



## A Crisis in the Subjectivity of the Analyst: The Trauma of Morality

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# A Crisis in the Subjectivity of the Analyst: The Trauma of Morality

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Gillian Straker, Ph.D.

This paper explores the dilemmas that arise when treatment is offered in circumstances when spiritual and ethical survival comes into conflict with physical survival and material well-being. Through an exploration of the author's experience in South Africa's war of liberation, this conflict is explicated. Although these experiences are now historical, it is argued that they are pertinent at the current time as the West, following 9/11, finds itself encouraged to think in terms of war, as notions of both a war against the West and a war against terrorism have become part of many public discourses. Questions that may arise for us as relational analysts and as individuals as a result of this are flagged, and although no easy answers are proposed, the importance of this exploration is highlighted.

## The Trauma of Morality

As I approached this conference topic I found myself challenged by its title, as it called for more than usually deep self-reflection. I sensed that it would lead me back to my personal history in South Africa and its struggle for liberation. If anything created multiple crises in my subjectivity, it was this struggle, and I need therefore to locate myself in this broader social context before I speak of my work there.

I was born in South Africa where I spent all my life until 1978. When I was 28 I was offered a position as a psychologist in the United States and as

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apartheid was an anathema, I, like many of my peers at that time, felt it would be best to leave South Africa. Despite my opposition to apartheid, I was not highly politicized as I had unwittingly allowed myself to be shielded from the full horror of apartheid. This cocooning of the private self from the social self was not unusual, as the whole social structure with its press censorship, strict segregation of blacks and whites, and control of the education system supported this sequestering. To become politicized required an active effort. But once outside of South Africa, with distance, and in the light of some very intense personal experiences including at the level of the spiritual, I decided that returning to South Africa was essential to my being. After a period of reflection, discernment, and much agonizing, I gave up my position and returned to the country of my birth. I remained there until eight years ago, when once again I made the decision to leave, and this time went to Australia, where I currently live. The decision to immigrate involved complex personal reasons but was also informed by the thought that it was not inappropriate for others to take forward the transformation agenda, as indeed they have.

In deciding to share my work in South Africa during the time of the struggle for liberation, and to speak of my subjectivity in that particular context, I am influenced by where I find myself in the current moment. For the first time ever I find that my experience of living in a zone of civil conflict, which for so long alienated me from colleagues in the West, now seems to unite me with them. This is because the violence that has been endemic in Africa, the Middle East, and many other parts of the world, has since 9/11 become more tangible in the West.

The dilemmas that this creates are profound and they encourage the kind of splitting we associate with trauma. Thus in the current time we are encouraged to condone on a political level actions that result in the taking of civilian lives, actions that at a more personal level we would find abhorrent. We are thus encouraged to foster different moralities for different contexts. But should our sense of morality be so context bound?

On one level such contradictions in our moralities may be expected if we embrace multiple subjectivities. However, at what point do such contradictions become unsustainable provoking a need to dissociate? At what stage does an action condoned by our political self come back to haunt us at the level of the personal? How much tension can we sustain when our ethical and spiritual survival comes into conflict with needs like safety and material well-being, if indeed we take this conflict seriously and do not sequester it from our consciousness? Thus it is that I speak of

the trauma of morality as we contemplate the burning questions of our time. These questions include

- Can there be a just war?
- Can the end justify the means?
- Can one retain a mind of one's own in a circumstance that requires collective action?
- Can we transcend binary definitions as we are labeled patriotic or unpatriotic, or even traitorous, on the basis of simplistic criteria such as "for or against"?
- How do we handle feelings of complicity when we may be the beneficiaries of State policies that we do not condone?
- How do we deal with our own vicarious traumatization in the face of human cruelty as we attempt to be moral witnesses?
- How do we cope when the victim, both within us and without becomes the perpetrator?

I hope to share with you my close encounters with these questions as part of the lived reality of my work with a young man of 20. He was a fighter in the armed struggle against apartheid, and I call him Stanley.

### Context of the Clinical Work

The work in question began not in my consulting room, but in my home. One ordinary night I was speaking to a friend with the television on mute. I cast my eye idly toward the screen to become riveted by horror. I saw the image of a woman burning as a crowd of at least 50 youths attacked her. I turned up the sound and learned that she was accused of being a spy for the apartheid government. It was the first incident of what became known as "necklacing," a method used to deal with suspected informers and to strike terror into the hearts of those who might be tempted to become one.

