

Terror, Trauma and Healing

Steve Vinay Gunther
Northern Rivers Gestalt Institute
Australia

Personal Context

I love my wife dearly.

She is very important to me; if there was some kind of threat to her, I would want to protect her from it. Yet there are times when it is I who is the source of disturbance. I am not talking about my annoying habits; this is more serious stuff. Its to do with what therapist Lynne Jacobs calls a *traumatised state of mind* (TSM)¹.

Trauma can be defined as a stressor which overwhelm someone's ability to cope, characterised by feelings of helplessness in the face of some kind of personal danger. This can be the result of natural events, or more often circumstances such as the abuse of power, betrayal of trust, entrapment, pain or loss.

It is not overly dramatic to claim that most people have some kind of personal trauma in their background. This may be the result of childhood experiences of abuse (or witnessing abuse), neglect or degradation; it may be related to adult experiences of violence or humiliation. Psychological effects worsen with chronicity, unpredictability, multifaceted sources, of a sadistic nature, and perpetrated by someone one has a relationship with. Even single events can have a significant and lasting impact.

When you take into account rape and domestic violence (25% of women²), sexual abuse of children (20-30% for females, 7-15% for males) and the fact that 25% of children in the US are living with an alcoholic parent³, it can be understood that trauma is widespread.

Nature has evolved a dual brain system. The left brain deals with logical and verbal matters. The right brain stores experiences which are unconscious, emotional, somatic (non-verbal) and timeless. It organizes our motives and meanings. When it functions well it is the source of inspiration, intuition and creativity. When faced with trauma, it attempts to make sense of fearful or crazy situations, and in doing so offers up seemingly illogical emotions, illusions and delusions.

Not all trauma results in damage; people survive and even thrive – more on this later. But when a trauma is not integrated it can be triggered; the right brain dominates and the left brain rationality recedes. We operate out of a traumatised state of mind, resulting in a narrowing of functioning.

If I experience too much criticism, a lack of my needs being met when I am feeling vulnerable, or too much stress then I can tip into this TSM. When I do, a whole lot goes out the window: my sense of perspective, my rationality, my communication skills, even my caring for the other. I move

from a state of complexity – as befitting a 47 year old director of a Gestalt therapy training centre – to a state of reactivity and polarised thinking. My interpersonal and emotional intelligence drops.

What happens is that my peripheral vision is narrowed; I am unable to take in the whole picture, and become focused on danger and safety. I become vigilant about anything which looks like an attack, and attempt to defend myself in the ways which are familiar to me – withdraw until I have had enough, and then lash out in a verbal flare-up.

Needless to say, this does not help anyone. I end up more tense, and when its directed at my wife, she becomes more agitated instead of feeling soothed or reassured in her distress; the distance grows between us. When this occurs, it tends to add to whatever painful feelings are triggered in the TSM we are both experiencing, thus compounding our mutual suffering.

Fortunately, we end up finding ways through this maze. We cool down, do some deep breathing, come back to ourselves, perhaps apologise. Things slowly settle down and we find our way back to an even keel. Complexity returns. Adult functioning returns. Care returns. Listening returns. Generally there is some kind of learning which takes place, and a sense of healing.

This confessional vignette illustrates the personal effects of entering a TSM. These same effects are painted large in our conflict-ridden world. Political analysis and action only scratch the surface; to achieve a more profound understanding we must examine the dynamics of trauma on a social scale.

As a psychotherapist in Australia I encounter the results of trauma in people's lives. The consequences are almost always debilitating, often leading to a downward spiral into drug or alcohol abuse, depression, violence or ill health.

SOURCES OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Whilst the personal impact of trauma is similar everywhere, in the majority of the world the sources of trauma have a greater structural component. This includes:

- Poverty
- Dangerous or demeaning work
- Loss of control of life circumstances
- Fears about personal safety
- Loss of livelihood
- Sickness and disease, especially when untreated
- Major relocation e.g. refugees
- Racism
- Threats to life
- Abuse in all forms
- Restriction of liberty

These sources of traumatic experience tend to be shared experiences of the poor or disenfranchised.

