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The Psychology of Torture – Part I

By Sam Vaknin

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There is one place in which one's privacy, intimacy, integrity and inviolability are guaranteed - one's body, a unique temple and a familiar territory of sense and personal history. The torturer invades, defiles and desecrates this shrine. He does so publicly, deliberately, repeatedly and, often, sadistically and sexually, with undisguised pleasure. Hence the all-pervasive, long-lasting, and, frequently, irreversible effects and outcomes of torture.

In a way, the torture victim's own body is rendered his worse enemy. It is corporeal agony that compels the sufferer to mutate, his identity to fragment, his ideals and principles to crumble. The body becomes an accomplice of the tormentor, an uninterrupted channel of communication, a treasonous, poisoned territory.

It fosters a humiliating dependency of the abused on the perpetrator. Bodily needs denied - sleep, toilet, food, water - are wrongly perceived by the victim as the direct causes of his degradation and dehumanization. As he sees it, he is rendered bestial not by the sadistic bullies around him but by his own flesh.

The concept of "body" can easily be extended to "family", or "home". Torture is often applied to kin and kith, compatriots, or colleagues. This intends to disrupt the continuity of "surroundings, habits, appearance, relations with others", as the CIA put it in one of its manuals. A sense of cohesive self-identity depends crucially on the familiar and the continuous. By attacking both one's biological body and one's "social body", the victim's psyche is strained to the point of dissociation.

Beatrice Patsalides describes this transmutation thus in "Ethics of the Unspeakable: Torture Survivors in Psychoanalytic Treatment":

"As the gap between the 'I' and the 'me' deepens, dissociation and alienation increase. The subject that, under torture, was forced into the position of pure object has lost his or her sense of interiority, intimacy, and privacy. Time is experienced now, in the present only, and perspective - that which allows for a sense of relativity - is foreclosed. Thoughts and dreams attack the mind and invade the

The Psychology of Torture – Part I

body as if the protective skin that normally contains our thoughts, gives us space to breathe in between the thought and the thing being thought about, and separates between inside and outside, past and present, me and you, was lost."

Torture robs the victim of the most basic modes of relating to reality and, thus, is the equivalent of cognitive death. Space and time are warped by sleep deprivation. The self ("I") is shattered. The tortured have nothing familiar to hold on to: family, home, personal belongings, loved ones, language, name. Gradually, they lose their mental resilience and sense of freedom. They feel alien - unable to communicate, relate, attach, or empathize with others.

Torture splinters early childhood grandiose narcissistic fantasies of uniqueness, omnipotence, invulnerability, and impenetrability. But it enhances the fantasy of merger with an idealized and

omnipotent (though not benign) other - the inflicter of agony. The twin processes of individuation and separation are reversed.

Torture is the ultimate act of perverted intimacy. The torturer invades the victim's body, pervades his psyche, and possesses his mind. Deprived of contact with others and starved for human interactions, the prey bonds with the predator. "Traumatic bonding", akin to the Stockholm Syndrome, is about hope and the search for meaning in the brutal and indifferent and nightmarish universe of the torture cell.

The abuser becomes the black hole at the center of the victim's surrealistic galaxy, sucking in the sufferer's universal need for solace. The victim tries to "control" his tormentor by becoming one with him (introjecting him) and by appealing to the monster's presumably dormant humanity and empathy.

This bonding is especially strong when the torturer and the tortured form a dyad and "collaborate" in the rituals and acts of torture (for instance, when the victim is coerced into selecting the torture implements and the types of torment to be inflicted, or to choose between two evils).

The psychologist Shirley Spitz offers this powerful overview of the contradictory nature of torture in a seminar titled "The Psychology of Torture" (1989):

"Torture is an obscenity in that it joins what is most private with what is most public. Torture entails all the isolation and extreme solitude of privacy with none of the usual security embodied therein... Torture entails at the same time all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibilities for camaraderie or shared experience. (The presence of an all powerful other with whom to merge, without the security of the other's benign intentions.)

A further obscenity of torture is the inversion it makes of intimate human relationships. The interrogation is a form of social encounter in which the normal rules of communicating, of relating, of intimacy are manipulated. Dependency needs are elicited by the interrogator, but not so they may be met as in close relationships, but to weaken and confuse. Independence that is offered in return for 'betrayal' is a lie. Silence is intentionally misinterpreted either as confirmation of information or as guilt for 'complicity'.

Torture combines complete humiliating exposure with utter devastating isolation. The final products and outcome of torture are a scarred and often shattered victim and an empty display of the fiction of power."

Obsessed by endless ruminations, demented by pain and a continuum of sleeplessness - the victim regresses, shedding all but the most primitive defense mechanisms: splitting, narcissism, dissociation, Projective Identification, introjection, and cognitive dissonance. The victim constructs an alternative world, often suffering from depersonalization and derealization, hallucinations, ideas of reference, delusions, and psychotic episodes.

(continued)

Sam Vaknin is the author of *Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited* and *After the Rain – How the West Lost the East*. He is a columnist for *Central Europe Review*, *PopMatters*, and *eBookWeb*, a

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EQ--for the Agony and the Ecstasy

By Susan Dunn

EQ--for the Agony and the Ecstasy by Susan Dunn, MA Clinical Psychology, THE EQ COACH

"The Agony and the Ecstasy" is the title of a novel about Michelangelo, by Irving Stone. When I encountered the title in middle school, I decided to read the book to find out what "agony" and "ecstasy" might be like, states of existence apparently available to uber-humans like Michelangelo. I was sure I had not experienced them.

It may have been a misperception, or it may have been a vocabulary problem.

I'm now a grandmother, and I now know what they mean. In fact I have survived both many times.

When we're experiencing deep, intense emotions is when we feel most alive. It is also when we are most vulnerable and most afraid. When we're in despair, terror or torture, we want to know if it is going to go on forever. When we are in bliss, we need to know that if it should end, we would be able to survive it.

Managing our emotions is part of emotional intelligence. Managing them, not controlling them. Having such high states of emotion gives us experience in handling them, and the knowledge that we can survive them. It also brings us the understanding that they don't last. The good news is, no matter how agonizing, it won't last forever, and the bad news is, no matter how ecstatic, it won't last forever.

The Psychology of Torture – Part I

We also learn about the natural balancing act our brains do. When we have an ecstatic moment, for instance receiving an award, we learn that it's often followed by a "down" time. Having gone too high, we seek to restabilize by going too low.

Does the converse happen? If you experience a deep grief, you will have carved out a space that can be filled up by happiness or joy.

If you are not willing to experience the agony, you won't be able to experience the ecstasy.

To increase your emotional intelligence, take a course or get some EQ coaching. It's when we're experiencing our emotions that we feel most alive, and our life has the most meaning.

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