

The Wisdom of Tommy:

Classic Rock Opera Introduces Trauma and Reenactment Into Pop Culture

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In his introduction to the CD release of the classic rock opera Tommy, author and The Who biographer Richard Barnes states that "the story line was influenced by [Who songwriter/guitarist Peter] Townshend's rejection of psychedelic drugs and simultaneous discovery of mysticism...[he] was working on a metaphorical story device that put across the idea of different states of consciousness. The premise was that we had our five senses but were blind to Reality and the Infinite."

We, however, are also struck with the congruence between Tommy's story line and the processes of traumatic dissociation, reenactment, and a somewhat misguided healing.

We will assume most readers are at least somewhat familiar with Tommy. Our interpretation of the story follows (quotes are from the lyrics included with the album and CD):

Sometime toward the end of World War I, Tommy's father (Captain Walker) becomes missing in action. Mrs. Walker subsequently gives birth to Tommy, and takes a lover. Almost three years after the end of the war, Captain Walker surprises his wife and her lover by reappearing. The Walkers dispatch of the lover, presumably by murdering him in full view of their young son.

Mother: What about the boy? What about the boy?

What about the boy? He saw it all!

Tommy, horrified by this experience, has his reality denied (the denial of trauma is a common theme in dissociative patients, and seems to increase the psychological impact of the traumatic event):

Mother & Father: You didn't hear it. You didn't see it.

You won't say nothing to no one ever in your life...

Tommy responds to this trauma and his parents' subsequent injunction by, according to Barnes, becoming autistic. Autism, as far as we know, does not develop or progress in this manner. Diagnostically, Tommy meets the criteria for two conditions with frequent comorbidity: Conversion Disorder (e.g., "hysterical" blindness, deafness, and mutism) and Dissociative Disorder.

In the following songs, we find that Tommy is not disturbed by his sensory isolation:

Deaf, dumb and blind boy, he's in a quiet vibration land.

Strange as it seems, his musical dreams ain't quite so bad.

This lack of concern (la belle indifference) is a common feature of conversion disorders. His parent's, however, are highly concerned, and they will soon orchestrate a series of experiences in an attempt to cure their son. As is typical with the parents of abused children, however, the Walkers--while consciously intending to protect and help their son--in fact fail to protect him and the boy becomes repeatedly retraumatized. First, we learn that Tommy is often left alone with his cousin Kevin, who tortures the boy. Later, he is left in the care of his uncle Ernie--in spite of the uncle's known proclivities.

Mother: Do you think it's all right to leave the boy with
Uncle Ernie?

Do you think it's all right? He's had a few too many...

Father: Yes, I think it's all right.

Uncle Ernie's abuse is well-described in the classic Who song, "Fiddle About."

Uncle Ernie: I'm your wicked Uncle Ernie,

I'm glad you won't see or hear me

as I fiddle about...

Your mother left me here to mind you,

now I'm doing what I want to: fiddling about!

Down with your bedclothes, up with your nightshirt!

Fiddle about!

You won't shout as I fiddle about,

Fiddle about!

There are two songs that are devoted to describing failed attempts at "curing" Tommy. In "Eyesight to the Blind," a hawker (pimp) tells Tommy (or Tommy's parents--the audience is unclear) that they should see his woman:

Hawker: You talk about your woman, I wish you could see mine...

Every time she starts to lovin'

she brings eyesight to the blind...

Every time we start shakin' the dumb begin to talk...

Just a word from her lips and the deaf begin to hear.

Another classic Tommy song, The Acid Queen, describes the ill fated attempt to cure Tommy's disorder with LSD (and sex):

Gypsy: If your child ain't all he should be now

This girl will put him right.

I'll show him what he could be now,

Just give me one night.

I'm the Gypsy - the Acid Queen,

Pay before we start.

I'm the Gypsy - the Acid Queen,

I'll tear your soul apart.

Give us a room and close the door.

Leave us for a while.

Your boy won't be a boy no more

Young, but not a child.

Gather your wits and hold on fast.

