To Tame This Feral Man: Dissociation as an Antidote for Terror

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Abstract
The author presents a dream in which she was asked to de-escalate violence by means of working with Osama bin Laden and President George Bush. In the process of discussing this dream she considers the repetition of retaliatory cycles, splitting, conflicting views, and the role on fantasy in dealing with trauma. Next there is a discussion about the author’s situation during the 9/11 atrocity, with a focus on the experience of teaching trauma to her graduate-level trauma class at New York University. Questions are raised about the long-term effects of the atrocity as well as the transmission of this trauma.

Keywords
9/11, Osama bin Laden, retaliatory cycles, dissociation and fantasy, trauma

Was it a daydream or a night dream? I am not sure which it was, but I know I dreamt it sometime within the first 2 months after 9/11.

The dream: The President of New York University (NYU) telephoned me. Even though the semester had begun a month or two before, he wanted me to accept a new student in my graduate-level course on trauma. The student’s name, he said, was Osama bin Laden. He didn’t stop there. The NYU President made it clear that he wanted me to do what I could to tame this feral man.

I lingered little on the meaning of my having such a bizarre dream. I lingered more on thinking about whether my knowledge base could add anything to the impossible daydream task. My first thought was that I could analyze Osama. But of course this “analysis,” even a “daydream analysis,” was contingent on his willingness to enter treatment with me, a NYC Jewish woman who lived and worked downtown and had observed the unspeakable 9/11 atrocity. My second thought was curiosity about Osama’s childhood. Abuse sometimes leads to revictimization, and the abuser assumes the role of victim, victimizer, or both at different times. I wondered whether Osama had been an abused child. I knew that he rebelled against his family, that he was the 17th of over 50 children, some of whom were among the intelligentsia in Boston and in London. I also knew that his father died when he was 11 years old. However, this did not explain why he would create devastation on an international stage. My third daydream thought was that I could not analyze Osama. My detestation toward him was massive. He had profoundly aggrieved me, my community, my city, my country, and my world.

Whether my focus raced from the intrapsychic to the larger collective, it didn’t matter. My hate was profound; the atrocity he created was monstrous. His capacity for evil was overwhelming. I finally determined that I could not analyze Osama, even if it was daydream treatment. Also, I reasoned, my role was to be professorial not therapeutic. I had to find some way to tame this feral man through pedagogical methods. I began to think about what I could lecture on which might move this perpetrator of violence toward a more reasonable state. As I was daydreaming thinking about this, the university president called me back. He added another student to my class. His name: President George Bush. In my fantasy world, I was delighted. I was afforded the opportunity, at least in my imagination, to de-escalate violence.

In planning a class session with both bin Laden and George Bush present, I knew I had to deal with splitting. It had to be avoided. I wish Freud were coteaching with me. He considered culture and history through a psychoanalytic lens. I had little experience with this. However, in individual psychoanalysis we work with patients to recognize complexity and contradictions. I knew this way of thinking would be helpful. But in my mind I was clear that there was a good side (the United States and its representatives) and a bad side (Osama bin Laden and other fundamentalists). Our side and their side. Our side was clear: We were the victims. The violent collisions had advanced, leaving devastation all around me, downtown. Their side, at least to me, was clear: They were the perpetrators. Osama believed that Muslims should kill civilians and military personnel from the United States.
and allied countries until they withdrew support for Israel and withdrew military forces from Islamic countries. Given the 9/11 atrocity, I knew it would be hard for me to see Osama bin Laden or fundamentalists as anything “other.” However, I also knew that the passing back and forth of destructiveness had to end. I kept focusing on ways that we could acknowledge fundamentalism and its destructive nature while, at the same time, transcending the splitting of us and them and of good and bad. In my daydream lecture, I would focus on the repetition of the retaliatory cycles, the complementary doer–done relationships that Benjamin (2002) writes about. I would raise her question: “How can we come to understand diffusing power struggles, impasses brought on by passing the hot potato of blame back and forth?” (p. 474).

Our side and there side. While it took more thinking, I could think of why terrorists might bequeath us blame and want to hurt us. One could say that our nation has an internal fundamentalist spirit. We were defending our supremacy and assuming a position of uncomplicated superiority in relation to their beliefs. The question I would pose to my daydream class is: Can we represent the principles of democracy and progressivism without upholding a rank of superiority in relation to fundamentalism? If we could do this, might it quiet the hate? And I wondered whether it would be possible for Bush, for Americans, for me to do this, especially since, in my mind, fundamentalism was simply evil. I could also understand why Osama bequeathed us terror. Yes, we now knew what it felt like to live in fear. Was his terrorizing us a primitive effort on his part to rid of his fear by causing us to feel fear and to contain it for him?

