

Article

THE INCONSOLABLE ORGANIZATION: TOWARD A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE

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Abstract

A new metaphor and concept is proposed to comprehend massive organizational change where the inability to mourn prevails: "inconsolable organization." The group psychodynamics of this process are explored, in part with the aid of the work of Yiannis Gabriel on the concept of "organizational miasma." Three vignettes are used to "flesh out" the idea of an inconsolable organization. A tentative model is proposed, one that situates organizational inconsolability relative to other dimensions of adaptation to traumatic change. Recommendations are offered for assisting organizations in these circumstances.

Keywords

organizational psychodynamics; organizational change; organizational miasma; inability to mourn; consulting

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Introduction

This paper proposes a new metaphor and concept for understanding the experience, conscious and unconscious, of many organizations undergoing massive change: an *inconsolable organization*. I argue



that such an inner and intersubjective world occurs often, but not only, with the various forms of what is euphemistically called “managed social change.”¹ I begin with a global definition of inconsolability (and its origins in human infancy), then I formulate a theory of inconsolable organizations and offer three vignettes that, I believe, illustrate this idea.

Near the end of a recent paper on organizational totalitarianism in the United States (Stein, 2006a, p 20), I wrote the following paragraph.

...[E]ven though American-style organizational totalitarianism [from the 1980's through the present] has primarily symbolic casualties, they are casualties of terror nonetheless. One should never say that these are “only” the victims of psychological oppression. And even though most of those who have been disposed of [via downsizing and other forms of “managed social change”] are resilient and find other jobs (usually of lesser pay, benefits, and status), they carry the emotional scars of betrayal and of having been treated as inanimate “dead wood” or as “fat” to be trimmed. Once we recognize the official language of economics to be the smokescreen that it is, we have no trouble in discerning the brutality – even sadism – that it has obscured. Yiannis Gabriel (2005, 2006) has recently invoked the term “miasma” to characterize life in those organizations whose atmosphere is thick with loss, dread, and pollution. We have created inconsolable organizations.

This paper begins where I left off. In the present paper, I explore the experience, meaning, and explanation for what I have come to call “inconsolable organizations.”

This paper is an experiment. It begins in metaphor, and ends in an effort to explain many facets of organizational and broader cultural change. The core metaphor will be the idea of “the inconsolable organization,” namely an organization (corporation, factory, hospital, university, government agency, etc.) so engulfed and mired in loss, grief, and despair that no efforts on its members’ or leaders’ part can remove the spell. Before continuing, I wish to “immerse” the reader briefly in the kind of experience for which I have coined the term, “inconsolable organization.”

Some of my earliest thinking on inconsolable mourning came from a brief consultation with a research and development unit of US West immediately after the merger/takeover by Qwest in June 2000, led by the charismatic and flamboyant executive Joseph Nacchio. To a person, the dozen or so demoralized employees I interviewed spoke of how Nacchio was only interested in grandiose plans for fiberoptic telecommunication networks and had dismissed the long-standing contribution of service-oriented telephone linesmen that had long been the basis for US West. They felt that they had just been deprived of their identity, and to make matters worse, that the historical identity of US West had now been ridiculed as virtually worthless and had been pulled out from under them. Members of the research and development group had a wait of many months

before finding out what their fate was to be. They had lost their sense of purpose and direction, and engaged in busywork. There was a heavy emotional aura of dejection and demoralization, what I would later come to call inconsolable grief.

Some 7 years later, in April 2007, I sent the paragraph above to one of the persons with whom I had consulted at Qwest/US West. Her response adds additional emotional weight to the long-term oppressive effects of her experience. I quote with her permission:

This has been an interesting moment for me. First of all, let me say that I think your paragraph is accurate and you can go ahead with it without reservations. The other part of my comment has more to do with the effect that your paragraph has had on me. I haven't responded to you earlier simply because when I try to talk about that time, I still get blocked. I hadn't realized that I am still very sad and angry and feel betrayed by that whole experience. Even after all these years, I can't quite put into words what that was like. (from the letter of 24 May 2007)

I want here to try to find words, meanings, and emotions for this widespread type of workplace experience. Specifically, I would like to play within the space between the symbol (the metaphor, the map) and the object (organizational and cultural life, the territory; see Korzybski, 1933), and see how fertile the metaphor of an "inconsolable organization" might be in helping us to understand and explain organizational change, loss, and grief. At the same time, I explore how this might further a psychodynamic theory of organizational and cultural change. In both instances, the play space I shall try to create, in order to understand organizational and broader cultural change psychoanalytically, will be a "transitional space" (Winnicott, 1971) between imagination and reality.

According to Yiannis Gabriel, *organizational miasma* (2005, 2006) is the group psychological response (adaptation) to organizational carnage. An organization that becomes chronically mired in miasma further becomes what Michael Diamond (1998) calls a "defective container." I shall argue that often unfelt and unresolved (unconscious) grief over change and loss at the group as well as individual level underlies the experience of miasma. Like the concept of organizational miasma, the notion of inconsolable grief has considerable explanatory value for many facets of organizational and wider cultural change. Specifically, inconsolable grief underlies (a) much of the sense of thick pollution and (b) the inability of the organization or wider culture to contain anxiety.

