

Mauthausen

A Journey into History Then and Now

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This is a personal account of my experience of a seminar conducted by Drs. Amy and Arnold Mindell to process a part of world history. This seminar, which took place in Austria from April 27-29, 2001, included a day of worldwork in the concentration camp memorial Mauthausen followed by a two-day worldwork seminar in Vienna. The day at the camp was aimed at "...helping people remember the horrors of the Second World War and accept their deepest feelings, as well as recognize the many faces of racism, anti-Semitism and intolerance in themselves and others, and find ways of dealing with them."¹ The two-day training seminar was aimed at offering new ideas on awareness training and mysticism as a foundation for worldwork and world change, while creating a space for people's experiences at Mauthausen and the issues surrounding it to be processed further.

My Spirituality

Before beginning this account I would like to say a few words about my evolving relationship to the spirit, or divine, or essence of our being, as this aspect of my life was an integral part of my experience in this journey. I grew up steeped in the beliefs of the Greek Orthodox Church, which spoke of a male God that is separate from and outside me, who lives in the heavens, and who sent His beloved Son to sacrifice Himself to redeem humanity. As I grew older and was exposed to other systems of thought and forms of spirituality such as the process work paradigm, Taoism, Zen

Buddhism, the spirituality of the Aboriginal people in Australia, and that of the Native American people, my concept of the divine started to shift towards something that is inherent in all nature, an integral part of the entire universe. The use of certain artifacts such as a medicine bag, or the performance of certain rituals, such as burning sage and sweet grass, help remind me of and connect me to something other than my human form; an essence in me that is formless, has no beginning and no end, is connected to and *is* the universe. During this journey there were many times when I felt the need for this connection. Experiencing it momentarily created a state change in me, giving me access to a different perspective.

The Concentration Camp

April 2001, Mauthausen. What to say? So much feeling... The flood started kilometers away. Passing by woods I see fleeting images of people in the trees being walked to their death, to execution points, or physical exhaustion... Some are trying to escape. Railway tracks running alongside the road, thoughts of loaded trains heading for the death camps... Tears start rolling down my cheeks, the lump in my chest is getting bigger and bigger. *We must be getting closer. I feel it.* A sign appears on the road, Mauthausen 15 km.

I'm sitting in the back of the bus. Amy and Arny are sitting nearby with their eyes closed. They are preparing. How can one prepare? I feel them, and my heart is flooded with love. I

wish I could become a blanket, wrap myself around them, ease what we are about to face. My first impulse to join them was out of love. I wanted to be with them, be there for them, care for and support them as they were attempting the most difficult thing up to now in their lives bringing them face to face with their personal history, and their own pain. Soon enough I realized I was also there to face myself and my own pain and guilt, to carry the responsibility I hold for all this as a Greek citizen and an Orthodox Christian. The anti-Semitism that is so deeply ingrained in us made us lose our humanity; we did not save our Jews, nor our Gypsies like the Danish people did. Reading Michael Berenbaum's *The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: The World Must Know*, I realized for the first time how deeply ingrained, how widespread, and how old anti-Semitism is, how the whole world was responsible, not only Hitler and the Nazis. Reading that book was the hardest thing I'd done in my life. I had to stop midway and light candles. The inhumanity, the cruelty, the excruciating pain of it all made me want to stop many times but something in me kept me going. *If so many people experienced this horror, at least you can honor them by feeling it all...* In that sense this journey was also an honoring of all who lived through, and all who died in these horrific events.

I reach into my bag for my little medicine pouch and put it around my neck. I close my eyes and hold on to it. I'm going to need all the help I can get. I pray to my ancestors and loved ones who have crossed over. *Grandpa, grandma, Apostoli, Markus, Annja, Demon, come be with us, help us.* I open my eyes as the bus starts going up a winding road. My heart is pounding. Suddenly, as we come out of a turn, the camp appears in full sight; a huge cold, gray, stone wall. A fortress. A prison. My breath stops. I burst into tears. I hear Arny crying. *How are we going to do this? I don't think I can I do it.* The bus stops, people start getting off. *Everyone has left. I should get off.* I climb down the stairs and take a few steps but suddenly my knees buckle and a wail rises from within my chest. Alexia takes

me into her arms. The wail intensifies. I can't breathe. I try to breathe. Little by little more air is coming through. I open my eyes and look at it again. There it is, standing, a tall, gray stone wall, wires all around, towers standing above. *I'm going in. I'm going to go in...*

I walk up towards the entrance holding Alexia's hand; I'm so grateful she is there. As we walk through the entrance we come into a long, dark courtyard surrounded by tall walls. A cold wind rushes through me. My temperature drops. I'm freezing. Later that day I came upon a picture of that courtyard in a memorial book of the camp. It was full of men, so full, no space for them to move. That whole courtyard was full of naked, emaciated bodies. In the midst of them a human pile on the ground, people too weak to stand. Six thousand men, I read, were made to wait there for 24 hours; 140 of them died there that day.

