

## Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close: A Family Grieves

On September 11, 2001, 2606 people died in the World Trade Centre, 246 people in the four airplanes, 125 people at the Pentagon, and including the 19 hijackers the total is 2996 deaths. Certainly this attack was a national trauma, even a global trauma, whose aftermath has not yet ended, with any final resolution maybe generations away. The enormity of the event has been etched on all our psyches so that it can be hard to appreciate that these are also many individual tragedies. I quote from the film:

“...People aren't like numbers, they're more like letters. And those letters want to become stories. And Dad said that stories need to be shared.”

This is the story of Oskar Schell, and his family, and their tragedy. Based on the novel of the same name by Jonathan Safran Foer, this fiction tells a powerful individual story that needs to be shared.

Another reason I am taken by this quote about stories is that finding the individual's deep, unconscious story is one view of the process of psychoanalysis. Analyst and analysand must listen for the clues that allow a story to take shape, the unconscious to become conscious, the story to be reviewed and corrected and modified so that it reflects the reality of the analysand's full experience. This process takes place within a relationship, one that often has echoes of the early family relationships.

Freud examined grief, comparing it with melancholia, or depression, in his paper, *Mourning and Melancholia*. He writes:

...Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind [as in melancholia], the same loss of interest in the outside world – in so far as it does not recall him - the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him. It is easy to see that this inhibition and circumscription of the ego is an expression of an exclusive devotion to mourning which leaves nothing over for other purposes or interests.

Freud wrote with a single mind psychology, the focus of everything occurring in the mind of the individual. Relationships are not irrelevant in Freud's theory, but Freud's focus was on the unconscious processes and structures of the mind, particularly as relating to our most primal drives. In terms of grieving, Freud explained how our instinctual, libidinous attachments to the lost person must be withdrawn and returned to the self, re-invested in the self.

Our initial view of Oskar might fit very closely with Freud's ideas. He seems to feel very alone in his grief. I feel this is most epitomized in his hiding of the answering machine, keeping his father's final words to himself. Early in the film he recalls his time and attachment to his father, the adventures his father would create so that in spending time together Oskar would challenge his anxieties of the outside world. He discusses the tale of New York's “sixth borough”, part of New York that floated away, leaving only traces. Of course, given the context, this becomes a metaphor for loss, for the deaths in the terrorist attacks, possibly an idea of heaven or a place in our mind where our lost ones reside leaving only traces in our world. Oskar is desperate to hold on to his father. He is keeping away the outside world. He makes the analogy to the eight minutes it takes for light to travel from the sun to the earth so we wouldn't know the sun had gone out until eight minutes after the fact. Oskar notes that one year after his loss he feels that “my eight minutes with my dad are running out”.

Oskar faces a dilemma: while he is locked in the aloneness of his grief, he is also needing to honour his father, and to honour his father means to reach out into the world and its people. He is needing to grieve. Oskar is trying to deny the reality of his father's death as we see in one of the earliest scenes when he complains bitterly about mourning at an empty coffin; this is not an acceptance of the loss. Thomas Schell was obviously a loving and devoted father; he was very cognisant of his son's anxieties about the outside world, and with great compassion sought to help his son reach out and so to gain confidence in relating to others, to not be alone. So, on the one hand, Oskar wants to hold on to his father, to deny the death to an extent, to keep his father alive, but needing to exclude the living world around him. But this would be an unchanging father, the father who never dies, which is contrary to the lesson his actual father set to impart: that we can change, we can overcome our anxieties.

Oskar finds a key with the name 'Black' on it, and assumes his father meant the key for him. I suggest that unconsciously Oskar is hoping that the key unlocks the solution to his conflict, that he can both honour his actual father while simultaneously hold on to the never dying father. As he states, “[It was] the only way to stretch my eight minutes with him. Maybe I could stretch them forever.”. And so Oskar launches himself into the world, packing his survival backpack, determined that his anxieties – he lists many – will not stop him.

At this point we are still safe within the realm of Freud's single mind psychology. Oskar is launching out on his own. He insists on himself needing to overcome his anxieties. Interestingly, after his manic list of anxieties there is a memory of one of his last interactions with his father, when they are at the swings in a play area and his father hopes to have Oskar try the swing. Thomas is warm as he coaxes Oskar to try, and he recalls his own joy and sense of freedom when he would be on a swing; he is hoping Oskar will take in his experience as a motivation to overcome anxiety. But Oskar cannot overcome his anxiety in that moment, and asks to go home; his father is clearly disappointed. Oskar uses this memory to face his immediate fear of crossing the bridge, and he pushes himself into the world.

