

## Portrait of the Absent Dialogue: Rethinking Generational Transmissions

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*'...the major text, work of art, musical composition, the 'news that stays new' (Ezra Pound), asks not only for understanding reception. It demands reaction. We are meant to act 'anew', to translate echoing responses and interpretation into conduct.'*

(George Steiner 1997)

When the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter showed Polaroid photos of New Guinea tribespeople to themselves, they were puzzled. Never having seen a photo before, they could not make the link between the self and the image. As Carpenter explained to them by finger pointing to the nose in the photo and then their nose on their face, they suddenly had a moment of recognition. Some were shocked, ducked their heads, turned away, coming back for another look, time and again.

When I first viewed my mother's Holocaust video testimony, I was also shocked, also turned away many times. Like the tribespeople, it took me some time before I could recognise my mother as the same woman who I knew. I struggled to keep watching and listening. I watched and listened to the mother I thought I knew, but she was telling a story I could not recognize. She was a stranger, I was shocked by what I heard.

I turned away, came back to listen and look again, sometimes months later. The image was *her* face, the voice was *her* voice. I tuned away from her, she was not me, but my reaction was *as if* I was turning away from part of myself. My reaction continued to puzzle me for a very long time.

Some years later, I conducted my personal investigation into the transmission of trauma in Holocaust families. I produced a split-screen video which highlighted my reactions to watching my mother's Holocaust testimony. *'The Many Faces of Trauma'* synchronously captured two faces on the same screen, my mother's in the top left of the screen and mine in the lower right. As I returned to view the video many times I gradually uncovered layers of meaning to our relationship. I

discovered a new meaning to why a picture is worth even more than a thousand words.

Another picture awakened in me yet another dimension of understanding of parent – child relationships in Holocaust families. Around that time, my aunt drew an extraordinary picture (see below). Her self-portrait captured in its stillness the fleeting sensations that I almost grasped, but not quite, as I witnessed my reflections in the video images.

My aunt's drawing captured a part of her, a self fleetingly sensed, not yet really known. My profession had taught me the power of childhood experiences that emerge decades later as part of our identity. Now as I reflected, this drawing spoke of a wordless self, a merger between parent and child. To pry open this intimate fusion opens up a new level of intimate uncharted terrain.

Further reflection on Anne's drawing increased my awareness of the reasons for my previously puzzling reaction to my mother's video testimony. In my head I had known for some time that for some children the task of emotional separation from a parent may become a life-long task. I was also aware how emotional boundaries naturally emerge from those intimate rhythms when emotions are exchanged in fleeting to-and-fro glances, words of comfort or reproach, sensitive hugs or even loving smacks that parents and children exchange daily from the nursery onwards. These boundaries are co-created as matters of the heart and mind.

We revisit such emotionally based boundaries often, sometimes to renegotiate them, for example when family share the joys of a birth or a marriage; sadness and shock of illness or death; or anniversary and commemoration events. We often emerge from such moments of emotional upheaval, experiences we define as life transitions, feeling stressful precisely because our emotional boundaries are being reshaped.

Like all families, Holocaust families struggle to define these intimate familial boundaries: between mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, sisters and brothers. But Holocaust families imbue these boundaries with extra barriers due to the legacy of extreme trauma. Such trauma often resulted in a process that froze all emotional experience in the service of survival, 'emotional meltdown'. To survive demanded that meltdown.

The survivor's awareness was focused in the service of survival: naturally their emotions, emotional reactions, emotional words, emotional relating

all these faculties became paralyzed, or, at best, emotional rhythms were often reduced to muted, fleeting body language. Who can decode those fleeting gestures, those glances that express a rainbow of emotions.

For me, watching the video of my mother's testimony recreated critical fleeting moments. I was forced to avert my gaze at times when my mother's eyes had a certain familiar but, for me, unbearable look. What was going on I wondered? Much later, I discovered why such moments were unbearable, why I turned my gaze away from her image. I could not survive watching those moments in her testimony, hearing her eyes screaming, pleading.

Pictures of the face - drawn, stills or video – can capture those emotional 'sounds' (screams and wailing) beyond words – visceral rhythms that resonate with ferocity. Where do they arise? For me, that sound arises from my nursery days, a distant past alive in the present. I assume that past, my exiled self in the background, is trying to connect, signalling from my 'Void'.

