

# COLLECTIVE TRAUMA: THE NIGHTMARE OF HISTORY\*

ARLENE AUDERGON, London, UK and Enterprise, Oregon

**ABSTRACT** *Although trauma is usually examined as an individual experience, it is a collective dynamic. Whole communities are traumatized and dynamics of trauma involve all of us and affect the course of history. An orientation to understanding trauma is needed that is at once personal, communal and political. This paper discusses why understanding the dynamics of trauma is essential for facilitators of conflict resolution in zones of conflict and for post-war reconciliation and community building. It also considers that, in addition to international tribunals and truth commissions, there is a need for community forums throughout society to work with issues of accountability and collective trauma concerning past and current conflicts. Trauma is also relevant to such issues as understanding dynamics of revenge, the silence accompanying atrocity, and historical revisionism.*

**Key words:** trauma, hotspots, war, reconciliation, conflict resolution, Process Work

Much has been studied and written about trauma and methods of working with trauma, mostly from an individual psychological perspective, focusing on the internal experience and dynamics of trauma. Trauma, however, is not only an individual psychological phenomenon but also a collective one. Entire communities are traumatized, and the dynamics of trauma have collective dimensions that influence the course of global history. Even when our focus is therapeutic, to support individuals with traumatic experience, orienting only to individuals' symptoms is inadequate. An orientation is required that is at once personal, communal and political.

My experience conducting post-war forums in Croatia led me to deep soul searching and research on dynamics of trauma, particularly concerning how to work with dynamics of individual and community trauma in conflict resolution work. Over years, I grappled with how to develop my facilitation skills to work with volatile and intractable conflict in post-war zones in a way that does not re-trigger trauma. I've been deeply touched by the participants in these forums who often shared their most personal and tragic experiences, and who have taught me how our most intimate experiences are also communal, and touch a chord in us that is

---

\* This article is extracted and summarized from portions of my book, *The War Hotel: We are the Players in Violent Conflict*, which is to be published.

deeper than the polarizations of our conflicts. As I write about the collective dynamics of trauma in relation to violent conflict and conflict resolution, and occasionally bring an example from these forums, I am still grappling with how to honour both the private and social meaning of their experience.

## FORUMS IN CROATIA

Over several years, Lane Arye and I facilitated many forums of people from all war-affected areas in Croatia, dealing with post-war issues of return, reconciliation and community building. The project was coordinated by a non-governmental organization in Croatia, Udruga Mi, and supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), USAID, The Threshold Foundation, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The participants were from a wide variety of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as international organizations and heads of municipalities. The participants worked as psychologists, social workers, lawyers, teachers, doctors, mayors, and youth workers and in community planning. The forum participants were a mixed group of Croats, Serbs, Muslims, and other ethnicities, such as Hungarians and Roma, and from mixed backgrounds and mixed marriages. Each participant had unique war experiences and many were themselves refugees, displaced or returnees. All had experienced great loss during the war and many had severe traumatic experience. The groups gathered to discuss and process together the kinds of tensions and issues they met in their work and lives. One of the ideas behind the forums is that people are able to work in their commu-

nities only as far as they have themselves been able to grapple with and process the complex and painful issues with which they are faced. The success of their practical efforts concerning community building across Croatia was very much dependent on how they could meet the tensions and polarizations in the atmosphere of their communities in the aftermath of war, with its toll on the spirit of community and outlook for the future.

We would usually begin the four-day forums by opening up discussions about the many issues on people's minds, such as human rights, youth, elderly, gender issues, community hopelessness, economic issues in the community, young people leaving their communities, the need to find mass graves, the separation and reconciliation of communities, and outbreaks of violence. During the forum dialogue we would agree on an area to focus on and differentiate points of view and polarizations, supporting a thorough dialogue among all voices within the forum, including those that were not overtly in the forum participants, but which were referred to as attitudes 'in our communities'.

The underlying approach to our facilitation was based on Mindell's (1995) notion of deep democracy, that a community can discover an inherent wisdom and direction forward when the interaction of all views is facilitated with awareness, including those views that communities tend to marginalize as unwanted or too extreme. In addition to representing the interaction of all viewpoints, deep democracy involves representing the deepest emotions of community, the underlying polarization of 'roles', which may be mythic in dimension, such as 'insiders' and 'outsiders', or oppressor and oppressed, as well as experience that underlies the polarizations and links us to one

another. We found process work methods of conflict resolution to be invaluable in our work, particularly concerning how to orient to those spots where conflict occurs in cycles, where reconciliation is blocked, where people grow hopeless, and where conflicts earn the name 'intractable'. In conflict zones, and post-war zones, the impasse to working with such 'hotspots' impacts the essential work of rebuilding community across the fields of social work, education, economics, law, and local political activity. Burnout and depression may be pervasive at social, economic, psychological and spiritual levels.

