

# THE TRAGIC NATURE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

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## THE SAD STORY OF OEDIPUS THE KING

Tragedy is not exactly the same thing as bad things happening to good people, or just overwhelming bad things happening to anybody, or to lots of people. It's more complex than that and its complexity helps to shed light on why tragic occurrences are so often the cause of individual and organizational arrest of growth and change. It's really a mental model issue. The Oedipus Myth is one of the founding stories of Western civilization. Most people have heard of Oedipus because of Freud's ideas surrounding psychosexual development and the "Oedipal Complex". But even more than that, the story of Oedipus provides a good illustration of childhood adversity, multigenerational trauma, bad luck, and fate and we suspect that many of our readers will never have heard the full story of this unlucky man [1]. Here's how the story goes:

*Cadmus was the legendary founder of the city of Thebes. Because in Theban mythical history, victory so often entailed disaster for the victors, a 'Cadmean victory' was proverbial in Greek, referring to a victory that damages the victors as much as the vanquished [Vietnam? Iraq?]. Cadmus' grandson was named Laius, and he was a nasty piece of work. As a result of yet another of a seemingly endless cycle of family feuds, Laius had to flee Thebes and he was taken in by Pelops, King of Pisa. Not being a particularly grateful guest, Laius "carried off" (euphemism for sexual assault) Pelops' son, Chrysippus, who later committed suicide (presumably an ancient Greek example of sexual abuse and its possible consequences). Whatever the case, the god Apollo – through the Delphic oracle - warned Laius that, as punishment for his behavior, if he fathered a son, that son would kill him. But despite his perfidy, Laius recovered his kingdom and married the beautiful Jocasta (remember that name) but he remained haunted by the prediction of the oracle. Accordingly, when a son was born, Laius had the baby's feet pinned together with a spike (yes, let's remember that's how Oedipus started life) and then gave the baby to a servant to abandon on Mount Cithaeron where it was expected that the baby would be eaten by wild animals.*

*Instead the servant gave the baby to a shepherd who brought him to Polybus, king of Corinth, and Merope, his queen. These two, being childless, brought him up as their own son, naming him Oedipus ("swollen feet") from the deformity of his feet. When Oedipus was grown up, after being taunted with being no true son of Polybus, he went to Delphi to enquire about his parentage. The Delphic oracle told him only that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus immediately assumed that the oracle was referring to his adoptive parents, so deciding never to return to Corinth because he loved the people he knew as his parents (abandoned by his biological parents, now he is forced to abandon the parents he loved in order to protect them). Now homeless and in despair, he began to wander in the direction of Thebes. As he was walking along the road, by chance he encountered a stranger and his servants at a place where three roads met. Unbeknownst to Oedipus, this was Laius who was on the way to see the oracle again because he had received omens that his son would return to kill him. In a standoff, Oedipus refused to give way when ordered to by the king and Laius either rolled a chariot wheel over Oedipus' foot or hit him with his whip. In anger, Oedipus killed Laius and his attendants, thus unwittingly and unknowingly serving as the instrument of Fate.*

*Oedipus went on to Thebes, which was at that time being terrorized by the Sphinx, a monster who destroyed those who could not answer the riddle she posed. Creon, brother of the recently widowed Jocasta and regent of Thebes offered the kingdom and Jocasta as wife to whoever should free the city of the Sphinx. Oedipus guessed the answer to the riddle and the Sphinx killed herself. The grateful citizens of Thebes appointed Oedipus to be their King and in fairy tale fashion, he married the still beautiful Jocasta, having no idea that she was his biological mother. Things went well for the couple for awhile. They had two lovely daughters and two handsome sons. But there is no escaping Fate. Thebes became devastated by plague and famine and the Delphic Oracle proclaimed that the only way to save the city was to expel the killer of Laius. No one had put two-and-two together after all these years, so no one knew that King Oedipus was the guilty party, not even Oedipus.*

*But, wanting to save the city, King Oedipus decided to investigate the decades old murder of his predecessor, King Laius. In his investigation of Laius' death, Oedipus discovered that the man he had killed in the quarrel on the way to Thebes was Laius and worse yet that Laius was his biological father and his beloved Jocasta, his mother. Apollo's punishment of Laius had been played out through him. In horror and despair, Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself with a piece of her jewelry. He was then deposed, and sent into exile, and lived out his life miserably*

*[847, 872]. His daughters, Antigone and Ismene, and sons Eteocles and Polynices all came to disastrous ends [1-2].*

The Oedipus story unfailingly illustrates the tragedy that is human existence. Even as the son of a king, Oedipus gets a very bad start in life abandoned to die, with spikes driven through his feet (presumably already a toddler and walking), the part of this story that typically is the most ignored and the most horrific is this ancient story of child abuse. The original perpetrator is never truly socially condemned for his crimes – for his sexual assault of an innocent boy or for the abuse and intended murder of his own son - and even his death does not serve any sense of justice we would recognize. The gods make him pay, but largely through wife, his son, and his grandchildren. Oedipus took the burden of this multigenerational violence on himself, and tore his own eyes out. His fate was his destiny and he could do nothing but punish himself for the twinned sins of killing his father and marrying his mother.