The exact impact of these traumas is not however predictable. Individuals find can find a way through to productive a meaningful lives, and the same can happen col-

lectively. The very experience of a common trauma can bring people together.

Support is one of the moderators of trauma. A significant factor determining whether a tragedy becomes a trauma is the degree of isolation a person or population experiences. Aaron Antonovsky refers to social support as a "generalised resistance resource", allowing health to flourish despite significant stressors.

We can reach far back in history and look at the experience of the Jews fleeing Egypt for the first time. A band of nomadic and previously disparate tribes thrown together in the desert, isolated and spurned by civilisation. The mutual support engendered a profound level of bonding which was the genesis of both a nation and a religion.

However as well known history charts, the millennium which ensued saw regularly punctuated conflicts which often erupted into bloody wars. Peaceful and cooperative times were interrupted by large trauma. The impact on individuals was huge, but it also appears that collectively experienced trauma is held within cultural memory. Thus we could speak of a TSM at a group level.

This was most clearly evident in the aftermath of the holocaust; some of the seemingly endless anger of the Israeli government can be seen as the classic narrowing of thinking which characterises a TSM. The actions of the last 50 years have also bred this TSM amongst the Palestinians as a result of their displacement, lack of autonomy, and economic deprivation. An entrenched TSM on the part of both groups means that life gets interpreted through the lens of anxiety, fear and aggression.

Another example is the aftermath of 9/11 in the US. There were many in New York and across the country who were directly affected – from the families of the victims to the firefighters and rescue teams. However the whole event was a shared traumatic experience for much of the North American population. Yet it did not result in as much Post Traumatic

Stress Disorder (PTSD) at the time as might have been expected. This can be attributed to the unprecedented amount of community support which was marshaled at all levels.

However, we can see other dynamics of collective trauma by widening the lens to what preceded 9/11 and what came after.

The war in Vietnam was a major humiliation for the US. Despite the protracted years of bombing and jungle warfare, political promises of pushing back the communists and large expenditure of money, the war was lost. A sense of humiliation in the US population was one of the effects.

Humiliation is one of the inputs to trauma. The effect of the German defeat in WW1 was not the end of war but a brewing resentment. Humiliation and shame do not generally produce humility, but result instead in the desire for revenge. Trauma alters the chemistry of the brain, producing a damaging excess of cortisol; effects include difficulty in logical thinking and a reduced ability to control emotional outbursts. Reaction easily takes over, and moral thinking gets reduced to an *eye for an eye*.

In the wake of 9/11 there was an opportunity for the American populace to consolidate the strong social support that emerged, finding their way out of a TSM rather than choosing the reactive path. Unfortunately the US government threw its weight behind the latter, with a consequent downward spiral into hate and violence; a move-

ment which takes everyone deeper into a TSM. One clear sign of this is hypervigilance; the obsessive focus on danger and safety which characterises current official policy is a classical symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD).

The victims of the wars – in this case Afghanistan and Iraq – are of course also thrust into profound trauma in a seemingly inexorable process. The population of these countries is subject to ongoing threat, humiliation, dislocation, and increased poverty. The experience of trauma becomes embedded, brain chemistry changes, and a traumatised state of mind permeates responses at all levels. From this springs the seemingly unstoppable madness of suicide bombers, civil war and a disintegrating society.

But let's not forget about countries which are out of the media focus. Throughout the world, human-made events are feeding individual and collective trauma. When this becomes a repeating experience down the generations then the TSM becomes a deeply embedded experience. The hallmarks are evident – either/or thinking, violent and unstable responses to any kind of perceived threat. Trauma breeds trauma in continuing cycles.

IS THERE A WAY OUT?

The burning question of course is this: is there a way out?

Spiritual traditions orient us to the expansion of individual self, in order to identify with a greater whole. This can be very effective in assisting people to move out of a TSM, to a place of centredness and non-reactivity. This tends however to be understood and practiced as an internal process.