### **HOTSPOTS AND TRAUMA**

Conflicts cycle and escalate at 'hotspots' (Mindell, 1995, 27, 41). A hotspot is a description of a particular dynamic in an interaction – for example when there is a momentary flare up in a group interaction, a 'zing', in which something hot is touched, followed by a tense silence, laughter, or quickly moving on and acting like it didn't happen. If we ignore a hotspot repeatedly, it will come back and conflict will escalate. If we address the 'hotspot' carefully, this is the spot of potential transformation in a group or community interaction.

In Croatia, we described the hotspot as the doorway from past to future. At hotspots conflicts occur in cycles, repeating history. If we enter hotspots with awareness, they are doorways to future and building community.

At a hotspot there are erratic signals and the sense that something 'out of the ordinary' or 'out of control' might happen. At the hotspot people may become frightened, and yet, if the interaction can be carefully facilitated, people are eager and relieved to explore the hotspot, knowing this is where the real issues lie, and readily

understanding that when the hotspot is only ignored it will come back on its own, much more dangerously.

Touch a hotspot in a region of severe conflict and you will touch a reservoir of pain and possibly trigger symptoms of trauma. Avoiding hotspots, however, leaves the trauma intact just below the surface. Thus, special skills and knowledge about trauma are essential, along with accuracy in working with hotspots. To help groups work carefully at hotspots requires an orientation that recognizes that underlying creativity and a direction forward may emerge here.

In many traditions, a small mistake is intentionally woven into the design of a textile or rug, or painted into the design of a vase. The regular and repeating design is interrupted by the mistake so that the 'spirit' can free itself from the self-perpetuating system. A hotspot has this characteristic. It is the tear in the fabric of repeating interactions. Here we meet the pain and trauma underlying the community interaction. Here violence can be triggered. Here the deeper, creative levels of the group or community's life can also emerge.

### **Edge of chaos – non-linearity**

The hotspot might also be understood as the 'edge of chaos', a term used in complexity theory, referring to particular dynamics of systems that are 'far-from-equilibrium', where a system is ripe for evolution, just before it has gone over the border of chaos. Around this spot a system has non-linear tendencies, which means small inputs can yield massive change. Here, a community can be rapidly aroused and polarized into war. And here apparently small interventions can also support a community to transform and evolve (Audergon, unpublished manuscript).

## **Replay of conflict, replay of trauma**

A major characteristic of hotspots is that they are points around which conflicts cycle and history repeats. A major characteristic of trauma is that it replays.

Traumatic experience intrudes and recurs. The traumatic experience is not 'remembered' but relived. The experiences of traumatized individuals include both the numbness of cutting off from the experience and the violent replay and intrusion of events in flashbacks, nightmares, visceral experience of the events and body symptoms. Collectively, we participate in dynamics of trauma by both silencing and cutting off the unspeakable events of our history and continually repeating them.

Trauma begins with an event or series of events that is too much to bear. The experience is beyond the 'edge' of what is possible to perceive and respond to, beyond what we are able to include in our identities, as individuals or communities. Judith Hermann writes:

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social contract are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word 'unspeakable' . . . The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma . . . traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event. (Hermann, 1997, 1)

## **Shock and witness**

At the point of the traumatizing event, a shock occurs; one part of us goes forward and a part of us stays trapped inside the shocking event. We may not even recall the shock, because there was no time to react. Life moved on, perhaps in an accelerated series of events oriented around survival.

Yet the initial shock, and the events that created the shock, are still there, just below the surface, as if suspended outside of linear time.

In everyday life, one part of ourselves perceives our experiences, responds, reflects and narrates. In situations of traumatic experience, witnessing is too much to bear. That part of us that would witness, react and respond cannot. While one part goes ahead, the traumatic event remains, frozen in time, until it can be witnessed.

One way this appears is that individuals may be able to tell the story in detail but with apparent lack of emotional response to the events. Or they will be deeply upset, but without control over their memory of events. This may be the inability to recall the event at all. Or the memory intrudes, without control, flooding consciousness or as strange inexplicable fragments. The lack of choice in remembering and grappling with memory reflects the lack of choice in the original traumatizing experience.

Many people who have been traumatized, particularly in combat experience, have ongoing states of extreme vigilance – mentally and physically prepared for attack. In Mitrovice in Kosovo, Albanian Kosovars told us how they were unable to go to help people living on the Serb side of Mitrovice who were severely traumatized, not sleeping, standing vigilant with weapons at their front doors. Vietnam veterans often suffer from vigilance: 'I haven't really slept for 20 years. I lie down but I don't sleep. I'm always watching the door, the window, and then back to the door . . . I get up at least five times to walk my perimeter' (Shay, 1994, xiv).

