

*Webinar Summary***Covid Iatrogenesis**

Webinar by Dr. Harold J. Bursztajn, MD

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“The best cure for worry, depression, melancholy, brooding, is to go deliberately forth and try to lift with one's sympathy the gloom of somebody else.”

Arnold Bennett

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown up many challenges to be tackled by humanity at large; not least of all are the sweeping mental health issues that it brings in its wake; affecting one and in various degrees ranging from overt depression and despair to an insidious undercurrent of anxiety and fear. The webinar was ‘performed’ by Dr. Harold Bursztajn, who wears the hat of a master ‘Psychoanalyst’ and very eloquently renders his interpretation of pieces of art (paintings by famous artists). Like a violin virtuoso, he waxed lyrically, elaborating on the theme of ‘Art for dealing with Mental health and bioethical issues,’ and produced such mellifluous musical musings, which had the capacity to soothe the ears, assuage hurt feelings and heal the heart that has been broken by witnessing human suffering all around.

Opening bar was a definition of Iatrogenesis as the unintended consequences of the treatment that is given. In the context of Covid the question “Is the treatment more dreadful than the disease?” attains ominous proportions.

Man should never give up the quest for beauty, because it is beauty which leads to truth and truth which leads to goodness. All analyses have an unwritten imperative to answer the question- what is true, beautiful and good?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Extreme personality change after a catastrophic experience (EPCACE) are two commonly occurring mental health issues among patients, their caregivers and health care professionals which need to be addressed appropriately. Unresolved mental issues can manifest as perfectionism, self-righteousness and scapegoating, which in combination lead to a pattern of toxic resilience. We need to be aware of both short-term and long-term consequences of whatever measures we may institute.

Then the performance shifted to the showcased paintings; narratives were drawn from them like strings which connected with and wove around the ongoing existential crisis that people are experiencing in the midst of this Covid pandemic.

Real psycho-mental healing and its gift -- clarity of mind -- do not come about unless the ‘unconscious’ is brought into the broad daylight of conscious awareness. The paintings and narratives served this important function of reconnecting us with our inner world of existential crisis and led us down a pathway of internal dialogue with our own hopes, aspirations, dreams, fears, despair and desolation.

Each of the pieces of painting was truly evocative, struck at an unseen chord and evinced a clarion call to the heart:

1) Coal miner's torch – Henry Moore 1942

Is the cure worse than the disease?

Where do we need to shine our light? Are we looking in the wrong place for our solutions? Are our strategies misfiring and hence causing more damage? We need to regroup our resources and re-focus, or else we are in danger of running around in circles and ending up in a state of hyper-focus and Acute stress disorder. The question of how we live assumes greater importance than the question of how we die.

2) Denial of aging and Entropy – Hyman Bloom 1960s

“Not treating someone with dignity, you lose your own dignity”-HB

Can we afford to deny aging and entropy?

How are we taking care of elderly in this Covid crisis? Isolating them and denying them human contact, human dignity and hope...cannot be doing them any good. Demoralising people is only going to reduce their immunity.

3) Zwai Schwatzende- Kathe Kollwitz-

“Teaching and learning is a human reality, not a virtual reality”-HB

To protect children and the elderly, schools have been closed without providing for day care of the children. This not only might lead to a generation that is alienated from itself, but also has the attendant risk of EPCACE in both the parents and the children.

4) No one is who they seem to be- Francesco Goya

“Never worry alone, never grieve alone, be yourself, and always be curious”-HB

Although wearing masks in closed spaces is recommended to prevent spread of infection, mandating use of masks in uncrowded open spaces appears to be unjustified. Social distancing has made an ugly turn to ‘social alienation,’ further leading to disruption of the very fabric of social life.

5) Marsayas – Hyman Bloom 1953

If you are competing against yourself, you can never win.

Marsayas is a half-human, half-animal character from Greek mythology who was a gifted musician; in his quest for perfection he challenged Apollo. Marsayas lost the competition and, as per the condition set by Apollo, he was flayed alive. We need to give up the ideal of perfectionism (along with self-righteousness, vigilantism, scapegoating, and dehumanization), as it leads to a pattern of toxic resilience which crushes the spirit of people and vitiates respect for human dignity, leaving a swathe of victims in its wake.

6) Seascape III – Hyman Bloom

If we do not acknowledge fear, we humiliate others.

Unless we keep an open mind and acknowledge uncertainty, we are doomed to be lost in the predatory sea. We should not be afraid to change our mind when we reach a better understanding of the current problems being posed on us. Aesthetics, grace and kindness should be our guiding lights in times of crisis. In this sea of uncertainty, a quest for beauty leads on to truth and goodness.

