

# THE COVID TRAIL

## Psychodynamic Explorations

*Edited by*

*Halina Brunning and Olya Khaleelee*



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*We dedicate this book to all who perished due to Covid-19*

# Contents

Acknowledgements	xi
About the editors and contributors	xiii
Introduction	xix
<i>by Halina Brunning and Olya Khaleelee</i>	

## **Part I: The shock of the new**

1. Stepping into the unknown	3
<i>by Halina Brunning</i>	
2. Disorientation, loss, and mourning	9
<i>by Birgitte Bonnerup</i>	
3. What is social dreaming telling us about the new terrain?	29
<i>by Halina Brunning</i>	
4. Guide to the new terrain	37
<i>by Mario Perini</i>	

**Part II: Reparation, resilience, recovery**

5. Despair and endurance: the experience of NHS staff during the Covid crisis 61  
*by Barbara-Anne Wren*
6. Multi-system failure of the body and the body politic 79  
*by Richard Morgan-Jones*
7. Power, fragility, and recovery 97  
*by Winnie Fei and Zhang Jian Li*
8. Vulnerability and resilience in a time of Covid 105  
*by Tim Dartington*

**Part III: The fourth humiliation of humankind**

9. The virus as symbol for the fourth narcissistic blow to humankind 121  
*by Claudia Nagel*
10. Covid—an intrusion of the Real 139  
*by Simon Western*
11. Questions of denial—Covid as a catastrophe 157  
*by Andrzej Leder*
12. What the International Listening Posts are telling us about Covid 171  
*by Rob Stuart and Olya Khaleelee*

**Part IV: Our new Covidian world**

13. The Long Covid at an individual and societal level 193  
*by Anthony Berendt*

14. The future of organisations and leadership <i>by Leslie B. Brissett</i>	213
15. Dark beam of light: what Covid is telling us about race relations <i>by Leslie B. Brissett</i>	233
16. The traumata of Covid: learning from the pandemic <i>by M. Gerard Fromm</i>	251
Follow the Covid Trail <i>by Halina Brunning and Olya Khaleelee</i>	269
Conclusions <i>by Halina Brunning and Olya Khaleelee</i>	275
Index	281

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Chapter 16 “The traumata of Covid” by M. Gerard Fromm. Parts of that chapter are based on chapter 11 and the epilogue of Gerard Fromm’s book, *Traveling through Time: How Trauma Plays Itself out in Families, Organizations and Society* (2022), reprinted here with the kind permission of Phoenix Publishing House.

# About the editors and contributors

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## Contributors

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**Simon Western**, PhD, is founder of the Eco-Leadership Institute and is CEO of Analytic-Network Coaching, a leading advanced coach training company. He is an internationally acclaimed author on leadership and coaching. His book *Leadership: A Critical Text* (Sage, 2019) is now in its third edition and is taught at business schools in Australia, the USA, and the UK. Previously a family psychotherapist, he is past president of ISPSO, adjunct professor at University College Dublin, and honorary professor at Moscow Higher School of Economics.

**Barbara-Anne Wren** is a psychologist and organisational consultant. She has a keen interest in using narrative to develop individual, role, and system resilience as described in her book *True Tales of Organisational Life* (Karnac, 2016).

She is a founder member and previous chair of the UK National Network of Practitioner Occupational Health Psychologists, director of Wren Psychology Associates, consultant psychologist at the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust, and an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland.

# Introduction

The Covid Trail was created at a time of real urgency and despair.

This project, like a number of previous ideas, having quietly organised itself and matured out of sight, perhaps even unconsciously, announced itself ready and fully formed when its time had arrived.

It was inspired by one of the authors walking along the Wandle Trail in South London, not far from her home, when like most Londoners during the lockdowns, instead of indoor activities, she was reliant upon walks to connect with friends and family. In so doing, she discovered the beauty of the Wandle river.

She thus allowed nature, as opposed to the city centre of London, to envelop and transport her deeper into this ancient unknown terrain. She is mindful that the river itself has for years been cemented over and has only recently been released, excavated in its full beauty, together with the natural habitat that supports it, appropriately now jointly called the Wandle Trail.

This book is an exploration of the new unknown terrain that Covid has presented to us. This is a dangerous, dark terrain, full of foreboding, that we are all exploring in our own ways, using such resources as lie at our disposal. To explore it is to follow its trail and to note each of its sharp yet subtle twists.

