

Transforming Conflict into Community: Post-war Reconciliation in Croatia

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Published in *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 3(2) Wiley Publishers 2005

and

***The Politics of Psychotherapy: New Perspectives*, Totton, N. (Ed.), London:**

Open University Press/McGraw Hill 2006

The Personal and the Political

Heading to Osijek: Introduction

Heading to Osijek, Croatia in a UN van, the landscape was dotted with charred houses. In Osijek, every building was pockmarked from gunfire and shelling. That evening, we took a walk along the river that had been the dividing line between Serb and Croat sides during the war.

It was 1996, a year after the war had ended. One of the women who had invited us, said it was the first time that Croats, Serbs and Muslims were meeting together to talk about the war and their future. They gathered from different parts of Croatia and from Bosnia. We (Lane and Arlene) and the participants were heading onto a steep learning curve. How do you open a discussion about the war, about reconciliation and moving forward? We learned that even asking people to introduce themselves publicly was charged. Saying their names could identify them as Croats, Serbs, or Muslims. If they also said where they lived, people could assume an entire story about what someone had done during the war.

The Project

This was to be the first of many visits to Croatia, between 1996 and 2001. The first forum was sponsored by IRC (International Rescue Committee). This seed grew into a project called “Building Sustainable Community in the Aftermath of War.”ⁱ It was organized by Udruga Mi, a Croatian NGO (non-governmental organization) and was funded by the UN High Commission for Refugees.ⁱⁱ The project included four day forums twice a year, regional meetings, a training group, and a journal. The forums were made up of 60-90 participants from all war-affected regions of Croatia. They were Croat, Serb, Muslim, and from other ethnic backgrounds such as Hungarian and Roma. They represented many NGOs, governmental organizations, and international organizations. Participants were active in their communities as social workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, counselors, mayors, city administrators and lawyers.

The purpose of this project was to support the work of key players involved with reconciliation and community building throughout Croatia. The idea was that if they worked among themselves on the painful and complex post-war issues, they could in turn better meet these problems in their communities and organizations. Each forum was a temporary, diverse community; a microcosm in which the region’s difficulties would naturally arise, so we could learn together how to work with them.

Approach to facilitation: Process Work, Deep Democracy and Hot Spots

Our facilitation approach is based on our training in and practice of Process Oriented Psychology or Process Work, developed by Dr. Arnold Mindell. The facilitator's task is to bring awareness to what is actually happening in an individual or group. The method recognizes patterns for change that first appear as a disturbance (Mindell, 1986). A teleological approach, Process Work looks not just for the cause of a problem or how to eradicate it; rather when a problem is unfolded with accuracy and heart, a new way forward is discovered that is often surprising, creative and transformative.

A main concept in this approach is 'deep democracy' (Mindell, 1992). Democracy usually means that different points of view are represented but ultimately the majority rules. In most groups and societies, however, some voices are pushed to the margins. They are considered irrelevant, irrational, or too extreme.

Mindell's idea of deep democracy means supporting both mainstream and marginalized voices. It also sees the emotional experiences at the margins of group life as potentially transformative. It is through the expression -- and especially the interaction -- of all the parts, that the wisdom and creativity of a community can emerge. Deep democracy also includes facilitation of the different dimensions of a group's experience: the outer themes and issues, the background emotions and polarizations, and the underlying shared human experience.

In Process Work, we use the term 'hotspot' to refer to those moments in our interactions where conflict cycles and escalates (Mindell, 1995, 81). They are spots we tend to back off from, or where we can be rapidly polarized in dramatic and potentially violent ways. Yet the hotspot is also a doorway to potential change and deepening of community relationships. Careful facilitation is needed, so that points of inflammation can lead to transformation, rather than a repeat of suffering.

In a mixed group of Serbs, Croats and Muslims in 1996, the very idea of talking about the war was terrifying, threatening, and ran the risk of re-traumatizing. As facilitators, we tried at all times to discover and support the group's innate wisdom, timing, and direction. We attempted to welcome the group, including its fears and its reasons to not touch upon the issues at all.