Psychotherapy tells us that with the right kind of support - and enough of it - individuals can find their way from a TSM as a way of life, to a more healthy *creative state of mind* (CSM). This requires a lot of attention to the integration of personal tragedy, such that traumatic reminders no longer trigger feelings of shame, humiliation and rage. With sufficient support and hard work, healing is possible.

But what about on the collective level? Is it possible to find enough support, willingness and identification with a non-reactive space, so that shared tragedy can be integrated and healing can be found in the social dimension?

There are a few precedents.

Truth and Reconciliation

As flawed as they sometimes are, Truth and Reconciliation commissions have shown that extended major trauma can be collectively processed. It would seem hard to imagine that the effects of years of torture and abuse can be so easily wiped. And indeed, there is still much personal trauma that remains after such commissions move on. However they seem to make an impact, reducing both individual and collective resentment and bitterness. If they were better run, received more funding and support, and were carefully fitted into local cultural practices, their impact could be even more significant and widespread.

Dialogue across differences

Psychotherapy recognises that dialogue is one of the most significant methods of bringing about healing. Martin Buber was a hassidic storyteller and early Zionist, not a therapist; but ideas about the valuing of human beings through dialogue have influenced therapy as well as politics and philosophy. He suggested that if we can enter into what he called the I-Thou, we will treat others as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end.

Many national and international conflicts can be characterised as failed dialogue. Differences result in alienation rather than enrichment. Attitudes become embedded in divisive views of the other, and the result is what has been termed geo-sentiment and socio-sentiment. There are some exemplary dialogues that have been set up to bridge intractable social differences. One is called Sustained Dialogue, instituted by students at the University of Virginia. This brings small groups of people together on a regular basis where there are strained relations, creating a "safe space" for discussion and contact. Over 40 facilitated groups meet, addressing racial, cultural and religious differences; for instance Arab and Jewish students talk about their different understanding of events.

The Dialogue Project facilitates dialogue across differences around the US⁴. Hard questions are asked and personal experiences shared. A reconciliation trip to Israel and Palestine was organised to meet the families of participants.

The Partners in Conflict project at the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem saw 11 Israeli and 11 Palestinian facilitators trained to conjointly conduct Palestinian/Israeli meetings, and to practice conflict resolution in their communities⁵.

The Peace Research Institute in the Middle East has conducted initiatives⁶ which include:

- bringing about encounters between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians who once lived together, visiting each others homes and sharing stories.
- developing materials for the improvement of communication between Palestinians and Israelis. This involves using inviting participants to analyse their own communication strategies and styles, thus developing a basis for understanding processes that underly relationship.
- the creation of a textbook on history of the region, jointly written, and incorporating views from both sides

There are many other such projects⁷. Much research has been done showing the effectiveness of what is known as Transformative Dialogue. The movement from traditional alienations to care for others from a meta position has been described as Neo-humanism by Indian philosopher P.R. Sarkar. Fundamentally, dialogue in social forums promotes social, interpersonal and individual healing. This is one of the best ways to move from a TSM to an appreciation of complexity.

Education for liberation

Knowledge and choice are good antidotes to trauma. Paulo Freire's ideas on education for liberation challenge traditional teaching methods and contexts, many of

which are traumatising through mistreatment, punishment and humiliation, alienation, and a lack of respect for the uniqueness of the individual.

The years of schooling are often either a source of trauma, or a reinforcement of trauma experienced in the family context. Freire suggests:

Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.

His methods include an emphasis on teachers and students working with each other in dialogue; praxis – action informed by values such as developing community and building social capital; conscientization – a consciousness that has the power to transform reality; an emphasis on lived experience and language that empowers; and finally education as liberation, contextualised by a transcendent spirituality.

These methods have improved not only levels of education amongst the poorest and most disenfranchised; they have also led to community organising. When people find they can make a difference in their lives, the impact of trauma is mollified.

His ideas have also been applied in the developed world, leading to meaningful student involvement in their own education. Inevitably, when education is provided in this way it becomes a tool for self esteem building, knowledge which enhances a sense of community, and thus becomes a powerful support for stepping out of the effects of trauma.