My point of departure is a 1943 statement by anthropologist and psychoanalyst Géza Róheim that "The great danger against which mankind has evolved culture is that of object loss, of being left alone in the dark" (1943, p 77). This species-specific danger rests upon prolonged and delayed infancy (neoteny, La Barre, 1954) and its attendant dependency. Developmentally and phenomenologically, the reified organization or wider culture of adulthood becomes

what I have called a symbolic object, with its attendant emotional response to separation and loss. (Indeed, one of the words used for downsizing-type firings is the verb “separate”; another is “redundant” [British].)

I posit that human groups – from organizational workplaces to ethnic, religious, and national cultures – as well as individuals can become *inconsolable*, a term whose meaning lies in the constellation of such synonyms as “comfortless, dejected, desolate, despairing, disconsolate, discouraged, distressed, forlorn, heartbroken, heartsick, unconsolable” (<http://thesaurus.reference.com/browse/inconsolable>, accessed 15 January 2007). The cross-cultural ethnographic record documents the emergence of inconsolable groups in the wake of massive cultural change, and their subsequent attempts to heal themselves (e.g., La Barre, 1971, 1972; Jilek, 1974), often by magical efforts to undo history and reverse time. Inconsolability over irrevocable – often sustained or repeated – loss often leads to the staging of organizational and wider cultural “ghost dances” to revive the remote, idealized past, and be rid of the polluted present. But ultimately, the “fix” fails.

It fails as well in inconsolable organizations. In addition to drawing upon literature on organizational downsizing, RIFing, rightsizing, redundancy, restructuring, reengineering, outsourcing, and deskilling, I present three vignettes from my action research consultations to illustrate and “flesh out” the metaphor of “inconsolable organizations.”

The nature and experience of inconsolability

The idea of inconsolability is most often associated with the emotional state of a baby, specifically, inconsolable crying. It is often, not always, associated with colic. In inconsolability, “often there seems to be no way to help – a cry of woe, sobbing inconsolably, seemingly flooded with grief” (Lois Barclay Murphy, 2006). “Sometimes a child in this despair seeks solitude behind a curtain or a tree; sometimes lying face down on the floor” (Murphy, 2006). Murphy goes on to quote from a letter she received from Kevin Frank, whom she once knew as a sobbing, unreachable child. He writes of “...the inconsolable state of grief, or what feels like an intolerable level of loss or disappointment, ...a very important point where the child begins to deal with our most fundamental relations – call it existential despair... .” He asks whether grownups face “the unfixable tragedy of life. Have we faced it, or have we negotiated it into a managed state?” (Frank, quoted by Murphy, 2006).

In inconsolable grief, “Our wants, and perceived needs come up bang against the wall of aloneness which wanting and hoping and grasping creates. Then, can we be with the sadness this evokes?” Can we “truly perceive the fact that there is *nothing* I can do...?” (Frank, 2006, emphasis in original). In inconsolability, even the good enough mother or father cannot soothe the baby. The best they can do is not to abandon the baby to his or her despair.

Inconsolable grief, expressed in crying, fuses the experience of inconsolable rage with inconsolable hurt (sorrow). Inconsolable rage and hurt occur together in both babies and adults. Murphy concludes that in the face of a baby's unbearable loss, "at the moment of inconsolability all we can do is to stay near" (2006). This latter is a vital point we who consult with organizations would do well to keep in mind when we are working with organizations and wider cultures experiencing inconsolable grief. Sometimes "staying near" is not only all that we can do, but is precisely what the client or group emotionally requires. This is less a "technique" than the simple fact of emotional availability to bear witness to the grief and loss.

Linking massive organizational change, miasma, and inconsolable grief

In earlier work (Stein, 1993, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2005a, b, 2006a, b), I have explored the triad of change–loss–grief with respect to workplace organizations. Here I expand that discussion to include organizational miasma, and beneath it, inconsolable grief. The data sources of this perspective are two-fold: (1) nearly two decades of action research as consultant to organizations undergoing massive change and (2) observation and participant observation in organizations undergoing downsizing, restructuring, and reengineering.

As mentioned above, Yiannis Gabriel's concept of "organizational miasma" (2005, 2006) has been crucial in crystallizing my notion of an "inconsolable organization." For Gabriel, "organizational miasma" is "a theoretical concept describing and explaining numerous processes of certain organizations, those governed by the religion of the bottom line. These include a paralysis of resistance, an experience of pollution and uncleanness, and feelings of worthlessness and corruption" (2006, p 1; the quotations are with his permission). There is "relatively little employee resistance" (2006, p 1), "constant criticism and self-criticism and the [contagious] experience of never being 'good enough'," "treating other people as objects," placing blame on the leader, and a heavy silence (2006, p 2). Organizational miasma is a "particular type of institutional story" (2006, p 3). Where official institutional stories highlight excellence, integrity and positive enthusiasm, the stories of miasma "focus on deception, corruption and, maybe above all, despair" (2006, p 4). Obliterating the "psychological contract" (Levinson, 1962) between employer and employee, the outer organization induces a non-soothing inner organization-in-the-mind in the form of an abandoning, persecutory introject.

