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# Witnesses to Trauma: Kafka's Trauma Victims and the Working Through Process

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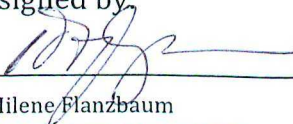
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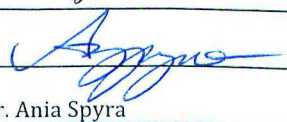
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## Witnesses to Trauma: Kafka's Trauma Victims and the Working Through Process

In "The Metamorphosis" and "The Hunger Artist," Kafka has gifted us with two characters who, in Kafkaesque fashion, "pay a terrible price when, willingly or not, [they go] against 'nature,'" as Joachim Neugroschel writes in the introduction to his translation of *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories* (Kafka xix). Gregor awakes one morning to discover that he has been turned into a giant vermin, and the hunger artist attempts to cope with his tragedy of not enjoying the taste of food by putting himself on public display, likening his role in society to that of a common zoo animal. Willingly or not, these two characters find themselves in situations that lie outside of the "natural" human experience, and for decades, literary critics have attempted to explain why neither Gregor nor the hunger artist are able to rise above their circumstances and rejoin their societies.

The explanations as to why both of these stories end with their main characters' demise are as numerous as the number of critics who have argued for them. Any reader of Kafka attempts to answer questions such as, why is the hunger artist so unable to relay his experiences to his audience members? Why does Gregor Samsa become transformed into a giant vermin, and what role does his family play in the ensuing turmoil? The hunger artist has been described as a symbol of the struggles of the modern-day artist<sup>1</sup>, as a model for ascetism<sup>2</sup>, and as a parody of Christianity<sup>3</sup>, to name a few interpretations, and many critics have attempted to draw parallels between Kafka's personal identity as a Jew

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<sup>1</sup> See Steinhauer, "Hunger Artist or Artist in Hungering: Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist'"

<sup>2</sup> See Rubinstein, "Franz Kafka: A Hunger Artist"

<sup>3</sup> See Cervo, "Kafka's A Hunger Artist"

and Gregor's transformation into a giant vermin<sup>4</sup>. Each interpretation adds to the collective Kafka wisdom among scholars.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, brought with it the rise of trauma studies, and studying the psychological nature of trauma allows us to show how characters are affected by their traumatic histories and how their ability or inability to cope with those traumas drives the action of their stories. Trauma studies blends the disciplines of psychology and literature to help us understand trauma when it is depicted in literature. When a character is "diagnosed" as a victim of trauma, his journey can be understood through what science knows about trauma and the post-traumatic process, allowing us to explore the relationship between literature and trauma.

Much of the criticism that exists about Gregor Samsa and the hunger artist helps to lead us to the conclusion that the two characters are victims of trauma and of the societies that leave them unable to process that trauma. Given what we know about Kafka's turbulent history, the tumultuous environment in which he wrote, and the nightmarish mode of his writing, it is surprising that this connection has never been made. In fact, Walter H. Sokel attempts to link Kafka's Jewish identity to his fictional writing by recognizing "the striking resemblance of structure between Kafka's representation of fictional characters with his presentation of the relationship between use of the German language and Jewish being" ("Kafka as a Jew" 852). Modern studies of psychological trauma add to the existing criticism and reveal something new about Gregor Samsa and the hunger artist: they each experience singular traumatic events that propel them from existing states of isolation into unfamiliar traumatic environments, and

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<sup>4</sup> See Sokel, "Kafka as Jew"

these moments (the hunger artist losing his identity as an admired artist and Gregor being turned into a giant vermin) are the points of no return for these two characters. Both the hunger artist and Gregor have to learn to exist in worlds that are nothing like what they have experienced. Defining these two characters as trauma victims explains why they are unable to escape these traumatic environments and heal psychologically. Without the support of their communities and with no way to “work through” their traumas, Gregor and the hunger artist are doomed to perish before their stories even begin.

In the third chapter of her book *Toward a Psychology of Uncertainty: Trauma-Centered Psychoanalysis*, psychologist Doris Brothers examines the idea of “trauma as exile.” According to her definition of trauma, both the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa experience singular traumatic events in each of their stories that propel them into worlds that are unrecognizable and incomprehensible. For Brothers, trauma involves

A violent uprooting from a familiar before and a free-fall into an utterly unfamiliar after... The traumatized person, therefore, *is* an exile, someone who is forced to live in a world that is no longer recognizable. It is a world in which hope itself may become a dreaded enemy (Brothers 45-46).

The ensuing feelings of disorder and unfamiliarity in the lives of the traumatized are part of the traumas themselves. For Brothers and her patients, life after trauma is uncomfortable and uncertain, and the same is true for the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa. Trauma for Brothers comes “when the certainties that emerge from and stabilize our relational worlds are destroyed by some experience that powerfully reveals their falsity” (46). When these “systemically emergent certainties” are destroyed by traumatic events, trauma patients are forced to encounter that world she describes as “no longer recognizable.”

