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Witnessed Improvised Diaspora Journey Enactments: an experiential method for exploring refugee history

JON BLEND AND ROZ CARROLL

This article focuses on the development and use of a method for exploring transgenerational trauma through semi-structured improvised enactments.¹ We evolved this approach out of a series of workshops and then live group events focusing on the legacy of the Shoah and refugee experiences of flight from persecution. Witnessed Improvised Diaspora Journey Enactments (WIDJE) draws on many established practices from psychotherapy, groupwork, and the arts. The combination of elements is critical: we use the structure of a journey, within the context of survival-driven diaspora, which is enacted by participants with other participants acting as witnesses. Witnessing provides containment and recognition of the stories that unfold. We include elements of improvisation within a semi-structured format.²

As teachers of psychotherapy we developed this approach to facilitate understanding of transgenerational and collective trauma both for trainees and experienced psychotherapists working with Jewish and other refugee clients. Our method takes into account the complex processes involved in evoking memories, and reconstructing and creating representative stories. It is essential to hold this in a context which also bears witness to the emotional journeys, past and present, of refugees. We are not trying to reproduce in a literal way the journey of the Kinder by train and boat; these experiences are well documented. Our work was focused on a range of refugee journeys – some existing in intergenerational memory, others visible in current news coverage. The aim here of using a symbolic

1 This article is based on our talk “Improvisation as Representation: Diaspora Stories Re-enacted” at *The Kindertransport 80 Years On: Critical Approaches to Kindertransport Research and Historiography*, symposium, Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London, 22–24 Jan. 2019.

2 Jo Salas, *Improvising Real Life* (20th Anniversary Edition): *Personal Story in Playback Theatre* (New York: Tusitala Publishing, 2019); see also Rod Paton, *Lifemusic: Connecting People to Time* (Wimborne, Dorset: Archive Publishing, 2011).

journey is to breathe air into history and to create an experience that can put participants in touch with both what is and is not discussed and/or documented.

Beyond words: the legacy of the Shoah

As psychotherapists we work with individuals and with groups, exploring personal, familial, and community stories. Many clients come with Shoah-related histories. These days there is increasing interest in and understanding of transgenerational trauma – wounds passed down from parents to children usually, and to subsequent generations. This can include the impact of collective trauma – horrific events on a large scale affecting a wide group. As Kai Erickson put it: “By collective trauma . . . I mean a blow to the basic tissues of life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality”.³

The devastating events leading up to and including the Holocaust had a major impact on family life during the Nazi era. Hundreds of thousands of families could no longer function as before, that is, living at home maintaining their traditions, income, and status. Families were forcefully evacuated by the Nazis, interned, or put to death; others were subjected to harsh conditions such as hunger, disease, and hard labour. The events seriously impaired the capacity of the persecuted survivor parents to care emotionally and economically for their young.⁴

Key psychobiological effects of traumatic experience are hyperarousal and dissociation and, over the long term, depression and chronic anxiety.⁵ Dissociation is an automatic protective response to trauma, which separates off unassimilable experience, leaving it “frozen . . . shrouded . . . by an anaesthesia”.⁶ Many among the survivors developed post-traumatic

3 Kai Erickson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 154.

4 Julia Chaitin, “Facing the Holocaust in Generations of Families of Survivors: The Case of Partial Relevance and Interpersonal Values”, *Contemporary Family Therapy* 22, no. 3 (2000): 289–313.

5 Allan Schore, *Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); see also Rachel Yehuda et al., “Depressive Features in Holocaust Survivors with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”, *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 7, no. 4 (1994): 699–704.

6 Gianni Francesetti, “Transmission and Transformation of Psychopathological Fields between Generations”, in *Gestalt Therapy with Children: From Epistemology to Clinical Practice*, ed. Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb, Nurith Levi, and Andrew Williams (Syracuse, Sicily: Istituto di Gestalti HCC, 2016), 217.

stress disorder (PTSD) in the years after the war, due to the prolonged duration of their trauma.

Parenting after the Holocaust was affected by survivors' strong desire to normalize life. Many quickly married and procreated, seeking to continue the Jewish race and thereby deny a posthumous victory to Hitler. Some of these relationships suffered, however, as spouses affected by trauma encountered difficulties with intimate relations. Constraining effects of neighbour hostility and pervasive antisemitism also led to social alienation and distancing, prompting many parents to conceal their Jewishness. Many survivors experienced apathy, emotional distance, aversion to change, intense anxiety, and paranoia. These processes created what is known as the "conspiracy of silence" or the "double wall" phenomenon.⁷ The children of Holocaust survivors could not understand what lay behind this wall of silence. Nonetheless, they could pick up unvoiced familial tensions and pain related to missing relatives who were unaccounted for. Instead what was transmitted to subsequent generations was an experiential void.⁸

