WHEN THE THIRD IS DEAD: 

Memory, Mourning, and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust

Samuel Gerson, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The origins of psychoanalysis, as well as the concerns of our daily endeavors, center on engagement with the fate of the unbearable - be it wish, affect, or experience. In this paper, I explore psychological states and dynamics faced by survivors of genocide and their children in their struggle to sustain life in the midst of unremitting deadliness.

Toward this continuous effort, I re-examine Freud’s theoretical formulations concerning memory and mourning, elaborate Andre Green’s concept of the “Dead Mother”, and introduce more recent work on the concepts of the “third” and “thirdness”. Throughout, my thoughts are informed by our clinical experience with the essential role of witnessing in sustaining life after massive trauma. I bring aspects of all of these forms of knowing to reflections about a poem by Primo Levi entitled “Unfinished Business” and to our own never finished business of avoiding denial while living in an age of genocide and under the aura of uncontained destructiveness.

Keywords: absence, dead mother, dead third, genocide, Holocaust, melancholia, memory, mourning, Primo Levi, third, trauma, witness

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The imperatives to bear witness and the seductions of blind denial are competing and everlasting legacies of the Holocaust. Each challenges our frailties in the face of an indifferent world, and marks the potential, as well as the limits, of being human. As we all know too well, the continuous presence of genocide and mass destruction, both as historical aftermath and as foreshadowed future, haunts our time and inexorably shapes our individual and collective destinies.

There is no end to our return to the atrocities of the past, we are visited in unbidden ways and in untold moments by the iconic images of mushroom clouds, emaciated figures staring blankly through barbed wire, stacks of skulls, and the dug up dumping grounds for the human waste left by ethnic cleansing. Yet even the continuous repetitions of genocide in new locales does not ensure that its meanings and impact can ever be fully acknowledged. Rather the re-emergence of traumatic memories may paradoxically widen the sense of absence and gaps in knowledge, and thereby leave us haunted by the traces of events that we can neither fully remember nor entirely forget. What inhabits us are the vivid, yet frozen, afterimages of atrocity conveyed in the cool light of the media, and what more invidiously invades us is a persistent miasma that tends to obscure our vision and muffle our response. The threats of the future may then move beyond our imagination as our memories elude our knowledge.

What then can exist between the scream and the silence? We hope first that there is an engaged witness - an other that stands beside the event and the self and who cares to listen; an other who is able to contain that which is heard and is capable of imagining the unbearable; an other who is in a position to confirm both our external and
our psychic realities and, thereby, to help us integrate and live within all realms of our
experience. This is the presence that lives in the gap, absorbs absence, and transforms
our relation to loss. It is the active and attuned affective responsiveness of the
witnessing other that constitutes a “live third” – the presence that exists between the
experience and its meaning, between the real and the symbolic, and through whom life
gestates and into whom futures are born.

The “Third”, “Thirdness”, & the “Dead Third”

The theoretical concepts of the “third” and “thirdness’ have been, in recent years,
the subject of numerous formulations from a variety of theoretical perspectives, and
have been applied to a host of clinical, developmental, pathological, and social realms
of concern (Aron, 2006; Benjamin, 2004; Green, 2004; Ogden, 2004). In the process,
we have gained a plethora of meanings that enrich the conceptual base of
psychoanalysis even as they, at times, threaten to move us from clarity to confusion. In
an issue of the Psychoanalytic Quarterly devoted entirely to “The Third in
Psychoanalysis” (2004), the eight articles offered a total of twenty-two different types of
the “third”. In an attempt to find order amid this proliferation of usages, I suggested that
all of the types of the “third” belonged to one of three major domains of concern – the
developmental, the relational, and the cultural – and that all usages of the concept could
be accounted for within these categorizations, albeit with some overlaps between these
three broad domains (Gerson, 2004). Briefly, the three major applications of the concept
of the third are delineated in the following way. First, the “developmental third” includes
those processes and structures through which the child moves from dyadic to triadic
relating, the prime exemplar of which is the Oedipal configuration. Second, the concept
of the “relational third” refers to the unique configuration in which self and other combine in every relationship and can be considered to be the intersubjective process and product of each relationship. The concept of the “analytic third” (Ogden, 2004) can be thought of as a specific form of the broader category of the “relational third” and illustrates that in all relationships unconscious structures are created that transcend the individuality of the two participants and that these are partially determined by the context within which the relationship exists. Third, the concept of the “cultural third” designates the existence and impact of all of the non-personal contexts and process within which each individual lives and that shapes the nature of their development; included here are linguistic forms that exert powerful influence on the structures of thought and affect. It should, of course, be borne in mind that of these usages of the concept of the third exist both in external and psychic realities, are configured both objectively and subjectively, and are registered and maintained in both conscious and unconcscious configurations.