If the definition of a traumatic event is an event that sends its victim into “an utterly unfamiliar after,” then the hunger artist’s traumatic event is the realization that his craft is no longer appreciated by his audience as it once was and that he will have to change his livelihood in order to continue hungering. In the first line of the story, Kafka tells us that “the interest in hunger artists has greatly declined,” and that decline reaches its breaking point when the hunger artist realizes that his craft is no longer admired among his audience members as it once was (Kafka 303).

For the hunger artist, it seems as if “the change had come almost overnight,” like what Brothers would call “a violent uprooting” (Kafka 310, Brothers 45). What does a hunger artist do in a world that does not appreciate the art of hungering?

This man, who had been cheered by thousands of people, could not display himself in sideshows at small fairs; and as for starting a new profession, the hunger artist was not merely too old, he was, more than anything, all too fanatically devoted to hungering (Kafka 311).

The hunger artist’s trauma is his realization that his livelihood, to which he was “fanatically devoted” and the concept of which Brothers would call a “systemically emergent certainty,” no longer has the same value that it once did. Once he has had that taken away from him, the hunger artist is plunged into the world of uncertainty that Brothers calls trauma. Nothing is the same anymore. The hunger artist had once rejected the idea of being displayed “in sideshows at small fairs,” but he is forced to reexamine his decision in light of his new world. If he is to survive, he must readjust his priorities. He compromises and signs a contract with a larger circus, even though it means he will be relegated to “a quite easily accessible sideshow near the animal cages” rather than being featured “as a star attraction at the center of the ring” (Kafka 312). Because his



trauma has placed him in an unfamiliar world, the hunger artist is forced to make decisions that he would not otherwise make.

The hunger artist must grow accustomed to a world in which people do not necessarily wish to see him on display. In his new home, he is not the main attraction and people do not go to the circus to see him. In fact, “any calm and lengthy viewing” of his exhibit “is made impossible” by the throngs of people pushing past his cage in order to get to the animals (Kafka 312). These people were “unable to understand” why anybody would stop in front of his cage when they could see the animals instead (312). The hunger artist now lives in a world in which not only is his craft underappreciated but in which many people cannot comprehend why his art could be desired in the first place. This radical change in public opinion and behavior certainly goes against what Brothers would call the hunger artist’s “systemically emergent certainties,” the destruction of which constitute a traumatic environment (Brothers 46).

Gregor Samsa also experiences a singular traumatic event that changes everything about how he sees himself and the world, although his traumatic event happens at the very beginning of the story: his world is turned completely upside down when he is turned into a giant vermin. The change happens all-at-once and very unexpectedly; he wakes up one morning to “[find] himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka 117). While his mental capacities are seemingly intact, his physicality has obviously been transformed:

He lay on his hard, armorlike back, and when lifting his head slightly, he could view his brown, vaulted belly partitioned by arching ridges, while on top of it, the blanket, about to slide off altogether, could barely hold. His many legs, wretchedly thin compared with his overall girth, danced helpless before his eyes (117).

His first “systemically emergent certainty” to be destroyed, then, is his very sense of physical self. He went to bed a man and wakes up as a vermin with little control over his body; his movement and appearance are entirely unfamiliar to him. The rest of his world seems intact (his family appears to be unchanged and his supervisor is just as meticulous as Gregor had anticipated he would be), but Gregor is unable to react to his circumstances in a familiar manner.

Gregor first begins to notice his new self when he tries to move. He contemplates going back to sleep, but “he was accustomed to sleeping on his right side,” a position his new physique does not allow (Kafka 118). He wants to get out of bed like he normally would every morning, but he cannot seem to control his legs. He spends fifteen minutes trying to get out of bed and still is unable to make any progress. His new voice is also unfamiliar to him; when he tries to respond to his mother, the sound includes “a painful and insuppressible squeal blending in as if from below” (120). His new world is so unfamiliar to him that he is unable to recognize the magnitude of his transformation and instead attributes his new voice to “nothing but the harbinger of a severe cold, an occupational hazard of traveling salesmen” (122). His experience is nothing if not something that Brothers would describe as “a free-fall into an utterly unfamiliar after” (Brothers 45).

According to Brothers, “when all certainty is exposed by trauma as a cruel myth and the future looks like a dark and barren wilderness, hope must be crushed lest it add further uncertainty to a future that is already unbearably precarious” (46). The hunger artist and Gregor are left without hope for the future when they experience the destruction of their “systemically emergent certainties,” and according to Brothers, “it is the

destruction of the SECs that once lent stability, safety, and meaning to our lives that turns us into exiles” (46). This exile is exacerbated for both the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa by the fact that their circumstances do not allow them to get the treatment they need to overcome this trauma. The destruction of these systemically emergent certainties (SECs) is only the beginning of these two characters’ struggle to overcome their traumas. It is not enough to say that Gregor Samsa and the Hunger Artist are victims of this kind of trauma—in order to understand why this discovery is important, we must explain how they are affected by their traumas and why they are unable to get better (and inevitably are doomed to perish). Before their stories even begin, however, Gregor Samsa and the Hunger Artist are already extremely isolated from everyone around them, and psychological studies of isolation trauma will illuminate why this leaves them ill-equipped to handle future trauma from the onset.