In a major piece of research entitled "Trauma and the Continuity of Self: A Multidimensional, Multidisciplinary Integrative Framework" (1998), Yael Danieli interviewed a sample of 422 adult children of survivors with a three-part inventory assessing multigenerational legacies of trauma.⁹ What emerged from the survivors' adult children were reports of the intensities of parents' adaptational styles that were then classified as "victim", "numb", and "fighter" post-traumatic responses. Nanette Auerhahn and Dori Laub theorized that the parents would displace their own repressed grief onto their children.¹⁰ These children have often absorbed their parents' emotions and cannot differentiate these from their own feelings. This is experienced in adulthood as "unexplainable grief".¹¹

The word trauma has its roots in the early Greek "titrosko" meaning

7 Yael Danieli, "Psychotherapist's Participation in the Conspiracy of Silence about the Holocaust", *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1984): 23–42; Daniel Bar-On, *Fear and Hope: Life-Stories of Five Israeli Families of Holocaust Survivors, Three Generations in a Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

8 Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (New York: Penguin, 1979).

9 Yael Danieli, *Trauma and the Continuity of Self: A Multidimensional, Multidisciplinary Integrative Framework*, (New York: Plenum Series on Stress & Coping, 1998).

10 Nanette Auerhahn and Dori Laub, "Intergenerational Memory of the Holocaust", in *ibid.*, 21–41.

11 Natan Kellermann, "Transmission of Holocaust Trauma: An Integrative View", *Israel Journal of Psychiatry* 64, no. 3 (2001): 256–67.

“to wound”. There is an associated word, “*rubido*”, which carries two meanings: to “rub in” to the wound and to “rub out” or erase.¹² So trauma is experienced as being both pierced and erased by the enemy. Those in flight also take part in the erasing process themselves to avoid being conspicuous and therefore in danger. In a diaspora situation, culture is often maintained secretly under difficult circumstances through worship, food, and music.

In her book *Memorial Candles* (1992) Dina Wardi talks about her experience of children of Holocaust survivors.¹³ Often one child in the family is designated to memorialize dead relatives and carry on the family legacy. This transmission is unconscious, rarely spoken of; being named after a murdered relative often carries with it a heavy psychic burden. “Memorial candle” children often take the role of scapegoats for the family, assuming the burden of their parents’ unmourned losses. At the same time this unconscious endowment serves as a link to the trauma their parents endured. The search to uncover the root of the suffering and to whom it belongs often brings people to therapy.

Psychotherapy and collective transgenerational trauma

Common to many diaspora experiences are occurrences for which words do not seem adequate. Clients may come to psychotherapy with uncertainties about their identity, feeling something is wrong but not being able to articulate what it is. When children of displaced immigrants grow up in a different culture from that of their parents, tensions and loyalty conflicts arise. There is often both a push to assimilate and a contrary pressure to maintain past traditions of the family of origin. When in, addition, families have endured trauma and/or severe hardship, the stories of this pain go into silos. Accordingly, psychotherapists need to be able to work sensitively with a client who may be suffering from what happened before they were born. Clients may not have directly experienced trauma but they may nevertheless be “haunted” by their forebears’ experiences, both known and unknown.¹⁴ Research by Danieli and others further reveals that the “conspiracy of silence” applies also to therapists,

12 Renos Papadopoulos, personal conversation, 2010; see also Renos Papadopoulos, ed., *Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place Like Home* (London: Karnac Books, 2002).

13 Dina Wardi, *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 1992).

14 Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History beyond Trauma* (New York: Other Press, 2004); Clara Mucci, *Beyond Individual and Collective Trauma* (London: Karnac Books, 2013).

who for many reasons may not pick up on references to collective and/or transgenerational trauma.¹⁵

As psychotherapists we understand that trauma is held in the body, in collective memory, in rituals and in objects, icons and artistic representation.¹⁶ These create multiple access points to memory, to imagined scenarios, to stories recounted, and fragments of history. People often ask how we can work with transgenerational themes when there may be little actual known detail of parents', grandparents', and great-grandparents' lives. In fact there are a variety of ways of invoking, inviting, and feeling into stories of our relatives' lives.¹⁷ The arts can play a pivotal role in this because they carry multilayered symbolic meanings and speak to unformulated "knowing in the bones". For example, there are moments in anyone's life when history breaks through: a chance encounter, a sudden connection with a film or a novel, or a piece of art, gives a new perspective. It is a change in perception – a detail or memory which had a hollow or indefinable meaning suddenly finds a resonance and is now redolent with meaning and/or feeling.

Others ask how we know the true nature of what our forebears encountered. In a factual sense that is hard to answer. Yet our emotional responses to shards of information about our histories, imperfect and incomplete though this knowledge may be, nonetheless carry validity. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, reflecting on the experiences of those who know little of their past, advocated "trying on" different narratives of events. This is similar to the way that an actor tries on clothes or shoes to feel into a character. Phillips called this process "cloaking". As he observed, who could say that what appeared to "fit" was not in some way a "truth" for that person?¹⁸

15 Danieli, "Psychotherapist's Participation"; M. Gerard Fromm, *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma Across Generations* (London: Karnac Books, 2011); Emily Kuriloff, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2014).

16 Roz Carroll, "The Blood-dimmed Tide: Witnessing War and working with the Collective Body in Authentic Movement", *Journal of Psychotherapy and Politics International* 13, no. 3 (2015): 194–208.

