

1.2 The basics and applications of Healing the Wounds of the History Program

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In 1995, fifty years after the end of World War II, I made a pilgrimage to Auschwitz concentration camp where both of my parents had been imprisoned for more than two years. I saw Block 10, where sterilization experiments had been performed on Jewish women, including my mother, by the infamous Dr. Klauber and Dr. Mengele. I saw the *place* where my father had worked processing the clothes, shoes and other belongings of people sent to labor camps or to their death by the Nazis. I visited the gas chambers.

In Birkenau, the concentration camp next door to Auschwitz, I wandered around the area they call “the burning fields.” At a point near the end of the War, there were so many train transports bringing in Jews to be exterminated that the gas chambers were operating 24 hours a day. The crematoria couldn’t dispose of the corpses fast enough. The Nazis ordered the camp inmates to create huge mountains of bodies and set them on fire. The bodies burned for weeks. The ashes were put in the nearby ponds and spread around the surrounding terrain.

What struck me, wandering around the former burning fields in the summer of 1995, was the fact that they were alive with the most beautiful wildflowers I had ever seen. I was moved by the way that nature was able to transform the results of such horror into beauty. This transformative principle that I observed so profoundly in nature guides my work as a psychotherapist and drama therapist.

In my journey to reconcile my own past as the son of Jewish WWII resistance fighters and survivors of Auschwitz concentration camp, I have tried to understand

how nations and cultures integrate a heritage of perpetration, victimization and collective trauma. I have tried to comprehend how collective trauma is passed from generation to generation. I have also committed myself as a psychotherapist to developing an arts oriented approach to working with intercultural conflict transformation in which collective trauma plays a primary role. I call this work *Healing the Wounds of History*.

Healing the Wounds of History began as a drama therapy process in which I used theatre techniques to work with a group of participants from two cultures with a common legacy of conflict and historical trauma. I first used this process in 1989 with sons and daughters of Jewish Holocaust survivors and Nazis. *I have since* used it with many other cultures in conflict, most recently with Israelis and Palestinians, Armenians and Turks on the legacy of genocide, Japanese and Chinese and Japanese and Koreans on the legacy of WWII, Tamil and Sinhalese in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil War, and last January in Lebanon with the factions who were involved in the Lebanese Civil War.

The *Healing the Wounds of History* method has evolved into several related applications: a closed workshop that **focuses on a single trauma or traumatized group or nation**. For example I have worked with the descendants Jewish Holocaust survivors, Native Americans on the legacy of their genocide and Hiroshima atomic bomb survivors as well as the second and third generation participants on the psychological, spiritual and emotional impact of the bomb.

The second application is a more general workshop open to persons of different cultures who wish to explore their legacy of historical trauma. This workshop could include a Vietnam War veteran, an African American who carries the burden of slavery and a German who feels the weight of Germany's Nazi past.

The third application involves therapeutic sessions with an individual, couple

or family for whom historical trauma is a defining event. An example of this.....
..I'm currently working with a man as a therapist who suffers from extreme anxiety and depression and who traces his symptoms to the experiences of his Holocaust survivor mother who lost her entire family in the concentration camps and was a hidden child in France fearing that she would be found and killed.

The fourth Healing the Wounds of History application lasts several days and brings together participants from two cultures with a shared legacy of conflict and trauma. The Remembering Nanjing project is an example of this application.

A fifth process involves creating a theatre piece over a series of months with the group participants on the theme of their conflict or collective trauma. The theatre piece is then performed for the public. I have done this several times with descendants of Holocaust survivors and the Third Reich where they created a public Holocaust and World War II commemoration together.

Finally, a *Playback Theatre* performance is produced after an intensive Healing the Wounds of History workshop in which workshop participants and audience volunteers share personal stories related to the historical trauma in question. This is something that we did in Nanjing last October.

