

# Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence

by Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S Wiley

Review by Anna Luise Kirkengen, MD, PhD

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Family therapist Robin Karr-Morse, assisted by Meredith S Wiley, has revisited a familiar place, the nursery, and two previously addressed topics, that of ghosts and that of violence. One would like to assume that the phenomena “nursery,” “ghosts,” and “violence” have nothing in common and no relationships at all. One is also tempted to object to any statements of there being links or trajectories.

Still, we all know better—or rather: we know worse. There are trajectories, and they affect social thriving, well-being, and health detrimentally. Therefore the topic is of high relevance for health care professionals and clinical practice.

In the first edition of this book,<sup>1</sup> Karr-Morse delineated the undeniable yet unappreciated connection between ghosts *in* the nursery and ghosts *from* the nursery when choosing to paraphrase psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg who, as Karr-Morse writes in the Preface of the present edition, “used the phrase *ghosts in the nursery* to refer to the tendency of parents to bring to the rearing of their children the unresolved issues of their own childhood.”<sup>2</sup><sub>pix</sub> These ghosts in parents’ pasts cast shadows, informing many parental relationships to their children whereby, certainly unintended, threatening experiences in the parents’ pasts transform into threats to their children’s present. This implies that they are engendering transgenerational lines of suffering and pain, rage and defeat, hatred and aggression, violation and violence.<sup>3,4</sup>

On the ever more expanding background of social and societal drama resulting from increasing numbers of events of school shootings in the US—and increasingly worldwide—Karr-Morse delineates a complex pattern of lived logic. This pattern is woven of threads we members of affluent societies wish to ignore because they are basically incompatible with our illusion of civilization. One thread leads from early neglect, abuse, and violation to self-neglect, abuse, and incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Another thread links abandoned and thrown-away kids to drug-using and runaway kids. A third thread follows the well-known path from self-medication with illicit drugs to forced medication with legal drugs in very probable, subsequent psychiatric care.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with the complex nature of her topic, Karr-Morse provides research results that, from a wide range of disciplines and fields, converge toward the highly comprehensive, accumulated evidence of what she terms “the roots of violence.” On the one hand, she draws from science; on the other she literally gives life to facts by braiding these with excerpts from dialogues with a young murderer she names Jeffrey, and his

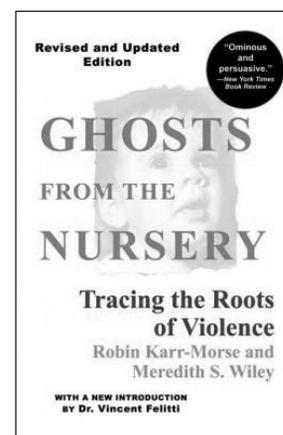
brother named John. By tracing a development from crib to crime, the making of a murderer—the highly likely path from violation to violence—Karr-Morse points to the essence of being human: being fundamentally relational and social, dependent on care and caresses, respect and recognition, and trust and touch by relevant others. Humans are born to others, must be held, carried, fed, comforted, and consoled by others. Their brain structure, immune cellular patterns, and hormonal responses are informed by the way they are met and treated.

Karr-Morse’s book provides broad associations to quite opposed phenomena. On the one hand, the subtitle of her book alludes to a Canadian institution founded by educator Mary Gordon called Roots of Empathy, a growing “school” introducing toddlers to children of different ages, aiming at fostering children’s empathy. On the other hand, the potentially preventable path from nursery to murder has been extensively explored in my Norwegian context, aiming at understanding what contributed to the transition of a young man from middle class into the murderer of 66 young people, suddenly one summer day.

Please read *Ghosts from the Nursery* closely and attentively! There are salient messages to all of us: professionals, parents, and laypeople alike. We need to learn the lessons provided here, and we must learn them fast. We have no children to lose, neither to murder nor to jail. ❖

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