I soon realized that, even in my daydream, I could not target a trauma class for these two class entrants, not at this time, not after the unspeakable devastation and destabilization of my community, my city, my state, my nation. Not now. Not ever.

And I realized too that there was simply too much splitting to contend with. There was secularism versus religiosity. There was the compromise of a civil society versus violent extremism. And there were the conflicting views as to whether we were a society to be emulated or a calculating imperial power to be destroyed. These splits were not manageable opponents for me. I felt the need to do something in my daydream but could not determine what to do. Nothing seemed to have the power or potential to truly end threat. I received little solace from my valued psychoanalytic theory, which often gives me organization, lucidity, patience, fortitude, and an understanding of human possibilities.

**My Antidote to Terror: Dissociation**

My daydreaming stopped almost as quickly as it began when I realized I was leaving my real traumatized world and escaping into fantasy resolve in an effort to avoid horrific reality. And I am doing exactly that in this writing—living in a fantasy world and playing with cures and attempts at pie-in-the-sky resolutions and happy endings in my doomed-to-failure effort to avoid the appalling 9/11 reality. Rather than focusing on the upheaval, disorganization, destruction, and fear, I was altering my state of consciousness. I was doing what people often do when there is massive trauma. I was finding a creative way to avoid the maliciously inflicted by retreating into fantasy. Clearly I was grandiose contemplating the taming of this feral madman in my civilized classroom. I was trying to focus on an enlightened world, the world of the academia, as an antidote to my terror, rage, vulnerability, and pain when faced with madness. But as we know, denial does not sustain us over time. So, back to reality.

What follows is information (a) relevant to my state prior to 9/11; (b) my real, nondissociated trauma story; and (c) a consideration of what I did immediately after the event and in the days following. While I list the many activities I engage in, given space limitations, I will focus mostly on teaching trauma to my graduate-level trauma class at New York University.

**The Reality**

I was a consultant to a large firm in one of the towers after the 1993 attack. I met with employees over several weeks, in groups and individually. We discussed their experiences, fear, and the changes that would enable them to feel secure. In this way, I got to know a number of the inhabitants in one of the towers. Most of these people died on 9/11. I have often thought about how I wish I had encouraged the senior partner of the firm to move out of the tower rather than my doing what I was asked to do, to help the employees feel safe again. On 9/11, my guilt was gargantuan. They would be alive, I thought, if only they continued to feel unsafe in the tower after the 1993 event. And perhaps they would have left their jobs and never returned to the tower if they felt the peril.

Around the time of the horrendous 9/11 tragedy, I had other complicated feelings in addition to guilt over not saving the 1993 victims from 9/11, grave sadness about the waste and wreckage, and weighty fear about the future. My other complicated feelings involved a personal ordeal that I had been living with for 7 years. I worried about my husband. I worried about how, in the event of yet another attack, I would protect a man whose mobility was severely restricted and who was dependent on medication and medical interventions. And I worried about me and how much I could withstand. In brief: My husband had a rare neurodegenerative disease and, as a consequence, our lives were filled with wheel chairs; special vehicles with ramps; pills, pills, and more pills; aides; doctors appointments; ambulances; hospitals; pain; prisms to minimize double vision; and so on. He was diagnosed 7 years prior to 9/11, and he died 5 years after, in 2006. The 9/11 was a trauma that stood on top of my personal trauma and, while I stood tall, I was already weighed down when the atrocity occurred. I kept thinking that everyone had a personal
limit as to how much they could withstand. I knew that I had to protect myself while I was busy helping and protecting others. Saakvitne (2002) states it well: “To balance the cost of bearing witness, we need opportunities that allow us to turn away, to escape from harsh reality into fantasy, imagination, art, music, creativity, and sheer foolishness” (p. 447).

**Before and After**

There is a before and an after. The before was filled with life as we had all come to know it. The after embraces anthrax, knives, box cutters, shoe bombers, home-made bombs, subway fears, and time-consuming checks and anxiety prior to boarding planes. Nothing will ever be the same again. I have a print of the World Towers. The artist is Richard Haas. The print was made in 1980. It hangs over my desk, at home, as it has since 1989, when I bought it. I used to look at it and then look out the window at the Twin Towers. At present I only have the representation. I used to enjoy looking at the print; it was a reminder of the view from the Towers, which I had prized. Now the print is a reminder of what was and what happened.

With the attack, my world was fundamentally altered. Except it wasn’t. The world was really not different from before. What was different was my experience of the world. Now I knew.