Shortly after this event the township in which this woman lived erupted in flames. This was related to so-called black-on-black violence that the State was fostering by its policy of enlisting informers in the black community and by its deliberate amplification of ethnic difference. The immediate trigger, however, was the assassination of a particular community leader. In the midst of this violence a group of 60 youths between ages 12 and 22 fled for their lives but were soon arrested by the police, detained, mistreated,

and released, but only after an urgent court interdict was brought against the State.

At this point I was asked to put together a team to work with this highly traumatized group, and it was in this context that I met Stanley and worked with him for over 10 years.

The work was sporadic and was always in a different venue at a different time, given Stanley was on the run. This meant we could not have a consistent frame, and safety had to be created through the contact itself. Further, although Stanley clearly wished to speak to me, he never defined this as therapy. Indeed, the idea of a talking cure was foreign to him, but somehow, despite himself, he became engaged, as I had credibility in his eyes. This credibility had nothing to do with my academic or analytic qualifications. Rather, it was based on the fact that I was associated with the team that had engineered his release from detention and provided financial support and safe houses to activists.

Stanley had also come to believe there was value in telling his story. He knew I was writing an oral history about his community and he wished to contribute, as he believed his people's stories needed to be told.

He also saw contact with me as an opportunity to educate the white community, including me, in regard to the real issues in the liberation struggle. However, he acknowledged that as a soldier there were mental burdens and that it was important to have a forum in which to speak especially as he was a leader.

As a leader Stanley was attempting to fulfill the African National Congress's (ANC's) agenda and make the townships ungovernable through civil disobedience, mass consumer boycotts, work stay-aways, protest meetings, and marches. In this role Stanley was brave, true, and in control. But there was little room for vulnerability, and indeed when I first met Stanley alone in the consulting room, or more accurately under a tree, this stance carried over into his contact with me.

I will not describe my initial work with Stanley, but I introduce him briefly and then describe a particular session that took place about 2 years into the work.

## Clinical Introduction

Stanley was a good-looking, vibrant, and charming young man. He was always neatly dressed in worn clothes that signaled his financial hardship. In his demeanor there was a strange combination of hypervigilance and bra-

vado. I felt acutely observed. Stanley also seemed always to have one ear out to hear what was happening in the broader environment, as indeed did I, given the circumstances of our meeting.

In our initial meetings we spoke almost exclusively of his work, but later he shared with me some of his background and his worries. He told me about his matriarchal, father-absent family and how he had to take care of his mother and his siblings. He knew that his activism was endangering them and he felt greatly conflicted, torn between his loyalty to the cause and his protective feelings toward his family.

Our sessions progressed in this manner until a particular session in which Stanley brought me into a very close and traumatic encounter with my own ethical being, an encounter that certainly created a major crisis in my own subjectivity.

### Death and Dissociation

Stanley started this session by asking if I had heard about a recent incident of burning, or necklacing, a suspected informer. He then proceeded to tell me of his involvement in the earlier killing of Maki Skosana, the woman whose image I had been riveted and horrified by as it flashed across my television screen.

He began by describing the death of Maki Skosana and how her killing had proceeded in stages. It began slowly with one or two individuals verbally abusing her, pushing her, and then hitting her. It gained momentum gradually until it reached a crescendo, at which point Maki Skosana died as a result of the injuries she had suffered. These included being set alight. Even after her death, the crowd continued to abuse her body, but I will spare the details.

Stanley spoke of how he approved of the killing of Maki Skosana because the political context justified it. For him, she was an informer who had told the police that the freedom fighters were planning a grenade attack. This information had allowed the police to booby-trap the grenades, which resulted in the death of these fighters. These soldiers were his personal friends, and his sadness about their loss was palpable.

However, Stanley did not dwell on these feelings but moved quickly through what seemed like an unbearable sadness into anger as he backtracked in his narrative to the time before Maki Skosana's death. He described how he and many other members of the community had been awake all night before her killing. They had been mourning the loss of their

friends and had saluted them through praise poems and through chanting and dancing. They discussed in depth the betrayal of their friends, and in the midst of this they decided Maki Skosana was the one to blame.