## **A NARRATIVE VERSUS REPLAYING**

The story repeats where there is a missing perceiver. The witness had to step out

because the events were too much to bear and there was no time for all the reactions and responses, which had to be put on hold in order to go forward, to survive. While life apparently went on, the traumatic event remains and replays. Mindell's concept of the 'metacommunicator' (Mindell, 1988, 40) is useful for considering the part of oneself that can witness and comment on one's experience, rather than only being swallowed in it. The ability to witness the story and narrate the story in effect commits it to 'memory', rather than the events simply recurring out of our control. Telling the story also involves bringing emotional responses together with the story, reactions of outrage, terror, rage and grief, reactions that had no time or space to unfold, but remained locked in the psyche and body. People who have told me their stories about what happened to them during the war in the former Yugoslavia often feel at first afraid to tell their story, afraid that they will begin to cry, and if they begin to cry, the tears will never stop. Shay writes:

Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meaning of the events and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that the trauma has caused. Such narrative often results in the remission of some symptoms, particularly intrusive symptoms, dissociated bodily sensations, affects and behaviours that inexplicably intrude in the person's life. (Shay 1994, 188).

### **Communalizing the story: the missing witness**

To tell and witness the story allows it to be

included into the individual's life and into the life of the community. While finding an internal witness is essential for individuals who have been traumatized, narrating the story is only healing for the individual when there is a community of people who can listen, feel and respond (Shay 1994, 188). When war trauma is viewed only as an individual psychological issue, it can recreate a sense of isolation and the notion that it is the individual who is sick, further isolating the individual from the community. This replicates the dynamics of trauma, a sense of being cut off or numb, while trapped and isolated in the experience.

The need to narrate and to listen to the story, rather than split it off or feel swallowed in it, is also a community need, not only an individual need. Yet, the difficulty for a community or society to hear and respond to its traumatic stories run very deep. The numbing associated with trauma happens at a community level and a global level, and includes difficulty in witnessing and responding to the atrocity, fear of triggering traumatic experience in others, hopelessness, fear of guilt or having to reckon with accountability, punishment or reparations, disinterest and disdain, and the wish to remain sealed in privilege and a happier view of the world. The fundamental dynamic of a missing witness and the replay of trauma is thus a historic and contemporary society-wide problem.

## **COMMUNITY TRAUMA**

When whole communities suffer atrocity, the trauma stays in the fabric of family, community and society for generations. Just as individuals may need many years before he or she is able to tell the story, and begin to recover and return to life, narrative

of the community trauma may begin to be told only in the next generations. If several years is not a long time for individuals to begin to be able to speak about their loss and trauma, 50 or 100 years begins to seem like a short time for a society to grapple with wide-scale atrocity and genocide.

### **Community dynamics: 'let's put history behind us'**

A splitting also occurs in collective dynamics of trauma, when one part of society suffers the atrocity and another part of society declares that it is time to move on, unwilling or unable to relate to the traumatic story as its own. Often the dominant group in society, or the group with the most social power, will not include the traumatic story of an oppressed minority group into its collective 'narrative' of events. The oppressed group that suffered atrocity (often at the hands of this dominant group) may feel locked in the story. If we are a part of a group that has oppressed another group, or gained privileges as a result of that oppression, we are often the first to want to forget about it and move on. Our lack of accountability combines with dynamics of trauma. It may be possible to hear and respond to our history and look at issues of accountability where our ancestors could not. Yet members of the next generation often want to get even farther away from the trauma or may feel innocent and untouched because it was not their personal responsibility and it all seems so long ago. This freezes us, as we split ourselves off from knowledge of the events of history and, particularly, from a feeling connection to our story. We may be unaware of the privilege of saying it's all in the past, when others cannot put it behind them, because they are still suffering.

### **REVISING HISTORY AS A SYMPTOM OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**

There are many examples in which one part of society 'goes ahead' while leaving those who suffered to bear the trauma on their own. That part of society that goes ahead bemoans the fact that the survivors of a group that suffered atrocity cannot seem to leave the story behind. In the extreme, one part of society not only goes ahead, but also determines the story should be written out of history. History is revised. In the Bosnian towns of Foca and Zvornik, after the Muslims were killed or expelled, the mosques were dynamited. When asked why these great works of architecture were destroyed, the new Serbian mayors said there never were any mosques there (Bartov et al., 2001, 190). There is a substantial movement to revise the history of the Holocaust, saying it never happened, it was fabricated by the Jews, or its proportions were exaggerated. Deaths are attributed, for example, to typhus and not to gas chambers. The genocide of Native Americans in the US is rarely told and has never been grappled with by society. Indians are still dehumanized and cowboys romanticized. The legacy of slavery in the US is learned as a part of African American history, but not reckoned with as a profound traumatic experience of US history that still persists. The history of colonization around the world is told as hero and adventure stories rather than stories of outrageous atrocity and trauma.

While historical revisionism is often thought of in relation to extremist and nationalist groups, we all contribute to the revision of history when we are only interested in a version of events that protects our interests or

innocence. Widespread misinformation and disinformation add to the problem.