The hunger artist sees himself as different from everyone else in the world, and he reacts accordingly. When he was more popular, people would approach his enclosure and engage with him and ask him questions. The hunger artist would interact with them for a short while, but then “he would retreat entirely into himself, ignoring everyone,” preferring to spend time by himself isolated from his audience and the world around him (Kafka 304). At the end of his tale, he reveals that the one thing that separates him from everybody else is that he could not enjoy the taste of food; if he could, he “would have stuffed himself like... everyone else” (315). The hunger artist divides the world into two categories: himself, and “everyone else.” He sees himself as the only one of his kind; even if it by his choice, he is alone in the world.

Regardless of the hunger artist's perception of himself in relation to everybody else (he perceives himself as being different, so he experiences the isolation whether he is actually isolated or not), there is the fact that the people around the hunger artist simply do not understand him. The hunger artist makes it clear that he is a genuine hungerer, but everybody expects him to cheat by sneaking food because they see him as a performer. "Insiders" would have known that "the hunger artist would never, under any circumstance, not even under duress, have eaten the tiniest crumb," but these "insiders" never appear; nobody believes the hunger artist's promise that he does not consume any food during the starvation period (Kafka 304). The watchmen think they are doing him a favor by turning their backs and giving him the opportunity to sneak food, and when he tries to prove his innocence by singing, "they were merely astonished at his skillfulness in eating even while singing" (304). Nothing the hunger artist does can help his audience understand his plight or accept his authenticity, which is the trait that forms the core of his self-identity.

Gregor Samsa's plight is just as grotesque and incomprehensible as that of the hunger artist, and while his background is told in hindsight, it is obvious that he, too, suffers from being abandoned by everyone around him and the ensuing isolation. Gregor is the sole provider for his family and feels responsible for paying his parents' debts, even if that means working in a job that makes him miserable. He is trapped by his father's debts but longs for the day that "he could have been rid of that job" (Kafka 150). Gregor did choose to sacrifice his independence to support his family, but after making that initial decision, he no longer has much choice about anything at all. He laments the fact that he works for a company that suspects the worst out of every employee (as shown by

the fact that his office manager shows up at his home at the first sign of Gregor's tardiness), but until he is transformed into a giant vermin, it seems as if there is nothing he can do to escape the misery of his job. Walter H. Sokel sees Gregor's metamorphosis as an event that "fulfills Gregor's secret wish for rebellion and the humiliation of his superior in the firm... without implicating his conscious mind," and this is true; Gregor is trapped by conflicting desires to provide for his family and to indulge his desire to leave his job ("Rebellion and Punishment" 208). He admits that he is "holding back because of [his] parents"; if he did not have to worry about paying off their debts, he "would have given notice long ago" (Kafka 119).

His status as the sole provider for his family keeps him from feeling truly integrated into society and into his family, leaving him in a world of his own. Gregor's job as a traveling salesman means "worrying about making trains, having bad, irregular meals," and "meeting new people all the time, but never forming any lasting friendships that mellow into anything intimate" (Kafka 118). According to his mother, Gregor "thinks of nothing but his job," and even during his time off from work, he does not attempt to socialize or leave the apartment (126). In fact, he has been home for a week before his transformation, and he spent his free time "poring over timetables," presumably planning his next work trip (126). In becoming so devoted to his family through his dedication to his career, Gregor has shut himself off from the rest of the world and has prevented himself from forming any real attachments with other people. Instead of going out and meeting people, Gregor finds a picture of a pretty woman in a magazine and cuts that out to put on display in his room—a token that becomes the one

item he vigorously defends when his mother and sister attempt to clean out his room later in the story.

This isolation from others due to their employment situations is something the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa have in common, and it has similar effects on how each character is able to deal with the destruction of systemically emergent certainties in their lives. Chimpanzees in the wild who have been abandoned by their mothers have been shown to have “long-term difficulties in stress response management, affect regulation, and close interpersonal relationships,” according to a study done by psychiatrist Linda Chernus (470). When they do not have meaningful attachments with other chimpanzees, they are considered to be suffering from isolation trauma, and they exhibit symptoms that are similar to “human children who are abandoned during infancy or early childhood” (470). Even before they experience the destruction of their systemically emergent certainties, the hunger artist and Gregor are suffering from a similar kind of isolation trauma. The hunger artist has absolutely no sense of community; he has nothing except his craft, “aside from short, regular breaks,” and he grows “more and more dismal because no one could take it seriously” (Kafka 309). He is the only one of his kind and nobody understands him. Similarly, Gregor is forced into isolation in order to provide for his family. After he threw “himself into his job with tremendous fervor,” his family begins to take him for granted and accepts the money he brings home with “no great warmth” (149). Just like the chimpanzees in Chernus’s study, the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa are on their own long before they are dealt their respective traumas.

