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## Memory

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## 27. The Long Afterlife of Loss

*Eva Hoffman*

Loss leaves a long trail in its wake. Sometimes, if the loss is large enough, the trail seeps and winds like invisible psychic ink through individual lives, decades, and generations. When the losses are as enormous as those that followed from the Holocaust—when what was lost was not only individuals but a world—the disappearances and the absences may haunt us unto the third generation; and they may inform our very vision of the world.

The transmission of loss across generations undoubtedly happens in the aftermath of every collective atrocity. But the Holocaust was a history-altering event, the great wound that bisected the twentieth century and has altered our vision of history and human nature itself. The Shoah has been studied intensively—sometimes obsessively—for its lessons in the extremities of cruelty and of suffering; and the large body of literature, testimony, and reflection to which it has given rise can serve as a template for the understanding of other historical calamities as well. Sixty years after the event itself, that literature includes a growing body of investigation and self-reflection about and by the so-called “second generation”—that is, the literal descendants of Holocaust survivors. It is for these literal descendants that the legacy of the Holocaust is felt in its most intimate form; and it is here that the delicate issues of transferred trauma and deferred mourning are felt most poignantly. In a sense, the elusive, deeply subjective experience of the Shoah’s heirs is also an acute example of a broader phenomenon: the bequest of historical experience from one generation to the next; and the attendant passage of that inevitable knowledge of loss and death that are the constants of the human condition, and sometimes, of wisdom.

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More than for our parents, the Holocaust, for us their children, was the paradoxical fundament. Dan Bar-On, an Israeli psychoanalyst who has written about the effect of the Holocaust on three generations, puts this simply: “My parents’ generation grew up in a world without a Holocaust,” he writes, “but for us there could be no such world.”<sup>1</sup>

To start with the Holocaust as the foundation is, potentially, a premise for a nihilistic or a wholly disillusioned philosophy; and perhaps the Shoah is the hidden basis for the metaphysics of nullity and absence, for the urge to deconstruct all meanings and reach an empty center, so salient in postwar visions of the world. But in childhood, the awareness of loss and death is not yet philosophy. Instead, for many of us, as we were growing up in the proximity of an awful knowledge, the Holocaust constituted both the most frightening kind of family fable and a sort of awful normalcy.

The knowledge of great loss and destruction was for us the first knowledge. It came with family stories, with those primal pellets of information in which so much later thought and inquiry is condensed. But how was the knowledge conveyed to us, how was it passed on?

In considering the legacy of the Holocaust, it has become routine to speak of the “memory” of that event and to adduce to this faculty a moral, even a spiritual value. But it is important to be exact: We who came after do not have memories of the Shoah. Not even those of us who grew up in the closest proximity to survivors have our own recollections of the events that constituted that event. I heard my parents speak of their wartime ordeal from my earliest years. In a way, I seemed to know the “story” of their survival—and all their close ones’ murder—from the beginning: the attic in which they were hidden by their Ukrainian neighbors; the bunker in the forest that my father had dug out with his brothers, the bridge on which he was arraigned by two hostile Ukrainian youths, and the icy river into which he jumped in order to save his life. The way my mother’s young sister died, and the mass grave into which her body was thrown. These scenes and disconnected fragments were my first knowledge, a primal pellet of imagery and narration in which a cargo of information was contained. The iconography of endurance, and of perishing, was so stark, so powerful, as to seem to belong to me, to my own perceptions. But of course, it didn’t. The attic, the bunker, the bridge that I had envisioned in my mind probably bore little correspondence to the actual sites or to the textures of my parents’ experiences.

I do not believe that memories can be transferred to another mind, nor acquired by psychogenetic inheritance. This is important to remember, as we are tempted, individually or collectively, to “identify” with historical tragedy; or to gain a sense of moral entitlement from fashionable victimological identities. Instead, what we children of survivors knew, what we often received with great directness, were the emotional sequelae of our elders’ experiences, the acid-etched traces of what they had endured. This, perhaps, is indeed the way in which one generation’s legacy is actually passed on to the next—through the

imprint of various personal and historical experiences, as these are traced on individual psyches and sensibilities.

In a sense, the possibility of such communications seems to me a hopeful fact of human nature, for, clearly, we are connected to each other more profoundly and more palpably than we often care to acknowledge. We have come to know by now that we affect each other in ways that are both immediate and invisible, that mental states are communicated, indeed transferred, from one psyche to another not only through rational messages, but along unconscious, or at least non-conscious channels. But the hopeful fact has its unhappy side, for pathology and despair can be passed on as efficiently as more salubrious states. There were bonds and transactions between survivor parents and their children that sometimes took lifetimes to unravel. There was a casting of a shadow, a transference of an immensely heavy burden. There were signals conveyed along subterranean passages from survivors to their descendants that injected anxiety into the latter's veins, or exploded like time-delayed bombs in their psyches long after they had been planted.

