

REVENGE, FORGIVENESS AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE WITNESS

March 23, 2013

The Chicago Association for Psychoanalytic Psychology
Association for Psychoanalytic Psychology

[NB: *Below is a draft of the speech presented at CAPP on March 23, 2013. This draft contains neither citation page references nor bibliography. It is © 2013, by Stephen Wangh and may not be reproduced without the author's permission. All queries should be sent to sw1@nyu.edu*]

Hello. I am very grateful to Michael Losoff for having invited me to speak to you today. His invitation has been a terrific goad for me to read some wonderful psychoanalytic writings and to think new thoughts, both about my work... and about myself. I'm honored to be here. I am also grateful to Scott Pytluk for his willingness not only to add to my presentation but to join with me in reading several sections of my paper and to Dr. Berardi-Colletta for her interrogative Message, "Forgiveness: Can We Talk?"... and to all of you for being here.

Let me begin with a disclaimer and a disclosure: The disclaimer is: I'm not a psychologist or a psychoanalyst. As a playwright and an acting teacher, however, I have spent a great deal of time investigating human emotionality and encouraging performers toward unencumbered emotional expression.

The disclosure is: My father was a member of the New York Psychoanalytic. His office occupied at the front of our apartment, so when we came home, we always had to enter very quietly, as you might enter a church... or a graveyard. And if the door to his office was open, there on the desk, like a small icon, you could see the photo of Sigmund Freud – you know, the one with the cigar. My mother, on the other hand, was a ballet dancer. And I? I studied science in high school, and entered college planning a career in physics, but during the next few years, my interest in theater overtook my dedication to science, and, though I still read the *Scientific American* every month, I've spent most of my adult life directing, playwriting and teaching acting... So talking to a psychoanalytic group about performance is, in some measure, simply a return to the central task of my childhood: the effort to bridge the chasm we called home.

Today, I'd like to do three things. First I'll recap portions of a speech I gave in 2002 to the Interpersonal Track of the Postdoctoral Program for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis at New York University, a speech about my work as one of the playwrights of *The Laramie Project*. Then I'd like to talk about what I've learned more recently about the dynamics of revenge and forgiveness, and how those dynamics are reflected in drama. And finally, I want to speculate about the role of the audience—we playwrights and therapists—we who are witnesses to the processes of revenge and forgiveness.

As many of you know, *The Laramie Project* is a play about the beating and death of Matthew Shepard, and about the aftermath of that crime for people of Laramie. Matthew was a student at the University of Wyoming, and on October, 6th, 1998, he was severely beaten, tied to a fence and left to die in the hills just outside of town. When it emerged that Matthew might have been attacked because he was gay, his death became national news, and, after reading newspaper reports of the crime, director and playwright Moisés Kaufman, who had been a student of mine at NYU ten years earlier, gathered a group of New York actors to travel to Laramie and interview the people of the town. I joined that group as they began to turn those interviews into a play, and together we wrote a script that includes the voices of fifty people, most of them citizens of Laramie. The play opened in Denver, in the 2000; then it played in New York, and since then it has been produced by theaters and colleges and high schools all across the country, often in conjunction with discussions of homophobia.

On the evening of October 6th, 1998, Matthew Shepard was in a Laramie bar, and was offered a ride home by two young men he didn't know, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. Once in their truck, Aaron turned on Matthew, robbed him, and then, just outside of town, Aaron had Russell tie Matthew to a fence where he beat him with the handle of a revolver and left him to die. Though it was only Aaron McKinney who had done the violence, both he and Russell Henderson were charged with murder. *The Laramie Project* contains

testimony from the trials of both these young men, including Aaron McKinney's confession to the police after he was taken into custody. The climax of the play is the speech that Matthew's father, Dennis Shepard, made at the end of Aaron McKinney's trial. Here is a part of that speech:

My son Matthew did not look like a winner. He was rather uncoordinated and wore braces from the age of thirteen until the day he died. However, in his all too brief life he proved that he was a winner. On October sixth, 1998 my son tried to show the world that he could win again. On October twelfth, 1998 my first born son and my hero, lost. On October twelfth, 1998 my first born son and my hero, died, fifty days before his twenty-second birthday.

I keep wondering the same thing that I did when I first saw him in the hospital. What would he have become? How could he have changed his piece of the world to make it better? ...

Matt's beating, hospitalization and funeral focused worldwide attention on hate. Good is coming out of evil. People have said enough is enough. I miss my son, but I am proud to be able to say that he is my son....

I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. Mr. McKinney, I am going to grant you life, as hard as it is for me to do so, because of Matthew. Every time you celebrate Christmas, a birthday, the Fourth of July remember that Matt isn't. Every time you wake up in your prison cell remember that you had the opportunity and the ability to stop your actions that night. You robbed me of something very precious and I will never forgive you for that. Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory of one who longer lives. May you have a long life and may you thank Matthew every day for it.

In my 2002 talk at NYU, I spoke about how the play left the impression that, through Dennis Shepard's mercy, healing from the tragedy had begun. And I questioned whether, in leaving that impression, we playwrights may have finessed the truth. I wondered if, in our rush to create a satisfying curtain, we had made Dennis Shepard seem more forgiving than he actually was, and if we had, thereby, avoided some of the thorniest issues in the dynamics of revenge and forgiveness. I speculated that perhaps our avoidance had something to do with the complex ties between forgiveness and religion. I noted that in her book, *The Human Condition*, the philosopher Hannah Arendt opines that forgiveness was, in a sense, "discovered" by Jesus of Nazareth." But then she adds, "The fact that [Jesus] made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense." So, in my paper, I suggested that perhaps the inner workings of revenge and forgiveness deserved further attention, both in our playmaking and in psychoanalysis.

