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### Evil, Trauma, Post Traumatic Stress: Martha Marcy May Marlene

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Betty Kershner, PhD. is a Registered Psychologist specializing in both adults and children, from infancy onward, and recently moved her office to West Toronto. She has worked with and consulted in a wide range of settings and is familiar with many types of concerns and solutions. She is able to offer assessments and treatment. Please Contact her here.

This year, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* explores the concept of evil. As a culture, we tend to delegate evil to deviants and despots, people who are comfortably different from you and me. For those of us in this psychoanalytic extension program, being

involved with or interested in psychoanalysis, we tend to think of behavior, including evil behavior, as emanating from the inner life, with evil deeds coming from people who are inherently if sometimes understandably flawed. What if the line between extreme evil and good is more permeable? What if, under certain kinds of circumstances, many if not most people could be induced to perform atrocities? What if evil can be called forth by the situation, by specific sets of circumstances that few could resist?

## Child Soldier Ishmael Beah

In 1991, civil war started in Sierra Leone. Ishmael Beah was a child about age 12. He describes a loving family in a caring community. Rebels invaded Beah's hometown, and he was forced to flee. Separated from his family, he spent months wandering with a group of other boys. At the age of 13, he was captured and forced to become a child soldier. According to Beah's account in his 2007 book *A long way gone: memoirs of a boy soldier*, he fought in the army, and killed savagely for the army, for almost three years before being rescued by UNICEF. In 1997, Beah fled Freetown by the help of the UNICEF due to the increasing violence and found his way to New York City, where he lived with Laura Simms, his foster mother. After high school, he enrolled at Oberlin College and graduated in 2004 with a degree in Political Science.

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During his time in the Sierra Leonean government army, Beah says he doesn't remember how many people he killed. He and other soldiers smoked marijuana and sniffed amphetamines and "brown-brown", a mix of cocaine and gunpowder. He blames the addictions and the brainwashing for his violence and cites them and the

pressures of the army as reasons for his inability to escape. In his book, Beah describes cutting the throats of his victims including in a contest he was proud to win, to see which young soldier could kill the fastest; burning villages with people trapped alive in their huts, and shooting without mercy those who tried to escape. He says that, at the time, he believed he was retaliating for a similar fate endured by his own family.

Later, Beah said that he found returning to civilized society was more difficult than the act of becoming a child soldier, saying that dehumanizing children is a relatively easy task. Rescued in 1996 by a coalition of UNICEF and NGOs, he found the transition difficult. He and other rescued children from different sides tried to kill each other. He credits one volunteer, Nurse Esther, with having the patience and compassion required to bring him through this difficult period. Slowly, he accepted her assurances that “it’s not your fault.” Living in Freetown with an uncle, he went to school and was invited to speak in 1996 at the UN in New York. When Freetown was overrun by the joined forces of the rebels and army in 1997, he contacted Laura Simms, whom he had met the year before in New York, and made his way to the United States.

“If I choose to feel guilty for what I have done, I will want to be dead myself,” Beah said. “I live knowing that I have been given a second life, and I just try to have fun, and be happy and live it the best I can.”

Arguably, few would be able to resist the circumstances that led Beah to become a mass killer – which for him was a temporary status. I would argue that his unique personality characteristics are what allowed him to return to some semblance of normal life, albeit not altogether, after he was freed from those circumstances. He was “good”, then he was “evil”, and then he, with difficulty, became “good” again. In my view, no-one, no matter his character, no matter how

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good a person he might have been, would have been able to resist those circumstances and refrain from evil, and survive.

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## Martha Marcy May Marlene

In Martha Marcy May Marlene, there is a combination of situational and personality features that combine to make the protagonist complicit in evil. In a minute, I will talk about those features of her environment that caught her up inexorably into compliance with murder – and her extreme disorientation due to those features in the situation that molded and caught her, and due to the events that overwhelmed her. But first, I will talk about her pre-existing personality.



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### Martha Marcy May Marlene Theatrical Release Poster \*

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We are told little about Martha's past, but what we are told is foundational. When she enters the farm compound, Patrick, the cult leader, immediately tells her that he knows she has never been taken proper care of: she accepts this description of her history. He tells her that he knows she has issues with abandonment, especially because of her father. We

learn that Martha's mother died when she was still a dependent and that her Aunt Dora, whom Martha believes hated her, came to live with and take care of her. Her older sister Lucy was away in college and away from family that seems to have been pernicious. Martha seems maybe 10 years younger than Lucy, so she might

have been around age 10 at the time that Lucy went away to school and Martha was left with Dora. Martha can't really return Lucy's hug when she sees her after an absence of two years, although she smiles at being hugged. She tells Lucy, "Just because we are sisters doesn't mean that we have to talk..." Martha arrives at the compound a virgin, so relationships and perhaps even encounters do not come easy for her – she does not engage lightly. All of this suggests a difficult childhood, insecure or disorganized attachment, and vulnerability to befuddled thinking and feelings of helplessness.

