

Addendum: COVID-19, psychoanalysis, and large-group psychology

Donald Trump's remarks about the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, which took place on August 11–12, 2017 motivated me to write this book. These remarks were perceived as an affront for societal division. An examination of the causes of such divisions became a focus of this book which I wrote during the summer of 2019 while in North Cyprus.

The impeachment of President Donald Trump occurred on December 18, 2019. The United States House of Representatives approved articles of impeachment on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The Senate acquitted Donald Trump at the end of his impeachment trial on February 5, 2020. His acquittal was almost unanimously on political party lines. We witnessed the deepening political division in the United States. During this period Donald Trump once more reflected the character of his personality organization.

As the final editing of the book was underway, the global outbreak of COVID-19 became an unexpected “enemy” for humankind. During the first week of March 2020, I was in Vilnius as a guest of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I participated in an international meeting which was part of Lithuania's celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of its secession from the Soviet Union. My interdisciplinary team from the University of Virginia's Center for the Study and Human Interaction (CSMHI) and I had first gone to Lithuania in April 1992. At that time, we met with representatives of the Lithuanian government and then facilitated a meeting with participants from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the Soviet

Union. This was the beginning of our seven years work in the Baltic states, mostly in Estonia. We tried to provide help and support for the Baltic states in their efforts to restore their independence in a peaceful fashion. As March 2020 approached, I was aware of the danger of getting contaminated with the corona virus especially through travel. But memories of our work in Lithuania and the other Baltic states made me to deny this danger. I wanted to take part in this government-sponsored meeting. I was also excited that the meeting organizers wanted this gathering to be “a marriage between diplomacy and psychoanalysis.”

The meeting was opened by the former Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus and was attended by well-known scholars, diplomats, and artists from Lithuania as well as other countries. The Lithuanians remembered the individual and societal traumas of their undigested Soviet past. I could easily hear their continuing fear of Russia. This meeting also opened a door for Lithuania to examine what had happened to the Lithuanian Jews in 1941. In that period of time there were approximately 250,000 Jews in Lithuania, or 10% of the total population. During the German invasion 206,800 of them were murdered by the Nazis and Lithuanian collaborators.

While I was in Lithuania, social distancing did not seem to be in the minds of people at the meeting, open markets, and in the streets. On my way back to the United States, I had to change airplanes and had to wait at the Amsterdam International Airport for four hours. I lost my denial mechanism in this crowded environment. After coming home to the United States, I noticed that for the first fourteen days I was checking to see if I might have any COVID-19 symptoms. Then I began collecting observations on the impact of the corona virus pandemic on individuals and large groups.

After the spread of COVID-19, the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) and other psychoanalytic associations provided guidelines for distance treatment by taking advantage of phone or online technologies. At the present time, I am supervising the therapeutic cases of nine younger psychoanalysts in different countries. I know in detail the life stories and internal worlds of the sixteen patients they are treating. Some patients began lying on a couch in their homes. They would only see via the internet the analyst at the beginning and the end of their sessions and talk to the analyst and hear him or her during the rest of the therapeutic session.

It is beyond the scope of this book to give detailed examples of the *initial* impact of the virus pandemic on individuals behind observable denial, fear,

anxiety, and devastating pain. I only wish to share some of my observations on how the sixteen analysands have responded to the pandemic and social distancing from their psychoanalysts. They returned, consciously and unconsciously, to their childhood losses and re-experienced anxieties and old defense mechanisms and fantasies linked to such losses.

Five middle-aged patients expressed open anger towards older people in their environments and in their cities. During their early childhood these five individuals had not received good parenting. They had experienced open and hidden guilt feelings due to their rage against their parents. During their analyses they were having a difficult time with letting their murderous fantasies surface. Now they could openly express their murderous rage against the older people who represented their parental figures because they would not be actual murderers, COVID-19 would be the killer. They would be saved then from feeling guilty.

I also observed how a massive shared threat on an individual's well-being could connect with this individual's large-group history. A man in his early thirties had been in analysis for four years when COVID-19 became a pandemic. He and his ancestors are members of a rather small Jewish community in a country where they were not directly affected by the Holocaust. During the first telecommunication session with his analyst, he filled the hour by referring to his identification with Anne Frank. He felt that, by not being able to come to his analyst's office, he was forced to go into hiding, like Anne Frank had done. At home he became preoccupied with the news of the virus situation in Israel.

Psychoanalysts themselves, staying alone in their offices or at another private location while continuing to work with their analysands via computer began to seek support for their own loneliness. For example, one psychoanalyst noticed two pigeons on his balcony. He started feeding them. Then he built a nest for them and began to keep his door to the balcony open. Within two weeks these two birds began entering into his office, eating bird food on the psychoanalyst's desk while he was conducting distant psychoanalysis. I must add that one of his patients while lying on a couch at home for her treatment away from her family members began holding on her cat tightly on her home couch. I also realized how I, as the supervisor, was required to be very careful to remain as a non-anxious, steady object for my supervisees.