It is in the liberties of fiction that the first person Oskar meets on his new journey is Abbey Black; of course having seen the film we understand her full role. However, even in our first view of her she is important to Oskar. She is clearly sad, and the situation hints strongly that she is grieving. Oskar finds the postcard of the elephant; in his resistance to his own grief, he remarks how humans are the only animal that cries tears, and that the seeming tears of the elephant are in fact a manipulation. He also immediately tells Abbey not to cry, more a reflection of his need than hers. Yet, the importance of others is also revealed in the same scene; Oskar notes how family of a dead elephant gathered when the calls of a dead member were played back a year later, a suggestion that elephants do remember and grieve, and grieve together as a family. Oskar needs Abbey, not only for the resolution at the end, but in the moment to see a reflection of his own grief.

I must detour at this point to mention one of the most profound images from the World Trade Centre attacks, commonly known as The Falling Man. The photograph was taken by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew, of a man falling from the North Tower, one of around 200 people who fell or jumped to their deaths on that day. The opening image of the film is a reference to the Falling Man, and the image recurs later in the film. Within the film I believe the image represents Oskar's fantasy of his father: possibly the idea of a man taking control of death, but also representing the certainty of the same death.

The scene that follows is between Oskar, in the bathroom, and his mother who is locked out, and a scene where we briefly have the image of the Falling Man, as Linda Schell seeks to see her son. Of course the bathroom is a metaphor for Oskar's psyche, his need to keep out those who love him. The reference to the Falling Man is the bind that Oskar is in: keeping out others in an attempt to hold onto his father, but also understanding that he cannot forever deny his father's death. At the door is his mother, someone other than his father, offering her love in the moment; if he lets her in, maybe he must begin to let go of his father. At that moment Oskar is not ready.

Not much further along in the film we are exposed to some of the deeper dynamics that collude with Oskar's need to exclude his mother, in the scene where Oskar wakes Linda insisting she not bury him when he dies. As Linda provides the opportunity for him to speak his feelings, Oskar expresses his anger at her depression, her sleeping half the day away and being remote the other half. His anger is murderous, which he is able to express when he says "I wish it were you in the building.". In part expressing her own survival guilt, and in part empathic to Oskar's feeling, she notes she wishes she had died rather than Thomas. Oskar's anxiety increases and he tries to defend against his wish in a denial: "I didn't really mean that.". Linda stays with Oskar's wish and underlines that the wish is true; I find this statement very empathic even while it is painful, and I find it a containing statement, allowing Oskar's anger. While there is no resolution in the moment, Oskar must allow his anger in order to grieve, not just the anger at his mother, but ultimately the anger at himself. I do point out that at the end of this scene we have a flashback where Thomas phones and speaks to Linda while she sees the World Trade Centre from afar. As the scene returns to the present, Oskar and his mother continue isolated from each other, each in their own grief, though I assert that Linda has allowed Oskar's grief to move on a step.

Between these scenes of the interaction between mother and son, we see Oskar's guilt in action; we may not be sure why he feels guilty, but we see its being acted out as Oskar replaces the answering machine so that only he has his father's words. We can easily surmise how he is trying to deny his father's death when we then return to Oskar's project. Oskar states how every time he leaves home he feels lighter, closer to his father, though he can acknowledge the cost, that he feels heavier away from his mother. Just prior to the second scene between mother and son, Oskar notes how he doesn't want to feel better; his project risks failing and he feels he is losing his father. Of course, this is one of his greatest fears, that in grieving he will lose his father completely. And we hear his father's fourth message to him: "It must be a very confusing day.".

Up to this point Oskar is still determined to hold on to a living father that cannot be, trying to maintain the denial by keeping out others, as epitomized in the relationship with his mother. He is still hoping that his quest to find the lock the key fits, or to find the sixth borough, can keep time in place, prevent his "eight minutes" from running out. But there are many forces that threaten to disrupt this wish. For one, Oskar is an intelligent boy, mature in many ways, too aware of reality to maintain his psychotic denial. Further, while he is trying to keep out others, the others in his life are caring and loving, which he does recognize. Oskar is in a bind. It is at this point that "The Renter" enters Oskar's life.

