Soul Murder and the Tragic Art

ANDONIA CAKOUROS

As you read this, the sounds you hear are My voice, My soul trying to speak of suffering-hoping to release and express. But the voice you hear is not only my voice-but possibly a sound resonance of the Suffering Universal Soul. Until a soul finds safety it cannot come forth. The ancient Greek tragedies through their carefully crafted characters captured the suffering and demise of the soul. The catharsis, as experienced through these characters at crisis point, allows for the character and the audience the release and liberation congested deep within the soul. Without this release, the soul fragments and moves into an abandoned wasteland until retrieved. The need of the spirit to heal seeks avenues to the "make whole" the tormented and lost soul.

As I listened to the sounds of my own voice traveling to the Suffering Shores of my own inner tomb, the following words flowed on to my empty page, ready to be impregnated with these responses--midwife to the pain--cries of taken life-of shattered dreams of little hearts allowed to bleed and rupture. The soul has its own scale of notes-one death to another moving inward or downward. Scream the birth through midwife space-let her hold and contain the blood as you scale all the notes.

Uprooted from Trust, thrust to a black dust, ashes to play in, stay in--no room for your darkened soul, spit upon by ashes--lava moves inside you like a serpent's crawl, it will erupt-find the MIDWIFE and spew ashes into an endless stream of WASTE-TOXIC-WASTE.

Medea came to mind, a woman whose own soul had been murdered allowed her to invite through Hecate an open space of such horror as to cut away her own blood, the greatest Soul Murder.

And Agave mistakenly kills her own son, seeing him as a wild lion-a metaphor for damaged "sight," killing her own blood-her own soul-then congested with horror. Oh dearest face

Pretty boyish mouth

You lie in my arms

so peaceful

So helpless

care And now again
You need my loving

My dear, dear Child

I killed you

No, I will not say that

It wasn't me

It was Dionysus,

Dionysus took me

And Dionysus killed you.

The ancient Greek tragedies, through their creative energies allow Medea, Agave, and so many other characters written by the great poets the Space to release and honor the suffering of those traumatized.

The Greek tragedies are a mystery, an avenue, a pathway of soul passage from one world to another--a tunnel to let the purgative screams escape out!

Soul murder, according to Dr. Leonard Shengold, clinical professor of psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine:

Of course a touch of soul murder can be an everyday affair. Every life contains occasions when one is the victim of the perpetrator of an assault on a person's right to a separate identity and a full range of human responses. Few people are without at least moments of beastliness. We are all capable of behavior so bad that we find it necessary not to register what has been said or done.

When one thinks about the issues of child abuse, thoughts usually go to sexual abuse--"the term "soul murder" was first used to describe the case of Kaspar Hauser, the seventeen year old boy who had been confined his entire life in a cellar, cut off from all communication. The term was coined in 1832 but only now has the psychiatric community begun to grapple with its meaning. Dr. Shengold conveys the true tragedy of soul murder in this first comprehensive account of child abuse and deprivation."

Antigone, as she goes into her tomb, bridal chamber, eternal prison in a caverned rock. ... I go living to the vaults of death as does a victim of soul murder-alive but dead.

As a teacher of many years I have encountered the empty eyes, broken spirits, and murdered souls of too many students. I listen and try to contain their precious blood
stained words--directing them when appropriate to psychotherapeutic help or medical help or help in other ways but being a Passage for them has been of paramount importance to me. Some of the most extraordinary moments have come out of class assignments. One of the most rewarding assignments was for an Oral Expression of Literature class to choose a minimum of three poems, two must be published, one can be original, developed around a theme. The complete analysis of each poem is written along with the Intro, Transitions, and Conclusion. I challenge them to be Bold, Truthful, Authentic, Vulnerable. Some meet the challenge.

Last week in one of my classes a young lady stood in the theatre in front of our class sharing her theme: Abuse. The first two poems were published poets--the third, an original:

Filthy fingers forging further,

Debris sinking into a once pure soul.

An ignorant man in numerous ways,

Yields more power than deserved,

(I now bypass many lines to the end of the poem.)

Alone with her turmoil,

In an unsafe place,

No longer fit to be called a home,

With even the slightest connection she had felt to anything holy perished.