In this article, I apply the notion of the third to that entity - be it personal, social, or cultural - that exists in relation to an individual and his or her experience of massive trauma. The concept of the “witness” is used as an exemplar of a “live third” – simply put, this is the other whose engaged recognition and concerned responsiveness to the individual’s experience creates liveable meaning. The “dead third” is conceptualized as the loss of a “live third” upon whom the individual had previously relied upon, had entrusted with faith, and in relation to whom or which, had developed a sense of personal continuity and meaning. In this regard, the third - again, whether person, relationship, or institution - serves the elemental function of solidifying an individual’s
sense of person, place, and purpose. We each develop within this crucial set of orienting functions provided by the “thirds” in which we exist, and while their presence is internalized throughout the life-span, we all remain vulnerable to their abrupt loss. External traumas call forth our need for the containing and meaning making functions of all the “thirds” in which we live; when such needs are ignored, we then face the internal traumas of living with the absence of that which made life comprehensible. Under such circumstances, the living thirds in which the person was nested, now become a nest of dead thirds from which he or she cannot escape.

So imagine life when the third is dead; when the container cracks and there is no presence beyond our own subjectivity to represent continuity. It is a world constituted by absence, where meaning is ephemeral and cynicism passes for wisdom; a world in which psychic numbness is the balm against unbearable affects, where feelings of ennui and emptiness replace guilt and shame, and where manias of all sort masquerade as Eros. This is the world created by proliferating traumas, injuries not acknowledged, or if recognized, not sufficiently healed before the next blow falls, and as the next becomes an inevitability, the cascade of assaults forces us either to hide from our fears behind the false security of a “gated community” or to confront them with the false security of unconscionable force.

This is the external world within which we practice psychoanalysis. And this is the internal world of many patients who seek our help. Patients suffering perplexing constrictions of enlivenment and engagement, and whose lives are often marked by curious failures cloaked in a veneer of studied indifference, or by achievements that yield a sense of fraudulence where gratification might be expected. These are the
patients who arrive feeling impoverished in the midst of plenty, and who enter our offices with the silent hope that the analyst’s presence may serve as a magical antidote to their sense of an inner deadness and to the nihilism that has taken root in that empty and meaningless space.

**Trauma, memory, and absence**

Freud taught us that the causes of loss of vitality are located in the intricate webs shaped by conflicts between Eros and Thanatos. An aspect of our lives is sacrificed in the attempt to regulate the power of the forces that compel us toward life and death. He also taught us that the relics of these conflicts are found in the symptoms of either letting go too readily of that which is most vexing, or holding on too assiduously to that which is most precious. In the former case, Freud (1914) viewed the “forgotten” as the missing link that could reveal the cause of neurotic conditions and the loss of capability. Failure to forget, on the other hand, was the hallmark of depression and revealed a desperate attempt to avoid loss (Freud, 1917). At the core of memory and of melancholia are issues of presence and absence - experiential states that Freud at times marks by the word “gap”. I highlight this term as it is our evolving understanding of the “gap” and our relation to it, as patients and as analysts, that is as central to our work as it was for Freud.

Freud (1914), in his essay *Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through*, retraced the history of psychoanalytic technique and wrote that, “The aim of these different techniques has, of course, remained the same. Descriptively speaking, it is to fill in gaps in memory; dynamically speaking, it is to overcome resistances due to repression (p.147).” In the years since Freud wrote this, we have learned that in the
lives of many traumatized patients, the “gaps” signify the enduring presence of an absence rather than a specific loss of memory; and that with these patients, resistances are better understood as aversion to facing uncontrollable pain, rather than as repression of unacceptable wishes. In a similar vein, while Freud believed that gaps in memory could be filled by the analyst helping the patient to identify and dismantle resistances to remembering, or by offering a plausible reconstruction of the unremembered past, now we also concern ourselves with how the analyst may help the patient come to recognize and reflect about gaps that represent the experience of absence.

Later in the same essay Freud wrote that "... we may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it (p.150)". We now understand that for victims of unimaginable trauma what is repetitively enacted is not a repressed memory, but rather an unconscious attempt to represent experiences that are simultaneously impossible to forget and impossible to tell. My focus in this paper is on trauma occasioned by intentional acts of violence committed by social and political entities that are aimed at the annihilation of a class of people for racial, ethnic, or political purposes. Survivors of genocidal acts have each been subject to a specific form of violence that has left an enduring residue based on the moments and form of the horrors experienced, the personality of the victimized, and the presence or absence of a mediating “live third”. There is, of course, a voluminous literature about how actual traumatic acts are registered by the individual and how they may eventuate in varieties of post-traumatic
responses and disorders (Krystal, 1978; Van der Kolk, 1996; Oliner, 2000); what may be a fruitful area of further exploration is how the individual inscription of specific traumas inflicted as part of a genocidal effort effects one’s ability to maintain or regain faith in a “living third”.