Employees' "objectification," being "treated as resources to be used and exploited," leads them to view themselves as having little worth and self-worth. Criticism is often internalized. Employees find that their stories are devalued if not silenced. They silence themselves (Gabriel, 2006, p 5). There is a widespread "profound sense of dejection and loss of self-esteem, a lowered level of energy

and interest with corresponding inhibition of activity, and a strong expectation of punishment” (2006, p 6). “All organizations inflict blows to our narcissism, but what we have here is a sequence of blows to our entire personhood” (2005, p 20). Here one’s very self is under siege. Not only is the once-sacred “psychological contract” (Levinson, 1962) between employer and employee abrogated and nullified, but everyone becomes disposable at a moment’s notice. “The Greeks believed that miasma occurs when sacred spaces are invaded or desecrated” (2006, p 9).

Miasma “is a Greek term meaning polluted or unclean. Attempts to ‘cleanse’ the organization by getting rid of the ‘dead wood’ may then be seen as attempts to lift the miasma. But such attempts are entirely vain” (Gabriel, 2006, p 8). Miasma is “an affliction that is enduring, that is contagious and that cannot be washed away”; it afflicts everyone (2006, p 8). “Miasma goes beyond mere toxicity, indicating a state of moral and spiritual decay, a corruption of all values and human relations of trust, love and community” (2006, p 8) that occurs when the cultural order is violated. Following Robert Parker (1983), Gabriel argues that “miasma is a state of pollution that is likely to happen in periods of sudden and severe transition from one state to another,” such as death (2006, p 9). To prevent pollution, rites of passage, such as funerary rites, occupy a transitional, “betwixt and between” (Douglas, 1966) state to move the person or group from one state to another. For instance, funerary rites aim “at removing a dead person from the world of the living and consigning him/her to the world of the dead” (2006, p 9), while removing the living from death back to life.

In massive organizational change such as downsizing, RIFing, restructuring, reengineering, outsourcing, deskilling, and the like, there are no rites of passage to acknowledge the loss of many people, and to mourn their loss. In fact, mourning is often explicitly forbidden. Members of the organization are stuck with inconsolable rage and inconsolable hurt. In the official view, the loss does not matter and should not matter. People are viewed as disposable rubbish, “fat” to be trimmed from the corporate “muscle.” In such a world dominated by “paranoid–schizoid” cognition and affect (Klein, 1946), diffuse, uncontained grief and dread prevail. There is the widespread effort at purification by sacrifice, often in the form of scapegoating individuals or vast groups of people for the sake of artificially bolstering the bottom line and temporarily increasing shareholder value. Indeed, all sacrifice is explained as merely unavoidable “collateral damage,” that is, “the view that no suffering, no lie and no savagery is too great, so long as it is justified by the bottom line” (Gabriel, 2005, p 20). The trouble is, no amount of sacrificing is ever enough, and the organization (via management) eventually “trims down to the bone” with the self-destructive conviction that it is saving itself.

One can speak of organizational despair. There is a heavy pall of unchangeability, and with it acceptance, submission, and resignation. There is

a giving up of all resistance to leadership and to events themselves. One feels at once swept up by events and dominated by them. The external(-ized) container, the organization, is fractured, and the internal container leaks out one's very self. As Thomas Ogden (1989) argues, the loss of containment (i.e., the loss of physically and emotionally reaffirming surfaces) leads to a catastrophic sense of the dissolution of the self (akin to turning from a solid into a liquid and running down the drain).

The result is an oppressive sense of helplessness. There is no striking back at the CEO or the well-suited consultant team. There is no preventing the process of being fired. One feels reduced to being a victim. There is no hope. Where anger and acting on it are stifled, there is only hurt. There is damage to the human spirit, spiritual decay, a "loss of spirit." There is a gutted, false self, an empty shell.

Gabriel writes that, "In general, during periods of sudden organizational change, rituals of separation and incorporation become neglected [if not outlawed], allowing contact with 'walking corpses'" (2006, pp 9–10). Gabriel's choice of image corresponds to the *Muselmann* image of the Nazi concentration camps, one I have drawn upon in characterizing the experience of the living dead who are both expelled from organizations and who remain behind as survivors (Stein, 1998, 2001). Because loss cannot be acknowledged and mourned, and only greater productivity from fewer and fewer people is valued, "the inability to mourn" (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1975) comes to govern workplace life. The symbolic dead who cannot be spoken about co-mingle with the living dead who remain behind. Gabriel beautifully writes that

An organization in a state of miasma reminds me of a city in the grip of a deadly and contagious disease, like the one that afflicted Pericles' Athens in the second year of the Peloponnesian War, so brilliantly described by Thucydides. In such a city, no-one appears immune, no-one is spared. The disease undermines people's faith in the gods, their institutions, their identity. Like the disease, the miasma cannot be fought or resisted. (2006, p 12)

