

October 14, 2013

The Persistence of Trauma as an Opportunity¹

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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I much regret that, having been advised by my physician not to fly for a while. Hence I am unable to be with you and learn with you in this conference, and I am very grateful to Marina Mojovic and Veronika Grueneisen for encouraging me to prepare a short presentation via Skype, on the topic I agreed to address.

I have entitled the presentation

THE PERSISTENCE OF TRAUMA AS AN OPPORTUNITY

1. Issue and the Opportunity

2. Four Events for Future Learning

3. Afterthoughts

4. Implications

PART 1: THE ISSUE AND THE OPPORTUNITY

The nature of this topic is not new to me. The idea of how to address it came to me while participating at the Kliczkow conference two years ago. There I was touched by how the vestiges of different sorts of past collective violence – namely wars and their aftermaths – often made it difficult for many of those who were there to benefit from what this kind of event offers. Moreover, as much as I was impressed by the work being done, I noticed every so often, that many of us were being numbed on many occasions. Since difficult things of the past take time to digest, to come to terms

¹ Presented at a conference on *The Impact of Social Trauma on Identity*, October 3-5, 2013, Belgrade.

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with. I was reminded of the title of the book written by Caitlin Thomas after the death of her husband, the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas: *Leftover Life to Kill*, an account of her brief escape to Sicily in order to digest what had been hard in their lives before and after his death.

In preparing myself for today, I thought about what members of this Conference – not necessarily – felt many with _____ in the course of this very special Conference.

Now, based on my personal and professional life experience, I shall address the topic of my talk, which for the sake of simplicity, I have named "trauma," or more specifically, "unresolved trauma from the past." This refers to traumas that, at the time they had occurred, its victims did not have the opportunity to work them out, and still gnaw at them, keeping them permanently looking for opportunities to do so.

By this, I am referring to events and experiences of the past, to which any collectives and/or individuals have been exposed, and which they have been unable to digest and work through, due to too little time and the lack of resources and opportunities. And it is because they are reminders of their individual or collective past traumas which in the very exceptional atmosphere at this conference, the participants looked for ways to do so in the here and now. When this was not possible, they were at times numbed because they could not do so there and then. And it is the difficulty of getting in touch with them which bars one from moving against these leftover traumas, these "vestiges" which cannot be worked through all at once without seeking ways for doing so. But to do just this, can only be done slowly and persistently in settings that are ready and able and harnessing themselves to do so. To recognize this, I believe, it is possible – and indeed necessary – for members of staff in these kinds of human-relations and group conferences, to act as what we call "learning companions." Having them here cannot fail to be relevant for those conference participants whose past traumas are being evoked and which, as such, raise their longing to resolve them. To address these traumas would pave the way for the learning in these conferences to become even more relevant.

Since I have given much thought to these issues over time and have actively worked on and with them in many fields, I shall now present four examples from different fields and end by summarizing what I believe might enable us to stop ignoring them and start to address them. This, by first "cathecting" and then "decathecting" ones' emotional investment in them and by providing opportunities for not silencing them, and thereby giving each of us the chance to have more of a say in our own lives.

PART 2: FOUR EVENTS FOR FUTURE LEARNING

I shall now present four different examples from different contexts, to illustrate different ways of preventing bygones from barring one in the present and, based on this, initiating future actions. No attempt will be made to explain here what their implications for us could be. This would require collective, learning-gearred discourse, which I believe we needs to be offered.

STORY I:

In 1953, when I worked as a budding mental health social worker in a Jerusalem mental health and child guidance clinic, a member of staff of a children's home, mainly for children who had survived the Holocaust, brought a 12-year-old boy for treatment because he was wetting his bed.

During the war, at the age of 2, he moved into an underground shelter in Poland with his parents and an aunt and uncle. One week before the end of the war, when he was 4, his parents went to get food for him and never returned. They had been handed over by the Poles to the Germans. Five years later he came to Israel.

He refused to come for treatment until I told him that if he did not come, I would have to refer to the youth organization, and tell them that they, the only parents he had, should send him to a closed treatment center. Thereupon, he came for treatment and stopped wetting his bed. Some years later he wrote that when he was 12, Jona Rosenfeld had come to watch him play basketball and that that had been the first time that anyone had seen him.

Ever since then, I have been in touch with him – even while I was studying abroad. He went on to serve in the army, became a driving instructor, studied social work, and worked as a social worker. When he got married, I was there. Today, he has two children and grandchildren, is retired, learning to play the guitar, studying and volunteering. Yes, and our families know each other and he knows about my writing and talking about him.

Five years ago, he started to come for weekly psychotherapy. There he made shivering movements and remembered that often, when he had cried in the shelter, his mother had put a pillow on his face so that the Germans would not hear him.

Many times he has asked me to adopt him and this I have refused to do.

