SEARCHING FOR AUNT ROSIE:  
ACCOUNTING FOR NON-CLINICAL, BENEVOLENT INFLUENCES ON THE LIVES OF BABIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

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...one of the central paradoxes of trauma [is this:] In the midst of the deepest suffering lie the seeds of growth, change, and hope” (Hart, 2006, p. 44).

When Selma Fraiberg first drew our attention, in 1975, to the hidden stories and repressed affects that assault the good intentions of parents, and invade the nurseries of their babies, she set our clinical imaginations tingling: “In every nursery there are ghosts. They are the visitors from the unremembered past of the parents; the uninvited guests at the christening” (Fraiberg, Adelson and Shapiro, 1975, p. 387).

Prof. Fraiberg’s article implied a new obligation about the social history, when parents bring their babies to us. Actually, perhaps she called us back to the kind of careful history-taking we should have been doing all along: the kind that extends its curiosity far beyond the toileting or feeding or crying or other problem of the moment, to understand all that mom or dad know about these things, from their own lived—and perceived—experience.

She taught us to not be morbid about it, and certainly to not jump to conclusions. Instead, we were to be thoughtful, to ask the next open-ended question that follows naturally from that which the parent has just said, or has just shown us. We were to inject wonder into the work of looking. And we were to hold up the possibility of repair, and hope:

...if history predicted with fidelity, the human family itself would have long ago been drowned in its own oppressive past. The race improves. And this may be because the largest number of men and women who have known suffering find renewal and the healing of childhood pain in the experience of bringing a child into the world....the parent says, ‘I want something better for my child than I have had.’ (Fraiberg, Adelson and Shapiro, 1975, p. 389).

On the 30th anniversary of the publication of Fraiberg’s original article—credited by some as the official commencement of the infant mental health movement—Lieberman offered an extension, an elaboration, and a new focus. In her “Angels in the nursery: The intergenerational transmission of benevolent parental influences”, she suggests:

...angels in the nursery—[which we define as] care-receiving experiences characterized by intense shared affect between parent and child in which the child feels nearly perfectly understood, accepted, and loved—provide the child with a core sense of security and self-worth that can be drawn upon when the child becomes a parent.... We argue that uncovering angels as growth-promoting forces in the lives of traumatized parents is as vital to the work of psychotherapy as is the interpretation and exorcizing
Implied was a monumental challenge. Just as Fraiberg proposed that the social history must search for ghosts, Lieberman argued for paying attention to forces which might do battle with the ghosts: those experiences in the lives of parents that stand apart from the hurts and dyssynchronies and traumas, and which struggle to find expression in parenting just as fervently as do the ghosts.

Professor Lieberman implies that our social histories are incomplete unless we have worked to unearth all the data, to understand all the influences in a parent’s life, including those which–nearly buried beneath the more obvious pain–represented the parent’s momentary experience of being understood, or being safe–of being, however fleetingly, loved.

 Memories of such moments are often elusive, and body-centered, just as are the memories of abuse, neglect and trauma. But our interview methods in infant mental health already prepared us to help parents access these early, pre-verbal, body-centered, affective memories. We learned to evoke stories, to listen patiently and to follow quietly, because we knew that the stories were not necessarily coherent, or the words readily available. Lieberman quotes one of the mothers in her study:

> My aunt...she was just always a very gentle, very loving...she’d brush my hair very gently and never pulled my hair, like my mom did. My mom was always in a hurry to get the hair brushed...get it over and done with, and my aunt would just take her time, and be so gentle...She was like a warm blanket... (Lieberman, Padron, Van Horn, and Harris, 2005, p. 509).

Lieberman reminds us that we must carefully attend to stories of repair, or of return to a state of peacefulness and synchrony. While more affect may be generated by a parent remembering his father’s drunken rages or his mother’s terrifying depressive withdrawals, we must also ask about whether father was ever not drunk and angry; whether mother ever had moments of being fully present, and even attuned; whether there was ever another figure standing by who represented a different level of presence, or even occasional devotion.

The point, of course, is not to minimize the hurts, or to push for forgiveness, or to suggest that the parent should have a more balanced view of his or her own parents. The point is to know all there is to know about a parent’s experiences of being parented, so as to better understand the potential of that parent to do it again with his or her own child, except better.

