Lives of the Unconscious. A Podcast on Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy

Translated by Soliman Lawrence

Episode 21: The Long Shadow of Trauma – Transgenerational Transmission

"for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation […]" (Exodus 20:5)

It appears beyond a doubt today, in Western culture, at any rate, that our biography begins with our birth, or, at least, with the day of our conception. We explain and reconstruct what we are and who we are beginning the very first moment we behold the light of day. This is also true for our mental life: For explanations to our behavior, character, expectations, and personality, we look to those experiences that we can more or less remember and that pertain to our lifetime. Psychoanalysis expressly shows how the psyche, or alternatively mental illness, arises in early childhood relationships. But is this window through which we look at ourselves perhaps a somewhat arbitrary choice and, above all, much too small? If we are who we are because of the formative influence that our father, mother, and siblings have had on us, then is it not in turn also true that our father and mother are who they are because of the influence that their fathers and mothers and siblings had on them? Once we have pulled on the thread peering out of the deep well of our history, we realize that it never stops, but only becomes longer and longer. Father and mother also have their own histories, continuing back into an endless succession with a genesis that can indeed only be comprehended through myth.

From this point of view, every childhood is not so much an origin as a kind of point of translation, where the story of the parents, the family, even contemporary history are transferred to that individual and begin to intertwine with their own particular history. After all, other societies have placed less value on the individual part of this history. For a long time, for instance, it was customary not to give children their own individual name, but to pass down through the generations the names of their parents—William Sr., William Jr. Even the individual date of birth had for a long time no special significance in our society and was rather mostly unknown to people, as is still the case in other cultures today. A certain parallel can be drawn to our biological heredity, the genes—ancient Greek for lineage, family, genus. Our genes do not first come into being at the time of birth, of course, or even through early childhood relationships, but rather are carried over from one generation to the next; at the same time, they reassemble, to some degree, in each person anew, forming an individual, whereby epigenetic changes can in turn also have an impact after the fact. Like the particular shape of a chin or eyes, psychological themes

can be quite consistent over the generations. Psychological structures are handed down, they have a history that extends beyond the birth of the individual. They are by no means as individual and variable as they may appear; even if—here is the limit to the gene metaphor—they are basically formed socially. And—here, another limitation to this metaphor—the individuation of a human being is more than the recombination of inherited components. This is also always a creative process in which something new and unique comes into being—indeed, in the end, also quite mysterious.

Nevertheless: The tapestry of every single one of us, woven out of our culture, our individual and collective history, is so densely knit that with every step we take to get a closer look, to understand who we are, the smaller and more entangled the patterns and images become. This is due above all to the fact that we incorporate into our psychological metabolism the zeitgeist and the social relations we are surrounded with; all this becomes a part of us and our identity. History, cultural context, family history, are all integrated within and made into our individual identity, which we then experience as something we have all to ourselves. Even if there are indeed stowaways onboard. For example, again in connection with our names, something which, although we feel to be our own, was a choice into which all the unconscious fantasies and expectations of our family history have settled, as when parents name their child after their deceased grandfather.

Such transgenerational processes become especially meaningful and indeed also especially tangible, however, when the psychological structures and family history passed on through the generations cannot be readily integrated into one's own identity. Here we come to the long shadow that trauma casts on family history. They can be so pronounced as to endure throughout the generations, if not seen, then at least sensed. Some alien substance, which is swallowed with the mother's milk, so to speak, and yet is sensed as not part of the ego; while at the same time something that can neither be evicted from nor integrated into the psychological household.

In episodes 19 and 20 we already heard what it means to bear a trauma in the psyche and what psychological consequences it can have for the person affected. We heard that trauma impedes the construction of the psychological structures or tears apart the structures that have already been formed. But such psychological wounds are not only an issue for those persons directly affected by the trauma. Trauma introduces into the world a wound, which, if no

bridges are built or relations of meaning established, can become a void, and not only for the person affected but also for their children and children's children. It is precisely this notion of an inherited curse that can be found in the frequently cited biblical passage in which God's vengeance pursues sinners into the third or fourth generation—which today appears to us quite unjust, as we generally understand guilt in individual terms. Even if it does in fact reflect real experiences. Guilt that is inherited? Trauma that is passed on from generation to generation? Nowadays, numerous empirical studies—above all attachment research—have shown that trauma can be passed on from one generation to the next, especially if it has not been processed by the person affected and integrated into a psychologically meaningful context.