They then went in search of her, and Stanley described how they tracked her down. As he relayed these events he moved from the flatness of his initial description of Skosana's death to anger at her betrayal of his comrades, to sadness at their loss, and back again to anger. In the moment he redescribed the attack on Maki Skosana, something even more terrible materialized in the room. He became very excited and animated as if caught in an awful *jouissance*, a sexualized pleasure.

I experienced this second description of the attack and the affect attached to it as utterly horrifying and even more paralyzing than the first. I was aghast at this side of Stanley that he now felt safe enough to reveal.

I was also stunned that throughout his entire narrative Stanley showed no awareness of my presence, except when he described the moment that Maki Skosana was set alight. This lack of awareness was remarkable given Stanley's usual hypervigilance and his need to continuously assess my reactions. In this meeting, however, these qualities simply disappeared. He was totally transformed. He was oblivious to my presence and to his surroundings. He seemed to be in a trance, except in the extraordinary moment that he described the igniting of Maki Skosana.

This was a moment that I too remembered, as it was this moment that most disturbed me as I watched riveted to the television, haunted by the image of this woman in intense pain who tried to pull her skirt down as it slipped up. It was a moment for me of maximum contact with her very real humanity as she clung onto a notion of modesty in a circumstance so beyond this, a circumstance of maximum inhumanity.

It was not this aspect of the event, however, that disturbed Stanley. Instead he reported that as Maki Skosana was set alight the smell of her burning hair alarmed him. He got in touch with fear, and momentarily he questioned the legitimacy of taking a human life. However, this recovery of a different morality and self-state did not last long. His political self, defined as it was by the imagined gaze and ideology of this particular crowd, took over from a more personal self, and Stanley was swept back into the crowd's excitement and mood as they killed Maki Skosana.

As Stanley described his fluctuating states of mind at the time of the killing, it seemed to me that his self-states in the room changed in a parallel process. As he spoke of how Maki Skosana was set alight, as in the crowd, so too in the session, he seemed to come out of the trance like state he had been in. For the first time as he described the moment Maki Skosana was

set alight he reestablished eye contact with me and seemed once again to be aware of my presence, just as he had become aware of her presence.

However, in this moment of awareness I was amazed to find that Stanley seemed to expect me to condemn him for his fearful reaction when Maki Skosana was ignited. In the session he explained to me that he had never before killed a person and linked this to his fear. It did not occur to him that it was participation in the attack itself that was cause for disapprobation, at least from my perspective. It most certainly was not his moment of fear that was a problem for me. His perception that this was the case was totally at odds with what I felt at that moment. It was also at odds with how Stanley normally saw me as “not radical enough,” yet in the session he imagined I was so “radical” that I would disapprove of his moment of pause and fear.

Nothing could have been further from the truth of what I may have thought, had I been able to think at all. Indeed thought was impossible as I listened to Stanley’s account of how his own personal conscience came to be replaced by that of the group as they killed Maki Skosana.

### A Crisis in the Subjectivity of the Analyst

I turn now to my own subjectivity, and although thought had fled, my emotions were all too present, albeit that I could only identify them in retrospect. At the time the experience was inchoate and incoherent.

Stanley was someone I admired. I supported his cause. For me he was the equivalent of a French resistance fighter warring against the evil of Nazi persecution. How then could I come to terms with the atrocity he described as well as his reaction to it, a reaction that embraced excitement without remorse? Yet this atrocity had to be seen against the backdrop of the abomination of apartheid, which was of equivalent if not greater proportions. His fight against this could not simply be dismissed because of the heinous nature of his act.

I felt the ground beneath my feet slip. I felt sucked into a black hole. At this moment there was no possibility of saying anything or bringing my subjectivity to bear on the situation; such subjectivity had been massively disrupted. I felt void and empty. In this state I offered no resistance to Stanley, who attributed to me his own self-recriminations.

In retrospect, I understood the dynamics between us in psychoanalytic terms implicating projection, projective identification, Oedipal dynamics, and my own vicarious traumatization. At the time, though, these thoughts did not enter my mind. I was too overwhelmed to think and was simply in



touch with the emergence in the room of what I have termed elsewhere an anti-analytic third (Straker, 2006), something pernicious and dark. I deeply experienced a crisis in my own subjectivity, as I became a witness to gross inhumanity in a way that I had not intended. Moral witnessing had been part of my agenda in the anti-apartheid struggle. This turn of events made me a witness from a very different position.