In this paper, I focus on an overarching aspect of the trauma of genocide – namely that the violence was initiated by political and governmental entities, and carried out by individuals, whom the victims had reason to believe would, at very least, act with a basic concern for human life. Beyond the terrors of the actual experience of violence, the victimized individual must also contend with the loss of faith in a protective world and the subsequent sense of living in the presence of a “dead third”. I believe that this aspect of trauma reflects and elaborates on Freud’s (1920) definition of the traumatic as “… any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield (p.29).” Freud, in this essay, is defining trauma in terms of excessive amounts of excitation that have effected “… a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli (p.29)” and his theorizing about the “protective shield” occurs within the larger metapsychological, economic, and biological perspectives that informed this work (Rosenbaum & Varvin, 2007). However, one can deduce from Freud’s (1926) later work on danger situations that trauma may be best understood in terms of the nature of the threat to the individual rather than by the degree of excess stimulation. In this regard, Zepf & Zepf (2008), emphasized Freud’s first danger situation – the loss of the object’s love – and stated that “Thus object loss remains the trauma’s common and dynamically effective factor (p. 340).” I attempt to describe how this object-relations view of trauma can be extended from the functions and loss of functions of primary objects, to that of
larger social forces. Kirshner (1994), from a Lacanian perspective, has noted that “… extreme traumas might be defined as experiences producing a tearing of the network of signification which supports symbolic relationships, resulting in the negative effects of psychic numbing, profound withdrawal and addictive oblivion…(p. 238)”. These social, psychological, and clinical phenomena are exemplars of the trauma of living in relation to a “dead third” – namely, that in addition to the actual terrifying experiences of horrifying death that one is encountering and threatened with, there is also the overwhelming experience of learning that there is an absence of concern about one’s plight not only by the perpetrators, but also in the silent others, be they individuals or nations, that allows the violence to proceed.

Clearly, there is an intricate relation between the initial events that trigger the trauma and the presence or absence of a mediating presence that powerfully affects the registration, representation, and recovery from the assault on the self. I emphasize the role of the “live third”, as embodied in the concerned witness, as the other that creates the possibility of processing the effects of trauma, including, and perhaps primarily, the trauma occasioned by the absence of an engaged and protective world at the time when the actual traumatic acts occurred. Marcello Vinar (2005), in his keynote address at the IPA Congress in Rio de Janeiro, made clear that the victim of purposive attempts at his or her annihilation suffers not only from loss of specific attachments, but more globally from the destruction of belief in the possibilities of a coherent narrative that does not betray personal truth; as he put it, “The worst anxiety is not connected to the loss of the object, but to the absence of its representation (p.315)”. When the effects of trauma culminate in an
internalization of the shocking loss of faith in a concerned object, we may find that it is not specific memories that are acted out, rather, it is the presence of an absence - the gap itself comes to life and demands our attention.

Eva Hoffman (2004), speaking from the vantage point of the experience of children of survivors of the Holocaust, wrote that: "Nor was it exactly memories that were expressed at first by the survivors themselves. Rather, it was something both more potent and less lucid, something closer to enactment of experience, to emanations or something closer to embodiments of psychic matter - of material too awful to be processed and assimilated into the stream of consciousness, or memory, or intelligible feeling (p.6)."

For survivors of the Holocaust and their children, truth often resides in the reality of the absence, or put another way, absence itself may becomes the abiding presence. We are helped in our understanding of this through Winnicott’s (1971) discussion of a patient, who as a child during World War II, was evacuated from London to rural England and who then developed an amnesia for her parents. Winnicott wrote: “From this my patient reached the position, which again comes into the transference, that the only real thing is the gap; that is to say, the death, or the absence or the amnesia. In the course of the session she had a specific amnesia and this bothered her, and it turned out that the important communication for me to get was that there could be a blotting out, and that this blank could be the only fact and the only thing that was real (p.22)."

Winnicott offers us a few other examples from this patient to illustrate "...how the sense of loss itself can become a way of integrating one's self-experience (p.20)."
Speaking of her former analyst the patient remarks, “The negative of him is more real than the positive of you”, and at an other time, “All I have got is what I have not got”. Winnicott formulates this as “…a desperate attempt here to turn the negative into a last ditch defense against the end of everything. The negative is the only positive (p.23).”