We walked through the courtyard and joined a group of us who were reading a sign on the wall. It listed the nationalities of the 195,000 people who had died in the camp. A large number of Greek Jews were among those who had died there. *I wish we had saved our people...*

We were now entering another courtyard. This ground was meticulously laid with bits of stones too. The entire camp was built of granite from the rock quarry near by, with the slave labor of 300 inmates who were transferred there in 1938 from the Dachau concentration camp expressly for this purpose. They had built it for three years. Stepping on that ground made me aware of each step I took.

On the left side were the barracks where the inmates lived, bare rooms with wooden bunk beds, three tiers high. At the times when the camp was full, five people slept in each bed, fifteen in each bunk, with no blankets and no heat. The SS forced them to sleep with the windows open in the freezing cold. Next to that were the bathrooms where they forced people to wash with frozen water. Many of the prisoners in the camp died from starvation, physical exhaustion, and the cold. Outside the next barrack was a sign saying that this had been the children's barrack. Having reached my

limit, I did not enter that barrack or the rest that lay ahead one next to the other. I walked outside them with a heavy heart. On the right hand side was what they called the banker, the isolation ward. People taken there, were experimented on and tortured to death.

We gathered slowly in a space that had been turned into a meeting room and sat in a circle. The silence was thick. Amy and Arny opened by saying there was nothing that we could do in this place that would be right. Somehow that was so relieving to hear. They honored the Jewish people, the Roma people, the gay people, the so-called disabled and so-called mentally ill people, and all those who resisted and ended up in the camps. They thanked everyone who came, all those who felt, and those who were numb, those who were sitting with the guilt and those sitting with the pain, and asked us each to introduce ourselves and where we came from. We were a group of about 90 people from 16 countries: Austria, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, the USA, New Zealand, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Estonia, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Japan, Hungary, Croatia, and Greece.

Group work, as conceptualized and practiced in the process work paradigm, entails among other things interactions between the various positions, roles or viewpoints on a particular issue. These form the polarities in which a certain field or group atmosphere manifests. Certain of these viewpoints, in their initial expression, may appear to some to dishonor the apparent victims of a given situation.

Amy and Arny informed us that in honor of all that had taken place in Mauthausen we were going to focus on inner work during the time we spent together in the camp, leaving any group interactions that might want to happen for the time we would spend together back in Vienna, during the next two days.

In process work “the inner self, relationships and the world are all [seen as] aspects of the same community process” (Mindell, 1995: 66). In this sense, inner work—working on the outer situation as an aspect of one’s inner life—is one of the levels that is addressed when

working on world problems and vice versa; inner problems are also addressed as reflections of outer social problems.

Amy and Arny told us that we were going to try to work with the “ghosts,” the deep experiences that are felt but not directly represented. We were going to try to work with our experiences of those who had perished in the camp, both the persecutors and the persecuted. Encouraging us to go inside they started leading us through an inner work.

Let a spirit come to you... Introduce yourself to them, and ask them their name. Ask them who they were, what they were doing before they came to the camp... Get to know them... Speak to them and find out how you might use your life to their benefit? What can you do to help them complete their life?

In my vision a little boy appeared to me. He was standing at the door of one of the barracks with his arms outstretched, looking straight at me. I took him in my arms and held him close... Victor used to live in Russia, out in the country with his parents who were farmers. *Love people*, he told me, *love them and enjoy life*.

Amy and Arny encouraged us to share our visions and the insights we had, and one after the other, people starting talking about loving people and enjoying the simplicity and beauty of life. It was a revelation to many of us that the “dead” didn’t seem to be into hatred and revenge but into love and enjoying the beauty of life!

I am putting the word *dead* in quotation marks to highlight its field aspect, i.e., that the word dead refers not only to those who died but also to a role in this field, both outer and inner.

We broke for lunch with a lighter feeling than when we had entered that room. As I entered the guesthouse though, a few miles away, I realized I could not stay indoors nor eat at that point, so I left the group and started walking toward the camp. On my way back I noticed some huge cliffs of gray stone and realized this was the quarry. I had seen pictures of it on the Mauthausen web site² and read about the events that had occurred there. This was

the epicenter of the camp, the reason of its existence in that spot. Mauthausen was a punishment and death-by-labor camp. The SS forced people to extract granite from the quarry using only the most primitive tools, and wherever possible their bare hands... People were literally worked to death.

