Trauma

By Michael Gordon

I've been worried lately about my childhood trauma because, by any standard, they are wholly unimpressive. I'll describe the most serious to you shortly, but you'll quickly notice that they are not exactly the makings of a television miniseries. In fact, when you read about them, you probably won't even consider them the least traumatic. Maybe mildly upsetting or barely memorable, but not traumatic in any real sense.

Now I don't want you getting the wrong idea: As a clinical psychologist, I'm in a position to know much about the pain that early terror can inflict and in no way would I belittle the toll it can take on a person. Nor would I wish such pain upon myself or upon anyone else. I know how even brief moments of actual trauma can forever disfigure a child's body of perceptions and feelings. Every day I hear about the tragic, sometimes even horrific experiences that can't keep from casting an eternal pall over the workings of a victim's mind. No, you won't find me among the ranks of those who dismiss the consequence of early wounds by regarding those who have been ravaged by them as weak or self-justifying.

I am most happy to report that my own life has been far more stable and manageable than tumultuous and overwhelming. Sure, I've experienced my share of shock and disappointment. But generally speaking, I was one of the many who grew up in quiet suburbs, well fed and care for, educated more or less, and largely content.

It might strike you as odd, but those of us who have not been traumatized also bear

a burden. We look back on our relatively stable, trauma-free histories and, yes, we can wonder about ourselves and even feel lacking. Perhaps it's that we have more trouble accounting for the defects in our characters because we don't have such obvious explanations for their presence. We can't identify those sharp, crystallized events and tie our worst faults to them. We're unable to explain our obsessions or insensitivities or fears or anxieties or fits of anger or problems with commitment as expectable outcomes of a uniquely tortured past.

We of placid backgrounds also can feel at a disadvantage when it comes to creative pursuits. No art history course is complete without full descriptions of artistic madness and the events that produced them. Movies recounting the lives of our greatest composers and writers rarely leave out the early seeds of inspiration that too often were sown from the miseries of abandonment, abuse, and upheaval. If you didn't know any better, you would assume that entry into the ranks of the artistic required early lives marred by almost unspeakable pain.

So I've been searching every nook and cranny of my childhood for some event that might qualify me as traumatized. I've got to unearth sufficient trauma to gain me entry into a cadre of the creative. And that's what brings me to the subject of rhubarb.

My father always kept a garden at the rear fringes of our yard. Here he valiantly battled the forces of nature, especially the voracious dining habits of all manner of rodents and associated pests. These must have been a hardy lot because they seemed to survive every conceivable form of chemical warfare my father could bring to bear which, in these pre-Rachel Carson days, were numerous. He was successful in that every summer he produced a small crop of tomatoes, several baskets of squash, and a

bean or two. I can't now imagine the per unit cost of his harvest, what with the bags of fertilizer and shelf-loads of fungicides and insecticides it required. But the garden was a source of pride and an opportunity for his occupational therapy.

I went through an agrarian phase when I was maybe seven or eight. Don't ask me where one would develop such inclinations within an existence that allowed for little contact with agriculture save frequent visits to the supermarket. Perhaps I was influenced by a song on one of my records that detailed the process by which carrots would grow from carrot seeds. Who knows, but I nonetheless was charmed by the thought that I could sow and then reap.

This garden, while marginally productive, was not the prettiest of sights nor was it sprawling. But there was this section in the back right-hand side that was large enough to support a row or two or rhubarb that my father must have planted the year before. I adopted these few plants and, as my record of children's songs instructed, watered them well and made sure that the weeds stayed at sufficient distance to allow for light and room to grow.

As best I remember, raising the rhubarb was a reasonably gratifying affair because they sprouted up quickly and proved a hardy crop. My efforts were also aided by a lack of gustatory interest on the part of the swarming pests that perennially ravaged that area. But while the process moved along at a reasonable pace, it still required far more patience than I typically had in store.

You have to understand that delay of gratification has never been one of my strong suits. I barely had enough restraint to engage successfully in projects that demanded far less persistence. The constructions that unfolded from the near-random pairings of

pieces from my Erector set always suffered from my failure to patiently tighten all the nuts and bolts. I didn't do much better with Tinker Toys or other then-popular preparations for a career in engineering. Marshaling the requisite patience to live this little bit of the farmer's life was to became a personal challenge.

Every day I'd charge out back to gauge whether the evening had brought growth sufficient to justify a harvest. I would bring other family and friends along to see if they would attest to the time being ripe for me to enjoy the fruits of my modest labors. And rhubarb being rhubarb, it wasn't that terribly long before I could talk myself into thinking that the moment of truth had arrived.

It's funny how all these years later I can still remember the exhilaration of the harvest. I had taken a small pair of scissors from the wicker sewing basket and dashed to the garden. I knew that the operation required some care so that the crop could continue to grow during the rest of that season and perhaps the next. Nonetheless, my pruning was more of a hacking given that the scissors were designed more for cutting thread than celery-like stalks. But somehow I managed to cut the seven or eight pieces and arrange them in a pile on a piece of paper towel.

I don't know if you've ever had the pleasure of cutting rhubarb, but there's much to commend it. Rhubarb has a distinctive, pungent smell and the reddish color, especially when it glistens with juice in a morning sun, can grab the attention even of an earnest but scattered junior farmer. Don't forget that I was also imbued with the grower's pride of having shepherded the process from seed to fruit. I was thoroughly captivated by the wonderment of it all.