I have used the term 'exiled self' previously to locate the experience where the infant is so totally isolated from the rhythm of care that she can no longer make use of care. I now wish to extend this notion to use the term 'Void' to articulate a zone in the mind, or a state of mind characterized by absolute absence. This is beyond emptiness, 'without content'. The legacy of massive trauma creates this Void beyond the ordinary void which still retains a meaning, a void relative to something else that has content, that is not void. In contrast, for the infant, Void is where the exiled self resides. It is Absolute, nothingness for eternity for the infant. And if not recognized, attended to and engaged with, this Void has the potential to persist into adulthood with dire consequences for the individual.

Some images that capture experiences arising from this Void I believe can move so intolerable as to force a viewer to avert her gaze. I believe that such fleeting reactions occur when we bear witness to Holocaust testimonies that capture the complex emptiness, the Void. Those moments demand reflection, a search for connections, a response: to find meaning, interpret and translate the layered meaning of the image into words.

No wonder artists often enter into isolation, withdrawing from the familiar, to return to that mysterious timespace zone of creative solitude. There they get down deep to connect with their exiled self. There they

seek to connect, again and again, seeking self-recognition 'anew'. Once in a while that deepest link finds self-expression.

Anne, the artist, transformed her life-long experience of her exiled self. In the Void she confronted moments from her past, now to see for the first time her face-to-face encounter from a previously hidden past. Through that moment of intense self-reflection she witnessed a unique sight, spanning at once three generations. Her self was born through the portrait. That birth of a new visual dialogue embraced her complete being. That dialogue echoes and reverberates with all the pain of a rebirth. I return to take a closer look at that moment. Anne explains:

*'This drawing was done on the last day of our intensive weekend workshop, our 'Retreat' in December 2001...[with the] theme 'The relevance of our childhood experiences to the modern world and our lives today.'*

Why did Anne, my aunt, search for years to make this deep contact, to struggle to express her exiled self? How did she eventually achieve that connection with fragments of herself, those parts that eluded her for over 60 years?

Transcending a lifetime bounded by the time - place of the senses, Anne's moment arrived to re-enter her Void, the space she knew she'd one day come to know. The time arrived to zero in on the essence of the Void. She connected. There she dialogued with her absence. Then she drew her absent dialogue.

*'As I sat on the bed, my childhood photo in front of me, I slowly began to draw.*

*I drew the child face first, very gently as if caressing her face with my pencil. The eyes had to be right, the hair had to be right, the ribbons perfect (my mother made sure of it when she put them in), the mouth closed (as per the photographer's instructions).'*

CHILD SURVIVOR

Anne Handelman  
Braun 01



To George with memories of Conference Auci

Anne's drawing mirrors her doubly charged self, a self with a familial intimacy that closer than ordinary intimacy, she is fused double. Her self-revelatory drawing's absence of self-boundary expresses the well-known saying: 'it is art when it hides the art'. Both a hidden and a revealed personal truth is revealed in Anne's portrait. Her fusion protected her from experiencing her Void till captured in the drawing it became Real.

A few weeks ago, friends, a couple, dropped in. As they sat down, she looked at Anne's drawing, exclaimed: 'Wow!' She was overwhelmed. She reacted to the reality the drawing conveyed. She remained overwhelmed for some time.

The picture spoke to her. She spoke back. They dialogued. Sealed in the image of the two faces are thousands of stories and histories. The friend was a fast talking, faster thinking woman in her 30's. She spoke a hundred words a minute. My mind could not keep pace with her lips' speed.

Clearly, her interest aroused, curiosity piqued, imagination ignited, she translated the images: silent screams of two women, a mother and daughter, but which generation, survivor and child survivor? Or child survivor and second generation? Or one woman's mind blending with her daughter's, exposed as merged for all to see? Another possibility, daughter's mind, the smaller image, resting on her mother's even as she embraces and holds the mother. A silent drawing speaks many stories. Overwhelming stories. Stories from the Void.

Anne's drawing spoke volumes to that viewer, engaged her deeply in self recognition. What did she recognize? Did Anne's drawing mirror something, or transmit an essential experience, or both? Did it convey such an elemental state that it triggered an identification with the process of subjugation? Should I explore more deeply my own reactions to Anne's interwoven images? Will I risk trespassing beyond the boundary of the permissible? Are certain private or intimate facts beyond exploration? But I must keep going, to try to shed more light on this image of intimacy, partly for selfish reasons, because they are part of my experience.

My mother, like Anne, is also a child survivor. Anne's double image evokes in my mind deep, boundariless images of my mother and I. Like my rapid talking friend, I find parts of myself in these ambiguously unified images. Anne captured elemental experiences, beyond words, that

allow me to enter, process and emerge from a silent generational dialogue, to engage anew, to rethink and to renegotiate a new dialogue with my mother. I find such dialogue between the generations precious.