Where the psychic damage to the parents has been severe enough, such communications, or processes, have come to be referred to as "the transmission of trauma," or, alternatively, of "traumatic memory." As with "trauma" itself, I think caution is advisable in the use of these phrases and their implicit reification of tenuous, intricate, and—yes—rich internal experiences. And yet, the phrases do refer to real phenomena. For of course, the conditions of survivors' lives, their psychic states and scars, could not but affect or infect those around them, their children most of all. There was a passage of something, by some means. If we cannot yet say exactly what or how, nevertheless, the questions raised by transmission of trauma are an extreme version of more general questions, about the transmission of any family legacy. What features of our parents' personalities enter us, and through what means? How do they become preserved or transformed within us, converted into liberating visions, or twisted into paralyzing knots? It is possible that, just as Freud used the study of neurosis to illuminate the structure of the normal psyche, so the close examination of the intergenerational passage of acute psychological states may throw light on more general, or "normal" processes through which affective messages are communicated from one psyche to another, and from one generation to the next.

Clearly, the strongest form of such transmission is the earliest. When the passage of subjective states happens between the mind of the adult and the delicate, hyperreceptive psyche of a child, the effects can be profound and formative. Psychoanalysis has long been interested in the inward workings of such transactions. But in recent decades, experimental psychology and, increasingly, the "harder" sciences of biology and neurology have undertaken close studies of mothers and infants and have observed how maternal states are conveyed to the child through body, gesture, ways of holding, gaze. They have also described how a child's chaotic, inchoate inner states are shaped or left to founder by parental "containment" or its absence. If the mother or parental figure can provide some

calm, some framing for the confusions of childish sensations, then the child may become calmer, more stable, more confident. If such containment is missing, then internal confusion continues to reign.

Undoubtedly, there were good, bad, and middling mothers and fathers among survivors of the Holocaust. Undoubtedly, most of them meant well—maybe desperately well. And undoubtedly, some of them failed in providing for their children the foundations that happier families may furnish. We may surmise, on that most primal level, that some of the mothers, having undergone so much loss, clung too closely, too desperately to their infants—clung to them for dear life. Others, it seems, were too numbed or too afraid to make much physical contact with their children at all. Afraid, perhaps, of new losses; afraid to pass on what was now inside. Whatever their best desires or intentions, whatever the precise methods of communication, the states of feeling conveyed by survivors to their offspring were often of the most radical negativity.

What was the impact of such states on the children's psyches? The psychoanalytic literature in this area is large and often poignantly informative. As with survivors themselves, each case and story is of course different, but there are leitmotifs that recur with sufficient regularity to suggest patterns of phenomena and of feeling.

Over and over again, in second-generation literature, testimony is given to a helpless, automatic identification with parental feelings and their burden of intense despondency. Over and over, the children speak of being permeated by sensations of panic and deadliness, of shame and guilt. And, accompanying the suffusion by parental unhappiness, there is the need—indeed, the imperative—to perform impossible psychic tasks: to replace dead relatives or children who had perished; to heal and repair the parents; above all, to rescue the parents. To rescue the parents, and keep rescuing them, from their grief and mourning, from death which had so nearly engulfed them and which had undone so many. To keep undoing the past, again and again. A more than Penelope-like devotion, a more than Sisyphean labor; for this boulder not only keeps rolling down the hill, it can never be rolled up in the first place. A more than Orphic danger, for to look back in this case is to be dragged into Hades yourself. And yet, the children keep trying, are compelled to keep trying: for how can you leave your parents in a state of half-death, how can you not try to bring them out of an inferno?

And the parents so often hoped for rescue. They invested so much in these children, and imbued them with so much yearning. To replace—revive—the dead ones; to undo the losses; to repair the humiliations wrought by the abusers; to provide the redress of unconditional love and protection against deadly danger. There were hopes, no matter how unconscious, that the children could relive all that the parents had lived; and, at the same time, that they could start new and much happier lives.