It also happens that I loved the taste of rhubarb, particularly when it had been gently

stewed in brown sugar and cinnamon. I liked that you could taste the sugar all the more for the tartness of the fruit. That I would soon have a favorite dish with fresh ingredients I had myself provided almost hurt me with anticipation.

And so I marched proudly to the kitchen with rhubarb in hand. I imagine I had the same look as a cat who prances up to the back door with an unfortunate bird clenched in its teeth. My intent was that my mother would cook to no small degree of perfection my cherished bundle of fruit.

My mother, while certainly distracted by household chores and other such obligations, sensed my bursting excitement and, without hesitation, helped me to cut the fruit into smaller pieces. We placed them in a copper-bottomed pot along with the other ingredients. I personally supervised the measurement of the cinnamon and probably threw in any number of other spices just because fruit as magnificent as mine deserved the company.

At this point there wasn't much to do but let the heat gently work its magic. So I ran back outside and got involved in rescuing a box turtle that had the poor judgment to walk on the road in front of our house. Because I determined that this turtle required ongoing treatment, I hurried about searching for the right-sized box, a container for the water, and other amenities that I could provide this captive of my puerile attentions. As far as the rhubarb was concerned, its care was clearly turned over to my mother, who had assured me that she would keep a close eye on this most blessed of concoctions.

After what must have been an hour or so, I returned to the kitchen in full anticipation of finding a glass bowl placed lovingly in the center of our round oak table. In it would be the now pinkish fruit mixture of perfect consistency and aroma. Hungry

from my various exertions, I joyed in the thought of sitting up on the chair and thrusting my spoon into the still-warm dessert.

Now we get to the traumatic part, for the scene I carried in my head in no way matched what I actually discovered. While I was out rescuing the turtle from having its shell redesigned by a Chevy, my mother's friend, Mrs. Saunders, placed her morning call. I don't know what they discussed during that particular call, but such conversations typically involved comments about other neighbors, maybe a 20-minute retelling of a 3-minute incident at the community pool, or consideration of vacation plans. To be honest, I was never so much interested in the content of these conversations as I was frustrated by the limits they placed on getting my needs met promptly.

Whatever my mother and Mrs. Saunders discussed, it was of sufficient fascination to my mother that she completely forgot about her responsibility to my cherished rhubarb. Their fateful conversation had persisted so long that the mixture of fruit and spices began a predictable and irrevocable decline in status. Indeed, by the time I came upon the scene, what was once so promising a potion now was an unrecognizable, hardened, and thoroughly unappealing mass of encrusted carbon. Because every last molecule of moisture and life had been boiled out of my rhubarb, it no longer even smoked or bubbled. The desiccating fruit seemed to bond with the metal of the pan to create a new form of matter characterized by remarkable strength. It took me courses in college chemistry and geology to convince myself that there were compounds of even greater hardness than that which was produced by the slow but murderous charring of fresh rhubarb.

I don't honestly remember the details of my reactions to the great rhubarb immolation. I could conjure a scene that had me fleeing the kitchen in shock and horror. To highlight the profundity of my dismay, I could even have me entering into a catatonic state. That's it. My mother, now overwhelmed with guilt, would find me huddled in a dark corner muttering and whimpering inconsolably. We would enter years of therapy from which I would emerge functional but pathetic. Only years later would we be reconciled in a scene replete with recriminations, tears, and bittersweet confessions. But, alas, I truly don't recall what transpired on the day the rhubarb died.

I hope you understand that my amnesia for this event would be considered in some circles as evidence of my trauma. Many of us, when traumatized, go through periods when we forget the event, presumably because we need a rest from its effects. Some tiny fraction of us takes that process to rare heights and forgets that we are only one person and not many. In my case, I would have to be honest and tell you that I probably forgot that which was all too forgettable.

As I mentioned, I have reason to be familiar with human reactions to intense stress. I've witnessed the rage, the irritability, the agitation, and the retreat to safer internal worlds. I'm no foreigner to what lengths people will travel to shut down their emotions or to run from their fears. It's often tragic that so much joy can be squandered in a lifelong effort to avoid confronting a single source of upset. It doesn't take much experience with those battered by early bruisings to understand the importance of providing them aid.

Of course, those of us with non-traumatic trauma don't have much recourse other than to deal with the distress. We can't exactly convince anyone of a medical necessity

for treatment. Even the most liberal of prescribers might have problems handing out medication for rhubarb trauma. Besides, no insurance company would pay for the remediation of post rhubarb stress disorder. And I wouldn't imagine much community support for "Survivors of Maternal Rhubarb Burning."

You shouldn't worry about me. Perhaps I developed character as a result. And I can pass bunches of rhubarb at the store without developing a tic or having flashbacks or falling apart. I'm proud to say that I can even bake a respectable strawberry rhubarb pie without experiencing homicidal urges directed at my fruit-abusive mother.

Understand that I consider myself blessed that this is just about the worst I can come up with by way of early childhood trauma. But I still have to wrestle with the problems of the trauma-free which are made all the worse by my creative aspirations. So I just need to know: Does my depressing early experience with rhubarb qualify me for a shot at a Pulitzer?