

Transgenerational Haunting in Psychoanalysis: Toxic Errands

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Editor's Introduction:

In consultation, my first meeting with Maurice Apprey

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It was more than a decade ago that I first encountered Maurice Apprey's work in a book chapter, "Repairing history: Reworking transgenerational trauma," in a book of remarkable essays, *Hating in the First Person Plural*, edited by Donald Moss (2003). Apprey argued:

In transgenerational haunting, then, a contemporary generation is unwittingly possessed by an earlier generation. The possession preserves history, but in a poisonous, un-metabolized version. (2003, p.12)

Accordingly, one generation of traumatized people may be so close to a trauma that they may choose never to speak about it to their children. Nevertheless, choosing to be silent does not mean that the next generation will be protected from the traumatic experience. It may, in fact, uncannily experience what it has never been told, what it seems like it never knew. The generation that is "frozen" with trauma might "inject" messages, percepts, and mandates into the next one. (p. 17)

Self as agency is therefore an approximation; the Other as absolute is a misnomer. When Self and Other engage in the process of resolution of a conflict, a new opportunity opens up. (p. 23)

Maurice described how this silenced trauma of the previous generation is nevertheless conveyed as an urgent, unconscious "errand" for resolution. He has observed over his years of working in many different contexts of social, ethnic, and racial conflict that it is often not until the third generation that these transgenerational hauntings can be brought to conscious and addressed. Maurice's writing touched me in many ways. I found a new frame within which to begin to understand and explore traumatic aspects of my patient's histories. Inevitably, I thought of my own father returning home from World War II where he served in the North Africa and Pacific fronts. Despite his determined silence, and in fact because of his silence, the unspoken trauma of war that he brought home with him permeated—haunted--our family.

Maurice grew up in a small town in Ghana, not very far from a former slave castle that *puzzled* him as a child. The remnants and shards of unexamined histories and other historical puzzles that had hitherto remained dormant in his mind became *awakened* when, as an adult, he studied psychoanalysis under Anna Freud in London, and in the U.S., studying phenomenology under Amedeo Giorgi (who incidentally had been my teacher as well in my graduate studies). In addition to his work as a psychoanalyst, Maurice has served as a full professor of psychiatry and a Dean of African American

Affairs at the University of Virginia, a university that was founded in 1918 by Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner, and the original campus was built by slaves (whose names are now, finally, engraved in a memorial at the center of that first campus site). Now a man from a country that was once central to the British/American slave trade holds a high position at a university that was founded by a former slave owner in a state that had fought in the U.S Civil War to preserve slavery and had held black people as second-class citizens for another century after losing the war. Here was a man, I imagined, who knew how to make his way as a stranger in a world that must have been far less than welcoming to him. Here was a man who took one historical puzzle from one continent to another, and one academic discipline to another to navigate what “haunting” truly meant.

At the time of my initial encounters with Maurice’s work, I was struggling particularly hard with one patient, Teresa, who repeatedly came to mind as I was reading. Having been deeply affected by his writing, I invited Maurice to teach a seminar on transgenerational haunting as a part of the “Keeping Our Work Alive” seminars that we sponsor in Pittsburgh for psychotherapists and psychoanalysts committed to the practice of in-depth psychotherapy. Maurice presented his model for understanding the urgent, unconscious errands imposed upon an unwitting recipient of the transgenerational “hauntings” of previous generations. He also offered a redefinition of “resistance” as an opportunity rather than only a defense. It was a first sample of the many times he would take familiar psychoanalytic concepts and transform that into new realms of meaning. As he asks in a chapter included in this book:

What *implications* present themselves when we use existing psychoanalytic theories in inflexible ways as points of entry into psychoanalytic exploration? What may we come to grasp if, for example, we treat some forms of resistance as opportunities rather than opposition to analytic understanding? (Apprey, 2017, p. 16.)

The day-long seminar would allow time for a case consultation and the topic of the day was an ideal structure for the presentation of my work with a young woman with whom I was feeling quite useless as her therapist. I was stuck a cycle of blame—either myself as incompetent or my patient as impossibly resistant. An accounting of my that initial consultation/encounter with Maurice that day, now more than a decade ago, will serve as a vivid illustration of Maurice in action and his compassionate exploration of resistance and analytic impasse. Since that first seminar, Maurice has been a regular and deeply valued teacher in our ongoing seminars.

