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VIOLENCE AND LOVE – THE CONCEALED HERITAGE OF OUR FAMILIES

The more we know about our families, the more we can know about ourselves, and the more freedom we have to determine how we want to live. /.../ Even the worst and most painful family experiences – alcoholism, sexual abuse, suicide – are part of our accumulated identity. Only by understanding what led to those behaviours can we begin to understand the dark side of ourselves and learn to relate more fully to others.³

Jana: My dearest Violeta, I am more than well aware of the fact that we are about to touch upon a highly sensitive, painful topic that renders people uncomfortable. I am also well aware that it needs to be spoken about. Why is your book entitled *The End of Silence*?

Violeta: My dearest Jana, allow me to answer your question by sharing with you the questions I continuously strive to find answers to during my counselling sessions: how can someone express their distress if they are unable and not in the position to put it into words, to share it with the world, to open up their mouth to tell it to fellow men? If they remain caught in their silence within? If this person's silent pleas for

help remain ignored and unheard, even though human distress always finds a way to express itself?

Humankind has been granted the ability to speak, to put our thoughts and emotions into words, to share with the world. Which is why your distress CAN be expressed through words and can prevent you from replaying it over and over again in a variety of other ways. What am I referring to? I am referring to indicators, symptoms of someone's distress, initially indicating depression but, subsequently, growing and growing until the person sees suicide as the only way out.

During my practical work, I have so often come across cases during which the healing process could not be initiated until the person put an end to their silence, until the person refused to stay silent any longer and until they decided to share their pain with others. After all, this is what we experienced ourselves, Jana, first-hand, right? Focusing on my experience, I can tell you that I could not accept myself, combined with all the traumatic experiences I had been subjected to as a child, with empathy and understanding until I expanded my understanding and spoke up, before being heard and accepted with empathy and understanding.

Jana: You spoke up much sooner in life than I did. It took me as many as 46 years to finally open up about my mother's passing, during a therapy session. Do other people open up sooner?

Violeta: It is most unfortunate that a too large number of people remain silent and isolated in their pain for their entire life. Do they perhaps not possess the power and strength to

open up? Perhaps they are not given a chance to open up? A safe relationship in which they can do that? Have they perhaps been rebutted in the past for speaking up, which led to bad and painful experiences? In my counselling practice, I too frequently meet adults who experienced parental loss in their childhood, but who remained isolated and in silence with their traumatic experience. Until they decided to undergo therapy, they had never ever been given a chance to speak, to grieve. It has also come to my attention how also present-day children continue to be pushed aside in a troublesome silence. I personally find that we are doing them a great disservice!

Silence leads to much more severe and long-term issues in the life of a child than the traumatic event itself. I think adults in the Western world lack the awareness that children who experience such a huge loss as the loss of a parent are in dire need of at least one adult person in their life who provides them with the empathic support they require at that point in their life. Modern society is so afraid of death anyway. We find it hard to start and even more challenging to continue a conversation that discusses this particular topic. If we fail to speak to a child who has lost their mother or father, if we fail to listen to them when they share with us their feelings, thoughts, pain, the child is left abandoned, to their own devices, in their silence. The child does not obtain good experiences that would facilitate the recovery process. If the family of the child cannot help them, the child should be able to find the support and help they need at school, in the local community. Every single good experience, no matter how big or small, of being seen, of being heard, of feeling

that they can do it, is relevant for the affected child and serves to protect them.

What I am trying to emphasise here, is, that everyone who has found themselves in distress over parental loss, needs to speak up. Even if you were not given the chance to speak up during your childhood years, it is of such great value to be able to share your experience at any point in your adult life and accept the story of your childhood. It is never too late! The healing process can begin when you speak up.

Jana: We both lost a parent as children. You lost your father as a 9-year-old girl (he was 37 years old at the time), while I lost my mother as a 6-year-old girl (my mother was 38 years old at the time of her death). My mum left us suddenly, from natural causes. Even though the death of your father was just as sudden, he committed suicide. Does parental loss in all cases cause similar problems in children?

Violeta: Parental loss in childhood from any cause is a traumatic experience in and of itself. Every child namely has only one mother and only one father. Our mother and father are inherently the protectors of our childhood and parental loss in childhood shakes the affected person to the very core of their being. The younger the child, the more unbearable the inner distress. Children are even at a greater risk if the death of the parent is sudden or violent, if the parent commits suicide or is a victim of homicide. I am positive that the death of a mother or father in childhood, irrespective of the exact cause thereof, has traumatic ramifications for the affected child, particularly if they are left all alone in their desolation.