Family constellations

Bert Hellinger has been described as "one of Europe's most innovative and provocative existential philosopher/therapists". He escaped the Gestapo, worked as a priest with the Zulus, trained as a psychoanalyst, then in group dynamics, Gestalt and family therapy. He has illuminated the way that unconscious mechanisms – ties to family and community – perpetuate conflicts across generations, through a unique form of therapeutic work known as *Family Constellations*.

This approach involves finding healing and reconciliation through changes in family systems. Rather than working with the actual family, the process utilises representatives to stand in the place of those members, placed in position by the client. By paying attention to the experience of the representatives and noting where the systemic dynamics are, the facilitator is able to create changes in the pattern of the family constellation which support movement towards healing.

Hellinger does not claim this approach will produce broad social changes. He says: "Reconciliation starts in our soul. If whatever we are ashamed of or reject is acknowledged, and agreed to, and even loved, then we can become more complete and at peace."

However he has provided some challenging and profound perspectives on the sources of conflict, and for a number of years he and others doing this form of therapeutic work have been dealing with the impact of larger traumas, such as the effects of the holocaust on both Germans and Jews as well other ethnic conflicts. One of the essential principles involves the nature of the relationship between perpetrators, victims and social/family systems. He points out:

Many of those who have suffered, or who belong to a group that has suffered

much, are angry at the perpetrators. They reproach them. They don't want to forgive in any way. What happens? Those who reject the perpetrators become in their souls like them. Suddenly, they have perpetrator's energy and they continue the conflict just the other way around. Like a wheel that turns, but is always the same, without any solution. Furthermore, those who are reproached are re-enforced in their aggression. So all the accusations and all the blaming by the survivors of ethnic conflict against the perpetrators just achieves the opposite of what is intended. They stand in the way of reconciliation.

Through this work the healing of the soul refers not just to that of the individual, but also of the family or group soul – a concept more familiar to native peoples than to the individualistic western notions of self. It is in our identification with the group that lies both our identity and our conscience.

Thus guilt and innocence are not the same as good and evil. We do destructive and evil things with a clear conscience when they serve the groups that are necessary for our survival, and we take constructive action with a guilty conscience when these acts jeopardize our membership in these same groups.

So leaving behind a TSM requires the experience of humility, mourning of loss, and a deep sense of interconnectedness transcending both individual and group identity.

Cultural creativity

Creativity can have a remarkable impact on turning trauma around. In 1987 a white director living in Kuranda, Northern Queensland started working with local Aboriginal dancers, creating a dance theatre. His goodwill, hard work and expertise in the promotion of such events, combined with the spirit and dedication of the dancers to produce an show which became successful very quickly. Within 2 years hundreds of thousands of tourists were coming to view the show each year, and it also toured the world.

More significant than the popularity of the work, was the effect on the local community. It's success eased racial tension, developed a sense of self-determination, and revived the local Aboriginal language and culture which was on the verge of being lost. The culture came back into the hopes of the Tjapukai people. Only a few elders had retained the language; now the renewal brought about by the dance theatre meant that it became a spoken tongue again, and is now taught in the local primary schools.

Further, an attraction called the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park⁸ was created, with the majority shareholders being the Aboriginal tribal councils. The success of the company has spurred the formation of other Aboriginal dance groups. Employment has been created for the Djabugay people, and they have developed confidence to speak out publicly. The success of the Park is remarkable since no government subsidies were used in its establishment or later development.

This is nothing more healing for trauma than empowerment, and this is a inspiring example of a project which grew with no subsidies or political input.

Reconciliation

The Reconciliation movement in Australia is an example of some of the healing

that can take place. The Aborigines have been displaced and dispossessed for 200 years, and it is only in the last 40 years that they have even been given full citizenship status. The path of reconciliation has taken a number of turns. The Mabo case in 1992 invalidated the original justification for sweeping the Aborigines aside: the fiction of "terra nullius". This case opened the doors for Native Title claims. Both practically and symbolically, this was a gesture towards the trauma that the Aborigines have been subject to. In 1995 a national enquiry into the government policy of removal of Aboriginal children from their homes in the first half of the 20th century commenced.