7) Keeping Hope alive: Winter -Hyman Bloom 1980

8) Keeping Hope alive: Summer -Hyman Bloom 1980

Though it is dark in winter, there is still some light...hope is to be kept alive; the seasons change and eventually summer arrives. This pandemic too will pass, there might be other pandemics in future; we should not react in a kneejerk fashion that will compromise our future stability.

9) Photographs showing parents of Dr. Harold (a) in amongst other fekalists (sanitation workers) in the Lodz ghetto during the typhus pandemic 1942; (b) after the Shoah.

Grieving is important to keep hope alive and hope is what makes us ethical.

The Bursztajns were part of the resistance in the ghetto; they showed remarkable courage and joined forces in the ghetto to fight the typhus which was threatening to wipe out the entire population of the ghetto. The people in the ghetto worked with each other and kept their hope alive by focussing on what they could do to help the situation rather than trying to achieve perfection. The few who survived were able to keep hope alive and memory alive.

10) The Rabbi- Hyman Bloom 1960s

Keeping hope alive keeps reason alive

The Rabbi keeps the law of the Torah; even when we are frightened and feel threatened, we cannot let go of the fundamental human values viz respect for human dignity.

11) The Owl -Henryk Epstein

Even in a crisis situation we need to hold on to reason and still look for beauty which will lead us to truth and goodness.

The owl is a medieval symbol of the Jew, then often meant disparagingly, but here it represents survival. The painting also has flowers, which epitomise all that is beautiful and inspirational. The recommendation is to go back to our roots and find principles, personalities and creativity from our heritages that will inspire us.

After the narratives were expounded, there was a delightful concerto played by Professor Harold and Professor Mary Matthew as they responded to the attendees' questions, which were more like requests to prolong the performance in order to bask in the luminosity of mood engendered by the articulations and to relish & absorb its finer attainments. Both minds and hearts were again swayed by the lilting music produced.

- 1) Societal response to the virus has been perceived by many to be over the top and has engendered a culture of fear never before seen. In this backdrop what has been articulated has been like a soothing balm, and hence sincere gratitude has been expressed. (Autonomy and individual responsibility)
- 2) The way people are dying and final rites being conducted without allowing people to participate....how does one deal with the despair caused by this denial of grieving. (Article.3. Human Dignity and Human rights)

Asking the question is the beginning; people are not asking enough questions because they are blinded by fear. Questions are not asked due to denial and despair, both of which are deadly in the current pandemic.

The answers perforce will be contextual and vary with different circumstances.

"I have never yet answered a question that I have never been able to ask."

As health care workers we need to be prepared for the next pandemic and have a conceptual road map to deal with the mental health issues.

- 3) How do we divert from perfectionism and, more importantly, how do we communicate with our leaders about avoiding the pitfalls of perfectionism?

(Article.3. Human Dignity and Human rights & Article 13 Solidarity and cooperation)

Politicians are puffing themselves up as perfectionists at our expense. While they say that they are saving lives, they are not saving human lives, only their own political ambitions. The people need to be heard; they cannot be denied a chance to lead a meaningful life. 'One size fits all' approach is draconian in its conception and diabolical in its implementation. What we need is the realism of our 'human face,' not perfectionism. Individuals have to be supported and empowered in maintaining agency—i.e., to help themselves in a way that is sustainable and upholds their dignity.

For instance, measures taken in developed countries may not suit developing countries. In fact, each country may have to customise strategies, as in the case of Sweden and Norway which adopted different policies though they are geographically, developmentally & economically similar. As it is, the Covid pandemic calls for better strategies for Asian countries in order to save lives and livelihoods.

- 4) Social isolation occurring in children raises serious concerns about their emotional development. Advent of online virtual classrooms bereft of human presence, eye contact or emotional bonding can be demoralising to the students. How best can one facilitate learning in this setting?

(Article 16. Protecting future generations)

A good approach would be to acknowledge that it is different now and follow it with taking feedback from the students as to how it feels for them. By interacting with them, sharing how we feel as teachers, we create a space wherein the students and teachers can worry together and devise strategies to make the learning experience better. Teachers are best able to use psychoanalysis to unravel conflicts and complexes in the students (Anna Freud). Though not everything is speakable, it is necessary to make them a part of teaching conversations.

“Teaching and learning is a human reality, not a virtual reality”

The need to see, touch and feel other humans is a big part of our growth and development; the concern with social isolation is that it might beget a generation of fragile ‘human robots’ without emotional connection. For that reason, we need to go back to traditional in-person teaching as soon as possible.

- 5) The reported incidence of suicides occurring due to isolation has flagged a serious concern; we may need to modify the way we are quarantining people. (Article 5 Autonomy and individual responsibility & Article 6 Consent)

Stigmatisation is one of the causes of suicides. In one case the person was a patient needing dialysis who was isolated from family and committed suicide out of despair.