We know now that the Renter is, in fact, Oskar's grandfather and thus the father of Thomas, and likely began to suspect this even prior to Oskar voicing it later in the film. He is the necessary catalyst for Oskar to solve his dilemma, not providing the solution to Oskar, rather being the tool for Oskar to use as he must. However, a tool not in

terms of an inanimate object, rather within a relationship that can form and take on many characteristics as Oskar may need. This is a strong parallel to the role of the psychoanalyst, who tries to provide for the analysand a relationship the analysand may use, to simultaneously explore feelings, work through conflicts, and have an alternate and empathic perspective. I wish to continue on the theme of the Renter as an analyst, but wish to make clear I am not stating that the Renter is a metaphor for an analyst. In fact, I am stating something closer to the reverse, that an analyst in joining the analysand in an analysis embodies qualities that can be found in other relationships. The primary difference in most cases is that in an analysis the main story is that of the analysand, explored in an immediate relationship with the analyst, but where the analyst's story by necessity must be very limited. One reason the parallel is so strong with the Renter is that he wishes to focus on Oskar, and out of his own necessity must keep his personal story out of the relationship.

As I stated, The Renter enters the story at a crisis point for Oskar. Oskar had seen evidence of him previously, from afar, but it is in the moment of crisis he is seeking him out, even if he is unknown; I believe Oskar already suspects his grandmother is not available as he crosses the street to her building. His first words to the Renter are important: "I know someone is in there. I won't hurt you.". These words are courageous, belying the anxiety and maybe covers up a more personal question: "Is someone there who will not hurt me?". Oskar opens the door and shines the light on the Renter, who holds out a note that he doesn't speak. Having established that Oskar's grandmother is out, the Renter makes the offer that they can wait together. He is inviting Oskar to connect with him, much as his son Thomas would invite Oskar to connect in the world around him. Oskar almost seeks an excuse to not connect: "Are you a stranger, technically?". The Renter does not reply; he is in an in-between space, a stranger and not a stranger.

Oskar, like many analysands with their analyst, wishes to know the story of the Renter. When this is not offered, Oskar manically tells his own story from missing his father to finding the key to his project and all the Blacks he has met along the way. Oskar is enabled to talk because he knows the Renter is listening. Often it is felt that telling one's story is the entirety of a process, or the end of a process, but the fact is that it is only the beginning. The Renter makes the offer to go with Oskar, just as the analyst offers to go deeper into the analysand's story. Oskar, in his mind, resists, but gives in to his need for companionship and despite his resistance he agrees. This too parallels the analysand's experience in both wanting to maintain the repressed while simultaneously needing to explore the hidden in safety with another.

When Oskar meets with the Renter the following Saturday morning, he tries to dictate how the Renter will fit into his project, and his uncertainty about including the Renter remains. Oskar is continuing his desire to keep his father alive, to resist the necessary grieving as to try and avoid his sense of loss. He wishes to co-opt the Renter into his defensive structure, to repeat what he is doing with his dead father. If the Renter were to submit to Oskar's demands then Oskar's project would only be a parody of his father's wishes in that Oskar would not have to face his anxiety of truly trying to connect with someone.

In an analysis there are boundaries, most typically reflected in the regular but limited times, the space where the work happens, and various aspects structured in the frame of the treatment. The Renter too has his limits, the first of which he confronts Oskar with immediately, that he will not walk eleven miles to see the next Black on the list.

Instead, the Renter insists on taking the subway, one of Oskar's many fears. The Renter confronts Oskar with the reality counter to his fear, that the subway is actually safe. Oskar's response is interesting, "'That's easy for you to say.', which actually, it wasn't."; Oskar on some level understands that the Renter's demand is not a purely selfish one. If the Renter's motive were only narcissistic in nature it would be easy to say "do this as I wish"; but he is more stating that he hears Oskar's anxiety but instead of avoiding it should join him in facing the fear. Oskar enters the subway with his gas mask – his defenses – covering him, his tambourine shaking away.

The exchange in the subway is a wonderful sequence that shows the undoing of a particular defense, a reduction of anxiety, and some working through within the relationship. As Oskar sits some distance from his grandfather, a stranger between them, he is alone, his gas mask on. The Renter reaches out to Oskar with the words, "Think about nothing." and Oskar pulls up his gas mask – dropping his defense a bit - to respond to the connection offered. He declares the words an oxymoron, associating to the warm relationship with his father and their oxymoron battles. The Renter empathically engages Oskar in a similar exchange, and Oskar allows him to remove the gas mask entirely. Within the immediate relationship Oskar is helped to remember his father in a warm, unthreatening manner. Grieving can be seen as a process which allows us to remember rather than to keep the pain immediate within us, and allowing Oskar to remember as he does is counter to the fear that he will lose his father entirely. And the effect? Oskar is also able to connect to the immediate presence of an other. He moves closer to his grandfather. He declares, "And even though he never said a word, for the first time since Dad died, I felt like I had someone to talk to.". Oskar is experiencing a new connection outside of his father, able to imagine something new and real rather than holding on to the unreal desire for his father.

