

Unthinkable; Trauma, Truth, and the Trials of American Democracy

By Jamie Raskin, New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2022, 448 pp. \$32.

Reviewed by Karen B. Rosenbaum, MD

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On the surface, Congressman Jamie Raskin's memoir is the story of the fight for democracy when democracy was ruthlessly threatened, culminating in the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Diving deeper, it is also a love story by a father for his son and the story of a father's grief over the death of his beloved son who died by suicide a week before the raid on the Capitol.

The book begins with an epigraph in which Congressman Raskin quotes Albert Camus, "I realized, through it all, that in the midst of winter, there was, within me, an invincible summer" (Ref. 1, p 10). Mr. Raskin explained that he describes himself as a "constitutional optimist" in both his personal constitution and the U.S Constitution. This unwavering optimism and his unabashed truth telling, despite feeling traumatized by the adversity and disappointment that bulldozed Mr. Raskin and his family since 2020, is compelling. Mr. Raskin's world view could bring hope to people and families dealing with severe mental illness. His optimism was severely challenged by the two traumatic events that occurred around the same time, leading Mr. Raskin to question this quality that he had previously valued in himself.

In the preface, Congressman Raskin begins, "In the week between December 31, 2020 and January 6, 2021, my family suffered two impossible traumas: the shattering death by suicide of my beloved 25-year-old son, Tommy, and the violent mob insurrection at the U.S Capitol" (Ref. 1, p 13). He explains that his son, Tommy, experienced a mental illness that had "seized and ultimately controlled the dazzling mind and pure heart of this brilliant and empathetic young man" (Ref. 1, p 13). In the book,

Mr. Raskin patiently describes the origin of Tommy's illness and separates his son's compassionate, brilliant personality from the depression that took hold of him. Mr. Raskin discusses how the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had adverse effects on the mental health of many young people, including his son. A 2022 meta-analysis on suicide among young people during the pandemic agreed with prior studies on this topic and revealed that "During COVID-19 pandemic, the suicidal behaviors showed an increase, and, in particular, a sharp growing trend could be observed starting from Summer of 2020" (Ref. 2, p 2).

Mr. Raskin laments that he did not see the signs on the days before Tommy took his life. He sometimes fantasizes about speaking to Tommy as if Tommy had not committed suicide. A similar magical thinking coping mechanism is dramatized in a recent movie, *The Son*,³ released in 2022, the same year as Mr. Raskin's book. In *The Son*, a film by Florian Zeller based on his 2018 play, Hugh Jackman's character, Peter Miller, has a 17-year-old son, Nicholas, with his ex-wife, Kate (played by Laura Dern), who is depressed and sullen and eventually kills himself with a firearm in his beautiful New York City apartment. There is an ending where his son survives the shooting, has a beautiful girlfriend and career, and writes a tell-all book about how he chose to live. The viewer painfully learns, however, that this was not real and only the hopeful dream of a father trying to survive the brutal loss of his son.

In his thoughtful account, Congressman Raskin discusses how his son Tommy was very concerned with philosophy and ethics. Tommy agonized over an essay on the Trolley Problem, the dilemma of being the only person who can take over a runaway trolley and who must choose between doing nothing and hitting multiple pedestrians or turning the trolley to actively run into one person, thus avoiding hitting the mass of pedestrians. This turned out to be Tommy's last essay before his suicide. An article by Gabriel Andrade explains how the Trolley Problem "should be considered of great importance in medical ethics" (Ref. 4, p 1). He discussed how it could be argued that medical ethics is about balancing autonomy, beneficence, maleficence, and justice. As forensic psychiatrists, we frequently balance the competing interests of the law, the community, the well being of the individual we are evaluating, and the attorneys who retain us.

Congressman Raskin’s openness about Tommy’s illness, even in his professional life, is profound. He read Tommy’s note in one of his televised statements, “Please forgive me. My illness won today. Please look after each other, the animals, and the global poor for me. All my love, Tommy.”⁵ Later in his memoir, Mr. Raskin explains how these words helped him keep going even while he was despairing in his grief and on the state of the country.

On his way to the first day of the impeachment trial, he reflected,

This precious young man of boundless talent had given all his energy for the idea of the dignity and worth of all human beings—and all sentient beings. For Tommy, violence was the enemy of humanity and of all living things. The purpose of democracy and its operating system, the law, was to control, even to end, political violence, state violence, criminal violence, racial violence, gender violence, mob violence, the deliberate and needless infliction of pain and suffering on others. The purpose of democracy is to dignify and uplift each person on his or her path in life, to address misfortune as best we can, to make this life a gentler proposition (Ref. 1, p 311).

This same legal system is what allows us as forensic psychiatrists to work to strive for objectivity and to educate the triers of fact on mental illness.

In his memoir, Mr. Raskin also discusses the Twenty-Fifth Amendment and aptly explains why psychiatrists alone would not be helpful here. His analysis includes that psychiatrists opining on the President’s mental state would not be sufficient or relevant to assess the ability of the President to do his job. A fitness for duty examination of the President would also necessitate opinions from people who fully understand the job of President of the United States. Whether or not the President has mental illness, his call for a “seditious attack” made him unfit for office according to Mr. Raskin and the majority of his colleagues. In his analysis, Mr. Raskin agrees with the argument made by numerous psychiatrists, such as Jack Drescher, MD. In his article, “On the 25th Amendment and Donald Trump: Don’t Weaponize Psychiatry,”⁶ Dr. Drescher discusses the Goldwater Rule and warns us not to misuse psychiatry for political purposes and explains the history of this dangerous practice.

In summary, *Unthinkable* is a poignant, interesting read that covers the topics of suicide, ethics, democracy, and the law, and therefore will be of interest to many forensic psychiatrists.

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Criminal Testimonial Injustice

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Reviewed by Alexis Glomski, DO, and Susan Hatters Friedman, MD

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In *Criminal Testimonial Injustice*, Jennifer Lackey guides the reader through testimonial injustices that occur from the beginning of the criminal process in the interrogation room to the final stages in front of parole boards and how they affect suspects, defendants, witnesses, and victims. Although the detailed explanations can be tedious and redundant, Lackey excels at connecting the practical and philosophical concepts through use of stimulating case examples.

Lackey describes “agential testimonial injustice” as occurring when the way that testimony is extracted bypasses, exploits, or subverts the defendant’s own agency, and yet that testimony is considered with an unwarranted excess of credibility. If another party is given undue credibility, that can also result in agential testimonial injustice to an individual because the individual’s own testimony is then regarded as less truthful by comparison. She uses cases of shaken baby syndrome to demonstrate the excess of credibility that is sometimes given to experts and describes how, in some cases, experts testify that an infant’s