Now let us look at the *initial* societal/political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. As I listen to the coronavirus news updates, I realize how they are

closely linked to themes that appear in this book. How border psychology, societal divisions, racist attitudes, and expectations from political leaders have become the primary preoccupations of large groups along with medical, economic, and other realistic issues. Let us examine this by looking briefly at different types of major shared catastrophes.

Some massive traumas are from earthquakes, tropical storms, floods, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, and other natural causes. When nature shows its fury and people suffer, those affected tend ultimately to accept the event as fate or as the will of God. Following man-made accidental disasters, survivors blame a small number of individuals for their carelessness. Both natural and accidental catastrophes usually do not bring ethnic, national, or religious border issues to our minds, unless the second-type disaster is like the 1986 Chernobyl accident that spewed tons of radioactive dust into the atmosphere. Sometimes, murdering a “transference figure” for the members of the large group, such as John F. Kennedy in the USA, Yitzhak Rabin in Israel, Olof Palme in Sweden, Giorgi Chanturia in the Republic of Georgia, and Rafik Hariri in Lebanon, provokes traumatic societal responses. When the murderer and the murdered leader belong to the same large-group identity there is no impact on border psychology.

Other massive traumas are due to the *deliberate* actions of an enemy group, as in ethnic, national, religious and political ideological conflicts, racism, terrorism, wars, and genocides. Earlier in this book, I wrote that only some massive traumas at the hand of the Other may evolve as a chosen trauma. However, all deliberately induced social traumas by the Other inflame large-group identity issues and border psychology as soon as they occur. The protection and the maintenance of the metaphorical large-group tent’s canvas becomes a shared preoccupation.

In Chapter Eight, I wrote about a fantasy of Martians coming to Earth and forcing human beings from different races and ethnic and religious backgrounds to come together against a common enemy. As a non-visible enemy, COVID-19 did not come from Mars. But like the imaginary Martians, it threatens all human beings: old people, young people, rich people, poor people, famous people, and refugees. This threat right away initiated a need to protect physical borders between countries and some locations within the same country. Since every large group needs to protect itself this was an expected and realistic development. This development, however, became linked to leader–follower psychology, large-group identity, and political themes. Donald Trump’s usage of the term “Chinese virus” is an example of

this. Increased attention to the physical borders and social distancing also created societal divisions and racist attitudes within the same country, such as between old persons and young persons, and white persons and persons who appeared of Asian ancestry.

Interestingly, incredible communication technology has begun to create increasing psychological “holes” in the physical borders. For example, I began receiving email message from individuals whom I had met in many countries and who, in normal times, were not in contact with me. Sharing the same “enemy,” I sensed, had brought us together again. I received an invitation from China to give a Zoom seminar to mental health workers on social trauma, loss, and mourning. I willingly did that on April 3, 2020. I was informed that 8,000 individuals listened to me. When my seminar ended there was time to receive questions from the listeners. I noted that the first question they asked me was not a medical one. They wanted to know why Donald Trump had referred COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.” I noted large-group identity concern was a prominent concern.

In Chapter Six, I wrote how the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI) meetings, have become a symbol for me illustrating the importance of psychologically informed dialogues in removing irrational views of one another and opening a reflective space of communication among people with different large-group identities. On April 5, 2020, members of the IDI had their first telecommunication gathering under the leadership of the IDI President Gerard Fromm. Our member from Palestine could not join us due to technical problems. The other twenty-two members from seven different counties shared their personal experiences, the nature of the anxieties related to business, the impact of the grieving process and its rituals, and the anger at betrayal by incompetent persons in authority. Listening to other members of the IDI, I also noted once more concerns about large-group identity and societal divisions, especially those supported by organized religions. We noted that deep denial over COVID-19’s danger by some local religious leaders and religious organizations is taking place worldwide. The day after our first IDI telecommunication gathering, I heard from a colleague in the Republic of Georgia. She described the political reasons why the government was not daring to interfere with the Orthodox Church. Church members were continuing to have wine from one shared spoon and kiss the same cross.

Since Donald Trump’s remarks about the events in Charlottesville on August 11–12, 2017 motivated me to write this book, I will finish my

Addendum by noticing how his language pattern at the present time, in April 2020, continues to stimulate societal division in the USA. During his daily virus briefings, the words “incredible” and “fantastic” are heard again and again. Sometimes within a minute he mentions “incredible” three times. Almost all of his themes connected with this word refers to his and his followers “greatness.” Meanwhile, he continues, during almost every briefing, to verbally devalue those who question his sense of superiority.

By looking back at deadly plagues throughout history, such as the Black Death peaking in Europe and causing the deaths of 75–200 million people in Eurasia and North Africa in the fourteenth century, some scholars expect huge social, economic, and technological changes after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. We will have to wait to evaluate from a psychological point of view how this “enemy” will influence large-group psychology and international relationships.

April 16, 2020