Then, Martha is confronted with the circumstances at the farm. Of course, unlike our child soldier Ishmael Beah, Martha went to the farm voluntarily. One could argue that only a limited range of personality types would choose to go to such a place.

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## How Good People Turn Evil

Philip Zimbardo's 2007 book [The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil](#), was written partly out of his research in preparation for his expert witness testimony for one of the MP guards from the Abu Ghraib abuses and tortures – about the situational and systemic forces that had contributed to the abuse that the guard had perpetrated. His research concluded that the military and civilian chain of command had built a "bad barrel" in which a bunch of good soldiers became transformed into "bad apples".

A large body of evidence in social psychology supports the concept that situational power triumphs over individual power in given contexts – the pervasive yet subtle powers that inhere in the political, economic,

pervasive yet subtle powers that inhere in the political, economic, religious, historic, and cultural

religious, historic, and cultural matrix that defines situations can dominate an individual's will to resist. Individuals come to conform, comply, obey and be readily seduced into doing things they could not imagine doing when they were outside of those situational forces. According to this research, it can transform ordinary people into indifferent or even wanton perpetrators of evil.

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We here in Canada, especially in psychoanalytic circles, usually go on the assumption that inner determinants guide us. Such biases are more common in societies that foster individual, independent orientations, such as European and American cultures, and less so in collectivist-oriented societies, such as Asia, Africa and the Middle East. We know ourselves based on how we behave in familiar situations, but what happens when the ground rules change? Most of us overestimate the importance of dispositional qualities – innate character – and underestimate situational power.

The Stanford Prison Experiment was Zimbardo's study of the psychological effects of becoming a prisoner or prison guard – their character transformation when they are faced with powerful situational forces, leading ordinary people to do bad or evil things. The experiment was conducted at Stanford University in 1971. Twenty-four male students were randomly assigned roles of prisoners or guards in a mock prison situated in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. Of interest, in this era of huge student protests against the Vietnamese War, none of the subjects wanted the role of guard. They all wanted to be assigned the role of prisoner, many stating their anticipation that they themselves would be incarcerated at some time in the future, for demonstrating or some other minor infraction against "The Man", and that this experiment would help them know what to expect.

The Stanford Prison Experiment was Zimbardo's study of the psychological effects of becoming a prisoner or prison guard

Zimbardo and his team selected the 24 males whom they deemed to be the most psychologically stable and healthy. These participants were predominantly white and middle-class. The group was intentionally selected to exclude those with criminal background, psychological impairments or medical problems.

The participants adapted to their roles well beyond Zimbardo's expectations, as the guards enforced authoritarian measures and ultimately subjected some of the prisoners to psychological torture. Many of the prisoners passively accepted psychological abuse and, at the request of the guards, readily harassed other prisoners who attempted to prevent it. The experiment even affected Zimbardo himself, who, in his role as the prison superintendent, permitted the abuse to continue and felt at the time that, while he did not agree with the guards' behaviour, it was within an acceptable range. He discusses how he became absorbed in the experiment and temporarily lost his own moral footing. Many healthy, normal young men began to behave pathologically in a very short time.

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By the second day, after just 24 hours, guards became more than annoyed with the prisoners, who were refusing to follow orders, and began to over-react and abuse their authority, menacing and harassing the prisoners who just one day earlier had been their peers and equals. They shortly attacked the prisoners with fire extinguishers. After only 36 hours, one prisoner began to act "crazy" in reaction to the guards' treatment of him. Zimbardo became convinced that his suffering was real and that they had to release him.

Several guards became increasingly cruel as the experiment continued; experimenters reported that approximately one-third of the guards exhibited genuine sadistic tendencies. The other guards, some of them with open

disapproval, nevertheless acquiesced silently to the abusive treatment.

Zimbardo aborted the experiment early when a graduate student whom Zimbardo later married objected to the conditions of the prison after she was introduced to the experiment to conduct interviews. Zimbardo noted that, of more than fifty people who had observed the experiment, she was the only one who questioned its morality. Despite a planned two weeks' duration, the entire experiment was abruptly stopped after only six days, when they had to admit to themselves that they were abusing the prisoners.

Zimbardo's results are compatible with those of the Milgram experiment

The study concluded that personal identity subjected to arbitrary control as well as deprivation of privacy resulted in passivity, dependence and depression resembling learned helplessness, and that most of us can undergo significant character transformations when we are caught up in the crucible of social forces.