The Oedipal story rings a note of truth to us because it is not unlike the stories of the young people who come into residential treatment and juvenile justice settings, who have hurt others and are doing violence to themselves. They have mistaken the trauma of their lives for their destiny and instead of learning what it means to be safe in the world, to manage emotions, to work through loss, and envision a different life ahead, they keep moving deeper and deeper into the muck. As we get to know their stories, the roots of destruction reach far back in time and if we do nothing to help, the contagious effects of interpersonal violence continue spreading through the generations as they did for Oedipus and for the children that followed him.

This is NOT how we Americans like stories to work out at all. Behind American thought today there lies a strong Judeo-Christian heritage which is based on the concept of justice and the vision of a just world [3]. We are not comfortable with tragedy. In our version of the world, the Good Guys win and the Bad Guys lose. God is just and if you just play by the rules you will be safe. And if things haven't gone right for you, it's because you screwed up somehow. We largely and erroneously choose to believe in a just world, where each person gets what he or she deserves, a world of inevitable progress in which the just are justly rewarded and the guilty are punished. Sickness is the problem of the individual, probably genetically and biologically-based and the concern only of the medical and psychiatric experts assigned to ameliorate it or simply tolerate it. Poverty is the fault of the impoverished. Crime warrants punishment. Within our segregated, individualized, demystified, and fragmented lives we avoid resonating with the suffering of others, we are not "our brother's keepers". We pretend we have solved a

problem once we have found someone to blame for it. Lock them up and throw away the key; more law-and-order; more jail time – those are the social prescriptions of the last few decades and for long before that.

The profound existential and ethical problem for people who work in human services is that when we deeply listen, the stories of our clients' lives read much more like the Oedipus story than an old cowboy Western or Rush Limbaugh's view of reality. In Oedipus' story, where do we put the blame? Where does it all start? Whose fault is it anyway? And if Laius was to blame, why is it that Oedipus and his entirely innocent children, are the ones who "take the fall"?

Ancient Greece is one of the birthplaces of democracy and the bedrock civilization for Western thought. The Greeks did not see the world in the same way as the ancient Hebrews or modern Americans. Death is and always has been humankind's greatest mystery and our awareness of our own mortality our greatest burden. Born in utter helplessness, we struggle from birth until death with our desire to be in control, to never again experience the terror associated with being helpless and vulnerable. For the ancient Greeks, human life was controlled by forces that human design could not control and which were frequently capricious and beyond rational explanation. They perceived that we would always struggle but that the struggle was hopeless – that ultimately we cannot control our lives and that we all end in the same place. For them, your fate was your fate and you could not outrun this natural law that governed the universe. It is from this recognition that the Greeks created drama and particularly, the tragic drama. As George Steiner has said, "*tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe*".

*"Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence... Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. There is no use asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd. We are punished far in excess of our guilt"(p.8)[3].*

In the Greek world, part of being a human being was coming to grips with this sense of tragic consciousness, looking existential terror in the face and staring it down. In an interesting connection between the Greeks and our modern world, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay (see Chapter 9), after years of working with Vietnam Veterans, came to believe that the Greeks had actually invented tragic drama as a therapeutic method to help young combat veterans, scarred with what we now recognize as PTSD, to be able to come back and heal so that they were able to participate in a democratic community. He recognized that in order to participate in combat, soldiers had to overcome social morality or *nomos* in order to kill

– what soldiers must do in war are transgressions in society. The Greek philosopher Aristotle saw theater as a method for producing “catharsis” and enabling returning soldiers to be reintegrated into the community.

By catharsis, Aristotle used three meanings of the word that were current in his day: 1) religious purification of a ritual taint and expiation of a religious sin; 2) medicinal purgation of something unhealthy, poisonous, or impure; 3) mental clarification, removing obstacles to understanding, the psychological equivalent of producing clear water from muddy water. He believed that all three were necessary for different battle-scarred individuals and that the experience of tragic drama could provide them. As Shay wrote,

*“My conjecture is that the distinctive character of Athenian theater arose from the political need to purify, purge, and reclarify civic understanding to its returning soldiers, so they could again fulfill the roles of citizens of a democracy....The ancient Athenians had a distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration of returning soldiers that was undertaken as a whole political community. Theater was this community's primary means of reintegrating the returning veteran into the social sphere as Citizen”(p.3)[4].*

It is interesting to note that in order to treat returning World War II veterans, Maxwell Jones also turned to the uses of drama as a primary method of successful treatment within therapeutic communities. Some of the most successful programs to treat Vietnam veterans suffering from chronic PTSD were programs that used ritual and the creative arts. In the development of the Sanctuary Model, psychodrama groups, three times a week, were for twenty years a crucial part of our treatment of adult survivors of childhood abuse [5]. And today, many of our participating programs around New York City are working with Creative Alternatives of New York, implementing drama therapy to help traumatized clients to heal [6].

For the Greeks, every tragic hero – and by extension every human being - has a “*Hamartia*” or a *tragic flaw* and it is woven into his or her character. The hamartia is some quality upon which civilization, human freedom, and human well-being depend – qualities such as courage, wisdom, intelligence, piety, resoluteness, integrity, and concern for others – that are liable in certain unforeseeable situations to lead to disaster [875].

