

Room for a view

Unconscious melancholy

My daughter claims I have always been sad. In fact, she says she has inherited my unconscious melancholy. I don't think I am a morbid person. I feel content with my life — with my marriage of 40 years, my three wonderful children, my home in a part of the world where others save their pennies to visit for two weeks out of the year. Even the loss of my work as a result of cancer has brought some positive things. Yet I know what my daughter means. I do carry about some deep, mysterious sadness and have done so all my life.

I was not always aware of it. Had my daughter made her comments 15 years ago, I would have disagreed with her. Around that time we were visiting some Jewish friends. They were upset with me for not teaching my children more about our Jewish heritage. I told them that my own childhood was lacking in Jewish religious education and that I wanted my children to make their own decisions about spiritual values. If they were interested in Judaism they could explore it themselves. Our hosts became quite angry, and at one point the husband raised his voice and called me a “Holocaust survivor.” That ended the discussion. I thought his comment was bizarre, but I always remembered it just the same.

A few years later, I participated in a workshop sponsored by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. The seminar dealt with

issues of death and dying as well as other kinds of loss, such as divorce and abuse. For reasons I do not recall, I started to explore my feelings around being a Jew, an exercise that culminated with me screaming “I am a Jew” at the top of my lungs for several minutes. I never hid the fact of my Jewishness, but I didn't advertise it either.

My last name is originally German and I seemed to pass as a Gentile. When I entered medical school I received invitations from medical fraternities to join their ranks. During “rush week” I quickly noticed that none of the other applicants were Jewish. (As a Jew you learn to recognize other “landsmen.”) I was asked to join one of the fraternities, but when I asked them if they had any restrictive policies about Jewish members, the embarrassed reply was Yes. It then became apparent that only non-Jews were invited to rush week, but because no one knew me, and my last name gave no clue, I was inadvertently asked to participate. The good news is that a second fraternity chose to change their charter and welcomed me as their first Jewish brother.

My only formal Jewish education was at an ultra-Reform temple in

Chicago. We jokingly called it St. Sinai on the Lake. I attended Sunday school, and at age 13 I was confirmed, rather than bar mitzvahed as my older brothers had been. I never learned Hebrew or travelled to Israel. My future attendance at temple was on ceremonial occasions only.

I have a not-so-latent obsession with the Holocaust and the Second World War. My family laughs when I go out to rent a video; they want to know what Holocaust film I will return with. I read books, fiction and non-fiction, on Holocaust themes. I especially enjoy those that describe personal journeys involving dangerous escapes or heroic deeds. Sometimes I just want to read about life in the shtetl or ghetto. And, to be honest, the acts of horror also captivate my attention. But the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, is the closest I've been to the physical reality of the war.

Why this morbid fascination and curiosity? Where does my sadness originate? My immediate family escaped the Holocaust in Germany, first by moving to Europe, and ultimately by emigrating to Chicago in 1938. I was born two years later — an “accident.” After I was



born my mother, then in her 40s, was hospitalized briefly for depression. Was it an accident that I was conceived around the time my paternal grandmother was murdered in Theresienstadt? Was I unconsciously brought into this world to replace lost souls?

My parents never discussed their pain at leaving Europe. My father, a physician, left an important university appointment in 1933, the day after Hitler became Reich chancellor. How did it feel to say goodbye to family for the last time? How did it feel to survive when so

many perished? My father's sister died in the Warsaw Ghetto. I was told some facts. I was shown some photos in an album. Feelings and emotions were never expressed. We spoke German at home.

I have a video of my aunt talking to an interviewer about her life before leaving Germany. She described her work in the underground, and Kristallnacht, and the death of those close to her. But she turns off her emotional reactions as soon as they begin to surface and, instead, focuses on an intellectual discussion of events.

When I was 11 years old my parents took me to Europe for a summer holiday. It seems remarkable to me now that we went to Germany and Austria as tourists in 1951, only six years after the war. The railway stations were still mostly rubble from the Allied bombs. Later I learned that my father went to Frankfurt to claim financial compensation from the German government. I even received a few hundred dollars every month I was in university, as part of the reparation agreement.

Later I went on to specialize in psychiatry. Another accident? As part of my training I spent a lot of time examining my life and my family interactions. I saw in myself a tendency to deny my emotions and to intellectualize. I worked hard to reverse this trend. This period coincided with the hippie era, and so drugs also assisted me in my quest for emotional and spiritual answers. I learned a lot, but until my daughter mentioned it, I never really recognized my sadness.

Now I understand this sadness as inherited, almost archetypal. It has roots in Judaism and branches in my immediate family of origin. Some of the flowers are in my family, and the seeds are dispersing to grow in the future. The difference now is awareness. Sadness is not the problem. Denial is.

My daughter, a filmmaker, has plans to make a documentary exploring our relationship and our mutual experience of sadness. The idea occurred to her when I talked about visiting Germany and seeing the birthplace of my parents. I plan to go back to Germany, to visit a concentration camp, and to see the old house belonging to our family, which has recently been relocated to a museum, to be restored as an example of German-Jewish heritage. My daughter wants to travel with me and, perhaps, to witness the healing of some wounds. The thought of this common adventure fills me with happiness. I want to see how the film ends.

Peter Uhlmann
Psychiatrist
Powell River, BC

Reflections by Michael Gordon on the lingering effects of the Holocaust appeared in the previous issue.