

THE
UNINVITED
GUEST

FROM THE
UNREMEMBERED
PAST



AN EXPLORATION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS TRANSMISSION
OF TRAUMA ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

PROPHECY COLES

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The cover of the book is a photograph of Betty Pinney's Doll's House, in the Museum of Childhood, Bethnal Green, London. By kind permission from V & A images/Victoria and Albert Museum. London.

In memoriam

M. A. P. 1936–2010

A. C. P. 1950–2007

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prophecy Coles trained as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist at the Lincoln Clinic and is a member of the London Centre for Psychotherapy. She is the author of numerous articles and her book, *The Importance of Sibling Relationships in Psychoanalysis*, was published by Karnac in 2003. This was followed by a book she commissioned and edited, *Sibling Relationships*, also published by Karnac.



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PREFACE

Freud wrote to Binswanger on the anniversary of his daughter's death, "...we will remain inconsolable". Sophie had died in 1919 during the influenza epidemic that raged through Europe after the First World War. But Freud then had to manage another loss. Sophie's two-year-old son died two years after his mother. This led Freud to write further, "... to me this child had taken the place of all my children and other grandchildren, and since then, since Hienele's death, I don't care for my grandchildren any more, but find no joy in life any more" (quoted in Pollock, 1961, p. 353).

I am using that brief quotation from Freud's letter to Binswanger for it gives rise to the question that I am posing in this book: what legacy does grief, loss, trauma have upon the second and third generations? When Freud wrote, "I don't care for my grandchildren any more", what impact did his agonized grief have upon them?

I have an emotional interest in the idea that knowledge about ancestral history can be an important part of self-knowledge. When my brother and sister and I were quite young, our mother left us in the care of our father and went off with another man. She returned

later carrying this man's child, and we were all told that our mother and father were reunited and that the child was theirs. We grew up with this lie. My mother's behaviour caused all of us pain, but behind this pain is also a theoretical question that I am asking in this book. What impelled her to run away? What unconscious fantasies was she enacting? What part did her parents, my grandmother and grandfather, play in this complicated love affair? Was she enacting a scene from the unremembered past of her parents or grandparents?

On the back of all those questions runs an even more imponderable one, in what way has the life I have led and the choices I have made unconsciously carried aspects of my mother's unremembered past? Of course, I have not been able to answer these questions directly, but some of the ideas that I explore in this book have been impelled by a belief that we must be open to the possibility that there may be some uninvited guests whom we need to bring to our psychoanalytic table and ask them why they are there.

I need to add that although I began thinking about the effect of our ancestral past some years ago, this book is dedicated to both my brothers, who have died while I have been writing it. Their deaths have added another imperative to my question about the ghosts that can haunt the nursery of life. As I witnessed them coming to know that they were going to die, I needed more urgently than ever to write about my sense that perhaps they went to their graves carrying unacknowledged griefs.

The way I have structured this book is along the trajectory of a free associative musing. There are two reasons for this structure. The first reason is that I have found that the most liberating idea of psychoanalysis is the concept of free association (Bollas, 2002). When I was an anguished adolescent of sixteen, I came across Joanna Field's *A Life of One's Own* (1934: Marion Milner assumed the pseudonym of Joanna Field when she first published *A Life of One's Own*). This book changed my life, for it opened a door into my mind. I discovered that if I allowed my mind to freely associate to whatever crossed its threshold, there were unimaginable treasures and anxieties waiting to be explored. Later, when I went to university and studied philosophy, I was drawn to thinkers who believed that the unfurling of their own minds was the way to gain

knowledge of themselves and others, but also it was a way of understanding the history of ideas.

This leads me to the second reason for the structure of this book. The outstanding philosopher of the idea that the development of one's own mind was ineluctably part of the history of ideas was Giambattista Vico, who, in 1728, wrote his autobiography. In his book, he set out to write not an account of the events that had taken place in his life, but he was interested in exploring the history and development of his own ideas. Isaiah Berlin, commenting on Vico's contribution to philosophy has this to say,

the notion that there can be a science of mind which the history of its development, the realisation that ideas evolve, that knowledge is not a static network of eternal, universal clear truths either Platonic or Cartesian, but a social process is traceable (indeed is in a sense identical with) the evolution of symbols—words, gestures, pictures, and their altering patterns, functions, structures and uses—this transforming vision, one of the greatest discoveries in the history of thought. [Berlin, 1979, p. 120]

This model has been my ideal throughout my intellectual life; that is to say, I have held on to the idea that, whoever we are, there is a history to what we are saying and thinking and believing that takes us beyond the here and now. So, my free associative musing is also the history of the development of my ideas as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and, most significantly, my increasing awareness of family history across the generations.

As an example of what I mean about the development of my ideas, many years ago a patient brought me a dream in his penultimate session. In the dream, he and his girlfriend were going to his grandmother's house, for he knew that she would welcome them and give them a meal. Looking back now at that dream, I realize that I knew nothing about this man's grandmother. She had never appeared, as far as I could remember, as a significant figure in his internal world, and yet here she was, at the end of therapy. In those days, I felt myself to be far too young to be seen as grandmother, even if I was a transference figure! Imaginatively and emotionally I was out of touch with the possibility that grandparents or even great-grandparents might have a significant place in the landscape of the internal world. Time has wrought a change. I have become a