At the time I began writing that paper, in 2001, I was surprised to find that there was not a great deal of psychoanalytic or psychological writing about either forgiveness or revenge. In an article in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* in 1966, Charles Socarides had written, "Curiously enough, vengeance – one of the most persistent and powerful emotions of man – has had little attention from scientific investigators. Much attention, however, has been given this state by poets, playwrights, and other artists." -- It has recently been pointed out to me that it may be seem odd that I refer to Dr. Socarides at the beginning of a talk on a subject related to homophobia. But, though his opinions on the etiology of homosexuality may be suspect, Socarides was right about the curious lack of attention afforded vengeance in the psychoanalytic canon. In fact, little more was written on the subject between the date of his paper, 1966, and that of mine in 2001.

But today that is no longer true. Since 2001, more than 100 journal articles, chapters and books have been written on the subject, and “forgiveness therapy,” championed by Robert Enright and others, has become a known method, or rather, a range of methods, of dealing with interpersonal injuries as well as with the aftermath of ethnic cleansings and other mass traumas. In fact forgiveness therapies are so widely spread that there is now a growing push-back: books and articles which raise serious doubts about the use forgiveness as a therapeutic strategy and which suggest that in some situations, forgiveness may not provide a healthful pathway to recovery from an interpersonal injury.

Another thing that has changed during the past ten years has been my own appreciation of what I, and many Americans, experienced in the aftermath of 9/11. When I spoke at NYU in April, 2002, the events of that day were fresh in the minds of everyone present. The classroom in which I spoke was just one mile north of Ground Zero where the cleanup from 9/11 had only recently removed the last twisted steel girders of the Twin Towers. But April 2002 was still one year before the beginning of the War on Iraq, and, it seems to me now, I had not, at that time, entirely digested what 9/11 had to teach us about revenge.

In September, 2001, I was entering my 20th year of teaching at New York University. On the morning of Tuesday, September 11th, I had arrived early to attend a committee meeting on the top floor of the Tisch School of the Arts building, a few blocks east of Washington Square. Because I was early, before I went into the Dean’s office for our meeting, I spent a few minutes staring out the windows of the larger faculty meeting room on the west side of the building, windows that have an unobstructed view west toward Washington Square, the Hudson River and New Jersey. The sky was wonderfully clear and bright that morning, and as I looked out the window, I noticed an airplane flying south over Manhattan. “That’s strange,” I thought, “That plane is flying very low.” Then I left the room and went into the Dean’s office for our committee meeting. At the end of that meeting, we heard the strange news from the Dean’s secretary:

Something terrible was happening at the World Trade Center. And as I walked through Washington Square on my way home, I paused beside the Arch where a group of people were staring towards the Twin towers, both of which were on fire one mile downtown.

Later that day, NYU cancelled all classes, and for the rest of that week and for several more, hundreds of NYU students slept on the floor of the gymnasium because their Wall Street area dorms were uninhabitable. Some students simply left town, and those who remained were rather in shock. So on Thursday, our department invited any students and teachers who wanted to, to gather at school just to spend some time together. We divided into small groups, and in the group I joined, we told each other stories about what we'd experienced during the previous two days.

Two of the stories I heard that day have stuck with me ever since. I'll tell you one now, and return to the second one later.

One young man in our group related how, a day after the attack, he'd decided he needed to get out of the City. So he took a Greyhound bus to go visit a family he knew in a small town in Pennsylvania. But when he got off the bus, right there in the bus station, he saw that the headline of the local newspaper read "Revenge!"

"I got right on the next bus back," he told us, "I felt like I'd be safer in New York."

At the time, I didn't fully appreciate what he meant... though I remembered that my own first thought when I'd seen the towers on fire had been, "Oh, God, I know what George Bush will do with this."

Like that young man, the idea of revenge terrified me... but the reasons for my aversion were... overdetermined. In the home I'd grown up in, expressions of anger had been entirely taboo, so as a child, I'd always avoided all violence and considered myself a sissy. In college, during the Viet Nam war, I'd

been a conscientious objector, a draft dodger and an anti-war activist. So in 2002, as I reacted against the rising call for revenge in the American press, I couldn't be sure how much of my reaction was a moral or ethical revulsion to the terrible political and interpersonal repercussions of revenge, and how much was simply a symptom of my personal neuroses.

I remembered that, as a high school student, I had often amused myself by drawing war pictures, and I knew that as an actor, I really enjoyed playing angry characters on stage. Besides, I couldn't deny that many of the greatest plays I'd ever read, plays I found really exciting, were stories of revenge. So I realized I had to be careful that I didn't impose my own fears and prejudices upon other people's experience. As Quentin Tarantino keeps reminding us, violence and revenge can be exciting and entertaining fun.

[At this moment, I interrupted my lecture to encourage the audience to play a game: Slap-Hands. Two partners take turns slapping each other's hands.]

As Neil Altman writes in his wonderful book, *The Analyst in the Inner City*:

[D. W.] Winnicott often reframed seemingly destructive feelings and impulses as having a valuable place in the growth process...[and he] believed that the suppression of hate could lead to an unrealistic, "sentimental" attitude that was not helpful in child development nor in the therapeutic development of analysands.

The black feminist author, bell hooks, expresses a similar warning against the repression of rage in the social arena: "Racial hatred," she writes, "is real. And it is humanizing to be able to resist it with militant rage."