As I came closer I noticed Martin, an Austrian man from the seminar, sitting cross-legged on the ground in the middle of a field facing the huge cliffs. He was meditating. He looked so tiny in front of those cliffs, yet I felt that he was holding that entire valley and all it had witnessed in his arms. The agitation and tension I had felt entering the guesthouse melted away; this was the place for me to be. I followed my feet to the left and found myself next to a small pond at the base of a long series of stairs made of that same stone. I recognized the 186 “stairs of death” from the pictures on the web site. Inmates were often forced to climb up and down them endlessly, carrying large blocks of stone on their backs until they could no longer stand on their feet. The blocks often fell, crushing those following behind. Some people were pushed by the guards to their deaths, while others jumped in desperation, wanting it all to end.

I took out a little piece of sage I had brought with me and lit it. I started to turn around in a circle, crying, praying for the release of those who had died in that spot. Suddenly the whole place reverberated with a booming *ommm...* *Oh my god, what is that?* The cliffs, the air, the ground, my body became one healing vibration... And again... *ommm...* the sound filled up the space, lifting it... no space, no time, just the vibration, glowing... I felt whispers of gratitude from all around... *thank you... thank you.*

Out of the deep silence that ensued arose another sound, this time from within me! I let it come out, feeling it reverberate in my bones and in the air. This sound had first arisen a few weeks earlier in the “Stone Songs” seminar³ that Amy and Arny had led, weaving together theoretical ideas from the areas of music and physics, immersing us in the worlds of our tones and overtones. The goal of the seminar

was to get in touch with the deepest most basic intent that is guiding our lives and to connect it to our experiences in the world. We explored this basic intent as subtle vibrations that are inherent in us, and in all matter, which contribute to the larger global vibration that guides the universe. One of the ways that we tried to get in touch with this subtle vibration was through the use of tones and overtones that arose from within us, starting from various access points (body symptoms, relationship problems, and group atmospheres), which we then unfolded through visions and stories.

The sound I refer to above arose in an exercise in which we started from experiencing a body symptom. We let that experience express itself in a tone, which we then unfolded into an image and a story. We then found the first overtone to that tone, unfolding it in a similar way, and let the two tones interact, being open to whatever emerged. In the end we meditated on how we could use the resolution that emerged with ourselves, in our relationships, and in the groups we are a part of.

The story that emerged in the end of that exercise came back to me: This was a healing sound created by the rubbing of my body up against the rim of a huge bell floating in the universe as I was orbiting around it. Lightness came over me. A bird started singing near by. I opened my eyes, noticing the glimmering of the sun in the water and the brightness of the green of the vegetation that was now starting to cover the granite cliffs.

I heard voices approaching and got up to leave. I was not in an emotional space for human chatter. I thanked the spirit of the place and started climbing the stairs to get back to the camp. Midway I had to stop. My legs didn't have the strength to take me any further. *This would be the end for me*, I thought, having a fleeting imagination of being shoved into the void. Each step I took brought me back to the grim reality of what had taken place there. By the time I reached the top my heart was heavy as lead.

A few meters ahead I passed by what the SS had named the “parachutists’ cliff,” a cliff more

than 50 meters high from which inmates, mostly Jewish, were pushed off.

How could they do this? How?

I passed by the memorials different countries and groups have made. The one made by the Roma people in honor of their dead was earthshaking in its simplicity: rail tracks leading to a pile of flowers on the ground.

God, how could this have happened?

I reached the camp and entered the courtyard in despair. I've lost track of time. *Where is everyone? They must be taking the tour of the grounds. I wish I could find Alexandra. I can't take this alone anymore.* Like magic I see her figure appear from afar. *Is that really Alexandra? Please let it be...* By the time I walk there the group is gone. I walk down some stairs leading to a basement where I think I saw them go and enter into a long, dark, empty room. I get the shivers. It's cold and damp in here. I hear voices near by. I turn a corner at the end of the room and enter a very small square room. I look up. *Oh my god, I'm in a gas chamber.* Tears start rolling down my cheeks. My jaw starts to tremble. Showerheads are hanging from the ceiling. The room is crammed... it's so small. Martin is standing at the door, Alexandra right in front of him. I squeeze Martin's arm in appreciation for his presence in the quarry, connecting with him for a moment with my eyes, and grab onto Alexandra. She turns. She sees me. She's so relieved. I can't believe I found her. She's pale. She has tears in her eyes. I hold on to her tight; I'm so grateful she's there. I reach into my little sachet and take a pinch of a mixture of sage, sweet grass, and cedar I have with me from a Native American ceremony I'd been to a few years back, and sprinkle it on the ground. The Austrian guard is telling us this was the only gas chamber left intact. The camp was liberated before the SS had time to dissemble it. He's telling us one gruesome detail after the other. Two inmates were made to do everything, lead people to the chamber, close the doors, open the valves. They had to carry the bodies to the next room and put them, one by one, in the two crematoria that were there to burn. These two people survived to tell their stories as they