As I tried desperately to come to terms with this crisis in my own subjectivity I both had to realize how many parts of myself I had previously split off and had to begin to reclaim them. I began to realize how strongly I had felt that safety and hope for the future resided with individuals like Stanley. I began to own how much I had surrendered the responsibility of carrying this for myself in coming to terms with this.

I had to begin to confront how much I had allowed white guilt to cripple me. This is not to say that collective guilt for past injuries should not be embraced. It should be, and I certainly felt guilty not only in regard to history but also currently as a white in an apartheid state. I also knew how little my own contribution was relative to others, including Stanley.

Nevertheless I came to understand that white guilt, like all guilt, has a potential to have an unconscious, potentially destructive underbelly. It encourages us to give away parts of ourselves and can immobilize us. I knew that I had to claim back for myself what I had lodged in Stanley, hope and trust in the future, and agency in shaping it.

The reclamation of these parts of myself took some time, as I still wanted what Stanley held for me—namely, goodness and a hope for a better future—to remain intact. I did not want this messy and terrible experience embodying violence and brutality to become part of us. I wanted violence and brutality to remain in the Other (i.e., in the State).

I wished to distance from the knowledge Stanley had imparted to me. Yet I felt that this knowledge now bound us together in a secret of massive proportions. For some time it was not possible for me to see Stanley or myself as subjects. I felt he was an object in my gaze as I struggled to see him as a person beyond this heinous act. I also felt that I was an object in my own gaze as I watched myself from outside of myself, struggling to come to terms with the facts. I was deeply embroiled in the kind of impasse described by Pizer (2003), Ringstrom (2003), and many others. I felt the numbness of the vicarious traumatization that exposure to human cruelty brings.

I am not sure how the session ended. Did I end it somehow or did Stanley run out of steam? I cannot quite recall. The only thing I am sure of is that he did not ask my view on the matter of the killing of Maki Skosana and for this I was vastly thankful, as words had fled.

I felt that I had done as much as I could simply staying in some way present, albeit in a consciously experienced split and dissociated state with role reversals and fluctuating identifications and a wish to be out of the room, yet paradoxically wishing to stay in contact.

Any comment I could have made would have attempted to engage Stanley's fear in regard to his transgression. I would have attempted to engage a morality that condemned the killing of Maki Skosana, as did many in the black community including Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela.

However I had to acknowledge that it was not my comrades and/or family members who had been destroyed by the information the police had obtained. I might have felt differently had this been so. This knowledge inhibited me in sharing my response. I was further inhibited in my exploration of both Stanley and my own inner world by the understanding that clinical work in a context of continuing traumatic stress is not the same as clinical work in a context of posttraumatic stress (Straker and Sanctuaries Counselling Team, 1987; Straker and Moosa, 1994) and that this needed to be taken into account.

Despite these difficulties in sharing my responses, my confrontation with myself continued apace. I knew as never before that I could not accept that the end justifies the means. Yet this was not a simple matter.

Apartheid was a supreme evil, and although it was not a planned, systematized genocide, as was the holocaust, its evil was clear and undeniable; Stanley in many and diverse ways contributed to its downfall, and this had to count for something. Yet I still could not come to terms with this act.

More and more I came to know that I needed to hold on to my own beliefs about right and wrong and to place them on my own agenda. I too had a right to have a stake in the sort of society that would emerge post-liberation. However, this entailed the necessity to relinquish my unconscious wish to believe that all that was good and right was invested in those in the struggle and all that was bad was located outside ourselves in the State.

I knew that I had to take ever more seriously the sentiments that Mandela and the ANC so often expressed, namely, that the conflict in South Africa was at its most basic level not one between black and white but between those who were for and those who were against an inhuman system. I believe it was this wisdom of Mandela and other leaders of the ANC that allowed the later transition to democracy to occur without the revenge that had been predicted. It was a wisdom that is as pertinent today as it was then, a wisdom that dictated a very specific and narrow definition of who the enemy is. It was based on criteria over which individuals has a

choice. It was this definition that seemed to be at the heart of the possibility of peace.