So, in preparing to talk about this subject, I've tried to be careful not to let my personal aversion to aggression prejudice my views of revenge. But the reading I've done has begun to make it clear that what we call "revenge" is not actually the same as "militant rage," or "hate" or even "retaliation" – the *lex*

talionis—“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life.” In fact that famous code of Hammurabi, far from being a provocation of unbridled revenge, was, in Biblical times, actually a social control aimed at minimizing bloodshed. It was a decree meant to limit retaliation to *only* an eye for an eye.

What we call revenge, however, is something quite different; it is an ongoing obsession which *makes use* of rage, but does so for purposes other than simple retaliation or emotional catharsis.

In fact, in 1956, ten years before the Socarides paper, psychiatrist Harold Searles had described the psychodynamics of revenge quite clearly:

[V]indictiveness seems to lend itself particularly well to the repression of grief and separation-anxiety. It enables the person to avoid or postpone the experiencing of both these affects, because he has not really *given up* the other person toward whom his vengefulness is directed: that is, his preoccupation with vengeful fantasies about that person serves, in effect, as a way of psychologically *holding on* to him.

So, revenge is not simply retributive anger, the immediate fury which arises upon receiving an injury. Revenge is something that festers, something that can last for years, and may even be passed from generation to generation. It is a denial mechanism in which the anger and violence are only the external manifestation of what is actually happening on an unconscious level. The reason the anger of revenge seems so difficult to let go of is that, unlike simple rage or retaliation, it serves two interconnected purposes. On the one hand, as Searles says, it serves to help the victim *hold on* to something that has been lost, to keep alive something that is gone. And on the other, as our colleagues, Drs. Böhm and Kaplan suggest, the function of that holding on is “to conceal a dreadful wound in the self” which lies beneath.

[At the end of this paper, I addend a few remarks about the possible neurological basis of revenge.]

In 1887, Friedrich Nietzsche suggested that the reason revenge fantasies – what he called *ressentiments* – can be so very violent is because the *purpose* of these fantasies is, in his words, “to *deaden*, by means of a more violent emotion of any kind, a tormenting, secret pain that is becoming unendurable, and to drive it out of consciousness at least for the moment.” To do that, Nietzsche wrote, the avenger requires “as savage an affect as possible, and, in order to excite that, any pretext at all.”

But then, if the purpose of revenge fantasies is to “deaden” an “unendurable” pain, what is it that makes a particular pain “unendurable?” Well, first of all there may be individual developmental factors that can make someone more or less able to bear or metabolize an injury. For example, Böhm and Kaplan write that:

[T]he degree of vengefulness in an individual can often be traced to wounds in self-esteem that were caused early in life by parents who were too controlling or too self-absorbed.

But then there are also cultural factors, societal values which teach us which kinds of pain we may and may not bear. For instance, what passes in our culture as a mere sexual intrigue – say the love affair your sister is having with her new boyfriend, might, in other countries, justify an honor killing. While on the other hand, in a polygamous society – or in Paris, perhaps – the fact that your husband makes love with other women might be experienced as a mere annoyance – or possibly as a relief – while in America it could warrant vengeful promiscuity or divorce.

But whatever the developmental and social factors which combine to make a particular transgression seem “unendurable,” there is, Böhm and Kaplan suggest, one unifying principle: “Thoughts and fantasies about revenge generally arise,” they write, “out of the anger that is awakened after we have been put in an inferior position in some humiliating way.”

Philosophy professor Dianne Enns suggests that this same dynamic can arise in political and ethnic contexts. Writing about colonial oppression, she says:

The humiliation of violation, occupation, enslavement, defeat, sexual assault, and the trauma of witnessing death or being forced to kill may be salved by the transformation of grief into grievance, fear into power, anger into violence.

For, unlike other denial mechanisms which the psyche might employ to distract one from such pain, revenge directly counters and obscures the humiliation by offering victims the perfect antidote: A feeling of power. As Altman puts it:

Recourse to violence ultimately reflects human unwillingness to accept powerlessness and vulnerability...

The clearest, and most dramatic example I know of this process is in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Lear is a proud man, and when he is humiliated by his two eldest daughters who threaten to strip the king of his retinue of 100 soldiers, he confronts them and calls upon the gods:

...touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall--I will do such things,--
What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep
No, I'll not weep:
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!

Lear thus invokes his vengeful anger precisely in order *not* to feel the sadness, the grief and pain of his humiliating injury. He would rather go mad than mourn his loss.

And what happens to those who, like Lear, cannot – or will not – weep? “To be unable to mourn,” writes Robert Lifton, “is to be unable to enter into the great human cycle of death and rebirth – to be unable, that is, to ‘live again’ Any disturbance of this work of mourning within an individual, hampers his mental development, his inter-human relations, his spontaneity and creativity.” As Lear foresees, he will simply go mad.

Thus, besides all the exterior, legal, cultural, religious, ethical and interpersonal problems that it causes, revenge is, at bottom, an expression of a profound *intrapsychic* blockage. A blockage in which the exterior manifestations actually serve the interior one. For if the avenger’s violence creates more enemies, so much the better; that circumstance simply ensures the ongoing justification for his anger. **Revenge, one might say, is a preemptive strike against the possible outbreak of grief.** In the political realm, for instance, as long as the Israelis keep one-and-one-half million Palestinians confined within the ghetto of Gaza, this continuing insult is almost certain to incite the Palestinians to retaliatory outrage which will, in turn, justify continued Israeli revenge.

But how does this blockage become established? After all, all human infants are born knowing how to cry. In our culture, however, many children – but especially boys – learn early on that tears are not permissible. This lesson is so ubiquitous that, in my acting classes, while almost all of the women find that, when a script calls for strong sorrow, tears come easily to their eyes, very few teenage men have retained that capacity. In fact, for many young, male acting students, re-acquiring access to tears can be a signal accomplishment.

