It takes our breath away

By Jonathan Sklar

We take breathing for granted as being ordinary, normal and natural. We usually do not give it a thought. This is where Covid-19 attacks humans, in a vulnerable place we take for granted. Take our breath away and we suffer instantly. Not being able to 'catch our breath' causes instant mental suffering, leading to feelings of being distraught, severe anxiety fearful of dying. Now we are beginning to know that any early sign of impediments to our usual respiratory rhythm may lead to a sense of terrible slow strangulation.

The First Day of Lockdown

My daughter wrote the following a few days ago: "On the first day of lockdown I felt a rush of emotions as I was planning to leave the house. The virus wasn't just on the television as it was outside my front door. How do you protect yourself against something you can't see? I thought I must be able to see something and the only way I could understand the virus was to imagine a world full of zombies outside my front door and we had to find out way to get past them! My thoughts then shifted to the heroes in zombie movies and how they survived. I was reliving the film '28 Days Later' for real! In the film one lives out a terrible and devastating epidemic, moment to moment.

I picked up my backpack and started to pack it for the day ahead, packed so much stuff… food, drink, sanitizer, layers of clothes, I packed it all! As we drove I kept looking at people thinking they looked different in some way, I was actually looking for zombies in the street! It sounds crazy but that is how I lived my first day. Three weeks later I still pack too much in my backpack when I leave the house but I've stopped looking for zombies on the street; the global impact of Covid-19 is so much scarier to me!"

Ghosts

We are in the territory of ghosts and ghouls, an imaginary system of daydreams that turns the invisibility of the virus into a visual representation full of imaginary terror. Hollywood has poured out a diet of such images for many years to titillate our pleasure as it comes close to great fear, in the knowledge that its just in the imagination. Yet an alternate reading might be that the film industry in the guise of entertainment and profit has been offering us images and stories about the terrible calamities of global warming, but it is not for pleasure nor is our pandemic today.

The virus can take away our lives but much more than that is also scary. The pandemic is taking away jobs, destroying commerce, savings, factories, and shops and potentially destroying much of our ways of how we live our lives.

So many of the world's population being under 30 years of age have an intimate acquaintance with spirits of our times. The Dementors of Harry Potter infest the darkest places, glorying in decay and despair as they drain peace,hope and happiness out of the air around them. Dementors, if one is too close suck out every happy memory inside ones mind, reducing one to being soulless, like them. It is a modern take on vampiric phantasies that are directed at sucking blood out rather than breath, but the effect is to dominate and wipe out our internalised stability of good enough memories as our inside stuff is removed leaving us empty. Such phantasy is about wiping out the mind, especially our ability to think, discriminate and to eventually become free of its shackles. In the midst of what seems a long campaign to fight for the next breath it is very hard to think about anything else in that continuing moment.

Ghosts, phantoms, wraiths are often the spirit of the dead, haunting us the living. The word ghost, denoting spirit is linked to the Latin spiritus, which also means breath. Ghosts can be demonic as Dementors or holy as in Spiritus Sancti, which includes the idea of taking breath in as in *inspiration* and hence linked to creative life. They also may contain vague shards of more painful memories from the past, now ghosted as a form of staying away from very unpleasant thoughts from perhaps earlier in our life.

We are used to think of the ubiquitous teddy bear, Winnicott's transitional object,invested with power, existing in the gap between the mouth and breast. In its most early state it is a Me-Not–Me object shared by the baby and mother. He wrote of the origins of the transitional object as "leading to an attachment to a teddy, a doll, a soft toy, or a hard toy". Play is an essential component in our mental development, by ourselves and with others. Later, good enough experiences advances into imaginative journeys, between the interiority of the self and the environment of the maternal. In time the adult in his/her cultural experiences, moves position of the internalised play between mother and baby to maturity with the serious playfulness of the adult's use of a cultural object.

Could we try to define madness? asks Enid Balint.

"Is it a state when you are on your own, but in order to maintain the boundaries in your life you have to be creative? To be on your own without being creative is not being alive. Being on your own and being creative might be mad but it is being alive".[1] Here is an example of a Winnicottian paradox that can help us make sense of how citizens in the privacy of their own particular lockdown can be creatively alive or on the edge of being emotionally deadened by their attempts at being alive. For my daughter it required a shift from seeing and expecting to see zombies on the streets beyond home, a visual hallucination of alive madness on the path to realising the reality of the scary object that Covid-19 really is. Her momentary madness was a journey to realising the horror of reality.

Today, in lockdown cities we can no longer visit museums and art galleries, cinemas,theatre, concert halls and opera houses. The places that we congregate to come close to the arts as manifestations of human thoughtful achievements that touch us contain manifest supplies of another invisible product – the pleasure of play within a cultural object. And there is an avalanche of online communications to help us survive solitary imprisonment so that now allow us to look at Michelangelo in the Sistine chapel, or a virtual tour of the British Museum or an exhibition of paintings, film archives, great orchestras are freely opening their archives and pianists are playing live online. A huge mass of wonderful moments to suck up and to fill up our emptiness. We can be touched but not physically. It is nearly enough but human beings need physical touching as much as breathing.

In time, when the virus has been overcome, the importance of cultural objects as mechanisms to keep us sane and thoughtful to the resonances beneath the surface need to be remembered. Financial support for such organizations and in particular our artists is an essential part of our complex life. Van Gogh, mad-alive and invariably struggling, sold but a single canvass in his lifetime (Red Vineyards near Arles, sold to Anna Bloch sister of his friend Eugene Bloch).

We can ride the flow of these cultural envelopes into our homes, in our captivity and we have time on our hands to take advantage of such rich themes. It is a force that can fill up our emptiness with extraordinary creative influences, sounds and ideas. Families locked in together can begin to be and play together in new ways as our timetables have, of necessity, altered.

Such possibilities of play things can be a bulwark against our despair and can even, in the moment of our *recreation* with them, take our breath away in the form of inspiration for now and the future.

1. E. Balint, *Before I Was I*, pp. 233-4 Free Ass 1993.

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