

Intersections of personal vs. collective trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic: the hijacking of the human imagination

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Abstract: This paper explores how the deadly shadow of COVID-19 passing over the Earth constitutes a collective trauma that frequently opens up or ‘triggers’ un-remembered personal trauma, and it provides clinical examples of these intersections. The paper further explores how the human imagination, which we normally utilize to make meaning out of traumatic experience, can be hijacked by fear – leading to avoidance of suffering and to illusory formulations and alternative realities such as conspiracy theories. Alternatively, the imagination can be employed in more realistic and creative ways – leading through conscious suffering to healing and wholeness. Which path the imagination takes is shown to depend on the capacity of individuals to feel the full reality of the human condition in general and the exquisite vulnerability of our existence as fragile human beings at this moment in history. Ernest Becker’s analysis of our ‘denial of death’ and his urgency to embrace our common human vulnerability is explored in relation to Jung’s early tendency to deny the body. The author proposes that the more creative uses of the imagination, connected to a more humble and realistic apprehension of our common destiny, may be seen in the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement that swept the world in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, collective trauma, conspiracy theories, Coronavirus, denial of death

Introduction

In this paper I wish to explore how the intersection of collective trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the personal trauma of individuals from their historical past, is capable of hijacking the human imagination and turning it into pathological formations with destructive consequences for both individuals and groups. This ‘hijacking’ of the imagination is ironically similar on a psychological level to the way the COVID-19 virus hijacks the chemical processes of healthy cells, forcing them to manufacture viruses instead. This poisons the cell’s normal life-processes and turns it into a

different life-form with a different goal – producing millions of coronaviruses – the original meaning of ‘virus’ deriving from the Latin word for ‘poison’. I believe we see many forms of such ‘poisoned’ or hijacked imagination in the current culture of the USA. Conspiracy theories are a vivid example. And they appear to be as contagious as viruses.

A collective crisis such as the current pandemic stirs up both memory and imagination, very much like a river running happily downhill towards the sea encounters an obstruction and flows back upon itself, flooding all the low-lying areas previously untouched and ‘forgotten’. For some, the low-lying areas now flooded with memory are full of dark memories and dark imaginings. Some of us are especially vulnerable to this ‘dark imagination’ because we have been here before – in the fear-saturated ‘trauma worlds’ in which we have grown up.

For many years now, my special interest in the field of analytical psychology has been in early childhood trauma and the dissociative defences that grow up in the inner world to protect a vital core of the personality that I have called the ‘imperishable personal spirit’ or soul (Kalsched 1996). I have discovered that in the traumatized psyche, these dissociative defences usually make up a kind of protective ‘system’ that I call the Self Care System. I believe this system is found frequently enough in unconscious material to constitute a kind of ‘core complex’ in the traumatized psyche, made up of archetypal forces that are recruited for defensive purposes (Kalsched 2017). The powers and forces in this system help regulate the amount of affect and memory that is allowed to become conscious in the ego. In order to accomplish this, the system attacks and injures the *capacity to feel*. Therefore, the imagination in the traumatized psyche is often dark and full of ‘vehement’ emotions – polarized and polarizing energies that characterize what we call the dissociative psyche. The dissociative psyche falls into binary extremes – totalistic categories that generate a great deal of righteous anger and grievance – all constructed around an image of innocence that props up a false self-esteem in the absence of genuine self-esteem that comes from the deeper sources of secure attachment. In order to maintain the inner sense of goodness and innocence in the presence of traumatic disappointment, illusory narratives are necessary and they, too, are a product of the hijacked or poisoned imagination.

Trauma and dissociation

A word about trauma and dissociation. In its more general sense, the word *trauma* simply refers to the fact that *we are all given more to experience in this life than we can bear to experience consciously*. This means that psychological defences will be necessary to help us survive experiences we cannot yet integrate. These defences fall along a spectrum of mild to severe. On the milder side, they are necessary and adaptive, helping us to

self-regulate and go on living. In their extreme, dissociative form however, they constitute an attack on the integrity of our experience *in reality*. They push some of our experience/memories into the unconscious and keep it dissociated from our so-called normal personalities. They also hijack the imagination and produce dreadful fears of the future and dreadful predictions about the life we are living. They activate what we might call the *dark imagination*. For some people, this ‘dark imagination’ is painfully reminiscent of the psychological atmosphere in which they grew up in their trauma-saturated homes. The isolation and loneliness in COVID-quarantine, the fear of death, the loss of a dependable future, the economic anxieties – all these very real collective traumas ‘trigger’ some people in powerful ways – activating their un-remembered past injuries and experiences that lay dormant inside.

For others who do not harbour such unbearable early experience, the imagination is not hijacked by fear and dread. It is not so dark. These people have grown up feeling relatively safe and supported in their families of origin. Their imaginations have not been hijacked by fear, because their normal childhood fears have been mediated in loving and containing relationships. Such fortunate individuals can use their imaginations to imagine their futures in a realistic way. They can imagine ways out of the current crisis, or imagine ways to help relieve suffering, or even imagine ways to enjoy themselves during the times of isolation the pandemic has brought. These are the people we saw singing on balconies in Italy when COVID-19 began, or those volunteering to care for the sick, or those who spoke of appreciating the reflective time that quarantine provided to do creative projects or to see more of their children on Zoom.

Clinical examples

Here are a few examples from my clinical work of how the imagination is ‘activated’ for either better or for worse.

