

Memories of the Holocaust and Questions of Past Lives

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Abstract

The aim of this case note is to highlight areas within psychology which are, in the main, as yet unaddressed by professionals, including psychiatrists, psychotherapists and counsellors whose practice may not incorporate working within a transpersonal framework and who may be confronted by those patients whose issues do not appear to fit any current diagnostic models. The seminal literature examined relates specifically to the psychological effects of inherited memory of war trauma for second and third generation survivors of World War II. Attention is given to the implications of addressing issues as specific to the present and to holding the possibility that they originate from another life or that the memory has been 'inherited' genetically or through what Jung defined as the Collective Unconscious.

The transmission of memory and possibilities of origin in connection with questions on whether memory may be transmitted genetically or other, are discussed throughout using case examples of myself whose ethnicity is Jewish (pseudonym used within thesis) and another who has no genetic connection to either Jew or German. Both have memories of being either victim or perpetrator and have experienced different types of therapy, discussion being given on whether any healing has been facilitated, the suitability of the therapist with regards to training, background and orientation. Speculation is made on the interpretation of dreams and visions which they bring to therapy from a psychotherapeutic point of view and how these may be explored within the therapeutic relationship.

Introduction

This paper is a brief article based upon my original thesis 'Death in the Consulting Room: Memories of the Holocaust and Questions of Past Lives' submitted under separate cover as a paper in its own right. My thesis takes up the question of working therapeutically with clients who hold the belief that they have lived through the Holocaust in a previous life-time, examining the topic from both psychodynamic and transpersonal perspectives. At the age of four I had a dream which remained with me for the rest of my life and eventually led to a Masters Dissertation on the subject of reincarnation and the Holocaust and now a published memoir. I'm starting to fall asleep. I can hear footsteps, rhythmic footsteps and start to get frightened. I say to my mother, "don't make me go-the Sandman's coming, I don't want to go". He comes and in the dream he has a cart or a wheelbarrow and I have to get in. He takes me away and I'm very frightened. Then I'm in some kind of bathhouse or shower room. It's not a big room and it's full of women. We have no clothes on. It's all yellowy or sepia colored...I'm a young child; a girl of about eight years of age.. I wake up in a cold sweat terrified.

The dream was recurrent for many months if not years and then as life progressed, the 'memory' retreated and did not return until adolescence, the start of Grammar School, communal showers and being bullied and beaten as a 'dirty Jew'. My first overdose was taken after being asked to leave my school where I had been so desperately unhappy that I had failed to live up to the academic expectation of the institution and so clinically obese that I was unable to achieve the required standard in any sport. Thus began my ambivalent relationship with life and death and ultimately professional training in analytical psychology and Jungian psychotherapy in order to attempt to understand who I am.

Memories of the Holocaust

As a counsellor and psychotherapist trained in hypnotherapy, analytical psychology, Jungian Psychotherapy and past life regression, I remain a little sceptical of the process of what is deemed to be a journey into a former incarnation. My scepticism exists, despite the research I have undertaken on the question of working therapeutically with clients (like myself and many others) who believe that they have lived through the Holocaust in a previous life-time. My academic research examines the topic from both psychodynamic and transpersonal perspectives whilst taking into account aspects of the theory of reincarnation and transmission of memory.

When one studies the many ideas associated with memory, the questions arising become too many to be discussed in one academic thesis let alone a three thousand word article. However, consideration is given to the theories of the collective unconscious archaic and genetic memory as discussed by Freud who asserted his belief in that the transmission of memory was not only influenced by past experience and repressed into the unconscious, but also by innate factors, that is by 'elements with a phylogenetic origin, an archaic heritage. Many theories exist in relation to the transmission of memory. In theosophy and anthroposophy, the Akashic records (a term coined in the late 1800s from akasha, the Sanskrit word for "sky", "space", "luminous", or "aether") are a compendium of thoughts, events, and emotions believed by Theosophists to be encoded in a non-physical plane of existence known as the astral plane. There is no scientific evidence for existence of the Akashic records. However a belief is held by many that, like the collective unconscious, there is a record of all that was, all that is and all that will be held somewhere in the universe [1,2].

There is also the possibility that memory may be transmitted through the morphogenetic field or morphic resonance which is discussed as 'The influence of previous structures of activity on subsequent similar structures of activity organized by morphic fields. Through morphic resonance, formative causal influences pass through or across both space and time, and these influences are assumed not to fall off... they come only from the past' [3,4].

In addition what must also be taken into consideration is that of false memory syndrome, a suggestion of the therapist, as opposed to a genuine recollection by the client and the possibility of cryptoamnesia (a record of overheard conversations, pictures, stories and forgotten television programmes (Woolger) whilst researching the possibility of past life memory [5,6].

All research undertaken for my thesis specifically relates to second and third generation survivors of the Holocaust, Jew and non-Jew, but may be equally applicable to any persecuted race or ethnic minority, whether holding a memory of a past life or those who suffer 'survivor's guilt'. This applies also to those who may have descended from those who were perpetrators as well as the generations following the victims. Peter Heint states that: 'the transgenerational transmission of war trauma demonstrates the fact that the ending of wars is not dictated by historical dates [3,4]. Heint further comments that the trauma lives on, transmitted through both second and third generations, which brings into question those born to survivors and their grandchildren. Whether or not the trauma recalled by these individuals stems from direct relationship to victim or perpetrator, previous life-time, or some other source, is actually not the issue but more important is how therapists may work with a client who brings material which is not only horrific in the extreme, but may trigger the therapist's own issues according to belief and culture [7].

Hans Ten Dam defines the explanation of genetic memory as speculation as the research into the physical basis of memory does not indicate genetic coding and transfer of memories [2]. It may also be questionable that, due to the nature of the regression therapy undertaken, that part of what emerges is a product of 'False Memory Syndrome', a suggestion of the therapist, as opposed to a genuine recollection by the client. In his article, 'The False "False Memory Syndrome" Syndrome, (1999), Ten Dam comments: 'It is sometimes said that if memories from childhood may be false, memories from a previous life must be even more unreliable' [8,9].

Alternatively, one may consider Rupert Sheldrake's theory that morphic resonance may provide an interpretation for the memory of past-lives. He hypothesises that 'memories' held are the result of tuning in to a collective memory thus making it possible to tune in to the memories of specific people This would then indicate that the 'memory' held does not actually belong to the individual who experiences it as if it were their own, but is the 'memory' which has been 'picked up' from the morphogenetic field [10,11]. Consideration may also be given to the possibility of a spirit attachment, a soul who has been unable to move on and lives with his 'host' as part of an individual's psychic make-up outlined briefly as an attachment which has been known about by mediums and psychics for many year and is postulated as being the energy or spirit of a dead person or entity attached to a living person frequently triggering physical and mental health problems [12].

If the 'collective' as defined by Daryl Sharp (2009), contains 'the psychic' contents that belong not to one individual but to a society, a people, or the human race in general, then it follows that we may all

have access to a far greater memory than that inherited genetically. In all cases, the 'memories' held by these individuals are believed to be from a different lifetime. In this vein Stanislav Grof (1995) comments...elements of ancestral, racial, and phylogenetic memories, conscious intelligence of the DNA molecule and metaphysics of the genetic code, dynamics of archetypal structures, and the fact of reincarnation with the law of karma must now be incorporated into the subject's thinking [13,14].

Having attended several workshops with Roger Woolger (1947-2011) on Deep Memory Process and Voices of the Ancestors, two or three individuals within each group of approximately twenty held 'memories' of the Holocaust. In one group of twenty-one, six recalled Holocaust trauma. In every case the age group of the individuals concerned fell into the category of second or third generation survivor, either victim or perpetrator [15].

Case Notes

As an illustration I offer two case studies, Leah (myself) and Peter (pseudonym), both of whom, through dreams and visions, believe that they lived a previous life as either victim or perpetrator during the Holocaust. The 'memories' they hold have had a profound effect on their personal and spiritual development throughout their lives. Many others with whom I have now corresponded through various groups, and several whose stories have been published by Rabbi Yonassan Gershom discuss their profound psychological and somatic issues which have deeply affected their state of 'being' in this lifetime. Gershom, found compelling evidence of many souls who had returned, both as Jews and non-Jews. When questioned as to how to determine whether a story is actually a case of reincarnation, he claims that there are no ways to prove it. What he does tell us is that regardless of the 'truth' of the story, it offers an indication of how deeply the Holocaust has affected our collective consciousness and that for those experiencing 'flash-backs', the [psychological] effects are very real [16,17].

In terms of genetic memory, neither I nor 'Peter' lost any known relative during the Holocaust. At four years of age, I had experienced no exposure consciously, nor discussion about the war. My father was a radio engineer with the RAF based in Egypt during the war. His father came to the UK in 1913 to marry my paternal grandmother. My mother's families were British, her paternal grandfather arriving from Vienna long before the First World War. Peter was born to parents of British origin (three grandparents English) and Native American ancestry on his father's side, raised in Canada with no Jewish or German connection. We have both experienced vivid 'flashbacks' in one form or another throughout our lives, me as a Jewish victim, Peter as Nazi perpetrator. One may therefore wish to question the source and depth of where memory originates and how much is held by the individual within the depth of the psyche.

Considerations for Therapists

Regardless of the origin of the contents of dream, vision, or as Woolger refers to it 'the spiritual imagination, it is as Jung defines it, 'the inner truth and reality of the patient as it really is'. Jung held that before dealing with the material of the collective unconscious the personal unconscious must be dealt with first Unless the client is able to enter the deepest levels of the psyche and has already explored in therapy issues from his present life, it may be unwise to consider any form of major regression on a transpersonal and spiritual basis [18].

Other questions arising are the number of sessions which may be necessary in order to facilitate a healing for the client, the orientation and training of the therapist, and whether or not a therapist needs to be trained in past life regression. This is based on, for instance, a Jungian or transpersonal psychotherapist who is experienced in working with archetypes, visions, dreams and active imagination. Such a therapist may well hold the necessary 'tools' in his toolbox in order to work with the client bringing 'past-life' material, which for others may seem too far away from any form of 'reality' within their own understanding or belief system [19].

As in any form of therapy, each individual case is absolutely unique and must be treated accordingly. This then raises a question, again, as to how each individual therapist, if and when confronted with questions of 'past lives', deems it best in terms of facilitating a healing for the client, to work with his client's belief system within the therapeutic relationship.

I question within my dissertation the possibility of my case studies' 'death instinct', i.e. the wish to revert to the non-existent state, the state of Thanatos in Freudian terms. As I own here my part within my dissertation, I discuss the initial dream, the end result of which, regardless of which type of therapy I have undertaken is always the same; I die as an eight year old child screaming in a gas chamber. As the middle of three daughters, I struggled to maintain any kind of existence within my middle-class Jewish upbringing, feeling unseen, unheard and misunderstood and question the 'reality' of any of my 'memories'. Peter had a traumatic childhood and suffered abusive parents; his memory recall was that of a Nazi, his childhood spent with an obsession with anything military which leads to the question of whether the 'life' he 'remembers' may be the impact and implication for the creative aspect of the unconscious to contain or release the experience of a deeper psychic affect. Are we simply seeking a reason to explain why we have experienced the psychological difficulties we have encountered on our life journey?

Conclusion

Whatever the truth is, the purpose of my research was an attempt to find a way of coming to terms not only with my own memories but also to offer comment to those therapists who find themselves working with an individual who believes that their issues stem from a former incarnation. Although, due to the nature of the subject, what appears to emerge is that there can be no real conclusion, it is suggested that a client's memories are accepted as if they are real and accept our client's story for what it is, a psychic reality to be respected and treated accordingly.

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Supervision (June 2013). Now a published author, her own memoir is available on Amazon 'Death in the Consulting Room: A Memoir of Life, Death and Determination' by 'Lisa Costa'

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