After the start in the subway, the building of the relationship continues, as does the working through. At the next Black residence the Renter playfully follows Oskar's lead in aggravating the man. Following this Oskar is sitting with his grandfather talking about the grandfather's hysterical decision to not speak; but there is also a reflective message when Oskar quotes a psychology text declaring, "...because speaking would recreate the event.". Of course, in some ways this is exactly what Oskar needs to do, recreate the event in a sense that it can be worked through rather than repressed in an effort to prevent the loss of his father.

Oskar and the renter come to the next anxiety, the old wooden bridge by the water. As with the subway, the Renter takes the lead, asking that Oskar trust him and follow. When Oskar has crossed and is ready to take the lead, he says to his grandfather "Don't leave me.". Yet he does. Does this depart from the idea of the analyst? I do not think so, for while the analyst tries to be with the analysand throughout the session, sessions end and the analyst must allow the analysand to be on their own; but the analyst is there to be found again. And so the Renter has left traces of himself, the arrows to where he can be found again. Initially Oskar is angry, but the Renter holds to the actual promise, to tell his story; he shares his trauma with Oskar, the death of his own parents; while an analyst would not share in this manner, the point is the empathic understanding that the Renter has for his grandson. He understands Oskar's project as an attempt to work through the experience just as his not speaking may be a similar attempt. This is not lost on Oskar, who declares that he wants his grandfather to continue to join him. His grandfather shrugs as his father did, "...and I loved that."; Oskar has again let go a little bit, safely, and not lost his father, but found him in the immediate relationship he is experiencing.

So Oskar's project continues, searching for the lock that the key will fit, and the Renter continues to search with him. So while the project itself seeks to deny the death of his father, the unconscious project in needing to grieve, to give up on the idea of an immortal father, moves forward. It moves forward in the relationship with his grandfather, and all the various people that Oskar meets along the way. However, working through is not an easy task, and we are witness to Oskar's mounting frustration in the industrial workplace where Oskar is trying to fit his key in countless locks and stumbles across the tray of keys that symbolize the seemingly infinite locks he must search. Oskar is overwhelmed by the impossibility of his task and runs from the workshop. His grandfather follows. Here Oskar needs his grandfather in order to face a painful truth, that his so called solution will fail. He needs his grandfather's honesty and this is what he gets. No, his grandfather does not believe they will find the lock, and Oskar is able to admit his own uncertainty. It is at this point Oskar asks his grandfather (which he also now states his knowledge of) come with him to be shown something.

In the Schell residence Oskar's grandfather looks at the photos of his son, a brief reminder that Oskar is not the only one to grieve; Oskar's grandfather is not only grieving his son's death, but the tragedy of not having known his son. Then Oskar shows his grandfather the photos of the Falling Man. Why? I postulate that this is a deeper awareness behind the wish for his immortal father, the knowledge that his father's death is a certainty, thus so is the need to grieve. It still contains a defense against helplessness in that, as I stated earlier, there is superimposed the idea that death could be a choice, that one can control the uncontrollable. However, the working through that has occurred allows Oskar to note the defense, that all kids who lost their fathers must see those fathers in that image. This is an initial phase of acceptance for Oskar, being able to share this with his grandfather. And so he is able to attempt to go yet one step deeper, and he brings out the answering machine.

The answering machine recordings represent the depth of the trauma that Oskar experienced on the day of the World Trade Centre attacks, and with his grandfather he attempts to go through all messages. At the time of the first message, Oskar is at school, "wasting time". By the second message Oskar is in class and by the third the children have been let out of school in order to return home. And by the fourth message Oskar is in front of the church. It is important for us to remember that in all of these messages Thomas is speaking directly to Oskar. We know that he has spoken to his wife, Linda and has indicated he is trying to reach Oskar. After the fourth message Oskar's grandfather is starting to be overwhelmed by his own grief and indicates it is no good listening to these messages, but no good for whom? Oskar certainly needs to push on and plays the fifth message. Oskar notes he was with Stan the doorman at that point. He gets to the sixth message and notes that it was left at 10:27, ten minutes after the previous message. But Oskar's grandfather pushes Oskar to stop, he cannot contain his own pain and guilt let alone allow for Oskar's; because of his own grief he has reached the limits of his empathy, and insists that there will be no more searching.

It seems another loss for Oskar when his grandfather leaves, and his grandfather, overwhelmed by his own guilt and grief is lost to Oskar as a usable object other than to bare the brunt of Oskar's anger. I think it is interesting how Oskar is able to connect to who his father was; the whole angry speech about his father is delivered in the past tense. And he is able to separate from his grandfather's guilt, noting how he lost a good father but has had a rich experience of him before his death, while his grandfather's choices left him with no experience of his son. Oskar's grandfather's boots are heavier.