For me the most compelling way to understand such clinical phenomena has been through the use of theories and concepts that highlight the presence of a sense of absence at the core of the person. Figuring most prominently in this regard is Andre Green’s (1986) poignant concept of the “Dead Mother”, one that, in my mind, transcends its seemingly singular location in the maternal and describes the many realms of absence that configure obstacles in the pursuit of enlivenment. My use of Green’s concept is both figurative and literal; if we stretch the metaphor the “Dead Mother”, it can signify the shocking and, therefore, traumatic withdrawal of provision and care from those sources whom we have either relied upon in the past or have come to expect to be nurturant in the future - be it a parent, a doctor, another human being, a community, or “Mother Earth” herself. Furthermore, the trauma occasioned by being in relation to a living other person or social entity who has become “dead” to individual extends beyond the external loss and involves severe damage to internal psychological structures. As Laub (2005) noted, the same dynamics and phenomenology found in the “Dead Mother” syndrome “… hold true not only for the infantile symbolic maternal loss but also for the traumatic loss of the good internal object of any age (p.315).”

In a similar vein, I believe that for survivors of genocide, the “Dead Mother” concept can usefully be extended to include survivor’s experiences of the world at large as unresponsive to their suffering and unconcerned about their fate (Laub & Auerhahn,
Mankind as “Dead Mother”, much like the more personal one Green described, is a human world so absorbed with its own losses, fears, and needs that it remains silent and unmoved by the plight of the victim; it is a world that exists, but without provision for shared experience, and so it comes to occupy and to reverberate within psychological space as a “Dead Third”.

Green (1986), from a more literal point of view, offered a compelling portrait of the psychology of individuals whose mothers are so saturated by traumatic loss that they leave a legacy of blankness and deadliness at the core of the living child. In this usage, Green’s “Dead Mother” poignantly evokes experiences of many children of survivors whose parents not only had to live with their own specific traumas, but who also, almost always, were in the throes of unresolvable mourning for their own dead parents, siblings, friends, and children. Green described the Dead Mother as:

“An imago which has been constituted in the child’s mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming the living object, a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, toneless and practically inanimate, ... Thus, the dead mother, contrary to what one might think, is a mother who remains alive but who is, so to speak, psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care (p. 170).”

For Green, the Dead Mother is an absent presence whose effect on the child is like that of a black hole that relentlessly sucks the child’s vitality. As he put it “The patient has the feeling that a malediction weighs upon him, that there is no end to the dead mother’s dying (p.181, 1986)”. There is “no end to the dead mother’s dying because her absence has become his as he was compelled to forge a connection with her. The milk she fed her infant carried the toxic serum of the deadness festering in and
about her, leaving the child saturated with the mother's undigested loss and her
‘blankness’. Her emptiness becomes his, and his becomes the task to fill them both, to
create presence in the space left by absence.

This task is both imperative and impossible, and in the face of this paradoxical
claim, all other desires become meaningless quests. Achievement is hollowed by the
erasures of absence and drapes the self in a mask of falseness. This is the ultimate
psychological resting place of the “Dead Mother”, a fate in which the tracings that are
left in the child’s mind outline all that is not there, and this not-there-ness constitutes
both the “gap”, or absence, as well as what fills the absence. Perhaps this would be
more simply imagined as the haunting presence of ghosts who, because they can never
be banished, become primary objects of identification and so form the most enduring
aspect of the self.

The idea of a mind occupied by the non-presence of the not-fully-dead is vividly
captured by Nicolas Abraham (1975) who, in theorizing about the existence of
unconscious material that does not function like dynamic repression, introduced us to
the concept of the “phantom” and referred to it as:
“... the burial of an unspeakable fact within the love-object...The phantom is a formation
of the unconscious that has never been conscious - for good reason. It passes - in a
way yet to be determined - from the parent’s unconscious into the child’s ...The
presence of the phantom indicates the effects, on the descendants, of something that
had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents...The phantom which
returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other (pgs.
53-4)”.

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Abraham’s poignant description of the life of the “phantom” finds an uncanny echo in a short story with the unsettling title “Cattle Car Complex” written by Thane Rosenbaum (1996), a child of Holocaust survivors. The author, writing within an autobiographical sensibility, succinctly summarized the intergenerational transmission of trauma when he wrote: “He carried on their ancient sufferings without protest - feeding on the milk of terror; forever acknowledging - with himself as living proof - the umbilical connection between the unmurdered and the long buried (p.199)”.