Theory and Principles

Healing the Wounds of History is based on several premises that I would like to briefly outline here:

1. The First one is collective trauma. Collective trauma is a psychological state shared by any group of people and can affect even an entire society. Examples in the United States include the events of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and the Vietnam War. In Japan, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the earthquake and the destruction by the Tsunami are examples. The impact of

collective trauma is carried in our psyches in the form of images, stories, sense memories, and spoken and unspoken messages transmitted by parents, teachers and the media. Ultimately, this process evolves into a collective narrative. This narrative is absorbed unconsciously through a process similar to osmosis and has an impact on the cultural and national identity of the individual and the group.

2. The second one is the trans-generational transmission of trauma. The trans-generational transmission of trauma is a real phenomenon observable in the United States in cultures such as African-Americans and Native Americans where the continuing destructive impact of slavery and genocide is visible centuries after the original atrocities took place. Historical trauma is also transmitted inter-generationally from parent to child where a father's alcoholism or depression, for example, may be directly due to the unresolved Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome of his experience in the Vietnam War, but the historical and collective aspect of the trauma is never fully addressed. I think that Dr. Muramoto's research which reveals that some cases of spousal abuse in Japan may be the result of the unresolved PTSD war trauma suffered by soldiers returning from WWII. This same phenomenon happened in Germany as well. The inheritor of such a legacy of historical trauma receives the parent's trauma as a burden of unexpressed grief, often out of their conscious awareness.

3. The other principal at the heart of the Healing the Wounds of History model is that historical trauma can also have negative effects on cultural and national identity and self-esteem. Human beings are tribal in nature and have a need to feel good about the tribe to which they belong. When this pride of association with their nation or culture is disrupted through a history of war trauma, humiliation, defeat, or subjugation, it negatively affects the collective self-regard in the form of internalized oppression. This can influence the way individuals view or value themselves and their own culture.

4. The Fourth Premise: Healing the Wounds of History takes the view that there is a potential perpetrator in all of us and that under certain circumstances every human being has the capacity for dehumanization and cruelty.

5. The 5th premise is that there can be no permanent political solutions to intercultural conflict until we understand and take into consideration the needs, emotions and unconscious drives of the human being.....until we understand how to tame our impulses towards revenge, hatred, jealousy, greed, racism, absolute submission to authority.....the list goes on and on.

6. By working with specific participants who are representatives of their cultures I seek to make a therapeutic intervention in the collective or societal trauma. Healing the Wounds of History, which takes a psychological as opposed to a political approach to conflict, provides a map to help polarized groups travel across the emotional terrain to reconciliation. In this sense the approach is a form of social activism.

Therapeutic Goals

This work has five important therapeutic goals: The first involves *recognizing and deconstructing cultural or national identity*. I support workshop participants in reflecting on their cultural identity or identities with the goal of working through obstacles to their self-esteem—how they feel about themselves. Within each person's constructed identity lie cracks that hold the fragments of their collective story. Feelings, associations, sense memories that formed the person as well as emotional memories emerge from this deconstruction.

Often it is the member of the family who has been designated consciously or unconsciously as the carrier of the family legacy who shows up in the workshop. In other cases, the collective trauma has gone underground. Due to the assimilation or the silence of a traumatized parent, the family legacy is hidden from the participant's

awareness. In the end, my goal is to help participants uncover the collective story of perpetration or victimization they may be carrying and help them integrate their legacies in a more generative and positive way.

The second goal involves *intercultural conflict resolution and teaching intercultural communication*. Often there is a taboo against speaking to “the other”. People from polarized cultures to stereotype, dehumanize or demonize each other that the simple act of talking can be an important step towards healing.

There can also exist a lack of authentic understanding of the other culture or empathy for their emotional or political stances. Through the self-revealing, storytelling and playful aspects of the Healing the Wounds of History process the tension between the opposing groups is momentarily eased. Enemies are humanized.