Oskar retreats back to his project, which certainly could be interpreted as a regression. But he returns with fresh eyes and discovers the number for an estate sale. Calling that number he discovers that it is for Abbey Black. he rushes to her home. As she invites him into her car he notes he does not get into cars with strangers; this, of course, is an echo of the question he had asked his grandfather when they first met, when Oskar first reached out to someone to help him with his project. Abbey, similar to his grandfather, declares that she and Oskar are not entirely strangers; she can help. She is able to bring him to her ex-husband, William.

William Black is the final person with whom Oskar must interact in order to complete his own process. First Oskar asks about William's knowledge of Thomas, and almost seems to have run into another dead end. But Oskar tells his story, briefly, again, and in revealing the key, the connection is made. William in a sense becomes an alter-ego for Oskar. He had a poor relationship with his father, and they did not speak. He had warning of his father's death but was too eager to let go. One important detail, William could not hear his father's last words until it was too late. William needed to tell his story, and Oskar was there to hear it. Oskar's empathy for William is touching. When he refused to open the letter Abbey had declared William childish; Oskar responds, "...but you were his child.". It is empathic and reflective. But Oskar is also clearly disappointed to learn his quest, on its surface, is an illusion. William states, "I know you're looking for something and this isn't it."

Oskar's quest has not been for naught. In his moment of disappointment he reaches out to another again, and is able to reveal the depth of his trauma, the reason he could not let go of his dead father. William takes Oskar's hand, literally connecting and Oskar is able to reveal he was present at the time of his father's last call. He explains hearing his father call out "Are you there?" nine times to his son, but Oskar was unable to pick up the phone; Oskar is racked by guilt, "He needed me and I couldn't pick it up.". Now William becomes a symbolic father to Oskar as he is asked for forgiveness; William returns the earlier empathy by providing Oskar exactly what he needs in that moment, absolution of this guilt. Oskar's grandfather had been too consumed by his own guilt to recognize his grandson's, but William has worked through enough of his own to be available for Oskar.

Oskar runs home (and notice how he takes the subway alone). There is the brief vision of his father as the Falling Man, but not as representing choice, rather only the certainty of his death. Next we see him in his room, destroying the project, the failure to keep his father as an immortal figure, and all the frustration that explodes out with that knowledge. And here his mother intervenes, "Let it go."

His mother then reveals how she has been part of his process all along, how she could not let him be on his own. She went into his room and tried to think like him, "I wanted to understand." and "I was searching for you.". She further explains how she shared his experience in meeting all of the Blacks that he went to see. And she explains her insight into his project as it existed on a deeper level: "I know you had to go make sense of things and I got to go with you.". And it is not just a recollection because there is an immediate process as Linda and Oskar share their similar experiences of those they met. Oskar voices how he thought only his father could think like him, the connection he was most afraid of losing, but in being able to grieve he has found the same in others, and in the moment, particularly in his mother. He further voices how he realizes he is not alone, that his story of loss is shared by many, if not all of us. In the moment he and his mother continue to grieve together, sharing their favourite memories of Thomas; and when Oskar shares what his father said, "I really love your mother. She's such a good

girl.", it allows Linda a catharsis. In the final moments of their grief Oskar and Linda have found each other.

The ending may be melodramatic, but it does represent an important final point. It is a declaration of the end of grieving, not just for Oskar, but for the entire family. Linda is able to peacefully reflect on the book about the project. Oskar's grandfather is able to return to his wife. Most importantly Oskar is able to reflect on his experience, his journey. He initially sought to deny his father's death, to prevent a feared total loss motivated by his guilt. Instead he could engage in a process which allowed him to connect both to strangers and to family. He was able to live up to his father's wishes for him. Recognizing his father would have been proud is the reward: he has not lost his father, rather he has been able to internalize him. This is symbolically represented when Oskar can think like his father, discovers a real last message from Thomas, and finally can go on the swing and share some of the thrill his father had described.

I began by quoting some of Freud's ideas about grief as described considering a single mind psychology. While all the points Freud made have definite validity, we do not exist as a single mind. Rarely does our grief happen in a vacuum; I would argue that even most who are unfortunate to grieve alone may have some solace in the internalized objects of their past. We exist in a world of many minds, with similarities and with differences. The importance of being connected is not reflected in the theory of a single mind psychology. Oskar felt he was alone, but even his project was an attempt to be with someone, namely his father. And as he honoured his father as his project surreptitiously compelled him, he reached out to family and to family surrogates, as he grieved with them, and was richly rewarded in keeping an internalized father he so desperately feared losing.

Thank you.