One patient – confronted by the alarming death rate caused by COVID-19 – suddenly began to fill up with longings for her ex-husband – a man she had precipitously divorced a decade earlier and regularly vilified in her sessions, claiming that he was an ‘evil man’ and a terrible abuser. Suddenly, against the backdrop of our global crisis, she started missing him and began to value who he was as a person despite his violence toward her. This shocked her with the realization that there was much ‘more’ to her relationship than she had ever let herself feel consciously. She had some grief-work to do and her fast-paced outer-directed life had made it easy for her to avoid these feelings.

Another woman, horrified by what she called the ‘angel of death’ hovering around the Earth, broke through to an under-current of tearful gratitude for her life in general and for one close friend whom she realized she had

completely taken for granted. She telephoned this friend and expressed these feelings, leading to a much deeper feeling of intimacy between them.

A third patient whom I was seeing on Zoom was musing out loud about whether she and I would ever see each other again in person. I said something like ‘well, I don’t know ... but what I do know is that we have what’s between us right here, right now ... just you and me in this moment’. Suddenly, tears welled up and she got in touch with how frightened she was that I (her therapist) might die from the virus, and that underneath this fear were some feelings of love and appreciation she had not been able to feel or express previously. This took our relationship into the immediate moment that we might otherwise have ignored or skipped over. It moved us both. These three examples illustrate some of the ways COVID-19 has helped us appreciate the vulnerable life we have with each other. They deepen our experience and enrich our imaginations in life-enhancing ways.

There are also negative effects, and ways our current pandemic makes things much more difficult for people. The current threat – with its invisible enemy, its mortal danger, forced helplessness and lack of containment by protective leaders ‘triggers’ or activates the early nightmare of emotional, sexual, or physical abuse and neglect suffered by many of my patients as young children. Early un-remembered terror suddenly has a ‘hook’ in present reality and a new edition of their childhood pain now comes roaring back, attaching itself to the outer threat, making it feel all the more terrifying. Here is an example. A middle-aged male patient, retiring to bed after another anxious night obsessively watching the news about the pandemic, dreamed he was being menaced by monstrous wolves whose yellow eyes peered at him out of the darkness surrounding his childhood home – the same home where his brutal alcoholic father had regularly entered his bedroom and beaten him. He woke from this nightmare breathless and in a sweat, feeling utterly alone and desperate.

In his session the next day he was agitated and emotionally dis-regulated. He spoke of his sleeplessness, his fear and dread of the virus, and then mentioned the dream which only repeated his terror. As we processed the dream together and he felt my attention and concern for him, he started to remember the dread and terror he felt as a little boy menaced by his enraged, drunken father in that very bedroom where the dream was ‘staged’. This brought tears of recognition and it suddenly became clear to both of us how his current dread of the virus was linked – through his dream – to un-remembered childhood suffering at the hands of his father. He had seen those menacing predatory wolf-eyes in the rage-full eyes of his own father. This gave his current anxiety a context, grounding it in his personal history. The connection was a kind of revelation. It made his current panic about COVID-19 more meaningful and less overwhelming. He was grateful for the creative role his dream played in connecting past and present, providing a greater context for his current fear.

Two forms of the imagination

In these examples we see some different ways an outer crisis like COVID-19 is metabolized by us psychologically, involving the imagination in the pathology of defence on the one hand or in the creative process of making deeper meaning on the other. The imagination can work either 'for' or 'against' us as we struggle to adapt to an outer crisis. As depth psychology has taught us, imagination is how we make meaning out of our experience, and when experience becomes 'too big' or terrifying, or threatening to our self-esteem for us to organize in our customary ways, the imagination gives us *archetypal* stories and lenses through which to see our experience. These *categories of understanding* as Immanuel Kant called them, do not always help us to integrate our experience because their narratives are structured in binary, totalistic categories, and they are driven by existential insecurity and *fear*. In our fear, we project the threat we feel onto others, creating enemies and descending into outrage and grievance. We become victims or perpetrators of violence. We descend into a dissociative psychology leaving a more differentiated conflict psychology behind. We see this splitting and dissociative psychology operating in USA culture right now in the polarization of its politics and all the many outrages that people feel – including systemic racism, nativism, malignant nationalism and 'othering' of all forms.

On the other hand, the imagination can also be a huge force for integration and psychological growth in the face of a crisis. It can supply us with archetypal stories and 'categories' of unity and wholeness. It can help us imagine an ideal of healing and connection between the opposing forces in the psyche and the world. In what follows I would like to explore both sides of this story with the aid of two authors who have written extensively on the subject of the human imagination. The first author is a colleague in New York City, psychologist Dr. Frank Faranda. His book is titled *The Fear Paradox* (Faranda 2020) and deals with how fear and the imagination get tangled up with each other leading to pathological formations. The second is Ernest Becker whose classic treatise on the *The Denial of Death* (Becker 1973) challenges us to develop what Jung (1956, para. 572) called some 'imagination for evil' which Becker might have translated as some 'imagination for death' – or better yet, some 'imagination for grief' which might emerge from our awareness of death. If we can include death in our imagination about life, Becker says, our imaginations are liberated from their fear-based and defensive functions to serve what Abraham Lincoln (see Meacham 2018, p. 74) called the 'better angels of our nature' leading to potentially new ways of imagining our future – perhaps even to a new paradigm shift in our cultural consciousness.

Imagination in depth psychology

Before we get to these two versions of the imagination, let us pause briefly to remind ourselves what the imagination, in fact, *is*. Following Jung, James Hillman describes the imagination as an image-producing substratum in the mind – an *anima, media natura* – that mediates deeper unconscious processes, including emotions, to the conscious ego (Hillman 1975, p. 38ff). Imagination, says Hillman, is where the soul ‘lives’. It is that ‘self-sustaining and imagining substrate’ that helps us ‘deepen events into experiences’, peoples our dreams with ‘presences’, bathes us in fantasy, and ‘makes meaning possible’. In short, the imagination helps us integrate body and mind, affect and image, conscious and unconscious. It is the architect of our dreams, filling them with ‘affect-images’ and it weaves these images into *stories*. In this sense the imagination is an organ of integration and wholeness for the individual – unless of course it is dominated by fear.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) agrees with Hillman and Jung. ‘One might argue’, he says, that ‘images are the currency of our minds.... The business of making images never stops while we are awake and it even continues during our sleep when we dream’ (p. 319). Damasio suggests that the imagination is continually working creatively to enrich consciousness with deeper affect-material from the body and the ‘primitive centers’ of the brain.

