming life events that are traumatic, unresolved and influential in the life of her child.

Trauma, particularly trauma that precipitates Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), is a common and significant feature in the experience of too many women on a global basis, most of whom are mothers. PTSD contributes to and facilitates a destructiveness and chaos that has the power to plague and disable. Traumatic events involve many contexts and causes, but interpersonal trauma such as rape, assault, abuse, betrayal, rejection and abandonment have become too common among women. Time alone is unfortunately not an effective healer for these experiences. The consequences of these kinds of events take many forms, such as disproportionate, poorly-controlled anger; poor self esteem; an inability to relate to others; a lack of confidence in relationships; isolation, and a broad range of identity issues that can paralyze

efforts to assume a care-taker's role. And these are but a *few* of the manifestations of trauma – the hauntingly persistent beast of trauma – for many mothers.

Part Four

As our conversations continued, the relationship with my mother deepened. I began to gain a whole new perspective on her life and its consequences on my own. Mother was not an image any more; she became a real, unique woman who endured much suffering and trauma in her life, and also happened to be my mother. She never had occasion to put these experiences into context or to understand them, but knew they had intruded unwantingly into her life on an almost daily basis. She had survived and escaped one of mankind's darkest times, but peace for her was elusive except for her faith. Her spirituality, faith and belief emerged as her way of coming to terms with this experience. God spared her life and left her family intact: a gift she never forgot.

It wasn't until later in my own development that I came to recognize something that had been there all the time. I remembered going to a workshop that dealt with the transgenerational aspects of the Holocaust and later coming to visit my mother, telling her of my experience. She seemed cautiously open when I asked her if she remembered the death camps, a topic we had never specifically discussed. She sighed, took a deep breath and said, "I was aware that something was going on – people disappeared and trainloads of people passed by frequently – but people were too afraid to ask what was happening, fearing for their lives." She also revealed that her biggest fear was actually the Allied bombers that flew over in the hundreds, shaking the buildings and everything in them. They were situated near a munitions factory (disguised as a cigarette factory) and everyone feared being bombed into oblivion. As we talked, her demeanor suddenly began to

change rapidly, as if she was there again. She began to cry and tremble, barely able to tell me that she had to stop because she couldn't talk about it anymore. I felt dreadful, as the last thing I wanted to do was upset my mother. At this point I too was shaken – not just by the abrupt emotional turn, but also by the realization that my mother had PTSD.

Our conversations continued. More experiences emerged. These also came in emotional ways, telling of her fear when a German soldier inadvertently bumped my sister, a baby at the time, in the forehead with the butt of his rifle. The horror and fear my mother felt emerged more through her body than her words. I was mindful to avoid becoming my mother's therapist, and was able to share insights that I had learned about trauma in an intimate way, appropriate to mother and son. Trauma, however, has many dimensions and as much as I would have liked to have thought that I could control the beast, I knew to aspire only to be content with acceptance and understanding.

Part Five

The conversations with my mother challenged me to be a son in a capacity I had never considered before. As time went on I found myself sensing a growing internal discomfort that seemed psychologically and emotionally rooted but obscured at its source. Images began to intrude in my thoughts that were very painful and unwanted. Intense glimpses of unpleasant and frightening experiences from my childhood began to emerge. I saw images of my younger self, protecting myself from a severe beating by my father. I heard the words "dummy," "jackass," and "stupid" resonating in my head, not knowing where they were coming from or why. I had heard and felt this all before, and wondered again what I had done and whether I was a bad person. I so enjoyed my conversations with my mother. . . why was this coming now? The thoughts and feelings forced

me to limit the frequency and periods I could spend with mother, and the passage of time just seemed to intensify the intrusions.

I tried to hide what was happening but with no real success, particularly as it pertained to fooling my mother. As I sat in her kitchen one afternoon, she looked at me and asked, "What's wrong? You seem more sullen and distant." I looked back at her, unable to hide my feelings of sadness and pain, and began telling her about the many things that had been going through my head. I told her that it wasn't my intent to hurt her, that I didn't want what I was experiencing, and that I didn't feel like I had any control over it. I didn't know why these things were happening. "I keep hearing you and Dad calling me dumb, stupid and a jackass," I admitted. I told her that I was reliving those experiences, that I didn't know why nor did I want it to continue.

