Moving Beyond Trauma when Identity is Based on Intergenerational Grief

Rebecca Grinblat Delohery

ABSTRACT:

How do grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, or 3Gs, move beyond their inherited trauma and grief to form an identity? As a 3G myself, I know that we have not moved beyond our grandparents’ experiences yet and that the trauma is at the core of our identities. Many 3Gs have studied the Holocaust, as if learning the historical facts will help us make sense of ourselves. Many of us go into the caring professions, as if in ‘fixing’ others we will have earned the worthiness to be alive, the justification for our existence. Some of us embrace the source of our grief and learn to tell our grandparents’ stories, as well as our own. Is this the way to move beyond trauma? My journey to identify and express myself has taken me from Australia to the US, Israel, and now to Ireland, where there is no Jewish community to speak about. I have had to move away from the tradition and the binding of family and community ties to discover my own voice, which only began to emerge after encountering my husband’s art. My husband, Thomas Delohery, an Irish Artist of Catholic descent with no family connection to the Holocaust, has helped me to break away from the expectations of how I should narrate my own story and find an utterly new voice. Becoming connected to his art, which depicts various aspects of the Holocaust, has also given me some of this freedom to stop merely relating the stories of those who have come before me and to talk about my own journey. In 2007 my husband asked me to open one of his shows in Ireland. This gave me a platform to bring my thoughts on his work and on my history to artists, journalists, critics, students, and others who attend his show. When he exhibited in Canada, later in the year, he spoke to students about the process of creating art about the Holocaust, and I was able to bring the historical and personal context in talking about my family’s experiences and what it was like for me as a young Jewish woman whose family had undergone such trauma. My paper examines the experiences of various 3Gs and asks if moving beyond trauma through connections to art and other experiences outside the traditional Jewish narrative is possible.
As a grandchild of Holocaust Survivors (or a 3G), I ask how we 3G’s move beyond our inherited trauma and grief to form an identity; whether it is possible to do such a thing; or whether our trauma is seared into our souls. In my exploration of this, I have to talk about my family but it is not my purpose to “out” them, to shame them, or to expose them. I don’t intend to reveal things that will humiliate them. Rather, I speak today about my own experiences and feelings, and my journey to create or discover an identity. I will speak honestly about how I have experienced things in my life’s journey from my birth in Melbourne to a family descended from Holocaust Survivors on my mother’s side all the way to Ireland where I currently reside with my husband.

As I thought about how to begin this presentation, my natural inclination was to go back to my grandparents – to present their stories as the precursor to my own. I don’t remember a time when I didn’t know what had happened to my grandmother during the Holocaust. From the time I was old enough to understand anything, she told me stories about her life during that time. On the other hand, my grandfather was silent. But the details of their experiences are not relevant here so much as the trauma that resulted from them and the emotional fallout that has played itself out in my family.

I come from a bound family. I don’t know if either of my grandparents came from families with the same sort of structure before the Holocaust, but post-Holocaust and I believe, largely because of the Holocaust, when they met and married, this is the dynamic of the family they set up together. What do I actually mean when I refer to a bound family? In her 1998 study of the Holocaust in Three Generations, Rosenthal said,

“The bound family closes itself off from the outside world, while at the same time permitting almost no limits to be set between individual family members. These families…avoid conflicts, cultivate a harmonizing style of communication, and place large parts of the family history under taboo. To avoid having to address the theme of threatening parts of their past, bound families often tend to create family myths: unquestioned justification strategies shared by all the family members, a collectively maintained belief that factually diverges from reality.”

I would say that there are lots of myths in my family. One of those myths is that we have no conflict. In actual fact, when conflict is there, it places great strain on

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everyone because not only does it remain unacknowledged and therefore unresolved, but everyone puts a great deal of energy into pretending it isn’t there in the first place. It is the perennial pink elephant in the middle of the room! This is a prime example of avoiding conflicts, cultivating a harmonizing style of communication and placing parts of the family history under taboo. It may be commonplace within Survivor families but it can be at the cost of emotional or psychological well-being. Before we even step into the world, we are censoring ourselves in a way in which our families have imposed and to which we never formally agreed. How can we ever allow anyone to truly know who we are if we are devoting so much energy to denying parts of our own histories and ourselves? How can we even truly know ourselves?

Apart from the myths, there are lots of secrets – many of which don’t even seem to need to be secrets. For years, I felt that there was something at the centre of my family that we were all dancing around but I didn’t know what it was. I was finally told what the secret was when I was in my early twenties and it made absolutely no sense that it was even being kept a secret. The effort of keeping the secret has cost a very close relative of mine a chance to be really close to anyone, as well as the chance to reach personal fulfilment. What a terrible price to pay for one secret – a lifetime of denial of herself. The saddest thing is that this secret keeping continues even now because, and I quote, “One such decision makes every subsequent effort at honesty and openness among family members concerning important matters in life impossible.”  

This secret particularly, but all my family’s secrets, have forced others within our family into the role of accomplice, including me. Perhaps part of the reason I’m delivering this paper is that I don’t want to be part of this process anymore. I don’t want to have to keep lying about things, hiding the truth in shadows and silence. I don’t want the unhealthy need of my family to keep secrets to stymie my desire/need for truthfulness.

Taking all of this back to the theme of trauma, how do the secrets and myths that are so much a part of my bound family relate to the transmission of trauma? Rosenthal says that,

“…Silence and family secrets as well as family myths constitute some of the most effective mechanisms of ensuring the sustained impact of a problematic family past…The more closed or guarded the family dialogue, or the greater

2 Ibid p. 210
the attempt to make a secret of or whitewash the past, the more sustained the impact of the family past will be on the second or third generation.\(^3\)

So the very silence that is often intended to protect children of survivors has actually extended the trauma to them, and in turn, to us the 3Gs. How does this work? Trauma is largely transmitted far more through silence than through words and stories. Children and grandchildren of Survivors can sense the gaps in the stories that are told and need to fill these in. When the information is lacking, they will create fantasies and fears to fill the gaps. Silence is more damaging to descendants no matter what the intention.

There can be many damaging effects of the trauma. Of course, not every descendant will experience all of them, and some may not experience any at all. Most of us will experience at least one of the effects, which, as Rosenthal has described, can include, “…blocking out information about the family past, fear of extermination, separation anxiety, guilt feelings, impeded separation-individuation process, and acting out the past in fantasies and psychosomatic symptoms…”\(^4\) Specific reactions in 3Gs can include “…withdrawing from the horror depicted in survivors’ narrations of persecution and killing, failing to grasp the full meaning of certain details of the experience, or even repeatedly forgetting the information that has been communicated to them…”\(^5\) Descendants can also feel a “general anxiety toward [the] extra-familial and non-Jewish world…”\(^6\) I certainly identify with some of these. To give a specific example though, I used to think that there was something wrong with me because although I feel grief around my Oma’s and Opa’s experiences, no matter how many times I am given the particular details, I can never remember them. Now I understand that this is an experience shared by many 3Gs. Apart from this particular forgetfulness, I have struggled with the separation-individuation process, and I know that at times, I am fearful of the non-Jewish world.

One factor that can determine how badly traumatised the survivors are, and by extension, how much trauma has been passed on to the 2Gs and 3Gs, is their “working through” process. The survivors were traumatised by their experiences but

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3 Ibid p. 11
4 Ibid p. 8
5 Ibid p. 9
6 Ibid p. 9
then tried to normalize as quickly as possible, sometimes managing to work through the trauma, and sometimes not. They had children who received the trauma of their parents through silence and in turn, also had to try to work through it. This trauma was then passed on to the 3Gs – to me and other grandchildren of survivors and the task for us is and has been to find our own way to work through it. Traditionally, the way to work through the trauma of the Holocaust in the Jewish community has been through narrative. We are all encouraged to tell our stories, to tell our grandparents’ stories as the source of the trauma. Many of us also go into the caring professions, as if by ‘fixing’ others, we can fix ourselves too, and prove that we are worthy of life in our community’s eyes. Some of us go into Holocaust studies to try to understand what happened, but as far as I’m concerned, there can only be understanding of the facts at an intellectual level which does not satisfy the emotional need.

When I was at university, I did my Honours thesis on “Public Reactions to Schindler’s List”, and my Masters thesis focused on traumatic memory and oral testimony. I have worked for the Sydney Jewish Museum, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, the Victorian Courage to Care travelling exhibition, the National Library of Australia, Monash University, and Limerick City Library. In each of my roles, in some way or other, I facilitated the telling of survivors’ stories and limited my own voice. But I don’t believe that the way forward, the way to move beyond trauma into an identity no longer based on grief, is achievable merely by repeating other people’s stories no matter how precious those people or their memories are to us. We each need to find our own voices. My grandparents are among the fortunate group of Jewish people who survived the Holocaust. They used their survival to remember those who perished, to raise a family, and to live the best lives they could. My mother has used her life to honour her parents by living the best way she could, raising her own family along the way. But I am greedy and I want more than that. I don’t want to live with the purpose of being someone else’s memorial candle.

And I think it is this need that kept me moving from Melbourne to Sydney, to Washington D.C., and to study at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. And it was at Yad Vashem that I met the Artist who through his work would help me look at the
Holocaust, my family’s trauma and my own trauma from a new and perhaps un-traumatised perspective. Incidentally this man also became my husband.

One of the first things I noticed about Thomas Delohery was his Art. He creates mixed-media pieces to depict aspects of the Holocaust using Indian Ink, Watercolours and Oil Pastels on Paper. The works are mostly done in vibrant colours and this was and is a very different approach to the Holocaust from what I had ever seen before. When I look at his work, I feel the power of his images but without the pain that comes with looking at photographs associated with the Holocaust. Any time I look at black and white photos of the Shoah in books or at museums, I feel as if I'm looking through a family photo album of dead relatives - it's painful, and I have no distance from it. Tom, on the other hand, feels that the black and white photographic images allow most people to detach from the subject as something from the distant past and irrelevant to their lives today. Tom’s work with its vibrant colours gives me a filter through which I am able to look at the Shoah from an artistic and intellectual perspective. There is no pain for me in these images rather, a positive and powerful connection. And by contrast, Tom’s intention in using colour is to draw people in – where he feels they are alienated by black and white images, they will relate more readily to colour and feel it more relevant to their lives.

As an Irish Artist of Catholic descent with no family connection to the Holocaust, Tom responds extremely differently to the way I do. Where I respond with verbal narrative, he responds through visual narrative - creating pieces of Art. For those of you who have already seen Tom’s work (he’s one of the Artists exhibiting at this conference), you would know that his pieces are about 2ft x 3ft in their frames but they didn’t start out that way. When Tom began his depictions of the Holocaust in 1997, they were enormous pieces – oils on canvas – 6ft x 10ft in dimension. These smaller pieces were originally conceived as working visual ideas – plans for the larger ones. Instead, Tom found that the power was being lost in the larger canvases where the smaller ones were retaining their power, and so they became the medium in which Tom worked.

Tom takes an intellectual approach to his work. He can sometimes be inspired by a word or phrase written by someone such as Primo Levi, or it could be a particular
image that provides inspiration, but he will always anchor that into factual research so that his depictions are based on the facts of the events. In terms of style, Tom has developed his own powerful and unique style, but he has been influenced in his approach by other Artists such as Chaim Soutine, who was himself a Jewish man on the run from the Nazis during the Holocaust, and Harry Clarke, an Irish Artist who is known for his stained glass depictions of fairy tales and fantasy. Another Irish-born Artist, Francis Bacon’s views on painting have also been hugely influential on Tom. The brutality of the fact, risk-taking and how much one should push a piece were all factors in Bacon’s work and helped Tom make the transition from purely representational work to the suggestive and expressive work he creates now. Having said this, Tom also has an intuitive approach – he once told me that he senses the image rather than seeing it, and this is what he depicts on the paper.

Interestingly, although Tom has always asserted that his approach is somewhat detached due to his family not having had any direct involvement in the Holocaust, I question that. Tom has suffered from terrible nightmares over the last few years and I can’t help but wonder if this is because he has tuned in to a trauma and absorbed some of it. We know that there is such a thing as vicarious traumatisation which happens to people who are exposed to the details of other people’s traumas. I have to wonder whether this is what is happening to Tom – an Artist’s response to collective suffering?

Tom’s approach to his work has given me new insights in terms of the way I am able to view aspects of the Holocaust, as I mentioned previously. But apart from that, it has given me a new platform from which to speak and work. Ever since I moved to Ireland and married Tom in 2006, I have been involved in the administrative and PR side of Tom’s work – typing his Artist Statements, sending press releases, and driving Tom and his work to various venues. But I became involved in Tom’s work in a different way in 2007 when he had an exhibition in Co. Meath, Ireland. He invited me to open this show. It was a great opportunity for me to bring my thoughts on his work and on my own personal history to artists, journalists, critics, students, and others who attended his show. And there was a freedom in presenting to that audience because it wasn’t a Jewish audience, and I felt that their expectations of me were not so bound up with telling my grandparents’ stories. As it happened, I did focus quite strongly on
that narrative but in my final comments, I was able to break free of that and voice my
own thoughts.

Later on in the year, Tom took a couple of exhibitions to Canada. He spoke to
students about the process of creating art about the Holocaust, and I was asked to
address the same group. In this context, I was able to bring the historical and personal
context in talking about my family’s experiences and what it was like for me as a
young Jewish woman whose family had undergone such trauma. It was the first time
that I had been asked not to merely relate the stories of those who have come before
me but to talk about my own journey.

I have been living in Ireland for nearly three years now. It is a Catholic country
although the Church and State are now officially separated. Tom and I live in
Limerick City, which has had no Jewish community to speak of since the Pogrom of
1904. And yet, it has taken this time of being physically removed from the Jewish
community that I have been able to step outside the expectations of the community
and perhaps those of my own family to even think about taking a different approach
to my identity. In fact, I don’t think it was until I moved away that I even realised how
entrenched my identity is with the intergenerational grief caused by the Holocaust.