hid when the camp was under attack and the SS didn't have time to kill them.

My stomach is turning. *I can't hear anymore. I can't see anymore. It's too much... it's too much...* There is something cruel and harsh happening in the moment, in the way all this information is being laid upon us in such detail with no reaction to it, no expression of feeling from our guide, or space for us to react. I sprinkle a little mixture in each of the crematoria, wishing to bring some healing to it all, and move through the room with the photo exhibit, taking quick glances around. I want to honor the people in the pictures but don't have it in me anymore to stop and really look. From a distance I hear the guide ending his narration by recognizing the existence of all the prejudices that lie at the root of this genocide, in Austria today, and feel a slight sense of relief. I wander off towards the meeting room and sit in silence waiting for the group to gather.

"Why do these things happen? We're interested in trying to find out more about that. Most of us have already imagined ourselves being here. We want to try to go further with this imagination." Arny's voice brings me back out. I open my eyes and see Martin sitting across the room. Our eyes meet and I smile again in gratitude for his healing presence in the quarry. *"We want to lead you through another inner work now. Close your eyes... It's 1945. You're in the camp. See yourself. Where are you? What's happening around you? Now start rising above the scene. You're floating above... keep rising... go up to the clouds... keep rising... go up above the clouds... keep rising... you're leaving the earth... keep rising... you're up on the moon... look down... what do you see? You are the force that has created this... Why? Why have you created this? Talk to this force until you get an answer..."*

I saw myself in the courtyard outside the barracks, in the midst of other women. We were standing in line, waiting. None of us knew what was going to happen next. Terror... I started rising above, higher and higher. The people started to get smaller and smaller until they were just tiny specks. Then I was in outer space looking down at the earth. The planet was surrounded by a lightning storm. Huge

yellow lightning bolts were flashing all around the planet. I became the creator of that storm, and when I heard Army ask why, I said, “*You have to learn to deal with me.*” “*Are you completely nuts?*” I asked the force. “*Look at what you have created...*” “*You just have to learn to deal with me,*” it said in a very matter of fact tone. “*You just have to learn to deal with this force.*” As the force I felt there is nothing really evil about me. I am just one among the many forces in the universe and human beings need to learn to deal with me. I’m just an energy that needs to be wrestled with and used.

For a moment I felt very detached, and experienced a sense of acceptance of it all as part of nature, part of me, a larger me. I quickly lost that sense as we were exiting the building when an Austrian man turned to me and said, “*Isn’t it beautiful? It’s really just a beautiful place. Those are the Austrian Alps.*” He had noticed that I was looking at the mountains one could see at a distance. Ugh... Instant polarization! I was silently raging inside my head. *WHAT? What on earth are you talking about? Yes, what beautiful scenery you chose to put this monstrous place in... How nice that people got to have such a beautiful view as you hanged them, shot them, gassed them, starved them, worked them to exhaustion, made them freeze to death, tortured them, or conducted your medical experiments on them. I am sure they appreciated it a lot.* I wanted to kill him. I slowed, letting him walk ahead. I was in no state to interact with him. *Tomorrow... I’m sure everything will come up tomorrow.* I was so polarized; he had suddenly become the SS in my eyes. He was the embodiment of all evil, and I had no awareness in that moment of my own “evilness,” of my raging murderous feelings!

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Martin to my side. That man seemed to appear right when I desperately needed something he brought with his presence! The polarization softened for a moment. We hugged and walked in silence for a while, and then I shared my experience of him down at the quarry, thanking him for what he had brought to that place. Midway to the exit I noticed a pile of small stones at the base of a memorial column

and following an impulse I took out my pouch from underneath my blouse. I was looking for a small glass stone that a Jewish friend had given me, asking me to take it with me and do with it whatever I felt pulled to do. I lay it on the ground in the midst of the stones, a little piece of sparkling magic for that place. “*It looks like an eye watching over things,*” Martin said looking at it from above, and we continued towards the exit. It was soothing to walk next to him; something in his presence softened the effect of that place on my body.

