JENNIFER J. FREYD

THE LOGIC OF FORGETTING CHILDHOOD ABUSE

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BETRAYAL BLINDNESS

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Our jet from St. Louis was landing at the Denver airport, heading west. The morning was sparkling clear. The air, dead still.

I sat in a window seat on the right side, near the front of the plane. With my forehead pressed against the cool plastic window, I admired the snowcapped Rockies glistening ahead and contemplated the houses and buildings down below, growing ever larger as we made our descent. I half-listened to the flight attendant on the intercom announcing connecting gate information.

The houses below me looked fresh and appealing in the November sunlight, still small enough to appear like toys, yet large enough to look worth exploring, a bright playroom of dollhouses. And then, fascinated, I found myself looking down on another jet.

That plane was a bit lower than ours, and I gazed upon its fat back for a moment or two before being hit with a horrifying jolt of awareness: There was not room for two planes! We were both headed for the same spot in midair! Yet the attendant was still on the intercom, talking on about connecting flights. I wondered, Should I scream? Does the pilot realize this? What do I *do?* Don't they realize the danger we are in?

I've wondered since then: For how long were these panicked questions bouncing about my mind? I doubt it was more than

a fraction of a second, because suddenly our plane made an abrupt change in direction. Instead of continuing down, we headed up. And the flight attendant stopped talking.

As I looked out the window the houses and the other jet shrank as we made our escape. I looked around at the other passengers, wondering, Was anyone afraid? Were they relieved to be spared a midair collision? Had they even noticed our missed approach? I couldn't tell. At least the flight attendant must have noticed, I thought, for she *did* stop talking.

After perhaps a minute we leveled off. I watched eagerly as we circled the Denver airport and began our descent once again, this time heading due south, landing on a runway that I had been on many times—but only for takeoffs. I looked around for other planes but could find none. No planes were in the air near the airport. Nor were planes on the runways. Where, I wondered, had they gone?

To my amazement, the flight attendant resumed her announcement of connecting gates. She simply picked up where she had left off, as if nothing had happened.

Wait a minute! I silently protested. Haven't we just barely missed a midair or runway collision? Won't they say something about what just happened? Explain? Reassure us?

The plane parked at the gate. The attendant stopped talking. As I gathered my coat and carry-on bag, the man sitting in the seat two rows ahead of me caught my eye. We had been at the same conference in St. Louis and we recognized each other. He looked concerned and confused. He hesitated a bit before blurting out to me, "Did you notice anything strange? Weren't we heading down, about to land, when suddenly we went back up for awhile?"

"Yes," I agreed. "That did happen!" I looked around to see if others would chime in, but no one seemed to be paying us any attention. As I exited the plane a few moments later, I passed the flight attendant, who was standing in front of the cockpit, chanting, "Good-bye! good-bye!" in the standard cheery way. But instead of the door being open, as is usual after landing, this time the door was closed.

And that was that. Thanks to the crew's silence, most passen-

gers on that flight disembarked blissfully blind to both the betrayal of safety and the betrayal of truth they had just suffered.

Today I wonder: What if my acquaintance had not asked if I noticed something strange? Would I now believe that I had seen us get so close to another plane? I might well say to myself, "Surely a near collision on a clear day, at a big American airport, seems a bit far-fetched. If it had really happened they would have explained it, acknowledge it at least, right? Maybe this was all a fantasy of mine—a false memory."

These doubts are tempting. The old Denver airport is no longer, but I have no choice: I must continue to use that airline and the new Denver airport—unless I give up flying to conferences or vacations, which would mean giving up large portions of my professional and family life. If the near disaster were simply a false memory, then I would not have to believe that I had been put into that kind of danger by people, technology, and a system that I *need to trust.*

It is not difficult to imagine what lay behind the pilot and crew's decision to remain silent about the event. By not acknowledging the missed approach perhaps the passengers would remain unaware, or at least unsure, of the danger that had been present. And if the event were not acknowledged, if no one made a "big deal" about it, maybe those passengers who did notice it would forget.

That missed approach into the Denver airport hardly ranks as a trauma next to other horrifying events: war, disasters, violence. Although I need to trust airlines and airports, the trust required of me is limited in time and scope and does not begin to compare with the trust that a young child needs to have for his or her caregivers. Nonetheless the same rule applies: See no betrayal. Hear no betrayal. Speak no betrayal.