I need to emphasise that my practical work has shown me that families of suicide survivors, as a rule, envelope themselves into even greater silence, because the cross and heritage of suicide proves that much harder to bear.

Jana: I, too, frequently come across suicide being viewed only through the lens of the moment someone takes their own life. But, is suicide really a result of only the exact moment someone goes through with it?

Violeta: No, I am positive that it is not. Usually, people tend to not see the bigger, whole picture, but only separate, small particles of the overall underlying truth. Causes that lead someone to commit suicide are often sought in extremely narrow terms, in current events or relationships. There are only a few and far in-between families who, by themselves, delve deep enough to gain an insight on the exact causes that led to a tragic event, such as parental suicide. I believe that our life forms part of our societal and family heritage that can lay an extremely heavy burden on someone's shoulders. My practical work has shown me that all suicides result from negated traumas, violence and suffering during our childhood years that the adult person, who ultimately decided to kill themselves, never allowed themselves to consciously recognise and accept as part of them.

Children cannot choose the family they are born into. Children cannot avoid suffering. But, when we embark on our adult life, we can make the decision to expose the concealed heritage of our families and to change the course of our life. I have experienced on my own skin that people

decide to resolve their own burdens and the burdens of their family heritage when they experience a profound inner desire or distress that makes them decide to overcome and let go of all that that has happened to them.

But this process cannot begin without the proper experiences. You need to believe that it is possible, believe that there is something more out there, something different, something better, something more beautiful. Like more genuine relationships. Like more empathy, more power, more strength, more words, more freedom, more choice. A living and breathing interaction with yourself and others, more trust and feeling of safety within, in inter-personal relationships and the attitude towards the world as a whole. You can embark on a path of personal growth, which is the greatest gift, time and energy that you can endow yourself with. Personal growth is a lifelong learning process. All things that truly matter are built slowly, step-by-step, right?

Jana: You have touched upon an inner wish and distress. When do you reach the precipice that compels you to finally make a decision and seek help?

Violeta: As a rule, adults feel compelled to finally seek help by experiencing severe issues, distress and weight of various symptoms of unknown origins. They feel that they can no longer do it alone, that they are going to break down. The sooner they decide to get help, the better.

Issues come in various shapes and sizes. They may be indicated by depression, severe feelings of powerlessness, restraint. People tend to isolate themselves, try to drown

their sorrows in addictive substances and are prone to various diseases. They are also often overcome by strong feelings of fear and shame. They experience eating disorders, a low self-esteem and a poor attitude towards themselves. They are extremely wary of and mistrust others.

If you have experienced a grave injustice, such as parental loss – which is further exacerbated if the parent commits suicide – during your most vulnerable and helpless part of your life, you deserve as an adult to walk at least a part of your healing and therapeutic path with an empathic person, who understands you, has the relevant know-how and can offer you more than your friends and family members.

The know-how of a therapist that guides you through the therapeutic healing process is of extreme importance. Only they can help you expand your horizons and recognise the powerful subconscious forces that drive you and affect you.

My clients are very surprised when I tell them that these forces are their concealed past and family heritage.

Jana: Interestingly enough, it is a byword that children pay for the sins of their parents. What kind of concealed heritage carried by our families do you have in mind?

Violeta: We could call it your dowry. Big? Small? Very small? Should it make you laugh or cry? As far as I am concerned, whatever dowry you end up receiving, you need to open it, become acquainted therewith and make something with it. Even if it drives you into sheer despair!

All our lineage stories and our heritage are, generally speaking, very similar. There are so many violent experiences

and un-grieved losses that burden us and continue to echo within us in the present day. We are all the heirs of our lineages and their life experiences. The material world marks only one of the dimensions of the heritage that is observed. You also inherit tough experiences and entanglements experienced by your forefathers and -mothers on an emotional, psychological, and spiritual level, which have a hidden hold over you and lead their very own separate life in your subconscious, waiting to be released. History of mankind is filled with danger, violence and painful events.

Jana: How can the current generation start to clear the heritage of past generations?

Violeta: The clock cannot be turned back. You can, however, learn from the past, become familiar with it and distance yourself from it if it was extremely challenging. Luckily, we all also inherit the good stories of our ancestors. Their love continues to flow within. If the descendants are wise enough to come face to face with the twists and turns experienced by their lineage that remain a part of them, whether they are aware of them or not, and decide to introduce changes in their life, they can truly feel bestowed by immense grace.

These insights may, of course, also remain uncovered, but, in that case, the entire weight of the heritage that you fail to clear and grieve will be passed on to the next generation or your children. You need to see the bigger picture in order to establish an inner feeling of safety and trust so that better relationships get the chance to be re-introduced in your life. It is then that you feel the freedom of being able to decide

how to act and to not allow anyone to ever take that away from you. That way you also reclaim your inner power and stop paying for the sins of your parents. You always need to consciously put an end to the flow of violence!