As I’m writing this account I’m realizing how much I’ve needed to do this. It is only in the slowing down of the events that is happening through this recounting that I am becoming fully aware of all the details of my experience. It’s like I’ve been on system overload, not able to feel and experience it all to its full extent. My father passed away ten days after this journey, pushing it all even further away, but a little Post-It label on my computer kept it from sinking completely into the background. “*Write about Mauthausen.*” As I’m writing now I realize it has been difficult holding it all inside. This experience needs to come out; it needs to be shared.

As we step outside the last gate separating us from the outside world I feel a sense of relief. *I’m out of there.* We walk towards the bus where people are hanging out in groups of threes and fours and enter into a conversation with another Austrian man who was standing alone. “*Thank you for being here,*” I say. “*It’s a big thing...*” “*You know, I think they should just let the grass grow over it instead of preserving it like they do, let time do its thing, let it deteriorate,*” he tells us. “*But how can we let it go if we haven’t even begun looking at it?*” I ask. “*I’ve seen it over and over again, I’ve seen it enough,*” he replies. “*I came here with my school when I was fifteen years old, and have seen so many films about it...*”

As he said that I remembered the group of teenagers I saw at one point while we were in the camp being taken around the grounds. They had reminded me of being a teenager myself, on a school excursion, being taken around yet another ancient site. I was never

really open to learning anything about ancient Greece, or the rest of our history while I was in school, mainly I think because I was reacting to all that glorified history being shoved down my throat. *Somehow their history must be shoved down their throat too, I thought, creating a reaction that never gets a chance to be processed, which must stop them from being able to open up to learning from and facing their history. If I had a hard time doing that growing up in Greece, which is a country that has been glorified for its past and carries the collective projection of being a cradle of civilization and the birthplace of democracy, I can imagine how difficult that must be growing up in a country that has been chastised for its past, and carries the collective projection of evil... Shame, humiliation and guilt must play a huge role in all this.*

I was so glad this was only the beginning, that we had the next two days in front of us to focus on all these interactions that were in the background waiting to emerge. I said something to that effect to the man I was talking with, and climbed up the stairs of the bus, giving it a rest for the moment.

Emotional exhaustion, I think, was the state of many of us on that bus on the way back to Vienna. We hit rush hour traffic so it took double the time to get to the city. The delay gave me time to let go into my exhaustion and then slowly pull myself together, at least to the point of being able to function again in the outside world, enough to have dinner and get myself back to the youth hostel.

The next morning I woke up feeling nauseated. I jumped into the shower, hoping that would help, but as soon as I saw the showerhead I thought of people being gassed and felt worse. I stood under the hot water for a while, and then got dressed and went to look for some tea. My stomach was turning. Riding the subway I was relieved that I was heading to the seminar rather than the airport being left to deal with all this on my own.

The Group Processes

After introducing us to the basic concepts of group work⁴ Amy and Arny led us into a group process suggesting we try to process

experiences and feelings related to the day in Mauthausen and the Second World War.

My recollection of the group process we had that morning is skewed by the altered state I was in, but I remember at some point a woman saying that she was tired of feeling accused, tired of feeling guilty. As soon as she said that I felt a rush of rage rise up in me. I found myself standing in the middle of the group trembling. *YES. I am the one accusing you. How could you? How could you do such a thing? How?* I was screaming inside my head and at the same time trying to calm myself down. I didn't want to just let all this emotion loose on people. I didn't want to injure the scene. The intensity of the emotions put me in an altered state. I was no longer following what was going on, all I could hear were my own words. All I could do was stand there and tremble and wait. I knew I was a part of the field but couldn't find a way to bring myself in. *No, don't just unleash all this onto people... just sit with it and wait...* The next thing I remember is a young Austrian woman standing on the other side saying *"I don't want to push it aside anymore, I want to look at the guilt, I need time to look at the guilt."* I felt a melting in my chest, a release... I could breathe easier... I sighed in relief and shared the effect of her words on me, thanking her for helping release the murderous feelings that had taken over in me.

The woman went on to talk about her guilt. She was the daughter of a Nazi officer who had dedicated her life to trying to make a difference. She was working in an organization as an ally for immigrants living in Austria, trying to work with the xenophobia that was prevalent in her country. The sharing of her personal struggle with it all changed the atmosphere in the group, creating a momentary resolution. Many issues had been touched upon and were waiting to be addressed. Acknowledging their presence, we paused for a lunch break, knowing that some of these topics would be focused on in the small group work scheduled for the afternoon. The nausea that I was feeling that morning had finally eased. I was so grateful we had begun to go deeper into all this.