This isolation is problematic on its own, but it continues to cause problems for the hunger artist and Gregor as they attempt to work through their traumas, just as it does for

chimpanzees in the wild. According to Chernus, “the success of early relationships... is highly correlated with the development of an adequate capacity to cope with stress throughout life,” and chimpanzees showing signs of abandonment and isolation trauma are left less able to handle future traumatic events when they occur (471). This prevents them from going through what Michael S. Roth would call the necessary “working through” process, a concept that comes from Freud (Roth XXVI). This process involves “[confronting] one’s emotional, intellectual, and erotic links to the past, and to one’s subject” and “coming to terms with extreme events, including the trauma that typically attends them” (XXVI). By the time that the hunger artist and Gregor experience the destruction of their systemically emergent certainties, they are already at a disadvantage when it comes to being able to overcome such destruction and experience the working through process. Chimpanzees and humans are able to recover from isolation trauma when they are provided with therapy that allows them to form “emotionally close relationships with others,” and without this therapy, the chimpanzees and humans remain unable to form close personal attachments with their peers and are less able to handle future trauma. Neither the hunger artist nor Gregor are provided with this kind of therapy, so they are left on their own when it comes to working through their separate traumas.

This helps to explain why the hunger artist and Gregor struggle to understand their traumas when they first experience them. Because of their early isolation experiences, they are left with no emotional framework to process trauma. When they are thrust into “a free-fall into an utterly unfamiliar after,” as Doris Brothers would say, they have nowhere to go for help and no communities to consult. The hunger artist and Gregor enter into a cycle in which they try to heal themselves that involves the denial of any

problems, attempting to cope with methods that are not successful, and eventually becoming completely overwhelmed by the destruction of their systemically emergent certainties because they are never given the opportunity to heal with the one thing that they need: the ability to represent their traumatic experiences and give testimony to others. This cycle is typical of two-dimensional model of post-traumatic stress disorder for which Berthold P.R. Gersons argues, which is one that divides the diagnosis of PTSD into a “re-experiencing symptom pattern” and a “denial symptom pattern” (253).

According to Gersons, both symptom patterns can be present in an individual going through a post-traumatic experience, but the two-dimensional model allowed him to diagnose more police officers with PTSD, and the same is true for the hunger artist and Gregor. Under the two-dimensional model, the hunger artist and Gregor are sufferers of PTSD, and their initial denial of their traumatic environments is a symptom of this.

The hunger artist does not allow himself to recognize immediately the growing disinterest of his audience. It appears to have happened all-at-once because that is how the hunger artist remembers it, but “in reality, of course, the change could not have been so sudden, and people now belatedly remembered early signs that had been insufficiently noticed, insufficiently stifled amid the raptures of success” (Kafka 310-311). At first, the hunger artist is too unwilling to address his failure as an artist, and denial of the problem is one of the methods by which he attempts to cope with the trauma of failure and loss of self-identity. Instead of recognizing that there is no longer an audience for his craft and finding something else to take its place, the hunger artist refuses to admit that he cannot go on living as he has been; Kafka writes that “as for starting a new profession, the hunger artist was not merely too old, he was, more than anything, all too fanatically



devoted to hungering” (311). The hunger artist merely pushes his trauma away and tries to ignore the fact that he and his craft have been rejected by the world. He is so unwilling to move on that he joins “a large circus,” and “to spare his own vulnerability, he avoided reading the contract” (311). He is experiencing a “massive adaptive failure that is directly initiated by the traumatic event”; he is trying to adapt in a way that does not actually help him (Gersons 253). This is evidence of the fact that the hunger artist has no concept of the magnitude of his trauma or how to begin coping with it, and his ignorance and lack of therapy precipitate his continued decline.

Gregor Samsa experiences a change that is extremely sudden in nature, but he struggles at its onset with recognizing that the change has occurred and that he can no longer go on living life as he normally would. His first reaction, too, is to deny that he has experienced any kind of trauma; he tries to ignore the fact that he has been turned into a giant vermin. In their work with Vietnam veterans and PTSD, David C. Johnson, Susan C. Feldman, Steven M. Southwick, and Denis S. Charney argue that “the progress of this disorder is aided” by “ineffective coping strategies” that do not actually benefit the person involved (218). Gregor’s denial of his metamorphosis is similarly an ineffective coping strategy. One of his first reactions is to attempt to fall back asleep; he wonders, “What if I slept more and forgot about all this nonsense” (Kafka 118). He is determined to get out of bed and make it to the train station so he can get to work. When he thinks about how his boss will react to his absence, he imagines that he will send a doctor who will give him a clean bill of health other than being “work-shy,” and Gregor asks, “would the doctor be all that wrong in this case?...” Aside from his drowsiness, which was really superfluous after his long sleep, Gregor actually felt fine...” (120). It seems so ridiculous

that Gregor can even think that he will make it to work and that everything is fine, but this just shows his inability to process the trauma of being turned into a giant vermin. He is not in a healthy enough state emotionally to recognize that he is in trouble and is actually suffering from trauma.

In their isolation from others and difference from anybody else in the world, the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa are not unlike many Vietnam veterans who experienced post-traumatic stress disorder upon their return from war. One of the reasons that many Vietnam veterans had such a hard time returning to society after the war is that they were not returning to an understanding and supportive community. Part of this was because of “the lack of success of the war effort”—many Americans did not believe in the war, so they were unsupportive of veterans—but the difficulty many veterans faced also stemmed from their belief that “no one understands them” (Johnson et al 222, 223). The hunger artist and Gregor suffer from both issues. In the case of the hunger artist, he experiences a lack of support from his audience because they do not appreciate his art, but he also suffers from the fact that nobody in his audience truly understands why it is that he must go on hungering. One by one, the members of Gregor’s family completely reject him and are therefore unsupportive in that way, but he also suffers from the fact that his situation is impossible to understand. Because of their inability to integrate themselves into their communities, the hunger artist and Gregor both enter into cycles of unsuccessful treatment behavior which perpetuate their post-traumatic experiences even further.