From the first session with Teresa, there was a sense of disturbance that seemed to reach beyond her and the problems she identified as brining her into therapy. A doctoral student in her mid-twenties, Teresa was hesitant to begin therapy, having recently left a psychoanalytic therapy that had ended badly. Throughout her previous therapy, she had felt both judged and misunderstood by her female psychoanalyst. The therapy ended by mutual agreement with both Teresa and her analyst feeling defeated. As she struggled against anxiety and depression, she feared she would not be able to finish the Ph.D. program, so she decided to try therapy again, this time with a male

therapist. Two years into our work together, I found myself on the edge of defeat. As much as I enjoyed and admired Teresa, there was some way in which we were both trapped in an impasse.

At our first meeting, there was, for me, an immediate contradiction in her presentation--on the one hand she was visibly, painfully shy to the degree that I felt I was supposed to look past her, while on the other hand she was dressed in a unique, highly creative style that drew my eyes with delight. It soon became clear that this contradiction was lived out in almost every aspect of her life. It appeared to me that Teresa was biracial, but there was no direct mention of it in the initial session. Her doctoral program was unusual in that it was interdisciplinary—her own creation—between English, film studies and Latino studies. She had come to Pittsburgh to pursue a Ph.D. after working several years as a documentary filmmaker, the significance of which eluded me as we began our work. The first session was dominated by stories of her distress with her previous therapist and her anxieties in her academic work, with no reference to her personal or family history.

When I inquired about her family background in the next session, Teresa said she was “bicultural,” her father being Jewish and her mother Latino. She was raised as a “middle class Jew” but felt neither truly Jewish nor truly Latino. She expressed a determined disdain of both of her parents, explaining that she was actually raised by a poor, Nicaraguan woman, who was referred to in the family as grandmother, but in fact was not her grandmother. “Grandmother,” who didn’t speak English, raised her and was her true love object. She died when Teresa was 13, leaving this young adolescent girl bereft. Teresa felt that no one understood how profound this loss was for her. This was one of many experiences that led Teresa to develop a deeply private interior world, one that expected misunderstanding and humiliation from those around her.

From her earliest years, Teresa felt she looked neither truly Jewish nor truly Latino, “people just can’t read me.” This scarred her and fed her shyness as a girl, leaving her feeling like an outsider. Her older sister looked significantly more like her mother and identified as Latino. As a young girl, she was sent to intensive gymnastics lessons, accompanied by her father’s fantasies of her going to the Olympics. Her father made his disappointment in her gymnastics failure well known to all. Teresa was sent to a private high school (this being right at the time that her beloved Ecuadorian “grandmother” died) that her parents could barely afford but reinforced their inflated self-images. She hated the school and what it represented but in defiance earned the highest marks. When the school day was over, she went to the Latin American cultural center that her sister attended, but she never felt she fit in the way that her sister did. Her father drove both of his daughters to be successful, to “make him proud” in his own family, who were not pleased with his choice of wife. Her childhood stories to me were dominated by accounts of her “grandmother” and her father. There was little mention of her mother, who seemed a peripheral character in the family system. By the age 16, Teresa was becoming increasingly depressed and dreamt of committing suicide. Her one reference to her mother in these initial sessions was that she told her mother of her

suicidal dreams, and “there was no response”. Her inner life again became more private and pained.

Teresa moved to another city to attend college. She described her college life as a “continual emotional crisis,” during which she did “field research” to establish a Latino identity, immersing herself in the Latino community in her new city. She spoke only Spanish and dated a Latino guy in a relationship that she found to be good and full of emotional vitality and intensity. As we finished these initial discussions of her history and growing up experiences, she added that her current boyfriend is biracial, but “raised white”. She went on to say that she didn’t know how to “read the cultural signals” and no one knew how to “read” her. “I feel the scars. I feel scarred and scared.”

Her family faded from our view for the next couple of years as our work was dominated by struggles in her academic work, her social anxiety, conflicted relationships with women friends, and her writing. Throughout it all, I was often taken by Teresa’s piercing intelligence, which she repeatedly disowned. At some point I learned that while in college, Teresa and her Latino boyfriend produced an award-winning political documentary on life in Cuba. While Teresa might have lived this as a source of pride, instead the success was largely attributed to her partner and lived inside of her as a foreshadowing of future failure, doomed to repeatedly fall short of the mark (as in never going to the Olympics). Throughout this period, the affective intensity of Teresa’s struggles dominated our sessions, but the roots and sources seemed out of our reach.

I began to feel that the therapy I had been providing up to this point had been supportive but was insufficient. I often felt more like a teacher or coach than a psychotherapist, but Teresa clearly valued our time and work together, so it had seemed “good enough”. Then there was an event that shook me deeply. Teresa had written a paper that earned her a major award in her field and publication in a highly ranked journal. I hadn’t even known that she had written the paper, but suddenly she was going to London to attend the major international conference in her field and receive the award. “Finally,” I thought to myself, “she will be getting the recognition she deserves and won’t be able to deny.”

