

Psychospiritual Dynamics of Borders and Walls in Regard to the Invasion of
Ukraine by Russia
by
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As psychotherapists, particularly when working with couples and families, we frequently see the most amazing and complex walls that have been constructed between people who are undeniably in close relationships with one another. In individual therapy we encounter the internal walls erected within the psyche of the individual. In both cases the therapy contract is usually some form of working with our clients to dismantle these walls. If we were gurus in an ashram rather than psychotherapists in an office, the contract would be framed in terms of helping someone overcome the illusion of separateness from other humans and from all of life.

Walls guarding against interpersonal or intrapsychic intimacy, and supporting the illusion of separateness, wreak havoc in the lives of individuals and the people closest to them. Sometimes psychotherapists attempt to integrate spiritual principles into psychotherapy, perhaps even unconsciously (Rhead, 1996; Rhead, 2014), and sometimes gurus attempt to integrate psychotherapy principles into their spiritual teachings (Kornfield, 2020). Integrating the principles and practices of psychology with those of spirituality can potentially lead to powerfully useful understanding and healing for individuals and for all of humanity (Rhead, 2012).

The brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russia is entering its eighth week as I write these words. Terms like genocide and war crimes are increasingly being used to describe what is taking place. While I am participating in activities in the world that I hope will reduce the suffering that is taking place, my psychologist's mind is spinning with curiosity and speculation about how to understand what is happening. Participating in Zoom meetings with psychotherapists around the world, including from Ukraine and Russia, feeds this intense curiosity about why this new holocaust is unfolding.

Clearly part of what is taking place can be seen as an extreme version of Malignant Othering Syndrome (Rhead, 2021). In this syndrome, people come to view other individuals or groups as inferior to oneself or one's reference group as a defense mechanism against unconscious fears of one's own inadequacy. Such inadequacy is often framed in terms of intelligence, courage, and morality, although many other frames are possible. Once one has established one's superiority to the other it becomes easier to rationalize treating the other badly, if for no other reason than the belief that the other does not deserve to be treated well. A feedback loop can now arise in which the unconscious fear of inferiority is exacerbated by the underlying moral inferiority reflected in having treated the other badly. The exacerbated fear of one's inferiority then triggers additional malignant othering.

Another part of what is taking place in Ukraine can be seen as related to Wealth Acquisition and Hoarding Addictive Disorder (Rhead and Clark, 2019). The largely unconscious psychological and spiritual dynamics that drive the addictive behavior of the billionaire oligarchs in Russia and in many other countries way beyond any kind of rational concept of enough wealth, and leads to the impoverishment of huge numbers of people at the other end of wealth distribution around the world. (Rhead, 2012)

As the Ukraine debacle is unfolding I find myself very curious about the conscripted Russian soldiers who are perpetrating the atrocities, whether firing artillery rounds at residential neighborhoods and hospitals from a distance, executing individual civilians face-to-face while their hands are tied behind their backs, or raping and murdering women while forcing their children to watch. My curiosity expands out to the friends and family members of these soldiers, and the dilemma of how they deal with the news of the atrocities being committed in their name, and suddenly I flash back over 50 years to my own history with such a dilemma.

In the last 1960s young men of my age, including some who were friends of mine, were conscripted to fight in the US invasion of Vietnam. When reports of atrocities of these good American soldiers began to surface I was initially quite certain of their source: communist propaganda. Then when some of these reports were verified as true to my satisfaction, I blamed it on our military

conscripted methods. I assumed that a few bad apples, morally deranged young men who should never have even been allowed to possess a firearm, were mistakenly allowed into uniform. Then when the scope of the atrocities being committed became clear, I reassured myself that if I were in Vietnam I would have the courage and moral integrity to refuse to participate in such things. Then my friends, also courageous and moral young men like me, began to come back from Vietnam and tell me the horror stories of what they had done to innocent civilians, and my defense mechanisms collapsed. Clearly there was no way to rationally continue to tell myself that I would never have done such things had I been there. At that point my inner psychologist began to explore, both in myself and others, how we humans come to behave so badly.

As I now reflect on this question with regard to Russian soldiers in Ukraine, I revisit the theories I have already explored in the articles I have cited above. These theories all revolve around just a few concepts: (1) That we are all inherently one at a spiritual or existential level and we will do extreme things, consciously or unconsciously, to try to experience that oneness. (2) That we all have an inherent desire to contribute to the healing of the world, sometimes conceptualized as finding meaning in one's life, and we are all susceptible to the delusion that we are making that contribution when in fact we are doing the opposite, and (3) That we all desire to feel loved in a deep and existential way by some kind of divinity and we sometimes do very harmful things to others in a misguided attempt to earn this love.

Reflecting on the behavior of Russian soldiers in Ukraine I notice that an old psychological concept, cognitive dissonance, comes to mind and makes a potentially valuable addition to the concepts noted in the preceding paragraph. This concept seems to have applicability to the understanding of soldiers committing atrocities, and well as to the understanding of how their friends and family try to cope with the awareness that these atrocities are being committed.

Going to war has two obvious and inherent risks: death and deep existential regret for causing death. Awareness of these risks would seem likely to cause a reluctance to participate in war. However the above-noted misdirected drives for oneness, meaning and love tend to counteract this reluctance and create a sense of ambivalence or uncertainty about the wisdom of a decision to participate in

war. At this point, cognitive dissonance can tip the balance of the ambivalence. The very fact that the stakes, death and regret for causing death, are so high, can make the difference. The thought of taking such a very great risk is completely dissonant with the thought that it would be a very bad decision. One way to resolve this cognitive dissonance is to conclude it must indeed be a very good idea to take the risk. This resolution is made easier to the extent that one's inherent drives for oneness, meaning and love are primarily unconscious.