Hal Boris (1987) captured the sense of life in this haunted state in his paper “Tolerating Nothing”; he wrote “I am saying that what for some people is an absence, a void, an echo, there is for others a presence, a menace, and a pain beyond measure. Nothing doesn’t feel like merely nothing, but as a no-thing filled with malign and dreadful implication. These people ... have not come fully in possession of their lives (p.118)”.

They “have not come fully in possession of their lives” because they were infused with the unmetabolizable traumas of those who brought them into life. We have just recently begun to recognize fully how the self can be constituted by absences that are residues of traumas suffered by the other. Faimberg (1988), in her work on “The Telescoping of Generations”, illustrated this in her description of a child of survivor patient for whom:

“... identity was determined by what was excluded from the history of the parents; identity remained, therefore, in solid connection with this history, and since it was organized under the aegis of negation, it can be labeled a negative identity...the threatening absent object, not symbolized yet as a lost object, is a present non-object... (p. 116)".
Gaps, phantoms, voids, and negative identities are all concepts that attempt to describe the living experience of deadness, alive somewhere in the realm between presence and absence – this is the “deathlife of the self” described by Langer (2001) and the “life-in-death” described by Lifton (1979). I think that these states can also be usefully thought of as a third entity - as the personal, social, and political contexts within which and through which an individual’s navigation of internal and external experience is mapped. Yet unlike the thirdness described by Britton (2004) that pulls us into a world beyond dyadic merger and creates the triangular space necessary for reflection and meaning, the third constituted by ghosts and phantoms leaves us alone in the shadows of destruction. I believe that the enduring presence of absence within the psyche may best be conceived of as a dead third, and when we live in relation to it, we live within the trace, memory, reverberation, and echo of loss. The losses embodied in this ephemeral but ever present dead third exist as the impossibilities that confront the life of desire and hope. Rather than the potentials found in triangular space, the absence of an involved and caring other leaves only a dense and collapsed heap of destroyed internal and external objects for whom no one mourns. When one lives in relation to a dead third, what is longed for, what exists, and what has been lost, all interpenetrate each other as no empathically engaged other exists as a singular independent essence that can pull one out of his or her suffocating subjectivity. In this collapsed state there is no enduring live external force that exerts its own will, with whom we must contend, and through whom our wishes and losses can evolve.

In a third constituted either by the ghostly presence of death in the other’s mind, or by others who willfully disregard fundamental human needs, there is an absence of a
world beyond ourselves as a site for enlivening engagement, and, as a consequence, past and future are frozen in time and exert no influence other than the one that separates us from even the possibility of desire. Unlike the third created in relation to the living parental couple, to be in relation to the dead third is to float in the realm of the Real rather than to be anchored and to develop within a symbolic order. Experience, then, cannot be comprehended, processed, articulated, heard and circulated as socially borne truth. In consequence, living with and through a dead third means to be in possession of, and possessed by, sensibilities that cannot be known as anything other than absence.

Our understanding of how the existence of such states are formed and are passed from generation to generation has been enriched by the research of Main and Hesse (1990) on the processes by which trauma suffered by parents effects the infant-parent attachment system. Their research suggests that the development of disorganized and disoriented attachment in infants is prompted by “... lapses and dissociations in the parents’ discourse during discussions of traumatic experiences - most often the death of a significant person. [and that] In such cases, the infant's disorganized attachment status may be seen as a second-generation effect of the parent’s own directly traumatic experiences ... (p.109)”.

Fonagy (Fonagy et al., 2002), drawing on this work, as well as his experiences with second and third generation children of Holocaust survivors, has conceptualized the presence of unrepresentable psychic contents in the parents as forming the early developmental bases for the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Dissociation in relation to unprocessable loss, and the transmission of this state of psychic alienation to
children, is now seen as the dynamic through which the phantom slips from one life into another (Davoine & Guadillere, 2004).

A vivid portrayal of this was captured by an Israeli filmmaker who was creating a documentary of his mother’s trip back to her childhood home in Poland and then to the site of her internment in Auschwitz. When asked by the son how she felt to be embarking on this trip, the mother answered that she was like a corpse going back to the scene where she lost the children and husband of her first marriage. She said, “I am going to visit the place where I died, where my life ended”. The son was thrown by her response, his voice quaked as he continued to try to speak through his tears and asked, “How can you say you died – weren’t we born, aren’t we alive?” The mother did not respond.

What response is possible?

