THE HERO in the Mirror

From Fear to Fortitude

SUE GRAND
THE HERO
in the Mirror

RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES BOOK SERIES
Volume 41
The Relational Perspectives Book Series (RPBS) publishes books that grow out of or contribute to the relational tradition in contemporary psychoanalysis. The term “relational psychoanalysis” was first used by Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) to bridge the traditions of interpersonal relations, as developed within interpersonal psychoanalysis and object relations, as developed within contemporary British theory. But, under the seminal work of the late Stephen Mitchell (1988), the term “relational psychoanalysis” grew and began to accrue to itself many other influences and developments. Various tributaries—interpersonal psychoanalysis, object relations theory, self psychology, empirical infancy research, and elements of contemporary Freudian and Kleinian thought—flow into this tradition, which understands relational configurations between self and others, both real and fantasied, as the primary subject of psychoanalytic investigation.

We refer to the relational tradition, rather than to a relational school, to highlight that we are identifying a trend, a tendency within contemporary psychoanalysis, not a more formally organized or coherent school or system of beliefs. Our use of the term “relational” signifies a dimension of theory and practice that has become salient across the wide spectrum of contemporary psychoanalysis. Now under the editorial supervision of Lewis Aron and Adrienne Harris, the Relational Perspectives Book Series originated in 1990 under the editorial eye of the late Stephen A. Mitchell. Mitchell was the most prolific and influential of the originators of the relational tradition. He was committed to dialogue among psychoanalysts and he abhorred the authoritarianism that dictated adherence to a rigid set of beliefs or technical restrictions. He championed open discussion, comparative and integrative approaches, and he promoted new voices across the generations.

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SUE GRAND
To Jennifer Leighton, Dori Laub, and Bernard Rous
With gratitude
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In times of trouble, we are inspired by courage. In every life and in the life of every culture, there are moments of danger. In our personal lives, we have intimate anxieties, interpersonal conflicts, traumatic encounters, and real-life reversals. We are challenged by terminal illness, job loss, the death of a loved one. In analysis, we face uncomfortable truths. As citizens of the world, we are exposed to economic instability, global violence, and the effects of global warming. Some of us have endured genocide, earthquake; too many of us are living in a war zone. In the course of human existence, danger takes many forms. There are vast differences between our predicaments. But these predicaments illuminate human bravery.

In the midst of fear, people keep faith with the self, and they keep faith with the dignity of others. As clinicians and as citizens of the world, we are moved by this capacity. We start to ask ourselves questions. What is courage? Will we find it when our time comes? Can we find creative solutions when our problems overwhelm us? Who do we become when everything seems lost? When we feel threatened, what happens to our ethics? What is the price of survival and self-preservation? Is it possible to act on behalf of ourselves and for the other? If we are fortunate, these questions awaken our own potential. They widen our circle of empathy and allow us to appreciate the strengths and the resources of others. They permit us to see the heroic capacity in ourselves. But all too often, these questions become an affliction. They roil around inside of us and can become the occasion for shame, paralysis, deference, or self-attack. When this happens, we cannot find the hero in ourselves. We cannot reach across difference and join hands with another. And so, we turn to something else. We fantasize about Heroes and Cowards and Villains. These figures infuse our inner worlds and we act them out. As individuals, as families, as small groups and large collectives, we construct an idealized Heroic self which few of us can really live up to. We create a “cowardly” self which no one can admit
to. To repudiate our own “cowardice,” we seek and find an adversary to vanquish. Every time we feel frightened, we infuse that fear with Heroes, Cowards, and Villains. We fill our world with conflicts, antagonisms, exhortations, and devaluations. Ordinary “problems in living” (Sullivan, 1953) become complicated. Cultural problems become inflamed. In our personal lives, we seek an analyst. As global citizens, we clamor for peace, even as we make war.