We also worked with the atmosphere that was so terrifying, to not leave it threatening from the background, where it was more dangerous. The issue of 'differences' was charged. The atrocities in the former Yugoslavia were a direct result of the political manipulation of differences. It was therefore important as facilitators that we did not fall unconsciously into the role of pressing them to speak about their divisions.

A bomb in the bakery - A friendship between a Croat and Serb

During that first forum in Osijek, a participant came into the room after a coffee break, saying she had just heard that a bomb had exploded at a bakery. A woman rushed out to call her husband who worked near there. No one had gotten hurt. We asked about the level of danger in town. A man who later described himself as a frontline fighter during the war said in a casual and relaxed way “It’s nothing to worry about – It’s just the local Mafia.” We were a bit shaken, but the group was ready to move on.

So we did. We offered to work with two people in relationship. Two old friends, a Serb and a Croat, wanted the opportunity. We recall how we then felt relaxed – working with people in relationships is something we might do anywhere – and we enjoyed facilitating them. They discussed what had until then been a taboo subject between them: what they had actually experienced during the war, and how it made them feel about each other as Serb and Croat. They had not had a ‘real conversation’ since the war. Each wanted the other to understand her experience, not only friend to friend, but as Croat and Serb.

We looked around and people were riveted. In the break, the same man who had spoken so casually about the bomb at the bakery, came to us now in a great state of excitement and agitation. He thought their work was tremendous, and wanted to know how it was possible. He had never seen Croats and Serbs speaking together so personally and politically since the war. He said it was potentially life-changing, yet also life-threatening. A woman said that if some people in her town knew that she was in a room where this kind of conversation was taking place, her physical safety could be endangered.

Here, as was often the case in future forums, personal interactions were highly charged and political. And the ‘political’ was always deeply personal.

Don’t talk politics

When any issue about the war was touched, a silence came over the group like a low, chilling fog. We learned quickly not to try to forge ahead in this fog, but also not to be swallowed in it. Moving too quickly could be dangerous, re-triggering acute symptoms of trauma. Just sitting in it, was as dangerous, furthering distress and hopelessness.

We decided to explore the dynamics creating this silence and fog. Rather than trying to overcome this silence by getting people to speak, we represented what we imagined was an as yet unspoken voice that said, “Don’t talk about the war.” It threatened, “Don’t speak to people from the other side, or else.” Participants joined in to give expression to this voice. “Don’t talk about what divides you. It’s far too dangerous.” Others added, “Don’t open up old wounds. It could inflame the conflict all over again.” “It will open up too much pain.”

Several people said that anything ‘political’ must be avoided, and that it is important that we discuss only humanitarian issues of rebuilding society. The predominant attitude with

which the group identified was that “we are all humanitarians here. We like each other. We are not the intolerant ones who created the conflict.”

As facilitators, we respected their fears and their urge for unity after the devastation of their lives in the name of ethnic/national difference. At the same time, we noticed a thick tension in the room that no one was talking about. And during breaks, the Serbs went with Serbs, Croats with Croats, Muslims with Muslims.

A useful Process Work method is to observe how a group identifies itself (the “we”), as well as what goes against or disturbs this identity (the “not we”) (Mindell, 1995, 42-3). Facilitation involves supporting the interaction of all parts of the group’s experience, including both that which is closer to the group’s identity and whatever disturbs that identity. This group identified with “humanitarian aims.” They were *not* the “intolerant ones.” They were disturbed by the underlying conflicts that they feared could escalate, which were already apparent in their signals (separating into ethnic groups during breaks), and in the tense atmosphere between them. The tension in our group was a small mirror of the tension in people’s communities, which appeared both in a generalized depression and in occasional violent outbreaks. To begin a process of reconciliation and rebuilding within communities, there needed to be a way to talk about what happened at an individual and community level, without inflaming further violence.