For those same eyes which witnessed the trespassing of all of which was her

Could not see a being, let alone, god who would allow such a fate.

Condemned by her family and now devoid of belief,

She wanders.

All grown up she may seem,

But still very much a broken child,

Always keeping watch,

And still faintly wishing for a response.
Every student—close to thirty in the class and me—were crying at the end-in reverent silence of her courage of TRUTH. She ended by saying she was okay and after many years of therapy that sacred moment in class marked a courageous step towards healing. We were the first to hold her pain outside of her therapeutic space. We were the first to witness her shame.

I asked her permission to include these few lines. On Monday in class, Nicole and other members reminded me of how important Creating Space for Murdered Souls and their Shame was. And to them, this work was Holy.

God called me to Teach—I listened to the call and my own soul and spirit have so enriched.

When Achilles heard of Patroclus' death

the pyre in his heart ignited

with such a flame that the flood

of the blood of the thousand bitters

he drew could not quench it.

We have no name for such a wound.

"Our Wounds" (by Ed Tick in Greece)

When Andromache bid Hektor farewell the hope in her heart was doused with such a grief that the memory of the sweet sweat of the million kisses they shared could not salve it.

We have no name for such a wound.

You and I pile our logs a hundred higher than the
pyre of Patroclus. You and
I blow a thousand kisses
beyond the tumbling Trojan walls.
Do not deny it, though it cannot be named. Do not disguise it, though it shroud your soul.

Leonard Shengold, M.D., has said:

Soul murder is neither a diagnosis nor a condition. It is a dramatic term for circumstances that eventuate in crime--the deliberate attempt to eradicate or compromise the separate identity of another person.

Therefore murdering someone's soul means depriving the victim of the ability to feel joy and love as a separate person.

Child abuse is the abuse of power. We do not have coherent psychology of power; much is unknown. Soul murder is as old as human history, as old as the abuse of the helpless by the powerful in any group-which means as old as the family: [Medea, Agave, Elektra, Antigone].

Soul, or psychic, murder involves trauma imposed from the world outside the mind that is so overwhelming that the mental apparatus is flooded with feeling."

Here is a poet's sense of the soul being forced into its own murder:

The soul driven from the body
Mourns the memory it leaves behind.
A dove hit in flight sadly turns
It's neck and sees its nest destroyed.

[by Abu Al-Ala Al-M'arri]
The Olympic Spirit is the opposite of this soul murder. The Olympic spirit is about truth and courage and humility and honoring the struggle, the flame symbolizing purity, denotes friendship and peace as it endeavors for perfection and victory. The ancient tragedy provided the space by which the murdered souls of the play could release their agony--a collective scream from mankind. The catharsis became a unified one of actor and audience as the souls resonated and harmonized in the pain. Today we live in a world of tormented, saddened and deadened souls ravaged by everyday life, traumas and terrorism. The tragedies are one avenue to break through the silence and release the agonia. Sardello in his book says: "The effect of terrorism is not merely to kill people but to commit soul murder on those of us not directly affected. It views people as objects, and we become objects, even to ourselves."

When innocence is taken

in a child

or an adult

or a nation

All the world splinters to decay.

For that inner cry screams in silence and the sound is deafening--it is heard without ears-for Souls hear in a Universal way and touch the pain unseen.

I love Euripedes. He was such a voice against abuse. In a world, both then and now-he challenges us to awaken to war's awful cost and unending pain. Euripedes wrote this prayer for an end to war--for he truly knew its cost:
Let my spear lie idle for spiders

to weave their web around it.

May I live in peace in white old age.

May I sing with garlands around my white head,

having hung up my Thracian shield

on the pillared house of Athena.

May I unfold the voice of books, which the wise honor.

from *Erechtheus*

As my dear friend Ed Tick, a great healer in Upstate New York, who sent me the Euripedes poem, wrote in an email: "Especially in times of terror we can't forget Beauty nor break our devotion to Her. Beauty is the food of the soul. They can't take it away from us. It's yours, mine, ours."