For us, a pair of experienced psychologists and writers, to edit this book together we needed to find a way of thinking about and understanding the world, supported by a common language. That language is psychoanalysis and system psychodynamic thinking.

Motivated by a desire to express what is hidden, dangerous, and difficult to express, this book takes us on a trail that starts with disquiet, disorientation, and loss. Through attempts to make sense of a narrative that we would rather not recognise, the book slowly shakes off the sense of disorientation in the initial fragmented narrative, and looks for a guide to lead us through the pandemic. This guidance cannot offer a guarantee of survival, but it acts as a psychic container for the necessary understanding that we all seek.

The first disorienting part of this book thus ends with a containing coherent guide to the trail. There is not so much light at the end of this trail, for we cannot guarantee the future, but there is a clear path to follow, despite its meandering and dangerous nature.

The second part of the book is devoted to pairing despair with resilience through balancing power with vulnerability. We take an international perspective while tracing how this pattern of resilience paired with vulnerability plays out in all four chapters.

In the third part of the book we delve into the realm of psychoanalysis, to seek solace, or at least a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of Covid and the pandemic, as we examine the role that we as human beings have played in sowing our own environmental destruction in this unfolding catastrophe.

The fourth and last part of the book offers a glimpse into the post-Covidian world which forces us to fully recognise the longer and deeper impact of Covid upon our bodies, relationships, constructs, and civilisation.

To create this book, we were fortunate to have been able to bring together a team of amazing colleagues from around the globe who speak our language. Of course, this language is not necessarily English *per se*, but that of psychoanalysis.

This is a book that simultaneously deals with lived-in reality and with the hidden aspects of existence. One way of uncovering the hidden aspects of reality is through symbolism and visual representations. Let us then explain the choices we made in selecting the five images.

The cover image, *The Sick Child*, by Edvard Munch is an evocative and poignant scene of an ominous loss: a scene of a family bracing itself for the death of a child. At the time of Covid when family membranes were sharply pierced by unexpected and brutal loss and the inability to attend to the process of dying, this image stands for all losses.

The image associated with Part I of the book, *The Shock of the New*, is a photograph by Thor Simony taken at Moen, a small island in the south east of Denmark. The image represents the disquiet of an empty snow-covered platform which simultaneously represents the presence of absence and the absence of presence, leaving the viewer uncertain as to the swimmer's fate and safety. The lifebuoy indicates the omnipresence of danger, the horizon is unclear, the water icy cold ... If only we had had our own personal lifebuoys when Covid struck ...

Part II, *Reparation, Resilience, Recovery*, is about surviving the greatest inflicted injury and how we dealt with it as individuals, systems, and cultures. The best image to illustrate this is again by Edvard Munch: *Separation*. Here the wounded heart of a lover is on fire as well as much of his body, while he tries to support his own falling frame, having nearly died because of his lover's ethereal disappearance ... loss not yet mourned appears to threaten his own life.

The image associated with Part III, *The Fourth Humiliation of Humankind*, is a photograph taken by one of the authors (HB) at the front of the National Theatre in London two years before the pandemic struck. A group of friends have come together in a joyous welcoming reunion, but hovering ominously above their heads and invisible to them, is a punishing Finger of Destiny. It seems to say: *You do not even know that you have been selected ...* We cannot be sure how this selection will play out but certainly, humiliation and punishment are already visible, at least to the viewer, if not yet to the group of friends. If only they knew ... And now it is already too late, for we have all been selected for suffering and humiliation.

For the last part of the book, *Our New Covidian World*, we selected the lustrous image of *Norwegian Landscape*, again by Edvard Munch. What is striking here is the intense luminosity which is playing on the landscape making it simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, multicoloured and irradiated, real, and surreal. Is this uncannily familiar yet strange landscape the essence of the Covidian world?

The volume ends on a physical trail built of each chapter's essence, arranged in the same way as the book: from shock, disorientation, and fear through mobilisation of resilience, a realisation of the enormity of the changes humanity faces, and an attempt to comprehend these processes as a guide to this permanent "new normal".

We wish to thank all our contributors for working within the prearranged structure and for trusting the process. In this Introduction we decided not to describe the actual content of the book nor to introduce the contributors as their chapters will speak volumes.

Let the images guide you along this Covid path.

We leave you free to explore the trail ...

*Halina Brunning and Olya Khaleelee*  
*Autumn 2021*