Primo Levi and Post-Holocaust Mourning

This question crystallized in my mind when I happened across a poem by Primo Levi titled Unfinished Business (Levi, 1981). The poem was written six years before his death by suicide in 1987 and thirty-six years after his “liberation” from Auschwitz. In the poem the narrator offers his ‘resignation” from a life that is experienced as filled with “uncompleted work”; he laments not having touched someone, or built something, in a manner that expressed his longings and concerns, and that might have made a difference and left an enduring mark. What is most haunting – knowing, as we do now, that Levi would be continued to be recognized for his personally courageous and historically incisive writing – are the concluding lines of the poem:
Above all, dear sir, I had in mind
A marvelous book that would have
Revealed innumerable secrets,
Alleviated pain and fear,
Dissolved doubts, given to many people
The boon of tears and laughter.
You’ll find the outline in my drawer,
In back, with the unfinished business.
I haven’t had time to see it through. Too bad.
It would have been a fundamental work.

For me, both the poem and the history in which it is wrapped evoke the pathos of a continuous living death that follows the impossibility of articulating the experience of genocide in a manner that both honors the realities of unimaginable atrocity and maintains hope in the decency of man. *Unfinished Business* is the impossible business of living within a dead third - it is a testimonial to the failures of the other and of the world to repair the damage done to the experience of goodness. In my first reading of Levi’s poem, I took this failure at reparation to reflect his own sense of the fate of his literary work. In this version, mourning was replaced by the fantasized creation of a memorial that would, at the least, be as monumental as the deaths. Perhaps, even more fantastically, the memorial work would repair the trauma of the past by insulating the future from the possibility of a repetition of unbearable atrocity. For Levi, this may have been the obligation that felt as necessary as it was impossible for him to
accomplish - the unfinished business of revitalizing a deadened world through his own creativity.

“It would have been a fundamental work” Levi wrote - perhaps he longed for an imaginary creation that could have transformed himself and the world. Upon my first reading of the poem I was left thinking that in the place of mourning, there is melancholia. There remains only an unfinished business that leaves life itself devoid of meaning through an unconscious and tragic embrace of deadliness - a life in which reproaches against an uncaring world are transformed into self-reproaches for not being able to save the world. Indeed, it seemed quite plausible that Freud’s (1917) dictum that “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” aptly described Primo Levi’s melancholy.

But no, saying that Levi has not fully completed the mourning process feels profoundly wrong - first, for the hubris contained in suggesting that we possess some understanding of how one might psychologically live with a deadliness of which we have no direct experience. And second, there is the error of believing that proper grieving - that is, the relinquishment of the grip of the dead - itself enables life. No, we do not know how Levi might have continued to live; and yes, it is disturbingly true that the taking of his own life undermines our faith in the redemptive power of creativity that his own work had paradoxically inspired. Still, we wish to believe that life can be enabled and even vitalized by bringing the deadliness up from the netherworld in which it is neither buried nor fully alive. And to believe that this painful reckoning could alter the endless immersion in the half-life of a stillborn existence where life is attempted, desired even, but is missing some essential property that would imbue activity with the potential for growth.
There is another reading of Levi’s poem *Unfinished Business* that comes to mind – one in which he does not describe a failed project; rather he illustrates that psychological survival requires that the impossibility of life be spoken. *Unfinished Business* is, after all, a finished poem; it is the creative expression of the failure of creativity to erase destruction. Let us not forget that Primo Levi lived for 41 years after death became a constant presence in his life and that his giving voice to despair may have made life possible for him and others during those years. In this vein he offers a model of mourning that does not rest on the hope of changing one’s relation to the past by relinquishing and severing attachments to memories and people in order to forge new bonds. Rather, Levi offers a vision of living one’s life with a sense of integrity, a sense of true self functioning if you will, by courageously living with the enduring deadliness. A life infused with the constructive force of Eros requires also an articulation of the numbing deadliness in life, of Thanatos. In this seeming paradox it is not the relinquishments of mourning that ensure future life, but rather a courageous engagement with loss, absence, and death that does not aim toward an illusory end of “working through” but toward the continuous challenge of living with.

Living with the facts and consequences of wide-spread indifference to genocidal madness leaves us needing to question the adequacy of Freud’s (1917) thoughts concerning recovery from loss. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud states that, “The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again (p.245).” We know that Freud worked within the basic assumption that when one works through loss, there is a potential replacement available for the ego to pursue. Yet what if that which is lost is faith in an empathic world, and what is found
in its place is the reality of a largely indifferent world, a dead third, or a “Dead Mother”? Clearly, the notion that there can be a completion in the work of mourning of the monumental losses of genocide is, if not an untenable idea, than one which we would do well do regard as a suspect and costly achievement. Martin Amis (2007), in his recent novel about the psychic fate of a survivor of the Soviet Gulag, put it succinctly when the survivor, in a letter to his daughter written from his deathbed, speaks of how he detests the term “closure” and states, “The truth ... is that nobody ever gets over anything” (p.235).

