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The Gulf in Me

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An early autobiographical essay written during the Gulf War, exploring the relationship between political catastrophe and personal psychology — the 'gulf' as metaphor for the internal split between feeling and knowing, between bodymind aliveness and the culturally conditioned numbness which allows us to watch mass destruction from a safe distance.

KEY THEMES

— The Gulf War as mirror of internal fragmentation

— Numbness and dissociation as cultural phenomena

— Political catastrophe and personal psychology

— The body as site of un-numbed awareness

— Feeling response as resistance to objectification

Written During the Gulf War

This essay was written in early 1992, in the aftermath of the Gulf War. It explores a connection which at first seemed private and idiosyncratic but which, in sharing it with colleagues, revealed itself as widely felt: the connection between what was happening in the world and what was happening inside.

The Gulf War presented us with a spectacle of mass destruction, sanitised by the language of 'surgical strikes', 'collateral damage', and 'smart bombs'. The language itself was a form of dissociation — a way of thinking about killing without feeling it. And we were complicit in this: watching the bombing on television, processing it cognitively, remaining — as far as possible — emotionally untouched.

This is precisely what we ask our clients not to do. We ask them to feel what they have been trained not to feel, to let the body speak what has been kept silent. But the Gulf War confronted me with the question: how deeply did my own numbness go? Could I feel what was happening, as a bodymind reality, or was I trapped in the same dissociation I was trying to help clients move through?

The Gulf as Internal Split

The 'gulf' of the title has multiple resonances. There is the geographical gulf — the Persian Gulf where the war was fought. There is the political gulf between the ideology of the 'new world order' and the lived reality of those caught in the bombs. And there is the internal gulf — the split between knowing and feeling, between cognitive understanding and somatic reality.

This internal gulf is precisely what body psychotherapy addresses: the chronic opposition between reflective processes (knowing, thinking, deciding) and spontaneous processes (feeling, sensing, impulse). The war exposed how socially maintained that split can be — how entire cultures can know something and not feel it, can understand intellectually what is being done in their name without the body registering it as real.

To feel the Gulf War bodily — to let the images of death and destruction land in the body as what they actually are — was an act of resistance against the cultural anaesthetic. And it was painful. That pain was also, I believe, an experience of being more fully alive.

What This Has to Do with Therapy

What does a political essay have to do with psychotherapy? Everything, if we believe that the dissociations we are trained to help clients with are not merely individual pathologies but reflections of collective cultural patterns. The client who cannot feel their anger, or who knows intellectually that they were abused without being able to feel the reality of it, is enacting a dissociation that is also socially cultivated and maintained.

The therapist who cannot allow themselves to feel the reality of political catastrophe — who maintains a professional distance from the body's response to the world — may have a blind spot precisely in the area where they most need to be present: in the bodymind territory of shock, numbness, and the gap between knowing and feeling.

This essay is a reminder that the work of becoming more embodied, more alive, more genuinely feeling — the work we invite clients to undertake — has no safe boundaries. It extends into our relationship with the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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