

## Massive Shared Trauma and “Hot” Places

---

\*Vamik D. Volkan, M. D.

Director, CSMHI, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

\*\*For the Lucy Daniels Foundation Conference

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

November 1-4, 2001

---

The events of September 11, 2001 have turned our attention to terrorism, religious and ethnic identity issues, and mourning over loss. A memorial service took place on October 28 at the former site of the World Trade Center, now called “Ground Zero,” in New York. It was attended by performers and politicians, but it was chiefly for those who had lost someone when the tragedy occurred at the Twin Towers. During this ceremony, the family members of WTC victims were given wooden urns containing dust, “ashes,” from the wreckage site. The meaning of the urns was clear, as the ashes symbolically, if not literally, represented the people who had perished. The family members would have a “piece” of their loved ones. Through these they would psychologically link themselves to the people they had lost.

We do not yet have stories of what the family members have done with their urns. I am sure that in time we will hear tales of where the urns were placed and how people reacted to them. I suspect that these urns will evolve into what I call “linking objects.” During yesterday’s presentation, I spoke of Charlie, the dog that functioned as a linking object for Dali. A linking object is a place where the mental representation of a lost object, psychologically speaking, meets with the corresponding representation of the mourner. When a loved one dies, an adult goes through various phases of mourning, which can be divided into two categories (Pollock, 1989; Volkan, 1981): (1) the *initial* mourning, and (2) the work of mourning. The *initial* mourning includes responses such as denial, shock,

bargaining, pain, and anger, which eventually lead to the beginning of an emotional “knowledge” that the deceased is gone forever. Under normal circumstances, the initial mourning process lasts for about three or four months. Before it is completed, however, the “work of mourning” begins (Freud, 1917). This second category of mourning involves a slow process of revisiting, reviewing, and transforming the mourner’s emotional investment in the image of the lost object. In other words, the work of mourning refers to an internal encounter between the images of the lost object and the corresponding self-images of the mourner. There are three major avenues (or a combination of them) that the work of mourning can follow: “normal” mourning, depression (melancholia), or perennial mourning.

**SLIDE 1**

Three major avenues of the “work of mourning:”

1. “Normal” mourning
2. Depression (melancholia)
3. Perennial mourning

1. “Normal” mourning: After the initial acute grief, the mourner examines a host of different images of the deceased. Slowly, within a year or so, he or she tames the influence of these images on his or her self-representation. The mourner no longer utilizes these images as if they would still respond to his or her wishes or perform certain tasks for the mourner. Tähkä (1993) states that the images of the lost object eventually become “futureless.” The “normal” mourning comes to a practical end after the mourner

experiences the anniversaries of meaningful events without the deceased (or lost person or thing). Only during certain occasions, such as anniversaries of the death, religious holidays, weddings, or other funerals, do the mental images of the deceased become temporarily “hot” again. A significant aspect of the “normal” mourning process is the mourner’s selective and unconscious identification with certain enriching functions of the lost object. This, of course, influences the mourner’s existing self-representation and modifies his or her sense of identity and ego functions to a certain degree. A young man who had been a rather irresponsible person before the loss of his father, for example, can become a serious businessman like the deceased. After “normal” mourning—a painful process—we enrich ourselves. In a sense, “loss” is balanced with “gain” and changes occur in our identities and ego functions.

2. Depression (melancholia): If an adult had a complicated and ambivalent (love or hate) relationship with the now deceased, he or she ends up identifying *totally* (Ritvo and Solnit, 1958) with the mental representation of the lost object. In simple terms, we can say that the mourner makes “unhealthy, not enriching” identifications with the images of the deceased, who was both loved and hated. The struggle that the mourner had with the one who is lost now becomes an internal struggle between him or her and the mental representation of the deceased. Such a mourner’s internal world becomes a battleground. The mourner wants, unconsciously, to destroy (hate) the lost object’s representation and feels guilty. At the same time, the mourner feels obliged to hold onto (love) it because he or she still feels dependent on the representation of the lost object, as if it still has a “future.” The mourner experiences depression (melancholia) and may even become suicidal due to the guilt and self-punishment that arise from his or her wish

to destroy the mental representation of the lost object. He or she also feels exhausted and withdrawn from the external world because of the constant inner struggle between these competing processes.

We have known about the two avenues above since Freud's (1917) work, *Mourning and Melancholia*. A third avenue has been much less studied and was the arena of my research during the 1970s and 1980s (Volkan, 1981; Volkan and Zintl, 1993). In this presentation I will concentrate on this third avenue, perennial mourning.

