

How to work through transgenerational transmission of traumas?—A personal path of awareness

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Abstract: In this short psycho-autobiography, I disclose the influence of family inheritance in my own path of life, discuss the integrating power of awareness and share broader reflections on the way we can work out painful legacies.

Childhood albums are amazing documents. Mine opens with a tiny watercolor sent by a family friend to mark my birth. It pictures a smiling baby peeping out of a Flawa cotton wool box and makes a tender play on words with our family name: C, O, two T's, O, N—I often had to specify “*Cotton, with two T's!*” Originally, it is an Italian surname *Cotone* which had only one T. The watercolor suggests softness and warmth... But here is what my mother wrote: “*We don't think Marc-André will be raised in 'cotton'.*” What did she mean by that? At first, I was unable to think anything about it. As a result of repression, I was forbidden to access my feelings. “*With Marc's screams, you need strong eardrums,*” she also penned in her perfect handwriting. “*Mommy is proud because baby has just inaugurated his vase. Just think, at 11 days old!*” Here was a mother, struggling with her firstborn, who didn't know how to meet his most essential needs—*emotional awareness, physical touch, breastfeeding on demand...*—and this mother was mine! I had to respond to harsh demands instead, as shown by the well-educated little toddler in subsequent photographs. Left with emotional deficiencies, I was to cope with an insecure sense of attachment that I restaged in later life in my relationships, longing for the phantom of the truly loving mom missing in my childhood. Could this possibly be an outcome of transgenerational transmission of traumas?

Demands and projects

At the time of my birth, in late February 1958, my father was undertaking engineering studies that would make him unavailable. “*I didn't know how to deal with children*”, he repented later. He was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and grew up in a working-class neighborhood on the shores of the lake. Dad was the eldest of two boys and was trying to make up for a sense of shortcoming that stemmed from a despised family background. His father was a basket maker, as was his grandfather who came from Southern France—more about him later. My mother was also the eldest of four daughters, or so she thought until she discovered an older half-brother. She was born in Geneva too but grew up in the rural canton of Fribourg. Her parents ran a well-known delicatessen there. In 1949, they emigrated to one of Geneva's poorest suburbs under circumstances that I will discuss. What were their concerns at the time of my birth? What loyalties did they have to their own parents? These are the “fairies” of popular tales bending over a child's crib. In psychological terms, we call this an imprint. As far as I'm concerned, I'll sum it up in two words: *demands* and *projects*. My parents were busy with my father's studies and were not much available. My mother worked—sometimes at night—and entrusted me here and there. In our small apartment, I had to meet their demands and take up as little space as possible. The maternal bond could not fully blossom. I had to be at my parents' disposal to facilitate their project. Later, I came to realize that these two words—*demands* and *projects*—determined many choices in my own life, as well as on the Swiss political stage. (In its Fall 2008 issue, *The Journal of Psychohistory* kindly published my essay on the subject: “In Switzerland: Childrearing Aimed at National Consent”, <https://regardconscient.net/earchives/0803educonsent.html>.)

To understand my mother's inheritance, we must go back to her childhood in Bulle, canton Fribourg. The daughter of a butcher, she attended *The Holy Cross* boarding school for young girls, an establishment run by Catholic nuns. It was a very strict institution and—although a good student—she kept some bitter memories of it. “*There was discipline*, she told me. *There was a sister we called a dragon...*” It was also a monument of the local culture, as well as religion that gave rhythm to the daily life of this mainly Catholic and bilingual canton of Switzerland. In consulting the archives, I noted that 80 children made their First Communion in 1943 in this small town, including my mother. To her, religion was a source of consolation that allowed her to deal with her sufferings by turning to God. She passed this coping mechanism on to her own children, as we attended church until we were sixteen—our parish was also called *The Holy Cross*! What was my mother trying to keep at bay through her practice of religion? Was it family violence, which was very common at the time, attachment anxieties or other tragedies?

Fear of being caught

Canton Fribourg lived mainly on livestock and cheese production—the famous *Gruyère*. As a butcher during World War II, my mother's father was involved in clandestine slaughter. A riot broke out in 1944, when federal inspectors came to visit one of his colleagues suspected of selling on the black market. There was a trial in the Federal Criminal Court and my grandfather was also fined in what came to be known in the local culture as “The Butchers’ Trial”. My grandfather did kill some pigs but at the time, whole cars left for the bigger cities loaded with smuggled meat. I learned that someone close to him had betrayed him—someone my mother knew well. Then I noticed feelings of shame, guilt and betrayal percolating in my own emotional life, sometimes an irrepressible fear of being caught and condemned far beyond what the present circumstances would justify.

The events I am talking about are not unrelated to the fact that the family left their hometown in 1949 and ended up in urban canton Geneva, in much more precarious conditions. A kind of distancing, followed by a social downgrading. This Geneva city suburb was at that time inhabited by immigrants, poor Italians looked down upon by the Swiss. In their apartment above the store, there was no hot water, no heat, and the toilet was outside. This is what my mother said about it:

“In Bulle, we were fine, we had a young woman who came to make our clothes for Sunday, a seamstress. We were a comfortable, middle-class family. My father was esteemed... And here we were, in a hole like this, ah that was hard, but well, we ended up getting used to it...”