So like Lear, a victim in our culture – especially a male victim – can feel *doubly* humiliated. Lear has been shamed by his daughters, but he is also

ashamed for being *like* his daughters, for feeling that “women’s weapons, water drops” might “stain [his] ...cheeks.” This double load of shame can make the violent sensations of revenge a great comfort for such a victim.

Lear does not know what he will do. What he knows is that his choice is either to feel the sadness and pain... or to find revenge. And strikingly, it does not matter to him what particular vengeance he takes, what matters is that whatever he does, it must embody, in Nietzsche’s words, “as savage an affect as possible.”

I will do such things,--

What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be
The terrors of the earth.

“[A]nd, in order to excite that [affect],” says Nietzsche, the psyche can employ “any pretext at all.”

For Aaron McKinney, the pretext was that Matthew Shepard was gay. But on a larger stage, the history of war is rife with just such pretexts: The sinking of the *Lusitania*, the Reichstag fire, Pearl Harbor and the Gulf of Tonkin, all served as pretexts for years of war and millions of deaths. And then, there was 9/11.

We now know that George W. Bush started planning the war on Iraq well before that day. But he needed a pretext. And because humans are projective beings, the objects of our anger, like the objects of our love, need only vaguely resemble their originals. So it did not matter to Mr. Bush that the government of Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11; it was enough that Saddam Hussein had survived Bush’s father’s war, and that the Iraqis were Muslims and therefore deserved what he called “Shock and Awe.” Just as, in 1864, it had not mattered to Colonel John Chivington that the Indians encamped at Sand Creek, Colorado were peaceful Cheyenne and Arapahoe who had been promised safety if they

camped there. It was enough to Chivington that they were Indians, so he commanded what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre.

Neil Altman suggests that these sorts of vengeful acts are “particularly characteristic of the United States, with its high ideals and multiple failures to live up to them. The U.S. resort to torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment in the wake of the 9/11 attacks is,” Altman writes, an “example of a manic defense, in the sense of a flight *to* action.”

Of course America is not alone in resorting to a “flight to action” against others who only resemble an imagined enemy. Thus, in 1995, it did not matter to Ratko Mladić that the people who lived in Srebrenica, Bosnia were twenty generations removed from the Turks who had invaded Serbia in the 15th Century. To General Mladić also, it was enough that they were Moslem.

But Altman is right that in America, though we don’t engage in honor killings, our culture is particularly averse to expressions grief. Psychologist Richard Reichbart suggests that the prohibition against crying is built upon a developmental “disidentification with the mother,” reinforced by a “Western cultural matrix in which crying is considered weak and womanly.”

As the American pop song declares: “Big boys don’t cry.” ... Or, as Edmund Muskie discovered in 1972: Men who *do* cry don’t become President. So, in America, if you slip and fall on a broken sidewalk, you don’t sob... you sue. Our whole view of life is distinctly adversarial. In sports, at work, in politics, and maybe even in love it is understood that, if you’re not winning, you’re losing. And in America, a “loss” is something to be ashamed of, and therefore something to be denied.

Viewed in this regard, Dennis Shepard’s reaction to his son’s death is striking:

My son Matthew did not look like a winner. He was rather uncoordinated and wore braces from the age of thirteen until the day he died. However,

in his all too brief life he proved that he was a winner. On October sixth, 1998 my son tried to show the world that he could win again. On October twelfth, 1998 my first born son and my hero, lost.

For we are a country of Winners and Losers... or, in the election vernacular of 2012, a nation of "makers" and "takers." So, to be uncoordinated, to wear braces, to say nothing of being a minority, or poor, or gay in America, is not only an economic burden, it is also a shame, something to deny if you possibly can. And the fashion industry, the hair industry, and the make-up industry all make a living out of this denial. They inundate us with ads designed to make us ashamed of our bodies and to sell us products designed to obscure and deny that shame. And every time we read a magazine or buy a makeup product, our fear that we have reason to be ashamed, and our belief that our shame must be denied are reinforced.

Of course, larger, deeper, more humiliating traumas, from interpersonal betrayals to ethnic cleansings, demand stronger medicine than hair products and designer jeans. They require a cure violent enough to sustain an ego that might otherwise feel utterly destroyed. Olga Botcharóvna, who led conflict resolution trainings in Bosnia and Serbia after the war there, writes that among victims of that civil war, the anger of revenge was often, in her words, "the only source of energy for a victim." Or as the Count of Monte Christo says to his one-time fiancée, "If you ever loved me, don't take my hatred from me, it is all I have!"

The irony is that what makes the anger of vengeance so intractable is that, in fact, anger is *not* all the avenger has; what he *actually* has is a grief he cannot bear to acknowledge. As Harold Searles wrote:

In my experience, patients do not become free from a crippling thirst for revenge merely by working through the hostility residing therein. Not until the therapy has gone on to achieve a working-through of the deeper-lying grief and separation anxiety is the foundation for vengefulness

eradicated, and the patient's approach to his fellow men governed instead by genuine friendliness.

So it is not strange that Dennis Shepard might cling to his anger even as he offers mercy to Aaron McKinney:

You robbed me of something very precious and I will never forgive you for that. Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory of one who longer lives. May you have a long life and may you thank Matthew every day for it.

After Dennis Shepard's statement, our play, *The Laramie Project* comes to a swift conclusion, leaving audiences with the impression that, as police officer Reggie Fluty put it: "Maybe now we can go on and we can quit being stuck, you know?" But I've come to feel that by ending on that note, we playwrights attempted an impossible short-cut to forgiveness, a miracle cure for a chronic condition. For neither Dennis Shepard's anger and grief, nor that of the citizens of Laramie, had actually been worked-through.