Finally, Henry Corbin (1994) describes an entire world of the imagination, the *mundus imaginalis*, and relates it to an ineffable dimension available in our spiritual life. He points out that in our quest for orientation and meaning in this life, there is a vertical dimension, symbolized in Sufi literature by the North and its Pole Star. This dimension, he says, is ‘something like a psycho-spiritual realm of three dimensions which the ordinary two-dimensional view cannot account for, since it is restricted to contrasting consciousness and unconsciousness’ (ibid, p. 6). A person who has lost this transcendent ‘polar dimension’, is faced with meaninglessness.

Corbin’s (1994) mystical description locates the imagination in an intermediate third space ‘between the worlds’ of spirit and matter, between the finite and the infinite, between the temporal and the eternal, between the finite body and the infinite mind. At its best the imagination serves to unite these opposites in a mysterious ‘third’ that gives life meaning and direction.

Jung has always privileged this paradoxical ‘third’ space in his own experience of the imagination. In his autobiography, Jung (1963) said, ‘In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the *imperishable* world irrupted into this *transitory* one’ (pp. 4–5). For Jung these ‘irruptions’ were the moments when his dreams and visions broke into his day-world and illuminated his daily life with a deeper meaning and an expanded consciousness.

The dark (hijacked) imagination

The imagination can also be recruited for defensive purposes. So let us first explore the dark side of the story, which is especially apparent today in the collective culture of the USA. COVID-19 has scared many to death, individually and collectively. Murray Stein (2020) has called the coronavirus the *Umbra Mundi* by which he means the archetypal ‘shadow’ of death passing over the world – the opposite of the *Anima Mundi* or animated soul of the world. In Jungian psychology we like to think of the *Anima Mundi* as a kind of divine presence within material reality. But if the ‘divine’ is animated life and soulful presence, then apparently it is also death and oblivion. So, as our imaginations try to grasp the current pandemic we also have to make room for the dark side of God and what Kierkegaard calls our ‘sickness unto death’ in the face of it. At this time in history, we are being asked to confront this reality, to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with our eyes wide open, and although we would like to ‘fear no evil for Thou art with me’, as the Psalmist says (23:4), we realize that the very ‘Thou’ whom we hope will rescue us from our fear is the same frightful deity whose dark powers are now making the beautiful landscapes of our earth into killing fields. As of this writing, over 500,000 from the USA are dead.

We are left to cower in fear in the presence of this invisible threat – to shudder in the face of the dark numinous – what Rudolph Otto (1958) called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. As COVID-19 spread over the planet, we were asked to take in the grotesque reality of thousands of our fellow citizens dying alone in hospital beds gasping for air on ventilators, bodies piling up in refrigerator trucks while we huddled in quarantine, trying to take the precautions necessary to stay alive. In earlier times – for example the dark ages in Europe – when plagues far worse than the coronavirus struck, all people *had* was their imaginations with which to fathom where the danger was coming from and why. Then as now people needed explanations that gave meaning to the meaningless, and thus some sense of control. Then as now, the imagination obliged. In ancient Athens, when a terrible plague struck, Thucydides blamed the disease on foreigners from Ethiopia and Egypt. Then as now, conspiracy theories spread like wildfire. The citizens of 14th century Christian Europe could only imagine that the Black Death that killed 50 million people was God’s conspiratorial punishment for their sins (see Pamuk 2020).

Today, we like to say, ‘thank God, we have science’. But as we have seen recently, science is no match for the fear-inspired imagination. The previous US President Trump promulgated the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was a hoax, perpetrated by the ‘deep state’ in collusion with the media to detract from his accomplishments in office. Many people say they will not take a vaccine against the virus for fear of micro-chips being injected in their veins so they can be controlled by the government. Mask-wearing has been

politicized, with some people on the political right in the USA claiming that this mandated public health measure is part of the overall hoax of the virus itself.

Conspiracy theories exist on both the political right and the left. They are ‘proof’ that we all live in an interpreted reality – not in reality itself. In other words, the psyche and its deep imagination stands between us and objective reality. If we have been traumatized, reality has been too much to bear and our imaginations have given us an alternative reality in which to live – even though this alternative reality, and our belief in its story, may alienate us from many of our fellow human beings.

There used to be something objective called ‘consensual reality’, against which our ‘interpreted’ imaginal realities could be measured. Ego-strength was thought of as the hard-won ability to live in consensual reality. This fact came home to me late last year when I read about an emergency-room nurse in South Dakota who was on the front line of treating COVID-19 patients who were filling up the ICU beds in her hospital. Jodi Doering reported (see Witte & Romm 2020) how disturbing it was that her patients were dying of the virus, yet were still in denial about the pandemic’s existence! Some were angry at her for being part of a ‘conspiracy’ to convince people that the virus was dangerous and that they needed to take precautions. She reported how sad it was that her patients were near their last breath, at the end of their lives, suffocating for lack of oxygen – and instead of calling loved ones or making preparations for their deaths, they were screaming angry epithets at the nurses.