The stories pour out

One morning something happened that was apparently small, yet extraordinary. A woman courageously and shyly said, “I feel a *little* more comfortable with people from my own ethnic group.” With this small admission, she opened a floodgate, and people’s upset poured out. “I knew I couldn’t trust you!” We asked why? Participants spoke emotionally about what people from another ethnic/national group had done to their sisters, families, communities; what it was like when faced with terror, or when standing in long refugee columns with screaming kids and no water.

As people began speaking for the first time in the group about their experiences, others couldn’t listen. Personal stories about the brutality committed by the other side were felt to be (and sometimes were) accusations toward the other side’s whole group. After a terrible story, someone would want to tell a different story about the good things that had been done by their side – or about the brutality that had been done by members of the other group.

The group was at a new stage of interaction. The participants were now speaking personally and emotionally about the war. Their stories and accusations led to a temporary escalation which brought the conflict out into the open. As their distrust and the experiences that divided them came to the foreground, there was a need for the group to find ways to respond to both the accusations and the pain of their traumatic experiences.

Trauma and Bridging the Distance

Museum pieces and watching TV

A small group from Sarajevo hung out together in the forum, becoming friends. Many of the participants felt this subgroup as a kind of clique. But, that afternoon, an opposite picture emerged. A woman from Sarajevo said that that the large group was holding the participants from Sarajevo at a distance. Though everyone had suffered loss during the war, and many had traumatic experiences, Sarajevo had been through a recent hell. She said “You keep us at a distance. You look at us like museum pieces. You look but don’t touch.”

A woman from Croatia went across the room and faced her. She said “It’s true. I remember keeping you at a distance when I watched Sarajevo on TV. At that point the war in Croatia had stopped and, though I lived only 200 kilometers from Sarajevo, I watched it on TV, and it seemed so far away. I couldn’t feel anything. I remember thinking I was glad it was there and not here.” Tears filled each woman’s eyes. At the moment the Croatian woman acknowledged that she had been keeping them at a distance, the distance was bridged. Looking around the room, every participant in the group was now crying. While continuing to facilitate, we also had tears rolling down our faces. The professional translator began to cry and was very upset that she wasn’t able to keep a professional distance, as she had been trained to do. When we assured her it was okay, she dropped to the floor and wept, others pitching in to keep translating. It was an extraordinary and intimate experience; several people went on to speak personally about how they had distanced themselves from their own and others’ pain, and had also isolated themselves from one another.

A deeper unity

Perhaps everyone knew the experience of watching television, frozen, unable to feel, and even being glad it was there and not here. The experience touched the core of the tragedy, beyond the participants and beyond the Balkans. The world had stood by, watching TV.

Traumatic war experience often results in feeling cut off or distant from memories and one’s own emotions. A natural response to traumatic experience is to split it off, because it is too much to witness, too much to bear. There is a need to focus on survival and moving forward. The more the traumatic experience is split off from consciousness, however, the more the experience may reoccur and intrude in debilitating symptoms, and the person may feel overrun by emotion and flashbacks (Hermann, 1997, 1-4). Similarly, the more a communal trauma is split off, and not talked about on a community level, the more likely the experience can reoccur and intrude in the form of community-wide hopelessness and depression, community violence, and even war (Audergon, 2005, 173-207; Audergon 2004).

We’ve seen how the group at first wanted to avoid politics and the divisiveness that had torn apart their hearts and community. At the same time, the ‘divisive politics’ that they feared was already palpable. When someone said the unspeakable in the most subtle way

imaginable -- “I’m a little more comfortable with my own group” -- the stories and mistrust that divided them spilled out.