Earlier in the play the Catholic priest, Father Roger Schmit said:

FATHER ROGER: I think right now our most important teachers must be Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. They have to be our teachers. How did you learn? What did we as a society do to teach you that? ... I think it would be wonderful if the judge [had] said: in addition to your sentence, you must tell your story.

But for several reasons, McKinney's story never was told. First because the judge ruled that McKinney's lawyers could not present witnesses who were prepared to testify that Aaron McKinney had been sexually molested by an older boy when he was a child. Then because the deal that Dennis Shepard and the prosecuting attorney made with Aaron McKinney's lawyer was that, in exchange for dropping the death penalty, McKinney's sentence could never be appealed. And finally, because the plea-bargain also meant that the trial would not go to a

penalty phase, during which the story of McKinney's childhood – and possibly embarrassing material about Matthew's drug use – could have been presented. Thus, contrary to Father Roger's hope, the circumstances of Aaron McKinney's trial actually *prevented* Aaron's story from being told.

And yet we in the theater company *had* heard these stories, and nothing prevented us from including these complicating facets of the story in our play... and yet we left them out. I don't know if having heard these statements would have changed minds among the jury – or altered the feelings of our audiences. But might it have. So I still wonder: Would knowing such things change your reactions to the play or your thoughts about the balance between revenge and forgiveness in this situation?

And then I wonder: why did we playwrights exclude these stories from our play? Was it simply in order to bring the play to a satisfying conclusion? Or was it that we narrators, like the perpetrators and the victims in our play, might have found some of our own thoughts and emotions about this story "unendurable."

Ten years later, Moisés Kaufman returned to Laramie with several of the same actor-writers in search of the late *sequelæ* of the Matthew Shepard murder. Their new play, *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* was first produced two years ago and it recently ran in repertory with the original play at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. The new script investigates what has – and what has not – changed in the intervening ten years. It also includes an interview with Matthew's mother, Judy Shepard, an interview in which Moisés asks Judy about the effect ten years of lobbying for hate crimes legislation has had upon her life.

MOISÉS KAUFMAN: I so vividly remember being at the [McKinney] trial and seeing you then. And now I see this woman and they don't seem like the same person.

JUDY SHEPARD: Yeah. I'm angrier now than I was then. Because it's still happening.

The stage direction reads, "She begins to cry softly, but does not give in to the tears."

JUDY SHEPARD: So here I am at the ten-year mark still fighting, and I had to adapt so I could keep doing this. Or, the feeling would be that it would have all happened in vain! I wasn't going to let that happen. Plus, just doing the work was my survival! It was how I coped with losing Matt. I could keep him with me all the time. And I was talking to someone and they said, "Well don't you think maybe it's time to let go, don't you think you're keeping Matt alive by doing that?" And I said, "Of course I'm keeping him alive by doing this! That's the point!" That is exactly the point.

A narrator then adds:

NARRATOR: On October 28, 2010, just a few months after that interview with Judy, President Barack Obama signed the *Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act* into law. Two months later on December 22nd, 2010, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed.

So, as we listen to this narration, we may think: Well, if Judy Shepard has been able to put her anger to good use, perhaps "letting go" of one's anger is not a necessary step for a victim to take; perhaps keeping the dead alive *can* put a terrible rage to good use.

Perhaps. But *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* also contains jailhouse interviews with both of the perpetrators, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, finally accomplishing Father Rogers' hope. And in those interviews,

each of them talks about Judy Shepard. This is from the interview playwright Stephen Belber had with Russell Henderson.

STEPHEN BELBER. Can you tell me what happened when you got out to the fence?

RUSSELL HENDERSON. Aaron told me to tie him to the fence. But I didn't actually tie him. I just wrapped the rope around his hands. Because, you know, I figured ... I wanted him to be able to leave.

STEPHEN BELBER. And so, when Aaron started hitting him over and over -- ?

RUSSELL HENDERSON. I just wanted it to stop. I wanted to hide. Make it go away. So I just did what I always did. I hid. Tried to escape. Pretend like it's not happening. Instead of being more ... strong. I didn't think I could stop him. That's why I went back to the truck.

STEPHEN BELBER. Well, one story I've always heard is that you tried to stop him from beating Matthew.

RUSSELL HENDERSON. (*A nod*) Let's just say I tried to stop him but I didn't try enough. You know what I mean? I didn't ... It's mostly just, you know, shame. That I didn't do more.

STEPHEN BELBER. Your grandmother told me you'd taken a victim empathy course?

RUSSELL HENDERSON. Yeah. And what they have you do is actually draft a letter to your victim. Which I did. And I chose Matthew's family, because even though Matthew was my victim, so was his family. And part of that is that you write about a time in your life when *you* were a victim.

STEPHEN BELBER. What did you write about for when *you* were a victim?

RUSSELL HENDERSON. About when my mom was killed. Which was, obviously, different circumstances, and a different level of

attention, but you know, we both lost family members, in violent crimes ... you know, my mom was killed in Laramie, she was raped, and then the guy just left her on the side of the road. She tried to make it back to town, but she froze to death ... writing about that really ... helped me, it made me understand the pain I had caused to Matt and to Matt's parents and family.

STEPHEN BELBER. Is that the letter you tried to send to Judy Shepard?

RUSSELL HENDERSON. It ... prepared me for what I wrote to her.

STEPHEN BELBER. And did you ever hear back from her?