3. Perennial mourning: Some individuals are involved in psychological processes that lead them to postpone completion of their "normal" mourning process or prevent them from evolving melancholia. In a sense, these individuals put the deceased person's mental representation in an envelope (in the old days, we technically called such an envelope an *introject*) and carry this envelope in their minds. They have an illusion that the deceased's images in this envelope can be brought back to life. However, if the envelope is never opened, the deceased stays "dead." An introject is an "object-image" that strives to be assimilated into the mourner's self-representation. This assimilation (identification) does not actually occur, but the introject remains as a specific object-image that constantly relates to and stimulates the mourner's corresponding self-image. I have seen some individuals who actually conduct conversations with their introjects as they drive to work, for example. Even when it appears on the surface as if such individuals suffer from hallucinations or delusions, in fact they are not suffering from a full-blown psychosis; they are simply perennial mourners.

It is the adult perennial mourners who chronically utilize linking objects. A linking object is a tangible, externalized version of the introject, a mental meeting point

between the mental representation of the deceased and the corresponding self-image of the mourner. When I began my research on complex mourning processes, I noted that many individuals who suffered from complications of losing someone “symbolize certain objects which belonged to the dead one,” and how “through this process, they are able to control a tie with him” (Volkan, 1970, p. 242). There were other clinicians who had also briefly mentioned such objects, but none of us had studied their meanings carefully.

These objects intrigued me. One of my patients would isolate himself in a room with a photograph of his dead father and look at it closely until he began to feel that his father was coming back to life toward him through the frame. Another patient was attached to the clothing of his brother, who had been shot and killed in a holdup, for eight years. He was obsessed with the idea that he would grow to a point where these garments would fit him. Still another patient kept his deceased father’s dirty handkerchief and treated it as if it were the most important thing on earth.

In a 1972 publication, I coined the term “linking objects” to describe these symbolic items and began to examine them descriptively and theoretically. A wide variety of items could be described as linking objects. I have seen the following used as such.

## **SLIDE 2**

### **Types of Linking Objects (1): Personal possession of the deceased**

One kind of linking object is a personal possession of the deceased, often something he or she used routinely or wore on his or her person, like a watch. Usually the mourner chooses an item that requires repairs. For example, if a watch is chosen, it is most likely broken. The mourner becomes preoccupied with fixing it, but he or she never

finds the time to have the watch repaired. It stays in a state of limbo, if you will, between being repaired and being broken.

### SLIDE 3

#### **Types of Linking Objects (2): Gift or symbolic farewell note**

Another type of linking object is a gift or a symbolic farewell note to the mourner from the deceased before his or her death, such as something a husband gave his wife before perishing in an accident, or a letter from a war zone written by a soldier before he is killed

### SLIDE 4

#### **Types of Linking Objects (3): Something the deceased used to extend his/her senses or body functions**

Also seen is something the deceased used to extend his or her senses or bodily functions, such as a camera (an extension of seeing). Again, the mourner has a tendency to choose a broken camera rather than an operating one as a linking object.

### SLIDE 5

#### **Types of Linking Objects (4): Realistic or symbolic representation of the deceased**

A mourner often chooses a realistic representation of the deceased, the simplest being a photograph. A symbolic representation might be used instead, such as an identification bracelet

#### SLIDE 6

##### **Types of Linking Objects (5): “Last-minute object”**

Some mourners become attached to an object that was at hand when the mourner first learned of the death or saw the deceased’s body — what could be considered a “last minute object.” For example, a patient was about to play a stack of his favorite records when the phone rang with the news that his half-brother had drowned. The records became his “last minute objects.” Telegrams received by relatives from the military informing them of the death of a son or husband also serves as “last minute objects.”

#### SLIDE 7

##### **Types of Linking Objects (6): *Created linking objects***

Finally, mourners may also *create* linking objects that did not exist before the loss. For example, the mourner paints his or her memories of the deceased and the painting becomes a linking object.

As you can guess, following the theme of this conference I will focus on *created* linking objects, especially those that are shared by many after a massive trauma in which members of a society or large-group experience losses which they cannot easily mourn. Let me begin with some more general remarks. I also observed in my patients what I call *linking phenomena*: sensations, songs, and behavior patterns that perpetuate the possibility of contact between the mourner and the one he or she mourns, without reference to anything tangible. One example of linking phenomena involves a young woman whose father had committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. While attending her father's funeral, the young woman stood in the rain. The song "Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head" came into her mind during the funeral, and this song functioned as her linking phenomenon for years.

Slowly, I came to understand that the linking object is more than a simple symbol. A symbol is something that represents something else. Linking objects, on the other hand, are protosymbols (Werner and Kaplan, 1963) or more often an amalgamation of symbols and protosymbols. In other words, for mourners, linking objects essentially become what they represent. Unconsciously these linking objects, or protosymbols, are an "actual" meeting place between the mourner and the dead.

When I wrote a great deal about linking objects in the 1980s, I naturally focused on their pathological aspects. After all, I was observing them among patients experiencing complicated mourning. Over time I became aware of the "progressive" or beneficial aspects of these items. While linking objects are utilized to postpone and freeze the mourning process, they can also be employed to initiate future mourning.

When circumstances are right, the mourner may go back, if you will, to his or her linking object, internalize its function, and begin his or her mourning process as if the loss had just happened.