The Core Betrayal Trauma: Childhood Sexual Abuse

Consider the pressure on a child who is sexually abused by a parent or other adult who has power and authority over that child. The child *needs* to trust his or her parents and caregivers. Childhood sexual abuse, whether molestation or even penetra-

tion, usually leaves no lasting physical evidence. It is neither explained nor understandable to the child. It is often not even acknowledged by the perpetrator, except to say it didn't happen or wasn't what it seemed to be.

Sexual abuse perpetrated on a child by a trusted caregiver is a perfect opportunity for the victim to create information blockage. To know is to put oneself in danger. Not to know is to align oneself with the caregiver and ensure survival.

This book is about information blockage as a natural and inevitable reaction to childhood sexual abuse. It is about the logic of amnesia for abuse. Memory repression will be shown to arise not because it reduces suffering, but because not knowing about abuse by a caregiver is often necessary for survival.

This book is also about the ubiquity of the human response of not knowing, of not remembering, betrayals. Everyday betrayals—a boss who speaks in a patronizing voice, a spouse who flirts with a friend, an airline that flies its plane dangerously close to another—also often leave little mark on conscious awareness.

Although I propose that not knowing is ubiquitous, I also propose that knowledge is multi-stranded, and that we can at the same time not know and know about a betrayal. Indeed, it is the human condition simultaneously to know and not to know about a given betrayal. The knowing is often the kind of knowledge or memory that cognitive psychologists call "implicit knowledge" or "implicit memory."

If I had "forgotten" that flight from St. Louis to Denver, the forgetting would have left me with little conscious knowledge of what happened. But it would likely have left me with other signs of learning and traces of the event. I might have found landing at Denver next time more frightening than I ever had before. Or I might have found myself "irrationally" trying to avoid the Denver airport.

The survivor of childhood abuse who "forgets" and does "not know" about the abuse similarly has memory and knowledge of the events that surface in other ways: specific phobias, learned behaviors, a self-perception of being a "bad girl" or "bad boy."

Recovering from Betrayal Blindness: The Memory Debate

Some people come to realize that they have been betrayed a long time after the event. Sometimes this recovery from betrayal blindness happens when the person forms a new understanding of a remembered event. Other times it occurs in conjunction with recovering the memory of the events of the betrayal.

In a 1992 article in the *New York Times,* Daniel Goleman described one person's realization that he had been betrayed:

> Frank Fitzpatrick, a thirty-eight-year-old insurance adjuster in Cranston, R.I., began remembering having been sexually molested by a parish priest at age twelve.
>
> Mr. Fitzpatrick's retrieval of the repressed memories began, he said, when "I was feeling a great mental pain, even though my marriage and everything else in my life was going well." Puzzled, Mr. Fitzpatrick lay down on his bed, "trying to let myself feel what was going on."
>
> Mr. Fitzpatrick . . . slowly realized that the mental pain was due to a "betrayal of some kind," and remembered the sound of heavy breathing. "Then I realized I had been sexually abused by someone I loved," said Mr. Fitzpatrick. But it was not until two weeks later that he suddenly remembered the priest, the Rev. James R. Porter . . .

To forget and to remember are everyday aspects of human experience. Sometimes people gain awareness of events that they had previously not remembered. But sometimes the forgetting and remembering are dramatic enough to become the focus of inquiry and even controversy.

As I write this book, a war is being fought over the veracity of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. Although I comment on this controversy, this book is largely tangential to the Great Recovered Memory Debate. Although it addresses whether, why, and how recovered memories of real abuse occur, it is largely silent on whether, why, and how false memories may occur. Similarly, this book is also largely silent on the question so central to this debate: Are most contested memories based on real abuse? Instead of dwelling on contested memories,

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I focus on the response of unawareness and amnesia to abuse and betrayal trauma. Although betrayal trauma theory and the false memory movement have origins in my own life experience (see the Afterword), I first presented my theory of betrayal trauma before the world or I had heard the term "false memory syndrome."

