

# TRAVELING THROUGH TIME

How Trauma Plays Itself Out  
in Families, Organizations,  
and Society

*M. Gerard Fromm*



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*For*

*Maryjane*

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# Acknowledgments

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Of course, behind everything is Erik Erikson, as foundation and inspiration. The Introduction and subsequent chapters take up his importance to the field of human development and to the Erikson Institute. Here let me simply say that it has been an honor of a lifetime to have worked with—and through the Institute, for—him.

Finally, to my fellow traveler, counselor, muse, and life partner, my wife, Maryjane, thank you for being there every step of the way. I'm so grateful to have shared these adventures with you. I love you with all my heart and dedicate this book to you.

## About the author

**M. Gerard Fromm**, PhD, is a distinguished faculty member of the Erikson Institute of the Austen Riggs Center and a fellow of the American Board and Academy of Psychoanalysis. He was the first Evelyn Stefansson Nef Director of the Erikson Institute, and directed the Therapeutic Community Program at Riggs for many years before that. Dr. Fromm has taught at, and consulted to, a number of psychoanalytic institutes across the country and has served on the faculties of the Yale Child Study Center and Harvard Medical School. He is president of the International Dialogue Initiative, an interdisciplinary group that studies the psychodynamics of societal conflict. He is also a past president of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations and of the Center for the Study of Groups and Social Systems in Boston. Dr. Fromm has directed or served on the staff of Group Relations Conferences in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Israel. In addition to an independent practice of clinical and organizational consulting, he is also a partner in College Health and Counseling Services Consulting. Dr. Fromm has presented and published widely, including the edited volumes, *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma across Generations*; *A Spirit That Impels:*

*Play, Creativity and Psychoanalysis*; and (with Bruce L. Smith) *The Facilitating Environment: Clinical Applications of Winnicott's Theory*. He is also the author of a book of clinical papers called *Taking the Transference, Reaching toward Dreams: Clinical Studies in the Intermediate Area*.

## INTRODUCTION

# Traveling through time

*“Bullets don’t just travel through skin and bone. They travel through time.”*

These words were tattooed onto the shoulder of a young woman whose father was shot during “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland. This wrenching, volatile, but also binding truth is the subject of this book. It’s a truth about traumatic experiences that happen to a family, but also to a society and to the organizations that link these intimate units with the larger context of history and culture. It’s also a truth about the way trauma plays out over time, including between generations. This book, organized in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, is a collection of stories and reflections on this phenomenon.

Trauma is a vast subject, and there has been considerable research on its various aspects over the last several decades (Brenner, 2001; Caruth, 2014; Coates et al., 2003; Fromm, 2012a; Hamburger et al., 2020; Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk et al., 1996; to name just a few). My focus will be on stories of trauma: the conditions that lead to it, the forms it takes, the ways it affects a person’s life and the lives of others, and how that fallout might be addressed. Etymologically, trauma is a *wound*

to an organism, a puncturing of the physical, but also the psychological “skin” or boundary that protects inside from outside. When Freud took up the study of trauma, he described the “protective shield” (1920g, p. 27) parents provide for children. What makes a psychological wound traumatic is that the events leading to it are extremely powerful, existentially threatening to the core self, and happen suddenly, in a way that breaches the person’s now internalized protective shield against massive overstimulation. The capacity for thought and even for feeling are overwhelmed. Instead, trauma leads to a reflexive effort to cut oneself off from the unbearable. A broader definition of trauma would also recognize the debilitating effects of cumulative traumatic stress over time, leading to sustained, self-protective warping of a person’s development, to chronic self-destructive efforts at dulling the pain, and to actions that might very well traumatize others.

The stories in this book were, to some degree, gathered and certainly shaped through my experience at the Austen Riggs Center, a small psychiatric hospital in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The treatment program is unusual in today’s world; quite troubled patients are seen in intensive psychotherapy in an open therapeutic setting. The reader will learn more about this program in the chapters that follow. Suffice it to say for now that the very personal data from such intensive work, and from the breadth of activities patients and staff engage in together, are quite rare these days. Mental health professionals do not usually get to know the patient as a person in such depth, don’t usually learn about the sufferings of their parents and grandparents, don’t see their artistic work in the local gallery or on the local stage, and don’t tend to discuss problems of living and working together in patient-led community meetings.