After hearing this story I was talking with a psychology colleague who said to me ‘that’s psychotic!’ I knew what he meant, but I do not think Doering’s patients were psychotic. She just lived in an entirely different reality – one in which her imagination had been hijacked and turned toward a completely convincing alternative story about the world. When I was in Graduate School in the 1970’s and we young psychologists were trying to determine whether our hospitalized patients were psychotic or not, there was a consensual reality, by and large, that we all lived in. We all received our news of the day from one of three major networks presented by broadcasters whom we could trust. At that time there was something called the ‘Fairness Doctrine’ that prescribed that News Agencies must report the news ‘fairly’. That doctrine was cancelled in the 1980’s and into the resulting vacuum poured the cable channels like Fox News and talk radio shows like Rush Limbaugh’s. Subsequently, social media channels like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram started reporting the so-called ‘news’ themselves. The result was a proliferation of emotionally driven, often outrage-driven, fear-mongering stories and ‘opinion’ that masqueraded for actual reality. People like the South Dakota nurse’s dying patient lived in a silo of such ‘information’ dominated by Fox News, Breitbart news, and the disinformation provided by the then President of the United States. She and the nurse trying to care for her no longer lived in consensual reality but in two entirely separate worlds.

It would not be fair to say that Jodi Doering's patient was psychotic. The psychosis was (and is) in the culture – not in her. When major sectors of the population live in separate 'realities', democracy is difficult if not impossible. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has made precisely this point in a recent book called *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* which gives eloquent expression to how easily the collective imagination can be hijacked by social media.

Such conspiracy theories as were apparent in Jodi Doering's story of her patient in South Dakota are part of a *dissociative psychology* (see Kalsched 2020). They begin in fear and, with the help of the dark imagination and the psyche's defences, they make fear worse. These theories are proliferating because we are being asked – all over the world – to confront the very real threat of death in COVID-19. It terrifies us and forces us to feel our own frailty. For many of us, this invisible threat is a *reality* that we cannot metabolize. It lies outside our window of tolerance.

When the imagination is hijacked by fear in this way, it begins to create an alternative 'reality' that protects us from the pain, confusion and suffering we are actually living in, but cannot bear to feel. In any normal, rational world, this kind of delusional thinking would be seen for what it is – a serious form of mental illness based on affective incompetence – an inability to feel our feelings. In today's world it has been politicized and called 'normal' by approximately one-third of the population in the USA.

Conspiracy theories such as the one on display in the above story are proliferating in the politically polarized landscape of the USA. QAnon is a classic example. It alleges that the world is menaced by a group of left-wing satanic paedophiles affiliated with Hillary Clinton, from which Donald Trump will liberate the world, saving the innocent babies from further abuse. This theory was well represented among the right-wing extremists who broke into the US Capital on 6 January, 2021 and threatened to overturn the normal processes of democratic government.

From a psychological point of view, conspiracy theories such as QAnon are imaginative narratives that accomplish something important for their adherents. They organize a complicated, frightening and conflicted world into binary categories of good vs evil, heroes vs villains, 'us' vs 'them'. And they generate a lot of righteous anger which always coheres self-esteem and also coheres a traumatically fragmented self. They also provide an alternative reality to the objective reality we are all living in – because objective reality under COVID-19 is too much to bear – more than we can feel. To face it brings up feelings of fear and sadness and grief and shame, all the vulnerable feelings that we have in this life if we are honest with ourselves.

There is another reason that conspiracy narratives seem to be so popular in today's world. New evidence suggests that they are addictive! In other words, neurologically speaking, the brain on grievance is similar to the brain on narcotics. James Kimmel (2020) recently reported that the psychology of

victimization, grievance, and outrage affects the brain's chemistry the same way narcotics do. 'It turns out', says Kimmel, that:

your brain on grievance looks a lot like your brain on drugs. In fact, brain imaging studies show that harboring a grievance (a perceived wrong or injustice, real or imagined) activates the same neural reward circuitry as narcotics. This isn't a metaphor; it's brain biology ... what this suggests is that similar to the way people become addicted to drugs or gambling, people may also become addicted to seeking retribution against their enemies – revenge addiction. This may help explain why some people just can't let go of their grievances long after others feel they should have moved on – and why some people resort to violence.

(*ibid.*, pp. 2–3)

Imagination for our common humanity: Ernest Becker

Now for an alternative version of the imagination and its potential in a crisis. As I have just outlined, a terrifying event such as the current world-wide pandemic takes us suddenly and unexpectedly into extremely vulnerable feelings that are a part of the human condition that we do not like to think about – *and would rather not feel*. Suddenly, we are all feeling the exquisite vulnerability of our existence as fragile human beings on this beautiful blue planet. Ernest Becker (1973) thinks that having the courage to feel the full impact of this reality is very important. He urges us to stop 'denying death' and to face our feelings about it, instead of allowing our imaginations to be hijacked.

If we bring Becker's (1973) powerful analysis forward and apply it to our current situation, COVID-19 gives us a small window into the tender vulnerabilities of the human condition and challenges us to respond to what he calls the 'fundamental existential paradox' of what it is to be human. Becker reminds us that we are beings with seemingly infinite symbolic and imaginative capacities, mentally and spiritually, living in material bodies that ultimately evolved from worms and will again soon end up being food for worms. As he says:

We are hopelessly split in two – dualities – aware of our own splendid uniqueness, sticking out of nature with a towering majesty – up in the stars contemplating the infinite, yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body, [a body that] aches and bleeds and will decay and die and go back into the ground ... in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.

