

5.0 out of 5 stars

Jerry Garcia's Trauma and Tragedy

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A Psychological Review of Long Strange Trip, in 18 Parts:

1) Abbreviations used: The Grateful Dead = TGD, Jerry Garcia = JG, documentary = doc

2) This was a wonderful doc, rich and remarkably well-constructed: joyful, energizing, and inspiring during the first episodes but, appropriate to the material, increasingly tinged with sadness in the final parts, as the tragedy that was JG's demise reaches its denouement. My goal in this review is to make fully explicit a theme that the documentary hints at brilliantly. I believe that this theme provides an essential key to understanding JG and TGD.

3) I just used the words "tragedy" and "denouement." I'll say a few words about why. "Tragedy," as defined by Merriam-Webster: "a serious drama typically describing a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (such as destiny) and having a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion..." Jerry was up against a superior force. I am referring to a psychological force, not to a biological addiction, though that may have been present, too. Exactly what force I mean will become clear soon. "Denouement"—this term indicates the clarification, uncovering, and coming to fruition of a significant plot element of a story. It can suggest that the end is contained in the beginning. This idea is very relevant to the story of JG's life—to the influence of his early childhood on his demise and death—about which more in a moment.

4) The documentary makes clear that an early and crucial event in JG's life was the death of his father, who drowned when Jerry was five years old. Though the doc doesn't go into it, I've read elsewhere that Jerry witnessed this death. While vacationing with the family, Jerry's father slipped and fell into the deep water rapids of a northern California river. Jerry watched, helpless and horrified, from the river bank as his father went under. Though the doc does not belabor the point, it finds a way to tell you that much of what follows in JG's life was, in some manner, a response to that death.

5) JG loved the Frankenstein movie, and eventually horror movies in general. That love started early in his life and lasted till he was just about dead. In fact, in every episode of the doc, we see clips of the Frankenstein movie; these clips function as the integrating metaphor of the doc. The one interview that JG wanted to do as his life was unwinding was about his passion for that movie.

6) The Frankenstein movie tells the story of a monster that is created from (dead) spare body parts and brought (back) to life. The book has him brought to life de novo from some kind of alchemical process from inanimate matter. The doc seems to suggest that Jerry, in some way, at most vaguely conscious to him, was trying, psychologically speaking, to animate or reanimate his dead father.

7) "The Grateful Dead"—this name, of course, directly suggests animation or reanimation. Yes, the dead remain dead, yet they are vibrantly alive. Jerry chose that name. Jerry was all about bringing the dead to life, and the band was his primary vehicle.

8) Background on Trauma: There is a phenomenon termed "post-traumatic repetition" that pertains to the tendency of a trauma victim to in some manner reenact the traumatic event without conscious awareness. (Freud, who first observed the phenomenon, called it "repetition compulsion.") A defining and intriguing aspect of this phenomenon is that the repetition takes a trauma one was helpless to prevent--often a trauma experienced in childhood--and, in the reenactment, gives it a form over which one has choice. An example is a girl who is sexually abused and later becomes a prostitute; she repeatedly reenacts a traumatically intrusive sexual act in a new form, one that is under her control. A second example is a child who is physically abused during childhood and later abuses his own child in the same manner. These two examples illustrate different forms of repetition: in the first, the victim reenacts the original event on herself, though in a more empowered form, one in which choice is possible; in the second, the victim becomes a victimizer, enacting the original trauma on someone else. In both cases, the repetition gives the original victim, after the fact, a sense of power that he or she lacked during the original event. As these examples suggest, the repetition may also be problematic for, or even cause direct harm to, oneself or others.

9) More Background on Trauma: It is often said that repetition of trauma is most likely to occur when the individual dissociates, either during the traumatic event or afterwards, as a strategy to deal with the overwhelming feelings of pain, horror, and helplessness. Dissociation entails psychological numbing, in which the emotional power of the event is muted or even eliminated entirely; actual amnesia for the event can occur as well. Dissociation is much more likely to occur when a trauma victim does not receive the emotional support from family or community that could help the individual fully feel and express the terrible inner states that he or she experienced and may be continuing to experience.

10) One of the remarkable things about TGD is that they, their families, girlfriends, roadies, and maybe some others, too, formed a more-or-less coherent and stable social structure that they called "The Family." They traveled together, and support of The

Family ate up much of the band's profits. A lot of the wealth that the band generated got spread around to support The Family, especially while touring.

11) Jerry was the leader and central figure of TGD. I don't recall whether the doc said that JG was ever called the "father" of The Family (does anyone who is reading this know?), but it is perfectly clear that if the inner TGD community functioned as a family, and it did, JG was the de facto father. In fact, early on in the doc, before TGD became famous and before their inner community became known as The Family, the doc showed how the band lived together in a house, were constantly interacting--and one of the band members described the situation as that of a "dysfunctional family." That early communal experience may have been the germ of the later idea of "The Family."

12) Jerry's father was a bandleader and, though Jerry never saw him perform, I've read elsewhere that he remembers his father singing him to sleep at night. Jerry himself was named by his father after his favorite bandleader, Jerome Kern. Music filled the home (Jerry's mother was a musician, too.) So, in making music central to his life, Jerry probably felt he was connecting with his lost father and, more broadly, his disrupted nuclear family (after Jerry's father died, Jerry lived for several years with his maternal grandparents). It is most relevant that in becoming the leader of his own band, Jerry was adopting the role that his father played—yet another reason that Jerry would have, consciously or subliminally, seen himself as the father of The Family, and would have identified this paternal role closely with his own father.