In general, one can distinguish two different ways in which the transmission of a trauma takes place: On the one hand, and this happens often enough, by actually repeating what has been suffered. One also speaks of repetition compulsion, i.e., the demonic tendency of the psyche to bring back what is unprocessed or traumatic, repeat it or let it happen again and again, reoccurring like a revenant (which we will hear about in another episode). The majority of parents who beat, abuse, neglect, or otherwise traumatize their children were treated in a similar way by their own parents. Often, the same violent, intrusive, impatient, or callous traits that they themselves were at the mercy of as children take hold of them in their relations with their own children, even against their own will and good intention to do better—as if an inner perpetrator and tyrant, against whom they have tried to defend themselves all their lives, had been lying in wait for just this moment. In the previous episodes we also called this inner tyrant traumatic introjection, by which a trauma penetrates the psyche of the victim and then carries on its monstrous afterlife. It is not uncommon for the abusive parents to be shocked when they become cognizant of this identification with their own parents; they may even feel very guilty and ashamed of what they have done. However, in the hope that it was now "really the last time," they often brush the event aside. Over time, the repetition compulsion will wear down this hope, for without therapy or other supportive help, they often do not possess the resources to take on this tyrant. This real repetition of traumatization characterizes the transgenerational transmission of trauma in the broadest sense—this is because it affects almost all forms of violence, or at least, all intra-familial forms. In the lifetimes of those parents who inflict violence on their children, there is almost always a long prehistory, a long shadow that falls from the past onto the present. Children who suffer from this form of transgenerational traumatization may trace

their experience back to a very real violation, such as being mistreated or neglected by their parents.

However, there is also a form of transgenerational transmission in which the trauma is transferred in a different way: Namely, not necessarily acted out in real terms and repeated outwardly, but on the contrary, by being made invisible and kept secret, haunting the family history like an elusive phantom. This has especially been analyzed in connection with the generational aftermath of war traumatization, for instance, in the Second World War. In the second generation, i.e., those born after the war, puzzling psychological phenomena, symptoms, and conditions were not uncommon: inexplicable nightmares, feelings of alienation, indifference and inner emptiness, or a feeling of something intangible; also, panic-stricken fears, identity instability, strangely vivid, memory-like fantasies, perceptions, and images that can hardly be shaken off; and, not least, conspicuous and seemingly nonsensical behavior, such as hoarding food, keeping emergency kits ready, or burying valuables in the garden. Symptoms, experience and behavior patterns that do not quite fit with one's own life story—but very much fit with what one's parents or grandparents experienced. The astonishing thing is that many of these people often knew nothing about the suffering or the deeds of their parents (at least initially). It is known in particular from victims of the Holocaust that people often kept silent about what they had experienced, and that the subsequent generations sometimes learned nothing about their family history. The family history was, many a times, kept a secret, and not infrequently children did not even know that they had Jewish roots. Strange gaps or discrepancies existed in the parents' narratives, but also in the way that they—the so-called first generation, i.e., those directly affected—interacted with their children; perhaps the climate of the family was shaped by a despondent and mournful atmosphere, without a clear cause being evident. Children sense early on with their parents that there are certain points that they should never touch upon. Even so, these kinds of silences, omissions, and evasions delineate a silhouette, which, if not available to conscious reflection, still acquires a more or less tangible form in fantasies and dreams. The French psychoanalyst and author Philippe Grimbert described this very impressively in his autobiographical story *Secret*. Grimbert, born in Paris in 1948, grew up as an only child. Of a rather delicate, even sickly, nature, he could not satisfy the expectations of his athletically talented parents. As a child, he imagined an older brother who had everything he did not have, who was more beautiful, stronger, more successful than he was, a brother who made his parents happy. This relationship to his

imaginary sibling was characterized by love and pride, but also by envy and hatred. When Grimbert was 15 years old, a neighbor and confidante finally revealed to him his harrowing family history. He, Philippe Grimbert, came from a Jewish family that was persecuted and torn apart after the German occupation of France. The older brother was not a figment of his imagination, but his very real half-brother: he was murdered in Auschwitz, along with his mother, his father's first wife—individuals that had never been mentioned in the family before and about which Grimbert had no conscious knowledge. Little by little, the author reveals his story: in actuality, the inner feelings and images that had haunted Grimbert from childhood onwards eerily resemble the traumatic scenes and experiences of the previous generation—although they were never spoken about. Grimbert eloquently describes how trauma imprints itself like a negative deep into the child's inner psychic structures, precisely because they are kept secret. A trauma does not disappear through silence; it cannot be silenced out of existence. On the contrary, studies show that the reminiscences of trauma do not become weaker through the generations, but unconsciously remain virulent, i.e., alive (cf. Moré; Rosenthal 1997, 2002). Traumatic introjection remains effective in fantasies, dreams, and experiences, but eludes language and thus understanding. It only becomes more diffuse, more intangible; it becomes a shadow or an undead, casting an invisible spell over the family history.