How far away one was from Ground Zero made a difference, as Strozier (2002) indicates. That trauma moved out in concentric waves of sadness. Psychic responses were associated with geography such that the closer one was to Ground Zero, the more likely one was to be traumatized. Strozier even maps a landscape of trauma and identifies zones from most to less sadness. From most to less, he identifies the following: scene at Ground Zero, up to Chambers Street, from there to Canal Street, and up to 14th Street. Furthermore, he identifies that, in general, from the 20s one could no longer see the towers. I live and work below 14th Street, about 2 miles from the Twin Towers. I live and work below 14th Street, about 2 miles from the Twin Towers. NYU is mostly below 14th Street as well.

Patients

I continued to see patients, many of whom were inhabitants of Strozier’s sadness zones.
Supervised Students and Former Students About Dealing With the Crisis

Many of my students and former students were consulting in local public and private schools in which children and teachers saw the towers fall, or lost a parent, or had a parent who was traumatized. I consulted with them as to how to be helpful to school personnel, families, and children.

Teaching My Trauma Course

The towers fell on a Tuesday. NYU classes were cancelled for the rest of that week. Many NYU students were only 1 mile away when the towers fell. Student homes and possessions and books were lost. All that oriented them to student life may have been aflame or inaccessible because of their downtown location. While students were relocated, it did not happen instantly. Clearly, many students and faculty were traumatized.

Eight days after the towers fell, I met with my graduate-level trauma class for the second class session. The first class had been a rather typical orienting one; I reviewed the course outline and discussed basic concepts such as the definition, history, and epidemiology of trauma. While I had planned to show and discuss a film in the second class, it was clear that I did not need a film to demonstrate reactions to trauma, as the students needed only to consider their own reactions to the 9/11 trauma. Thus, the class focused on both my and their 9/11 experiences. It was a powerful class, as I elaborated on elsewhere (Alpert, 2009). One student of color described how she had been stopped on the street and spat upon. This puzzled her as she, like them, was terrified about what had happened on American soil. Also she was grieving; a close friend of hers had died in the North Tower. Another student, an Orthodox Jew, told how she was approached on the street with the piercing words: “All the Jews got out. You Jews did this.” Other students told of dislocation, disorientation, terror, and loss of all possessions as well as inability to return to their dorms where their clothing, books, course assignments, computers, and homework were located. And still others told of watching people jump from the towers, of running and rubble, and the horrific stench of human flesh burning. And there were a few who spoke of death of current friends, old friends, or acquaintances. Some students were on externships and were already working with children who had lost their parents or working with teachers and children who “saw it all.” My students and I were traumatized. We were dealing with the same trauma at the same time, and it was healing to talk about it as a group and to relate it to assigned readings.

I continue to have students who were traumatized by 9/11 and I continue to have patients who were as well. Years subsequent to the 9/11 attack, some victims of 9/11 choose to leave their previous employment as workers in the financial world, as reporters, as photographers, as EMS workers, as firemen, as policemen, and so on. They chose to leave their previous employment and they chose to enter graduate school. Specifically, they chose to study psychology and, within that, trauma. They had been traumatized by the earlier 9/11 events, and they chose to become students in my trauma class. On 9/11, people became motherless, fatherless, widows, or widowers. We lost policemen, firemen, EMS workers, ambulance drivers, as well as those who worked in the towers. What will the long-term effects be? I wonder. There is a great deal written about intergenerational transmission of trauma (e.g., Faimberg, 2005). I wonder what the transmission of the 9/11 trauma will be to those who were in the zone of sadness as well as those who lived in the heartbreaking city or the gloomy country or the distressing world or to those who watched the heartrending event over and over again on television. Many generations of children will bear the effects of this event. Personal and sociopolitical trauma will be transmitted.

Second Dream

Was it a daydream or a night dream? I am not sure which, but I know I dreamt it sometime while writing this article. This dream was actually a visual image of the print of the World Trade Centers by Richard Haas. In the dream, the print hangs over my desk, as it always does, and looks as it is with one exception. All over the towers hang painted ceramic tiles created by my NYU graduate students. On some there is writing, but the words are illegible. On others there are drawings of people jumping from the buildings, running in the streets, or crying. All look terrified and horrified at the same time. Also depicted on the tiles are fire engines on the move, and rubble and residue on the streets. The tiles relate to death, fear, horror, loss, sadness, and mourning. In the dream, my 4-year-old granddaughter, wearing a pink t-shirt that has as its insignia “the future,” looks up at the tiles and then at me. She asks whether there will be more bad stuff? I sigh. I think. Finally, I say that we have to learn to live in the world of probability and not possibility. While it is possible that something like this will happen again, the probability is that we will all be just fine when we wake up tomorrow.

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