13) Weaving together some of these threads: As a small boy, JG was a child in a family. His father died and that death was traumatic for Jerry. Jerry became preoccupied with the animation of the dead (Frankenstein, The Grateful Dead). On a psychological level, Jerry was preoccupied with his father's death; he wanted to bring him back to life. The band became a vehicle for post-traumatic repetition. The band became a Family. Jerry was the father of this Family, one who was closely identified with his own father. Now the stage was set for a post-traumatic reenactment of the death of Jerry's father. In fact, some of the interviews in the doc suggest that Jerry was almost willfully using his heroin habit as a vehicle to bring about his demise and death. At least one of the interviewees in the doc used the term "suicide" when speaking of Jerry's death.

14) This is why I used the term "tragedy" to describe Jerry's life: "a conflict between a protagonist and a superior force (such as destiny) and having a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion." The "superior force" was the pain of his father's death and Jerry's overwhelming tendency to repeat the trauma. This also is why I used "denouement." Jerry's recreation of his family, with himself as father, inverted the original trauma, and his own death recreated, in inverted form, the original trauma. JG's demise and death was

a clarification, uncovering, and coming to fruition of a plot element that till then was unclear, hidden, latent. Jerry's demise and quasi-suicidal death was the denouement of the latent trajectory set in motion by his own father's death.

15) In the penultimate paragraph of Mary Shelley's book *Frankenstein*, the monster says: "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace, or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell." *Frankenstein* then alights on an iceberg, floats away, never to be seen again.

16) Though the doc focuses most strongly on the movie, I have read that the first novel Jerry read was Mary Shelley's book, which he picked up because he was enamored of the movie. It is striking that in the book, the monster is (though standing on ice) carried away in moving water; yet unlike Jerry's father, he is (at least for the moment) still alive—and the reader is left to wonder whether he might yet find his way to renewed, even improved, life. To the extent that Jerry identified his father with the monster—and he clearly did—the book's ending leaves open the possibility of a happier outcome than that experienced by his father. Focusing on the monster's immediate (and perhaps long-term) survival, notwithstanding having been carried away by the flow of water, would have distracted Jerry's attention from the unmitigated, terrible outcome that his father experienced in reality. Thus, Jerry's engagement with the *Frankenstein* story might have functioned as an emotional palliative for Jerry, as a (to use a phrase from the traumatologist Lenore Terr) "post-traumatic compensatory fantasy."

17) I know little about Jerry's life beyond what was covered in the documentary and the few bits that I've read on line. In thinking about the "theory" of Jerry's demise and death that I've presented here, it would be helpful to know more—both about Jerry and about TGD. For example, was young Jerry supported, emotionally, in a way that allowed him to mourn deeply after his father's loss and thus, in at least some manner, integrate his father's loss psychologically, or did JG dissociate the pain of the loss and thus become more strongly inclined towards repeating the trauma? Given how little has been understood about the needs of children until very recently, it seems likely that Jerry was not supported in a way that allowed for the integration of the trauma; and the apparent repetition of it in Jerry's life seems consistent with this speculation. But based on what one can learn just from the doc, I think the above reconstruction is probably correct, in that it may be the only way--think here of the principle of parsimony—one can create a coherent picture that accounts for some of the most striking facts about Jerry and TGD.

18) Concluding Reflections: Trauma—be from the sudden death of a parent, childhood

sexual molestation, the corporal punishment or abandonment of a child, or something else—can be so impactful psychologically that it has repercussions throughout one's life. It can even drive one to the point of death; and I am sure that many actual suicides have their ultimate roots in childhood trauma. The solution is to prevent such traumas and, if that is not possible, to do all one can to come to grips, or help others come to grips, with the traumas and the painful emotions they engender. When a trauma occurs but is dissociated, one becomes subject to compulsive repetitions. Then—however much the form of the repetition seems designed to empower the erstwhile victim—real control of one's life is impaired; and in the process, one may cause harm to oneself or others. In Jerry's case, the trauma of his father's sudden and horrible death was so profound that I believe Jerry was willing even to die in an attempt to, psychologically speaking, “undo” the feelings of helplessness that he endured.

If You'd Like to Read More: If you are interested in how experiences of childhood trauma can shape adult life paths, sometimes in ways that are almost unbelievably precise, an intriguing book is [Unchained Memories: True Stories Of Traumatic Memories Lost And Found](#) by Lenore Terr, M.D., who is a pioneer in the study of childhood trauma. Terr's previous book, [Too Scared To Cry: Psychic Trauma In Childhood](#), which is also excellent, has a more general focus on childhood trauma, but it does contain some brief and intriguing vignettes on how trauma shaped the lives and careers of Edgar Allen Poe, Alfred Hitchcock, and Steven King. Another excellent book with a somewhat similar focus is Alice Miller's [The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness](#). If you are interested in how childhood trauma shapes religion and myth, you might want to take a look at my own website, which you can find by searching my name on the Web.

Benjamin Abelow, M.D.