This policy was the source of an unspeakable amount of trauma, captured powerfully by the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*. The findings of the enquiry led to the establishment of National Sorry Day. Many politicians, religious and social leaders have recognised this day each year, and issued formal apologies for the treatment of Aborigines. Despite the leader of the country, Prime Minister John Howard, refusing to participate, the effect of a groundswell of reconciliation has been to acknowledge the harm done and its hurtful effects.

This culminated in 2000 in the People's Walk for Reconciliation. In a moving display, 250,000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a public declaration that "Reconciliation is the work of all Australians."

This movement and the above milestones have not removed the individual trauma of Aborigines suffering from the effects of colonisation. But they have strengthened the fabric of support and care in the community, symbolically and practically, so that the traumas can start to be addressed. This is a movement away from a TSM towards healing.

Restorative justice

Restorative justice provides an alternative way of dealing with the vexed area of crime and punishment. Crime is both a producer of trauma, and generally as result as well. The criminal justice system tends to compound the cycle of trauma rarely attending to healing for either victim or perpetrator. Incarceration generally perpetuates the cycle of trauma, and it is rare for the trauma of those convicted to be even recognised; prisons are not therapeutic environments! Given that .7% of the US population is in prison, this is a significant base of further trauma.

Victim-offender mediation first developed in Canada in 1974, as an opportunity for offenders to meet their victims face to face. There are now a variety of approaches including family conferences, circle sentencing and meetings between shoplifters and shop owners. What these approaches have in common is an approach to justice that is community based and dialogical. They are based on the proposition that victims and offenders are more likely to find healing where anonymity is dispersed and relationships are impacted.

Lisa Rieger describes the use of Circle Peacemaking, first developed in Canada in 1992 for use with native peoples:

The emphasis on value-based justice offers reconnection for victim, offender and community and includes spirituality and emotionality in the process.

Sentencing circles develop consensus on sentencing plans... and uses circle rituals which involve the victim, victim supporters, the offender, offender supporters,

judge and court personnel, prosecutor, defense counsel, police, and interested community members.

Family group conferencing, used in Australia with Aboriginal populations "deals with people's unanswered questions, painful emotions, the issue of accountability and the question of restitution or reparation"⁹. The condition is that the offender is not made an outcast; the process uses "reintegrative shaming" rather than labeling, degradation and exclusion. Despite the tear, the fabric of community remains intact.

Sentences as a result of these approaches are oriented around reconciliation rather than punishment. They are the outcome of a process which includes a healing circles for the victim, and the offender; a consensus on the elements of a sentencing plan; follow-up circles to monitor the progress of the offender. The sentencing plan may incorporate commitments by the system, community, and family members, as well as by the offender. The satisfaction levels of both victim and offender are high – around 80%.

The use of these processes holds hope for an alternative to the usual vicious cycle of crime, victim and punishment, to which there is often no end. By attending to healing in all parties, it implicitly recognizes trauma and its effects, whilst still holding people responsible for their actions.

STEPPING OUT OF THE CYCLE

Our most effective response to war, terror and the resultant trauma, is to step out of the cycle of thinking and action which simply perpetuates the pain and violence. The above examples were all developed in the 20th century. They can be applied more widely with great efficacy. Surely though we can, in this 21st century, turn our creativity and knowledge towards addressing the urgent task of devising and implementing newer ways to collectively reduce trauma. The ideas and practices of reconciliation, family constellation work, education for liberation, truth and reconciliation commissions, and restorative justice did not exist 50 years ago. Lets uncover and invent new solutions which can counter the invitations to fear and isolation.

Correspondence

Steve Vinay Gunther
Director, Northern Rivers Gestalt Institute,
15 Coleman St,
Lismore NSW 2480,
Australia
Email: chief@gestalt.org.au

Notes

1. Jacobs, L. 2006. Personal correspondence.
2. *Domestic Violence is a Serious, Widespread Social Problem in America: The Facts.* Available <http://www.endabuse.org/resources/facts/> . 2006. January 10th.