Our empathy is aroused mightily when we hear parents begin to explore their histories of sorrow and loss and alienation. If we stop there, however–stunned by the story, struggling to gather our wits and to respond empathically–we stop too soon. We are at risk of not knowing the whole story. We risk not meeting Aunt Rosie.
In my article, “Reconstructing the Parent’s Infant Narrative” (Trout, 2004), Kathrynn is unable to stop her horrific beatings of a toddler daughter and an infant son with an automotive fan belt that usually hung, ominously, on a hook next to the refrigerator. Stunned by her rage, and by the utter absence of protective empathy in this mother, the therapist also notes Kathrynn’s inability to come up with the slightest affect as she tells her own story of sexual abuse at the hands of several foster fathers and foster brothers. She had, long ago, split off her feelings of helplessness from her awareness of the events. Unable to put together even a shred of righteous indignation about the things done to her or the violations she endured, she could not feel sorry for herself, and was furious at me when my face displayed signs of sorrow-on-her-behalf. This, of course, precluded any possibility that she could see the pain on the faces of her children, as she beat them. She could not stop beating them because she could not remember the hurt that had once been hers.

But then a memory popped up, one day. It was an Aunt Rosie memory—what Lieberman would call an angel-in-the-nursery memory. There was a woman, she said—a large, African-American woman wearing a dress that looked like red bandanas—and the woman was rocking her. It probably happened, she imagined, in the orphanage where she spent a year or two of toddlerhood before her first foster home, at age four. The memory was untrustworthy, she thought, because it was so fuzzy. But the feelings that began to wash over her were not fuzzy. She was, for those brief moments as a little girl, safe, seen, secure, and—her body told her—fully loved.

What followed in this surprising treatment was never-before-felt sadness, and then anger. Her narrative about herself—that she was a promiscuous, fun-loving child and grown-up lady who had always used boys and men to get what she wanted—was shaken by the tender feelings evoked when she recalled the caregiver at the orphanage. Waves of caring-for-self were released, and then indignation at those who hurt her, and then indignation at anyone who would hurt a child.

“And there it was. She had said it. People should not hurt little children. Little ones would feel it deeply, she reported, and they would not forget...The fan belt disappeared...[never to return]” (Trout, 2004, p. 7). Kathrynn’s figurative Aunt Rosie gave something to this toddler that sat unremembered—much as ghosts do—for many years. Recalling it allowed the power of those fleeting moments of being cared for to open her to empathy-for-self, and empathy for her two little ones. The softness of that woman in the orphanage now flowed through her and out her fingertips (the ones that used to hold that fan belt) and onto these two abused children. It now formed a protective barrier around her abused daughter—against herself, interestingly—just as Kathrynn’s Aunt Rosie figure and that rocking chair may have once formed a protective barrier around Kathrynn. Kathrynn had identified with the aggressors in her own life for the sensible, adaptive reasons that usually obtain. It’s rather clever, really. Anna Freud described it sixty years ago:

A child introjects some characteristic of an anxiety object and so assimilates an anxiety experience which he has just undergone....By impersonating the aggressor, assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression, the child transforms himself from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat (Freud, p. 113).
But recollection of the Aunt Rosie figure in Kathrynn’s life made possible another grand piece of mental work: identification with the protector. Ultimately, her children were saved from further abuse when empathy was restored to Kathrynn through recollection of the feelings of having once been seen, and held; when identification with the aggressor was no longer necessary to fend off the affects associated with being impotent and overwhelmed; and when she could identify with the protector in this remarkable woman from her past.

To paraphrase Lieberman, Kathrynn had internalized the caregiver’s qualities that evoked her own feelings of being loved (Lieberman, Padron, Van Horn and Harris, p. 511).

I would like to now suggest yet another step in this progression, this maturing of our social history-taking. It is time to commit ourselves to exploring the same phenomenon in the histories of children, looking for those experiences and people who constituted an exception, challenged the child’s view of self and self-with-other, or offered the child a chance to identify with the protector. I ask that we search for Aunt Rosie, as we go about our work in the assessment of childhood disorder.

It is time to declare, as clinical principle, the importance of taking into account not only the hurts of children that support their negative internal working models, but also the “experiences characterized by intense shared affect between parent and child [and, perhaps, between the child and any number of other significant people in his/her life] in which the child feels nearly perfectly understood, accepted, and loved...” (Lieberman, Padron, Van Horn and Harris, p. 504)—experiences which offer an alternative way of imagining the world, and the self, and the self-with-other.

Against the backdrop of my illegitimate birth to painfully-young parents trying to deal with their ignorance, fear and grief about the pregnancy for me, the spinning chaos of the family’s sorrow at the death of my mother’s brother in the final days of World War II, and my dad’s anger and loss about suddenly finding himself a father when he had barely finished the 10th grade, I fell into the arms of my grandfather. He had been an awful father, himself—abusive, angry, sullen—so it seems impossible to imagine that he was, for me, a supportive alternative.

We didn’t talk, even when I became able. We just sat together, quietly. Sometimes his enormous shoes found themselves on my feet—or so photos say—so we must have played a little. But mostly I remember Grandpa’s hulking, silent self, creating a platform under me that seemed as stable as anything I would ever again experience (Trout, 2006, p. 9).