A similar dynamic around cognitive dissonance can also be seen in the way that friends, family, and countrymen of soldiers deal with the news they hear of atrocities. The thought that their soldiers are committing atrocities is quite dissonant with the thought that their soldiers, and their country, are of high moral character and what they are going is in the service of their country and the Greater Good. In this way I imagine many Russians are having the same struggles I had when first learning of the atrocities committed by my friends in Vietnam.

There is also a possible legacy version of cognitive dissonance for Russian soldiers. Many countries have histories that include morally questionable behavior on the part of their militaries. As noted above, Vietnam is an example for the US. However, for Russian soldiers this type of history is much more recent. Only 5 years ago much of the world was outraged by the murdering of civilians in Syria by the Russian army. Thus Russian soldiers in Ukraine not only have ancestors who committed war crimes against innocent civilians, they have contemporaries who have done so. Some of them might even have a personal history in this regard, as they may themselves have participated in the atrocities in Syria before their current involvement in the same process now in Ukraine. Such an historical legacy means that the psychological circumstances are already in place that could trigger malignant others. To the extent that one's ancestors or contemporaries have behaved in a way that might indicate moral inadequacy¹, it is likely that one will have doubts about one's own moral adequacy. These doubts would be even stronger if one has personally engaged in the past in ways that might indicate moral inadequacy. Fears that one might be inadequate in this way, especially

¹ An example of this can be seen in malignant othering of Blacks by Whites in the US. Especially for Whites whose ancestors were slave owners, there can be an unconscious legacy experience of felt moral inadequacy because of enslaving others that can trigger malignant othering of Blacks by Whites. The same dynamic can also exist in White Americans and Native Americans.

when these fears are unconscious, can trigger malignant othering. In this case the object of the malignant othering would be the members of a group that one has harmed, in the present or the past, because of moral inadequacy. In this case the malignant othering not only compensates for the feelings of inadequacy, but also provides something of a rationale for continued harm to others, since their perceived inadequacy makes them more appropriate targets. It is a process of malignant othering that simultaneously can resolve some of the cognitive dissonance involved in the tension between seeing oneself as a morally adequate person while at the same time seeing oneself as behaving in a manner that indicates moral inadequacy.

All of the above brings to my mind Lenin's famous work: *What is to be Done? Burning Questions of our Movement* (Lenin, 1902). In the current situation I would define "our movement" in terms of those of us who would like to help heal the world through psychological and spiritual principles and practices.

The terms "raise awareness" and "expand awareness" are sometimes seen as merely idealistic fantasies of old hippies, but they do represent some things that might have genuine healing value for our species. Much of the core of psychotherapy as it has evolved over time has to do with expanding one's awareness to include the knowledge that unconscious processes, whether individual or collective, exist in all of us and have a great influence on our behavior. Once one acquires this knowledge, then one can engage in activities, such as psychotherapy, to bring more of the unconscious into conscious awareness. This "expanded" awareness in turn give one great conscious control over one's behavior. It can also serve as an invaluable aid in knowing what brings deep happiness and what brings painful regret.

In a manner similar to psychotherapy, many spiritual practices are intended to bring into conscious awareness the spiritual forces and entities that are universally present in our lives. These forces and entities can do more than simply help us make more informed choices about how we live our lives in pursuit of happiness and avoidance of regret. They can also provide direct assistance in impacting the world in a positive way. As noted above, there can be significant cross-pollination between psychotherapeutic pursuits and spiritual pursuits, sometimes unconsciously so (Rhead, 2014).

While the expansion of awareness sounds like a very broad and ambitious intention, sometimes it can be undertaken in small and concrete ways. This can start with the selection and training of the members of a society who are authorized to carry and use lethal weapons—soldiers and police officers. Those who present with strong beliefs based on malignant othering that cause them to devalue certain other groups of humans based on nationality, religion, race and the like, should be excluded at the outset. Those who pass this selection standard would then have a significant component of their training revolve around psychospiritual education. The first lesson in the education would describe the reality of unconscious psychological processes and invisible spiritual forces and entities, and would encourage trainees to seek to expand their awareness to include these realities. The concept of legacy-induced malignant othering would be included in this lesson. The second lesson would address the various ways one can achieve such expanded awareness and would encourage (perhaps require?) that trainees engage in one or more of these processes.

In addition to those who wield power through the possession of lethal weapons, we must consider those who wield political and economic power. Requiring candidates for political office to have meaningful experience in the expansion of awareness in the ways noted above would be difficult, but could have an impact (Rhead, what mgith?). Similarly, recognizing the psychospiritual pathology involved in acquiring and wielding power through wealth (Rhead and Clark Wahad) could be regarded as a condition that is severe and can be dangerous to others could change the ways in which it addressed. These could include involuntary hospitalization and restrictions on access to excessive wealth in order to protect the general population.

A “movement” that Lenin would never have imagined is the current explosion of interest in the use of psychedelic compounds. Although these compounds have a very long history of being used quietly within the realm of religion and spirituality, their bursting into the public arena in the 1960s as a result of the discovery of LSD was a very different picture. The suppression of their use by very strict laws drove much of the popular use underground and virtually stopped scientific experimentation completely. Recently scientific research has been exploding in

many parts of the world, and the underground movement has become more publicly visible. While scientific research has focused primarily on mental health issues for which psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy can be very useful, the more popular psychedelic movement is more focused on the expansion of consciousness being addressed in the article. Social and governmental support of this popular psychedelic movement could also contribute to the healing of the world, one person at a time.

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