3. Based upon several surveys of inmates and adults on probation (1995-1997). Available online from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs). Located in publications section under: "Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probation-ers." April 99. NCJ 172879.
4. Available <http://thedialogueproject.org/Highlights/2004.htm>. 2006. August 10th.
5. Available <http://www.podziba.com/middleeastcase.html>. 2006. August 10th.
6. Available <http://www.vispo.com/PRIME/4proposals.htm>. 2006. August 10th.
7. Panorama projects. Available <http://www.panoramacenter.org/projects.asp>. 2006. August 10th.
8. See <http://www.tjapukai.com.au/>
9. Correctional Service Canada. A selection of initiatives that attempt to repair harm from crime and attend to related needs, with some implications for the reduced use or length of custody. Available http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/pblct/satisfy/e_jus2.shtml. 2006. February 10th.

References

- Ahmed, E, N. Harris, J. Braithwaite, and V. Braithwaite. 2001. *Shame Management Through Reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Antonovsky, A. 1979. *Health, Stress, and Coping: New Perspectives on Mental and Physical Wellbeing*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Bagley, C. 1991. "Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: The State of Knowledge and Future Research."
- Bagley, C. and R.J. Thomlison, eds., *Child Sexual Abuse: Critical Perspectives on Prevention, Intervention, and Treatment*. Pp. 9-26. Toronto, ON: Wall & Emerson.
- Bar-On, D. 2000. *Bridging the Gap*. Hamburg: Koerber.
- Briere, J. 1992. *Child Abuse Trauma*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Brownlee, S. 2006. "The Biology of Soul Murder." *US News*. Available http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/961111/archive_034966.htm
- Buber, M. 1987. *I and Thou*. New York: Collier Books.
- Fisher, R.J. and L. Keashly. 1991. "The Potential Complementarity of Mediation and Consultation Within a Contingency Model of Third Party Consultation." *The Journal of Peace Research*. 28(1): 29-42.
- Fletcher, A. 2004. *Stories of Meaningful Student Involvement*. Washington: SoundOut.
- Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Giller, E. 2006. "About Trauma." Available <http://www.sidran.org/whatistrauma.html>. 2006. February 10th.
- Hellinger, B.. 2004. "Peace Begins in the Soul: Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation." Talk at Forham University. Available <http://www.hiddensolution.com/peace1.htm> on 2006, February 10th.
- Lebeau, M. and A. Suleiman (eds.). 1997. "Tell Beydar, Three Seasons of Excavations (1992-1994)." A Preliminary Report (Subartu 3). Turnhout.
- Liebkink, K. and A. L. McAlister. 1999. "Extended Contact through Peer Modelling to Promote Tolerance in Finland." *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 29:765-780.
- McNamee, S. and K. J. Gergen, eds., 1999. *Relational Responsibility: Resources for*

Sustainable Dialogue. San Francisco: Sage.

Rieger, L. 2001. "Circle Peacemaking." *Alaska Justice Forum*. 17(4). Available http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/forum/17/4winter2001/a_circle.html on February 10th.

Sarkar, P.R. 1982. *The Liberation of Intellect*. Calcutta: Ananda Marga Publications.

Shaw, R. 2005. "Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone. United States Institute of Peace." Available <http://www.usip.org/pubs/special-reports/sr130.html> on 2006, January 10th.

Valent, P. 2001. "The Right Brain As a Substrate for Reforging Psychoanalytic & Trauma Therapies." ASTSS/NCPTSD Annual Conference. March. Canberra, Australia. Available <http://www.trauma-pages.com/s/valent-2001.php>. January 10th.

White, Elizabeth. 2006. "1 in 136 U.S. Residents Behind Bars." *Associated Press*. May 22th.

2004. "Peace Begins in the Soul: Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation." Summary Report: Bert Hellinger at Forham University. October 4. Available <http://www.hiddensolution.com/peace.htm> on 2006, February 10th.

2004. "Sustained Dialogue." *UVA Online*. 34(9). May 14. Available http://www.virginia.edu/insideuva/2004/09/sustained_dialogue.html on 2006, August 10th.



Journal of Futures Studies

