

Book Review:

Theaters of Trauma:

Dialogues for Healing

By: Richard Raubolt, Ph.D.

(Drawings by Michael Schaeffer)

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In *Theaters of Trauma: Dialogues for Healing*, Richard Raubolt provides an unusual and compelling account of trauma and its treatment; unusual in how much it conveys about the inner workings of the therapist's mind, compelling in its deep engagement with patients' suffering. It is a haunting rendering of trauma's legacy, accompanied by drawings that speak in a way that words cannot about experiences of loss, invalidation, and fragmentation. But, more than this, Raubolt offers a glimpse of the toll the healing process takes on the therapist, no longer a detached observer, but a co-participant who must share the immense burden of the patient's pain. Raubolt's account inspires hope about the possibilities for healing through a process that leaves neither the therapist nor patient quite the same as he or she was before.

Nowhere has it become more fashionable to note how far psychoanalysis has moved beyond Freud than in the field of traumatology. One effect of this sentiment has been to restore to its rightful place the importance of real events and of traumatic impingements on the patient's life. But it must be remembered that Freud (1930) did not overlook these matters entirely. Not only did he

notice that our bodies are subject to deterioration and decay, but that we remain ever vulnerable to forces beyond our control as well as to the strain of our relationships with others “The suffering that comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other...[and is not]...any less fatefully inevitable than the suffering that comes from elsewhere” (p. 77). By taking all three sources into account without privileging any one of them, Raubolt offers a unifying perspective that is like a breath of fresh air

Raubolt begins this study with brief description of his dissociative model of the mind that will be familiar to the psychodynamically-informed clinician. In both illness and health, he proposes that we think and behave in ways that are not easily reconciled. Following MacDougall (1985), he describes these disparate perspectives as theaters or areas of private folly. Why folly? Because each reflects but one aspect of our inherent multiplicity, the fact that the perspectives and roles we occupy often are antinomious. Populated by a veritable cast of characters, each of us remains strangely unknown to ourselves. These characters express themselves variously in our thoughts and deeds as well as silently through bodily symptoms. Sometimes, however, the patient cannot communicate his or her pain by any of these means without activating fears of retraumatization. In such circumstances, the only way to convey it is by evoking experiences in the therapist's mind and body where it can be formulated safely. It is this third possibility that Raubolt develops with particular effectiveness in the fifteen clinical vignettes contained in this book. Each vignette describes the creative use of countertransference reactions to decode the patient's inner world. His approach is thoroughly intersubjective, centrally concerned with how to fashion a unique and viable intersubjective space within each individual treatment.

Raubolt sets himself the formidable task of speaking from “inside the wounds of trauma” (p. 7). He wants to convey the patient's experience from a first-person perspective, which he endeavors

to accomplish by speaking in his own voice and from his own perspective. He describes his work with Missy, a young, attractive woman whom, we learn, killed her father. “As pretty as she was to others, Missy appeared monstrous to herself...The act was simple enough; he died shoveling the snow she had refused to shovel” (p. 17). Traumatized by an act of omission, Missy could not forgive herself. She was haunted by her refusal and, as a result, remained completely cut off from others, unable to reach out to them or allow anyone to connect with her emotionally. She greeted the world with a seductive, if somewhat coarse and jeering veneer, drawing them close only to abruptly push them away. Beneath this facade was the terrible burden of guilt she could bring herself neither to own nor relinquish. She became increasingly involved in a series of petty thefts that cried out for a response. Raubolt movingly describes his struggle to engage her pain, to reframe her self-understanding in a way that accurately captured her feelings while drawing very different conclusions about them.

In reading this book, one is reminded of the image of a mirror and the very important role of empathy in the therapeutic relationship. However, what Raubolt mirrors to his patients is not so much their experience as such, but those aspects of it that cannot be experienced or entertained. Ever-alert to the threat of retraumatization, he eschews an experience-distant, interpretive approach in favor of one that seeks a unique relatedness with each individual patient.

Boulanger (2007) argues that the effective treatment of trauma requires that the therapist be emotionally available to the patient in the role of witness. As a witness, the therapist models how traumatic experience can be tolerated and, later, reflected on without emotional dysregulation. Raubolt’s work extends this approach by a focused examination of the therapist’s holding and containment functions. At another level, Raubolt invites us to bear witness to his struggle to contain unmentalized experiences and to put them to good therapeutic use. He allows us, at least in part, to

occupy his mind, to see his patients through his eyes. He writes as he works: with great courage, imagination, sensitivity, and flexibility. He describes the challenges of working with individuals who have been victimized by loved ones and devastated by misfortune. It is a humbling experience in which there can be no guarantee of success. Raubolt meets this challenge with commitment and with the conviction that examining the inevitable disruptions and conflicts in the patient-therapist relationship is the primary vehicle for healing.

References

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MacDougall, J. (1985). *Theaters of the Mind*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

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