As individuals and as collectives, we imagine the Hero as the antidote to our suffering. In this book, I will suggest that this fantasy exacerbates our suffering. I believe it turns the human condition into a cycle of trauma. It is a difficult world, and we all crave the Hero. When we feel endangered, we want immortality (Altman, 2005; Peltz, 2005). We all suffer from death anxiety (Becker, 1975; May, 1981; Yalom, 1980). We have a dread of helpless dependence (Klein, 1948/1975; Segal, 1964). We take flight from these experiences through illusion (Slochower, 2006), grandiosity (Kohut, 1966/1978a, 1972/1978b, 1984), and impulsivity. To enhance our sense of our own immortality, we imagine a Heroic figure of fearless rebellion (Slochower, 1970), resolute will (Arlow, 1961; Rank, 1922/2004), absolute autonomy (Rank, 1922/2004), superhuman endurance, and world-transformational powers (Campbell, 1949). This figure lives in moral absolutes and moral extremes (Alford, 1998). It tends to lack intimate attachment, even though it appears to act on behalf of the social world (Campbell, 1949; Rank, 2004; Reed, 1974). In its most magical form, this ideal can actually sponsor rash acts and noble deeds. These actions appear to us as a source of inspiration, and they provide a bulwark against our anxiety (Arlow, 1961). In these moments, the Hero appears as a figure of ecstatic goodness. This figure becomes the object of our adulation, excitement, and desire.

But the more we study this mythic figure, the more we will see how it turns against us. Our apparent savior is embedded in a problematic relational system: The Hero is outsized because we are making ourselves small. This figure seems to be without need, because we are absorbing its need. It seems autonomous, because we require illusions of autonomous selfhood (Gerson, 1996; Layton, 2004; Reed, 1974). It seems singular, because we have ceded all of our courage to a figure who appears to act alone. The Hero’s courage seems formidable, because it is opposed to a formidable Villain. In his discussion of Levinas, Rozmarin (2007) offers an eloquent

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*In this book, the Hero will not be denoted by a masculine pronoun, even though this configuration is often phallic in its nature, and has been inscribed on a male body. Although my thesis will touch on gender, it is not a study in gender.
description for this relation to other-ness: “It can serve as nothing but an empty location, a destination, for the subject of the discourse to store his fantasies of truth, salvation and doom” (p. 331). Through this idealized construct, we may assuage some anxiety. We may evoke some spectacular acts. But we also erect the “existential gulag” in which we are imprisoned (p. 337). We are locked into systems of intrapsychic, interpersonal, † and global conflict. ‡ Our problems become urgent; they have dramatic pitch and fervor; they are imbued with near-death experience, and we inflict them on others. Nothing else seems to capture our attention. We fail to address the “ordinary” dilemmas of the human condition. We cannot find the “ordinary” hero in ourselves.

In this book, I make a plea for this “ordinary hero.” I critique our visions of the Heroic and propose an alternate vision of courage: one which reflects the realities of human fear and human subjectivity. In my view, danger is endemic to the human condition. The most pedestrian problem can bewilder us and thrust us into states of existential isolation. Our challenge is to keep faith with the self, while we keep faith with the other. This requires a condition of interdependence and mutual reliance, in which the hero is us. In this context, the heroic is social, and courage is not the province of a singular Hero. Bravery is not defined by its antagonism with destructiveness, but by an awakened ability to meet human trouble. To move toward this position, we must confront our own anxiety. If we can admit to being mortal and insecure (Ensler, 2006), we might not defer to the Hero. We might stop waiting for that Hero to arrive. We would be less inclined toward rash action and more inclined toward reflectivity. We might ameliorate our shame and our paralysis. Perhaps we could seek hope in our own social world. To find this hope, “the urge for unlimited vastness and boundlessness, omniscience and eternity, must to some extent be overcome or transformed” (Aron, 2005, p. 693).

Heroic Otherness and the Great Generation‡

The problem under study has psychological, cultural, and ethical dimensions. It takes different shapes in different social contexts. For me, this

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1 See Chapters 4, 6, 7.

2 See Chapters 2, 3, 8, 9.

‡ I would like to dedicate this chapter to my father, Saul Grand. He told me his story, and encouraged me in this project.
problem also has personal meaning. I never thought I had courage. I never knew if I would have it, if the time came. Or perhaps, I should say, \textit{when} the time came. Given my heritage, persecution seemed inevitable. For a child, that was enough of a problem. But there was a greater one: How would I act, in dark times? By the time I was 7 years old, life was an incipient moral crisis. I can see myself, with my grandmother, skipping rope in Brooklyn. I am eating penny candy, in Greenwich Village. From the outside, I must have seemed like a child. But in my mind, I was tilting at fascism. Everywhere I looked, there were Heroes, Cowards, and Villains.

