

Am I My Brother's Keeper?
Narratives from Two Pandemics

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The stories that make up the narrative of the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, as well as the larger International Association of Analytical Psychology (IAAP), convey who we are as a community of Jungian analysts. This constructed account of our origins, and our struggles, repeated and disseminated, lends a sense of reality, continuity, and cohesion. Elements deemed worthy are incorporated into our aspirations and values, and are seen as expressing the soul of our group. These aspirations and values contribute to a collective identity. Undigested elements are relegated to the borders of the group unconscious and are rendered alien, unreal, and non-sensical. In the nineteen-eighties, San Francisco was ground zero for the AIDS epidemic. Two member analysts died of AIDS. Many from our institute community had lost loved ones and/or had clients who had been infected or impacted by the epidemic. And yet we seemed to have no institutional memory of this time. A number of us were engaged in AIDS activism during the height of the crisis. The ensuing search for spirit and meaning, influenced our trajectory into Jungian psychology. The biases we found in the institute environment however, led us to downplay this involvement to avoid being seen as other, insufficiently psychological, unconscious, unidimensional, and over-identified with a social and political agenda.

Thirty-five years ago, some of us broke away from the therapeutic models we learned in our graduate programs. We conducted our work away from the insulation of an office, to respond to the crisis that had gripped our city. This work has never been recognized as part of our institute's history. Nor have the stories about the epidemic's impact on individual members and our community been adequately told. Why have we, who lived through the decimation of a generation of gay men, remained silent. Those of

us who were directly engaged in the communities impacted, including the members of the panel that I am representing, have rarely referred to that time.

Two years ago the seven of us began meeting to discuss our experiences during the height of the AIDS crisis. Our discussions resulted in an institute forum held early in 2020. Excerpts from that presentation at the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco are presented here. I highlight statements made by each member of our group.

Ironically, a week after that program, our institute abruptly closed its doors in response to another pandemic: COVID-19.

Reflections on the AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco

Raymond Buscemi

I don't know what to say. I've thought about what I might want to say and I tried to organize it, to bring it into focus, to produce something tangible, something that might offer a glimpse into the past, into my past, and my own experience of the AIDS epidemic. But I don't really know what to say because I don't know the words to capture the confusion and grief and anger, the terror and joy, and the raucous love that define that time for me. I don't know what to say because there is nothing worse than trying to reconnect with these feeling memories—memories that I have actively and unconsciously tried to outrun, only to find myself, here, *here*, trying to find some words now as I write this. I don't want to disappoint you. These are the words I was able to find; there are more words I might discover; and there are words I will never know—and that is at the heart of what I lost to the epidemic: men I knew and men I didn't know and men whom I wished I had known.

Being here today is a chance for me to be as present as I can with these memories, without distraction. This is the closest I can get to telling you what my experience was and is in relation to an epidemic that stole so much from us and denied so many the right to grow old. I remember guys who looked as though they had aged thirty years in a matter of weeks as the virus destroyed them. I remember thinking of someone out of the blue and then remembering that he was dead and it was as though he died all over again. That still happens. Trying to find words to share with you today has been painful. What words could do justice to the fact that I turned away from someone I loved and who loved me and who was sick and dying. Someone who asked for me and wished I'd come see him, to say goodbye.

Jeffrey Moulton Benevedes

Teenage Chad had been told to leave his mother's home in Portland when she found out he was gay. He rode a bus to San Francisco, living on Polk Street as a very adorable prostitute turning three tricks a day in the early 80s and infected with AIDS before we even knew that the virus existed. Placed by Catholic Social Services with my partner and me, he was our gay foster son. Such a cheerful boy given what he had experienced. Chad came of age, had a boyfriend, and left with him to travel across the United States. It was only upon his return to the city that Chad informed us that he had AIDS, infected by someone who bought him in the early days of the silent spread of the disease. His death soon thereafter was as surreal as any I experienced. His innocence extinguished, and his death a marker of his mother's shame and humiliation about having

a gay son, and what life on the streets meant for gay kids in those early years of the epidemic. The grief of his death became a frozen heartache that was only finally thawed this last year, nearly thirty-five years later.