Yet mourning has been typically thought of as a necessarily time limited process, as if life could not go on if the relation to loss continued beyond some socially agreed upon time limit. For Freud, incomplete mourning morphed into endless melancholia; yet, I would suggest the opposite, namely that it is truncated mourning, perhaps even any notion of a completion of the mourning of genocide, that culminates in disguised forms of melancholia and mania. It is a melancholia formed by the refusal to care any longer, it is marked by cynicism and indifference, and it is a melancholia that may ultimately transform into desperate and delusional manic attempts to deny that there was even ever an event that called for mourning. I shall return to the contemporary manifestations of denial of the Holocaust toward the conclusion of this paper; now, I return to the conditions that perpetuate the deadliness within the victim of atrocity.

Trauma, as we know, is made so by its quality of overwhelming the individual’s capacity to protect oneself from destruction. And we have come to know that even when trauma’s initial impact of eluding representation is attenuated, the trauma, like a virulent virus, may evolve into a secrecy occasioned by the shame and guilt of being
simultaneously within the gates of hell and living an everyday life. We have learned that the maintenance of shame and guilt-ridden secrets are often a consequence of actual and/or feared social isolation and, so, of continuous retraumatization.

Primo Levi (1988), in his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, wrote about the inmates of concentration camps whose fate it were to be forever silent carriers of unspeakable experience; they were called, in German, the *Gehminstrager* [the bearers of secrets]. They remained trapped in their role as ‘secret bearers’ because no one could bear their truth; and in the end, this proved for the ‘secret bearers’ themselves to be unbearable; and perhaps particularly so for those who felt compelled to, as well as prohibited from, articulating the secret. We are disturbed and humbled by each reminder of the cruelties of suffering alone and are reminded that the gaps in memory and in mourning can never be filled in a solitary fashion; rather the absences require the presence of others for both their registration and their reworking throughout the life span. Harris (2005) has described this process as the shared labor of relational mourning; it is a communal holding wherein each participant has the singularity of his or her experience acknowledged without leaving an after-effect of isolation (Poland, 2000).

**Witnessing**

We have all come to recognize that the most basic necessity for psychic aliveness in the aftermath of atrocity is the active witnessing presence of an other. Through the devoted labors of many psychoanalysts, working with both heart and mind with Holocaust survivors over the past sixty years – Bergmann (1985), Kestenberg (1993), Kogan (1995; 2002; 2003), and Laub (1992, 2005) are among those who have
made essential contributions in this arena - we have learned that the presence of an other who can bear living with that which cannot be represented in words, is what gives meaning both to life and to death.

Early in my career, long before I recognized the significance of what was said, a man in his early thirties who was born in hiding in Poland in 1943, and who spent the first two years of his life in the silencing atmosphere of his parent’s fear, asked me one day if I had heard of the question that is asked in all ‘Introduction to Philosophy’ courses - the question that ‘If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make any sound?’ He then went on to say: "Well neither of the two choices made any sense to me. It seems to me that in order for a tree to make a sound there has to be more than one person to hear it. If I were alone in the woods and a tree fell, I would need to turn to someone and ask ‘Did you hear that?’ Without someone else’s response, how could I be certain about what happened?” I have now come to recognize that beyond the epistemological issues about the intersubjective nature of knowledge that his question and thought illustrate, he has also offered us a poignant insight about the desperate longing for an other who might actively witness his disorienting and unbearable experience, and through whom it might coalesce into livable meaning.

His absence began at birth; the following vignette ends with death. Recently, in an on-line conference (IARPP, 2006) I posted a comment suggesting the concept of living within a “dead third” and the need for a witnessing other to rescue one from its numbing effects. I then received a reply from Doron Levene in London describing a remarkable interview that he had just had with Helen Bamber, the founder of the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture in London. She told him about her experience
in 1945, when as a 20 year old volunteer from England, she entered the newly liberated concentration camp of Bergen Belsen. Helen Bamber said:

"People were in very difficult situations, sitting on the floor, they would hold on to you and dig their fingers into your flesh and they would rock and they would rock and they would rock and we would rock together. You saw people rocking, but the act of rocking together and receiving their pain without recoil was essential. The reason people are so humiliated by terrible assaults on their body and mind is that they have a sense of contamination and the realization I had was that one had to receive everything without recoil. It was one of the important lessons I had in Belsen. I remember saying to one person, who I didn't think would live very long, that I would hold her story and her story would be told”.