### **BETRAYAL AND BORDERS**

Absence of protection is an important feature of trauma. Trauma caused by physical and sexual abuse of children occurs not only from the aggressive acts but also from the act of betrayal by the person who has our trust and responsibility to protect us. People in Croatia frequently spoke of the trauma that arose when those they thought to be trusted neighbours demonized them and turned on them in vicious ways. Shay describes a fundamental feature of combat trauma as arising from major betrayals by the soldier's own leaders. 'We found out we killed a lot of fishermen and kids . . . the fucking colonel says, "Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it . . . We got body count!"' (Shay, 1994, 4, 170–1). For political refugees often the greatest trauma comes from betrayal by their government in its primary responsibility of protecting the human right of safety. In the midst of the most terrifying experiences there is no one to turn to, no authority to call, because the government and police are in on your demise. When countries refuse refugees, trauma is recreated. Similarly, the prejudice and unwelcoming attitude that many refugees face compounds trauma. Facing a cold and unwelcoming bureaucracy, which none of us particularly like, can trigger trauma associated with torture. A cold and blank look on the street replicates numbness and splitting off of the traumatic story. A welcoming attitude can, in turn, change someone's life.

### **TRAUMA, TELEVISION AND TEARS**

When people who have suffered violence, expulsion and genocide call to the world

for help, and feel the world turn away, it exacerbates trauma perhaps more than anything else. We all have taken part as we watch television and read the news about a situation of unbearable tragedy and go about our daily business with little reaction or concern. The amount of tragedy in our world is just so great that we cannot feel it. We may feel a kind of cold detachment we cannot explain, as if the horrific events are happening in a separate, parallel world. We watch the news and go on with life, barely mustering the energy to keep up with our own daily work. It is noteworthy that this is a description of the dynamics of trauma. One part goes ahead focusing on normal life, splitting off from the events that are too terrible to witness and include.

The first time we were in Croatia, in 1996, a group gathered from all regions of Croatia and from Bosnia. A group from Sarajevo tended to keep together. They were sometimes a few minutes late to a session, having to deal with stairs, and the mobility needs of a young man in a wheelchair. Most of the seminar participants would have said they had a kind of 'status' in the group, in part due to their warmth with one another and because of their cosmopolitan style from Sarajevo. Some even felt they held themselves apart, but in a group interaction something very different emerged. Although everyone in this group lived through the war, and many had suffered trauma, Sarajevo had been through the most recent living hell. Those in the group from Sarajevo felt they were being held at a distance because of their war trauma.

One woman said 'You treat us as though we were museum pieces. You look at us, but don't touch.' At this point, a woman came forward and sat facing her. She said 'I watched Sarajevo on television. At that time, the war in Croatia had stopped, and

though I lived only about 200 km from Sarajevo, I watched it on TV. It seemed distant. I remember I couldn't feel it. I remember feeling I was glad it was there and not here.' As she spoke these words, face to face with the woman from Sarajevo who had suffered excruciating personal loss, tears began to stream from people's eyes. I never saw anything quite like this before or since. Every participant in the group of about 60 had tears streaming down their faces. We assured the professional translator that it was OK that she was touched and could not hold back her tears. She, too, sat on the floor and wept, as others spontaneously pitched in to keep translating. As Lane and I continued to facilitate, we too, wept. Others spoke about how they had distanced themselves from one another's pain, and isolated themselves from each other, watching television about what was going on, even in the next village, exactly as the world had stood by and silently watched it all on television.

### **Silence**

We usually experience our tendency to fall silent as a feeling of awe, sadness, impotence, hopelessness, or disinterest. We rarely recognize that silence is an active ingredient in the planning and carrying out of atrocity. Silence is a dynamic of trauma, as we try to banish the events from our collective awareness and concern. Silence is anticipated and enforced through manipulation of our tendency to invest our authority in others, demonize our neighbours, seek safety and focus on business as usual. Silence is also augmented by our notion of the inevitability of ethnic conflict. In the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda in the 1990s, much of the world looked on and believed that ancient ethnic hatreds had somehow erupted, rather than

grappling with the facts of genocide (Gutman, 1996).

### **REPLAYING THE NIGHTMARE**

The nightmares of history do not spontaneously erupt. Past injustice and trauma remain in the fabric of our collective interactions and are ignited to create war. For example, in the former Yugoslavia past injustice and trauma were intentionally awakened and manipulated for the purpose of carrying out ethnic cleansing, war and genocide. Terms to elicit memory of past injustice and trauma became the linguistic and emotional context for unfolding events. A revived Serbian nationalist or 'Chetnik' movement recalled the memory of the ultra-nationalist Ustase movement in Croatia during World War II. The Ustase had been responsible for concentration camps and mass murder of Serbs, Jews and others. Throughout the war in the 1990s, Croats and Serbs were referred to regularly as Ustase and Chetniks. Muslims were called 'Turks', to associate them with the invasion of the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth century. Many people commented that, while it was never easy to get current news during the war in Bosnia, you could readily hear about the events in Kosovo in 1389 as if they had happened yesterday, when the Serbs lost the famous 'battle of the blackbirds', in Kosovo. During the genocide of Bosnian Muslims, many Serbs were convinced they were defending themselves against aggression by the 'Turks'.