The “divisiveness” appeared also in their emotional distance from their own traumatic experience and from each other. This was expressed in the accusation: “You keep us at a distance.” Admitting the truth of an accusation can be transformative (Mindell, 1992. 59; Arye, 2002). When the Croatian woman admitted that she had been keeping both Sarajevo and her feelings about what was happening there at a distance, the group got in touch with the pain of being cut off. When the distance was acknowledged, a space opened in people’s hearts to share the enormous pain; with that came a sense of relief from isolation. The compassion and momentary unity the group now shared was miles from the forced feeling of togetherness and “tolerance” from earlier in the week.

That evening, there was a spontaneous party. Local wine and a guitar seemed to appear from nowhere. Until early morning people sang together, everyone singing songs from all parts of the former Yugoslavia. The atmosphere was wild, festive, intimate, joyous. We remember one moment when we felt goose-bumps but didn’t know why. Someone whispered that that they were all singing a song from a beloved Serbian singer, who had been outlawed during the war.

Accountability and responsibility

In Fifteen minutes, we were in the 14th century

Throughout the six years of our work in Croatia, participants frequently spoke of the need for accountability. We have come to believe that grappling with matters of accountability and responsibility at a personal and community level is essential for reconciliation in post-conflict zones, and for conflict prevention.

Six months after our experience in Osijek, we returned to Croatia for a forum in the ancient town of Split, on the Adriatic Sea. One morning, some Croatian Serbs (ethnic Serbs whose families had lived in Croatia for generations and who held Croatian citizenship) accused the Croats of poor treatment of Serb returnees, who had fled during the war in 1995 and were now returning to Croatia. They also wanted someone to stand accountable for the atrocities committed against them in 1995. Croats were outraged that they were being blamed for not being open armed to returning Serbs, after the Serbs had committed such atrocities in 1991 against *them*, while occupying regions of Croatia. Serbs responded that Croats had committed grave atrocities against *them* during the Second World War, when Croatia was allied with the Nazis. Within 15 minutes we were back in the 14th century! Each side wanted the other to take responsibility for the problems of the country and the region.

Symmetrical blaming leads to escalation and cycling of conflict, but, as we will see, it can also be an important step on the way toward conflict resolution.

The 'killer'

As we listened, we realized that each side was talking about the same "ghost role." A ghost role is a part of the process that is being referred to or implied, but no one is representing it directly or identifying with it (Mindell, 1995, 89). Whether Serb or Croat, each side accused the other of being a killer.

That afternoon, we told people that although it might be difficult to watch and listen, we felt it could be useful to represent "the killer" whom everyone was suffering from. After getting the group's permission, we entered the role, representing the glory of killing and power. One woman, looking shell shocked, stood up and said that she knows this man; he was in her kitchen. She proceeded to tell the story of when a war lord forced his way into her house and threatened her and her family. Then she played this man, swaggering and strutting around the room, making threats and spitting venom.

At first the participants looked on in a stunned silence. Then one by one they started reacting to this role, arguing with it, expressing their fury, their terror, their loss and pain. The woman left the role and joined the chorus of outrage. For a long moment, the whole group was united against the killer, united in their common story, no longer blaming one another, able for now to see each other's humanity, anger, and grief. Some of the shock and numbness of the past few years began to lift as their reactions -- that would have been dangerous or even fatal to express during the war -- now rang out and were echoed and welcomed by the community.

This process suggested that the group needed -- and perhaps the larger community needs -- to express its shock and outrage against the 'killer.' This is important in two ways. First, this expression unlocks frozen reactions within traumatic experience, beginning a process of individual and collective healing. Second, it is an important step toward accountability, because people cannot begin to think about taking responsibility for the violence in their communities unless they have had a chance to process their shock and pain about it. These parallel processes of working with trauma and accountability are essential for reconciliation, and for preventing the replay of conflict and war (Audergon 2005, 38-40, 200-202).

Personal and collective accountability and responsibility

Over several years, essential discussions arose, differentiating personal and collective responsibility.