Sometimes the existence and power of the Aunt Rosie effect makes no sense, even to the child. As a result, this figure may not be mentioned in the social history, at first—not by the child, not by the child’s parents, not by other informants. The Aunt Rosie figure may have rarely been around. She may have had an entirely different meaning to other children in the family, or to the child’s parents. He may have seemed no one’s model of
good-enough parenting, much less the very foundation upon which the child built hope. While my grandfather was a fine carpenter, no one would ever have accused him of building up children, or even caring about them. Was it the coincidence of my coming into the world just days after the bombing of Junior’s ship in the Philippines, and the resulting death of grandpa’s firstborn and namesake—_that_ made him look upon me with benevolence, protectiveness and even love? “I didn’t know, of course, that Grandpa may have been finding his own kind of stability in me, his first grandchild, a strapping baby who looked very much like him, and who may have felt a bit like his own little boy, the now-deceased Junior” (Trout, 2006, p. 9).

But the unlikelihood that a certain figure in a child’s life could possibly qualify as an Aunt Rosie only makes our detective work more difficult, not less important. It does not mean that the figure—thought to be innocuous, or absent, or even mean, to others—did not fill the bill exactly, for the baby or young child.

And what about prenatal Aunt Rosie’s? Who will tell us about her, unless we ask ever so carefully?

A young, pregnant girl found trusted support—and an understanding ear for her powerful affects, as she worked on the decision about whether or not to relinquish her unborn child to adoption—from a young therapist. By peculiar coincidence, very dear friends of this therapist later adopted the baby. She visited her friends regularly, and everyone noticed that the baby would always calm immediately upon the appearance of the therapist, who had spent so many hours comforting his birthmother, when he was still inside her. When the baby was three he moved far away, with his adoptive family.

When the boy was eight, the old family friend came for a visit, and she and the child went for a walk. He asked, “Nancy, are you my birthmother?” She reiterated the facts that she was sure he already knew, to which he responded, “Yeah, I know. But sometimes I think you must be my birthmother, because I can hear your voice in my head. Why is that?” (Thompson, 2006).

This may be key to the power of Aunt Rosie. Her voice _can_ be heard in the child’s head years later, struggling against other voices, reminding the child of other possibilities, opening doors in the child’s imagination, countering negative perceptions of self, providing a soothing Other when it is needed most, creating a capacity for self-regulation.

In the remarkable film, “Whale Rider” (2002, Pacific Pictures Ltd/ApolloMedia GmbH & Co.), Pai experiences what would certainly qualify as a traumatic birth, accompanied as it was by the simultaneous death of her mother and her twin brother, followed almost immediately by the departure of her grief-stricken father. She is left to be raised by grandparents. Grandmother is kindly, and tries to assert Pai’s right to life and nurturance in the face of Grandfather, who happens to also be the chief, and who is obsessed with his failure to produce a male heir who can lead the crumbling Maori tribe. His son—Pai’s father—has not only refused the role, in favor of being an artist, but he sires twins, the male of which dies at birth. The surviving twin, Pai, is deemed unqualified either
for the leadership mantle or for her grandfather’s love.

Koro, Pai’s grandfather, mourns unceasingly about the decline of his tribe, and the inevitable end of a 1000-year tradition of the chief siring a male heir. The Maori civilization appears doomed, and Koro blames his son, himself, and his granddaughter. He grumbles, he withdraws, he asserts (within earshot of Pai) that she is of no use to him. At the hospital, grandmother must insist, “You’ll acknowledge your granddaughter!”, even as Koro stares at his dead grandson in the isolette, and tells the nurse to take the living female child away.

But the grandparents do take Pai home, and grandfather begins to fall in love. His depression is challenged and his obsession is interrupted by the baby Pai, who draws him to her. Pai finds herself nourished by this quietly insistent grandmother and this grumbling grandfather. As she grows, it is grandfather who picks her up at school on his bicycle.

It is not a smooth or consistent path. Grandfather rejects her for the military training helavishes on the tribe’s boys. He then must struggle with the fact that Pai is their equal. He doesn’t know what to make of her. She refuses to die, like her brother, or to disappear into idle sadness, as many of the Maori women do.

At age 12, she claims herself in a famous speech at her grade school pageant—a speech she pointedly dedicates to her grandfather, Koro, the chief. The power of the trauma that accompanied her birth has clearly loosened. The power of her grandfather’s disappointment has not trapped her. She affirms to all that—while they may have seen her grandfather often reject her—the two of them have a secret love and respect, and it has saved her. By now, everyone knows about Pai’s Aunt Rosie, so it is only a modest surprise to hear her affirm that she is connected to powerful internal working models drawn from grandfather Koro, and from the ancient ones.