Your mind must learn to roam...

How similar to the confabulated paths of many trauma survivors, at once reenacting their trauma while seeking healing. As we know, this path often involves intense sexual experiences and substance abuse.

Captain Walker hears about a special doctor, a "doctor I've heard could cure the boy!" Following good medical practice, the doctor first determines that Tommy's condition is not physiological:

Doctor: He seems to be completely unreceptive.

The tests I gave him show no sense at all.

His eyes react to light, the dials detect it.

He hears but can not answer to your call.

The hope for a cure, the doctor realizes "lies with him and none with me." The doctor then introduces Tommy to a mirror (a metaphor for psychotherapy?). Tommy becomes enthralled by his own image, much as trauma patients must initially become highly self-preoccupied. Much like the family members of many trauma patients, Mrs. Walker becomes impatient with this process, and she is narcissistically wounded by what she perceives as her son's self-indulgence:

Mother: You don't answer my call with even a nod or a twitch

but you gaze at your own reflection!

You don't seem to see me but I think you can see yourself.

How can the mirror affect you?

Can you hear me? Or do I surmise

that you fear me. Can you feel my temper rise?

Do you hear or fear or do I smash the mirror...

Mrs. Walker smashes the mirror, probably prematurely and in a way that seems to liberate Tommy but in fact subtly retraumatizes him. We make this interpretation based on Tommy's later behavior. Although smashing the mirror does have the desired effect ("Extra! Extra! Read all about it, pinball wizard in a miracle cure!"), Tommy emerges from his trance a narcissistic cult leader. We are impressed with this twist in the story, having known several trauma survivors who have (in our opinion) become "Recovery Gurus" who demand rigid adherence to "treatment modalities" that are dogmatic at best

and traumatic at worst. Tommy hits the lecture/workshop circuit as the "new messiah" promising freedom to those who will follow him:

Tommy: I'm free! I'm free! And freedom tastes of reality.

I'm free! I'm free! And I'm waiting for you to follow me.

Tommy opens up "Tommy's Holiday Camp" (which sounds strikingly similar to some "recovery centers" or "retreats"). Ironically (but not for those who have worked with trauma survivors who are not fully integrated!), Tommy hires one of his old perpetrators--Uncle Ernie--to help run the camp.

In the final song, "We're Not Gonna Take It," we find Tommy insisting that his path to recovery is the ONLY path:

Tommy: Welcome to the camp, I guess you all know why you're here.

My name is Tommy, and I became aware this year.

If you want to follow me, you've got to play pinball.

And put in your ear plugs, put on your eye shades.

You know where to put the cork!

Hubris (arrogance) is the cause of the hero's fall in Greek tragedies. Tommy suffers from hubris; he believes he is now "whole" (he is not) and that his recovery is a model for everyone (it is not). In fact, Tommy appears to be on the road to coercing--and thereby traumatizing--those he consciously seeks to serve:

Tommy: Hey, you gettin' drunk, so sorry, I got you sussed.

Hey, you smokin' mother nature, this is a bust.

Hey, hung up mister normal, don't try to gain my trust.

'Cause you ain't gonna follow me any of those ways,

although you think you must!

The campers begin to rebel, chanting "We're not gonna take it!" Tommy insists they follow, and coerces them into experiencing the sensory deprivation he himself experienced while dissociating:

Tommy: Now you can't hear me, your ears are truly sealed.

You can't speak either, your mouth is filled.

You can't see nothing, and pinball completes the scene.

Here comes Uncle Ernie to guide you to your very own machine.

The rebellion grows, as the campers' protest grows louder and more threatening:

Chorus: We're not gonna take you!

We forsake you! Gonna rape you!

Let's forget you...better still.

We can speculate here that Tommy, now the target of his enraged followers, does in fact get raped. The album closes with Tommy crying out "See me, feel me, touch me, heal me!" just as he did while initially dissociated. Thus, the circle is closed. Tommy's reenactment--in part, facilitated by an imperfect and subverted therapy--is now completed.