*“The force of tragedy is then that the highest virtues, the qualities that are most necessary for any well-led life – themselves can defeat the achievement of their appropriate end, eudaimonia, a well-led, happy human life” [7].*

For the ancient Greeks, the root source of Western culture, there was no such thing as “autonomous art”. There was, instead, a unity of cultural practices - religious worship, tragic and comic theater, architecture, sculpture, painting, poetics, dance, and music were integrated. For the Greeks, art

was always simultaneously personal and political, expressive and therapeutic [8].

## IS BIOLOGY DESTINY? OUR TRAGIC FLAW

But in the intervening centuries, we have lost our awareness of the true nature of human existence, of tragic consciousness, of the “tragic sense of life” [9]. Do we - do all humans - have a “tragic flaw”? Exposure to overwhelming traumatic events and human evolution are intimately entwined. In her book, *Blood Rites*, Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out that, “*The original trauma, meaning of course, not a single event but a long-standing condition - was the trauma of being hunted by animals and eaten*” [10]. Viewing our distant past from this perspective, it is a wonder that our species even survived, given our lack of adequate defense or protective adaptations.

To do so, we developed some very special adaptive skills. We learned to bond together – and fight together, not only for food but also for mutual defense. We developed unique forms of communication in order to convey information over time and over space – symbols and then language. Our brains enlarged, becoming capable of making thousands of associations to any event. Our memories became more tenacious than those of our mammalian ancestors, compelling us to hold on to information throughout a lifetime, particularly memories induced by fear. Our emotional systems, hardwired to our autonomic nervous system as an inheritance from our mammal relatives, became even more intimately connected to our memories, our need to attach to others of our kind, and our complex network of thoughts and ideas.

Although ultimately this growing complexity gave us superiority over other species, there were some distinctive problems. Like our modern computers, the sophisticated functioning of our complex brains demanded a high degree of “system integration” and certain optimal conditions for proper operation. Our big brains may have been the reason we started killing other animals for food because the brain consumes proportionately, such a high level of energy [11].

Traumatic experience produces a physiological overload that the brain and body are unable to adequately manage if they are to continue functioning normally. Our primary defense to cope with this physiological overload is the mechanism we discussed earlier called “dissociation”. Although a life-saving coping skill in the short-run, dissociation produces fragmentation of vital mental functions, and the result is diminished integration and therefore impaired performance. Because we have foresight, we can anticipate problems ahead; for the same reason we can anticipate the end of our own lives and of everything we have ever

known. Our capacity for dissociation grew out of another vital need springing from our traumatic past. Our central nervous system is very vulnerable to the effects of stress. Overwhelming stress is physiologically and cognitively disorganizing. Dissociation helps to protect and buffer the central nervous system from this physiological and emotional hyperarousal.

Our emotions alert us that something is out of kilter, not right, not what we want. They are our sensitive “mental radar”. We perceive the experience of our feelings through our minds but because every separate emotion evokes a specific pattern of response in the autonomic nervous system, every emotion radiates an effect throughout every organ in our body. Every language, in fact, has dozens of expressions for emotions that are expressed in physical terms – “a lump in the throat”, “a broken heart”, “bowels in an uproar”, “a sickening feeling” – all are examples of this deep knowledge. But because our emotions are so intimately connected to our vital organs, it is entirely possible to die of fright or die of a broken heart. Additionally, prolonged emotional arousal has negative consequences for vital organ systems in the form of stress-related illnesses [12].

Since one of the main purposes of our emotions is to alert us to the occurrence, significance, and nature of events and experiences that are part of our reality, any disorder, any disruption of established meaning or belief, will evoke a powerful emotional response. This response will not stop until the disparities are resolved, until we have reordered our reality [13]. Our feelings will not let us rest until our inner conflicts have been resolved.

Under conditions of extreme stress, victims of trauma experience “speechless terror”. This loss of language function is frequently profound and extremely important. The traumatic experience and all associations to it cannot be incorporated into a cognitive schema, partly because the brain system that accomplishes this task is shut-down under the impact of extreme stress. The victim experiences and remembers the trauma in nonverbal, visual, auditory, kinesthetic, visceral, and feeling modalities, but is not able to “think” about it or process the experience in any way. Our cognitive processes are dependent on language function and without words we cannot “think”. Trauma produces a disconnection syndrome, a functional “split-brain” preparation in which the two hemispheres appear to function autonomously, at least as it concerns the traumatic experience.

The traumatized person becomes possessed, haunted by the theater in his mind. He cannot control the intrusive images, feelings, sensations. They come into consciousness unbidden, terrifyingly vivid, producing a

vicious cycle of helpless self-revictimization. But here we are faced with a dilemma - the victim of trauma is trapped within the silence of unwitnessed memory. To heal, he must speak, he must feel, and hearing the words, he must incorporate the experience into some kind of cognitive schema that allows him to make meaning and finally put the experience behind him so he can go on. But the biological responses to trauma inhibit and prohibit such speech. The brain is disconnected from itself and perceives any attempt to reconnect as a dangerous threat to survival. So intrusive sensory experiences and negative feelings predominate, behavior becomes increasingly separated from the social meaning system. The person disconnects from other people as they actively avoid listening or participating in a dialogue with the victim. Trapped in time, while the world moves on around him, he is neither alive nor dead. He cannot escape the trap alone, the biological reverberations have set up a snare which grabs at him and refuses to let go. So, he does the only thing left to do - he speaks in the only voice he has in the language of the nonverbal brain. He acts.