My name is Paikea Apirana. And I come from a long line of chiefs, stretching all the way back to hawaiiki, where our ancients one are—the ones that first heard the land crying and sent a man. His name was also Paikea, and I am his most recent descendant. But I was not the leader my grandfather was expecting, and by being born I broke the line back to the ancient ones. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. It just happened. Who is to blame? But we can learn. And if the knowledge is given to everyone, we can have lots of leaders. And soon, everyone will be strong, not just the ones that’ve been chosen. Because sometimes, even if you’re the leader and you need to be strong, you can get tired—like our ancestor, Paikea, when he was lost at sea, and he couldn’t find the land, and he probably wanted to die. But he knew the ancient ones were there for him, so he called out to them to lift him up and give him strength. This is my chant. I dedicate it to my grandfather (“Whale Rider”, copyright 2002).

Pai then launches into a tearful but powerful chant, in her native tongue—a chant that reminds all in the audience of their heritage, and calls them to strength. Ultimately, this baby—who lost her mother and father and twin brother in one fell swoop—becomes the leader of her tribe. She was a high-risk infant who would not go down. I believe it was
because there were Aunt Rosie’s in her life.

We must be clear: the Aunt Rosie effect is not about the child looking up to someone, or having a hero. It is about a lived—or, at least, perceived—experience of being in the presence of a novel force, a person who challenges the child’s internal working models, a person who suggests that the child’s customary experience is not all there is. The power of the person in the child’s life comes from a particular quality of connection with the child: one that, while perhaps episodic, nonetheless constitutes irrational devotion, and makes the child feel seen, understood, and loved.

Such a person does not have to be nice to be an Aunt Rosie; surely Pai’s grandfather shows us this. And such a person does not have to be around all the time; Kathrynn, the mother who could neither stop abusing her children nor hold onto the affects associated with her own abuse until she remembered her own Aunt Rosie, shows us this.

Such a person does not have to be smart about children, necessarily, in order to interrupt abuse, or to plead a child’s case, or to show empathy when no one else is. Hard-edged children have wept in my office as they merely recalled the annual summer visit of an uncle, “who used to go for walks with me, and he told my dad to ease up on me. It only lasted a week but I grew up knowing that, for that week each summer, my dad would seem calmer, he would drink less, he would even laugh, and he would not hit me.”

Foster parents and mentors know that, for all practical purposes, being Aunt Rosie is the ultimate expression of their job. They will not be in the child’s life forever. They get a shot, for a little while, at challenging everything evil and unsympathetic and overwhelming that has characterized the child’s life, affected his expectations, aroused his defenses, and diminished his hopes. They get a chance to provide comforting structure, where there was none; to chase down the child who can only run away from intimacy, letting the child know that he can run, but will always be caught and brought home; to demonstrate consistency, even when the child flails against it; to hold when the child pretends to not need or want it; to keep showing up when the child’s experience says that nobody is reliable.

We must also be clear that our searching for Aunt Rosie is not an excuse to overlook the hurts, to minimize the pain, or to “look on the bright side”. We will never try to re-direct the child’s story to “the positives”—usually a sure sign that we are overwhelmed. We will stand witness to every last scrap of the child’s pain. We will neither imagine that there is always an Aunt Rosie nor that, if there was one in the child’s life, awareness of her will mitigate the damage. Our job is to let our wonder about the child’s experience span all of her experience.

Fraiberg taught us to be persistent and thorough in our collection of the data, searching for clues about what hides back there that would help us understand why a particular child is picked out for abuse, why infantile affects are treated by a parent as malicious, why a parent cannot reach the goal of falling in love.

Lieberman called upon us to also pay attention to unexpected moments of parental empathy, or protectiveness, and wonder why; to be interested in the emergence of
unexpected strengths—or surprising insightfulness—at a certain moment, and wonder why. She taught us to be hungry for information about the benevolent influences in the lives of parents.

My call is merely for employing the same open-minded thoroughness as we struggle to understand the whole history of a child. In the midst of the chaos, the losses, the awful neglect, the traumas: who stood for something divergent from these patterns in the child’s life? Who attracted the toddler’s attention to another way of being in the world? Who installed hope? Who gave the child reason to wonder whether his dismal view of himself, or of self-in-the-world, was entirely correct? Who, through these acts of love and challenge, set the stage for a therapeutic breakthrough, or a self-correction, or an interruption in a cycle of violence or chaos in the child’s own life, decades later?

This is our marvelous responsibility in child welfare and in clinical practice: to use our understanding of the importance of all early experience to help the child construct a complete story, to help him understand and embrace not just deficiency and pathology, but also strength and joy. In the process, we may have to modify our social history protocols, and our diagnostic work will be made a little more complicated. But we will know, finally, all that we have to work with, and our tools for helping the child will have expanded.

REFERENCES