But dare I go further with Anne's child survivor experiences? Inevitably, if I explore her images further, it must lead me to deeper levels of understanding her inner being. And mine. Dare I focus my mind, apply my knowledge, intuition and instinct, dare I cast my eyes to see beyond the surface dimension of her drawing? And me. Dare I speak what I sense from her art, a hidden life, a Void, lived beyond consciousness? Do I have a choice?

For some years I have been under this drawing's spell, its power intrigued me from the first moment I saw it. Only now do I begin to realize why those images were so disturbing, penetrating, how they gradually transform my layers of ignorance to awareness, the unknown to known.

I explore further for another reason. I have another urgent dialogue awaiting. This dialogue can not wait because I'm booked to march. I am preparing for a once-in-a-life encounter with my mother. Truth is on the March. My mother and I are both planing to take part in the Adult March of the Living in May 2005. Unless I explore this dialogue between the generations, unless I attend to Anne's drawing seriously, I face the risk that my Void may remain silent for ever.

I missed out on so many generational dialogues in my childhood and later. I need to catch up, I am blessed to have a second chance. So I eagerly seize this opportunity for a new found dialogue, to capture intimate family events which otherwise risk remaining invisible, null and void. In the Void. As I reflect on Anne's drawn images, I return to the Void with new experiences, I create a mental space, a new dialogue of the senses.

Anne's drawing visually reconstructs aspects beyond the 'conventional dialogue', her 'self-portrait' of doubles reveals new thoughts, new possibilities.

*'At the time I thought of this drawing as a self-portrait, but as time went by it took on more meaning. At times I saw it as my childhood self, with my mother during the Holocaust. At other times I saw it as myself with my children and grandchildren. Often I see the child protecting the adult. One thing is certain: this work was a collaboration of both of them.'*

‘Both’. Mother and daughter; mother and grandchildren; woman and child within. They all collaborated, all are ‘both’.

These identities of double are a new form of self - a ‘self-infused-with-other’. Anne’s images structure and bring into relationship experiences without words, the Void is no more. She does so with the precision of a visual scientist, but more of that later. Our culture, so dominated by the construct of the defined self, pursuing perfection in ‘self-esteem’, ‘self-expression’, ‘self-actualization’, and ‘self-acceptance’, Anne courageously holds onto her sense of difference. She finds expression for and copes with her experience of being dissolved as a self-in-the-other.

I see Anne’s portrait as an antidote to the despair brought on by the denial of such authentic personal experience.

Her portrait is a double gift: artistic and experiential. Look at the two fused faces, the little girl’s chin merging with older woman’s forehead, no clear beginning, no clear end, boundaries are merged. At once, Anne’s images of the two faces capture dual experiences of child survivors, their double identities.

Look into the four eyes, generations looking outward, parallel gaze never to meet, except in the viewers mind. In my mind’s eye these images capture the core of fused identities: generational, personal and artistic. Anne’s images silently wrestle. They are engaged in a silent struggle of identities, each seeking a separate selfhood.

At once immersed, yet emerging from the Void that refuses to be classified, those eyes, intolerant of restriction, defy the convention of ‘self’ and ‘other’. They wish, desire separateness, but refuse to be separated. How could the images be separate after surviving that trauma-driven dissolution, the meltdown of self, how could a child survivor and child of survivors be restricted to the images of a conventional ‘separate’ self?

Survivor families’ struggles with identity occur at a different experiential registry to ‘ordinary’ families, by virtue of the trauma they survived. Their experiences were so compressed, dense, complex that the very essence of being, in infancy, childhood and later, was restructured, reshaped beyond relatedness – exiled and Void.



For survivor families, a face connects not only with the basic emotional expressions noted by Paul Ekman: anger, fear happiness, sadness, disgust and surprise (others add contempt) but the little girl's eyes, her mother's, also express the Void of exile. That look of parallel gaze, the absent dialogue, never to see the other, to not recognize, nor meet. Never, that is, unless we, the viewer, recognizes the look of Void. Once recognized, our validation offers a second chance, a chance to engage anew in the absent dialogue. The Void of exile may yet be transformed.

Anne needed to withdraw to her mysterious time-space to connect with her Void, her exiled self. She found the image to express the texture of crisis, the fused face-images. To draw, she willed herself to return, to seek out, to understand herself through childhood's natural medium of dialogue, drawing. She looked into the mirror of her childhood, there reflected and in her drawing represented the images of her, and her mother's, Void, exiled self.