She would get used to this social decline but with consequences, especially in the way she looked at her children. In her eyes and in comparison, we always were “*lucky*”! This is an example of how repressed experience is passed on to the next generation, a reason why children suffer the denial of their own emotional needs.

Natural son

My grandfather himself hid a skeleton in the closet and coped with the feeling of having to atone for a fault. In 1972, he died of a stroke at age 68 and it was at his funeral that his secret was made public. He had a natural son, whom my grandfather had always presented to his daughters as their cousin—who made his coming out on this occasion. In an authoritarian way, my grandfather had managed to impose silence on the whole family. One can imagine the impact of this secret on my grandfather's life, as he became frustrated with a legitimate heir. We can understand the guilt he felt. But what was the impact on the following generations?

My mother made a point of planning her pregnancies. We were all “*wanted children*”—as she often said. However, my first daughter was conceived out of wedlock. I certainly did better than my grandfather because with her mother, we started a family. But then in my mid-twenties, I was young and unprepared for fatherhood. I had inherited a “role” and staged it in my own path of life. This reminds us that children “feel” far beyond what we can imagine. That they are bound to manifest in their own lives what their parents and grandparents did not resolve. Free speech should flow naturally between generations. But when a tragedy occurs that cannot be put into words, the truth finds other ways through restaging. This shows the importance of acquiring such language skills.

Bearing witness

Now to my father’s side. One day, while still living with their parents, his brother received a phone call: “*Hello, we found a cross in the mountains with your family name on it, is it someone from your home?*” The young man was puzzled, since the first and last names were those of my future father—who was alive and well! After a few questions, the parents pulled out a newspaper article from the 1920s. My grandfather’s older brother did die accidentally in 1922, during a ski race in the Jura mountains (Switzerland), at the age of eighteen. Only one portrait remained of him. Many years later, visiting the site with my father, I realized that a veil of silence had covered the memory of this tragedy. Here again, the lack of words to express grief and the importance to bear witness to an inner experience that had remained unspoken since. Why had my grandparents given their first son the same forename? What kind of loyalty did this imply? And was this tragic death just “bad luck”? I decided to go to the cantonal archives to find out more.

One of the first documents I came across was not about my grandfather, but about his own father. The latter had fought in World War I in the French army and deserted in April 1916. The minutes of the Geneva administration, which dated from 1922, showed that he waited six years to regularize his situation. Even my father didn’t know—another heavy secret and more questions. My grandfather spoke of his father as a drunk, but never mentioned his military background. What traumas was he drowning in alcohol? Was there any connection with the accidental death of his son, who got lost in the fog and apparently froze to death? How did this secret weigh on his children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren—my generation? Through a few steps, the documents I found allowed me to know more about my great-grandfather: previous homes, military assignments, family situation. Little by little I was piecing together the enigma of this mysterious ancestor, whose first name was Louis.

Premature deaths

Originating from Southern France, Louis answered the call to mobilize and left his family in August 1914 to join his military unit based in Antibes, by the Mediterranean Sea. A studio photograph taken after his departure shows his wife surrounded by their four children. Standing on the left is my future grandfather, in the center, his older brother who died in that fatal accident eight years later. Two younger sisters are on the front stage. Evidently, their mother is not pleased as she’d have been taking care of the family business in her husband’s absence. At the beginning of the century, Louis had established himself as a basket maker in Geneva and would work with his eldest son after the war. When the latter succumbed in 1922, his second son took his place—that is my grandfather, who remained the only man in the family when Louis also passed on two years later. Two premature deaths that were to weigh on several generations, but how?

My grandfather was then nineteen years old and hard work would be the key to survival. He worked as a basket maker in a cannery, then took over his mother’s shop and made countless glass jug baskets, fishing baskets, hoods, and baker’s racks, not to mention repairs of all kinds.

The only way out was to get up early and work. My father helped him and imagined becoming a basket maker himself. As a teenager, I also worked with him. I feel this injunction living in me, as I felt it living in my grandfather. He had an expression: “*Work, work; bistro, bistro.*” First work, then... work! Because going out for a drink wasn’t an option. Angry at his alcoholic father, he never went to a bar. What would have happened if he had drunk a glass or two? His pain would have surfaced. Perhaps the depressing ghost of inebriated Louis or the distress of having lost his older brother, then his father two years later... A whole traumatic experience that he never talked about. His relationship to work was therefore a way of dealing with trauma.

Shell shock

There was another thing for Louis: the shame of being a deserter. Here was a man whose residence in Geneva was only tolerated—he was living meagerly on the product of his basketry. “*A bohemian’s job*”, my grandfather used to say. With his desertion came the humiliation of not being able to return to his country, France, which he had served. This feeling of shame has largely blocked expression of emotions in the family. They had to keep quiet, to keep themselves small for fear that the past would catch up with them. At the time, refusal to serve was punishable by death. What was the impact on the next generation? My grandfather’s relationship with society was problematic because of the shame his father carried. So was my dad’s whom I often saw struggling with migraine when he had to confront other professionals as an engineer in the building sector.