### **LOSS AND REDEMPTION**

A common pattern through history is that when a group or nation has been put down and has suffered loss and trauma, it shares and participates in a collective mood of



despair. The shared history has mythic proportion and binds people together in the tragedy and in the germination of a seed of redemption. 'We will not be oppressed again. We will not be defeated again. We will not be hurt again. We will show the world who we really are.' Milosevic and Serb nationalists tapped into the loss and the heroic stories that accompanied the Serb defeat in the 1300s in Kosovo, to give birth to a new mythology of a Greater Serbia 600 years later. Similarly, Germans after World War I, humiliated from defeat, were easily stirred into a dream of redemption in the 1930s under Nazi rule. The fresh legacy of the genocide of Jews in Europe was followed by a great dream and hope in establishing the state of Israel. The events of 9-11 have been used to support an 'empire' mentality behind the US War on Terror.

### **Repeating nightmares and the cycle of revenge**

History also repeats through arousing the public urge to retaliate. It is useful and possible to understand and get to know our urge for revenge and its relation to our notions of justice and wish to relieve trauma. Knowing our motivations for revenge can help us to find ways to take our needs seriously, without acting out the repeating nightmare of retaliation.

There are several motivations for revenge. One essential motivation is accountability in the form of paying the price, settling the score. When accountability is refused, the urge for revenge is greater. Working with issues of accountability is therefore an essential part of conflict resolution. Another motivation for revenge is to try to break free from pain. If you feel trapped inside a

painful polarization in which you are the victim of oppression, temporary relief occurs by flipping to the other side of the polarization and making pain in others. We often switch 'roles' without realizing it. We easily flip-flop between occupying the role of the one who is hurting and the one who hurts others. Even when we stub our toes on a chair, we identify with the pain of our stubbed toe while kicking the chair across the room. This tendency is easily exploited to keep nations identified with how they have been oppressed and hurt while they are, in turn, hurting others.

The urge to revenge also arises out of a wish for others to know how it feels to be hurt and humiliated and for the pain to be included in community. This may be accompanied by a belief that if only the oppressors knew what it was really like they might wake up and change. In a forum, just at the point of heated conflict, as people are ready to lash out in revenge, if you encourage them to express themselves more fully someone may cry and shout in outrage and pain about the suffering, trauma and atrocities they have endured until someone receives the message. Conflicts can transform when someone on the other side can share a drop of the suffering. As long as no one shares the pain and outrage, as long as it remains split off, the urge remains for revenge.

Revenge can arise out of internalized oppression. The oppressor, living in close quarters inside our own minds and hearts, continues to kick and haunt us. This internalized aggression may be acted out against oneself and one's own group, and against others, autonomously replaying without our awareness. At times revenge is also an urge to stand up and refuse to be further hurt or humiliated. Out of the

accumulated hurt and suffering, we rise up and say 'no more'. After the Six Day War in 1967, Ben-Eliezer, a Knesset member, said 'We were not so few in number as there is a tendency to believe. By our side fought the six million, who whispered in our ear the eleventh commandment: Do not get murdered' (Morris, 2001, 311).

Our urge to retaliate and to take revenge may also be a wish to put an end to the story of suffering, to get out of the nightmare, to no longer endure the pain. Our urge to stop the wheel of suffering can in turn inflame and renew a new cycle of violence and the perpetuation of suffering.

Our motivation for revenge may also be experienced as a matter of heart towards those who died and even to make contact with the realm of the dead. This urge may accompany the trauma of war, to avenge and even grieve for one's comrades or ancestors. 'Here's one for you baby. I'll take this mother fucker out and I'm going to cut his fucking heart out for you' (Shay, 1994, 89).

The replay of trauma in individuals, in nightmares, flashbacks and visceral experience, and the replay of trauma in society in the perpetuation of unacknowledged pain and in cycles of violence, might be understood as a search for awareness. Traumatic experience is history, still present, seeking witness. It is in some ways a hopeful perspective, which might guide us to find methods and forums to work with collective dynamics of trauma in conflict zones and around chronic conflicts of society. We need ways to include our heated emotional and traumatic history, to connect emotionally to our story, rather than feel numb or disassociated, while revising history and beset by new rounds of violence, whether up close in its clutches or on television.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY, COMMUNITY TRAUMA, AND COMMUNITY FORUMS**

Dynamics of trauma and accountability are woven tightly together. Issues of accountability have often been an important focus in our forums in Croatia. Sometimes it seemed as though participants were involved in untying a great tangled knot, discovering and pulling at the central threads of their varying perspectives and emotions concerning personal war experience, community pain and trauma, the need for accountability, and to explore questions of individual responsibility and group or national responsibility, while all the while focusing on the needs of their communities and concrete issues concerning community building.

