

A Workshop Example

(written by George Halasz, 2008)

“This afternoon’s trauma workshop fulfilled many hopes to find comfort through a deeper understanding of how to cope with our inner demons. Attended by over thirty participants, aged from their mid-twenties to eighties, survivors, their families as well as nonsurvivors, came to listen, learn, and share reflections. As we formed a large circle, Natan invited us to share how we cope with tragic memories of the Holocaust: should we only remember, or is it finally time to forget, to move on?

To explore some of these sensitive issues, Natan placed three chairs in the middle of the circle, to represent the first, second, and third generation, and called on people to trade places as part of a series of mini role plays. Taking on any one of these assigned roles, we started to open up, to explore experiences from any one of the roles of a Holocaust survivor family; what it felt like, from the inside, to be a survivor’s son or daughter, a parent or child, or grandchild. Which subtle messages were communicated from one to the other within this highly emotional system?

A tearful and distressed granddaughter’s words focused our minds and hearts to acknowledge the insufficiently worked-through ‘trauma’ of a grandmother. This prompted Natan to transform the moment when he borrowed a black case from one of the participants and invited us to imagine that it contained the survivor’s trauma. Thus, we could look at different ways that we deal with it, holding onto it, putting it ‘out of sight, out of mind’ under the chair, embrace it, or hand it over to others. Trauma was thus ‘enacted’ and became externalized, concretized, and visible. This allowed us to make new links to sources of our otherwise unknown distress. The trauma was actualized.

The ‘trauma’ of our hidden ‘demons’ previously known to reside in the deeper layers of our unconscious as fears, terrors, feelings of chaos, abandonment, helplessness, anger, or rage thus became more tangible and less overwhelming. Because such intense feelings are often ‘acted out’ in different phases of our life cycle, either as risk-taking or aggressive and damaging behaviors, now they might be easier to handle.

As additional participants delved deeper and encountered and conquered more ‘demons,’ a stirring sense of curiosity motivated one Holocaust survivor who hitherto had been silent to read from his recently written manuscript, a story told for the first time after sixty years. Containing and attempting to control that tangible ‘trauma-filled black case’ contrasted with our usual paralyzed response to trauma, and helped us to overcome our sense of chaos, our loss of control.

The afternoon's encounter offered hope that such overwhelming feelings might be gradually transformed, and as the stories opened up to reveal ever deeper layers of otherwise hidden hurt, we felt that we were able to share together a theme that had previously been so full of pain. As feelings and thoughts were voiced, they could be 'seen,' and at the same time their owners experienced a sense of relief.

A child of survivors recalled how she went home from Natan's last workshop two years ago, and for the first time in her life had cried deep tears of relief that she had stored inside her during a lifetime of silent pain, unknown to her till she took part in that workshop. The experience had changed her life, she said.

In this workshop also, many layers of silent distress were exposed for the first time. And at the same time, for some, increased resistance blocked off further understanding. Natan took great care to explain that it was all right to stop exploring, to take a rest, or even to leave the memories alone. We all need to respect our safety zones, to decide when to confront, and when to support, and to nurture those emerging feelings that threatened to overwhelm us.

As the transmission of Holocaust trauma was mentioned, one grandmother attempted to soothe the tearful granddaughter, and herself, by defensively exclaiming: 'No, no, no, we did not pass on any of our trauma to you, and you do not need to be upset.'

Natan gently but firmly guided such repeated and all too familiar misunderstandings between the generations. For some of us, such moments galvanize our steely resolve not to open up again. We do not want to be exposed and vulnerable, and we are afraid to open up to someone who might deny the reality of our feelings. In such situations, we decide it is better to cut off from all feelings, not to risk being rejected.

Yet, to not share can, and does, compound the burden of trauma as it fuels further family conflicts. Sadly, misplaced efforts of reassurance and clichés like 'that was in the past, we must look to the future' merely inflame feelings of fury or silent rage.

So, it became apparent how families transmit trauma, even if unintended, and sadly persist to deny this reality. Instead they fall into lifelong patterns of family communications that misread each other's moods of sorrow and pain. Such patterns can start early in life, in the nursery, as mothers and fathers silently witness their baby's cries. These moments can persist or may be triggered decades later, at the other end of the life-cycle, when it's the turn of the grown-up children to care for their aging parents and grandparents.

A particularly poignant moment for me in the workshop occurred

when Natan (as the second generation) recalled from his own family experience a deep sense of pleasure as his daughter and mother shared, and talked about his mother's past. He relived with us that intimate moment with heartfelt words, gestures, and such a warm smile that elicited knowing reactions in kind from all the participants.

This was more than just professional care. Natan shared his pleasures and sorrows from the depth of his humanity. He blended with consummate clinical skills a sense of understanding that was an antidote to the complex sense of ache, emptiness, futility that Holocaust survivor families endure for decades.

Again and again, we asked 'Should we speak?' 'Is it better not to speak?' 'What should I say?' 'How should I say it?' There were no simple answers. We need to be reminded that to keep our minds open to listen, to hear, to ask, and to answer, to tell each other our stories calls for great and intense effort. This was the secret and the message of the workshop: That we can attend to the gaps inside only by opening up to those gaps.

While reassurance is necessary at times, it is not sufficient to repair, to fill those unmeasurable gaps that trauma has excavated in our minds and hearts; the memory of murdered loved ones, abandonment, torture of body, mind, and soul.

In the final moments of the workshop, the black case was opened and we could learn what was inside it. What a surprise! Only the owner had the right to open it, when she felt the time was right. The black case could be opened, in the right place, at the right time, when the owner felt that it was safe enough. As she did, we felt much relief. We even laughed. There were no demons inside. Of course, for survivors and their next of kin, the box contains their black memories, they have black cases by the trainload, half-buried and half-exposed, often battered, blood-stained, soiled, and beyond recognition.

Survivors do not have the luxury of the symbolic black case. There will always be a difference between 'real trauma' and its symbolic representation. However closely that approaches to realism, the real and its representation will always be in a relationship, approximating to an infinite gap.

As this trauma workshop reminded us, we should not confuse the survivor's real experience and the imagined. Yet in the minds of their children, there is the blurred zone of transitional trauma, the 'transmitted trauma' that many, including me, feel transmitted as real" (Halasz, 2008, pp. 17-18).