My wife Betty, who is here with us today, is a World War II orphan. Her father died while fighting in Italy when she was 8 months old. Some years ago the American World War II Orphans Networks was created through the efforts of individuals. I have been attending their annual meetings over the past six years or so, and have gotten to know over 300 orphans, some of them closely. During these meetings, the orphans speak of their stories and searches for their parents openly. I noted that those orphans who had linking object generally fared better. Those who did not have linking objects attempted to create them. The orphans' regular meetings supported their utilization of actual or created linking objects to develop more cohesive images of their dead parents. Most of them were too small to have actual memories of those they lost, and some were born after their parent's death. But, only after creating a more cohesive mental representation of their parent could these individuals initiate an adult mourning process, 50 years after World War II. This was possible through the utilization of the actual or created linking objects.

Now that I have described how individuals utilize linking objects or phenomena, I will focus on shared linking objects and related large-group identity.

\* \* \*

There are already discussions in public and the media regarding what to do with the "Ground Zero" area of New York. Should part of it be left as a memorial? Should

they create the images of the Twin Towers with beams of light from the ground to the sky?

Psychological responses to loss become complicated after a deliberately caused massive trauma. The members of the affected group may feel helpless, humiliated, ashamed, and unable to mourn and express their own aggression or manifest assertive behavior. After September 11, American has so far shown, paraphrasing Heinz Hartmann, an “average expectable regression.” We have rallied around the leader, identified with each other, used flags as protosymbols, and become involved in more intense “us” and “them” psychology. But, we have not lost our individuality, and we have not shown malignant “purification rituals,” except in some isolated cases. In one case, a man was killed because, to the killer’s mind, he looked Arabic. Furthermore, we did not stay passive. We began to bomb Afghanistan, which will induce psychological reactions in us – and of course in the people of Afghanistan. But, we are still helpless in finding the answer to the terrorist attack. I am sure that sometime in the future we will build a monument to September 11.

Monuments, usually made out of marble or steel, are like boxes in which the unfinished psychological processes of an affected group are kept locked up. In this sense, they are a kind of shared linking object. Like an individual’s linking object, they can either postpone or become instruments for the work of mourning. Some monuments are works of art. But appreciation of them as art forms takes time; they have to stop being “hot” (emotionally speaking) before their beauty can be appreciated. Also, some monuments have a “change function” according to what goes on within the large-group whose members have been affected by the shared massive trauma and their descendants.

New hostilities with the old or new enemy can make such monuments “hot” again.

Otherwise, a year or even centuries can pass before previously “hot” places cool off, and we remember them in some way during the anniversaries of events.

During the siege of Tskhinvali, the capitol of South Ossetia, by Georgian forces in 1991-2, three young South Ossetian combatants died at the same time. They were buried in the schoolyard of High School #5, as the Georgians had captured and were occupying the cemetery. One of the victims had attended this school, and it was thought to be a safe place to bury them. Then, more and more dead defenders were buried there, including 30 who were apparently killed on the same day. Now the graves there number more than 100. No natural death cases were buried in the schoolyard except a few from a shelter for the elderly. During the first month of the siege, these elderly were cold and hungry, so they made coffins for their friends and themselves (they became heroes in a different sense). Burials of those who had participated in the conflict continued in the schoolyard after the war.

The yard slowly became a holy place. First, grieving relatives visited the graves, and then erected a chapel and statue called the Crying Father. In South Ossetian culture, fathers do not usually cry, but when they do their tears reflect extreme, ceaseless pain. An iron fence separates the cemetery from the rest of the schoolyard, but the statue is visible over the fence. Children can look out over the cemetery from all three floors of the school. Ceremonies are held there on anniversaries and religious holidays, and the school children would read poems on revenge and aggression. As years passed, the poems became tamer, and the focus moved from aggression to the subject of the statue. The schoolyard cemetery is still a very hot location. It serves as a daily reminder of the

war to the children, and promotes the transgenerational transmission of the hatred and trauma of the war.

I cannot show you a picture of the cemetery and statue, because when my team members and Georgian participants visited the site, angry and armed South Ossetians surrounded us. Though they wore civilian clothes, they indicated that they were security forces, and that we, strangers, were contaminating their holy place. They took our cameras, and we negotiated our way out. It was clear that the Crying Father and the cemetery had become symbols of South Ossetians' ethnic identity.

Two years after my visit to the cemetery, I met with South Ossetians at a meeting in Tbilisi. They confirmed that this place had become a symbol of their shared identity. They were also aware, however, that it was “poisoning” the school children who had to pass it every day, by keeping their feelings of enmity toward Georgians alive. Suggestions of moving the cemetery or moving the school met with opposition and lack of funds. They were not ready to end their sense of victimization that was symbolized by the cemetery and its statue. Victimization has become a part of their shared identity, and it would be difficult to modify it with little struggle.