The third goal is to help participants move deeply into and experience their personal and *collective grief and mourning*. As I guide participants through the Healing the Wounds of History process there is a well of grief that will eventually be tapped into. Even if it is not displayed or acknowledged at the beginning of a workshop, I am always aware of its presence. The collective grief of the participants’ parents, grandparents, ancestors and culture as a whole is implied by the very act of our coming together. This grief may be related to victimization or to perpetration, or both.

Each traumatized group has a need to experience this inherited pain as unique and special. The added dimension of groups in conflict, sometimes perpetrators and victims grieving together, can have a profound cathartic effect. Participants, as representatives of their cultures, are given the opportunity to give shape and expression to this collective grief, the principle being that, until that pain is grieved fully, the legacy will continue to be passed on to the next generation.

The fourth goal is to *create a culture of empathy*. At its core, Healing the Wounds

of History is about teaching empathy. Workshop participants develop the capacity to feel compassion for the pain of the other group and transcend the impulse to view one's own suffering as superior. This helps to create double binds that participants must resolve. How can I hate this person and have empathy for him or her at the same time?

The fifth goal is to *create meaning out of suffering*. A healthy human being needs to create purpose and meaning out of his or her life. Here the work of Victor Frankl has had a great influence on my work. Suffering is a great teacher. When there is a legacy of trauma, shame, guilt and humiliation, the task is to transform it into meaning. This is a psychological and spiritual task. How can one create meaning out of the meaningless events such as the Holocaust or Hiroshima? The way to master suffering, I believe, is to create acts of service and acts of creation.

Methods and Techniques

Drama Therapy in Intercultural Conflict Resolution

In working with polarized groups over the last 23 years I have identified six phases that can develop in a multi-day workshop. These phases do not necessarily emerge in a progressive way but depend on the given circumstances of the group process including a feeling of safety, cultural influences and the amount of emotional and aesthetic distance from the collective trauma.

Phases of the Process

The first phase in bringing cultures in conflict together is *breaking the taboo against speaking to each other*. Often there is an invisible barrier preventing contact. Speaking to the “enemy” is often perceived as a betrayal. But when two polarized groups break the taboo and engage in honest dialogue, they can begin to work through the layers of unresolved feelings they carry about each other. I work first with the emotional pioneers who pave the way for others to follow.

The second phase involves *humanizing each other through telling our stories*. When members of cultures in conflict listen deeply to each other's stories and hear each other's pain, they begin to care about one another. Their feelings of empathy and friendship become more powerful than the historical imperative to hate one another.

When there is enough trust, I move into the third phase of *exploring and owning the potential perpetrator in all of us*. In order to reconcile, people need to acknowledge that under extreme circumstances, we all have the capacity for cruelty. Accepting this truth is the great equalizer. It levels the playing field.

The fourth phase is *moving deeply into grief*. Grieving together and giving each other permission to grieve is essential. People carry their parents', grandparents' and ancestors' pain, and until that pain is grieved fully, the legacy continues to be passed on to the next generation.

The fifth phase moves towards *creating integration, performances and rituals of remembrance*. When groups in conflict create commemorative rituals and performances, privately and publicly, to acknowledge the complex, difficult history they share, they provide a way for people to channel their feelings in an aesthetic form. Public presentations serve to extend the healing effects of the reconciliation into society by touching the lives and consciousness of others who did not participate in the workshops.

The final phase of this process extends the learning achieved in the workshop out into the world, *making commitments to acts of creation or acts of service*. Creation can mean sharing stories, creating poetry, art, theatre and somehow transforming the pain of their past into an aesthetic form. Another mode is to channel the participants' energy into service: working with political refugees, helping survivors of rape, or doing other work that helps to end injustice or make reparation.

I trust in the profound healing and transformative principles I found in nature when I made my pilgrimage to Auschwitz in 1995—the horror of the ashes of the cremated bodies scattered around the burning fields could be transformed into transcendently beautiful wildflowers.

Thank you for allowing me to introduce some of the principles upon which my work is based. I look forward to continuing our important dialogue on Peace Education.