Any efforts he took to protect himself or others at the time of the trauma were a failure, and yet images of what he could have done - "failed enactment" - continue to obsess him. Robert Lifton has talked about "failed enactment", in which *"some beginning, abortive image forms toward enactment in a more positive way that is never possible to achieve... a schema for enactment that is never completed"* (p.9)[14]. This failed enactment is associated with profound feelings of helplessness, which is a fundamental characteristic of any traumatic experience. Pierre Janet believed that traumatization resulted from failure to take action against a potential threat. The resulting helplessness gave rise to "vehement emotions" which, in turn, interfered with proper memory storage. He thought that successful integration of memories depends on successful action of the organism upon the environment [15]. It is this failed enactment that propels traumatic reenactment, the profound tendency to compulsively and behaviorally relive the traumatic experience outside of conscious awareness. It was Freud, of course, who focused attention on this phenomenon that he termed "the repetition compulsion": *"He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it without, of course, knowing that he is repeating... he cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering"* (p.150) [16].

After the trauma, one of the most perplexing experiences for the individual victim is that the world goes on as before, even as their own world has been completely shattered. Other people outside of the "trauma envelope" appear relatively oblivious to the traumatic event [17]. For the victim, personal reality is no longer congruent with cultural

reality. The individual spontaneously attempts to realign the two realities to produce reattunement between the individual and the cultural, by behaving in ways that are obviously divergent from their previous behavior. Early on they may attempt to talk about their experience and to share their overwhelming emotional states. This need to talk, to confess, to release stored tension is powerful and important for continuing mental and physical health [141]. It is what the Greeks called “catharsis”.

There is no innate mechanism residing solely within the individual that insures reintegration. The result is that the unfortunate survivor of trauma encounters their own “black hole” within which the light of awareness, of peace, and of wholeness is absorbed [18]. On opposite sides of this gaping chasm are the traumatized individual and his or her social group. Traumatic experience shatters basic personal and cultural assumptions about the primary way we order reality. Suddenly there is no safety, the world no longer makes sense, other people cannot be trusted, the future is no longer predictable, and because of dissociation, the past itself is no longer completely known [158]. Our culture tends to actively inhibit victim responses. As we mentioned earlier, switching the topic, pressing our own perspective on the victim, exaggerating the victim’s responsibility for his or her own victimization are all ways listeners use to avoid the feelings associated with victimization [19].

If we understand that reenactment behavior is a message, a signal, from another consciousness, a consciousness that is nonverbal and yet intelligent, we can begin to understand symptoms in an entirely different way. A schema for enactment that is incomplete will continue to press for completion according to the cognitive imperative. A speechless consciousness, attempting communication with its social group, can only do so through the medium of other forms of communication, through behaviors that tell the story they are trying to convey. If the person cannot integrate the traumatic experience because the experience itself resists words and cannot be ordered, then the person can do nothing except turn to his or her cultural group for help. But as we have seen, there are monumental barriers to getting this help. The social group is likely to go “deaf, dumb, and blind”, insensitive to the messages the victim is trying to convey. Instead judging and punishing the person for even trying to send out the message.

The price for the individual victim is a high one. They cannot make meaning out of the traumatic event without a cultural context and the consensual validation that accompanies it, yet the cognitive imperative demands a resolution of the conflict and a restabilization of the sense of personal reality. The only viable solution is further dissociation – and that

ends up creating truly tragic situations, even when tragedy is no longer inevitable.

As a result, the victims begin to signal their distress in the only way left open to them, through the repetitive, often ritualized, seemingly bizarre signal, symbolic and emotionally charged behavior of the nondominant hemisphere. One man tries to jump off a building, another woman repeatedly runs razor blades across her breasts, another buys an assault weapon and sprays bullets across a crowded street. These culminating acts of destruction are acts of desperation and helpless rage, the ultimate response to years of misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of the victim's social group. The play is performed over and over, often developing into such pervasive life themes that all that is apparent is pathology. In displaying a performance, traumatized people are doing what they are biologically evolved to do: engage their social group in a healing dialogue, a shared experience of pain.

It is our contention that these post-traumatic effects are the “tragic flaw” for the entire human species, the unfortunate consequence of emergency measures aimed at promoting survival that may ultimately annihilate the species. This then is what makes the human condition so tragic: that the very skills, abilities and defenses that keep us alive in the face of life's catastrophes become the source of our downfall. Our response to trauma in the short run: fight/flight, dissociation, emotional numbing and all the rest, including culturally defining a shared reality, keep us alive in the face of immediate threat. But when these same adaptations become chronic responses, even to non-threatening situations, they become the source of continuing trauma as futile signals to the social group go unrecognized. That is what makes up tragedy: that our greatest strengths are also our greatest weaknesses. How can this be? How could we have made it this far with our history of repetitive exposure to fearsome trauma if there were not some way to heal, to overcome our “tragic flaw”? We believe the answer lies in culture and creativity.

## SHARED REALITY OR SHARED INSANITY?

We are an intensely social species and the reason and result of this social nature is that other people help us to maintain our individual reordering of reality and keep us away from existential terror, hence it is a truism that misery loves company. To achieve the benefits of social connection, we developed a highly important attachment system – what we have termed the Human Operating System - to create lifetime bonds among those of our kind. The development of most of our capacities, in fact –

cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and moral intelligence – became highly dependent on attaching to others of our kind and as that happened, our relationships with each other, within families, within our larger cultures became intimately connected to survival. Our profound and innate need to bond to others makes the unvarnished inevitability of loss unbearable unless we can alter the reality in some way, unless we can transform the tragic into some kind of shared meaning on an intellectual, but more importantly, an emotional/cultural level.

Collective trauma tends to be a powerful stimulus for group dissociation. Inducing dissociation - a trance state - is far easier in fact, in a group setting and all cultures have social mechanisms, often closely tied to artistic performance that usually includes drumming and dancing – rhythmic activities that are designed to induce group trances [20]. Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development have shown that playing music together actually synchronizes brain waves [21]. There are good evolutionary reasons for this. *“The central problem for any species whose primary adaptive techniques depend largely on collective, rather than individual, action, is to develop and maintain social coherence and coordination over time”* (p.28)[22]. Dissociation serves this task extremely well, allowing participants in a socially contrived trance induction to enter the same emotional state, the same level of arousal, and the same level of vulnerability to suggestion. All of these factors serve to enhance group cohesion, decrease group conflict, and be more open to the instructions of a leader. Tribal dances, music, drumming and chanting all serve this purpose, affecting not just our psyche but our brain function as well.

The result is that defining a shared cultural reality as a buffer against existential terror is a central function of any workable family, community and culture. Religious, moral, political, and economic ideological systems are designed to provide a basis for that sense of cultural reality in which each individual participates. The main difference between culturally accepted alterations of reality commonly noted in religious ceremonies and political events, and the common forms of twisted reality noted as the symptoms of psychopathology, is that in the former people agree together to ignore and deny the distortions and contradictions that exist, while in individual pathology no one else agrees with the view of reality shared by that individual. Instead, the person is called delusional, mad, or at the least eccentric.

The result of this phenomenon is that health is associated with illusions, in fact *“a considerable amount of insanity, in the sense of being out of touch with reality, is requisite to optimal mental health”* (p.21) [20]. According to one researcher who has extensively studied “positive

illusions”, our ability to redefine our reality results in an increase in productive work, improves aspects of our intellectual function, improves our memory, inhibits disturbing memories, increases motivation, improves performance, improves coping, and gives us better physical health [23]. According to some authorities, people who are highly self-conscious, know themselves well and have more realistic perceptions of the world also tend to be more depressed [20]. As the philosopher Santayana put it, *“Sanity is madness put to good uses; waking life is a dream controlled”* (p.261) [24].

## CREATIVITY AS EVOLUTIONARY NECESSITY

There has always been a borderline between the two realities, that of the existing status quo culture and that of those considered to be insane. Children, artists, prophets, visionaries – and some psychotherapists - spend time in this shadowy area and how they will be greeted in their culture will be determined by many factors including how willing the culture is to come to grips with a denied reality and how well the individual can manage to fit into the culture without appearing too threatening [20]. For as long as humans have been capable of pondering the nature of illness, disease has constituted a dis-integration, a loss of intactness, a break up, a deterioration, a reduction to fragments or parts. One word for the Devil is *“Diabolos”* - the divider, the splitter-into-fragments [25]. Western medicine traces its roots to the same ancient Greeks and the original therapists, the *therapeutes*, were those chosen as the attendants of the cult of Asclepius, the god of healing. According to Plato, it was Asclepius who was able to bring about *“love and reconciliation between the most antithetic elements in the body”* (p.i)[26].

As the story goes, Asclepius was the son of Apollo who learned the art of healing from Chiron, the Centaur, half-man, half-beast. Healing the two Chiron-sides of man, the irrational and the rational, was the work of Asclepius, who practiced the double side of medicine - the science and the art. But largely forgotten in these days of machines and managed care, is the other vital position that Asclepius held. He was also the patron of artists. Serving the god required artistic performance in the form of ritual, poetry, songs, music, and performances. Musical and poetic competitions were held at his place of worship and the temple of Asclepius in Athens was immediately adjacent to the great Theatre of Dionysus [26].

Turning to the non-Western world, the Native American cultures provide us with other examples of the relationship between healing and the arts. According to the Navaho, *“to be sick is to be fragmented. To be healed is to become*

*whole, and to become whole one must be in harmony with family, friends, and nature"* (p.57)[27]. In tribal groups, healing ceremonies are the main therapeutic activity and the entire social group participates. The ceremony often includes a re-enactment of the initial or pathogenic trauma that is supposed to have caused the loss of integration, and a fundamental part of the ceremony is often a re-enactment of the great myths of the tribe [28]. The ceremonies comprise a complex performance utilizing music, dance, art, costumes, and verbal scripts, all in a group setting that typically involves the entire community. This ceremonial activity is used for individual healing but serves a basic social function as well, marking off major events, both natural and traumatic, for the entire tribal group.

Unequivocal evidence for the artistic nature of man date back at least forty thousand years to Cro-Magnon man, and survive in the form of cave paintings, statues, necklaces, flutes and other musical instruments [29]. We cannot say for sure when such expressions of creativity began, although the groundwork for such organized behavior can be seen in our primate brethren. But, actual artistic expression appears to originate with our primal ancestors and predates language. Certainly, as the art historian Lucie-Smith has said *"The cave paintings in particular, hidden in darkness for many millennia, and perhaps unseen previously by any but their original creators, give us a new perspective on the story of human culture taken as a whole. They seem to supply confirmation of the fact that the activity of making art, prompted by whatever impulse, is central to the existence of the species. The story of humankind now begins unequivocally with men's and women's activity as artists, and it is art which supplies the strongest thread of continuity as the tale develops."*(p.18)[30]

But since we gave up living in tribes and have progressively moved into increasingly technological societies, people have wondered *"What is art for?"* Why are human beings drawing, staging, singing, and dancing at least as far back as our ancestors who lived within highly decorated caves? Why would such complicated and apparently superfluous capacities become so highly developed? What is the survival value of singing, dancing, and storytelling?

The longstanding history of artistic achievement forces us to look at art from an evolutionary perspective. What evidence is there that art has anything to do with human evolution? The art historian, Dissanayake has noted three important criteria for attributing evolutionary importance - and therefore selective survival value - to any trait or behavior. The first criteria is that the artistic expression is universal. There is no human group existing today or known to ever have existed that did not engage in creative expression. In evolutionary theory it is generally accepted that if

a behavior is found throughout an entire species, it must have contributed in some way to evolutionary fitness. The second characteristic is that in most societies the arts are integral to many activities of life and not to be omitted. This is particularly true the closer we come to being able to find cultures more similar to our hunter-gatherer evolutionary heritage than our own modern culture. Again, we can assume that an evolutionary mechanism is at work if a great deal of effort is expended by individuals or by groups in performing certain activities. Third, the arts are sources of pleasure and Nature usually associates pleasurable affect with advantageous behavior [31].

Rituals were created as “social dramas” that were initiated by some breach of social custom, law, or ritual propriety, precipitating a crisis which could only be resolved through a ritual drama [32]. Part of the drama involved the individual or the entire group entering the “confessional mode” in which suppressed thoughts, denied behaviors, and withheld emotions could be shared with others [33]. In these group mimetic events, from which our theater derived, individual thoughts, feelings, and beliefs could be turned into coordinated social efforts, with different individuals playing different roles, experimenting with different behaviors, but all the while sharing the same global cognitive model of their society [34].

In human ritual play, from childhood on, costumes provide a concrete and enacted way of entering a different role, becoming another animal, mythical being, or person in the enacted drama. From the earliest years, children engage in fantasy play that helps them cope with life’s challenges and manage distress. Theater, the universal playground of fantasy, is thought to have its origins in a similar attempt at resolution of negative feelings - the mourning ritual. *“The religious ritual out of which it is thought tragedy grew - the dance of mourning... was in itself an action, a response to a condition...an answer in terms of gesture and action rather than language and represents man’s first attempts to deal creatively with pain and fear. Any action at all was better than nothing” (p.5-6)[35].*

What have we lost by marginalizing this human need to create, to perform that is evident in early childhood and then is suppressed? In communities, in schools it is the arts programs that are cut, the theater programs that are considered to be expendable. Creative therapies are rarely funded by managed care companies, while mind-altering and usually mind-numbing drugs of many kinds are freely available. Few workplaces encourage the routine use of play and the palpable evidence of laughter that denotes a place where people are happily engaged. What evolutionary science shows us is that as human beings, we need to eat, we need to sleep, we need to procreate, and we need to create. In creating environments that stifle creativity, the kinds of environments we

have described in this book, are we helping people to heal or are we driving them – and ourselves – mad?

## MADNESS AS A THE LOSS OF INTEGRATION & THE ART OF HEALING

*“Madness, in its wild, untamable words, proclaims its own meaning; in its chimeras, it utters its secret truth; its cries speak for its conscience... The crime hidden from all eyes dawns like day in the night of this strange punishment”(p.27) [36].*

*Michael Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*

What is art for? Creative transformation, in all its variations, all requiring performer AND audience, is a primary integrating mechanism in an organism highly susceptible to the protective, but ultimately destructive mechanism we call *dissociation*. Human beings are uniquely capable of altering reality in many different ways, but this altering capacity can become so profound that we are equally capable of losing our way, trapped in our self-created, self-deceptive, dissociated reality that may bear little relationship to the fundamental nature of earth, air, and other living beings [20].

Victims of trauma look mad because we have largely put aside our abilities to translate nonverbal to verbal messages. Victims of interpersonal violence demonstrate ritual and performance gone amok. Just as the capacity for dissociation is biologically based, so too is the response to dissociation - the ritual signal or what we used to call “the cry for help” - and it too happens automatically, hard-wired into the brain chemistry itself. The problem does not lie with their body, which is just doing what it is supposed to do. The problem resides within the culture which has failed to serve its socializing function for the individual. It is the corporate body which has become impaired. It is the corporate body that refuses to hear the meanings in the messages, the cries for help and healing that are consistently ignored. We cannot afford to hear their cruel secrets or their guilty confessions because we would have to respond, we would have to resonate with their pain, we would have to help them find a way out of their prison. Trapped within the tragic circumstances of their lives, the silenced victims of trauma are bereft of the shared experience of tragedy.