So, I took a closer look at this period of World War I. I asked the departmental archives for my great-grandfather’s service record and reconstructed his military assignments between August 1914 and April 1916. Given his age—he was 37 at the time of mobilization—Louis was incorporated into a territorial infantry regiment. They were engaged in the battle to dig trenches, supply the front lines, collect the dead bodies... In September 1915, Louis transferred to Verdun, known for its horrid battle that lasted ten months. We went there with my wife and walked in Louis’s footsteps. The facts recorded in the *Journal of Marches and Operations* of his regiment gave me an idea of what he went through, the trauma with which he returned to Geneva in April 1916. At the time, the notion of war trauma was only referred to as “*shell shock*”. War traumatized people—not to mention deserters—were held in suspicion as malingerers trying to escape combat. In the absence of a diary that Louis did not keep, I found the medical report of his regiment’s medical officer, dated May 8, 1916, two days after his desertion. Here are some excerpts:

“The state of men is detestable... The most striking fact is the great fatigue. Since May 8, 1915, the date of its arrival at the Verdun front, the regiment has not ceased a single day to occupy the frontline trenches... in sectors exposed to heavy shelling... In addition, during that winter, protection from cold and bad weather... was poor... There is loss of weight and in some a sickly appearance.”

This gives an idea of the physical state in which Louis returned. As for his mental state, he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and never stopped drinking. In early 1919, during the Spanish flu epidemic, the family was hospitalized for many weeks. All this shows the psychological suffering in which my grandfather lived his adolescence. The absence of a fatherly support for him translated into a form of sacrifice in work, as we have seen. For his older brother, there was the sacrifice of his life, lost accidentally a few years later. I think there is a connection between Louis’s traumatic experience of the war—which he probably never talked about—and the death of his elder son. His son was exhausted by the effort and “*buried by the snow*”, according to the newspaper account, in conditions reminiscent of the trenches of Verdun: cold, stupor, asphyxiation... To me, his death is a tragic expression of an undisclosed

past—and the fact that my father had the same first name as his deceased uncle implied that I was also connected to that trauma. But in what way?

A path of awareness

I spoke earlier about the notion of “role” when I recalled my mother’s memories of being a first daughter who is kept in the dark about her older half-brother—and is therefore frustrated by her status as an elder. I *am* that elder boy *lucky to* be recognized as such, but who also reactivates her frustration and anger when expressing simple emotional needs. Now, in my father’s lineage too, the “role” of elder takes on an added value—since Louis’s elder son died tragically. A suppressed elder in the first case, a sacrificed elder in the second. When my parents were telling me I was “a big boy”, they also told me that I was lucky to be here and had to take that role. The role assigned to the child is reflected in every gesture of the parent—even a glance. I played this “big boy” role with my little sister—and throughout my adult life with the feeling that I could never do enough. I have in mind certain symptoms: backaches, migraines, feeling of exhaustion... I could not stop and had to hold on!

Back to Louis. He, too, had to hold on so as not to falter—it was a matter of survival. His son probably died of exhaustion in that snow trench. A few months before I went to Verdun, I started to experience symptoms: anxiety, difficulty breathing, palpitation and chest pains. Fearful of a heart attack, I went to see a doctor who didn’t detect anything wrong. And then I thought about our small apartment, back in that despised suburb of Geneva. Due to lack of space and to be able to study, my father had installed a device that isolated my crib from the light with a blanket. I fell asleep under there for the first two years of my life, from about eight to ten o’clock at night—after which my parents would take the blanket off and go to bed. I think they were convinced that they had found a way to make the best use of our small space. But they didn’t realize that I was running out of air! I did some calculation and concluded that after an hour, the air I was breathing had a carbon dioxide concentration of 5%, instead of the usual 0.03%. The gas was accumulating in the bottom of the crib. According to a study I consulted, it’s a high enough concentration to cause hot flushes, palpitations, chest pain and anxiety. At higher doses, carbon dioxide poisoning can cause sudden infant death syndrome.

Now, wasn’t such a setting remindful of the trenches of Verdun, the snowdrift under which my great-uncle was buried and the moist atmosphere of my grandfather’s basket workshop? The sensations were there: anxiety, suffocation, palpitations, fear of dying... I suggest this as a personal example of how trauma is passed from one generation to another, through restaging. I realized that I had literally been living under an invisible dome, with the imprint of the blanket placed like a veil between me and the world. I had to put this puzzle back together to gradually free myself from it. Then the symptoms disappeared. In doing this work, I realized the power of projections that parents impose onto their children and the amazing impact on their lives. But also, the infinite sensitivity of the child who grasps the unspoken messages and unconsciously puts them back onto the stage. It is a painful realization, but also an extraordinary opening because in our lives, everything fits. We just need to realize it!

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