To reach these personal insights took a great deal of time and much discussion with trusted peers. Yet I think that it was being forced to confront my guilt and my split-off parts that allowed a deepening of trust between Stanley and me. Over time he too had to grapple with how many of our differences were a function of class, gender, power, and race positions and how far they were a function of our own personhoods. Both of us were therefore challenged to look at how much we could really tolerate the otherness and subject status of the other. We had to look at each other more clearly, and not only through the lens of the hope of salvation that each of us initially carried for the other.

We once again revisited our differences in depth at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings when it ruled that the evidence against Maki Skosana was flimsy. However, Stanley never really moved from his position that it was the will of the people that Maki Skosana be killed and that he was merely carrying out their will. This provided him with moral justification for his actions. Furthermore his feelings in regard to any activists/soldiers who were chastised by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission mirrored those of Vietnam veterans. He felt betrayed by the society he had defended (Lifton, 1973).

As we revisited Maki Skosana's death in this new context I felt my subjectivity challenged once again, and I know that Stanley felt the same. Yet I could be with him very differently this time around and could understand his feelings of betrayal even though my views remained very different to his. We were more able to have a subject-to-subject encounter, and this was no mean feat.

I felt that I had been transformed by my encounter with Stanley as I am sure that all of us are when we grapple with profound differences between ourselves and our patients and yet remain in the dialogue.

Perhaps the site of most transformation for me was in understanding that not only is the personal the political, but the political is deeply personal. This is so not just in an abstract manner, but in our ongoing lived reality. As world events unfold in the current time, it is to this knowledge that I find that I return.

I learned at a very intimate level that there are very few clean hands in a war, although both sides will claim that some hands are cleaner than others. The position of ontological innocence is not sustainable. This does not mean there are no innocent victims. Innocent civilians, men, women, and children are being killed all the time. Rather, it is that not only do violence

and counterviolence by their nature generate atrocities, but such violence has a historical context in the first place. These contexts include colonialism, slavery, economic exploitation, and religious fanaticism, and in this sense there is no ontological innocence, as individuals are always enfolded in discourses that precede and shape our drives, desires, and decisions.

We need to think about this even as we are encouraged not to do so by our elected leaders, who focus on our innocence and our danger, as well as the need for collective action. This focus by its nature does not allow too much attention to individual thought.

Nevertheless, I fear the rhetoric of war that now surrounds us, whether it is a war against the West or a war against terrorism, as I fear the moral danger that war produces. War sanctions that which is usually forbidden. In commenting on this in Australia, Savage (2005) highlighted that in our antiterrorism laws, for example, we are in danger of awarding the opposition an "own goal" victory if we undermine too much the democracy that we wish to protect. It is a fine line and a delicate balance.

In thinking through our own ethical and spiritual survival it is perhaps important to note that Freud (1919) thought that aggression and the expression thereof was part of the natural human condition and that this applied to all of us. He also commented on our ingenuity in justifying our own aggression. He did not ask what are the conditions that produce aggression but rather under what conditions we may be prepared to constrain it. Fanon's (1963) views on aggression are even more extreme as he argued that violence might even serve a healing function for the oppressed. We may not find this idea palatable or appealing, indeed I personally do not. However Fanon's views have a currency in many intellectual circles of note and are part of the rhetoric of a number of revolutionary struggles and thus cannot simply be dismissed without thought.

At this point I draw the paper to a close, but before ending must comment on the fact that I have spoken of Stanley at all, as to do so implicates a power relation of a different kind. I wish to note that not only did Stanley give me permission to tell his story, but he actively wanted his perspective to be represented.

This having been said, I end by repeating that a peacetime morality is different to a wartime one. Now more than ever we are being challenged to confront the trauma of morality as our concerns regarding our physical safety and material well-being struggle to stay on the same page as concerns about our ethical and spiritual survival.

This conflict of interests creates a circumstance in which the push toward dissociating our different selves amplifies. What we may justify in the

public domain moves ever further from what we may justify in the private one. A theory that celebrates a multiplicity of selves can accommodate to this tension. However, my work with Stanley leads me to ask, at what point does this tension between different moralities become unsustainable and lead us either to largely ignore what is happening in the political sphere or alternatively to become personally embroiled such that our different selves become dissociated and split apart? Perhaps this is a question for us all.

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