Theatre and Psychotherapeutic Healing are deeply connected. The tragedies allow the face of horror to confront us and allow us Sight. The therapeutic process allows this as well. Both bring Sacred Space to the wounded soul. In both processes the victim is served by a witness. The ancient tragedies have their audience as does the patient working with their therapist, thus co-creating the Space of healing. This co-creation is necessary to penetrate the wounded soul and to allow for healing.

In 1995, while on sabbatical in Greece, I was at the International Ancient Greek Tragedy Festival at Delphi. While watching a production of Henrik Mueller's *Prometheus Bound*, I began to feel the presence of a woman sitting to my right. Her intensity as she watched was incredible. Afterwards, she asked me if we could share a meal or glass of wine. We did. With her green eyes bright and alive and her short reddish hair, she walked with a cane. Her story still reverberates in my every cell. Marta was a concentration camp victim. At three, she watched her parents
and siblings taken from her--Killed. Her little soul murdered. From three to thirteen, she was continuously raped. More soul murder. The cane she walked with supported her legs that had been broken, her once-shattered pelvis and once-broken hips--but the soul murder was not complete for she found another support in her life besides this wooden cane. A German psychiatrist worked with her for 30 years until his death, and in 1995 she had already journeyed 23 times in her camping van traveling from one Greek Festival to another all summer long away from her home in Italy. This journey each summer was a ritual of her soul path. She did not believe in God. For her, God existed in her psychiatrist who nurtured her murdered soul piece by piece, patiently, reverently and with deep compassion. The Greek tragedies also represented god for her--the suffering souls resonating with hers, allowing her time and time again catharsis and deeper healing.

It was a night I shall never forget-Marta sends me cards to remember her. Marta burned my soul with her courage--forgetting her is impossible!

We had a Divine Appointment that night. I with my penetrating faith in God and Marta with her penetrating faith in her gods, Our Gods intersected that night and we both knew that the Divine Good had been upon us.

Marta opened doors for me with her sorrow. I hope my witness to her supported her in her Journey--a helping hand to her cane.

My friend Marta was shamed. When one is shamed, it is a purposeful assault on the soul. When shamed, the victim tries to bring together resources to protect the soul. When the assault is extreme and inescapable as happened to my friend Marta the result can be soul murder leaving a sociopath, a physical body inhabited by a dead soul, a living machine that can kill or maim without feeling or remorse. Shame is insidious and worn like a heavy cloak not bringing warmth or comfort but Burden. My friend Marta, because of her intense co-created journey with her psychiatrist and the Greek tragedies, was able to overcome a living death.

Again Shengold: "The literary and clinical presentations support the surprising finding that the damaging traumata can also contribute to the strengths and talents of the suffering victim."

Commenting on Shengold, Samuel Ritvo, M.D., Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center says, "With the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope as his main 'patient,' Shengold intrigues us with the story of how Trollope rescued himself from a miserable, nearly devastating childhood and
adolescence through creativity, sublimation and adaptation to the culture of his time. All the while, and quite appropriately so, Shengold remains in awe of the mystery of creativity."

More than ever our world needs the Olympic Spirit to provide the space as it did in ancient Greece for an opening not a denial of our Humanity in all its colors-dark and light.

Through the Olympic Spirit we can all find our way home-to re-think our ways-to go back to our roots.

Awe and reverence of the Olympic Spirit are critical for this Healing.

The Olympic Spirit calls to Greece for magnanimity which means Great Souled-Big of Heart-Inclusive rather than Exclusive.

The Olympic Spirit is alive, but it cannot be alive until We are in an alive state, until we create the Space to be alive, to create and cultivate and toil; people must re-think their thoughts; open their hearts; compete in a state of celebration, of competition that is holy and healthy and spiritual. To celebrate Greek tragedies allows us a glimpse of how dark and how painful our souls can be-and yet amidst all our pain an Olympic Torch can come inside and burn us once again--cauterize the pain and lift us out and up into Olympic Spirit.

The Olympic Spirit believes in the power of dreams. The athletes of the Paralympics offer us the opportunity to witness their moments as whole athletes embraced and bathed in the Olympic Spirit.

The sacred space of Theatre offers also the opportunity to witness and heal with the wounded of the tragedies. Both events allow the unseen wounds a space to BE freely.

In order to live freely we must acknowledge the same loss, the same cry, the same pain-we in this world are the same.