Upon her return, the first session was filled with an angry accounting of the time she spent with the woman she roomed with during the conference. I was bewildered. What about the award? Teresa reported that she said next to nothing upon receiving the award; it was as though she were paralyzed. There was a big reception afterwards, but Teresa left “vanishing without a trace,” as she phrased it. Although I did not say it at the time, I thought to myself that her vanishing herself “without a trace” from an opportunity for such positive recognition must have multiple layers of meaning. I wondered what it was that was being vanished from our attention and recognition in the therapy. “Vanishing without a trace” was a phrase that took residence in my mind and became a kind of defining statement of Teresa’s struggle to take her place as a competent and respected woman.

After the conference, Teresa withdrew socially and plunged into a tortured effort to write her doctoral dissertation, which became the focus of our work for the several weeks. She would spend all day in the library but end up surfing the net rather than researching or writing. When I asked her to describe in more detail what seemed to break down in her thinking and writing process, Teresa spoke at length, "I don't have a system of study. ...I can't order my ideas. ...Everything I write seems shitty to me. I don't know how to ask for help, total mess, humiliating to show anyone this mess. ...I complexify everything." When I asked how she reconciled these self-perceptions with the fact that her work has already won two major awards *before* finishing her Ph.D., Teresa replied, referring to her faculty and advisors, "I wouldn't be able to survive if their opinion of me were to change in an accepting direction." I was truly taken aback by her statement, but I didn't know what to do with it. How could someone consciously court rejection and dread acceptance and recognition? She was "vanishing" her competence from the purview of her professors. I felt, too, that my own competence was vanishing.

I made the same mistake that I was beginning to realize that I was making over and over again with Teresa: I shifted our attention back to solving the problems in her writing process rather than hold on to her statement, "vanished without a trace," that had shocked me. I now recognized that I was making this mistake repeatedly in my work with her, as she seemed to be making the same mistakes over and over again in her doctoral work. But I couldn't grasp the meaning of what was happening between us. I felt locked into her tortured relationship with her mind.

In preparing for the consultation with Maurice, my anxiety was heightened by the fact that I was presenting my work in front of an important group of colleagues. I did not feel good about my work with Teresa. My frank and detailed presentation was filled with the self-criticism that had so often marked Teresa's presentation of herself and her writing. There was no criticism coming from Maurice, only a sustained, focused attention.

As I finished, he spoke to the group (reconstructed from my notes at the time):

"I don't know Bill, as we just met this morning, but I had the very clear impression from his questions and comments during this morning's paper that he is very good at what he does. So now we have to ask ourselves the question, 'How is it that there is no evidence of that competence in the case he just presented?' That is the question for this group. How can we help Bill find the meaning of what has been happening with Teresa? There is a level of inquiry between Bill and his client that is unconsciously forbidden. Teresa, most likely without knowing that she is doing it, moves Bill repeatedly into the role of a teacher—or perhaps a father who is encouraging, demanding "success". She does not allow him to act as her psychotherapist. Her history, the history of her family is nowhere apparent. Inquiry into the past is not allowed. There are only the dilemmas of the present. It is as though this present has no past. Vanished. Banished. She has hired Bill to do a very important job, but there is a danger in this task that they have undertaken together. Here is the paradox. Bill and Teresa must examine this paradox together. Bill has

asked us as his colleagues to help him burrow into this paradox. What are we to make of it?"

Maurice then invited the group to wonder aloud, to not be concerned with being right or wrong but to give voice to how the paradox was affecting them. A wise and moving discussion ensued. Maurice listened to the group, eliciting themes, and then articulated the nature of the "fundamental paradox" as he was coming to understand it.

He sat quietly for quite some time and then began to speak slowly, with long pauses between each comment, allowing space and time for me and the group to be infected and affected by his words:

"There is an unconscious danger in shifting attention from the exterior to the interior and from the present to the past. After being given her award, Teresa disappeared herself without a trace. We have to ask ourselves, who else, what else has been disappeared without a trace. What are the traces of family tragedies, the losses that have been disappeared? But the "traces" of these unknown tragedies remain unconscious in Teresa's struggles to define herself, to claim herself in public. What is the threat of her mixed cultural heritage? Is she to be dark or light? Is she to be middle or lower class? In her family, things aren't what they look like. Hiding, secrets, what is it that cannot be claimed? Could it be that there is something more dangerous hidden by Teresa's shyness, her disappearing of herself? She has said that she could not bear to have the faculty's opinions of her move in a positive direction. Again, I wonder, what is the danger represented by acceptance? These are the questions that must be brought into the work. Behind her incapacity to claim herself is terror, danger. We have to wonder who else has been in danger? What are the stories of the family that must be learned? She has been possessed by a phantom. She lives a problem that was not truly hers, but is now hers to face and resolve that problem together with you."