The world of AIDS became everything in my life for ten years. But it was a life that felt sequestered in a protective silence. To open up about the disaster to non-gay people—to straight people—to people who might be judgmental—was unimaginable. They couldn't understand the tragedy we, as gay men, experienced as our vital and emerging community was cut down in its nascent years and further stigmatized by a disease associated with homosexual sex. Silencing and quieting my experience existed as an unconscious collusion with majority culture as it fled from the frightening effects of this biologically and socially infectious disease. For that, I still feel angry . . . at myself and, honestly, at the collective of heterosexual others. The wound is not healed, and how will it ever be?

Claire Costello

I witnessed all of my patients slowly deteriorate, become debilitated, succumb to horrible infections, get worse, get better, become disfigured, blind, swollen, demented, and ultimately slip into semi-comatose states and eventually let go. I mourned the deaths of two hundred beloved men. It took everything within me to find a resilient inner capacity and spiritual attitude from which to do my work.

Through the presence that grows within us as we live in dialogue with that which awes us, we continue to grow new cultural attitudes that influence the transformation of consciousness.

Something happened.

Something happened that has been incorporated into the fabric of our being and within the fabric of our culture. Something we need to bring to the surface so we can savor it, make use of it, and move forward.

We share experiences of life on the edge, of encounters with the non-ordinary states of consciousness often experienced near death. We glimpsed into mysterious and numinous moments that transformed those who lived and died in a time of extraordinary human suffering, heroism, and compassionate action. We recognized something to hope for, to be nourished by, to build strength in.

We offer this to individuals and groups, living in fear and isolation, that it may give them a chance to respond, with integrity and an open heart, to the current issues of our day.

Michael Bala

Recently we, these colleagues and friends on this panel, were meeting. Someone asked each of us, “What motivated you to become active in AIDS work?”

This was my answer: I was motivated to do AIDS work because I feared genocide. What the hell did I mean? I had been holding inside, tucked deeply away, profound genocidal anxiety. I was thinking primarily of gay men in early days of AIDS. Much of what motivated me was fear that I and my gay brothers, could easily be rounded up, detained, quarantined, put away in camps to protect society. Eliminated.

In the early day of the epidemic, HIV hadn’t yet been identified. Terms like “gay cancer” and “gay plague” were bandied about in the media and on the streets. Fear of contagion was widespread. I had learned in school of the Holocaust. And I had learned something about the genocidal treatment of Native Americans, Black Americans, and

genocides throughout the world and throughout history. It didn't seem so far-fetched that we, the fags, could so easily be the next group to be singled out and locked up.

Paul Fishman

When I first came across the phrase “queer diaspora,” I was only slightly troubled by the thought that a powerful cultural complex would so direct the lives of another group of which I am a member. Like my grandparents and great-grandparents who left Eastern Europe a century before, I needed to find a better home. I would have been more troubled by the phrase had I known diaspora's other meanings. Whereas in contemporary usage, *diaspora* denotes the involuntary mass dispersion by a dominant power of an unwanted population from its indigenous territory; in biblical usage, it connotes the participation of the population in divine retribution. Diaspora's first appearance is as a punishment for transgressing Mosaic law. Worship other gods, buck the collective, think for yourself, and you are asking for it. You will be forever scorned and banished. In other words, the force causing diaspora is the archetype of the Self, awakening us to oppositions and providing us with opportunities to split or to individuate.

Caught in powerful personal and cultural complexes thirty-five years ago, we—our institute and I—failed adequately to “kindle a light in the darkness” of those times, to hear and respond to the call for a more timely emergence of cultural competency. For my part, it seemed necessary to hide in order to survive the fear of scornful judgments, sensed or imagined. Rather than speaking my truth to power, I was overwhelmed by it.