And how do you break a spell? Naming or telling is perhaps a kind of counter spell: Only once "he who must not be named" has in fact been named, does it lose its terror, becomes something that can be confronted and perhaps even redeemed. But not just any kind of storytelling. Some kinds are alive and can help to integrate, by harmonizing feelings and facts with one another. But there are also ways of speaking that conceal more than they reveal. So, for example, when an anecdote from the war is told, but the really unspeakable parts are at most expressed indirectly; or conveyed subliminally through affect, for example, by the way the storyteller acts, in their reactions or apparent lack of affect; or in the style and structure of the story, in the omissions, gaps, ruptures, and pauses. The sensitive points in the story are often difficult to decipher, for example, because the narrator's speech is muddled or involves such extravagant detail that it obscures the matter more than explains it; and finally, also well-known, is when the same anecdotes are always repeated, in which questions are rather pushed aside than really answered. Let there be no misunderstanding: This distorted, muddled, or veiled way of narrating is not necessarily a deliberate act of deception. It is rather that the way of speaking even

eludes the narrator themself. Reflected in the narrative form is a part of the inner numbness, confusion, or turmoil that has been left in the psyche by the trauma. With these narratives, it is important not only to pay attention to *what* the person says, but also to what they do not say, what is said implicitly. The *way* the person speaks often reveals a struggle with the unspeakable, but sometimes also a quite conscious unwillingness to speak at all. Many psychodynamic-oriented clinical interviews focus attention on the narrative style and the coherence of the narration. So, for example, in the AAI, the Adult Attachment Interview, a renowned interview procedure on attachment styles among adults. A narration style that is rigid, chaotic, or fragmentary, sometimes even breaking off completely and ending in unfathomable silence, is more common especially among those still burdened by unprocessed traumas.

Silence: a specific, yet no less common, way of expressing something. This was already mentioned in the example of Philipp Grimbert's story *Secret*. The reasons for the silence can vary considerably, whereby a distinction must be made between transgenerational processes in families of perpetrators and in families of victims. The children of perpetrators, for example from the Nazi era, also had to suffer under the deeds and the silence of their parents, all the more so as they were often also directly subject to severe aggression and projections. It is not uncommon to describe the silence of the perpetrators as repression, for example because of feelings of guilt. In fact, this is often less a matter of repressed feelings of guilt and lost memories than of a deliberate concealment and silence, which at best arises from a certain social shame. Renowned on this topic are the studies of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research—among its most well-known representatives was Theodor W. Adorno; these studies analyzed groups of supposedly former-Nazis. In one-on-one interviews, these people had large "memory gaps," disavowed antisemitism and other beliefs as well as acts of violence, and invoked their duty to follow "the orders of their superiors." If, however, these people were interviewed in a group in which they were 'among comrades,' the character of the conversation changed and there was a cynical, arrogant mutual understanding, even a shared heroism about their own Nazi entanglements. In these interviews there was not a trace of guilt; removing the conditions of social shame was all that was necessary in order to loosen their tongues.

Feelings of guilt turned up much more often on the side of the victims, for example in the form of survivor guilt or paradoxical guilt, which we will hear about in another episode.

Here, the silence centers around something unspeakable for which no words or feelings can be found; a horror that is too overwhelming, feelings of guilt or shame that are too powerful; perhaps also the expectation that silence would protect one's own family, true to the old adage, "let sleeping dogs lie"; not least, the attempt to negate the identification with victimhood, even if this comes at the price of denying a piece of one's own identity. Often it is only the third generation, i.e., the grandchildren, who break the spell of silence and dare to approach the subject, certainly also because they have a greater distance to it. Telling and coping with one's own family history—if necessary, also in or as part of therapy—is one of the essential ways of making the unresolved history one's own and removing the blind spot in one's own identity, according to the thought:

"What of your father you inherit, | Earn it, that it be possessed."
(Goethe, Faust I, verse 682 f.).

Not infrequently, narrative also serves to bring justice to what has been lost, that which lies under the spell of trauma. In the case of Grimbert, to remember the deceased half-brother and his mother. What is true for Scheherazade in the tale *One Thousand and One Nights* is perhaps also true for the world of psychological meaning in general: only those who tell their story, survive.

Literature References:

Bar-On, D. (1993). Die Last des Schweigens. Frankfurt am Main. Campus

Faimberg, H. (1987). Die Ineinanderrückung (Telescoping) der Generationen: Zur Genealogie gewisser Identifizierungen. Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse, 20:114-142.

Freud, S. (1913/1999). Totem und Tabu. Gesammelte Werke, Band IX. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Goethe, Faust I

Grubrich-Simitis, I. (1979). Extremtraumatisierungen als kumulatives Trauma: Psychoanalytische Studien über seelische Nachwirkungen der Konzentrationslagerhaft bei Überlebenden und ihren Kindern. Psyche – Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse, 33 (11):991-1023.

Moré, A. (2013). Die unbewusste Weitergabe von Traumata und Schuldverstrickungen an nachfolgende Generationen. Journal für Psychologie, 21/2.

Rosenthal, G. (1997). Der Holocaust im Leben von drei Generationen. Familien von Überlebenden der Shoah und von Nazi-Tätern. Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag.