

Life and Living in the Shadow of the Dead Mother:
Making Psychoanalytic Meaning from Covid 19

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It was January 17, 2020. The weatherman had predicted an unexpectedly sunny, relatively warm day, so I decided to walk to my office. It was a new space for me, and I savored every second of the journey, taking special notice of my name plate on the exterior wall beside the door. After more than ten years of practicing in agencies, group practices, and a patchwork of sublets, I'd just finished decorating my very own waiting room and therapy space. I remember walking home that day just a little more joyfully than usual, basking in a delicious sense of delight and accomplishment. My children were at school and going to a friend's house afterward for a playdate. My husband and I would take our dog for a walk in the neighborhood and chat about our day.

It was February 17, 2020, a full month later. It had been a grey day, busy and full. My husband and I were sitting on the couch in our family room while we let the kids play Fortnite in the basement playroom. They were thrilled for the usually forbidden luxury; on this particular evening, my husband had wanted privacy. He'd heard about a virus in China and felt it was important that we watch the news. It was that night that we saw so many families, buildings and buildings of people, in Wuhan, in lockdown, desperately quarantining from what seemed to be deadly consequences of a novel virus--the Coronavirus. Neither my husband nor I spoke; we were silent with sadness, fear, and a sense of looming anticipation.

And then, it was March 17, 2020. Another month had passed. Once more, it was a grey and frigidly cold day. I was supposed to be on a plane to sunny Las Vegas with my adventurous, smiling children, on our way to explore the Grand Canyon, but instead I was frantically planning my transition to online therapy and scrambling to decipher the routines of homeschool while my

children, once again, were reluctantly and with a bit of desperation, permitted a safe distraction in the basement with their video games. This was the day our world shut down. Our own lockdown had begun. What I remember the most was the silence. No traffic, no trains, no airplanes, no children playing outside...no people at all. It was an alarming, almost deadening silence.

An unexpected, eerie change in my life was the near absence of laundry. With nowhere to go, the kids wore the same pajama pants and t-shirt day after day. My husband and I simply changed shirts, according to our Zoom responsibilities. The traditional staples that mark time had suddenly vanished. As I've heard more than a few times from more than a few people, in 2020 there was no groundhog day, it was rather a groundhog year. The news was similar day in, day out. Covid. Deaths. Political unrest. Storms and fires. Police brutality. Civil unrest. It all felt like too much. An endless kind of too much that started to all blur together. Frank Lachmann (2008) references Elissa Marder's book "Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity", and seems to uncannily portend, "To protect ourselves and ward off the pernicious effect of the shock experiences of everyday life, we interpose filters between our experience and our surround. But, the filters that we establish, such as dissociation and withdrawal, diminish affective experiences and expressive communication. These filters can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and unreality...our sense of others and of ourselves is dulled" (p. 187). Was I withdrawing? Or dissociating? Life certainly had become tinged with a sense of unreality, even covered by a blanket of dullness like a cold, dampening snow.

The relationships I'd had with my patients were now lessened to a Zoom box from a computer screen in the corner of my son's bedroom. Was this real? Had life become a kind of "dead mother", as described by André Green (1996)? Would I become a "dead mother-therapist", "brutally transforming a...source of vitality...into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate"? I fought against such a trajectory in part with the support of a peer group through the American Psychoanalytic Association. We met weekly, discussing the state of the world, our practices, and our feelings about it all. We'd talked about Richard Geist's (2008) idea of "becoming part of the water" (p. 134) in terms of seeking empathic immersion and connectedness in therapy, and how in some ways, and some days, it felt like we might just drown right along with our patients, but in others, we felt more deeply connected in our therapeutic relationships than ever, sharing in a difficult but gravely authentic kind of twinship experience. We were also, in fact, in the "water" with one another, mourning the loss of what once was together, while holding each other afloat, all at the same time.

From the safety and discomfort of my new home office, I was meeting with my patients in their own less-than-ideal spaces--their own home offices, their bedroom closets, even in their minivans and cars. They would be wherever they could find real privacy and a sense of safety to put down their filters, and to feel themselves beyond the dullness of withdrawal and dissociation that Lachmann and Marder described. Many of them were struggling, some carrying "the colours of mourning: black or white. Black as in severe depression, or blank as in states of emptiness..." (Green, 1996, p. 146). Seemingly frozen with heavy despair, falling asleep in sessions, I began to wonder if these patients were experiencing what Green conceptualized as "psychical holes" (p. 146). Had the loss of vitality of life and living, a sense of a consequential

emptiness, a deadening silence been a traumatic enactment for these patients? Was the Covid catastrophe, and all that came along with it, a reminder, a re-experiencing of an earlier “love lost at one blow”, “without any warning signal”? (p. 146). Could it be tinged with the affective ghosts (Bromberg, 2003) of a past catastrophe, one that left their youngest selves with a “disillusionment”, a “loss of meaning”, unable to explain what happened, attempting “in vain to repair...”, leaving them to profoundly and tragically “feel the measure of his(/their) impotence”? (Green, 1996, p. 150). Had my own move online, despite the potential for a forward edge twinship experience, replicated a loss and longing for “her smell, her skin, her look and the thousand other components that ‘make up’ the mother(/therapist)?” (p.148). Would the seemingly endless nature of Covid awaken the sense that “there is no end to the dead mother’s dying, and that it holds him(/them) prisoner?” (p. 153). How might I liberate my patients--and myself--from such a sense of “captivity”? (p. 153).

In short, I did the only thing I knew how: I kept living, loving and creating. With intention. My family and I made an impromptu night at the beach with some sand in our backyard. We hung up lights outside and had camp outs. We pretended to travel to new lands, tasting Puerto Rican delicacies and listening to cultural music. And for myself, I followed Freud’s advice to Ferenczi (Rolfe, 1918) and began psychoanalytic education.

It’s now February 17, 2021. Almost one year later. It’s still quiet outside, but it’s a soft kind of quiet, peaceful, even. My kids are downstairs, again playing Fortnite, this time with their friends. I’ve adjusted to their transition to a mostly virtual life, and have been able to even find delight in the fact that they’ve found a way to keep their connections to the kids that matter to

them. I mourn the loss of the touch of my friends and extended family, but I'm also appreciative of the technology that allows me to keep my own connections and even make new ones! I've also found a deep fulfillment in the stillness of time, the striving toward life and living, and the richness of psychoanalytic thought. Life and living in the shadow of the dead mother has been a painful and heavy burden, but the essence of psychoanalysis and the felt presence (Geist, 2008, p. 134) of my analytic peers and ancestors has been the antidote that's made all the difference.

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