This preoccupation grew out of a post–World War II (WWII) sensibility. As a child of the Great Generation, I was born into a riveting and disturbing worldview. Danger was imminent; life was a test of cowardice and courage. This vision was evoked by the war, and it was particular to \textit{that} war. There had been an epic battle between good and evil, and the Heroes had won. Then they came home, put on suits and ties, went to work, and mowed the lawn. They looked like ordinary men. But they were objects of mystery, terror, and excitement. We would shudder to think about what they had seen. They barely spoke about the war. We never knew the soldiers inside of our fathers, and those soldiers were never known by their own children. But Nazism had made them larger than life. We were filled with their nobility and their sacrifice. But we were also filled with self-doubt. Whatever they had done, we didn’t know if we could do it. But after WWII, you had to know that you could come up with the “stuff” (See also Harris, 2008).

\textit{Bystanders and Rescuers: The Debt of Memory}

This conviction bore the imprint of mass trauma. It would be many years before I could query its traumatic origins and find another register for courage. I was born in 1952, shortly after the end of the war. Heroism was a prevailing motif in my culture. Cowardice evoked our condemnation. We had black and white moral codes, which were mirrored by the images on our black and white television. That’s where I saw the newsreels of the concentration camps. At the time, everyone was reckoning with the same shock. The truth had been hidden, and now it was our responsibility to see it. No one thought much about monitoring these images, or about their effects on a young child. In my memory, I am paralyzed, watching. I seem to be alone, and the images keep rolling. How old could
I have been? Perhaps 3 or 4. Anyway, I knew who they were, and I also knew who we were. My father was an American Jewish soldier, who was stationed in Dachau just after its liberation. What he saw left a stain on his memory. I was born 7 years later. The newsreels simply confirmed what I already knew. In my family, Nazis were evil, but passive bystanders were not far behind them. Before I could crawl, I got the message: Violence was endemic to the human condition. It would come again, and there would be another victim. From infancy onward, I received a moral edict: I must act, on behalf of the innocent, when their time came.

In my family, we knew who the devil was, and we were vigilant about his return. I was always worrying about how I would escape. I liked hidden spaces, trap doors, secret stairwells, and I wanted a cloak of invisibility. I watched for the exit. The Nazis weren’t dead; they were silent, and they could always come back. But I also knew that the devil would change his shape and his ideology. Persecution could happen anywhere, and it could be directed at someone else next time. Dachau wasn’t just about us. This time, we were it. But next time, someone else could be it. They might need us to rescue them. If someone needed our rescue, there must be no hesitation. If a culture of terror arose, we had to fight injustice. Regardless of the risk, we had to take it. Nothing could trump the protection of the innocent. Nothing could legitimate inaction. My moral universe was bounded by these three possibilities: perpetrator, bystander, victim. I never got to tangle with smaller ethical questions. I was walloped with the big one, from the first moment of speech. I decided pretty early that I wasn’t the perpetrator. I studied survival, in case I was the next victim. But if I wasn’t the next victim, who would I be? Someday, I would be tested. On that day, I would discover the worth of my soul.

As a child, I thought I had to solve the problem of good and evil, before the next cataclysm. My mind was always full of Heroes and Villains. It was inevitable, perhaps, for me to become a psychoanalyst, studying the problems of malignance and destruction. With my heritage, I made the link between personal and political conflict, well before I read critical social theorists. But I was still knotted up about courage and cowardice. When I wasn’t witnessing my familial story, I was reading other stories. Thousands of books were cluttering our walls: Holocaust testimony, American history, world history, philosophy, literature, ethics, mysteries, fairy tales, cartoon books, contemporary politics. Newspapers and magazines were everywhere. I always had an affinity with psychology, but I never thought psychology was distinct from politics, literature, or
history. Wherever a good story took me, that’s where I went. But in every story, I found a Hero.