In earlier days, the burden was not on much on individual victims or individual witnesses. Collective cultural experiences provided for healing rituals in which trance was induced, the trauma could be relived and the

pain integrated into a meaningful whole consistent with a larger mythical system. The ritual would involve music, dance, drama, performance and the entire social group would be involved. In this way, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional change and transformation could occur, social relations and subjective experience could be brought into harmony [37]. Trauma and terror, pain and grief could be transmuted into the joy of performance, the creation of beauty, the healing rhythms of dance and song, story and poetry; not forgotten, but changed and changed together; no longer a recurrent terrifying fantasy of the solitary victim, but the newly transformed addition to the culturally shared reality, another chapter in the culture mythical system.

Until modern times, there was a much closer union between the creative arts and cultural rituals than are evidenced in our culture today. For us, artistic expression has become specialized and marginalized, even dissociated, made into a commodity like everything else. But in other cultures the situation is quite different. For Native Americans and other tribal cultures even today, creative expression through ceremony and dance in which everyone plays a role, remain the focus of communal life, serving combined purposes of worship, healing, education, building of group cohesion, confirmation of group identity, as well as entertainment. There is a large accumulated body of knowledge about the relationship between creativity and individual healing. But art is not just an individual endeavor. We must keep in mind the lessons of our ancestors about the essentially social nature of artistic performance - creative expression may turn out to determine the state of health or illness of an entire society as well.

## TRAGIC CONSCIOUSNESS

*September 11 may go down as one of the most tragic events in modern history not only because of the thousands of deaths it caused but also because it so seriously distorted American perceptions about itself and the world. It has knocked America down into a dank and dangerous cul de sac, making it susceptible to apocalyptic visions of darkness rather than motivating it toward high visions of human possibility.(p. 45)[38]*

Jim Garrison, *America as Empire: Global Leader or Rogue Power?*

September 11, 2001 represents a collective trauma and a shared loss that has had profound effects on the way we all live in America. The reaction to September 11 – the Iraq War that began in 2003 - represents a collective failure to fully engage in the grieving process that inevitably

follows a traumatic loss. The tragedy of the World Trade Center bombings and the national response to it, are large scale analogues to what frequently happens in the lives of individual children and their individual families, individual staff members within organizations and within organizations-as-a-whole [39-42].

All too often, anger and aggression substitute for mourning, while shaming and blaming stand-in for a shared recognition of human tragedy. An inability to sit with the reality of loss and move on through that loss inevitably makes us less safe in the world, whether we are an individual child, a family, an employee, an organization, or a whole culture and unleashes powerful and contagious negative emotions that can readily lead to individual and collective disaster. The culture joins together to distort and alter reality in a way that makes life bearable and in doing so creates “positive illusions” that promote health. But sometimes the culture goes too far, or for too long, distorts reality to the point of danger. As a species we are at that point of great danger, denying the enormity of climate change, of the sheer amount of cataclysmic weaponry available, of overpopulation, and the inherent dangers of continuing to allow wars – any wars – to occur.

The denial of tragedy poses an unrelenting problem for all human service delivery systems because tragedy is what brings people to our doors. Traumatic experience creates tragic dilemmas that trap individual trauma survivors in the everlasting moment of the traumatic events and paralyzes their capacity for self-actualization, and growth. If we cannot recognize and respond appropriately to the tragic nature of their experiences, we are unprotected from the contagious nature of tragedy and the individuals we serve will stay trapped and we are likely to be trapped with them. Earlier we referred to this phenomenon as “parallel process”.

The Greeks may have been right in the first place. It may be true that we cannot escape our “fate” but we only can know that in retrospect – we cannot see what is in store for us ahead of time. When we are willing to accept that there are fundamental flaws in humanity and human nature that leave us vulnerable to the effects of tragedy than we must reckon with how to help individuals cope more adequately with the tragic remnants of the lives they bring to us. As we are discovering from modern physics, human intention alters reality. If so, then what are the limits to altering a person’s life trajectory? We know a great deal now about how that life can be altered as a primary effect of traumatic experience, but how can we change that trajectory once someone is hurtling down a destructive path?

Similarly, when something goes very wrong in an institution, it is virtually impossible to place the blame adequately on the shoulders of one person, even if we find comfort in trying to do so. The situations are far too complex for that. As in the lives of individuals, traumatic experiences can put an institution on an increasingly destructive trajectory bringing with it a sense of inevitability, helplessness and hopelessness for all those involved with that institution. Institutions serve as the mediators between individuals and culture and they are designed to support the versions of reality that the culture creates in order to give the members of the culture a shared perception of being safer than we really are. This need to create a shared reality as a buffer against existential terror has deep roots.