During the debriefing Amy and Arny were talking about wanting to find a way to bring in the “dead” more, in group process, in the sense of bringing in their sense of detachment. *“Most of us, in group process, are not aware that we are doing things [such as seeking revenge] thinking that this is what the ‘dead’ [the victims in a given situation] want us to do. But if we talked to the ‘dead’ we would realize that they might want something different. If we talked to them more, there might be more interaction and more freedom.”* Amy and Arny were suggesting that we speak to the “dead” more as a way of accessing a more detached and infinite perspective which has grown from life’s agonies and ecstasies. The “dead” are a place in us. Their comments hit home!

In the small group that afternoon we focused on xenophobia, trying to unfold the role of the one who didn’t want other people to come into their country. We struggled to go beyond the polarization between a xenophobic figure that seemed to just hate and wanted nothing to do with anyone who had different values or a different lifestyle, and one who identified with being different, but the figure identified with being the “other” seemed to remain unchanged by any interaction. Any attempt to express the fear and the need for safety that some of us felt to be beneath the hatred of the “other” was met by resistance from the side that identified with being different: *“But you are not the cold-hearted fascist who wants to exterminate me,”* the “other” would say. At one point, standing on the side of the xenophobe I felt that the “other” actually just wanted to wipe me off of the face of the earth. *“You don’t make any space for me to exist. You have no interest in me, in what I am experiencing and what I am feeling,”* I said as the xenophobe. *“Yes, it’s true, you have caused me so much pain and suffering, I just hate you. I don’t believe you. I don’t trust you. I don’t want to open up to you or make space for you,”* said the “other.” *“As long as you don’t make space for me to exist in my difference I will hate you and want to kill you,”* I said as the xenophobe. We realized the two sides resembled each other in that neither could make space for the other.

Sharing, later on, the difficulty of getting people to go deeper, Arny told me that I needed to let myself go into the dreaming, feel into the essence of the different roles, and bring it in. *Right! I have to do it!* How many times had I heard this, yet it was as if I was hearing it for the first time! What helped me hear it, I think, this time, was the realization that behind trying so hard to get others to go deeper lay my edge—the limit of my known world—to attempting to go deeper myself! Realizing how difficult it was for me to do gave me a deeper appreciation of the immensity of my request of others!

Perhaps sharing an example might help illuminate how getting to the sentient essence can lead to a momentary resolution in group process. I remember a group process in which the group interaction seemed to be stuck in a polarization between the positions of the social activist and the hermit. The social activist was furious at the hermit for staying up in the mountains meditating, and wanted her to come down and help change the world. The hermit felt she was changing the world by working on the inner aspect of things unseen. She felt unappreciated by the social activist. With the facilitator’s encouragement, the hermit tried to go into the sentient essence of her experience and after a few moments of silence shared how painful it was for her physically when she was in the midst of all the tension. The hermit suffered from a form of arthritis. This brought a change in the atmosphere of the group and in the social activist, who started sharing her pain around the physical strain her body was under, being continuously in fighting mode, and how much she needed to allow herself to be a hermit from time to time. At the level of the essence they found a common ground; the two of them then started talking about ways to care for each other and themselves while being in the world.

Going back to the seminar in Vienna, the next morning, Amy and Arny talked to us about open forums, a more linear style of group process that creates the space for people to focus on a specific issue needing to be

addressed in the community, leading us through some questions regarding an open forum that we would like to put together where we live. Later we spun the pen to see which of those topics the Tao wanted us to focus on. Spinning a pen is a kind of divination ritual. The person it points to is seen as carrying the background dreaming of the group. In other words, whatever this person works on is meaningful for the whole group. The pen pointed to a woman who wanted to conduct an open forum on the theme of guilt.

A Swiss man opened the discussion by talking about wanting to take responsibility as a Swiss citizen for the role his country had played in prolonging the Second World War. *"If it hadn't been for us, the war would have ended two years earlier. I feel terrible when I think how many people died in those two years..."* A woman from the Slovak Republic shared her feelings of pain and guilt for the anti-Semitism in her country. Then a young Austrian woman took the microphone and said, *"I feel a lot of pain when I think of all that happened but I don't feel guilty."* As soon as I heard that I felt something in me react. *What do you mean you don't feel guilty? How can you not feel guilty?* I got up and started to move around in the back of the room, wondering if I should interact with her about it. Here I was back in the spot I was the day before! I felt agitated... *You should feel guilty. You are guilty.*

The group let it go. People continued to take the microphone and speak until at one point Arny came in saying that there was a ghost in the room, something we were all talking about but none of us was directly representing; the accuser. He stepped in the middle of the group and addressing the young Austrian woman said, *"I need to talk to you about what you said about feeling pain but not feeling guilty. Would that be right for you?"* The woman agreed and came forward. An intense silence filled the room like it does when a group is about to focus on a hot spot. These intense moments are doorways to deepening the process.