After their initial denial of their problems, the hunger artist and Gregor attempt to work through their traumas in ways that do not actually help them. Because of the isolation trauma that has left them emotionally stunted when it comes to processing

stressful stimuli, neither the hunger artist nor Gregor understand what they need to heal; in Gregor's case, his family does not understand, either. The hunger artist first tries to resolve his situation by relegating himself to a sideshow exhibit at a large circus. He tries to reason with himself about his decision, saying, "a large circus, with its constant turnover of huge numbers of people and animals and apparatuses, can find use for anyone at any time, even a hunger artist" (Kafka 311). He wants so badly to believe that this is the answer and that this decision will give him an audience again, but he is reacting to his trauma in a way that will never bring him healing.

The hunger artist's reaction will never relieve his suffering for two reasons, one of which has already been explained by Chernus's studies of chimpanzees and isolation trauma. Because of his earlier isolation, he is not capable of acting in an emotionally stable manner, so his reaction is not a healthy response, and he does not have the emotional capacity to understand that this new distraction will not actually ease his pain. Secondly, even if it were the right decision, it still would not help him heal because his audience does not react in a way that would facilitate his "working through" process. Instead of indulging his desire to be noticed, his new audience members "were intent on visiting the animals" and walk right past his exhibit on the way to do so (Kafka 312). The lack of support from his audience—even if they do not realize they are hindering his progress—perpetuates the hunger artist's PTSD. Even the "stragglers... hurried by with barely a sidelong glance in order to reach the animals in time" (313). The hunger artist is unable to connect with the younger generation of his audience because they do not understand what he is doing there, and the hunger artist is eventually forced to admit that he is "merely an impediment on the way to the animal cages" (313). The hunger artist

tried to fix his situation by compromising and settling for a smaller exhibit, thinking that it would allow him to stay connected to his audience, but he only faces further rejection.

The hunger artist continues to waste away and hunger on until finally, he succumbs to starvation. His isolation and abandonment have become too much for him to handle, and he has been given no outlet or therapeutic community to assist in his healing process. As he continues to practice his craft, “he labored honestly, but the world was cheating him of his reward,” which is recognition of his talent and support of his emotional needs. Relegating himself to a sideshow exhibit has not helped the hunger artist understand his trauma one bit, and his last words to the supervisor convey feelings of shame that he never revealed his secret: he hungered because he “couldn’t find any food that [he] liked” (Kafka 315). The hunger artist should not be made to feel ashamed for this; regardless of the nature of his craft, he performed the act of hungering in a genuine manner without cheating, and what more could an audience expect of him? His inability to understand and cope with his trauma has destroyed his self-identity even further, and by the time he succumbs, he “is no longer proud” of his craft. The hunger artist has been destroyed by the original destruction of his systemically emergent certainties.

When they first discover that Gregor has been turned into a giant vermin overnight, Gregor’s family is not sure how to react, but their reactions and attempts to soothe his emotional wounds are clearly connected to his continued demise and eventual destruction. His analysis of his family’s hypothetical reactions to discovering his appearance are evidence that his wellbeing is attached in some way to their behavior:

He truly wanted to open the door, truly show himself and speak to the office manager; he was eager to learn what the others, who were so keen

on his presence now, would say upon seeing him. If they were shocked, then Gregor could bear no further responsibility and could hold his peace. But if they accepted everything calmly, then he likewise had no reason to get upset, and could, if he stepped on it, actually be in the station by eight (Kafka 129-130).

His logic in this section may be faulty—after all, no matter how his family reacts, there is no possible way for him to “be in the station by eight”—but it is proof of the fact that his relationships with his family members are important to his recovery. He will make a decision about his future behavior based on their reactions to his transformation. This is typical of PTSD patients, especially those who are Vietnam war veterans; just as a “lack of support at home made recovery from trauma more difficult,” support from family and community members could make a difference in their recovery (Hayman, Sommers-Flanagan, and Parsons 363). If they are calm, then he will be calm; if they react negatively, so will he.

When at first, it seems as if his family will be supportive, Gregor imagines a happier future:

But nevertheless, the others now believed there was something not quite right about him, and they were willing to help. His spirits were brightened by the aplomb and assurance with which their first few instructions had been carried out. He felt included once again in human society and, without really drawing a sharp distinction between the doctor and the locksmith, he expected magnificent and astonishing feats from both (Kafka 131).