One patient died because he was isolated and would not eat food from anyone other than family. In this case PPE could have been provided for the relative. Under circumstances of limited resources, we have to triage with mindfulness of human dignity, otherwise we will end up using triage in automatic-pilot mode; then people will get scapegoated and marginalised with all the trappings of Fascism.

- 6) Given that not allowing people to grieve leads to loss of hope, what does a doctor do? How do we allow people to grieve...when they are not allowed to attend funerals? (Article 12 Respect for cultural diversity and pluralism)

When a person dies, make his/her memory a blessing, make it heartfelt. Also, accepting one’s mortality helps someone who is bereaved and is grieving. Keeping memories alive keeps hope. A person grieving should never be left alone.

- 7) How to overcome stigmatisation, where does it come from? (Article 11 Non-discrimination and non-stigmatisation)

Stigmatisation comes from a person who is insecure and afraid, who when in pain blames and humiliates another. Fear is nothing to be ashamed of; it is needed for survival. In fact, being fearless is foolhardy.

“Those who serve others are placed above like candles”

This virus is no respecter of persons; anyone can be infected. Hence, the masses have to be educated.

- 8) We know now that mandatory lockdown has great economic and health costs, but reopening the economy will lead to greater number of deaths...how do we balance competing costs ? (Article 10 Equality, justice and Equity & Article 20 Risk assessment and management)

We need to look at both long-term and short-term consequences. There will be deaths if we reopen the economy, but there will be deaths if we do not reopen the economy. There will be people who drink, people who use drugs, people who will lose hope, their sense of self and dignity, and that also kills. Hence, there has to be a balance in our response.

Psycho-neuro-immunology informs us that immobilisation impairs immunity; if we do not cry after someone dies, IgA gets suppressed. Freedom to grieve and to perceive might in fact be saving lives rather than costing lives. Just trying to save lives from Covid leads to a tunnel vision, and we will end up in Hyman Bloom’s sea.

- 9) In India the masses are illiterate, and we need to educate the masses to bring awareness about the pandemic and also to remove the stigmatization. At this time, when people are

hungry there, we need to fill their bellies first. How do we educate the masses in this perilous situation? Internet and television should be used for inculcating good practises and building resilience in children. (Article 8 Respect for human vulnerability and personal integrity)

There has been an overwhelming panic reaction to the pandemic, largely due to the media. At this time, maybe we can educate the religious leaders, head men of villages, who can reach out and sway the masses.

Yes, there is something to fear, but it should not overwhelm us, dominate us; we should not be afraid of fear itself. Courage is reasonable action and acknowledging fear; otherwise fear will lead to panic, which is absolutely deadly.

10) Media houses are only showing negative news, which is killing our hope. Is it not their moral responsibility to project positive stories? (Article 14. Social responsibility and health)
This is the time that media should be playing a positive role and acting responsibly.
Bad news is news; good news is no news.

11) It was such a powerful picture and made us feel so connected and that of teaching that even photographs and real stories could be a medium to create hope that I realise when I listened to his side of the story. (Article 13 Solidarity and cooperation)
The photographers in the Shoah were part of the resistance; the idea was that even if they didn't survive, they had to build hope, and in that hope people worked together. Anything we do to encourage people to build their stories of hope is going to empower them. Even though the media is not doing anything to help the situation, that does not mean that people can't do their positive thinking on their own.

12) For people who cannot appreciate art, is there any other way of engaging them fruitfully? (Article 12 Respect for cultural diversity and pluralism)
Hyman Bloom was a big fan of Indian music and studied with Ravi Shankar. There are many different roads to go up to Mt Olympus or even Mt. Everest; it has to be very individual, has to be very authentic. The best way forward when you are with people is to ask people what's meaningful to them what speaks to their heart.
Expressing your emotions through paintings is so beautiful. I was fortunate to have a very good art teacher who brought out the best in me. Absolutely loved the articulations; they brought the human side of the crisis. At the end of the day it is Hope even more than resilience that is important to our psyche.

The finale to the performance was fittingly a few bars of delightful ethnic Indian music.

Epilogue

In the bible we have: John The Baptist, Mother Mary, Jesus Christ the Messiah who brought grace and twelve apostles who spread the teachings.

This entire performance has allegorical and biblical colourations.

Professor Russell initiated the webinar and introduced Professor Harold, Professor Mary moderated the discussions, and there were twelve participants who interacted and asked questions.

“As above so below”- Matthew 6:10

“Human beings are capable of both far better and far worse than we can imagine” – after reading Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents and On Transience