Unconscious expectations are often paradoxical; the transactions between survivor parents and their progeny sometimes seem nearly magical. Dina Wardi, an Israeli psychotherapist who has worked extensively with groups of second-generation adults, suggests

in her book *Memorial Candles* that, in every survivor's family, one child is chosen as a "memorial candle"—that is, as the instrument of commemoration, devotion and mourning.<sup>2</sup> Once such a symbolic role is conferred on them, the children rarely have the wherewithal to refuse it. They become votaries on the altar of the Shoah, their own lives and selves dedicated to their hurt parents and to the perished, whether they will or not. In Wardi's groups, the adult "children of survivors" recount, without sentimentality and often with a kind of wonder, dreams that feature scenes and sites of death. The patients discover their deep identification with the parents, but also with lost relatives whom they never knew. Often, they are relatives for whom they are named—for almost all of them, it turns out, were named for someone who was murdered. (I think of the moment, when I was about six, when I was told I was named for my two murdered grandmothers, my sister for my mother's sister. I did not have even the most shadowy images of these grandmothers, nor a sense that I had lost something with their deaths. But I remember my parents' tender sadness as they told me this, and a sense of a somber, though honorific mantle, being draped round my shoulders).

Sometimes, the identification with the dead has the character of the uncanny. I think, for example, of a young woman, described in one case study, who came from a newly prospering family of survivors, but who felt compelled to search trash bins for scraps of food at night. It turned out that a perished aunt of hers—whose story she may or may not have literally heard—had been forced to do just that, in another country, in another time. I think of the many case studies that report strange somatic symptoms, especially eczemas and rashes, for the skin is apparently a highly sensitive register of unconscious anxiety. Sometimes, it is precisely the children who express parental fears in these ways, while the parents remain seemingly calm and unbothered; for the adults, in some cases, may have enough wherewithal to "contain" or conceal their worst anxieties, even as the children sense them under or on the skin.

There is a strange fascination in such phenomena, perhaps because we still do not understand sufficiently how they happen, how the mind, or the unconscious, takes in scraps of moods or psychic states or half-heard information and converts them back into eerily apt symbolism. The process can give the impression of an almost literal haunting, a notion that recurs often in writing about the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Something re-emerges from the past that we thought had been dead. . . . but which has lain dormant in the turrets and caverns of the soul, till it returns in the form of specters and shadows.

Such manifestations belong to the world of ghost stories and the gothic—psychologically speaking, a world of fantasy and inner distortion. For in the second generation, the anxieties, the symptoms, no matter how genuine in themselves, no longer correspond to actual experience or external realities. They do not even correspond to anything that could be called "memory." In that sense, the guilt, fears, and shames, the mourning and acedia of survivors' progeny *are* a kind of distortion or exaggeration. And

yet, at the same time, this is exactly the crux of the second generation's difficulty: that it has inherited not experience, but its shadows. And sometimes, it needs to be said, wrestling with shadows can be more frightening, more confusing, than struggling with solid realities. Like Hamlet's father, the ghosts demand devotion, sacrifice, justice, truth, vengeance. The uncanny, in Freud's formulation, is the sensation of something that is both very alien and deeply familiar, something that only the unconscious knows.<sup>3</sup> If that is so, then the second generation has grown up with the uncanny.

In another essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud makes the suggestive observation that in order to accomplish the natural process of mourning—to grieve and then move on—you have to know what you have lost.<sup>4</sup> If you do not know what the lost object is, then mourning can turn into a permanent melancholia, or depression, as we would call it today. Freud, who to a large extent altered his theory as a result of observing the results of the First World War did not live to see the Second, and he may not have taken into account the losses of possibility, from which it may be impossible to recover—losses, as after the Holocaust, not only of particular persons, but of a people and a world. But his observation is particularly evocative for the second generation, whose entire historical situation has placed it in the "melancholic" position, whose fate it has been to live with a multitude of lost "objects" that they never had a chance to know. (I think of my grandparents, whose visages I did not know even from photographs. Again and again, throughout my earlier years, I tried to understand that, by all rights and natural patterns of the world, I should have had grandparents, that, in some notional way, I had *had* grandparents. An incomprehensible loss, the uncanny by another name.) Transferred loss, more than transferred memory, is what children of survivors inherit; and how do you get over loss that has no concrete shape or face? Vague loss itself, a placeless melancholia, may become the medium in which we live.

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The psychological story of the second generation is worth looking at because it tells us much about those impalpable movements of interiority and invisible corridors between mind and mind through which our crucial, first knowledge is formed. But it is not the whole story. The legacy of the Shoah also makes demands on us—demands that are moral, historical, and, ultimately, metaphysical. It is one characteristic of "trauma" and post-traumatic states that time stops at the most awful moment, that the past continues to overwhelm and overshadow the present and the mourning never lifts. The necessary task, for those who come into the inheritance of loss, is in a sense to liberate themselves from the thrall of the past sufficiently not to mistake our ancestors' history for our own. The demand has been to recognize and reckon with great suffering without mistaking destruction for the root and origin of the world—to place absence within the parameters of presence, death within the parameters of life.