Under this interpretation, Zimbardo's results are compatible with those of the Milgram experiment, in which ordinary people fulfilled orders to administer what appeared to be agonizing and dangerous electric shocks to a confederate of the experimenter.

While some critics argued that participants in the Stanford Prison Experiment were merely engaging in role-playing, basing their behaviour on how they believed that they were expected to behave or modelling it after stereotypes about the behaviour of prisoners and guards, Zimbardo responded that even if there was role-playing initially, participants internalized these roles as the experiment continued. There have, as well, been other critiques that dispute Zimbardo's conclusions about the generalizability of his results.

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When Martha arrives at the commune, she is stripped of her personal identity in no time at all. Her name is taken away and she is renamed Marcy May. Later, we see that anyone who answers the phone has a list of instructions on the wall about how they are supposed to handle the call and what they should say, including to say if asked that their name is Marlene: all females are the same in the farm. She is told repeatedly, in different ways, that her prior people mistreated her and

these are her real family. She is told that the past does not matter, and to forget it. The first words we hear from the farm instruct her in unquestioning obedience: “Just do it”, Zoe tells her, to put out her cigarette. When she asks why, she is not answered and is left to figure it out for herself. She must come up with her own justification for group rules that she accepts being imposed on her.

There is no privacy and no sense of individual rights, even over her own body. Clothing and beds are communal. Men eat first and women wait. Marcy May is told not to be selfish, to share herself and open up to them. This includes giving her body to any man who wants it. She is not allowed to reject an unwanted kiss at the restaurant. She is not allowed her own interpretation of reality. After she has been drugged by her assigned facilitator and raped by Patrick in initiation, as every women there has gone through, we hear her conversation with another of the young women. “I know you think that something bad just happened”, Marcy May is told, “but it was something wonderful...you are so lucky”. She is told that they all went through it and none of them would stay if they thought it was something bad. She is told that there is consensus about the meaning. The other girl comforts and teases Marcy May, like little children under the bed covers, and **Marcy May in effect agrees to give up her own independent perception and judgment in exchange for that intimacy and acceptance into the group.** Later, we see her engage in group sex while Patrick watches.

Of note, like with the Manson family that killed Sharon Tate in 1969, this family consists of a king bee and very many nubile young women. The other men either are useful to the king, bringing more women to him, or are seen by him as parasites, there only because of the sex. There are many parallels between this farm commune and the real Manson family.

## The Workings of Mind Control & Indoctrination

We will turn to an exploration of the workings of mind control and indoctrination in that personal transformation.

In Cults in our Midst, Lalich & Lifton (1995) describe some of the conditions that they claim would create an atmosphere in which thought reform is possible. They state that these conditions involve no need for physical coercion or violence.

1. **Control the person's social and/or physical environment;** especially control the person's time. Through various methods, newer members are kept busy and led to think about the group and its content during as much of their waking time as possible.
2. **Systematically create a sense of powerlessness in the person.** This is accomplished by getting members away from their normal social support group for a period of time and into an environment where the majority of people are already group members. Once the target is stripped of their usual support network, their confidence in their own perception erodes. As the target's sense of powerlessness increases, their good judgment and understanding of the world are diminished. Their ordinary view of reality is destabilized. As the group attacks the target's previous worldview, it causes the target distress and inner confusion; yet they are not allowed to speak about this confusion or object to it – leadership suppresses questions and counters resistance. This process is sped up if the targeted individual or individuals are kept tired – the cult will take deliberate actions to keep the target constantly

busy. The target's old beliefs and patterns of behavior are defined as irrelevant or evil.

3. The group manipulates a system of rewards, punishments, and experiences in order to promote learning the group's ideology or belief system and group-approved behaviors. **Esteem and affection from peers is very important to new recruits.** Approval comes from having the new member's behaviors and thought patterns conform to the other members. Members' relationship with peers is threatened whenever they fail to learn or display new behaviors. Over time, the easy solution to the insecurity generated by the difficulties of learning the new system is to inhibit any display of doubts—new recruits simply acquiesce, affirm and act as if they do understand and accept the new ideology.
4. **Put forward a closed system of logic and an authoritarian structure that permits no feedback from outside** the group and refuses to be modified except by leadership approval or executive order.

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## Trauma

I cannot conclude without some consideration of trauma – in this case, the trauma resulting from abuse inflicted on Marcy May, and the trauma from her own involvement, witnessing, and participation in evil.

