

Rupture and Repair: A View From New York City in Honor of Jeremy Safran

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This note is being written in memory of Jeremy Safran, shortly after the 2nd anniversary of his tragic and violent death. Jeremy was a tireless psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist and public intellectual, perhaps best known for his therapy process research on how patterns of ‘rupture and repair’ typify the interactions and experiences of therapists and their patients. The word ‘rupture’ captures our painful present moment, and one that would have resonated deeply in Jeremy. The global Covid 19 crisis, and the universally witnessed lynching of George Floyd, have revealed a deep and severe rupture rippling through society, pushing health services to breaking points, deepening health disparities, bringing illness and death arising from a virus on a scale not seen for over 100 years. Perhaps it was the fact that the virus has disproportionately and adversely impacted African-American and Hispanic-American communities, coupled with Black Lives Matter protests that have erupted across the globe, a seismic rupture is rippling through American life, and nations around the globe. In its wake, change is coming, with important moments of repair and resolution, but further ruptures, Jeremy would caution, are inevitable. This is a lesson Jeremy’s students learned well, i.e. that mis-steps and errors in communication are part of the ebb and flow of human experience. The crucial next step is to seek clarification, and achieve a resolution to conflict if possible. Restrictions on police in terms of outlawing chokeholds and redirecting funding away from police to social work, and other mental health services, are causes Jeremy would have embraced. He would have seen the task of reimagining safety, and advancing mental health, as essential to the achieving a reduction in health disparities and the banishment of systemic racism from American life, after a 401 year history of white supremacy.

One outcome of the present moment is sure to be an increased need for mental health services. Across New York City, at all the major teaching hospitals there are mental health services, and within them are specialized services for first responders, family members of victims, and the few survivors of 9/11. Come September it will be 19 years since that fateful day when nearly 3,000 people were murdered in New York City. A number in excess of 17,000 is the current count of deaths arising from the Covid 19 crisis in New York City. The virus is currently the leading cause of death in the United States, with no clear end in sight.

The burden of coping with this monumental rupture is being carried by first responders, health care workers, other ‘essential workers’, and grieving family members. Current levels of traumatic stress are almost unthinkable. And, while many of these citizens most severely influenced by the trail of illness and death caused by the virus will show resilience in the aftermath of this pandemic, there will be many others who will need mental health consultation, therapy, and counseling on account of understandable addictions to alcohol or drugs – on the rise since ‘shelter in place’ mandates came into effect some eight weeks ago.

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This enormous need for mental health services is likely to be profound, require enormous amounts of government resources, and a dedicated trauma-informed professional staff.

At the New School For Social Research, there is a MA program in Mental Health and Substance Abuse Counseling, and a PhD program in Clinical Psychology, nurtured for years by Jeremy Safran, now in the hands of a diverse and robust faculty group providing courses that include Gender Studies, Global Mental Health, & Culture, and Ethnicity and Mental Health. Our academic programs that train mental health workers have been popular for years. Now they are essential.

Our graduates will be called on to help meet New York City's expansive mental health needs over the coming decades. Ruptures can be repaired, but only with substantial effort, reflection, planning, preparation and resources.

It is a pleasure to see this special issue in honor of Jeremy Safran, produced by our in-house peer-reviewed scientific psychology journal that was initiated by New School graduate students, and is edited and managed entirely by graduate students. Jeremy was around when this journal was launched, and he was ever supportive of this venture. In his memory, we should be mindful of ruptures and seek repairs with compassion and wisdom.