I remembered covering my head, crying and being so frightened after my father beat me for breaking a bottle of milk that had slipped out of my hand. I told her I remembered the sixth grade when she and my father came home from a parent-teacher conference angry and yelling, saying that my teacher had described me as "a sack of potatoes with a head of cabbage for a brain." My father then proceeded to twist my ears, slap me and throw my report card in my face while calling me stupid. I said, "I never liked report card time because I thought I would be beaten and called dumb." I told her that I wasn't sure why all these things were coming up and that I certainly wasn't looking for this to happen. I went on to tell her that my relationship with her was very important and that I wasn't saying these things out of anger, but out of honesty. I then said that I didn't believe I was stupid and was proud of all that I had accomplished in spite of my struggles with those feelings.

Something began to happen to me at this point that I had always felt rather difficult to

put into words, but a sense of relief or comfort began to emerge from all the heart-wrenching emotion. I was still very emotional and as tears welled in my eyes, I turned to my mother and said that I understood what had happened to me. It wasn't that she or my father didn't care about me, but that this was rooted in their own experiences of fear, not knowing or understanding the consequences of what happened to *them*, and I had realized that blaming them didn't heal. I told her I could sense a feeling of peace, and that I wanted to enjoy the time we had together, wanted her to be part of my life and those of my sons. I said, "Perhaps God has given us peace in understanding what happened. I know that I am not the stupid, dumb person that I once thought I was. I am confident, intelligent and have worked hard to make my life meaningful. I am not wealthy in the monetary sense, but my wealth is deep and vast in meaningful relationships and realization of the gifts I have been given."

My mother looked at me in turn with red and swollen eyes and asked me how I knew I was at peace. "What a question," I thought, knowing it was deserving of an answer. "Mother," I said, "I have three boys and although they're not completely grown, they are well on their way to healthy adulthoods. I can count on one hand the number of times I've hit them and still have fingers left. Never have I called them dumb or stupid and I won't tolerate anyone else doing so, including when they talk to each other. They are boys, who do things that boys do, sometimes embarrassing me. Not everyone has agreed with my approach, suggesting that I'm too soft and that they are not disciplined. But I see confident, normal boys who will distinguish themselves with their abilities. I want them to know about your war, the impact it had on me and the consequences it's had for the family. They are successful in their own right and I trust and hope they aren't haunted by this beast. That's why I can say I am at peace.

They have had the best their mother and I could give, and the rest will be in their hands – without the beast I have carried."

Softly smiling, mother looked at me and said, "No, you're not stupid and you are right about the terrible consequences of the war. Your father was a good man but the war changed him and our relationship greatly. I'm happy for you and your family, and that you have found strength in this horrible experience. We say things at times that we don't mean or understand and do things that we can later only regret. May God bless you and your family; I'm happy to be a part of it and want to stay a part of it."

My heart was full of words. "Mother," I said, "I trust the pain stopped with me and didn't adversely impact my boys. I do want them to know and understand what happened to our family and the legacy that is also theirs. But I don't want them to have the same burden of pain. Life is too short to be dominated by so much anger and torment; you have suffered enough for all our lifetimes. We have been blessed with an opportunity to live again in peace and love. I want that for them and know you do too!"

Our conversation that evening ended with more peace than I had ever felt before. The unwanted intrusions stopped and I continue to enjoy conversations with mother. I feel that our relationship has reached another plateau. And our relationship and conversations have become even more important to me. I have realized that it's not often in life that one has opportunities such as this, and I regret not having such an opportunity with my father before he died. There is, however, a sense of peace about my father, an understanding that his anger was displaced from his overwhelming experience of war. I have forgiven my father and have accepted that he cared for the family in the best way he knew.

Part Six

This short memoir illustrates how a deeper sense of understanding allowed a son to explain a mother's atypical actions – her departure from the global perception and idealized image of Mother – and encouraged healing that transcended generational, cultural and experiential distances. My hope in sharing this experience is to contribute to others in finding peace. Pain from Mother or Father can be horrendous, haunting us throughout life, inhibiting us from living with a sense of confidence and security. If the innocence of your childhood was violated, it doesn't need to be repeated in the lives of others, particularly your children. Understanding and acceptance fuel faith and belief, revealing a perspective that allows peace to live in us. The beast often distances us from those with whom we should be most intimate; conversation closes the distance, and understanding and acceptance can restore the intimacy.

The author wishes to thank “Mother,” Maria Kokorowski, Reverend Jim Picton, and Emmett Early, Ph.D.

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