Again: When the losses are as enormous as those that followed from the Shoah; when their dimensions threaten to cover the whole landscape of the imagination, the task is difficult and often involves an arduous trajectory. But the trajectory also constitutes an intense moral and affective education. It is part of the second generation condition—but also its opportunity—that, by the virtue of inheriting its forbidding history, it has had to grapple with some fundamental questions not only notionally or formally but through immediate engagement, and in the smithy of the soul. Any morality worth its name begins in passion, or at least in subjectivity; and in order to become an ethics, it needs to be extricated, sometimes painfully, from the messy undergrowth of feeling and internal conflict.

Perhaps the most heuristic part of the second-generation experience inheres in the proximity to persecuted parents and elders, in intimate relations with people who have been greatly wronged and hurt. The close witness of suffering, the intimate coexistence with those who have been injured, is part of a transformative process whereby that early, psychically imbibed knowledge can be—in the best case scenarios—converted into a more conscious ethics and vision of the world. It is not our own suffering, in other words, but the suffering of others that poses an emotional and a moral challenge. How to acknowledge another's grief without being swallowed up by it oneself; how to gain one's own autonomy without abandoning those who need us; how to offer compassion without reducing the other to the status of "victim;" how to continue to treat victims of extreme violence as moral agents, even while recognizing the extent of their extremity.

On a larger scale, such questions are among the central issues of our time. How should we treat individuals who have been "traumatized," or groups that have been collectively victimized? What kinds of reparations are owed, and what kinds of standards can we bring to them? On such questions, our attitudes toward vulnerability and pain are often inconsistent and confused. On the one hand, we live in a time when identification with the victim is taken as a moral good; when groups that are perceived as "our" victims are presumed to be automatically innocent and automatically in the right. At the same time, much in our contemporary world mitigates against the acceptance of suffering, or incorporating it into our vision of the human lot. Our ideals of control, self-improvement, freedom from dependence, and the very speed of middle-class life do not leave much room for frailty, or for solidarity with those who may need our help. Our lives are so structured that we depend increasingly on mediating institutions for the care of the vulnerable. At the same time, our rhetoric is ever more pervaded by the professional and sociological vocabulary of victimhood—and in that vocabulary, suffering becomes reified into pathology or aggrandized into martyrdom. Suffering becomes Trauma; a person who has experienced adversity or been treated harshly becomes the Victim.

Indeed, it seems to me that the excesses of identity politics and various identifications with the victim—wherein groups who are perceived as "our" victims are presumed to be

automatically innocent and automatically in the right—are themselves a kind of displacement, wherein the actualities of suffering are placed at a safe distance and relegated to the sphere of abstract compassion and morality. But victimhood is not—for all that we would wish otherwise—a conveniently moral condition. This is something that those who have lived in intimate proximity to loss and mourning know or have to learn. If we lose our sympathy for suffering, we lose part of our moral being. The bearers of atrocity's scars deserve our help, our understanding, the alleviation of pain. On a personal level, if we are to be of help to those who have suffered great losses, then we need to remember, or perhaps relearn, the very old arts of simple sympathy and empathy; the ability to take in a story without excessive comment, to imagine what the other feels without diminishment or exaggerated sentiment; most of all, perhaps, to imagine the reality of the other person's situation accurately, and, sometimes, to help the sufferer see more accurately as well.

But if we are not to engage in yet another displacement, then we need also to remember that to deserve our sympathy or help, the victims of atrocity do not have to be especially virtuous, nor saintly—nor should such virtue be expected of them. Persecution is not a character-improving process, and collective suffering cannot assure collective merit. This is why a politics of trauma is not a sufficient antidote to the politics of power and why an ethos of martyrdom cannot serve as a basis for a decent society. After the collective memories have been excavated and the individual narratives recounted we need the restoration of principles that will assure mutual respect, even if we do not share enough past to warrant mutual love. Otherwise, the memories of pain will soon turn into someone's rage, and the conflicting narratives will come into possibly deadly conflict. Sympathy for those who suffered is our moral duty; but we cannot cease to treat the victim as a moral being. The recipients of great wrongs need, for the restoration of their moral world—and a shared moral world—a recognition of those wrongs; but they cannot be placed outside the community of justice and reason.