Scott Carollo

How can we distinguish between an acknowledgment of difference, which is an act of recognition, and an acknowledgement of difference as unconscious disavowal and projection? By unconscious disavowal and projection, I refer to the ways in which culturally derogated but, nonetheless, universal aspects of being human—derogated aspects of sexuality, for example—are located in the “other.” The other acts as container of that derogated aspect for the collective. The person with this identity carries the association with these aspects, creating a social vulnerability. We can ask ourselves when difference is acknowledged, does it enact a social othering or does it serve to make space in the collective, not just for that unique individual, but also for what this person represents for all of us? Does vulnerability remain a shared group experience, or does it then have to be carried exclusively by the one who is different?

AIDS was a *natural disaster*, which gave rise to certain growth opportunities: it was a time of coming out and coming together, taking care of one another; it engendered the mobilization of political agency. But AIDS, as scene of natural disaster, also opened up the opportunity, culturally, for the vulnerable queer mind and body to become the dumping ground for hatred, revulsion, and all of our deep confusions, anxiety, and shame about gender and sexuality, enacted with a force, I believe, even more destructive than the virus itself.

QiRe Ching

I was traveling to Europe every year in the nineteen eighties, tracking paintings depicting scenes of the lamentation. While at the Prado museum in Madrid, I was startled by a painting by El Greco. I stood immobilized for over an hour, unable to place the

image in a cultural context that was at all familiar to me. Titled *The Holy Trinity*, it was a depiction of a Pietà. However, instead of the Blessed Mother it featured a grieving God the Father, the corpse of his son draped over his lap. The image seemed to embrace the immense sadness hovering over my entire thirties. Young bodies ravaged by illness; surviving partners deprived of hospital visitation rights and without the legal protections to stop blood relatives from laying claim to the property of their departed lovers.



The Holy Trinity, El Greco

Over the years, I've thought many times about El Greco's painting, hoping that I would, somehow outside of the museum, encounter a corresponding likeness that could

help me bear a sorrow that has been constant and unending. Although the culture has seemingly moved on from AIDS, the loss continues to announce itself, not so much in relation to a presence, *but an absence*. I can never know how the lives of the men who died might have otherwise turned out, or make amends for hurts caused, when youthful awkwardness left much unsaid.

Recently, it occurred to me that, with the passing of time, I myself had gradually been assimilating El Greco's image. It was now living inside me, had become a part of me, as I steadily aged, grieving over the son I had once been and all the sons I had lost.

Reflections on AIDS and COVID-19

Thirty-five years ago, the mobilization of our grief, and anger into acts of defiance and protest, became an important rallying point in queer culture. The tone emerging from the current COVID-19 epidemic by contrast has seemed schizoid, characterized by societal fragmentation, and the dismemberment of the body politic. With sheltering in place, the absence of social contact has left people without the links that connect them to others and a sense of having a shared fate. In this present reality, the air we breathe, every surface we touch, or person we approach, have become potential threats to our safety. And then in June 2020, George Floyd was murdered. We have known all along that Black men have been disproportionately killed or incarcerated. It was a statistical fact that we had learned to tolerate, even accept as the rest of us went on our busy lives. But this time, while sheltering at home, we saw the images, and took notice.

The French writer, Herve Guibert wrote: "...AIDS isn't really an illness, and to call it one is a simplification, for it's a state of weakness and surrender that uncages the

beast within...The microorganisms responsible for both pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, that boa constrictor of the lungs, and the brain-destroying cysts of toxoplasmosis may be present inside each one of us but are kept in check by a healthy immune system, where AIDS gives them the green light, opening the floodgates of destruction.”

Our focus has been on one particular segment of the population impacted by the AIDS epidemic. Every story we tell implies an omission, and necessitates an adjustment, an addition - the inclusion of another story, to fill in the gaps, thus setting off a chain reaction, a continuous process of creation, one that is ever moving, expanding and marked by the untidiness that is a function of multiple viewpoints.

Today, we are witnessing a beast unleashed again as the coronavirus has laid bare pre-existing societal ills.

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