Accountability issues revolved around different time periods in the war. In 1991, Serb paramilitaries and the Yugoslav army seized large regions of Croatia, regions with majority Serb populations. At this time of ethnic cleansing, Croats were killed and fled. In 1995, the Croat army took these regions back and at this time Serbs were killed and fled. Both periods were marred by atrocities and war crimes. In the years between 1991 and 1995, in Bosnia, Muslims were victims of genocide. Bosnian Croats were also targeted and fled to Croatia. Huge numbers of people were uprooted from their homes and communities and, after the war, the country faced complex problems concerning refugees, displaced people, and rights of return. Issues often concerned housing, for example where Bosnian Croats who fled from Bosnia moved into Croatia, into houses that had been vacated by Serbs fleeing Croatia. Yet, the problems in resolving issues of housing, along with a wide

range of other practical issues in rebuilding community, reflected entrenched problems of accountability, the accompanying trauma and reconciliation.

Widespread problems of accountability combined with traumatic experience and often created an intolerable atmosphere in communities throughout Croatia. Suspicion and discrimination based on one's ethnic/national group was often too much to bear on top of personal suffering from war experiences. During our forums there were heated discussions around how to grapple with and differentiate personal and collective responsibility. Conflict often cycled around accusations and defensiveness. We also saw extraordinary transformations occur when people spoke about their group's part and their personal part in the terrible dynamics of war and the ongoing tensions.

In a group process one afternoon there was an atmosphere of suspicion as the subject of accountability arose. Questions lurked in the atmosphere. Where were you? Why did you leave? Why did you stay? What did you do? One person became highly anxious and distressed. In a sweat and panic he jumped up to leave the room. We were able to ask him first if he wanted to stay or if he wanted to leave, and if there was anything he would like to say. He said he was terrified that treading on such volatile issues could lead to a violent escalation of conflict and he could not bear it. His trauma was triggered. We appreciated that he was protecting himself and in so doing he was also protecting the group. We slowed down to find out if he wanted to stay and if so what he needed to be able to stay. He said he wanted to stay and very much wanted the discussion to happen but he did not believe it was possible. We encouraged the group to discover what was right for the whole group, such that the

discussion would not exclude anyone or retraumatize.

Someone asked if she could speak. She described the atmosphere in their communities created by suspicion, making people feel they could not return home and rebuild their lives, and that traumatic war experience was triggered. She went on: 'I feel that I am always questioned. And I am always questioning. I know the accused and the accuser inside of me.' She then told a story about a shocking and traumatic situation during the war that she had never spoken about publicly before, in which under terror, her actions had put her friend's life, as well as her own, on the line. They had both lived through it. She described the pain of self-questioning that goes on to this day, about the risk she had taken with her friend's life:

A quiet fell over the group. Then others spoke about their inner questions, accusations and doubts, and how they constantly reviewed their own conduct under the pressure of the times. Some spoke of their feelings of guilt about not having done enough to stop the atrocity. Several spoke about enduring terrible doubts around choices they faced that affected not only themselves but also their families and loved ones. Someone spoke about being in the role of a public authority and having to make decisions that would have life-or-death consequences for his whole community. People spoke very intimately about their deepest ethical questions and struggles concerning personal responsibility and accountability. The highly tense and explosive atmosphere of suspicion and judgement, and fear of re-triggering old wounds, and tripping on volatile issues transformed into a sense of deep concern and respect for one another and all they had gone through in a communal

process of reflection and accountability that was both collective and deeply personal. The participant who had been so anxious was visibly and deeply relieved, even elated. He later said he had never dreamed in his wildest imagination that this level of dialogue could ever happen in a group of Serbs, Croats and Muslims.

### **TRIBUNALS, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION, AND GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY FORUMS**

For a conflict to reach some resolution, and for a community to reconcile, accountability is needed. Accountability involves acknowledging events. It may involve trying and punishing war criminals. It involves reckoning with collective and personal responsibility. It means taking stock, telling the story, filling in the holes, the missing information, what happened to those who disappeared, and finding mass graves. It also involves recognizing the trauma caused by atrocities.

On an international level, the notion that accountability is needed to prevent the replay of violence led to the foundation of the international tribunals for both the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. By ensuring that there is individual accountability, the international tribunals aim to prevent entire groups from being stigmatized and to ensure that others do not resort to acts of revenge in search for justice. By establishing a legal truth, the international tribunals hope to prevent historical revisionism. Tribunals aim to put an end to impunity – that is, to prevent those in power from getting away with crimes of war and crimes against humanity. Tribunals aim to achieve a sense of justice and facilitate the return of refugees and reconciliation.

