

KEYNOTE

Friday 9.30am, Room I

National Nightmare: Thoughts on the Genesis and Legacy of Perpetrator Trauma

M GERARD FROMM PhD USA

Senior Consultant to, and former Director of, the Erikson Institute of the Austen Riggs Center; President of the International Dialogue Initiative, an interdisciplinary group that studies the psychodynamics of societal conflict. 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; has directed or served on the staff of Group Relations Conferences in the United States, Canada, Europe and Israel. Assistant Clinical Professor at the Yale Child Study Center and a faculty member of the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis. He has taught at, and consulted to, a number of psychoanalytic institutes in the United States and is also an organizational consultant and a partner in College Health & Counseling Service Consulting.

Selected Publications

He has presented and published widely; his books include:

Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma across Generations

Taking the Transference, Reaching toward Dreams: Clinical Studies in the Intermediate Area

A Spirit That Impels: Play, Creativity and Psychoanalysis.

“What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.” This quote from the Hungarian psychoanalyst, Nicholas Abraham, begins a recent book – part legal treatise, part Holocaust history, part family study - by Phillippe Sand.

In this presentation, Dr. Fromm examines these gaps by reporting on the themes and process of a conference organized through the Erikson Institute at the Austen Riggs Center in 2012. The title of the conference was “The Legacy of Perpetrator Trauma in Groups and Families” as experienced by descendants of Nazis, people who themselves were not guilty in deed but were inevitably caught up in powerful feelings of guilt, shame and horror by association. Trauma occurs at multiple levels for this group of people, beginning with discovering – or as a trauma survivor from a different context put it: “catching the doomed scent of” – the actions of loved ones kept secret from their families.

The conference examined the transmission of this traumatic experience across generations, the forms it took and some of the group dynamics within the conference that played out in relation to it. One generation’s secrets become the next generation’s gaps, and also their hauntedness. But a remarkable dream journal from the 1930’s suggests the ways that the early generation attempted to keep secrets from itself, leading to profound, collective dissociation, a dissociation that licensed horrific destructiveness.

A natural experiment in social dreaming, this record of ordinary German citizens’ dreams, which will also be explored in the presentation, illuminates the steady assault on a person’s inner life and the way that massive social trauma and malignant authoritarianism turns an essential privacy into dangerous secrecy.

A military psychiatrist of the First World War once commented that “Men learn from history that men learn nothing from history.” Eighty years later, as the world faces a steady though less extreme resurgence of authoritarianism, what lessons might we try to learn in the tragic stories of these families?