A national debate was raging in the media and the government about sending those accused of war crimes to the Tribunal in The Hague. Many people in society, and some in our group, were against sending any Croats to The Hague. Some Croatian nationalists felt that individuals who were now considered war criminals had valiantly defended Croatia and should not be prosecuted. They felt it would destroy the morale of soldiers who had fought to defend their country. Some felt that Croat war criminals should not be sent to The Hague until Serb war criminals had first been sent. Others feared the international community would withhold aid if Croatia did not cooperate, and some felt that this would

be a form of unfair collective punishment. Still others felt that war criminals on all sides needed to be held accountable by the Tribunal, so that society could move forward. They supported the principles behind the Tribunal: that accountability is an essential component of reconciliation and conflict prevention; and that it is important to hold responsible those individuals who are most guilty of crimes against humanity in order to make sure that collective guilt and retribution is avoided.

These far-reaching issues about individual and collective responsibility played out within the microcosm of our forums. Some people thought we should not talk about accountability within our group, because that was only a matter for war criminals. Others insisted that even those individuals who were not directly responsible, or who had even opposed the war, needed to assume some accountability for what their group or nation had done. Still others resisted the idea of anyone assuming responsibility for what they had not personally done. They firmly believed that each person should be seen only as an individual, accountable only for his or her own actions, and not as a member of an ethnic/national group.

Taking responsibility and community leadership

In most conflicts, whether it is at home or in a situation of war, people have a need for accountability. This is connected to an urge for justice and closure. It includes someone admitting what happened (versus denying what happened or making counter accusations), filling in the holes of missing information, and expressing remorse for what happened.

During one forum, amidst calls for accountability, an older Croat woman stood up and did something unheard of at that time. She spoke about a Croat soldier who had entered a Muslim home and killed a woman and child. Then she said, "I was a person who wanted military action to liberate Knin (a region of Croatia that had been held by the Serbs). That was war. But I did not want Savka and Jovan to be thrown into the well." (These are Serb names.)

Then a Serb woman stood up, on the verge of tears. She said, "No one can tell me that an 87 year old Croat man should be made to suffer at the hands of Serbs. I graduated from the best university. But I still can't explain to a Croat mother why her four year old had to die. Why did they beat up an 87 year old man? How can I learn to forget this?"

It was so painful to listen to these specific horrors. But, as each woman spoke about atrocities committed by *her own group*, it transformed the feeling of the whole group.

It was potentially dangerous, and therefore very courageous, for these women to speak in this way, due to an implicit code of loyalty. But each of these women had credibility within their own ethnic/national group, having suffered deeply during the war at the hands of the other side.

The Serb woman went on to say, “It’s not that I’m personally guilty, because I’m not. But if I were silent, I would not be taking responsibility. By speaking I take responsibility.”

With this shift in the notion of responsibility, the forum changed direction. An older Muslim man pleaded with the participants to turn together with him toward the future. First in small groups and then in the large group, participants discussed what they would do if they could identify with a sense of responsibility and leadership in their own communities.

Several people commented that the discussions on personal and collective responsibility had led to a new understanding of their experiences during the war and in the present time. One man said, “It never occurred to me until now that I had any responsibility for what happened in this region. Now I see that if something similar happens again, I can make a conscious choice about whether I will do something about it.” Enlivened, he said “This feeling of responsibility does not make me feel guilty; it gives me hope for the future.” A woman agreed, saying that she had been a teenager when the war started, and so she could not do anything. “But now I see that my feelings then – my hatred – contributed to the atmosphere that led to war, and that has led to wars throughout history.”

The Ripple Effect

Six months later, we convened the next forum. A young woman who had been quiet during the last forum told the group that the process about responsibility had influenced her in profound ways. She told the following story.