Marcy May was traumatized by, among other experiences at the farm, Patrick's rape of her. Yet she goes along and becomes the assigned facilitator for a new girl who arrives after her, helping to put that new girl through the same abusive process. Marcy May is the one to prepare her drugged drink, to feed the girl the same lie that she was given, that the odd taste is only because it is an herbal cleanse meant to wash away the toxins from her past, and that something wonderful is about to happen to her. Even when the girl tells Marcy May that she is

not feeling well, Marcy May ushers her into Patrick and continues her on her way. She does nothing to rescue the girl and is an active participant in inflicting the same abuse that was inflicted on her. Sitting outside Patrick's door, listening, her own abuse experience floods Marcy May. When she remembers this in the bedroom of her sister's summer home, relives it, she wets herself, losing bladder control: a bodily response to intense fear. Her fear is present with her in the moment, in her sister's house.

Trauma has shattered all of her basic assumptions. She has learned to distrust her own perception and judgment

Others may again be calling her "Martha", but she has no idea who she is, where she is, when it is, or what is going on. She is disoriented to time, place and person. Trauma has shattered all of her basic assumptions. She has learned to distrust her own perception and judgment. She can't tell if something is a memory or something she dreamed. She is unmoored from the

here and now, from reality. Martha/Marcy May is unhinged in an intense case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

And then there is the murder. We have seen her taken through steps of mental preparation. Marcy May was told to shoot the cat. She did not know if she should believe Patrick when he said that it had cancer. Then, she was told to shoot Max. Max took it seriously enough, was frightened enough, appropriately, to find a way to get himself out of harm's way. We, and Marcy May, are left with the question whether or not Patrick would have shot him or had him shot. It seems that he might have. The stakes are high, the confusion intense. Max's very existence was said not to matter, to be immaterial. Was he there, or not really? Marcy May did not know what to do, what to think, and did nothing. In those kinds of circumstances, even thinking stops.

**Trauma is that which cannot be assimilated into symbolic thought, cannot be mentalized.** It can be communicated only through projective identification. It breaks all assumptions.

She has to speak with someone who will share and confirm that worldview

Breaking into neighbouring houses with the select few from the group, a sign of favour that she was included, Marcy May goes along. We see her, along with the others, throw rocks at the windows to distract the owners. We see her rob. She has accepted that what she is doing is all right, because she is part of

something bigger, better, than this bourgeois house and the lifestyle it represents. Later, in a rare burst of coherence and clarity, if not within a realistic worldview, Martha straight-out takes a superior attitude toward her brother-in-law Ted, who is providing her with food and shelter, knowing herself to be a teacher and a leader, patronizing him and telling him that she is more advanced than he is, that he is mistaken in what he thinks is important in life, and that it is not his fault. When he reacts with predictable outrage, when his conviction of his own rightness conflicts with the worldview that she was taught by Patrick, our girl is shaken. Most of the very little that she had to hang on to, was the world view that she was taught in the farm, for which she gave up everything that she knew and believed before, and which went unchallenged by their isolation and confinement with only those who shared that view and belief. Now, if her brother-in-law takes that belief from her, she has nothing at all. Martha makes the phone call that is the undoing, perhaps the death, of them all.

“Death is pure love”, Patrick explains later. Marcy May is traumatized.

But what about that murder? Marcy May could have stopped it. By her silence, her inaction while present, she was complicit. She would have seen the girl advancing with obvious sinister intent behind the back of the homeowner. She would have been attuned to the menace in the words that Patrick was saying, “No-

one will get hurt if..” implying that they might. She would have heard Patrick’s commanding tone, which dismissed the homeowner’s interpretation of what was going on, and the homeowner himself as outside the circle of those who matter. The homeowner was established as someone of no value, but a threat. Marcy

May's silent witness provided a sense of acceptance of that murder, part of legitimizing it. She, along with the others present, helped to keep the homeowner surrounded and allowed the murder to happen. "Death is pure love", Patrick explains later. Marcy May is traumatized.

Her sense of reality is so far gone that she yields to her sister and brother-in-law, Lucy and Ted, like she did with Patrick and the others in the commune, to let them tell her that they know what is real and she does not, that everything will be all right, that there is nothing wrong in the circumstances, only something very wrong with her, and that she should take a pill, go to sleep, and fail to run for her life. In this case, her passivity in the face of confusion about reality may prove fatal for them all.

Is she evil?

As Ismael Beah writes,

"I stayed quiet still trying to decide if what I had seen was real.... I became afraid, since I could no longer tell the difference between dream and reality. ...**Our innocence had been replaced by fear and we had become monsters. There was nothing we could do about it.**"

The actor, Elizabeth Olsen, is the younger sister of the Olsen twins. This is her break-out role. She, along with writer and director Sean Durkin, were students together at NYU Tisch School of the Arts. This film, Durkin's first full length feature, was inspired by something he read about a girl escaping from a violent cult, whose leader tracks her down but then just gives her money and wishes her well. That story left Sean wondering about her first few weeks away. Something similar

happened with a girl who fled the Manson cult, while it appears that others from that cult were killed by them.

Thank you.

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