When people with histories of this sort seek our help, we inevitably come to represent a potential lifeline through fields of desolation and unimaginable ruin. The following dream vividly captures the internal world of a patient utilizing her analyst to help her navigate through the suffering ensuing from the presence of secret traumas and dead thirds:

“The ocean is roped off for people to swim. Babies are playing. You and I are on the edge, holding on to the rope. The ocean tide comes in. Parents are trying to save their babies. It’s dark. You and I decide to go in. I say we have to hold hands. We are looking for babies. I think all the babies are saved. We see zombie like parents, moving in the water, holding dead babies (Wrye & Wells, 1994, p.99).”

We are reminded here that just as we, as psychoanalysts, struggle to contain our patients’ rage and despair at a life spent hosting the phantoms of family history, so also
must we strive to allow patients to live out their absences in the treatment. The sense of absence may come alive in an analysis by welcoming, rather than seeking to banish, the phantoms as presences that forever shall inhabit the patient, and with whom we must, in Gurevich’s (2008) apt phrase, develop a “language of absence”. We all wish to align ourselves with our patients’ hopes and vitality, and perhaps particularly so when a spontaneous moment of pleasure breaks through the often foreboding clouds. Yet it helps us to remember that the states of mind that herald the presence of absence, or gaps, or phantoms, often are experienced as more enduring and real than are the moments of creative engagement. Patients who contain the desultory and abject sensibilities that accompany the presence of deadliness will be prone to experience any intervention from the analyst that indicates optimism as an abandonment of their truer sensibilities. We face the dilemma that in the moments when we advocate for the potentials of new birth, the stillborn patient may feel despair at being neglected in favor of the false and precocious self. In these instances patients may at first react with a sense of gratification and compliantly accept the analyst’s view of possibility, yet the abandonment of the negative registers of lived experience inevitably yields a reactivation within the patient of a sense of the impossibility of having their pain seen and endured (Peltz, 1998). As one patient put it, “I would be entirely hopeless, if I couldn’t be truly hopeless with you”.

In this journey, our patients and we often move through great aloneness and like Estragon, in Beckett’s (1954) *Waiting for Godot*, they may at times need to declare, often without words: “Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me.’ In these moments, the absences that constitute a psychic void and make
experience tedious and vapid, become charged with potential as they are contained by a presence, a presence of an other that allows the incommunicable to be held and become the subject of reflection and meaning rather than dulled by repetitive action or numbed in states of passive resignation. In these silvered moments of connection, a new third is constituted - a third that represents a world in which one’s life and experience has meaning and continuity. It is in this way that one may become part of a shared social order held together by common symbols and a moral world guided by concern for each other.

Faimberg (1988) captured these unique possibilities for engagement when she wrote that, "Between the intrusion and the appropriation, between emptiness and an ever present object, psychoanalytic interpretation seeks to establish the presence, embodied in the words required to name the absence" (p. 117). In whatever ways we may think about what is missing in our patients’ experience and in whatever ways we seek to locate and repair this, we follow Freud in his quest to enable vitality through our enduring presence and commitment to dialogue, knowledge, and memory in the face of fear and forgetting.

Our calling and responsibilities for active witnessing (Auerhahn & Peskin, 2003; Laub, 1995; Ullman, 2006) must also extend into the public arena whenever individuals and nations turn away from historical truth and its legacies of pain. We are all thrown toward despair and rage when we hear the shrill denials of the Holocaust. Our anguish is first for the reinjuries to those who have directly suffered, and then it is for the damage to our own experience that is caused by the denials. It is however, essential to consider that it is the deniers themselves that suffer great injury (Vinar, 2005); deniers
of genocide obliterate their own access to truth and thereby cause immeasurable harm to their own capacity to think about, to feel, and to contain responsibly the murderous aggression and wanton indifference that haunts our humanity.

Denial of the Holocaust, of any genocide, indeed of any killing, cannot ever remain compartmentalized - inevitably denial bleeds into the very fabric of the deniers’ functioning, compromising abilities to constructively process destructiveness. And so again as Freud taught us, the “gap” that cannot be memorialized, is fated to be repeated in ever more destructive action. In Germany, we are witness to a nation’s painstaking determination to face the horrors of its past so that they are never again revisited by the omnipotent and destructive phantasies of those times. In South Africa, the victims of oppression themselves reached beyond their own suffering to create a “Truth and Reconciliation” process that aimed to rehumanize all who have been damaged by uncontained violence. We are all forever heartened and made more whole by the courageous commitment to compassion, honesty, and responsibility that these nations have embraced. It is, I believe, the only way to carry forward the Unfinished Business that Primo Levi has left us.
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Samuel Gerson, Ph.D.
2252 Fillmore St.
San Francisco, CA 94115
415-567-3896

samgerson@aol.com