The Heroic Excites and Alienates Its Witness

Every time I saw courageous action, that action took on the status of a heroic idealization. This action was as awesome as it was alien; I would never do it, when my time came. As a child, I was terrified, full of fantasy, full of history, and ethically challenged. My daily life was infused with noble aspirations. Bravery was imperative, and it was a matter of life and death. In that epoch, courage was defined as *ecstatic goodness*. It was bold action, taken on behalf of the other, without concern for self-preservation. It was the willingness to “die on one’s feet, rather than live on one’s knees.” Anything less would be cowardice. I was raised on stories of rescue and resistance. But I was also raised to flee and to hide. My Heroic prospects excited me, but they were also a source of bewilderment and confusion. How could I be fearless, when I was frightened? How could I be bold, if I was invisible? How could I save multitudes, when I was in hiding?

I thought fear was the impediment to my heroic transformation. Everywhere I looked, the Hero seemed fearless. Everywhere I looked, the Hero was an object of adulation, celebration, and desire. His moral clarity seemed miraculous. I watched movies about the Great Generation. I saw my father protect victims of violence, on New York City streets. One night stands out in my memory. We were driving through midtown. It was dark and deserted. A man was attacking a woman on the sidewalk. My father leapt out of the car. He moved like lightning. His muscles rippled, and his outrage was formidable. He saved the innocent. In this moment, the demonic trinity was visible: perpetrator, bystander, victim. Then the bystander was activated. The rescuer appeared, and the malignant triangle was broken. Goodness won. Clark Kent turned into Superman. Heroic transformation was possible. Watching my father, I knew how we had won the war. I knew who had won it, and I knew which side I wanted to be on.

In this moment, I was inspired by the *bold action* of the Heroic Other. One inspiration led to another, and I began a lifelong inquiry: *Who* was the “Hero,” and how could *I* become *him*? I never noticed the problematic core of my own question. I kept depositing courage in the *Other*. I thought courage was an *essence*. I kept constructing the Heroic as a superhuman

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*For a critique of this type of essentialism, see Layton (2004).*
figure of ecstatic goodness. This figure only came to life in an opposition with “evil.” I chased the secret of Heroic transformation, but that secret would only appear in the midst of destruction. In ordinary life, it was beyond the grasp of ordinary human subjectivity. I couldn’t see this knot, for a long time. Gazing at the “Hero,” my vision was constrained by cultural tropes. In my childhood, good and evil seemed like pure forms, and they were always at war. This war was terrible and exhilarating. In the Nazis, destruction had been magnified beyond the recognizable. Malignance, tragedy, and the meaning of salvation: Everything had an extraordinary dimension. Courage had to become larger than life.

In daily life, my father was a man of ordinary goodness. He was generous, socially conscious, and he would help anyone. In Dachau, he must have done whatever he could. But whatever he did, it could never be enough. He was witnessing a paralytic and monstrous spectacle. In that moment, the Nazis made him into a set of eyes, just as I was made into a set of eyes by the newsreels. After Dachau, ordinary goodness must have seemed insufficient. When my father met crime on a dark street, he could intervene, while someone else was made into a set of eyes. Suddenly, Dachau was reversed: I was witnessing a Heroic spectacle. From the security of the car, I watched my father become larger than life. I saw him grow in size and in force; his body had otherworldly dimensions. His moral code was in precise correspondence to his action. He was miraculous, and he had x-ray vision. He arrived before the victim could be wounded.

In this moment, his ordinary goodness was transformed into superhuman goodness; it conformed to my Heroic idealization. In the aftermath of massive trauma, concern and integrity had to be spectacular. Compassion had to vanquish destruction. That encounter had to be seen by watchful eyes. My eyes were a repetition of, and an antidote for, his eyes on Dachau. Watching him protect a woman on the street, tragedy was undone. We could stop thinking about the millions no one could save. But I knew terror could return. One person had been saved, but millions were lost. My father wouldn’t always be there. I couldn’t just admire him. I had to learn to be him. I needed to penetrate the mystery of his Heroic transformation, but I could never do it. I could only witness violence and confirm the Heroic Other. In this, I wasn’t alone. In post-war American culture, we were always gazing at the Hero. If our Hero had an interiority, we didn’t want to know about it. When cultures idealize a Hero, they don’t inquire into the interior of that Hero. If we inquire into the subjectivity of the Hero, that Hero tends to fall off of his pedestal (see Goren, 2007; Thomas, 2005). In post-war America, we wrote a script for our veterans, and we