

Osama bin Laden, Symbol and Symptom

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Within minutes of the killing of Osama bin Laden, media outlets flooded us with giddy, gloating, repetitive descriptions of the event. Fresh details came in surprisingly few and far between, but that didn't stop the news outlets from recycling the story over and over. In the true sense of the word, the media, and of course the American public which consumes its product, was obsessed.

Osama's power as symbol was most strikingly manifested by the crowds that gathered within hours at the White House and Ground Zero, waving American flags and chanting, "Obama got Osama." But what exactly was bin Laden a symbol *of* for these surging, ecstatic throngs? His death symbolized the end of a notorious terrorist, yes, the mastermind of 911 and other horrific attacks. But our jubilation was disproportionate, and that's because it was also a sort of American psychological symptom: Our collective psyche condensed terrorism in all its global, historic complexity to a single event, masking truths that bin Laden's death calls us to confront.

All our neurotic national baggage – our insecurity, our anxiety, our terror of terrorism, our economic uncertainty, our guilt, our moral qualms about our own capacity for evil, our unhappiness – these symptoms fed the symbol and the symbol allowed us to exult and forget. No wonder we were obsessed. And though we celebrated Osama's death like the end of an era, dancing around it like a hanging at high noon, it's hard to imagine it will ultimately make much of a difference in our "war on terror."

Ironically, the same week that the bin Laden story broke, I began treating a woman who had a different obsession. She had fallen in love with her husband's best friend, and thoughts of him were haunting her day and night. She felt extremely anxious; she couldn't sleep or eat. She loved her husband, but something had "snapped," causing her to be almost totally psychologically consumed.

When I first met her I was struck by the intensity of her distress, and the single focused nature of her thinking. Unfortunately for her, I was briefly distracted thinking about the parallels between her acutely frightened state, and the country's obsession with bin Laden. The man she loved was a symbol that was similarly fed by her symptoms – her underlying lacks, fantasies and yearnings. Some of the reasons for her obsession could include deprivation of attention during childhood, insufficient emotional attention from her husband, depletion of her own emotional needs by the birth of her first child five months earlier, projection of unmet parental needs onto her dinner guest, or of course the possibility of authentic love-feelings that could threaten her marriage. Moved by her pain, and wanting to offer some immediate relief, I could only suggest these possibilities in that first session, warmly offering to spend time with her to explore what was fueling the obsession, and thereby helping her to break it up.

Bin Laden was a symbol personifying evil, while the man who came to dinner was a symbol personifying good. But together they offer identical examples of the typical meaning of the psychological symptom: A panoramic matrix of processes and dynamics condensed into a single arresting symbol. As Adam Phillips, a contemporary Object Relations theorist once wrote, "A psychological symptom represents a truth that can't be told in any other way."

The public glommed onto bin Laden's death as if it represented the defeat of terrorism; the woman glommed onto her husband's friend as if he represented salvation. The relationship of symbol and symptom is endlessly complex, but it always involves a distortion of the truth, a trick of the psyche, a distraction from where conflicts or deficits really lie. And the job of the psychoanalyst is to recognize symbols and symptoms for what they are: An interim focus of attention whose multiple causes and layers of subtle meaning beg for gradual unraveling. Hopefully the American public will soon acknowledge the essential insignificance of bin Laden's death and instead explore the historical and political realities that provoke and sustain terrorism; hopefully the woman will soon let go of her painful focus on her dinner guest and similarly begin to explore the multifaceted meanings behind it that subvert her self-understanding and peace.