It is his inclusion “once again in human society” that lifts his mood, and Gregor is comforted by the fact that even though his voice has become unrecognizable and there is something obviously wrong with him, it appears at this moment that his family has not given up on him. Much to Gregor’s surprise and dismay, his family does not take the sight of his transformation very well:

The mother, who, despite the office manager's presence, stood there with her hair still undone and bristling, first gaped at the father, clasping her hands, then took two steps toward Gregor and collapsed, her petticoats flouncing out all around her and her face sinking quite undetectably into her breasts. The father clenched his fist, glaring at Gregor as if trying to shove him back into his room, then peered unsteadily around the parlor before covering his eyes with his hands and weeping so hard that his powerful chest began to quake (132-133).

These are not the reactions Gregor was anticipating. His office manager leaves the apartment as quickly as he can, his mother is left speechless, and his father seems to be angry; none of these reactions are helpful for Gregor when it comes to making the right decision about how to handle his trauma. Upon realizing that his family is not going to be of much help to him, Gregor, "quite aware of being the only one who had kept calm," tries to resolve the situation by reasoning with the office manager (134). This, like his earlier denial of the situation, shows that he has no idea how to handle his traumatic state of affairs and will be unable to find a solution because of his earlier isolation. Gregor's struggle at this point is twofold: he is not capable of understanding his trauma or self-soothing, and his family has no idea how to help him, either.

Gregor's father's reaction is the most obviously unhelpful reaction of the entire family. His outright rejection of Gregor is the opposite of the therapeutic community Gregor needs:

Stamping his feet, he brandished the cane and the newspaper at Gregor in order to drive him back into his room. No pleading from Gregor helped, indeed no pleading was understood; no matter how humbly Gregor turned his head, the father merely stamped his feet all the more forcefully (Kafka 137).

Gregor pleads with his father, trying to help him to understand his situation, and his father is unable or unwilling to give Gregor the recognition that he requires. His father has stopped seeing him as "Gregor" and instead sees him as a vermin. Later, when he

“[leaps] to the conclusion that Gregor had perpetrated some kind of violence” against his mother, causing her to faint, he demonstrates that he is willing to destroy Gregor completely in order to “protect” his family (161). The apples he throws at Gregor that become lodged in Gregor’s back are a visual representation of his father’s ultimate rejection of him and of his inability to help his son cope with his trauma.

On the other hand, Gregor’s mother seems unwilling to let go of her son and does anything that she thinks will help him. In the end, though, her incessant caring is unable to provide an end to his suffering because it does not provide him with a true outlet for the expression of his trauma. His mother thinks of the vermin-Gregor and the human-Gregor as creatures with the same needs, but vermin-Gregor cannot be satisfied in the same way that human-Gregor once was. When Gregor’s sister Grete suggests that the two women clear out the furniture from Gregor’s room so that he has more room to roam about, Gregor’s mother expresses her distaste for the idea that they should abandon the possibility of Gregor’s eventual reverse transformation:

“...and if we remove the furniture, isn’t that like showing him that we’ve given up all hope of his improvement and that we’re callously leaving him to his own devices? I believe it would be best if we tried to keep the room just as it was, so that when Gregor comes back to us he will find that nothing’s been changed and it will be much easier for him to forget what happened” (Kafka 156).

This belief would be a benign one for the mother to have if not for the fact that Gregor overhears and suddenly changes his mind about the presence of furniture in his room. He decides that transforming the room would give him a way of “forgetting his human past swiftly and totally” and that “if the furniture interfered with his senselessly crawling about, then it was a great asset and no loss” (157). By refusing to admit to the possibility that Gregor is never going to be human again, Gregor’s mother has interrupted any

progress Gregor has made toward accepting his new vermin self. If he is ever going to move on, he needs to be able to exist within the framework of his new limitations, and his mother makes this impossible by allowing him to cling irrationally to the idea that he is someday going to recover from his physical transformation just as suddenly as it occurred.

Gregor's relationship with his sister is interesting in that she seems to be the character who is the most willing to live with Gregor's new form and to help him adjust, but even she does not understand what Gregor needs and ultimately grows frustrated with his failure to adapt and work through his trauma. At first, she tries to take care of him in the only way that she knows how—feeding him with the foods he normally enjoyed. This is part of the process that Nina Pelikan Straus would describe as Grete's own metamorphosis—"it is she who will ironically 'bloom' as her brother deteriorates" (Straus 653). Grete comes into her own identity by trying to take care of her brother, but she is ultimately unsuccessful. When she brings him milk, he recognizes that "it had always been his favorite beverage, which was no doubt why his sister had placed it in his room" (Kafka 142). Unfortunately, Gregor no longer cares for the foods he once enjoyed, so his sister's first attempt at providing for his needs does not help him. Her second attempt is to bring him food more suited for his new vermin form, including "old, half-rotten vegetables, some bones left over from raisins and almonds, some cheese that Gregor had declared inedible two days ago, dry bread, bread and butter, and salted bread and butter" (145). This method of caring for Gregor seems sufficient for a short while, but eventually Gregor begins to eat less and less, leaving the sister to remark "more and more... 'Now once again nothing's been touched'" (147). The problem with Grete caring



for Gregor in this way is that she is only looking after his physical needs—she never makes him feel comfortable about his condition, and he actually never feels like he can eat around her. Any time she comes to pick up his scraps, Gregor feels as if he must hide and “[scuttlers] back under the settee” (146). Grete ignores Gregor’s emotional need for human contact in favor of taking care of his physical needs, and this only makes it more difficult for him to recover from his trauma.