I was stunned and deeply moved. I felt as though he had opened a door that would allow me to see Teresa so differently and to begin working with her in the way she both needed and deserved. His advice to me was to "ask the questions that burrow into the paradox" and to "explore with her the family's histories for at least two generations".

"She is possessed by a dilemma that is not truly hers. Your job is to help free her from the phantoms of her family, to return the phantoms to their original sources so that she can claim herself and live her own life." As I listened to Maurice, I could viscerally feel how Teresa's defensiveness and "resistance" were in fact a form of communication of the prohibitions, secrets and silences that pervaded her family.

Under the guise of doing a documentary film, they were able to talk with distant relatives of the Ecuadorian family to see if they could discover the real family history. They succeeded, learning a great deal, but at the time there was no one to help them digest it and make meaning of its consequences in their own lives. Then, ironically, when Teresa attempted to bring this history to her first therapist, she was accused of defensively shifting blame to her parents rather than taking responsibility for herself. Teresa

was already well accustomed to “disappearing” herself, so it had been all too easy for her to comply and disappear her history and its profound relevance yet again. For Teresa, it appeared to her that I must have agreed with her previous therapist, as I didn’t inquire about her family history after the first couple of sessions. After my consultation with Maurice and my group of colleagues, I returned to my work with Teresa with a very different focus in mind. It was one that I did not expect Teresa to welcome. I was wrong. As I told her about having sought consultation and what I thought was important for us to begin wondering about together, she responded, “I think about my parents and my family constantly. I didn’t think I was supposed to talk about it here.” Her acquiescence to her analyst’s prohibitions of speaking her family’s history was deeply rooted in the family’s conscious and unconscious enforced forgetting and secrets.

Suddenly, now that there was permission and space to speak them, the stories of family tragedies, lies, and secrets filled our sessions. In that seminar, Maurice argued that trauma, in and of itself, is not inherently and inevitably pathological, but that it is the lies, silence and secrets that may come to surround family trauma and tragedy that are the roots of psychopathology. As he wrote in the book chapter that first led me to invite him to our seminars:

In transgenerational haunting, then, a contemporary generation is unwittingly possessed by an earlier generation. The possession preserves history, but in a poisonous, unmetabolized version. ...we have an obligation to learn the actual historical injury, and how it has been mentalized and extended. (2003, p. 12)

Teresa’s mother’s grandmother was a “black” Ecuadorian, descended from African slaves. Being “black” skinned rather than more lightly colored was enough for the family to be marginalized. Teresa told me that the “black” history of Ecuador is something that is not discussed. To intermix and intermarry with lighter skinned others was a way of moving the family into the mainstream. Teresa’s grandmother had married a lighter skinned man, but he had died tragically in an automobile accident leaving his wife destitute with five daughters. Or so this had been the family story. Teresa and her sister discovered that the true story, sealed away in secrecy within the nuclear family, was that her grandmother had kicked her husband out when she learned that he had fathered a child with another woman. Grandfather then moved in with his lover whose estranged husband returned and murdered both of them in bed with a machete. Teresa’s mother’s family was then totally impoverished, but her mother, both very beautiful and intelligent, was awarded a scholarship to Catholic school. It was not long before the principal of the school, a priest, told her, “I will take care of you, your sisters and your family if you will become my lover.” Horrified, Teresa’s mother told her of the priest’s offer. Teresa’s grandmother told her beautiful daughter to accept the priest’s generosity, so as “to let him take care of us.” Teresa’s mother dropped out of school, stopped being a practicing Catholic, and then moved to the U.S. Emigrating to the U.S. allowed her to escape the horror of the life of her family, and she hoped to be able to send money home to take care of her family in a different way than the one proposed by the priest.

Once in the U.S., Teresa's mother became involved in a Marxist/lesbian theater group, began writing poetry, seeking her self-respect within another marginalized community. Teresa's four aunts remained in Ecuador, all following their mother's determined message that they "marry up" into respectability and economic security. Teresa said that when she returns to Ecuador to visit her family there, her aunts are extremely controlling and absolutely "insane" about social status. Her mother was rebellious, never like her compliant, upwardly mobile sisters.

