



Tattered scripts: Stories about the transmission of trauma across generations



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how our families' unnarrated and unspeakable stories – the ghostly hauntings of our ancestors' unremembered past – exert their influence across generations. Drawing upon cultural, historical and psychoanalytic accounts of these hauntings, I seek to offer ways of making sense of these disturbing familial and personal experiences.

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We trail no clouds of glory
when we come.
We trail blood, a cord that
must be cut and post-partum
mess that mix with places,
people, and stories to frame
the house of childhood.
We dwell in that house
forever.

(Burt, 2013,1)

When I was training to be a psychotherapist in the nineteen eighties I read a paper called Ghosts in the Nursery (Fraiberg et al., 1980). I could not stop reading it and as I did so it put me into a very heightened state of mind especially the first paragraphs:

In every nursery there are ghosts. They are the visitors of the unremembered past of the parents, the uninvited guests at the

christening. Under favourable circumstances, these unfriendly and unbidden spirits are banished from the nursery and return to their subterranean dwelling place. The baby makes his own imperative claim upon parental love and, in strict analogy with the fairy-tales, the bonds of love protect the child and his parents against the intruders, the malevolent ghosts. [...]

How shall we explain [...] a group of families who appear to be possessed by their ghosts? The intruders from the past have taken up residence in the nursery, claiming tradition and rights of ownership. They have been present at the christening for two or more generations. While no one has issued an invitation [...] the ghosts conduct a family tragedy from a tattered script. (Fraiberg et al., 1980, 164–5)

Over the years these paragraphs have haunted me. Surprisingly I have never investigated why, despite my many years in therapy. It is a haunting that has come and gone. A number of reasons have brought it to my attention now. Most importantly has been the research topic of one of my PhD students, Dagmar Alexander (2015) whose research on intergenerational trauma has made a deep impression on me. I found myself reading the same literature for my own purposes, my internal world became disturbed as I found myself considering the hauntings of my own family.

The explorations of the significance of hauntings owe much to the early work of Avery Gordon (2008) who in her book *Ghostly*

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Matters, originally published in 1997, places the ghost and its haunting at the centre of the sociological imagination. For Schwab “the ghost is a social figure and investigating it can lead to a dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). I am all too aware that the themes of my supposed hauntings can be placed in the grand narratives of the 18th and 19th century: the last throes of the Russian Empire, the First and Second World Wars, the holocaust, the subjugation of women and women’s rights, the history, cultural and medical, of mental illness and psychiatry. I have tread lightly on these narratives. The lost, hidden, partial stories I have found could so easily be submerged into the social histories they reflect. For the moment, because they are so fragile the stories I try and reconstruct remain primarily within the subjective and inter-subjective, primarily my own and the imagined other. I glance at the historical and social contexts. I know of their existence, I do not ignore the political and socio-historical. For the moment though, for this moment, I want to see if the fragments I know, and have found, can begin to tell a coherent narrative of three generations of women whose lived experience, intimate relationships, expressions of motherhood, experiences of work, sense of identities and psychic lives have not only been profoundly shaped by the times into which they were born but whose lives were shaped by the conscious and unconscious choices that were available and held sway before, during and after their lives and how aspects of those lives were haunted by the unknown and the unspoken.

In her book *Haunting Legacies* Gabriele Schwab (2010) also places hauntings not just within the realm of the personal or even inter-personal but also embedded in their political and socio-historical contexts. To be haunted by the unspoken, the unacknowledged, the denied, the unremembered, is not just an individual experience; it is also a cultural one shared by many. Past familial trauma, about which we are not necessarily aware, can nevertheless have an impact upon us, the generations who preceded us and those that come after. Schwab begins her discussion by making a link to psychoanalytic thinking, suggesting that which cannot be acknowledged in a family, spoken of, or mourned, is disavowed and unconsciously transmitted to the next generation. This is especially true of traumatic experiences, which she suggests can be taken in but not fully lived in a conscious and remembered way. Taking her understanding from Freud’s (1917) essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Schwab suggests that the work of mourning is essential for breaking the silence and preventing the continued repetition of the original trauma across the generations. An aspect of the work of mourning is to be able to tell a story that makes sense, that is alive and dynamic and that, as time passes, may change. The work of mourning is not set in stone.