Especially in his work with the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies, Dr. Dori Laub has come to believe that an important part in the working-through of any trauma is the act of telling the story of trauma to others. According to Laub, Holocaust “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story” (63). Freedom to speak about trauma is a crucial element of the healing process, and it is a freedom that neither the hunger artist nor Gregor have at any time. According to Laub, the act of telling a traumatic to story to another human being helps the sufferer of trauma come to some sort of understanding about what has happened to him, and when this does not occur, “the ‘not telling’ of a story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny” (64). Both the hunger artist and Gregor express this need—even if it is unconscious—to tell their stories, and the nature of their traumas prevents them from being able “to tell and to be heard” (63).

After experiencing the destruction of his systematically emergent certainty that he is an artist and practices a talent his audience finds valuable, the hunger artist desperately wishes for real human contact that he does not get. Without this contact, the hunger artist has no outlet for expressing his frustration that he has lost his audience’s respect. The

hunger artist acknowledges that while he “grew terrified” of the audience’s visits as they passed him on their way to see the animals, eventually, he “longed for them as the purpose of his life” and “ecstatically looked forward to the flood of spectators” (Kafka 312). The hunger artist is so desperate for visitors—even visitors who do not want to see him—because without them, he has no way to work through his trauma by telling his story to others. The hunger artist is bothered by the noises and nuisances that come with being located so close to the animal cages, but he does not complain to the managers because he is afraid they will move him, and “after all, it was the animals who drew the swarm of visitors, one of whom might now and then be intrigued by the hunger artist” (313). The hunger artist is so desperate for human contact that he is willing to suffer further possible rejection just on the chance that one of the animal visitors will stop by his cage eventually and give him an outlet for expressing his trauma. When he finally does speak with his supervisor, he “[whispers] right into the supervisor’s ear so that nothing would be lost” (315). His prioritization of the fact “that nothing would be lost” shows how important it is to the hunger artist that his supervisor hear and understand what he has to say. Unfortunately for the hunger artist, this chance to speak with another human being comes too late, and by this point, he is unable to recover. Nevertheless, his many attempts to interact with the human world show that the hunger artist desperately needed human contact after the destruction of his systemically emergent certainties, and he never has the opportunity to serve as a witness to his trauma.

Gregor also suffers from the predicament of not being able to serve as a witness to his trauma, and one reason for that is obvious: as a vermin, he is physically unable to speak with his family or anybody else around him in a way that he normally would have

been able to before his transformation. When he is trying to communicate with his family through a closed door on the morning of his transformation, he takes care “to eliminate anything abnormal from his voice,” causing him to be unable to answer in anything but “yes” or “no” responses when the office manager comes to visit (Kafka 121, 128). His first attempt at real communication is unsuccessful because neither the office manager nor his family can “understand a single word” of what the office manager calls “an animal’s voice” (130). This happens shortly after Gregor experiences his trauma, and his attempts at communicating with the people around him show that he is desperate for that ability to communicate and therefore attempt to understand his trauma through witnessing. Just as the nature of the hunger artist’s trauma prevents him from interacting with other people, so does Gregor’s trauma prevent him from basic speech that would allow him to tell his story.

Laub also speaks about an “impossibility of telling” that interferes with the process of a trauma victim sharing his or her story with an audience. In the case of the Holocaust, the impossibility of telling is twofold: “the Nazis [tried] to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime,” and “the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing” (65). The first part of his statement is not applicable here—there is no evidence of higher authorities trying to “exterminate” the hunger artist or Gregor for the purpose of preventing their testimony—but the second portion of his argument is certainly relevant to the fates of both the hunger artist and Gregor. Laub argues that the Nazis stressed to their victims that they were not entirely human and that “their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves” or others (66-67). According to Laub, the experience of the Holocaust was

such a dehumanizing one that its victims could not understand their experiences themselves, let alone try to relate them to “outside witnesses” (66).

The hunger artist and Gregor suffer from the same problem. The issues they face are so unnatural and so dehumanizing that even if they were given the opportunity to speak to others about their traumas, they would have a hard time explaining their experiences and feelings. As the hunger artist wastes away in his cage and becomes more and more isolated from the spectators, he says, “Try explaining the art of hungering to someone! If a person doesn’t feel it, then you can’t make him understand” (Kafka 314). The hunger artist *does* feel his experience, and he recognizes that it would be impossible for anybody else to understand his experience if that person cannot feel it for himself. The hunger artist has external witnesses to the physicality of his trauma—his starvation—but his real torment exists inside, in the fact that he is the only one who can understand “the art of hungering,” and for that, he is the only witness. Even if the hunger artist were to be given the opportunity to attempt to explain his trauma to another human being, he still would struggle to work through his trauma in this way because of the incomprehensible nature of his trauma.