(*ibid.*, p. 26)

Contemplating the horror of our inevitable death is bad enough and fills us with fear and trembling. Add to this the fact that Mother Nature is brutally indifferent to our plight, red in tooth and claw, destroying what she creates

with a meaningless indifference to human affairs, and our fear intensifies. 'This is the terror that emerges from our existential plight, and we have to face it' says Becker (1973). 'To have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression' (ibid., p. 87) – and with all this, the unbearable awareness that we can be snuffed out in an instant like a guttering candle, and that no matter what, the cold grave awaits us whenever our number comes up.

Becker (1973) believed that the vast majority of men and women cannot face the reality of this fundamental duality. 'The child denies the reality of his world as miracle and as terror; that's all there is to it' (p. 261), he says. Hence we throw ourselves into a variety of what Becker calls 'heroic' and defensive activities designed to blot out awareness that we are ultimately helpless and abandoned in a world where we are fated to die. These 'heroic' postures include what he calls the 'vital lie of character' – what Wilhelm Reich called 'character armour'. It constitutes an effort to dominate and rise above one's underlying vulnerability or that of others – to take on invincible, god-like and heroic qualities, allying ourselves with what society designates as 'lasting values' – even starting wars in the name of these values – my immortality project or holy war against your immortality project. My bloody utopia against yours. (See ibid., p. 285). All forms of violence and war, says Becker, are social rituals that try to banish the awareness of our existential dilemma. They take the beauty and terror of the human condition and turn it into a story of victimization and persecution woven around a core of imagined innocence – a righteous effort to purify the world. They all lead to occurrences like Abu Ghraib prison, or the genocide of Rwanda, or the gas ovens of the Holocaust, or the lynchings of blacks in the Southern USA, or the knee on the neck of George Floyd. This habit of self-destructive heroics and denial of the body (and its universal frailty), illustrates the relationship between the denial of death and the dominion of evil. If I am powerful enough, or rich enough, or famous enough, I will not die – but you will.

Whether we agree or not with Becker's (1973) grim analysis is not the point. It is the horns of the existential dilemma that he places us upon that challenges us – and how we respond to it – with fear, defence, hatred and greed, or with courage, openness, generosity, grief and love. We sit astride a pair of opposites. We are housed in a dying, deteriorating body, yet we are filled with immortal longings. We are born of spirit and flesh, and it is up to our creative imaginations to unite them. The fear-driven imagination splits them and denies the body. How can we reconcile the soaring infinite reach of our own creativity and sense of the ineffable with the basic animal functions of the body – with the fact that 'we are [all] born between urine and faeces', as Freud says. Becker's analysis of Freud's anal obsessions is brilliant. In one passage (ibid., p. 33ff), he quotes the poet Jonathan Swift who describes in one of his poems the grotesque and absolute contradiction that is tearing him apart as he contemplates his beautiful lover, Caelia:

Nor wonder how I lost my Wits;
Oh! Caelia, Caelia, Caelia shits!

For Becker it is not the shit that is at issue, but the body, its impossible frailty, vulnerability, and ‘grotesquery’ standing in total contradiction with the soaring Spirit. We cannot bear this reality, he says and so we turn in horror to the ‘heroic’ and ‘utopian’ pursuits that help us avoid this human conflict.

Jung and Becker

Jung knew a great deal about the existential struggle that Becker (1973) highlights. He lived his whole life between the two worlds of Spirit and Matter – God’s world on the one hand and this ‘profane’ world in which he observed frightening, violent things in nature like ants attacking and eating writhing helpless worms. He knew we had to hold both these realities together – that we needed an imagination big enough to do this – and yet he struggled his whole life with these incommensurables.

When Jung had his horrifying childhood vision of God defecating on Basel Cathedral (Jung 1963, p. 36ff) his disillusionment was described in mostly theological terms. Viewed from Becker’s (1973) standpoint, this might be seen as the moment that he learned that God had a body – that Spirit and Flesh could no longer be separated as he was trying to do. Caelia shits and God shits too! Jung had trouble integrating this.

For much of his life, Jung preferred the celestial and spiritual to the sensate and feeling side of experience. As he says:

The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life The feeling for the infinite, however, can be attained only if we are bounded to the utmost In such awareness we experience ourselves concurrently as limited and eternal, as both the one and the other.

(Jung 1963, p. 225)

Jung does not explicitly mention the body and its mortality as the limiting reality in this quote but he gets the existential dilemma. He comes much closer in a letter written in April of 1959, two years before his death. At this late time in his life, Jung was reminded by a student of some early correspondence with Freud from 1911, in which Jung had tried to urge upon his mentor the idea that psychoanalysis was (or should become) a new religion. The student sent Jung an excerpt and Jung replied:

Best thanks for the quotation from that accursed correspondence. For me it is an unfortunately inexpungable reminder of the incredible folly that filled the days of my youth. The journey from cloud-cuckoo-land back to reality lasted a long time. In

my case Pilgrim's Progress consisted in my having to climb down a thousand ladders until I could reach out my hand to the little clod of earth that I am.

(Jung 1973, p. 19)

'Reaching out our hands to the little clod of earth that we are' means accepting the terrible and wonderful reality of our embodied plight on this planet, and this in turn means transcending a fear-driven imagination for one that accepts the unbearable feelings of grief and sadness inherent in our condition and opens to our embodied life's possibilities, and to the redemptive potentials that flood in after this acceptance. For Becker (and for Jung) this means what theologian Paul Tillich calls 'the courage to be' in the face of our existential dilemma. We must, according to Becker (1973), 'practice our own dying'. We must develop an imagination resilient enough to hold our common feelings of human vulnerability and frailty – all our creaturely inadequacies, together with our heroic strivings and 'immortal longings':

Whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false. Whatever is achieved must be achieved ... without deadening ... with the full exercise of passion, of vision, of pain, of fear, of sorrow [and of joy].