It is this rare and precious data that led Riggs to create the Erikson Institute, which I had the good fortune to direct for many years. Named for Erik Erikson, the Institute’s job was to bring this data into dialogue with others to see what all of us could learn in the overlap of our interests. We did this in many different ways: fall conferences on subjects like war trauma and the psychological effects of social media, an annual creativity seminar, a pro bono consultation service for local human service organizations, an annual conference for college counseling centers, interdisciplinary forums, clinical workshops and, perhaps most importantly, a program of Erikson Scholars-in-Residence. We learned

from these events, and so did our partners-in-dialogue. In particular, academicians interested in psychoanalysis, who tended to be already extremely knowledgeable about its concepts, found Riggs case conferences to be transformational learning experiences; as one Erikson Scholar said, Riggs was “where the theoretical rubber meets the clinical road.”

Throughout all of this, we held, as our North Star, Erikson himself, this restless, creative man who, with his own wounds from a complicated growing up and only a high school degree, became the pre-eminent developmental psychoanalyst of the mid-twentieth century. Erikson spent ten years on the staff of the Austen Riggs Center. He was a full-time clinician, but also an intellectual traveler. In a sense, while keeping one foot in the psychoanalytic consulting room, he put the other into a different discipline—history, anthropology, sociology—to see what could be learned at those intersections. His first major psycho-historical work, *Young Man Luther* (1958), was to some degree inspired and informed by his treatment of a patient at Riggs, whose breakdown, like Luther’s four centuries before, occurred in the seminary.

Erikson’s insight was that a child’s development is not only profoundly influenced by the family context, but that that family context is profoundly influenced by its historical and sociocultural context (Erikson, 1950). And that a young person’s struggle toward identity may also include influencing the next phase of that larger context, for better or worse. Witness his work on Gandhi (1969) but also on Hitler (1950), both of whose lives were shaped by the traumatic conditions—the brutality, humiliations, and pervasive losses—of their societies. The French psychoanalysts, Davoine and Gaudilliere (2004), write about how trauma associated with the “big history” plays itself out in the “little history” of ordinary families, some of whose members become the patients we see in our consulting rooms. A startling finding from their work is how often the patient’s troubles have to do with how a family’s traumatic history has been “cut out” (p. 61), so to speak, from the official narrative, in response to which madness becomes a research instrument for finding the truth.

This book, like an earlier one (Fromm, 2012a), grew from this clinical finding, as did three Erikson Institute conferences on the intergenerational transmission of trauma. The experience of that young woman in Northern Ireland has much to teach us, even if we don’t

necessarily recognize trauma in our own family histories. Indeed, it tends to be the fate of trauma that its effects slip below the surface when bad times have passed. “Men learn from history only that men learn nothing from history,” said World War II general Francis Braceland (1946, p. 587), paraphrasing Hegel, a sentiment also documented in the work of the trauma theorist, Judith Herman (1992). There are, of course, good reasons for this: the relief people feel when the horror is over, the wish to protect other family members from their suffering, the desperate need to forget, and so on.

But sometimes, what can't be emotionally contained, thought about, or spoken in one generation is passed on, in one way or another, to the next. Sadly, in some cases, an unspoken, perhaps unspeakable truth about trauma is taken out on, and thereby *communicated*, to the next generation in action, the consequences of which can be devastating. Viewed from this angle, we see trauma and its effects all around us. In American society, “deaths of despair” from opioids and horrific explosions of violence generate enormous trauma but also spring from it. We see again and again how abuse begets abuse. And, of course, natural disasters, which often include a man-made element—like the coronavirus disease and the mismanagement of its treatment—have traumatic consequences, which may be passed along in one way or another.

The ubiquity of trauma risks diminishing its importance; if everything is traumatic, nothing really is. And indeed it's important to make distinctions. Generally speaking, the effects of trauma from natural disasters differ from trauma at the hands of other human beings. Some events that might be traumatic for one person—given that person's history and resources—might not be for another. Resilience is real and needs to be studied along with trauma. But to minimize the latter is a step in the direction of learning nothing from history, a dangerous if all too human step, as we are witnessing now in the coronavirus crisis.