Arny asked her to say more about what she meant. The woman said that since she had first

heard about what happened in Austria during the Second World War, which was when she was young, she had felt a lot of pain for the people who had suffered but she did not feel guilty for the events that had occurred. Arny asked her what her father did during the war and she said that when her father was fifteen years old they had drafted him into the army, but he had refused to kill people and had been put in a camp. She came from a family system that identified with having resisted and being the victim of the power that had victimized the people that Arny was standing for. The interaction seemed to be stuck. The woman could not understand why she should feel guilty, while Arny was in a difficult spot, trying to stand for a voice that was critical of her statement, having feelings about it as a Jewish person, and at the same time being one of the identified facilitators of the event.

At this point, Amy came in telling Arny that he looked like he was having a lot of feelings. Arny took a deep breath and gestured to Amy to come in and help. Amy stepped in, giving Arny the chance to step out. He seemed relieved and grateful for the chance to do that. His awareness of being part of those who were decimated had allowed him to bring forward and represent the ghost of the one who is critical of those not wanting to take responsibility for the past, or for the present situation in the world. Now other people were needed to help fill in that role. The deep feelings that lay beneath the criticism seemed to be a key to deepening the process.

Amy stood for a minute with her eyes closed and then looking at the young woman spoke in a trembling voice, *"Over here, I need something from you... I have so many feelings... So many of my people suffered and died... I need something..."* An older Austrian woman jumped in the middle, and standing next to the younger woman said to Amy, her voice full of emotion, *"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I don't want my guilt to stop me anymore. I don't want it to be a wall between us. I want to connect with you..."* *"I want that too,"* Amy said. *"I don't want the guilt to be a*

wall between us either.” Both were in tears, holding one another’s arms.

Arny, who had come closer, said then to the woman, *“I want to tell you about my guilt. My people have done horrific things too. The whole scene that’s happening in Israel can be seen as a cycling of the victim unconsciously becoming the abuser.”* I was in awe. This was a crucial moment. I felt that his comment prevented the scene from becoming a public humiliation of the Austrian people, which would cycle the need for the emergence of a nationalistic spirit seeking to restore the dignity of a people. It is so easy to recycle history in our effort to heal the wounds it has left open.

An Austrian man that was standing nearby started to speak, tears rolling down his cheeks. *“I am in pain because I cannot feel the pain. I was there yesterday, and I could not feel the pain...”* This might be the deeper thing behind the first woman’s difficulty feeling guilty, I thought. A woman standing next to him started to cry. Someone supported her to speak and she shared her story. *“I lost the love of my life because we did not know how to deal with all this. We thought our love would be enough but it wasn’t. All this came in.”* She was Austrian and had fallen in love and married a Jewish man. A few years later they separated. People were all huddled around those standing in the middle. There was a deep sense of intimacy in the room.

Later on during the debriefing Amy and Arny commented, *“Guilt is essentially a relationship issue. It needs to come in. It creates relationship.”* According to my understanding, when guilt remains marginalized due to the suffering it creates, it paralyzes us, freezing us into numbness that becomes a wall that separates us from the people we have wronged. When we allow ourselves to feel guilt and bring it into the interaction, taking responsibility for the pain we have created, it melts the barriers, creating relationship where there has been a void.

Afterthoughts

This venture into history was a ray of hope for me in my despair around the seemingly endless cycling of history. I realized how fifty

years later we have barely begun to touch upon the issues that led to the Second World War, let alone all the trauma created by it. We poured cement over the ruins and rebuilt our cities, trying to bury it all and start over again, but it’s all here in our bodies, in our feelings, in our relationships, in our dreams, in our wars.

Perhaps it was impossible to do anything other than bury it. The events were horrific, the trauma immense, making it impossible for us to look back. We needed to create distance. We needed to move on. Our only hope was to believe in the possibility of a different future. There was nothing but despair, excruciating pain, inhumanity, destruction, and devastation in the past. We had to take what little of our humanity had remained and try to nurture it, try to help it survive. We needed to believe that this was the doing of evil forces, which we would never allow to take over again.