Ross Cheit's Recovery from Betrayal Blindness

"Long-lost memories of sexual abuse can resurface. I know, because it happened to me. But I also know that I might not have believed that this was possible if [it] hadn't occurred to me. And that's what makes me nervous." Ross Cheit, Associate Professor of Political Science at Brown University, spoke these words in 1994, in his first public speech about these matters, at age thirty-eight, two years after recovering memories of being sexually abused in the late 1960s by William Farmer. Farmer had been the administrator of the San Francisco Boys Chorus summer camp, which Cheit had attended between the ages of ten and thirteen.

Professor Cheit then explained how surprising this realization was to him:

> Two years ago, the topic of sexual abuse was something that I certainly knew nothing about. There had been one highly publicized case in California, this McMartin preschool case. I had heard of it. I didn't read the stories, and I certainly in no way associated myself with the topic. I was thirty-six years old . . . and I was busy working away as an assistant professor, teaching courses in sort of esoteric things that have nothing to do with human services, and really nothing to do with emotions. I was teaching courses on things like insurance and auto safety. And in early May 1992 . . . my local newspaper published its first stories about allegations of child molestation against former Catholic priest James Porter in Fall River, Massachusetts. I remember those front page stories well, because I had a sort of visceral reaction to them. I remember asking myself, why are these people bringing this up now?
>
> And part of the question was, why are "they" bringing this up?

> . . . And certainly, why are they doing it now? This is thirty years ago. Why are they doing this? In no way did I associate myself with these stories. And frankly, I thought the topic was somewhat disgusting. (1994a)

Despite Cheit's feeling in May 1992 that this distasteful topic of childhood sexual abuse was irrelevant to him, he experienced an astounding change in awareness of his own life just a few months later, in the middle of August, while on vacation with his wife:

> We drove north through Maine to the Canadian province of New Brunswick. We were celebrating our tenth wedding anniversary. The day after our anniversary, we were at a little village on the coast of the Bay of Fundy . . . It was the last day that I would live without any awareness or remembrance of a nightly routine of sexual abuse committed upon me twenty-four years earlier by the camp administrator of a summer camp I attended . . . I woke up the morning of August 24th, 1992, with something akin to a bad taste in my mouth. It was like the residue of a dream, but it was stronger than that. I can't remember if I actually dreamed about this man, but I woke up thinking about him. I woke up thinking about a man I hadn't thought of in twenty-four years. He was a man I admired. He was a man who was more than twice my age at the time, and he was also at the time a student minister at the Methodist church. It was like he was in the room with me. I could picture him. I could hear his voice. I could remember him quite well. And it was very compelling. And I thought about him on and off for the next few days, and the days stretched into weeks before it really sank in.
>
> But the earth did not shake that day. This was not some earth-shattering revelation. There was no epiphany. It was much more mundane than that. I was remembering somebody I hadn't thought of in a long time, and there was a combination of real affection and fondness for this man, and something very unsettling. What I remember, I would describe as "those things he used to do to me." But it was in no terms any clearer than that, and I didn't dwell on "those things he used to do to me." They were a bad memory. They were like remembering the time I stole something from the variety store and got caught. It was an embarrass-

> ing memory. It was certainly not the kind of thing I wanted to tell anybody about, not even my wife at first. And I was vaguely ashamed, although I'm sure that I didn't even use that word or those labels at the time. But I remember thinking, I let him do those things. And I was definitely silent about it. (1994a)

Ross Cheit ultimately prevailed in two lawsuits, one against William Farmer and one against the San Francisco Boys Chorus, for the abuse he suffered (Stanton 1995). With the help of a private investigator, Cheit located five additional victims of William Farmer and tape-recorded a confession by Farmer himself. Cheit's case of suddenly remembered sexual abuse is one of the most well documented cases currently available for public scrutiny.

Ross Cheit does not know exactly why his memories returned when they did. He identified several factors, however, that converged at this point in his life:

> First, it was a particularly conducive stage in my life, I think . . . I was nearing middle age.
>
> Second, it was the right time of year. It was not only the same month that I had always gone to camp. It was, as I would determine much later, within a few days of the exact anniversary of the last time I saw this man.
>
> Third, my guard was down. I was on vacation. I've led a life of constant work since high school, getting all the degrees . . . and moving into the life of an assistant professor. And it was truly the first vacation I had taken with my wife in seven years. So the bustle of daily life had subsided. No newspapers, no telephone calls, no distractions.
>
> Finally, and I think most compellingly, . . . I had recently learned that . . . a ten-year-old boy who is near and dear to me had joined a similar organization and was going to go to camp that summer. I didn't place particular importance on that when I heard it, but I knew that there was something about it I didn't like. And in fact, we were supposed to go to California for a vacation, and I would then have been able to see him at camp. And instead we ended up going to Canada.
>
> Anyway, this bad taste persisted, and I kept thinking about that man and the things he did to me. (1994a)

As a boy in the San Francisco Chorus, why didn't Ross Cheit acknowledge that William Farmer was betraying him? Why didn't Cheit know that he had been abused? And why did he fail to consciously remember the abuse for a quarter-century?