“I came to the last forum with a problem on my soul. The state had decided to build a nuclear waste dump in my town, and I felt helpless to do anything about it. But after listening to the others talk about responsibility, and then talking in my small group about what it would be like if I could take responsibility and leadership, I returned home and started to act step by step. I drafted a petition and gave it to the local municipal board. They convinced the neighboring town to also gather signatures. But they only gathered 700 signatures. So I organized volunteers and gathered 4,000 more. Now there is a halt on construction. In the midst of this, I met with the mayor. He told me that he is too small to make a difference. I told him that he is not small. Imagine me, a young woman, telling the mayor that he is not small! Now I feel much more powerful and free, because in spite of all odds, I have changed something in my community, and in my head.”

This woman’s personal transformation made her a political force to be reckoned with, and an inspiration to others.

This was part of the ripple effect of these forums. Participants had life-changing experiences, and witnessed others having such experiences. Sometimes people unlocked emotions and expression that had been frozen by trauma. Or they saw people from opposing sides talking with each other, fighting with each other, crying with each other, and loving one another. They were shocked and thrilled to realize that conflict need not

lead to war, but rather can be a doorway to intimacy and community. Then they went back to their local communities, changed. Participants often told us that when they now met a conflict in their community, where they would have normally been afraid or at a loss, they realized they could approach the situation with a new orientation. They felt not only that it was possible to work with conflict, but that doing so could strengthen their communities. As they brought these new patterns home with them, the ripples of change widened, and others saw new possibilities of living together, talking openly with one another, and taking responsibility for their common future.

Inner, Outer, and Beyond

The project in Croatia can be seen as one model that might be useful in other post-conflict and conflict prevention efforts. Reconciliation and conflict prevention requires political and humanitarian intervention, at local, national and international levels, to deal with criminal accountability, provide basic services for those displaced during war, support human rights, and build civil society. These efforts are more likely to be sustainable if the post-war issues are processed in depth at the community level.

Working deeply at the community level also builds relationships. In this project, lasting friendships grew across ethnic/national lines. Professional collaboration was also fostered, essential to the joint effort needed to rebuild society. Relationships also spanned organizational boundaries. Organizations that had been at odds with one another, competed with one another, or had even worked at cross purposes, were able to work on their differences and increase their cooperation.

The very notion of working with conflict at a community level requires a shift in how we look at conflict itself. It means looking at our own responsibility and recognizing how our own feelings and attitudes influence our communities and world. It means not only aiming for peace, but being willing to have conflicts together, inviting all voices and facilitating the whole interaction - even or especially when it seems most difficult. And it means looking at how the problem “out there” may also be playing out inside of us.

This is both a psychological and political process. In Croatia, we saw individuals and groups transform when they intentionally and consciously stepped into the complex issues and painful emotions surrounding the war and post-war period, rather than feeling only at the mercy of these dynamics. Many people said that their participation in these forums was of life-and-death importance to them on their personal journey. They spoke of finding hope for humanity that they had been convinced they would never feel again. At the same time, they did not just hope for peace, but recognized that they are active and essential players in shaping their society.

We honor the participants who were willing to go the extremes and depths of their outrage and suffering. Sometimes the conflict seemed intractable; sometimes the pain was too terrible, the stories unspeakable. Yet, there was a sense of the whole group working through it together, as if we all were one body. The most intimate personal

things, spoken in the community, were not only personal, but also belonged to everyone. And as the group moved together through accusation, traumatic experience, hatred, terror, and hopelessness, there was a sense that the group itself belonged to something that transcended it, something that could hold and transform its conflict and pain. When we reflect on our experiences in Croatia, we feel a sense of awe – that what is transformative is ultimately beyond the individuals and group, beyond a method, and beyond words.

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ⁱ Tanja Radocaj and Mirela Miharija invited us to Croatia after meeting us at a Worldwork seminar in Slovakia in 1994. Tanja had a vision and, together with Nives Ivelja, Edi Zitnik and others from Udruga Mi, developed and implemented the project.

ⁱⁱ Other funders included OSCE, USAID, the Threshold Foundation, and the Open Society Institute, as well as the British, US, and Norwegian embassies.