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Reflecting on Anne's drawing now clarifies some of my deeply puzzling experiences. Her imaged duality of selfhood, exiled and Void, are fused. What had escaped me before now becomes obvious: two Voids can mirror each other, but it does take time to see.

To emerge from such a state of fused Voids, to sense that possibility, and later, to experience the process of becoming separate, is to emerge after the return to that Void. That journey demands that we return to the dissolved time-space as it was in the nursery. Many processes may nurture that emergence from the Void into a separate selfhood: the many therapies - art, talk, music or dance; Religion; Science; (in its original meaning 'knowledge'); or Art. Each in its own way confers a state of communion, a return to relatedness with the other.

Spaces - gaps, elision, lacuna, void - in relatedness do remain, but the absence of physical, psychological or spiritual is no longer catastrophic, no longer the Void of the nursery.

Anne negotiated many stages to finally arrive at her inner freedom. There, she expressed through her art the inner paradox: fusion and separateness; blurring and boundary. The two faces are connected, and separate, on many levels. As our identity is a paradox, so the two faces are two and one at the same time.

How long did Anne grapple before she could begin to draw, give shape to her emergence, to become separate? Till she recognized her need to give shape and voice to her double self. What impulses and rhythms guided her eye-and-hand to dance such paths on the paper, to give expression, form and structure to that inner fused being? That force, such force, remains a mystery, a spiritual destiny, maybe.

As Anne's nephew, I cannot separate my familial and professional reactions to her drawing. My dual roles, as relative and child psychiatrist, both inform my viewing. I know I have been granted special access, a privileged position through Anne's art to her inner being. I have tried to write openly and honestly with minimal self-censorship.

In writing of Anne's autobiographical art, I have been guided by the question: 'What essential experience does Anne capture and communicate?'

Acclaimed author and daughter of Holocaust survivors, Eva Hoffman observed that what transpires between survivors and their children, is: 'something closer to enactment of experience, to emanations or sometimes nearly embodiments of psychic matter – of material too awful to be processed and assimilated into the stream of consciousness, or memory, or intelligible feelings.'

Hoffman was referring to children of survivors. Anne is both a child survivor and a child of survivors. I look again and again at Anne's drawing.

*'The adult face was based on the other survivor's facial expressions with special emphasis on the eyes. It was done very quickly, making sure to put in expression lines to show her age. To finish the hair I tried to join it with the child's hair. The scribbles for the hair begin to look like the child's hands, so I formed them into hands embracing the adult's face.'*

I look closely at the face, hair, eyes, hands. The right and left hands are different. The thumb on the right hand is bigger, as if swollen. In a conversation years later, Anne shows me her arthritic right thumb. Artist with the precision of the visual scientist, Anne also captures that subtle facial asymmetry known to psychologist, where the left side of the little girl's face expresses her smile with the raised corner of the mouth more than the right side. Such attention to detail, extended into the realm of the unconscious captures a nuanced, calibrated inner sensibility where

Anne's drawing reaches levels of experience that are beyond words – the absent dialogue.

What I have tried to express is personal, my relating to Anne's drawing which captured her experiences beyond the unspeakable: states that embrace bewilderment, chaos, exile and the Void. I recognized myself, my experiences reflected in those two still faces. On the surface, I see only a comforting embrace. Behind the gaze, I witnessed the exposed exile and Void. These two levels of experience felt at the same time are depicted as the fused boundary, like Siamese twins, joined at the head, the very seat of consciousness. If the two, (who are they, in the artist's mind, in the viewer's mind?) never separate, they are doomed to share a common destiny, yet to separate involves a monumental struggle.

The psychological struggle to become separate is a process of a lifetime, epic in proportion and consequence. Some find that process too costly, they settle for another cost - a lifetime of incoherence. Anne's courage is to engage in that heroic struggle through her art, to find self-expression, to tip the delicate internal balance of the soul to be able to be separate enough to grieve the lost past and face a different future. In Anne's words...

*'At this stage I stopped. I felt it was finished. I looked at my watch; the whole process took fifteen minutes. I totally lost track of the time. I drew a deep breath and joined the group to say Goodbye.'*

*'The drawing marked a turning point in my creative artistic life. I became less critical and much more intuitive, experimental and playful in my artwork – a bit like a child who, upon picking up a pencil for the first time, discovers the joy of drawing.'*

### From Generation to Generation

The generational dilemma posed by and resolved in Anne's drawing highlights the individual survivor-artist's generational struggle, adult and child. I, as a son of survivor, respond from the vantage point of the second generation. But the story continues. It's now the third generation who speaks...