(ibid, pp. 283–84)

This may be bitter medicine – contemplation of the horror of our inevitable death – but it is paradoxically the tincture that adds sweetness to mortality. Jung agrees. 'Life is never so beautiful', he says, 'as when surrounded by death' (Jung 1925/1989, p. 85).

A contemporary example of creative imagination

I thought I glimpsed something of the beauty of this integrated imagination recently in the USA's experience of COVID-19. As infections mushroomed all over the globe, signs began appearing in every nation and in all languages that said 'We're all in this together'. Despite the universal suffering and fear of dying, 'We're all in this together'. This statement is true. It is called the *human condition*, yet we have not begun to 'see' it or explore its unifying and communal implications – perhaps until now. We began to imagine collaborating across national boundaries in the common cause of defeating the virus. There was talk of sharing our scientific findings, developing a vaccine together, shipping needed supplies around the globe without regard to race or ethnicity or whose 'side' we were on. All this suggested to me the

possibility of a new kind of imaginative vision and a potentially deeper appreciation for our common plight on this increasingly vulnerable planet.

There were people singing from balconies in Italy – musicians playing Beethoven’s Ninth from studios all over the world on Zoom, people in polluted Indian cities suddenly able to breathe again and see the Himalayan mountains. It seemed like we were being asked to imagine a new ‘story’ that might emerge from this shared suffering – one where we might find the courage to face into our fear together no matter what colour our skin, to let our hearts break together, and celebrate the incarnate beauties and mysteries of life together. This in effect would be a liberation of the imagination from its captivity by fear, so that the imagination could serve our wholeness and together help us transcend the pain we have endured. This would certainly be something unprecedented. It might open our otherwise hijacked imaginations to a new paradigm in our consciousness – one that would include the empathy for each other that we have been feeling in the common plight of this pandemic.

And then in the middle of all this, George Floyd, a black man, was violently killed in Minneapolis by a white police officer, while the whole world watched on video. In the middle of our shared vulnerability and our sense that we were ‘all in this together’ here was an example of how we are distinctly NOT ‘all in this together’. The clause in the USA’s Declaration of Independence that ‘all men are created equal’ clearly did not seem to apply in this instance.

It just happened that on the same day that the video of George Floyd’s killing was released, I had been reading the recently published biography of the great abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass. I had just read and been moved by his famous 4th July, 1852 address to the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. In that address Douglass said there was a horrible viper – i.e. slavery itself – coiled up in America’s bosom and that the ‘venomous creature was nursing at the tender breast of our youthful republic’ (Blight 2018, p. 235). In the George Floyd video – I got a new glimpse of that snake. Despite the American Civil War and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, some in the USA – people with Black and Brown skin, descendants of slaves or of indigenous people, women – were not free, not equal. There was a hypocrisy lurking at the very heart of the USA’s founding documents. It was suddenly clear to me. We are *not* ‘all in this together’ and in the USA we have not been for hundreds of years.

The sudden intrusion of this violent act against the backdrop of the shared vulnerability we were all facing from the pandemic had a galvanizing effect in the USA. Instead of polarizing the country again, leading to outrage, discharge, vilification and hatred, something else happened. Of course, the forces of divisiveness and outrage were present around the edges, and some people took advantage of the chaos to loot and vandalize. But that was a small minority. The vast majority of the demonstrations were peaceful. It was as if, against the backdrop of a shared vulnerability, we were being asked to

look squarely into yet another dark reality – this time, one we had caused or been complicit in, and one we could do something about. Instead of warping our imaginations in a pathological and defensive direction, the killing of Floyd brought people together. The shared plight that COVID-19 had introduced us to suddenly had a rallying cry: ‘Black Lives Matter’.

Peaceful demonstrations of white, black and brown people spilled out onto streets in cities all over the world – millions of people – a veritable rainbow coalition of support. It was like in the George Floyd incident ‘we’re all in this together’ had met with our hypocrisy and the brutally imperfect ‘self-evident truths’ implicit in the USA’s Declaration of Independence affirmation of equality among all men – but not *those* men, and not *those* women. Suddenly our ‘imagination for evil’ expanded and we could see the absurdity of the splitting and hatred against the backdrop of our common human frailties shared in the prior months of our communal suffering with the pandemic. And we suddenly had a cause for the future – struggling together to create a ‘more perfect union’ for us and our children to live in.

Conclusions

In conclusion, let me return to the clinical situation. In the psychotherapeutic work that I do with trauma’s survivors I am working mostly with people whose imaginations have been hijacked and stolen by fear. They are usually preoccupied with worry and anxiety and their imaginations are working overtime for survival. Living in a trauma-trance, they often cannot feel their feelings, especially as experienced in the body. They are too afraid of shame and potential humiliation. They feel like ‘shit’ and they are afraid to have their ‘shit’ seen. And yet, as my colleague Frank Faranda says, almost unerringly:

the path towards healing runs directly through the very thing we seem to fear most, our psychological pain [and childlike vulnerability]. This is perhaps the final paradox and one that is not solved with the rational brain. When a patient is able to sit long enough in their dark places with me, we somehow find our way toward healing. Not only do they come to be less afraid of the dark, but the dark itself begins to transform.

(Faranda 2020, p. 132)

Perhaps this process is equivalent to freeing the imagination from its dark defensive function – freeing it from its enslavement to fear, anger, and illusion and ‘emancipating it’ to serve its truer function of enriching personal and collective life with meaning.