Here is where the haunted workplace, like the haunted city, becomes an "inconsolable organization" that in turn is a "defective container" (Diamond, 1998) for those who work there. The inconsolable organization is an example in groups of what Volkan (1981, 1988) has called "complicated mourning." Inconsolability and miasma occur where organizational change cannot be mourned. If the idea of an "inconsolable organization" can be said to correspond at least in part with reality, its existence takes the form of the "unthought known" (Bollas, 1987). In place of acknowledging that great loss has taken place and collectively mourning it, the organization, from leaders to employees, attempts to negotiate, manage, and fix it through various magical remedies, ranging from frequent, peremptory firings to spasms of restructuring and reengineering. Beneath the organizational miasma lurks an inconsolable

organization that creates and sustains the miasma. Until the inconsolable grief can be thought, named, and felt; until the sense of guilt, shame, loss, futility, and hopelessness can be acknowledged, the miasma can only deepen. The organization-in-the-mind is a non-soothing internal object (introject). Both in the outer organizational context and in the inner one, one is unable to soothe oneself. One is left with the unabating landscape of desolation.

In order to avoid any emotional contact with the inconsolable organization within, and in order to attempt to rid themselves of the cloying sense of pollution, executives, managers, and employees resort to countless counter-vailing, counterphobic ideologies, and behaviors. The vicious cycle of (group) psychopathology is a response to the sense of chronic crisis, here, specifically, the catastrophic sense of loss and the grief it triggers. The original affect is sealed off from awareness and is replaced by a myriad of defenses: the threat of failure leads to secondary anxiety, in turn to additional defensive reinforcements, subsequent anxiety over the possible failure of the defense and the return of the repressed, and so on. Devereux's seminal paper, "Charismatic Leadership and Crisis" (1955), well captures the process of cultural crisis and loss. Devereux writes:

A crisis comes into being through the following process: In a situation of stress, which elicits *fear*, time-tested and traditional mechanisms of orientation and of action no longer produce the expected results. This leads to a schizophrenia-like disorientation and to catastrophic behavior (Devereux, 1939, 1950). *Fear*, which is an objective appraisal of the magnitude of a real danger, is replaced by *anxiety*, which is a sense of the inadequacy of one's resources in the face of stress. Since anxiety is harder to endure than fear, society rapidly becomes more preoccupied with alleviating its state of anxiety than its fear, and practically ceases to do anything about the danger which elicited fear in the first place. Figuratively speaking, a society in crisis clamors for "cultural bromides" rather than tools and weapons. This means that an autistically evolved intrapsychic "*threat*" replaces the objective "*danger*," and comes to occupy the center of the psychological field. Society then attempts to bring into being in reality – to "materialize" – precisely the kind of objective danger which corresponds to the initially intrapsychic threat. ... From then on society fights the phantoms – the Frankenstein's monsters – which, in compliance with its needs to project its intrapsychic threats into the outer world it brought into being, and therefore ceases to fight the initial, objectively real, *danger*. (1955, p 147)

Translating Devereux's analysis to "managed social change" and its discontents, we find that both grief and pollution are fended off by endless cycles of downsizing, restructuring, reengineering, outsourcing, deskilling, and the like, increasingly destabilizing and fragmenting the organization while expecting it to be consummately productive and profitable. The *reality* of loss and grief is

banished; in its place are put endless magical *rituals* of purification and regeneration that never suffice to dispel the now-misplaced *anxiety* when the rituals threaten to fail – which they must. Here, as is often the case in human groups, organizations commit themselves to solving the wrong problems. The process is not limited to downsizing and its cognate euphemisms. Many types and situations of organizations can be characterized by inconsolability over loss and miasma over the failure to mourn. Drawing upon the American individualist ethos, workers blame themselves and one another (“He/she must have done something to get fired”) for their fate in organizations rather than recognize the responsibility and culpability of capitalist and neoliberal ideologies and their corporate exemplars.

In the onslaught of organizational change that characterizes “managed social change,” one is repeatedly treated like disposable refuse. Employers, managers, and leaders (themselves one decision away from being eliminated) attempt to defend against feelings of worthlessness and helplessness. They try to shut these messages out – to displace and re-project the devastating feelings and self-image that had been projected into them. The sense of inconsolability occurs at a fundamental emotional level, involving violated boundaries, loss of control and self-efficacy, attack on one’s authenticity. One loses not only role but also one’s very self. It becomes too painful, too threatening, to mourn all that one is, or was. Awareness is replaced by the defensive spiral that Devereux describes. Even organizational miasma does not occur at as deep an experiential level as inconsolability.

The loss of the spirit, the death of the spirit, is perhaps the fundamental loss. It is “part of the locked up and suppressed nature of the inconsolable” (Seth Allcorn, personal communication, 23 April 2007). The inability to mourn, the phenomenology of organizational miasma, countervailing ideologies and behavior, and the vicious cycle of organizational psychopathology, all “rest” in layered fashion upon organizational inconsolability over the death of the spirit (see Allcorn, 2001). The “engine” for all these responses is traumatic, often cumulative organizational change and its relentless assaults on the self. Symbolic death feels like death nonetheless (Becker, 1973).