Perhaps we are now starting to have enough distance to look back, to go down into the basements and face the ghosts that are waiting for us there. Perhaps we can attempt to open up to all feelings and all experiences, at least enough to give ourselves the chance to go deeper into them to discover what lies beneath that wants to be let in. Perhaps we can now make space for more and more of these kinds of interactions, which are just waiting to be had.

So much of our history is untouched trauma... the enslavement of the peoples of Africa, the genocide of the Native Peoples worldwide, the genocide of the Armenian people, the Kurdish people, the peoples in Southeast Asia, the people of Iraq, the ethnic cleansing of Serbs, Muslims and Croats in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, the civil wars in Rwanda and Burundi, Sierra Leone. The list is endless.

We go about our lives carrying the experience of the people of our lineage, our culture, our race, our ethnicity, and all the feelings that they and we have about those experiences. Most of us hold on to these tightly, sometimes unknowingly, until somebody listens to our perspective.⁵ Being stuck, however, in a one-sided position over long periods of time affects

our bodies and physical well being as we begin to react to our own one-sidedness. Other sides of us, energies that want to be lived, manifest in our body symptoms in an attempt toward wholeness.⁶ It also affects our relationships, for when we are frozen in a “social activist” position, it makes it even harder for us to allow ourselves to entertain the notion that we are the “other” and explore this aspect of relationship life.⁷ On a global level, this is conducive to the cycling and escalation of conflicts as the underlying feeling experiences are never addressed.

Starting from the tension between polarized positions, interactions such as the ones described in this article provide the opportunity for feelings and experiences to be expressed, for one-sided positions to be stood for, and then also dropped when their deeper essence is revealed. Such interactions introduce fluidity back into the field, and awareness of both parts and the oneness connecting everything in the background, creating a ground out of which momentary resolutions and a sense of healing and community often arises.

Such work can be preventive medicine for body symptoms, relationship problems and escalation of conflicts. It is essential to our well-being, and to getting to know ourselves and one another. It provides an avenue for us to sense and become aware of the universal forces that are at the roots of these experiences, the interplay of which is at the root of our existence, each flicker of “lucidity” from our part a blink in the awakening of a “Self-reflective” universe awakening “itself to itself, and therefore us to it” (Mindell, 2000: 219).

It is awesome how much comes out of an interaction... It is well worth a try!

Notes

1. “The World—Inside Out” flyer for the event
2. <http://remember.org/camps/mauthausen/>
3. The Stone Songs seminar was conducted by Drs. Amy and Arnold Mindell, in Yachats, OR, from February 26 – March 2, 2001. The foundation and background to this work can be found in Arnold Mindell’s books, *Quantum Mind* and *Dreaming While Awake*.
4. Over the last decade, process work has explored

the “field” that occurs in a group. A field is an overall atmosphere, a kind of a wave field, which has a certain tension to it. This tension breaks up into polarities, roles, or viewpoints on a particular issue, which one can feel into and represent, while holding the space for an interaction between them to happen. People who feel pulled to the different viewpoints are encouraged to help fill in the various roles. The facilitator keeps an eye out for “edges”—communication barriers created by the group’s identity, and helps people express what can’t quite be expressed. The facilitator also looks for “ghost” roles—deep experiences felt but not directly represented, and helps to bring them in, as well as “hot spots”—intense moments—and helps the group stay with and go deeper into them. The facilitator also tries to notice the subtle signals indicating that a person standing for one side has actually switched and is now feeling for the other side, knowing that people are bigger than a role, i.e., that no one role captures the complexity of a person. At some point during the interaction the facilitator tries to go over to the various sides and dream into the essence of the expressed content, helping the interactions to deepen, as people “often only see the polarities and forget the feelings of the field that were there almost before the polarities were there.” Group process is seen as a way for a community to get to know itself and is based on the principle of deep democracy—an openness to all that is present, a feeling attitude that all people, feelings, experiences, and dreams are needed and valued parts of the whole, and all need to be known. (Quoting from Drs. Amy and Arnold Mindell presentation on group work at the “Stone Songs” seminar.)

5. For more on people as roles in a field see Alexandra Vassiliou’s *Listen or Die: The Terrorist as a Role*.
6. For more on the processes manifesting in our bodies see Arnold Mindell’s *Working with the Dreaming Body* and Amy and Arnold Mindell’s *Riding the Horse Backwards: Process Work in Theory and Practice*.
7. For more on the inner aspect of conflict see Arnold Mindell’s *Dreaming While Awake: Techniques for 24-hour Lucid Dreaming*.

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