As an American, I would like to imagine that something similar might be happening in this traumatized country I live in and love. Daily we see how the

imagination has been hijacked by fear and turned into a paranoid/persecutory narrative, stoking fear and suspicion. Daily we see how the worst among our leaders exploit this darkened imagination and its pathetic conspiracy-illusions for personal and political gain. Democracy seems in danger. But things might be changing and I would like to think the pandemic might have something to do with it. It is possible – just possible – that the current plague, by reminding us of our embodied vulnerability and common ‘creature-hood’, is constellating those integrative functions of the imagination that conspire towards both wholeness and aliveness. I think we could see this last Summer in the way people from all over the world – millions of people, black, white and brown – poured into the streets to support the Black Lives Matter demonstrations sparked by the killing of George Floyd.

I do not think this outpouring was just because everyone was ‘cooped up’ for too long, as some cynical commentators speculated. There was something more. Something intangible. Maybe even something ineffable. And I think it is the emergence of a new capacity for feeling – the experience all over the world of people from all walks of life being close to their own fragile aliveness – their own mortality – their own bodies. This has somehow made us more sensitive to the brutal inequities in our own history – economic inequities, educational inequalities, health-care inequities, racial inequities and especially the brutal killing of a black man by a white police officer. We are letting ourselves grieve – letting our hearts break together and the stillness of our quarantine (perhaps) is part of what has made this possible. Jung said we need an imagination for evil, and in the George Floyd incident for many of us, evil was on violent display.

But in our mutual closeness to death at the hands of COVID-19, in our shared fears and suffering, we may also be acquiring an imagination for good – a coalition supporting a world-wide movement that might restore us all to our basic humanity and to our love for one another and for the fragile Democracy some of us have inherited. There is a great deal of healing in the USA right now, starting with the Black Lives Matter movement and continuing with the election of a new President who knows about grief, loss, and responsibility. Americans are starting to be able to love their country again – but it is a different kind of love than the ‘Make America Great Again’ slogans plastered on the red hats of those Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol building in Washington DC on 6 January, 2021.

It is more like the love Angela Merkel espoused when the German Chancellor was asked about the future of German nationalism:

The nation-state alone does not have a future ... Germany’s past is a fractured past – with responsibility for the murder of millions and the suffering of millions. That breaks our hearts to this day. And that is why I say that this country can only be loved with a broken heart.

(Cohen 2020, p. 1)

So too America. Knowing about the realities of its own historical brutalities towards blacks, towards Native Americans, towards women, breaks our hearts. But it does not stop us from loving our country or striving towards the ‘more perfect union’ that is enshrined as the inclusive goal in the Preamble to the USA’s Constitution. In this way, Americans become what Becker calls ‘disillusioned heroes’ – rejecting the standardized heroics of a fear-driven mass culture, with all its bravado, its extremism, its binary polarities – embracing our humanity and vulnerability, marching arm in arm in a rainbow coalition of kindred souls, celebrating the life we are given together.

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TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Cet article explore comment l'ombre de mort de la COVID-19, passant sur la terre, constitue un traumatisme collectif qui souvent ouvre ou ravive un traumatisme personnel non-remémoré. L'article fournit des exemples cliniques de telles intersections. Il explore comment l'imagination humaine, que nous utilisons normalement pour donner du sens à nos expériences traumatiques, peut être détournée par la peur. Ceci mène à l'évitement de la souffrance et à des formulations illusoire ou réalités alternatives telles que les théories du complot. Mais l'imagination peut aussi être employée de manières plus réalistes et créatives, nous guidant à travers une souffrance consciente à la guérison et la complétude. Nous montrerons que le choix du chemin que l'imagination emploie dépend de la capacité des personnes à éprouver la pleine réalité de la condition humaine en général et la vulnérabilité magnifique de notre existence en tant qu'êtres humains fragiles à ce moment de l'histoire. L'analyse que fait Ernest Becker de notre 'déli de la mort' et son insistance à épouser notre vulnérabilité humaine commune est étudiée et mise en relation avec la tendance de Jung, au début de son œuvre, à renier le corps. L'auteur propose que les utilisations plus créatives de l'imagination, reliées à une appréhension plus humble et plus réaliste de notre destinée commune, peuvent se retrouver dans le mouvement Black Lives Matter, mouvement qui a balayé le monde à la suite de la flambée de COVID-19.

Mots clés: COVID-19, traumatisme collectif, théories du complot, déni de la mort, Black Lives Matter

In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie der tödliche Schatten von COVID-19, der über die Erde geht, ein kollektives Trauma darstellt, das häufig ein nicht erinnertes persönliches Trauma eröffnet oder 'triggert'. Es werden klinische Beispiele für diese Schnittpunkte angeführt. Der Beitrag untersucht weiter, wie die menschliche Vorstellungskraft, die wir normalerweise anwenden um aus traumatischen Erfahrungen einen Sinn zu machen, von Angst entführt werden kann - was zur Vermeidung von Leiden und zu illusorischen Formulierungen und alternativen Realitäten wie Verschwörungstheorien führt. Alternativ kann die Vorstellungskraft auf realistischere und kreativere Weise eingesetzt werden - was durch bewußtes Leiden zu Heilung und Ganzheit führt. Welchen Weg die Vorstellungskraft einschlägt, hängt von der Fähigkeit des Einzelnen ab, die volle Realität des menschlichen Zustandes im allgemeinen und die exquisite Verletzlichkeit unserer Existenz als fragile Menschen in diesem Moment der Geschichte zu spüren. Ernest Beckers Analyse unserer 'Verleugnung des Todes' und seine Dringlichkeit, unsere gemeinsame menschliche Verletzlichkeit zu akzeptieren, wird in Bezug auf Jungs frühe Tendenzen untersucht, den Körper zu leugnen. Der Autor unterstellt, daß die kreativere Verwendung der Vorstellungskraft, verbunden mit einer bescheideneren und realistischen Wahrnehmung unseres gemeinsamen

Schicksals, in der Black Lives Matter-Bewegung zu sehen ist, die nach dem Ausbruch von COVID-19 die Welt eroberte.