Ross Cheit and I have discussed many aspects of his experiences. But before we ever spoke to each other we had independently identified *betrayal* as a key concept in forgetting sexual abuse. Cheit had not yet read my article on betrayal trauma (Freyd 1994) when he spoke about the central role of betrayal in his experience with Farmer. Referring to letters he had just read for the first time in twenty-five years, which he had written to his parents from camp in the 1960s, Cheit said:

> But the letters were just devastating, because the letters were the first time that I thought about these actions in terms of what this man meant to me in my life, in terms of a relationship rather than in terms of just actions.
>
> And I read these letters, and I realized how important he was to me. I thought he was a great guy. I really admired him.
>
> I read the letters. And the whole thing shifted, from just "those acts" to complete betrayal. And I broke down that night and cried in a way I had never cried before. And I was sobbing, saying the whole time, he was such a great guy.

Ross Cheit was betrayed by William Farmer, an adult in a position of authority. Ross Cheit had admired William Farmer. He had *trusted* him.

Betrayal Trauma Theory

Betrayal is the violation of implicit or explicit trust. The closer and more necessary the relationship, the greater the degree of betrayal. Extensive betrayal is traumatic. Much of what is traumatic to human beings involves some degree of betrayal.

Betrayal trauma theory posits that under certain conditions, betrayals necessitate a "betrayal blindness" in which the betrayed person does not have conscious awareness, or memory, of the betrayal. A theory of psychological response to trauma, betrayal trauma builds from the belief that the degree to which a trauma involves betrayal by another person significantly influ-

ences the traumatized individual's cognitive encoding of the experience of trauma, the accessibility of the event to awareness, and the psychological as well as behavioral responses.

Self-interest would seem to demand that we be highly sensitive to betrayal and cheating. If, for instance, you discover that a grocery store cheats you by giving you less than you paid for, you are well advised to take note of this fact and either complain about the ill treatment or switch grocery stores. As a general rule, to the extent that you are able to choose with whom to engage in further social agreements, you would want to avoid those who had previously betrayed you. You would be well served to have an internal "cheater detector" providing you with information necessary to establish trustworthy social alliances (Cosmides 1989).

In certain kinds of abusive betrayals of children, however, escape is not a viable option. Here, the ability to detect betrayal may need to be stifled for the greater goal of survival. A child who distrusts his or her parents risks alienating the parents further, and thus becomes subject to more abuse and less love or care. In situations like these, it may be more advantageous to be blind to the betrayal.

A simple analogy can be found in the functioning of the human immune system. The immune system generally responds to infection with localized inflammation and fever, a systemic response. Inflammation and fever demand a great deal of energy, yet they are important to survival. However, there are situations in which these responses are more dangerous than helpful. If a hungry polar bear suddenly appears before a feverish explorer, for instance, the explorer's limited energy is better spent on running away than on coping with the fever. The usually healing responses of the immune system, which would cause the explorer to maintain fever, reduce activity, huddle shivering, feel sleepy, and be aware of pain, would all get in the way of fleeing from the polar bear. The innate fight-or-flight response takes over, ensuring that energy is directed to the brain and muscles. Thus, stress can suppress the immune system. What's more, in an emergency, analgesia—unawareness of pain—can occur as a lifesaving response.

Betrayal is like infection: often it is best to be aware of the

problem and change one's plans accordingly. But there are situations in which it is actually dangerous to respond in this "usual" way to betrayal, just as there are situations in which it is actually dangerous to respond in the usual way to infection. In the case of betrayal, those situations occur when the person doing the betraying is someone the victim cannot afford *not* to trust. If the betrayed person followed the usual response pattern and did not trust the betrayer, he or she would only make the situation worse. Or so it would seem; a sad consequence of betrayal trauma is that sometimes—perhaps often—the victim could afford to know about the betrayal but does not know that such awareness is safe.