Accountability in the form of telling the whole story, to be able to move forward, is also an essential premise of truth and reconciliation commissions. Some such commissions, most notably in South Africa, were based on a notion of restorative justice. An essential feature of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was that there was amnesty for people whose crimes were politically motivated and consonant with policies of either the state or a liberation movement, if there was full disclosure. This invited people to come forward, to fill in the holes of information crucial for the society to establish as complete a picture as possible of the gross violations of human rights, for society as a whole to be able to move forward.

While the notion of challenging impunity and the notion of amnesty are conflicting principles, some consider the work of tribunals and truth commissions as potentially complementary. (Some truth commissions do not have the condition of amnesty and work in conjunction with courts.) For our purposes here I want to underline that tribunals and truth commissions have both noted the value of the story being told in a public arena. Hearing the voices of victims and perpetrators in a public forum is thought to contribute to lessening suffering and to aid in the reintegration and reconciliation of society.

The scope of both tribunals and truth and reconciliation commissions is also necessarily limited, suggesting a need for forums throughout society to further deal with issues of accountability and trauma in the aftermath of war. The President of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia described the inherent limitations of the tribunals and the need for initiatives that derive from civilian society, ‘to repair the fabric of society, thread by

thread' (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, 2001).

For this to occur, community forums are needed in society at a grassroots level, particularly in conflict and post-conflict zones. It is possible for forums to be developed as a combined and concerted effort between NGOs, international organizations and governmental organizations. In fact, one of the advantages of conducting forums with representatives from various agencies, or organizing public forums as collaboration between agencies, is that it improves working relationships and creativity in community. With skilled facilitation, forums can serve a function beyond telling the story, working with the hotspots of community relationships at a much more interactive level. Processing issues of accountability and community trauma, combined with community building can lead to a heightened level of engagement, and renewed hope, furthering the effectiveness of all sorts of social, education and community work

### **TRAUMA, APARTHEID AND SUB-COMMUNITY WORK**

More than a decade after the war and atrocities in Vukovar, Croatia, the town is still in rubble. People live in near complete apartheid. From bars to playgrounds for small children, Croats and Serbs live separately. In a meeting there, several comments were made about those not present at this meeting and at other meetings to address humanitarian issues in the region. Using a simple intervention of Process Work (Mindell, 1995), we said that if there was a wish to interact around humanitarian issues with those not present, we could do that by creating a 'role' for those not present, and have that dialogue. We put a chair in the room to

represent this 'role'. A dialogue unfolded. Speaking from this role, one woman began to speak about her community's devastating trauma. She said this cannot be ignored when you talk about 'us' not coming to your meetings. 'When you do not acknowledge what our trauma is really like, we can't come to meetings with you.' There was a shift in the atmosphere. My co-facilitator Lane and I paused to acknowledge the trauma, throughout the region, among those present in the group, and those not present. Many realized that they did not sufficiently acknowledge their own trauma, out of fear that it was too big and due to the need to put it behind them and try to stay active and move forward in rebuilding community. Some said that in order to grasp and relate to the traumatic experience of others, they needed to make space to work on community trauma, and that the notion of only putting the story behind them, while understandable, disrupts their efforts to build community. We felt this process indicated that one of the things needed in this region is sub-community work on the extensive trauma in the region, and as sub-communities are ready, they will be able to work together increasingly.

In Kosovo, we visited Mitrovica. A bridge split the town in two. While there were few attempts in social services for the Serb and Albanian sides to meet, in essence they lived completely separately. We had the opportunity of meeting with a group of Albanian Kosovars. While international law requires reconciliation after the war, this group was relieved when we suggested that there must also be a strong feeling of not wanting to reconcile due to the great trauma of the war. A large group of people sat close together in a small entry to an office, very eager to talk with us and among themselves about what it is like for

them in the region. Forums for working with trauma are sorely needed in Kosovo within the sub-communities. When communities are asked to reconcile and move forward, without opportunities to work with the community-wide trauma, it's like an individual pressed to go ahead with life, while the trauma remains intact, replaying and intruding and blocking capacity to function. The flurry and fragmentation of activity after the war in Kosovo mirrored the collective dynamics of trauma, an attempt to rebuild and move ahead but usually without sufficiently relating to the underlying dynamics of community-wide trauma.

### **ROLE OF FACILITATORS AND COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION**

The orientation and methods of Mindell's Process Work recognize that the essential resources for an individual, group or community's transformation lie within that individual, group or community and their interaction. The facilitator represents a 'role' belonging to the group. It is the group's potential to facilitate the interaction between polarized positions, staying with hotspots, rather than avoiding them or falling into them. The facilitator represents the capacity within the group to create a narrative about what happened, rather than replaying the conflict or trauma, along with the capacity to discover a creative direction forward.