Teresa's parents met in a bar in New York. When I asked about whether there were family secrets on her father's side, she said she didn't know, but there was "lots of weird shit". Her father was "the official family fuck-up," the bad kid, constantly screwing up, constantly running out of money—a particular source of shame in a family that dearly valued money and prestige. So, Teresa's parents' marriage formed the first of many "fundamental paradoxes" that were to infect the broader family system: while her mother's marriage to a *white-skinned* American could have been a potential salvation for her family in Nicaragua, it was a disgrace and disaster to the upper middle-class intelligentsia of her father's Jewish family. For her father's family, this marriage was yet another fuck-up. Although at the same time, Teresa said to me, there was envy, "There goes Mark marrying this hot Latin chick; no Jewish woman could ever look like that." The marriage of Teresa's parents ensured that they would live at the margins of both family's cultures. Teresa said, "Both of my parents were marginalized, rebellious, troublemakers. My mother never taught my sister and I anything about manners or social behavior. She never adjusted to life in the U.S. She was and is treated with disdain by my father's family, so she has become a shadow of her former self."

"And then there was my father. He had violated his family's rules of race, class, and ethnicity. He wanted his kids to prove his family wrong about his mixed marriage. For us he wanted the prestige of fancy schools and fancy jobs, but neither of my parents knew how to behave appropriately in those circles. It was a mess. My father defied, mocked all social conventions. His life is a giant fuck you to the world. My mother stopped writing. As a child I loved writing, but then I would read what I wrote to my father, and he would interrupt and criticize. I stopped writing."

The parent's marriage was, and is, constantly conflicted and chaotic. Like her mother's father, Teresa's father had multiple affairs. Both daughters were and are regularly "enlisted" to side with one parent or the other during the relentless marital skirmishes. Teresa's sister was more defiant to her parents and by the time of her adolescence had created a life more distant from the family. Teresa, on the other hand, has felt a deeper sympathy, alliance and identification with her mother and has struggled with more enmeshed relationships with each of her parents. Both parents seem to Teresa to function more like perpetually defiant children than adults.

As these family stories unfolded, a very different light began to shine into my understanding of the paradoxes that permeated Teresa's life, of her careening among disparate groups and identities: Jewish, Latino, middle class, working class, Marxist, mainstream, "The Academy", community college, intelligent, stupid...all competing and

conflicting possibilities in her mind. It became clear to me how much was at stake—the “danger” that Maurice had wondered about—for Teresa to want and to have an intelligent life for herself. The risk and dangers were held at an unconscious level, constantly distorting or destroying her own sense of choice and ownership. If she was a successful academic, was she just living out her father’s dreams and demands, were these actually her father’s rather than her own? If she lived a life of a successful and creative writer, was she betraying her mother, whose own intelligence and creativity that had once gained her access to a private, Catholic school and then to a theater and arts community in New York, only to be lost to a priest and then to her marriage within a Jewish family that constantly demeaned her? In our work together up to this point, we had struggled somewhat blindly within these psychological and emotional conflicts, but now we began to understand their meanings.

I wish I could write that our exploration of Teresa’s family history transformed her psychotherapy. It doesn’t work quite like that. What opening the doors to this history did was to help us know and feel that the depth of the conflicts Teresa felt and the urgency of them were not hers alone. Her personal struggles also bore the weight of the tragedies and unspoken violations that have permeated her family. She could not turn to her immediate family to learn a more truthful history—there was still too much investment in the secrets. Ideally, Teresa could have talked with her parents about their lives, their struggles, the broader family dynamics, and the motivations for the family secrets. But as so often the case, this was not to be.

The therapy was not magically transformed, but there were significant openings. I listened differently. I was no longer pulled to be a teacher or coach, I sat in the room as a psychotherapist. I felt the weight of the violence and violations that permeated the greater family system. I had a different sense of time. Teresa’s feeling toward her parents, especially her mother, became far more complex. She had often dismissed her mother as embarrassingly, hopelessly childlike. Now her mother took on the dimensions of a figure both tragic and courageous. So, too, Teresa began to inhabit a more complex and vigorous space within herself. By the time we finished therapy, she had completed a very successful doctoral thesis, married, had a child, and earned a faculty position in a prestigious university.

As is so often the case in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, the therapeutic dyad needs to turn to a third, a consultant. Teresa and I had the very good fortune to invite Maurice into our work, and through his wisdom and interventions we were then able to “invite” the conflicted and tragic voices of generations past into the room and work with us. We were able to return to the generational histories that Teresa and her sister had begun to investigate years beforehand and now imbue them with meaning and seeking to free up the present from the tragedies and demands of the past generations.

The papers gathered together here, spanning three decades of Maurice Apprey’s writings, are an invitation to the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic communities to gain further insight and access the conflicted, tragic, and urgently pressing messages

that often haunt the lives and profession of psychotherapists and the lives and hopes of our patients.