Gregor’s experience is also a dehumanizing one that is impossible for him to express to those around him. Aside from the physicality of his humanity, which he loses upon his transformation into a giant vermin, Gregor increasingly experiences a loss of his humanity in non-tangible aspects, as well. When he looks out the window of his bedroom, he realizes all that he has lost and the amount that has changed about himself. He says he feels “some vague memory for the freedom he had once found by gazing out the window” because as time goes on, “even the things that were rather close were

growing hazier and hazier” (Kafka 151). Perhaps his physical state as a vermin is preventing him from seeing as clearly as he did as a human, or perhaps the longer he exists as a vermin, the harder it becomes to understand the human world around him; either way, it is clear that Gregor is experiencing something outside the realm of the normal human experience. When his mother and sister try to clean his room for him, he watches them “[clear] out his room, stripping him of everything he loved,” including his wardrobe and his desk, and he clings desperately to what is left of his humanity by protecting the picture of a strange woman dressed in furs that has been displayed in his room since before the beginning of his story (159). Earlier in the story, this picture was a sign of how far removed Gregor was from society—it is a picture of someone he does not know, and he cherishes it like someone would a picture of a loved one—so the fact that it is the one object he seeks to protect is significant.

Gregor is prevented from witnessing to his trauma both because he physically cannot speak and because his family does not give him the opportunity to interact with him. In fact, by the end of the story, almost everybody has given up on the idea that the vermin-Gregor is actually Gregor at all. Gregor wants nothing but human contact, and he struggles with the fact that his family is so close yet so far removed from him. In the final scene with the boarders, Gregor is drawn out of his room by his sister’s music, “hardly aware of his recent lack of consideration toward the others” and unconcerned with his grotesque physical appearance, because he wants to be involved in the fellowship of the boarders and his family (Kafka 175). As Grete continues to play, Kafka writes,

Gregor crawled a bit farther out, keeping his head close to the floor, so that their eyes might possibly meet. Was he a beast to be so moved by music? He felt as if he were being shown the path to the unknown food he was yearning for. He was determined to creep all the way over to the

sister... She should sit next to him on the settee, leaning down to him and listening to him confide that he had been intent on sending her to the conservatory (176).

The “unknown food” Gregor seeks is the opportunity to interact with other humans and share the story of his trauma. Gregor may not understand consciously that this is what he needs, but unconsciously, he is being pulled to his sister and feels the need to talk to her and to explain his circumstances. He is prevented from doing so both by his physical limitations and by his family’s inability to understand his predicament, which leaves them unable to serve as the emotional outlet that he needs. Grete, who at first tried to understand her brother, is the one who finally convinces her family to give up on Gregor. She says to her father, “You simply have to try and get rid of the idea that it is Gregor. Our real misfortune is that we believed it for such a long time” (180). It is Grete who forces Gregor into physical isolation by locking him in his room, where he is left to die.

Gregor’s family does not realize that he can understand what they are saying, so they feel comfortable talking about his being a nuisance to their family. Grete refers to their situation as “nonstop torture at home” and says that she cannot stand having vermin-Gregor in the apartment anymore (Kafka 180). His father expresses sorrow about the fact that Gregor cannot understand them and therefore “cannot come to some sort of terms with him,” showing that his family is unable to accept Gregor in his vermin state (180). Grete makes it clear to Gregor and to everyone else around them that she thinks the family would be better off if they didn’t have to watch over vermin-Gregor, who she says “wants to take over the whole apartment and make us sleep in the gutter” (180). Gregor overhears all of this and realizes that he will never be able to relate to his family or any other humans as a vermin, and therefore he will never be able to express the story of his

trauma and begin the recovery process. He expresses the fact that “his conviction that he would have to disappear was, if possible, even firmer than his sister’s” (182). With this realization, Gregor finally allows himself to die.

It is clear that the communities of both the hunger artist and Gregor Samsa have failed them (in the sense that they have not helped, and have even impeded, their recoveries from trauma). In the case of PTSD and other post-traumatic experiences, the response or lack thereof of a community is a crucial element of the sufferer’s recovery. The hunger artist and Gregor have experienced “a loss of trust in relationships with others,” and if they are ever going to recover, they need to be incorporated into therapeutic environments that allow them to establish new relationships of trust—if not with their previous communities, at least with new therapeutic communities (Gersons 253). One of the primary roles of a therapist treating veterans with PTSD is to “make it clear that the veteran will be supported and not rejected,” and this is something that is not made clear with the hunger artist and Gregor. Veterans in the study done by Johnson, Feldman, Southwick, and Charney who are not given adequate treatment eventually “succumb to a state of profound demoralization and hopelessness”; likewise, the hunger artist and Gregor “succumb” to their traumas because they are never given the opportunity to work through their traumas in ways that are truly beneficial to their recovery processes (Johnson et al 218). They both waste away to nothing after this failure to “work through” their traumas as a physical symbol of the mental degradation that has occurred in their personal post-traumatic stress disorder processes.

There will never be a definitive answer to the questions that Kafka’s literature pose—as Rubinstein says, “just as Kafka went on writing, so we go on explaining”

(Rubinstein 19). The literary dimension of trauma studies provides just one of these explanations as to why the hunger artist and Gregor struggle so much to overcome their circumstances. The effect that rejection by their communities has on the hunger artist and Gregor shows just how important a therapeutic community response can be to someone who is suffering from trauma.



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