Let me try to distill the argument thus far into an image. I believe that the quasi-topographic layering of this process in the organizational group can be approximated schematically in a stepwise figure or model (Figure 1). In terms of causal sequence, the figure proceeds from left to right. The “engine” behind all the psychological responses (to the right of the arrow) is traumatic change and loss. In terms of the proposed mental structure of the psychological adaptation, the right-hand part of the figure reads from loss of the human spirit (at the base) to various forms of deeply grained organizational pathology (at the top).

I turn now from theory to the world of organizational experience. It is my hope that the three vignettes below will illustrate the range of organizational contexts in which organizational inconsolability, miasma, and the elaboration

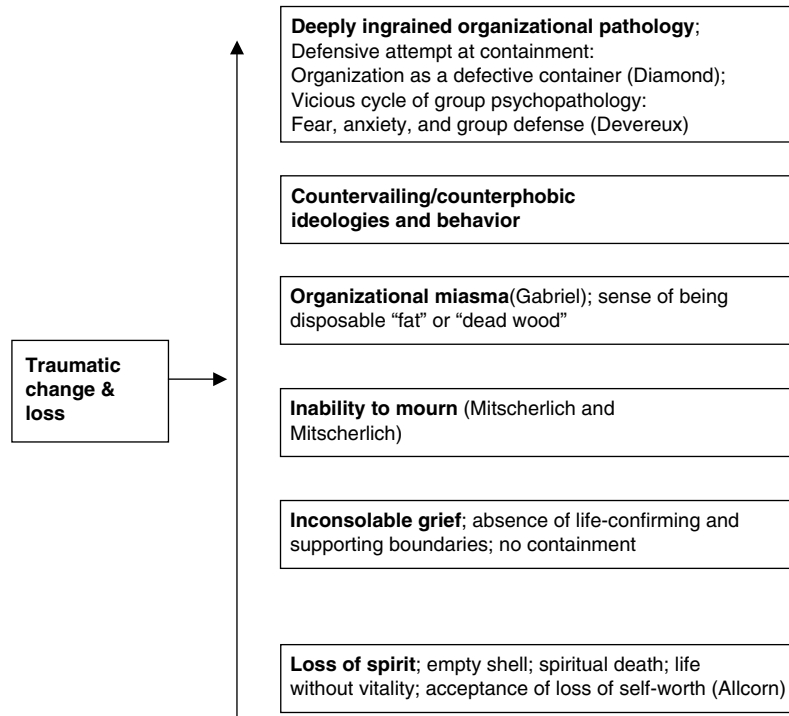


Figure 1 Organizational Experience: 3 vignettes illustrating the range of organizational contexts in which organizational inconsolability, miasma, and the elaboration of defences against them occur.

of defenses against them occur. Following the vignettes, I will discuss them relative to the model.

Vignette 1: of downsizing and disappearance

My first vignette comes from an interview I had with a computer company’s Chief Financial Officer during an organizational consultation. I will first provide some of her narrative, and then discuss it.

Am I glad to see you today! Howard, the strangest thing happened Monday. I was off sick Friday. I came in to work on Monday morning and the office next to me was cleared out. There was a desk, a chair, a computer, a couple of file cabinets and bookcases, a wastebasket. And that’s it. Empty. I still can’t believe it, and it’s already Friday. It’s like there’s a big hole in this place. I knew the guy ten years. His name is Don. He was one of our numbers crunchers. A quiet guy, just did his work. It seemed like he was always here, always working. He is a computer whiz anyone in the unit could go to for a computer glitch. We aren’t – maybe I should say weren’t, since he’s gone – weren’t exactly friends, but we worked together a lot on projects. He was kind of part of the furniture.

It's so eerie. I'm numb over it. I keep going next door to look in his office expecting to see him. Maybe I'm imagining that he's gone, and he's not. But the place is *so* empty. I've heard of this kind of thing happening other places when people get RIFed. Here today, gone tomorrow. But I've not heard of this here. It's like he disappeared. Like he never was here. Howard, I'm not being sentimental about him. He and I didn't have something going – if you're thinking that. I just can't believe they'd do it – and the *way* they did it. I asked around the firm, and everybody gave the same story. Because it wasn't just him. It happened all over the place. About five hundred people RIFed in one day.

I asked around, and nobody knows where Don went. No forwarding address or telephone number. It's weird, Howard. Like he just disappeared. You wonder if you're next. You try not to think of it. Work harder, maybe they'll keep you. It's ridiculous, because you know it's not true. But you've got to believe that you're valuable to them.

Events and experiences such as this have occurred millions of times in American workplaces since the mid-1980s. Forms of “managed social change” variously called RIFs (reductions in force), downsizing, rightsizing, outsourcing, offshoring, separation, and deskilling: when they occur, they give those who are fired no warning or preparation – except perhaps gossip and rumor. They are experienced as terrifying, dehumanizing attacks. Sometimes they occur as unexpected letters of dismissal in the US mail or as e-mail. Sometimes they take the guise of a fire drill, where everyone is supposed to leave the building, and those who are summarily fired are not let back in after the false drill is over.

However the firings are executed, they are designed to maximize surprise and to achieve a “clean break” from those who are cast away. They psychologically terrorize the workplace. People are suddenly and efficiently “disappeared” (verb). There are no metaphoric bodies to see and step over. The carnage is attested to by absence, void. Those who remain behind are left with only images in mind. The symbolic kill is swift and clean. Work is expected to continue within this empty shell.