Another important distinction to hold onto, as we consider the lives of families, is that between blame and responsibility. “Blaming the parents” is often an accusation leveled at the mental health profession, and sometimes therapists act in ways that seem to do just that. In my experience, this is not helpful. But the protest against blaming parents may well have become a societally supported and politically correct resistance against really looking at what happens between parents

and children. Nobody seriously doubts that parents affect children; in fact, parents want to and they should! That's what parenting means. Most want to take, and often want help in taking, that responsibility. But because they do, their vulnerability to guilt is enormous and their potential defensiveness understandable. Parents know they are in a position of great responsibility but they often feel bewildered about how to exercise it. Ideally, it's the role of mental health professionals to provide something—some alliance, some understanding—that helps parents do what they couldn't do before. The pediatrician-psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, did this for years on the BBC and in his consultation service. Perhaps, this book will also offer something in that direction for practitioners helping today's parents.

Simplistically ascribing a child's troubles to a parent's way of being is a mistake. It fails to consider that the developing child is also developing a mind, through which his or her feelings and fantasies about a parent's behavior are being processed and potentially misinterpreted. This sometimes leads to vicious circles of parent-child interaction that are hard to escape by oneself. There can certainly be exceptions, but parents are generally doing the best they can within the limitations of their resources. One of those limitations—the one this book studies—has to do with those parents who may be, unwittingly but powerfully, caught up in their own larger traumatic history, which can have serious effects on their children. From this angle, a child's behavior, sometimes their breakdown, may be an effort to break through to a larger set of truths and to something restorative for everyone. This is one of those clinical findings that the Riggs treatment program affirms again and again.

Erikson was a traveler, both intellectually and physically. This adopted son eventually found a professional home at the Austen Riggs Center, which became a home base for further travels. Erikson Institute activities brought us into contact with many travelers from other disciplines over the years, and have brought me into my own travels since then. To some degree, this book is a diary of those travels: a journal of the people I've met, what I've learned from them, and what I've found myself thinking about in response. When, in his later years, Erikson was asked how he envisioned the Erikson Institute, he made it clear that he did not want the Institute to dedicate itself to his theories, but rather to his stance: the "way of looking at things" (1950, p. 403) described above,

to which we might add the kinds of things—in history and culture and human development—to be looked at.

This “way of looking at things” could be called “applied psychoanalysis.” Even though the psychoanalytic part is no longer central to the field of mental health, ironically, its core truths have been incorporated into various disciplines and into society’s thinking more broadly: that childhood is profoundly formative; that child development includes the child’s relation to his body; that traumatic stress is destructive to that development—the more so the earlier it occurs; that human attachment is critical; that early relationship troubles tend to play out in later life; that people feel inner conflict; that they do things without knowing why and then resist that knowledge; and so on. Arguably one of Freud’s greatest discoveries, coinciding with research occurring in the young science of psychology, was free association: that we all possess a second form of thinking—more imagistic and associative—which coexists alongside our more linear, logical, verbal thinking, and can be an enormous resource in understanding ourselves and our world.

Dreams are one example of this, and the number of articles in the popular press about dreams during the coronavirus crisis attests to another way psychoanalytic thinking is now part of the culture. Of course, the psychoanalytic task of discovering psychological meaning in human behavior no longer centers so fully on Freud’s work; many other theorists, some of whom the reader will meet in this volume, have broadened and deepened his initial insights. And those who apply psychoanalysis to other fields of study are no longer happy with the word “applied”; it’s too one-directional and hints at too much expertise. In my time at the Erikson Institute, we tried to maintain a stance that was curious and consultative, rather than knowing and authoritative. And whatever learning we were able to offer was repaid by the learning we received.

One extremely powerful application of psychoanalysis readers will meet in this volume is a methodology for studying organizational dynamics called Group Relations Conferences. Another is a way of studying collective anxiety called Social Dreaming (Fromm, 2000; Lawrence, 1991). Here is an example of the latter, told in a closing session of the former.