Betrayal trauma theory does not directly address the issue of veracity of recovered memories of abuse or trauma. Instead, it asks the basic question "If a child is abused and betrayed, what would we expect to happen to the information about that abuse and betrayal?" From a logical analysis of developmental pressures and cognitive architecture, we can expect cognitive information blockage under certain conditions (like sexual abuse by a parent), which will create various types of betrayal blindness and traumatic amnesia.

After he had read a prepublication copy of my article on betrayal trauma, Ross Cheit wrote to me about the centrality of betrayal to his experience:

> I can't overemphasize the resonance between how you describe betrayal trauma and how I came to experience the underlying injury. I use the word "injury" advisedly. The concept of trauma never seemed right to me. It didn't fit my story. There were no threats. I never sensed danger. I didn't fear him. He was nice to me. Something didn't add up—and it slowly started bothering me more and more. A number of fairly common questions became as irritating as they seemed irrelevant: "Why didn't you tell anyone?" or "Why didn't you warn your friends?" and "So did he ever actually threaten you?" None of these questions fit. But your article quite accurately captures the nagging concern that did—essentially why didn't my cheater detector work? . . . I knew I had been had, so to speak, but I couldn't understand it. I couldn't explain it. Betrayal trauma does.

2

CONCEPTUAL KNOTS

The nature and even existence of the phenomenon of forgetting traumatic events have sparked intense professional, legal, and public debate (see, for example, Enns et al. 1995; Loftus and Ketcham 1994; Terr 1994). The recent controversy has prompted the formation of international organizations promoting opposing points of view (Boodman 1994; Grant 1994). The debate pits those who believe in the essential reality of most recovered and repressed memories against those who question the validity of those beliefs.

In distinct contradiction to much of the popular media coverage of the current controversy, strong evidence shows that people can and do forget sexual abuse and other traumatic events. One problem in approaching this controversy and reviewing the empirical literature centers on *language.* What do we call the phenomenon of forgetting abuse: memory repression? dissociation? traumatic amnesia? These terms carry confusing and often daunting histories.

The imprecise and inconsistent terminology leads to critiques that focus on a certain limited definition of the phenomenon. For example, the popular use of the term "memory repression" in the current debate has prompted some critics to attack Freudian assumptions of "repression." In a November 17, 1994, article in *The New York Review of Books,* Frederick Crews wrote:

> Once we recognize that a memory can disappear because of factors other than repression, even the best anecdotal evidence for that mechanism loses its punch. Consider, for example, the closely watched case of Ross Cheit, a Brown University professor who has recently proved beyond question that his suddenly recalled 1968 molestation by a music camp administrator was real. But had that abuse been repressed in the first place? In a phone conversation with me on September 7, 1994, Cheit declared that while he takes no position on the existence of repression, he is inclined to doubt that he abruptly and completely consigned his experience to oblivion. A more likely account is that the adult Cheit refocussed his faced but unrepressed experiences after he had read a book about pedophilia (as he did) and became morally exercised about it. While this, too, is guesswork, the fact that it can't be ruled out renders Cheit's case useless as a demonstration. (Crews 1994b, p. 55)

We know from looking at Cheit's case that Crews is confused about his facts: Cheit had forgotten his childhood abuse for approximately a quarter of a century and then remembered it rather suddenly as an adult. Crews's conceptual confusion is less transparent. He appears to be attacking a particular Freudian model in which memory repression is seen as distinctly different from other kinds of forgetting. Although Cheit remembered being sexually abused as a child after a quarter of a century of not remembering, Crews dismissed Cheit's case. Ross Cheit later objected to Crews's account in a letter published in *The New York Review of Books:* "I told Crews unequivocally that I had not thought of the perpetrator in more than twenty years" (Cheit 1994c, p. 76). Cheit also stated that the book on abuse had been purchased three months *after* he remembered the events.

Crews tried to explain why he considered Cheit's case "useless as a *demonstration* that repression exists" (italics in original) in a published response to Cheit's letter:

> The reasons for that fact include the necessarily subjective and anecdotal character of every reported act of long-delayed remembering, even when, as in Cheit's case, the events at issue did occur. We cannot rule out the possibility that the moment of recall has