Jana: You probably also need to know the stories of your ancestors. Sometimes they are hard to get.

Violeta: Indeed, you need answers to questions like: What is my background? Who were all these loved ones of mine? What was their greatest dream? Wish? Pain? Distress? How and why did they complicate matters unnecessarily? Why did some of them throw in the towel?

You need to look back upon the past with so much understanding and empathy. You need to realise what and why something happened and connect the dots of how particular events fit into your life. They have been experienced and felt in a concealed manner anyway.

This is why you need to penetrate the silence, find your relatives, talk to them, learn about the stories of their childhood and the stories of other ancestors. Quite often, you will be giving them the very first chance to discuss them! As soon as you open up about severe, painful and violent events in your lineage, you end up realising that some challenging topics that want to be released and cleared are handed down from generation to generation, only by putting on a different face than before. More often than not, they are waiting for you to allow yourself to grieve, to honour and respect them. In Slovenia, these faces are also laid bare in the high levels of alcohol abuse and one of the highest suicide rates on a global level.

You need to understand that all this is, in fact, your family heritage, but by keeping in mind that you are entitled to your own life.

Jana: You have told me how we all inherit our ancestors' stories. How should we handle and manage them so that they do not place an even further burden on ourselves?

Violeta: The key are those moments, in which you consciously decide how to act. When you make your own decisions. When you consciously set out to act differently than your ancestors. All people inherit a tendency to both violence and love from their forefathers and -mothers. What are you going to choose? Past stories are long finished even though they continue to echo and awaken within you. Present stories can, however, be consciously re-formulated. Nevertheless, if you continue turning a blind eye to the past, pretending that there is no such thing as the history of your lineage, negative entanglements from the past will be given even greater power over you also in the present.

Personally, I think that the genogram or record of your family's history is an excellent aid that helps many people obtain important insights. As soon as you explore your past and draw it, you are able to see your position and role in the entire story of your lineage and realise how connected you are to the entanglements experienced by your ancestors. A genogram is a good starting point for exploration because it compels many people to undertake examinations of their own and establish connections with the past of their lineage. And the silence is gone!

Jana: When did you start exploring your family's history?

Violeta: There came a point where I was simply left with no other choice but to dive straight in! I am still exploring it and learning! I used to wonder if all the burden that I once felt could be attributed solely to myself? Where had it originated from? How had I been able to accumulate it all? The weight on my shoulders was too much to bear. I needed a bigger picture that allowed me to breathe again and give meaning to all of my feelings.

I can still see before me a period, a good ten years ago, when I made a genogram of my own family during my Relational Family Therapy studies, during which I became even more committed to explore my family's history, the patterns permeating the life of my ancestors, their behaviours and entanglements. My family's concealed heritage or, to put it in other words, my dowry shook me to my core and rendered me speechless.

Slowly but surely, I was able to understand why my father had ultimately given up on life. He had run out of *everything good* he could hold onto! Since that insight, I have chosen to refer to people who have taken their own life as *suicide victims*. I hold the deep belief that they are, in fact, victims. This notion and concept continue to be proven time and time again in my practice. One could even go as far as to say that suicide is nothing but an indicator, consequence, sign of a wounded and traumatised family, who might have been affected by a particular trauma for several generations.⁴ Since all families form part of society, they can be adversely

affected by unjust, violent events such as wars, poverty or crises. A vicious circle that came to be god knows how far in the past. Violent individuals, violent society that creates new violent individuals, on and on and on and on, until one generation will gather the strength to put an end to the repeated violence. Only then will we be able to reduce the number of families and individuals that are the victims of too much suffering that makes them give up on their life.

Violeta: When I started to explore the heritage of my lineage, I was shocked by what I learnt. So many dreadful wounds caused by violence! So many victims! So much helplessness and silence! How insanely skewed views of themselves, of other human beings, of the world. Exploring my heritage finally enabled me to pinpoint to the origins of my heavy feelings and those subconscious forces that had been protruding my world from past generations.

All men died young, leaving their children without fathers. Both of my grandfathers had been victims of war violence before they turned 40. One at the beginning and the other at the end of World War II. My ancestors were severely traumatised by the war, which literally drained them of so much of their life's power. This is why my parents' life was so hard.

Recognising the pattern gave me further food for thought. Both my parents were born two

months after the deaths of their fathers. The same pattern, two tragic families, two tragic stories. Instead of being born into a world filled with joy and happiness, both my mother and father turned out to be victims of war, born into pain, sorrow, despair, and horror in their stead.