There was a hospital that looked like a lighthouse. Ariel Sharon, gravely ill, was being wheeled in on a gurney. But the treatment in this hospital was unusual. People were hung upside-down for a while, and that seemed to help them get better.

The group's work on this dream—taken up for its collective meaning—quickly led to a startling understanding. The conference had turned members' understanding of their home organizations upside down. They had become aware of its problematic dynamics and, to some degree, of their own unwitting participation in them. Now they were going back to the so-called right-side-up world and they were frightened! I include this story here to underline that a psychoanalytic “way of looking at things” invites us to consider the upside-down world: one in which the truth people discover through their own experience might be markedly different from what is accepted as truth in the right-side-up world; one in which the apparently rational may turn out to be deeply irrational; one in which trauma is no less traumatic because attending to it would be painful.

Following Erikson, this book is not a theoretical work on trauma, even less a comprehensive survey of that field. Rather it is a way of looking at the stories I've come across, through a lens having to do with trauma and how it plays out—travels in one form or another—over time. In that last conversation, a very old Erik Erikson was characteristically modest—even, I thought, nostalgic about the wandering young man he once was—when he said that his main hope for the Erikson Institute was that it would “give a promising person a real chance, the chance I had when I came to Riggs.” This book is also a record of my gratitude for the chances I've been given to hear and tell these stories.

Actually, I had one more conversation with Erikson, in a dream more than twenty years after his death. I was about to give a lecture on his work at the University of Hiroshima, having been invited by Professor Yuko Okamoto, herself an Erikson Scholar. The night before, I was chatting with two other tourists. When they asked what had brought me to Japan, I told them about the lecture, and that I had known Erikson years before. I added jokingly but also with a touch of melancholy: “You know, I'm a bit of a relic. I shook Erikson's hand. Now psychologists shake my hand,

and they feel something about that connection.” A few hours later, I had a dream:

There was a large dinner party in Erikson’s honor. When I arrived, the many guests were milling about chatting and having drinks before dinner. The atmosphere was quite festive, but Erikson was sitting by himself at the head of an empty dinner table. I felt sorry for his being alone, so I went over, said hello and asked how he was. He said that he was fine. I asked what he had been doing these days, and, to my surprise, he said that he had been “teaching in the streets.”

That’s where the dream ended. I immediately realized that I had been “learning in the streets” during this trip and many others, indeed during my entire time at the Erikson Institute. For which I am profoundly grateful to Erik. Only later did I realize that my melancholy matched what I imagined him to be feeling in the dream, and that his aloneness reflected a risk intrinsic to his “way of looking at things.” If one truly takes up the task of learning in the area between disciplines, the risk is of leaving one’s own home, so to speak—which also means leaving one’s area of expertise—and being a guest—or worse—in another. Even in the realm of interdisciplinary work, V. S. Pritchett’s comment in *The Offensive Traveler* (1964) is worth remembering:

By “being offensive,” I mean that I travel, therefore I offend. I represent that ancient enemy of all communities: the stranger. Neapolitan girls have crossed themselves to avert the evil eye at the sight of me ... And rightly: we are looking on the private life of another people, a life which is entirely their business, with an eye, that, however friendly it may be, is alien. We are seeing people as they do not see themselves. (p. 4)

“Where do I belong?” was a constant question for Erikson, a personal question from early life. So was “Where will I be accepted?” It’s to his credit that he directed these anxieties toward learning about the places he didn’t necessarily belong, and also—as any traveler should—toward giving something back to his hosts. Ultimately, he belonged to psychoanalysis—a discipline that helps people see themselves more

fully—but to those he met in his travels, he brought both a perspective and an attitude: a profound “way of looking at things,” to be sure, but also a humility—“*I have nothing to offer except a way of looking at things*” (1950, p. 403). In offering this record of my learning in the streets, I feel the risk and, to some degree, the aloneness intrinsic to Erikson’s stance. But I also feel that the risk is worth taking, first of all because he did—in retrospect, the Erikson in my dream was taking care of me more than I was taking care of him—and because this book is just that: an *offering* to those whose lives have been touched by trauma.