Living systems grow and change all the time. Change is a fundamental attribute of life. And yet trauma and loss put brakes on the constancy of change for individuals, for families and for organizations. One of the main reasons for refusing to deal with grief and loss in our individual clients as well as at an organizational level is the accompanying hopelessness that accompanies grief. It is the permanency of loss that is so staggeringly difficult to manage. It exposes us to the existential terror that we talked about earlier and once that terror is triggered, individual and organizational defenses we discussed move into place to deny and discount the importance of the losses that have been sustained. We are culturally unprepared to deal with the reality of tragedy. It's not the American way to believe that life itself has a tragic ending and that many small tragedies occur along the way. We are more comfortable finding someone or something to blame because it provides us with the illusion of control and avoids existential terror. When we touch that fear, that loss of control, we want revenge – we want to see the person or persons punished for frightening us and for hurting us - and in evening up the score we can make ourselves believe that we have regained control.

Our main protection against being overwhelmed by existential terror is culture. Cultural beliefs, rituals, and the transformations that culture provides, offer a buffer against the tragic nature of human existence. It is the shared support of other people who comprise our culture that help us move out of terror, fear and helplessness and move into the future. When committed to nonviolence and emotional intelligence, a culture can curb our vengeful desires. This effect of culture is true for individuals and for organizations. Likewise, organizations require cultural support from the culture within which they are embedded in order to move into the future and not give way to the pull of revenge, reenactment and ultimately, decline. Significant problems – and sometimes disaster – arises when the culture does not provide the sustaining buffering and leaves the individual unprotected. Worse yet, when the culture itself

supports and encourages blaming, vengeful, punishing behavior, than the contagion of violence can spread throughout the entire culture. This is most likely to occur when the familial, organizational, or societal culture has not completed its own mourning, is resisting change, and itself remains riveted in a past that no longer exists. We live in an excessively violent country that fails to protect its citizens from harm. That is the very least we can expect from our culture and our culture is definitely not delivering.

The underpinning of our culture is a profoundly divided one, so divided that until very recently the concrete symbol for that division was the United States map, into which we were divided into red and blue, not unlike a century and a half ago when we were divided into North and South. To heal those divisions and to work together to flourish in a truly multicultural system, we will need to put aside old hatreds and resentments and rise above our only-too-human desire to even the score, to conquer, to defeat “the enemy”. We have to give up the notion of needing an enemy to unite us and learn the skills required to pursue individual, organizational, national, and global democracy if humanity is to survive the next evolutionary steps. At a very fundamental level, this means that many Americans must make a deep and fundamental movement in the way we view the world.

To do so we must adopt a stance toward human tragedy and develop “tragic consciousness” that enables us to significantly widen the scope of our empathy. It is a movement that is not usually supported by our culture since it necessitates the development of an active understanding that “hurt people hurt people” and that if we are ever to get away from the fatal cycle of injury and revenge we will have to widen our perspective, recognize that we are all caught in a trap – victim, perpetrator, bystander – and that the only way out of the trap is to get out of it together.

## SANCTUARY

*Transformational change occurs when a critical mass of people actually can live the vision, embody the vision, and enact the vision in everyday organizational life (p.197)[43].*

*Purser and Petranker, 2005, “Unfreezing the Future”*

The word “sanctuary” has multiple meanings. It derives from the Latin word for “sacred”. In a religious sense, a sanctuary is a sacred place.

Historically, many ancient peoples used the word to connote the “right of asylum”, places that protected people accused of crimes, or of debts or fleeing persecution. In modern times, it is a term used by activists protecting refugees from wars in Latin America. It represents a place of refuge, of safety, of at least temporary freedom, of shelter from danger or hardship.

Our world needs sanctuary. We need enough time for the human species to grow up and to heal after millennia of coping with adversity. We need time to stop acting and reacting as if we were thoughtless, angry, suicidal children. In a movie made in the early 1990’s, *Grand Canyon*, one of the characters, faced with imminent danger, speaks with respect and compassion to a potentially violent youth and says, “*it doesn’t have to be this way*”. These simple words ring out across the years because in fact, it doesn’t have to be this way.

We do not have “free will”, at least in the strictest sense of the word. Our present is - to a great extent - determined by our past. We do, however, have the ability to determine our future. The power of reenactment in our individual and our collective lives is impressively strong. We underestimate that compulsion to repeat the past at our peril.

But, if we decide to become conscious, if we have the courage to confront our existential terror we may be able to recognize that we can choose. We may yet be able to collectively compensate for our tragically flawed biological existence. It is time to use our imaginations to get us out of the boring and wearisome apocalyptic visions that crowd our televisions and movie screens. What, after all, is so attractive about dying? While denying the tragedy that is all around us, we ceaselessly frighten ourselves with tragedies we can prevent.

We are not all powerful but we do have the capacity to choose how we react to the world around us. We are creating the world that we live in, every moment of every day. We can choose sorrow or we can choose joy. We can humiliate or we can offer compassion. We can choose to extinguish all life on this planet – or we can choose life. As a number of irreverent believers have imagined, “*On the eighth day, God laughed*”.

*We are barbarians, yet we have the possibility of producing a genuine culture in the future. But language, the most important tool with which to further this, almost entirely fails us. Perhaps other means will appear later which are more useful for the spirit and for truth (p.264)[882].*

*Dr. Georg Groddeck, Language, 1912*

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