Slowly but surely, I started to accept that my background from both sides of my family had experienced so much pain. It started to dawn on me that my father's death formed part of a bigger story and suddenly showed itself to me in a completely different light than before. Extreme violence against himself, despairing over himself and killing himself, had to come to the surface as a result of profound and denied pain. I know that my father had never properly grieved his own father. Because of my father's death, the trauma was passed on to the next generation, and two fatherless children, my brother and I, ended up being two new victims of violence, who also had to grow up without their father by their side.

Jana: *The story of the female line in my mother's family is so insanely tragic! I had never been given too much of a chance to explore it as all of my ancestors from the previous generation have been long gone. I have come to understand the underlying pattern in my family: children without a mother.*

My grandma died of a disease that was not yet known to medical science. Therefore, my mother remained motherless as a 6-month-old baby. My own mother left us suddenly at the age of 38 due to the same condition as her mother before that, which was already known at the time, but the wrong diagnosis had been made. This is why I was left without my mother when I was 6 years old. When I turned 24 and could already have given birth to my own little baby girl, I also suffered from the same condition than my mother and grandmother. Luckily, I did not end up sharing their fate by going into surgery at the very last minute.

Jana: So it is really important to start exploring and, most of all, discussing tragic family stories?

Violeta: As soon as you gather the courage to explore, you are shaken to your core by the bitter suffering carried in the childhood's stories of your ancestors. Stories that you ended up joining by being born into a specific family system. Histories of our families are covered by unresolved traumas, which have been kept secret and never brought to the surface. In compliance with the rules governing trauma, these are subsequently repeated in the same families, generation upon generation, in one form or another. My practical work has shown me that families not experiencing any kind of

mental disorders shown in the form of altered thinking, emotions, perceptions, behavioural disorders, are an exception to the rule.

As already demonstrated by several researchers all over the world, who have delved into the history of childhood or, to put it differently, how it used to feel being a child, our ancestors experienced so many traumatic events in their childhood.

As soon as you start exploring your past, your puzzle will slowly come together and so many *whys* will receive their *because*s. You make an important step as soon as you shift your focus from *why* to *how*: how is our family going to face its past burdens and new challenges brought about by the present and future? Your task is to raise your awareness and knowledge of your family, to seek help, support, and solutions. If you are able to recognise the repercussions of violence, see it and become aware of your attitude towards yourself, other people, and the world, you will give yourself the only possible chance to grow out of your ancient heritage.

Jana: How can you break out of old patterns from your childhood that you have received from your parents?

Violeta: Us therapists tend to say that nobody leads their own life but, in fact, the life of their ancestors. Only by recognising in your adulthood that distress, restlessness, and tensions are both a part of you and your heritage and by assuming responsibility and, if needed, seeking help, you start to respond differently than your ancestors and grow out of the heritage of trauma of your lineage. I could call this process *inner*

regulation, meaning that you decide that you shall not pass on any kind of violence onto future generations.

This process is a path of tears because present violence always originates in old unspoken-of and un-cried violence. Even though coming face to face with the truth causes pain, you begin to fully recognise how violent you are towards yourself, other people, and, above all, children.

You become positive that what you experience as violent is, in fact, violent. Growing up in violence comes in so many shapes and sizes! You do not have to be physically abused to be a victim of violence. Silence, rigidity, unresponsiveness, and being closed-off to the world are also violent behaviours. We have all, most likely, grown up and been raised in a type of violence. More or less.

The inner recognition that you can no longer continue living that way, that it does not make any sense, marks the breaking point. When you realise that change is inevitable, that you simply have to seek help, you are most supported by a safe relationship, in which you can be vulnerable and provide a raw account of your experiences. Your therapist will help you find the words to speak up, new insights about yourself, reclaim your power, freedom and so many other things that your trauma has deprived you of. Your therapist will help you progress to empathy towards yourself and the dearest to your heart.

This is a lifelong process and undergoing therapy also requires hard work. You are not left with much other choice, as, failing to do so, you are bereft of your beautiful experiences and opportunities in life by your entanglements and effects of trauma.

If you decide not to do anything about it, the trauma will be given the chance to be passed on to the next generation. Understanding and knowing trauma can have a positive impact on your view of life. All the painful experiences that used to be ascribed to your own errors, cruelty exercised by others or senseless strikes of destiny, can now be understood as the consequences of a family trauma that got out of hand. This way, you are absolved from the feelings of your own responsibility and guilt and the responsibility and guilt of your ancestors, in addition to becoming committed to assume new responsibilities when you become aware of and understand that you are the one who can introduce changes in both the present and the future.