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### 3. Touched by the Past in the Present

Our history is encoded in our body just as the rings of a tree encode the life story of that tree, including its genetic inheritance and the atmospheric conditions that were present from year to year (Stromsted in Johnson & Grand, 1998: 157).

War and peace are on my mind. In particular, the effects of war and peace on our embodiment and our intergenerational connections. We have not long returned from Norway, paying respects to my grandfather who is buried there. I wanted to visit to touch the earth and breathe the air at the final resting place of his remains. He was an airman in Bomber Command in the Pathfinder division of the UK's Royal Air Force, killed towards the end of the Second World War. He and his friends were shot down whilst bombing a U-boat base on the Oslo fjord. He's been dead for 68 years, yet his missing presence has loomed large in the life of my family. Like a heavy cloud with no rain.

Since making this voyage, the clouds have parted. I am changed by the experiences of being in Norway - an earth-touching experience indeed - and I am reminded afresh of the extreme futility of war. Meditating early this evening I find that feelings of loving kindness flow spontaneously for the German soldiers who shot down the plane of my grandfather. Crouching in walled defences as they man their guns. May they be well and happy. They are focused and shouting instructions to one another urgently, breathlessly, in German. May they have survived and lived long and happy lives. They shoot the plane, which starts its long, slow, spiralling, fiery descent to earth. The soldiers are jubilant, congratulating one another momentarily before regaining concentration. May they be alive now, in peaceful retirement. The 'plane explodes in a ball of fire.

My grandfather had a 'safe' job in Bristol; he worked in what was known here as a 'reserved occupation', so consequently wasn't sent to war. My grandfather's father-in-law, my great-grandfather, was killed by a stray bullet whilst he was out for an afternoon stroll in north

Bristol. A freak moment in the first day raid of the Battle of Britain in Bristol and the bombing of the Bristol Aeroplane Company. Upset by and indignant about his father-in-law's death, my grandfather joined up and left his safe job behind.

I picture him hunched in his turret as a rear gunner. I dare not see what he saw or feel the fear he felt. I dare not know the suffering he caused. By all accounts a quiet and sensitive man in temperament (bar the odd bout of indignation) I am ashamed to admit that I am relieved he never came home. How could eyes that witnessed the blanket bombing of Dresden and hands that helped to create that towering inferno ever rest easy at night?

Operations reports written by his pilot on the first night of the Dresden bombing say it all: "after the first five minutes he (the controller) said bombing was getting a bit wild...and ordered no more flares". How would a sensitive-hearted man have returned to everyday life, way before the support given nowadays to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder? I remember my Nana, my grandfather's wife, with love and a great fondness. How she remembered her lost love. I remember how her slightly brittle exterior was softened by the presence of children, animals, and the mention of her lost love. Her eyes then twinkled like a young girl again, perhaps from an age of greater innocence and ease. As I leave the cemetery in Tonsberg in Norway I feel the eruption of her grief and loss in my heart. Grief which has been frozen reaches boiling point in a matter of shocking seconds.

I imagine how it would be to lose my own love, in the present day. I sense the ghastly shock in reading the words 'missing, presumed dead' and 'killed in action' scribbled hastily in grey pencil on rough cream paper. Words urgent to communicate themselves housed in a scruffy little envelope which has journeyed furiously from the east to the west coast of England. I picture those words, and feel the waiting, longing, and hope shattering to despair, echoing a thousand-fold in the suffering of friends, family, neighbors all around: nearly everyone losing somebody. I sense the moment when the truth reveals itself: he's dead, he's gone, he's not coming home.

A line from Rupert Brooke's poem 'The Soldier' edges its way into my consciousness and suddenly makes perfect sense: 'there's some corner of a foreign field that is forever England' (Brooke, 2010). This cemetery in this small Norwegian town is one of those corners. I realise I have made the trip that my Nana could never make. My body tells me that a task is somehow complete.

I feel huge gratitude. To Jan, the kindly Norwegian who told me the story of his war. How he climbed onto the roof of his house with his friends to wave at the 'armada' of aeroplanes that night, journeying up the Oslo fjord: 73 Lancaster bombers and 12 Mosquito

planes. How the town of Horten, his hometown, home of the U-boat base, was lit up by the pathfinder bombers - my grandfather's 'plane amongst those - which made the city "like daylight" in Jan's words. The excitement of war through a child's eyes.

To the Norwegian journalist, his or her name unknown, who took the secret photos of the airmens' burial and crash site. He was determined to send photos to the relatives of the airmen, to show that they had had a proper ending and to share the story of the end of their lives. His courage in risking his life in capturing those secret images, camera tucked under his coat. To Pastor Knutzen who buried the airmen, insisting they had prayers in their own language, and years later offering friendship to my Dad in the midst of his grief.

I am grateful to friends from Germany. How I can now hear their voices and feel their presence without feeling childhood fear. Fear bred from frozen grief and archaic war films and myths about war heroes, winners and losers, and, in Pablo Neruda's words from his poem 'Keeping Quiet': 'victories without survivors' (Neruda, 1999). Since feeling the eruption of grief and loss in my heart - is this my grief? My loss? My Nana's grief? My father's? Or am I tapping into the universally experience of loss? Most likely all of the above. I have been aware of a thawing process within. I realise that I thought Tonsberg would be a place frozen in time. Time stopped on that icy, moon-lit February night in 1945. What a relief to walk along the waterfront, laugh with locals, wander about and see that Tonsberg is alive and well and that it's the year 2012.

My heart has been softened and strengthened by my funereal, liberating trip up the Oslo fjord. I feel more alive and strangely more relaxed than I've allowed myself to feel. I've fallen a little bit more in love with life, despites its design faults, or perhaps my human design faults. I feel more acutely the times when my heart clamps shut. Why does that heart-closing hurt so much, I ask myself with a new voice, puzzled. In those moments when heart-closing happens I realise that I am missing, presumed dead.

I am reminded afresh of the importance of inviting our clients to recognise when they are being touched by their ancestral legacy (see Ancelin Schützenberger, 1998). Honoring the "tying up" up of loose ends of work which are ancestors were unable or disinclined to complete as we each continue to weave the tapestry of our own lives, and its interweaving with those around us; friends and foe. Having been so recently touched by the past in this way myself, I am humbled by the power of the human body to heal itself, if we will just listen to its murmuring and prompts ("for heaven's sake, buy that ferry ticket to Norway!") I am aware, too, of the power of transformation that comes in and through the releasing, dissolving,

thawing, discharging - or the particular phenomenon associated with that person's letting go of trauma- and how care-full we need to be in holding that release in our work as therapists.

Most of all the words from Naomi Shihab Nye's 'Kindness' poem roam around in my mind (Shihab Nye, 1998):

. . . Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth. . .

May all beings be well. May all beings be happy. May all beings be free of suffering.

### **References:**

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