Frequently, security guards show up on a Monday morning or a Friday morning all over the plant to the offices and workstations of people who were designated to be fired. They escort them to the big auditorium over in the corporate conference center. They don't even tell them why they had to go, except that it was an important announcement. After they walk them in, they leave and lock the doors behind them. The CEO or CFO then enters and delivers a brief speech on how the company has to downsize radically in order to survive and be competitive. He tells them not to take it personally, that it's just business, and maybe thanks them for their service to the company.

The security police escort them back to where they worked, helps them clear out their personal belongings, then takes them down to administration to hand over all their keys and receive their last paycheck. The police walk them to their

cars, and that's the last they see of the corporation. They are told not to come back. They virtually disappear. They are rarely talked about. Management often justifies managing the firing this way because those who are about to be fired could not be trusted not to sabotage the computers or to steal equipment.

Following the firings, employees, managers, and executives try to work at their jobs as if nothing has happened. They rarely speak of those who are now gone; still, they are haunted by their absence. Those who remain are told that they should be grateful they still have a job. They all know that they could be next, so they live in dread of the future, trying to do the job of two if not three people. Admonished to forget the (devalued) past and those who occupied it, many of those who experience themselves as "survivors" of the RIF are afflicted with the survivor syndrome, feel pangs of guilt for having survived, and then attempt to rid themselves of the guilt by finding fault with those who were fired. The thought of randomness is unbearable.

Often those who remain feel like the "living dead," much like the emaciated, fatalistic *Muselmann* inmates of the Nazi concentration camps. The sense of individual responsibility, culpability and guilt ("I must not be good enough"; "I must have done something.") militates against any resistance or other collective action. Whatever sense of vital and interconnected community existed prior to all the firings and rearrangement of people and tasks, there is little sense of "we" or "us" afterwards. In its place is a collectivity of frightened monads. Those "old timers" who knew whom to contact "to get things done" in the informal system of relationships, and those whose "Rolodexes" of contacts were once seen as the lifeline that kept the corporation going, have long been fired. Life proceeds now impersonally by protocol, "by the book." Unable to mourn for who and what has been lost, those who remain become an inconsolable organization who try to console themselves through pep talks, admonitions, threats, and dogged productivity.

Vignette 2: a corporate pep talk – the finger in the waterbowl

I now offer a vignette of what might seem to be a tiny, discountable incident – but one that turns out to take us to the heart of the experience of downsizing and its wake. In 1999, following a presentation I had made about corporate downsizing and reengineering, I spoke with a secretary who had worked for many years for a multinational petrochemical firm that had undergone several waves of downsizing firings. First thanking me for validating her own experience during my lecture, she said that she wanted to offer an example of what I had been talking about. A new mid-level manager had arrived and was eager to make his mark on the organization. At a meeting of his supervisees, he admonished them: "We have a lot of work to get done here. Don't think for a minute that you're essential to this corporation. Everyone here is dispensable. There are a hundred people out there hungry for your job. And if you leave, your absence will be as little noticed as a finger taken out of a bowl of water. They won't even know that you'd been here."

She and I both shuddered. We briefly mused on the effect of this meeting for worker morale: perhaps it induced identification with the aggressor, and feverish productivity, accompanied by chronic terror, indifference, and deep rage at such humiliation. We also wondered about the new manager's own sense of vulnerability and expendability, and about the kind of childhood that might have set the stage for such drivenness. Does the conviction of inner worthlessness cultivate, via projective identification, worthlessness – and hopelessness – in others in order for one to feel superior and momentarily invulnerable? Here, a third managerial philosophy – *management by terror* – supplements the traditional distinction between “carrot” (reward) and “stick” (threat of punishment). What in the workplace, we wondered, does the threat of homicide look and sound like? The employees were not only threatened with the loss of their jobs – that is, their easy disposability and symbolic annihilation – but their very dignity and self-respect were also attacked. Even as they labored to increase their productivity and thereby try to create the illusion of indispensability, they were thrown into inconsolable grief over the loss of self. They lived and worked in the knowledge that at any moment they could be symbolically annihilated, made to disappear, and never be missed.

Under these circumstances of psychological assault and the expectation of assault, what happens to the organization and to the remaining people? The organization that remains behind can no longer contain the anxiety, dread, and even terror that management inspires. It becomes a “defective container” (Diamond, 1998). Instead of being an occupationally good-enough Winnicottian “holding environment,” the workplace is increasingly experienced as persecutory. A Kleinian “paranoid-schizoid” atmosphere prevails, in which employees experience themselves as a “them” at the mercy of management “us.” An employee is expected to do the work of another who has been “downsized” as well as his or her own, and to do so not only without complaint, but with gratitude for still having a job. For many employees, where once there was loyalty to a company, there is now the garnering of skills at one's current place of employment and the readiness to move on to the next job at a moment's notice. One feels redundant even before he or she is fired. From the stockholder's obsession with the next quarterly report to the employee's uncertainty about tomorrow, there is only short-term planning and the palpable presence of symbolic death and loss. Meanwhile, upper management tout slogans of “excellence” and “higher productivity” as evidence of having “turned around” the organization. For middle management and employees, the picture is surreal.