RUSSELL HENDERSON. I don't even know if she read it.

In the play as it stands, this conversation appears several scenes *before* the Judy Shepard interview. But I wonder what occasioned that playwriting choice: was it simply a choice to create a more uplifting ending, or was it that giving Russell the last word would have required the writers – and the audience – to feel a more disconcerting relationship to this tale of revenge and forgiveness?

It is this thought which leads to my next inquiry: What is the role, and what is the responsibility, of the witness – the playwright or therapist – who listens to, digests and reflects such a story of out to an audience or back to a client?

As in the earlier play, it is playwright Greg Pierotti who interviews Father Roger Schmit in *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. And this time Father Roger urges Greg to speak with Aaron McKinney in jail.

FATHER ROGER. And, Greg, ask Aaron about his remorse. Those of us who have done things in our lives that are really significant in their gravity, we are going to alter our remorse throughout our lives. Sometimes that remorsefulness gets chinked one way, and then it gets bent a different way, and then hopefully, by the time we die, we have it in the correct perspective. I think Aaron is not finished finalizing his experience of remorse. And remorse is something we

ALL need to think about. So you ask him about that. And Greg, do him justice.

GREG PIEROTTI. Father, how do I do Aaron McKinney justice?

FATHER ROGER. (*Surprised.*) You get to know him, Greg. Let him teach you what it's like to be Aaron McKinney, OK?

So Greg does go to visit Aaron McKinney in jail, and he does ask him about his remorse. But then Greg has to struggle with his own emotions:

GREG PIEROTTI. OK. So let me ask you, you know, in Russell's statement when he plead guilty he told the court he was sorry and felt he deserved to pay the price for what he did. But in your trial you never made much of a statement and so I'm wondering...

AARON MCKINNEY. You mean do I have remorse? Yeah I got remorse. My dad taught me I should stand tall and be a man. I got remorse that I didn't live the way my dad taught me to live. That I wasn't the man my dad wanted me to be. As far as Matt is concerned, I don't have any remorse. I heard that Matt was a sex predator, and that he preyed on younger guys and had sex with 'em. So when I heard that, I was relieved. People might say I am just trying to justify myself, maybe so. As far as I'm concerned, doin' what he was doin', Matt Shepard needed killin'.

GREG PIEROTTI. (*Pause.*) OK. You know those rumors about Matthew Shepard are not true, Aaron.

AARON MCKINNEY. That's not what I heard.

GREG PIEROTTI. (*Pause.*) OK. So, you have no remorse at all.

AARON MCKINNEY. Actually, I do feel bad for Matt's dad. That must be hard to lose your son.

GREG PIEROTTI. And what about his mom?

AARON MCKINNEY: For her to, yeah. I feel bad. Still she never shuts up about it, and it's been like ten years, man.

GREG PIEROTTI. Well, Aaron, you brutally murdered her son.

AARON MCKINNEY: (*Conceding.*) Yeah, I know.

As I listen to this dialogue, I wonder, what is Greg supposed to do with his own feelings as he listens to the man who beat Matthew to death? And what are we to do with ours?

To approach this question, I'd like to tell you the other 9/11 story that one of my students at NYU told in our small-group meeting on September thirteenth, 2001.

This young woman, who was a sophomore in one of my acting classes, explained to our little group that several days a week she worked as a waitress at a restaurant down in Tribeca, only a few blocks north of the World Trade Center. On the morning of September eleventh, shortly after the second plane hit the South Tower, the telephone in the restaurant rang, and when she picked it up, a man asked her, "Can you see the fire from the front window of the restaurant?"

"Yes," she said.

"Okay," the man said, "I'd like to reserve a table for eight in the front for fifteen minutes from now. Can you do that?"

"No," she answered, "We're closing." And she hung up.

That's striking, isn't it, that story? During the past twelve years I've told and re-told that story many times, and it always makes me wonder... many things. But recently, one of the things it has made me wonder is: Just what is it that affects us so strongly about that story... and just what is our affect? Are we appalled at the heartlessness of the man who called? At his undisguised desire to be a witness to other people's suffering? Do we think, "How callous! I would never do that!" Well, no, *I* would never call a restaurant and ask for a front-row seat to a disaster. But actually, at that very same moment, I had stopped by the arch in Washington Square, one mile to the north, and I'd stood there, staring at the fire for a minute, and then I had walked home to my apartment on West Tenth Street, and, after checking the news on television, I had gone up to the roof

where I stood and watched as first one, and then the other hundred-story building crumbled in a cloud of dust, one mile away. Meanwhile thousands of Brooklynites went to the Promenade and watched the same thing from across the East River. And millions of others, all over America, and around the world, watched the same scene on TV, where for days, the news played and replayed the images over and over and over.

So how was I—how are we—any different from the man who called the restaurant asking to reserve a table?

Well, for one thing, we therapists, and playwrights— we who make our living being spectators to emotional catastrophes— we don't have to pay for our front row seats. In fact we are paid to be voyeurs! On the other hand, we are not simply gawkers, we are spectators charged with the task of somehow transforming the violence we witness into something, else, something positive. That's our job. But if that is what we desire to accomplish, then, unlike other onlookers, we cannot not remain outside the stories we hear. Neil Altman puts our problem this way:

I would argue that to understand is not necessarily to rationalize or to forgive, but there *is* a problem here. To understand another person one needs to identify with him, at least briefly. Can we or should we do so when the person has committed an atrocity? We can only understand a human behavior by... putting ourselves into a position very much at variance with our ideals, into a position that may horrify us. The temptation is very strong to disassociate ourselves from someone who commits an atrocity such as the murder of innocent civilians. It is one thing, however, to say, "I would never do such a thing," and quite another to render the perpetrator categorically different from oneself or even subhuman.

Or, as Father Roger says to Greg Pierotti:

FATHER ROGER. Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson are products of our society. They are our brothers also. I don't say this in any way at all to excuse them... To understand does not mean to be permissive. But to understand also isn't the kind of thing that you decide in your office. To understand Aaron, you have to visit him.... Matthew is our brother, Aaron is our brother, Russell is our brother.... Greg, Aaron is much more like me than unlike me.

And for Greg Pierotti, Father Roger's advice is especially demanding, for in both Laramie Project plays, it is often Greg who serves as the voice of the LGBT community, and of the playwrights and the audience, who, by this point in the story, feel very tied to the suffering of Matthew Shepard and of the gay population of Laramie. Altman writes:

In cases where the perpetrator of a violent act has a grievance against you or your people, to empathize with him so as to understand his state of mind requires us to imagine how it is to see ourselves as bad, even as the perpetrator of, or collusive with, atrocities ourselves... It takes a great deal of emotional strength and complex mindedness to understand the other's point of view in this way and to assume **an appropriate degree of responsibility** for the other's rage and suffering, while utterly condemning his act and feeling completely entitled to recognition of one's own point of view [*emphasis added*].

Why should we put ourselves through such an experience? Because, says Altman:

[T]he links between all things human is inescapable; either you acknowledge your psychic link with that which is horrifying or disgusting or abominable to you, or you are at risk of piously or viciously acting out that which you are trying to condemn and disavow.

The weight of this “psychic link with that which is horrifying or disgusting or abominable to you” is common to both relational analysis and art-making.

Speaking about analysis, Stephen Mitchell writes:

The analyst discovers himself a cofactor in a passionate drama involving love and hate, sexuality and murder, intrusion and abandonment, victims and executioners.

And speaking of writing, Israeli author David Grossman says:

I write, and I try not to shield myself from the legitimacy and the suffering of my enemy, or from the tragedy and complexity of his life, or from his mistakes and crimes, or from knowing what I myself am doing to him.

Nor do I shelter myself from the surprising similarities I discover between him and me.

So we therapists and playwrights, though we may be bystanders, we must never think of ourselves as “innocent bystanders.” Because our manner of *standing by*, our way of listening, can have a profound effect upon the story and upon the person we are listening to.

I know that in my own therapy, my analyst, Emmanuel Ghent, found a way to say “Uh-huh,” as I spoke that made me feel heard without feeling interrupted. And I remember that one of the most transformative moments in our time together was the day when I became enraged at him for not having explained clearly enough exactly how I was to enter his building while the elevator was being worked on. After I unleashed my anger at him, Manny Ghent simply apologized, although there was really nothing for him to apologize for. And in that moment, it was the simple, unnecessary generosity of his apology that suddenly made me aware of the misplaced quality of my own emotion.

In the Introduction to the Mitscherlich book, *The Inability to Mourn*, Robert Lifton writes about the day in 1972 when German Chancellor, Willy Brandt,

visited Poland and fell on his knees there before the monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto:

By falling on his knees in Warsaw, Brandt showed that he no longer intended to deny the suffering which for generations the policies of Germany had inflicted on her Eastern neighbor; with this symbolic gesture he accepted the guilt.

But the guilt Brandt accepted was not simply his own, personal, guilt – Brandt himself had been persecuted by the Nazis during the war and forced to escape to Norway and Sweden. With his gesture, Brandt took upon himself the guilt of the whole German Nation. And so I wonder if, when we take upon ourselves the simultaneous honor-and-burden of being a playwright or a therapist, must we not, with that act, also take upon ourselves “an appropriate degree of responsibility” for the suffering and the shame that our characters and clients – both the victims and the perpetrators – each carry, even if we ourselves were not present at the moment of injury.

In the writing of the Laramie plays, I wonder if we playwrights mistakenly believed that we could remain “innocent bystanders,” objective reporters of a tragedy not of our making.

At minimum, it seems to me, we “relational” witnesses are called upon to demonstrate that we will not avoid feeling the suffering of victims, nor shy away from experiencing the vehemence of the perpetrators to whom we attend. And we are called upon to show that we consider the feelings that they find overwhelming to be... bearable. In Dr. Berardi-Coletta’s words, we must be willing to “weather” the “panic attacks, nightmares, and intense self-recrimination episodes” of our clients – and our characters.

Of course the “weathering” of strong emotions is the very essence of theater. The greatest plays are great because they force us to experience irresistible love, torturous betrayal, enormous suffering, violence, revenge, and

sometimes even reconciliation and forgiveness. In fact, in *King Lear*, it is precisely by “weathering” the storm of his emotions that the King becomes able to reenter what Robert Lifton called “the great human cycle of death and rebirth.”

But, it seems to me, in addition to our ability to bear powerful emotions, there is one more capacity that we witnesses are called upon to demonstrate for our clients and our audiences: the capacity to weather not only emotional *depth* but also emotional *complexity*.

Böhm and Kaplan point out that “[Violent men] have hardly any capacity for ambivalence and uncertainty.” And David Grossman suggests that this incapacity is characteristic of those who “approach reality with the mind-set of a sworn survivor”:

The survivor ignores anything that may complicate his worldview or delay his reactions, and so he tends to ignore the gray areas, the nuances, without truly facing the complex and contradictory nature of reality.... He thereby all but dooms himself to exist forever within this partial, distorted, suspicious, and frightened picture of reality, and is therefore tragically fated to make his anxieties and nightmares come true time and time again.