My reading of this literature coincided with my mother’s death and is intimately connected with my own processes of mourning. Whilst sorting through her papers as well as unseen family photographs I came across a pile pertaining to her and my father, and to my maternal grandmother, who lived with us throughout my childhood and adolescence. In reading and looking at these, and in sorting out her beautiful and extensive collection of antiques some from my father after his death, I was overcome by an intense fever that I had to write about what I had found and connect this with what I knew but also did not know. I have never before experienced being overtaken by such a compulsion to write, to make links and to tell a story that as yet has not been imagined.

I grew up in the 1950’s in the Scottish industrial city of Glasgow in a household of three generations of women without men. We had arrived in Glasgow in 1955 to live in a nineteenth century, red sandstone tenement. My mother, sister aged 9 and I, aged 5, had left behind the blue skies and the blue sea of Hove on the south coast of England for the dull foggy cold of this colourless, gloomy northern city to live with my grandmother and aunt. We had been homeless

for six months, my father having walked out leaving my mother with nothing except two young children to look after. We spent those six months living in a boarding house and I spent that time staring out of the window down the street waiting for my father to return, unable to speak.

Some years ago during the course of a client’s therapy I had to become reacquainted with that child of five who could not speak, who was lost for words. I was working with a client whose biological and adoptive fathers both died in traumatic circumstances, one committed suicide by hanging, the other’s death was unexplained. There had been times when working with him, when it felt almost impossible to remain in the room. Week after week we would sit together in a paralysed silence that seemed impenetrable. It is not that he would not speak, it is that he could not speak and this not being able to speak took up many sessions over a number of years. The sense of anguish, of suffering in the room was palpable. During a session towards the end of this period an image came into my mind of that little mute girl. I had not thought of her for many years. I knew there was something in her presence that if I could understand, would help me to be in this desolate, barren place where my client barely existed.

I was reluctant to revisit this memory but slowly as I allowed myself to stay with this presence rather than run away I was able to sense the quality of her, of me, of my own time of silence. It was as if I was frozen in terror; if I remained completely still, completely silent and did not breathe, maybe, just maybe I could stop time. And then I could hold onto my father, call him back, recover him for myself. But if I so much as moved, gave life to myself, found my voice my father would be lost to me forever for I would be acknowledging the passing of time and the existence of reality. Although it took me some weeks I was able to offer my client this image, this sense of a present absence. I made use of this understanding of my own frozen silence and unwillingness to break it to help us to understand and think about what might be going on for him. As he came to recognise the anguished child in his silence he was more able to find his words.

Since that visitation of the ghostly presence of a still, silent child, I have been trying to put into words a story that reaches back into the past, one which, for generations, has resisted any coherent telling. The documents and photographs found amongst my mother’s possessions surprised and shocked me. Whilst looking at them for a second time I had an epiphany; my muteness and anguish was not just my own but may also have belonged to my mother’s and my father’s families where missing fathers and absent husbands created a profound loss that could never be acknowledged. A profound loss has been described by Marris (1986) as a hole in the fabric of existence, a fracture in the continuity of meaning.

Abraham and Torok (1976) have famously argued that the most profound and damaging of secrets are secreted away in a “crypt”. Abraham (1988) elaborates even further when he writes that “the phantoms who inhabit our minds do so without our knowledge, embodying the unspeakable secret of [...] an other” (1988, p3). Despite my many years in therapy the phantoms were only released from the “crypt” after my mother’s death when I was in touch with my complicated sense of grief. I seemed to be freer to bring together what I already knew and what I was discovering. However it was not just the “facts” that were coming together, my compulsion to write was inflected with waves of intense feeling now that I no longer needed to keep repressed the words that had been so dangerous to voice.

It is not a situation *including* words that become repressed: the words are not dragged into repression by a situation. Rather, *the words themselves, expressing desire, are deemed to be generators*

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