Schlüsselwörter: COVID-19, kollektives Trauma, Verschwörungstheorien, Verleugnung des Todes, Black Lives Matter

Questo articolo esplora come l'ombra mortifera del COVID-19 che passa sulla terra costituisca un trauma collettivo che spesso apre, o aggancia un trauma personale non ricordato. Vengono offerti esempi clinici di queste intersezioni. L'articolo inoltre esplora come l'immaginazione umana, che normalmente utilizziamo per dare significato alle esperienze traumatiche, possa essere monopolizzata dalla paura – portando ad evitare la sofferenza ed alla formulazione di realtà alternative illusorie come le teorie della cospirazione. In alternativa, l'immaginazione può essere utilizzata in modi più realistici e creativi – attraverso la consapevolezza della sofferenza per una guarigione e l'interezza. La parte che l'immaginazione può avere dipende dalla capacità degli individui di sentire in pieno la realtà della condizione umana e la particolare vulnerabilità della nostra fragile esistenza come esseri umani in questo momento storico. L'analisi di Ernest Becker della nostra "negazione della morte" e la sua necessità di abbracciare la nostra comune vulnerabilità viene esaminata in relazione alla iniziale tendenza di Jung a negare il corpo. L'Autore propone che utilizzi più creativi dell'immaginazione, connessi ad una comprensione più umile e realistica del nostro destino, possono essere visti nel movimento Black Lives Matter che ha scosso il mondo subito dopo l'irrompere della pandemia da COVID-19.

Parole chiave: COVID-19, trauma collettivo, teorie della cospirazione, negazione della morte, Black Lives Matter

В статье исследуется, как проносящаяся над землей смертоносная тень COVID-19 формирует коллективную травму, которая часто открывает или «запускает» личную травму, о которой не было воспоминаний. Приведены клинические примеры таких пересечений. В статье также показано, как человеческое воображение, которое мы обычно используем для придания смысла травматическому опыту, оказывается похищено и задействовано страхом, что ведет к избеганию страдания и иллюзорным построениям, альтернативным реальностям, например, к теориям заговора. С другой стороны, воображение можно задействовать более реалистичными и созидательными способами, которые через осознанное страдание ведут к исцелению и целостности. Каким путем пойдет воображение – зависит от способности человека быть в полном контакте с реальностью человеческого существования в целом, от исключительной уязвимости нашего существования и хрупкости бытия в данный момент истории. Анализ Эрнеста Бекера нашего «отрицания смерти» и его призыв принять нашу общую человеческую уязвимость исследуется в связи со стремлением в ранних работах Юнга к отрицанию тела. Автор предполагает, что более творческое использование воображения, связанное с более умеренным и реалистичным представлением о нашей общей судьбе, можно увидеть в движении Black Lives Matter, которое пронеслось по миру после вспышки коронавируса.

Ключевые слова: ковид-19, коллективная травма, теории заговора, отрицание смерти, Black Lives Matter

El presente trabajo explora como la sombra mortal del COVID-19 pasando sobre la tierra constituye un trauma colectivo que frecuentemente abre o ‘activa’ trauma personal no recordado. Se proveen ejemplos clínicos de estas intersecciones. El escrito además explora cómo la imaginación humana, la cual normalmente utilizamos para encontrar sentido a partir de experiencias traumáticas, puede ser apropiada por el miedo – conduciendo a la evitación del sufrimiento y a formulaciones ilusorias y realidades alternativas tales como las teorías conspirativas. Alternativamente, la imaginación puede ser empleada en modos más realistas y creativos – conduciendo a través del sufrimiento consciente a la sanación y a la integridad. Cual camino toma la imaginación, se muestra que depende de la capacidad de los individuos para sentir la realidad plena de la condición humana en general y la exquisita vulnerabilidad de nuestra existencia como frágiles seres humanos en este momento de la historia. El análisis de nuestra ‘negación de la muerte’ de Ernest Becker y su urgencia por acoger nuestra común vulnerabilidad humana es explorada con relación a la temprana tendencia en Jung de negar el cuerpo. El autor propone que los usos más creativos de la imaginación, conectados a una aprehensión más humilde y realista de nuestro destino común, puede ser vista en el movimiento Black Lives Matter que recorrió el mundo en las postrimerías del estallido del COVID-19.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, trauma colectivo, teorías conspirativas, negación de la muerte, Black Lives Matter

新冠疫情期间个体与集体创伤的交汇：现代想象的劫持

文章探索了席卷全球的新冠阴影如何聚集了一个集体创伤，这一创伤时常打开或触发被淡忘的个人创伤。文章提供了这种交汇的临床案例。文章进一步探索人类时常使用的想象如何从创伤经验中制造意义感，以及这一想象如何可以由于恐惧而被劫持，这会带来对伤痛的回避，带来幻觉，以及替代性的现实，比如阴谋论。与之不同，想象可以以更加真实和创造的形式出现，这带来的是对伤痛的觉察和疗愈与完整。想象到底会走哪条路，取决于个体完整地感受人类真实状态的能力，以及感知在当下历史时期，作为脆弱的人类的极大脆弱性的能力。文章探索了Ernest Becker关于我们对“死亡的否认”的分析，以及拥抱人类普遍的脆弱的督促，这些探索也联系了荣格早期对身体否认的倾向性。作者提出，更加积极地使用想象，更多联系到谦卑，以及对普遍命运的现实的理解，这可以在后疫情时代席卷世界的黑人生命重要运动中看到。

关键词：新冠病毒，集体创伤，阴谋论，对死亡的否认，黑人生命重要