So if we therapists and playwrights wish to help our clients and our audiences free themselves from the violent spirals of revenge, we must also be willing, ourselves, to perceive and to explore “the gray areas,” including the “complex and contradictory nature” of forgiveness itself. As Sharon Lamb writes in her essay, “Women, Abuse and Forgiveness,” “[T]he granting of forgiveness carries...[with it a] contradictory admixture of power and powerlessness.” And, she points out, “valorizing... forgiveness...[can be] a seductive ideological cover for baser motives.”

In his response to my paper on *Revenge and Forgiveness in Laramie Wyoming*, Martin Frommer wrote in a similar vein:

The state of forgiveness that we long for – free from residual anger, resentment, or ambivalence – is an ideal. In real life... forgiving often coexists with resurgences of doubt, bitterness, hurt, and the painful feeling that the relationship has been inextricably altered by what happened.

So, it seems to me, we must be willing to perceive that, on the one hand, Judy Shepard's ten-year fight may indeed have helped move this country towards hate crimes legislation, while on the other, her unrelenting anger may have embittered Judy herself while punishing the penitent Russell Henderson. And we must be willing to see Aaron McKinney as both remorseful and not remorseful. And willing to acknowledge that a group of New York actors and playwrights can – and cannot – speak for the people of Laramie. And maybe even willing to perceive that each of us Americans is – and is not – responsible for the horrors of 9/11, the Ruanda genocide, and so on.... Or would such a willingness be asking too much of ourselves? Would it be asking ourselves to take on an *in*appropriate degree of responsibility? Of course the tricky part of Altman's admonition is that, in order to take on "an appropriate degree of responsibility," in our work and in our lives, each of us must take *full* responsibility for figuring out just what "an appropriate degree of responsibility" is.

But to recognize that forgiveness can carry "a contradictory admixture of power and powerlessness," or that it may "coexist with bitterness," means only that forgiveness is, to use Nietzsche's phrase, "Human, all too human." But to acknowledge this is not to deny that, at the same time, there seems to be something special, something "transformative," as Dr. Berardi-Coletta put it, about forgiveness: "Forgiveness of self is a deeply transforming and transformative outcome of psychoanalysis."

Hannah Arendt pointed in particular to the "unnatural" and "unexpected" nature of forgiveness. She wrote:

[F]orgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance....

In contrast to revenge, which is the natural, automatic reaction to transgression and which... can be expected and even calculated, the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way.... Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.

Reading this, I recall that, in my own analysis, it was the very unexpected and unjustified nature of Manny Ghent's apology that had such a profound effect upon me.

Rami Elhanan, the father of a girl who was killed by a suicide bomber in Jerusalem, draws a direct connection between the "unnatural," "unexpected" quality of forgiveness and the assumption of "an appropriate degree of responsibility":

[T]here are only two alternatives. The one is the obvious and the natural and the way most people choose, which is the way of retaliation and revenge because when someone kills your fourteen-year-old little girl you are very, very angry and you want to get even. This is natural; this is only natural.

[But] You start to think, will killing someone else bring back my baby? Will causing pain to someone else ease my pain in any way? Of course not. And it takes time, a long time, to choose the other way. The other way is the way of understanding. Why did it happen? How could such a thing happen? And the most important thing: what can you do, now that you have the burden on your shoulders to prevent it from happening to others?

I don't forgive and I don't forget, but when this happened to my daughter I had to ask myself whether I'd contributed in any way. The answer was

that I had - my people had, for ruling, dominating and oppressing three-and-a-half million Palestinians for 35 years. It is a sin and you pay for sins.

Thank you.

ADDENDUM ON THE PSYCHONEUROLOGY OF REVENGE

Psychiatrist and neurophysiologist Allan Schore notes that “The two components of the centrally, brain-stem-regulated Autonomic Nervous System are known to be antagonistic, reciprocally integrated circuits that control arousal, with the catabolic sympathetic branch responsible for energy-mobilizing excitatory activity and heart rate acceleration and the anabolic parasympathetic branch involved in energy-conserving inhibitory activity and heart rate deceleration.” Schore proposes that during the practicing period in child development, “the shame system that emerges ... represents an evolving cortical inhibitory control mechanism of excessive, hyperstimulated states.” Shame he says, is the psychological manifestation of “a shift of balance from sympathetic to parasympathetic components of the ANS.” It acts as a “brake” that can save a toddler from taking physical and psychological risks which, at this point in his development, would not be safe for him to take.

Humiliation is a kind of shame imposed by an external threat. The experience of humiliation, says Schore, is occasioned by “an elevated parasympathetic plus a heightened sympathetic reactivity.” In other words, in humiliation, the parasympathetic “brake” inhibits activity, while the psyche stays highly reactive to the external insult.

But if, as we have seen, humiliation is the covert precipitating factor in the etiology of revenge, is it not possible that revenge is the psychological manifestation of an opposite “shift of balance” in the Autonomic Nervous System? Is it possible that when the psyche becomes overwhelmed by the impotence and vulnerability induced by a traumatic humiliation, the brain-stem, in attempting to overcome this inhibitory condition, activates the sympathetic nervous system to a condition of hyperarousal, the condition that Altman refers to as a “flight to action.” And might it be that the “denial of an unbearable pain”

which impels revenge is simply the psychological experience of this autonomic nervous system shift? And if so, might we not speculate that one reason it is so hard for the vengeful to “let go” of their anger is that, on a psychoneurological level, their body is being activated by the brain-stem towards the hyperarousal that occasions revenge fantasies and actions?

Stephen Wangh

Address for the Chicago Association for Psychoanalytic Psychology

March 23, 2013