I have been very touched by the extraordinary welcome we received in our many visits to Croatia. Not only did we meet great hospitality, great parties and friendships, but also openness and thirst for the forum interactions. While forum participants may at first be rightly sceptical, along with feeling exhausted, depressed and hopeless at the grave difficulties they face,

we experienced the participants as deeply willing and interested in the possibility of finding a way forward. We came to realize that the role of the facilitator represents not only a sense of hope within the group, but the need to find a new way forward, with knowledge that it is possible and necessary to not repeat the trauma, and with the capacity to go into the most difficult issues with awareness in community.

At the same time I do not want to suggest that this process occurs easily. All we need to do is look around at the state of affairs in our world. There is a dire need for training of facilitators to develop the capacity to work with hotspots and to understand collective dynamics of trauma as well as for opportunities for people to gather in this way.

Forums offer an opportunity to process the heavy atmosphere in regions of conflict and post-war zones, which, when left to simmer, is a constant trigger for trauma and can be manipulated into further community polarizations and violence. By working with the polarized conflict and the associated trauma, there is a vital and real possibility of reconciliation and community building in conflict zones.

One of the reasons we tend to avoid hotspots is precisely because they are volatile. We naturally want to stay clear. Just as there is wisdom in staying with such hotspots with awareness, there's wisdom in people's caution and avoidance of these spots. In fact, one need not think of this as a contradiction. Staying with a hotspot does not mean diving into this spot, or avoiding it, but carefully processing the range of experiences and dynamics that arise here.

In community forums, it is useful to invite people to speak about their fears and caution, and to encourage the group's innate ability to find ways to go into difficult territory without repeating the violence. It is

useful to mention that the conflicts in the group may touch individuals' traumatic experiences and the collective trauma of the region and to confirm people's concerns. If someone speaks about a traumatic experience, this can set off traumatic experience in others. People may be afraid of hurting or shocking others. A group may fear opening traumatic stories because they are never ending. People may feel their own trauma is unimportant, in a field where others' stories are worse. It is already useful in conflict resolution work to just mention these things, while modelling an attitude that it is possible to go ahead with sensitivity to all concerns. Individual participants and the group can thus make choices and participate in the facilitation process. A feature of traumatic experience is that the original experience that created trauma involved a lack of choice and control. If the range of issues and concerns is skipped over, there is a sense of being without choice, which can replicate the experience of trauma.

In our forum work, as facilitators, we have learned again and again that it is essential to have a heart big enough to go with a group into deeply painful issues. If we are afraid of going into the pain, the pain will more easily take us over. Yet it also takes the heart and awareness to continually look towards ways to do so without recreating traumatic experience. The difference between replaying traumatic experience and being able to go into the painful territory in a way that is useful for a group and community lies in the group's awareness and heart.

While in a sense this is obvious, it is not always easy. It is easy to side unconsciously with caution or hesitation, rather than process caution, and in this way support a group to avoid the painful territory. It is also easy to side unconsciously with going into the difficult territory, in a way that

pushes or polarizes a resistance. It is easy to identify with these issues as problems of facilitation (which they also are) instead of recognizing that these problems for the facilitator are also dynamics belonging to the group. I know many people who struggled with profound anxiety and pain for years, as they dealt with the atrocities in their past, and the possibility of a life in the future. Touching on traumatic events of the past can be a return visit to hell. For me and my colleague, Lane, facilitating in communities with so much trauma has been extremely challenging, requiring a kind of vigilance that comes from heart, not fear, and constant learning.

### **PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND TRANSCENDING TIME**

There is nothing more personal than traumatic experience that shakes you to the bone, tears apart your identity, your community, spirit and meaning of life. Traumatic experience frays and fragments the psyche of an individual, the spirit of whole communities, nations and the meaning of history. The ghosts of history want not only accountability and to be included into history, but also to be relieved, to take their place beyond space and time. Time and again, those among us who have seen the very worst of humankind, seem to touch someplace in their own hearts, beyond all polarization, beyond even life and death, and from here inspire us to keep believing in humanity.

### **REFERENCES**

- Audergon A. *The War Hotel: We are the Players in Violent Conflict*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Bartov O, Mack P, Sells M (eds) *In God's Name: Kosovo Mythology and the Bosnian Genocide*. Oxford: Berghan Books, 2001.
- Gutman R (ed.) *Crimes of War: What the Public*

Should Know. London: Touchstone Books, 1996.  
Hermann J. Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. New York: Basic Books, 1997.  
International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Press release, quoting President Claude Jordan's speech made on 12 May 2001 in Sarajevo. On ICTY Web site, <http://www.un.org/icty/>.  
Mindell A. City Shadows: Psychological Interventions in Psychiatry. London: Penguin

Arkana, 1988.  
Mindell A. Sitting in the Fire. Portland: Lao Tse Press, 1995.  
Morris B. Righteous Victims. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.  
Shay J. Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character. London: Touchstone Books, 1994.

*Correspondence: Arlene Audergon.  
Email: [arlene@cfor.info](mailto:arlene@cfor.info).*