The intimate, felt legacy of the Shoah confers on us not only its weight and burdens, but a profound endowment. An early knowledge of death and loss is much more terrifying—and transgressive—than an early knowledge of sex; but it can also be a source of deep instruction. Mourning, after all, is at the very root of much human knowledge—of mortality, vulnerability, the needs for human connection. It is at the root, perhaps, of the reparative urge, the desire to protect our altogether perishable world, to redress some of its harshness and bring to it some healing and consolation. If one can dip into the somber past without being swallowed by it, then the past can become a rich vein of meaning. If you dare visit the Shades, you may bring back the kind of pity that is the source of beauty. Orpheus's song cannot bring back those claimed by the underworld, but it can become richer for his sojourn there. The urge to rescue, to repair and salve, which many of us felt so painfully in our early transactions with wounded parents, can transform itself—if it is contained in sufficient frameworks of emotional safety—into the re-creative and reconstructive urge, into the desire for creativity and meaning. The troubling closeness to pain

can expand into more considered compassion; the instinctive protest against our elders' humiliation can turn into a broader recognition of everyone's need for dignity and for justice.

Specters *can* be harder to grapple with than realities. But of course, specters can eventually be dispelled, as realities cannot. Many among the survivors' progeny have gone on to free themselves of their Sisyphean burden. Many have gone on to live lives free of ghosts. This is not the same as forgetfulness—indeed, what is required for such exorcism is almost its opposite. It seems that just as for survivors only full remembering could bring about some catharsis, so for the second generation, only a full imaginative confrontation with the past—with the ghosts of the dead, with the humiliations the parents suffered, with loss of what one did not know, and grief too deep for tears—can bring the haunting to an end. Here, psychoanalytic wisdom is the same as that old moral or philosophical kind: Only the truth—within the limits of the human condition—can make you free.

It was in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington that I had my strange epiphany. As I walked through this most daunting of museum exhibitions, and as I entered into its hellish world as into a familiar element, I suddenly thought: But there must also be something outside of this. There must be a reality that is not horror, but that is equally foundational. For me, in the beginning was the war, and the Holocaust was the ontological basis of my universe. And indeed, the Holocaust continues to stand as a kind of limiting condition of experience, and therefore a necessary part of our knowledge about human nature. It is because the Holocaust exposes the negative extremes of human possibility that it has been taken as philosophically central, not only by childhood minds, but by so many thinkers of our time. Hell, especially if it is of human making, is surely one clue about the human condition—and the Holocaust extends our knowledge of the human hell.

And yet, unless we want to fall into permanent melancholia or nihilistic despair, we cannot take the Holocaust as the norm that governs human lives. We cannot start from it as a basis, or move toward it as a form of transcendence, even of the darkest kind. That is why it is necessary to separate the past from the present and to judge the present in its own light. It is necessary to incorporate loss into a vision of life without losing the leaven of sympathy or empathy or the acknowledgment of our precariousness and fragilities. Again, coming into the knowledge of the Shoah is an acute form of the knowledge with which we all need to reckon: the awareness of everyone's vulnerability to the workings of time and decay, the quiet suffering that attends our ordinary condition of mortality, and for which perhaps the only compensation is our tenderness for each other's vulnerabilities, for what Adam Zagajewski calls "the mutilated world."<sup>5</sup> "We must love one another or die," W. H. Auden said.<sup>6</sup> Actually, we must love one another *and* die. We must love each other, ultimately, *because* we die.

After the dark logic of the Shoah, acceptance of a benign world does not come easily. The “normal” may seem suspect, or it may seem thin. How to find richness, authenticity, and depth in the temperate zones of ordinary life? How to find sources of significance that do not derive from extremity and to endow with value not only great losses but modest gains? In a sense—as with all aspects of second-generation experience—this is a question that arises in every transition to maturity; but which, for children of survivors, is sharpened to a fine acuity. For the inheritors of traumatic historical experience, the ability to separate the past from the present—to see the past *as* the past is a difficult but necessary achievement.

The moment of that separation, of letting go, is a poignant one, for it is akin to the giving up of mourning. There is pain in the very diminution of pain, the danger that time will dilute morality as it dilutes passion. We do not, generally, forget the facts; anyway, these are always available as information, in books or on the Internet. What we do forget, imperceptibly but inevitably, are the sensations accompanying the facts: the rightful rage, gratitude where it is due, the anguish of loss for the loved one’s death. This has to be accepted as part of time’s work and its passage. But if we do not want to betray the past—if we want to remain ethical beings and honor our covenant with those who suffered—then moral passion needs to be supplanted by moral thought, by an incorporation of memory into our consciousness of the world. There is a Jewish tradition that says that we must grieve for the dead fully and deeply, but that mourning must also come to its end. Perhaps that moment has come, even as we must continue to ponder and confront the knowledge that the Shoah has brought us in perpetuity.