Vignette 3: the threat at the Christmas party

My third brief vignette illustrates the nationwide (and increasingly global) psychological terrorizing of managers and workforce into capitulation and dependency upon corporate decision-makers. The process affects blue-collar and white-collar workers alike. Consider the following scenario.

At one American Great Plains hospital's mid-1990s Christmas party, the invited speaker, a physician-administrator, admonished his largely healthcare professional audience to accept managed health care (HMOs, PPOs, etc.) as the inexorable wave of the future. He told the group to make up their minds that it was simply a matter of altering their thinking to conform to the changes that made them primarily responsible to the corporation rather than to the customers (patients). To make his point, he showed a cartoon depicting a steamroller smashing down one doctor in the asphalt, while another wisely sidestepped his destruction. The caption read: "You can become part of the solution or part of the pavement." The physicians' response was uncharacteristic of prairie decorum, in which you politely listen to someone with whom you disagree, then go about your business as you had been doing. Instead, several physicians got up in the middle of the talk and walked out in disgust.

A week later, a physician colleague who had been in the audience wrote to me: "Does this [cartoon, presenter's haughty attitude] not instill a sense of helplessness? A sort of ultimatum? This doesn't smack of fascism, does it?" What he inquires in the negative, he affirms in the act of asking. It is as if what is not supposed to be happening – in the caring professions, of all places – is in fact happening. It is a matter of trusting – and mistrusting – one's senses and one's emotional response. The heavy boot of managed health care promises to crush all opposition. The looming threat, the anxious wait, conspire to create an organizational atmosphere in the medical community at once of dread, rebellion, siege, resolve, and anticipatory, inconsolable grief at the prospect of losing their way of practicing medicine and their very autonomy as physicians.

Increasing numbers of physicians in the United States feel demoralized, robbed of their identity as professionals, and treated as disposable employees. Many become disillusioned, embittered, cynical, feeling pulled to be more answerable to medical insurers and healthcare corporations than to their patients. What began for many physicians as a "calling" to care for sick people, turned out to be a grueling job in which seeing as many patients as possible and income generation became the central corporate virtues. The core value of the physician-patient relationship is replaced by the invisible industrial time-clock, according to which each patient merits but $7\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. The psychological control of workers, studied and advocated a century earlier by Frederick Winslow Taylor, triumphs in the practice of medicine. Many physicians feel trapped in their careers and betrayed by their employers. Physicians' own proud individualism militates against effective collective action in their own behalf.

Discussion of the three vignettes

The three vignettes I have just given certainly do not prove the existence of inconsolable organizations, but I think that they give the concept a certain asymptotic plausibility. That is, as illustrations, I think they provide at least

preliminary encouragement for “inconsolable organization” as a working hypothesis. I think that they also suggest that inconsolable organizations can occur in a variety of situations of organizational change: downsizing or RIFing, managed health care, and organizational crisis. Certainly all three organizational situations are outwardly hardly the same. However, I am arguing that at the conscious and unconscious level of what these organizations *feel like, how they are experienced, and what they are like in the fantasies of their members*, they are indeed the same phenomenon in different institutional forms. Finally, the vignettes offer support for the concept of inconsolable organization as at least approximating organizational reality. In the following discussion of the vignettes, I show how they illustrate the concept of inconsolable organizations and the larger texture (model) of which it is a part.

In the first vignette, the CFO felt the horror of sudden absences that characterize RIFs, restructuring, reengineering, and other forms of radical organizational change. Here, people do not so much leave the organization as they are abruptly severed – disappeared – from it. Loss takes the form of vast holes, gaps, in experience, both in space and in time. One day co-workers are present, performing their jobs, taking part in the everyday relationships of the workplace. The next day they are gone, vanished. There is no group-sanctioned transition for either those who are fired or those who remain behind. There is neither permission nor assistance to grieve the loss on the part of those who remain behind. Only work – productivity – counts. Here the living dead commingle with the haunting presence of those who vanished from sight. The atmosphere is thick with spiritual deadness. The absent ones wander the halls like the characters in Marc Chagall’s paintings. Inconsolable loss is experienced as horror.

The second vignette is the story of another hole in time. If in the first vignette the void consisted of the sudden absence of others, the second vignette is the undisguised threat of one’s own elimination and annihilation from institutional memory. The employees addressed in this surreal pep talk are good only for productivity, and their very existence is already declared to be nonexistence. They are nothings now, and will be nothings if they are fired or leave. They will not be missed; their absence will not even be noticed. It will be as if they never existed. They will not be grieved over, for there is nothing, no one to mourn. Their very existence is already tainted with nonexistence. Their life already embodies the death that is projected into them. Here, someone else is not the hole, but one is the hole oneself. One is thrust into inconsolable, anticipatory grief over the loss of one’s self.