Quite recently he and his family went to the place where he was born and had lived until the end of the war. Indeed, all in all, he is better than ever before.

STORY II:

In 1933, with the Nazi rise to power in Germany when I was 9 years old, our family immigrated to what was then Palestine, now Israel, which my Zionist father told us was what he had always wanted us to do. However content I was with this move, I had a very hard time adjusting to life here and especially learning Hebrew. I had many rather ineffective private Hebrew teachers, but there was one who made all the difference.

She, the daughter of a coachman, studied education and I found her very good looking. One day she told me that she was collecting the life stories of young people and could I please write mine. I did so right away and soon, all at once, I almost had command of Hebrew. Yes, then, at 13 years old, I was in love with a woman at least 12 years older than I was.

I remained in touch with her for several years and visited her after she had gotten married and given birth to their son, and I remember her very vividly until this day.

STORY III:

During 1948-9, I served in the Israeli army, during the country's War of Independence. There, I served as an army mental health social worker just after I had finished my studies in London. This was a most taxing assignment mainly because most of the soldiers I had to serve were Holocaust survivors. The most difficult aspect of the task was to take action so that the civil servants on whom they were dependent would not remain so devastatingly deprecating of them.

But then I was able to find a way to change their attitude to the soldiers. What I did was to suggest to them that before they began working with them, they should ask them to tell them their Holocaust stories. Doing just this worked miracles. Most of these officials were so moved by what they had heard that many of them totally changed their attitude and really struggled to help them.

I often thought about it in terms of my having "invented" what needed to be done.

STORY IV:

This story is about what happened in the fall of 2013 in Israel, the fortieth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, when all the, until then, classified files were made public, revealing, among other things, many of the mistakes and conflicts of the military commanders and heads of state and the, until then, censored numbers of casualties.

This revived the, until then, silenced public debate. The disclosure of the facts enabled and encouraged the first reunion of soldiers who had served in the most seriously hit regiments. It also re-opened the discourse on the travesties of these times and their implications for the current peace debate.

I mention this to alert us to how putting an end to silenced public political debate, became an opportunity for the collective to review the current peace policy, which is more than welcome, at least to some of us.

This is a collection of stories that, when opened up, were beneficial in offering us opportunities to consider how to act in and for the future by learning from each what from the past strikes one as relevant in the context.

PART 3: AFTERTHOUGHTS

These stories share four common characteristics.

1. None of what was done had been planned, each of it was improvised, done without having planned to do so.
2. All actions taken brought about some desired and positive results.
3. What was done in each case was not explained, but was expressed in actionable terms
4. In each of the stories, the interaction with each of the participants was welcomed by them and made them feel rewarded.

PART 4: IMPLICATIONS

So there are 5 reasons for why I had wanted to present these stories here?

1. So as to alert us to the importance of letting their messages have a say in our lives rather than remaining silenced. This is not in order to protest one having been silenced, but in order to do what Hannah Arendt – one of the few daring critics of the Jewish leaders during the Holocaust – said. Her criticism was that they obeyed the Nazis and participated in the persecution and murder of the Jews instead of them using their ability "to think".

I became aware of this calling quite recently, when I saw the distressing film *Hannah Arendt*.

This is my message for what conferences like yours-ours and similar ones can teach us: We should engage in ongoing thinking and considering what I/we can do, knowingly and deliberately, to confront the deadening and deadly traumas of the past in the course of these conferences.

2. To initiate an ongoing quest for what can be done, for the way to present what had been done and what could be done, to seek out evidence for not letting bygones be bygones, for daring to face the unknown, for identifying and acknowledging any tacit knowledge from the past that has made a difference. This in order to learn from the successes of the past, which have made a difference, without explaining them, but primarily to focus on what we did so deliberately, and thus, above all, to provide guidelines for what can and should be done in the present and in and for the future.

3. To consider what I have learned over the years on how to practice what one may call "learning from success", i.e. not to spend time on bemoaning or explaining all the failures of the past rather than learning from what had had a positive effect, and to learn what and how it happened so as to make use of it in the present.

4. To consider what is required for introducing and fostering mindsets that seek to create opportunities for not letting bygones be bygones, for looking for and creating opportunities to turn unturned stones, and not to be overwhelmed by the horrors of the past and of the present, and to give a voice to what had been silenced and not be spoken. And in that vein, to deliberately and systematically seek out ways that have worked in the past and may be relevant for individuals and

collectives who have been victims of trauma. And do so whilst remembering that "trauma" means "wounds," and thus in order to search for ways for moving beyond silencing them, to bringing them to light, so as to pave their way in and for their own future and for that of their collective.

5. Since each of us has done so unknowingly, let us get together to do so consciously also within the framework of these conferences and to see this too as one of our "callings."