The third vignette is yet another surreal experience: a Christmas party that threatens death. Eerily, the “savior” the speaker touts is not the “Prince of Peace” (the Christ Child), but an Angel of Death who threatens to crush anyone in its path. One is “saved” as a physician if one joins the inexorable momentum of the steamroller – that is, if a physician, a healer, joins league with the agent of

death! Managed care is depicted as an invincible juggernaut. The wave of the future of medical practice lies in identification with the aggressor and a repudiation of those “softer” values and virtues that characterized the covenantal relationship between doctor and patient. Paradoxically, if one chooses to “live,” one also chooses death-in-life. In the Brave New World of corporately managed health care, one loses, gives up, the allegiance to the patient and swears primary fealty to the corporation. Corporate totalitarianism creates and enforces clinical totalitarianism. I have heard many physicians despair over being ever again adequate to relate to their patients and to deliver thorough medical care. Beneath the frenzy of productivity and high “patient volume” and “patient flow” (a borrowing from the hydraulic model of physics) is inconsolable grief, a loss of professional vitality, spiritual death, and all-consuming miasma.

Conclusions

This paper has been an experiment in thought. It has proceeded from metaphor, to concept, and finally to a tentative model that situates organizational inconsolability relative to other dimensions of the “strata” of adaptation to traumatic organizational change. All change – individual, family, group, organizational, ethnic, national – involves loss and the emotional response to it. When organizational loss is not acknowledged, and mourning is proscribed, inconsolable grief and miasma follow. The various forms of “managed social change” create these in their long wake.

There remains the question for the action organizational researcher, consultant, and leader, of how to help employees through the transition. First and foremost, one must be able to acknowledge that there has been the loss of something that had been good, or at least “good enough,” and that there indeed must be a transition between “the way we were then” and “the way we need to become.” That is, there must first be recognition that there is something worth grieving over, and that a large part of that “something” is the loss of one’s very self and sense of self-worth. I remember hearing Harry Levinson say in a talk several years ago that the CEO must be the “chief mourner” of the organization.

Here, the central task for the action researcher, consultant, or leader is less to “do something” dramatic or decisive than to “be someone” for the clients and client organization. Being fully present emotionally, being willing to sit with people and listen with one’s entire being, go a long way in helping people feel emotionally “held” and not dropped into an annihilating fall. Bearing witness to trauma is no small thing for the traumatized person or institution. Empathic containment of such overwhelming distress is no minor contribution. In this way, we can begin to help others find their way and regain their spirit. I return to Murphy’s thought that in the face of a baby’s or organization’s unbearable loss, “at the moment [or the long period] of inconsolability all we can do is to

stay near” (2006). For the inconsolable organization as well, this must be a good enough start.

There are other tasks as well for the action researcher, consultant, or leader, but they can only be introduced once the foundation has been established in a relationship with the client or organization: namely that of truth-teller. Part of the work of mourning is the acceptance of the reality of loss and of what took place that resulted in the loss (even if this latter must be approximate, never complete). Helping people in organizations to emotionally navigate the transition and “regain their spirit” is inseparable from “telling the truth” about the authoritarian abuse of power and psychological terror that underlies the euphemisms of “managed social change.” Mourning, and with it reality-acceptance, are the foundation of resilience, individual and organizational.

Finally, the broader cultural and historical dimension to this reality needs to be recognized and identified. Certainly capitalism itself, or the American capitalism of the past three or so decades, is not responsible for all inconsolable organizations and inconsolable cultures. Still, the oppressive sense of miasma and inconsolable grief in many American workplace organizations of this era traces to capitalist ideology, and specifically to the primacy of shareholder value and quarterly reports as the highest good (Sennett, 2007). Ruthless corporate CEOs such as “Chainsaw” Al Dunlap (Scott Paper, Sunbeam) and “Neutron” Jack Welch (General Electric) of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are heirs to the worldview, style, and grandiosity of the American “robber barons” of the 19th and early 20th century industrial era (e.g., railroads, iron ore, coal, steel, oil, etc.). The halcyon era of the far more amicable and human “psychological contract” between employer and work is more limited to the period of the New Deal through the early 1980s. Thus the latter is more exception than rule in American history. There has long been an implicit partnership between government and big business. Psychoanalyst and psychohistorian David Lotto writes that

Throughout the history of modern capitalism (from 1865 until now) large corporations, big business, those who control the means of production – have been closely intertwined with, and often in virtual control of, governments. Totalitarian control, whether of the crude variety of Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, or Stalin, or the softer and/or subtler regimes of the [United States] as well as the “democracies” of Western Europe, and corporate totalitarian management style and world view, work well together to benefit the elite – the upper level corporate employees, the large stockholders, and the politicians. (quoted with permission, letter of 21 May 2007)

In conclusion, then, whether as psychoanalytically informed organizational scholars, action researchers, consultants, or organizational leaders, if we are to understand organizational inconsolability and miasma, and help people mired in them, we must be able to imagine and “hold onto” the vast unconscious and ideological systems that perpetuate them.

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Note

¹ For more extensive studies of the euphemisms and experiences of “managed social change,” I refer the reader to works by Richard Sennett (2007), Louis Uchitelle (2006), Barbara Ehrenreich (2006), Susan Faludi (2000); Seth Allcorn, Howell Baum, Michael Diamond, and Howard Stein (1996), and Howard Stein (1998, 2001, 2005a, b).

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