17 Bert Hellinger, with Gunthard Weber and Hunter Beaumont, *Love's Hidden Symmetry: What makes Love work in Relationships* (Phoenix, AZ: Zeig, Tucker & Theisen, 1998).

18 Adam Phillips, personal conversation, High Wycombe CAMHS, Buckinghamshire, 1997.

What brings us to this work?

In contemporary relational psychotherapy, the therapist's own history and subjectivity is considered to be always implicitly present, whether directly acknowledged or not. As therapists and authors with our own histories of refugee and diaspora backgrounds, we have a particular interest in intergenerational and transcultural stories.

Jon's mother Martha Blend was a Jewish refugee from Austria who came to the UK via the Kindertransport route in 1938. The full significance of her experience was concealed throughout his childhood. However, following the fiftieth anniversary in 1988 and the first Reunion of Kindertransports in 1989, Martha wrote a book about her experiences.¹⁹ At the same time, Jon began exploring his heritage during sabbatical travels in Borneo. In 1989 an indigenous Christian woman in Sarawak introduced him to the writings of Victor Frankl.²⁰ Jon was moved to visit the JEATH War Museum, formerly a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. This commemorates Allied POWs who in 1942–43 laboured under the direction of the Japanese constructing the Thai–Burma 'Death Railway Bridge' over the River Kwai (JEATH standing for Japan, England, Australia, America, Holland). Here he learnt about the diaspora experiences of the camp's survivors. On returning to England he joined other Jewish social workers with continental origins researching their heritage, later contributing to a social work manual on Jewish issues.²¹

At this period the publication of much eyewitness and survivor testimony began to take place in response to genocides from across the globe, breaking the "conspiracy of silence" among survivors, their families, and wider society.²² Jon later attended conferences concerning the Holocaust and participated in a group exploring "asymmetric dialogue" between Germans and Jews.²³

Roz Carroll grew up with an awareness of being the daughter of an Irish immigrant and feeling a strong affinity for the culture and literature of Ireland. Over the years she has recognized the split between her

19 Martha Blend, *"A Child Alone": A Kindertransport Memoir* (London and Chicago: Vallentine Mitchell, 1995, repr. 2008).

20 Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006).

21 Jon Blend et al., *Jewish Issues in Social Work and Social Care: A Resource Pack for Educators and Practitioners* (Newcastle: Faculty of Health, Social Work and Education, University of Northumbria, 2000).

22 Danieli, 'Psychotherapist's Participation'.

23 Daniel Bar-On, *Tell Your Life-Story: Creating Dialogue between Jews and Germans, Israelis and Palestinians* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2006).

inner identification with Irishness and her embeddedness within, and assimilation to, British life. Her father's book about his Irish diaspora experience also challenged the unacknowledged impact of evacuation, a second diaspora, on children sent out of London during the Second World War.²⁴

Roz's interest in the Holocaust started while working on a kibbutz in the 1980s. Later she trained at the Chiron Centre for Body Psychotherapy which was started by the German psychotherapists Bernd Eiden, Jochen Lude, and Rainer Pervoltz. She was profoundly influenced by the way Germans and Jews came together as trainees and trainers in emotional encounters and deep dialogue to seek connection and understanding of their mutual histories.

Evolution of the format

We met in 2003 and started teaching together in 2007 at Terapia, a child psychotherapy training organization in London. In 2015 we ran an experiential weekend workshop for therapists called "Naming the Beast: Addressing Collective Trauma and its Aftermath" at the Minster Centre, an adult psychotherapy training organization in London. Using arts-based exercises we supported participants to explore aspects of identity relating to their transgenerational history. We developed a safe space for them to connect to and understand themes of shame and anxiety within a context that drew on the concepts of piercing and erasure. What followed was a movement-based exercise to help participants explore their internalized "perpetrator" as well as their identification with helplessness in a "victim" position. After time to process, we ended with a commemorative ritual involving the placing of stones.

The next event was another workshop in 2015, "The Legacy of the Shoah", for a psychotherapy and politics conference, *The Body Politic*.²⁵ Our biggest concern in preparation for the workshop was the risk of dissipating intensity through too much generalized "talking about". We had only ninety minutes, which was not enough time for each person to tell their story as a narrative. We decided it was important to keep the focus on what was felt in the body, to help participants gather elusive fragments

24 John Ronald Carroll, *Luck of the Irish: A Saga of an Irish Family Arriving in England Just as World War II Is Declared* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2012).

25 Organized by Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, London, May 2015.

of buried experience or find embodied association to this powerful historical event. Our workshop was accordingly tightly structured and, in the first half, mostly non-verbal. We opened with listening to the song “A Hill of Little Shoes” which reflects on seeing the painful image of a mound of children’s shoes at Auschwitz and what this symbolizes.²⁶ We used a movement exercise to help participants orient to the themes.

Then we invited participants to take two pieces of paper from a child’s leather satchel, which contained many slips with evocative fragments of prose. The task was to resonate and respond, adding words of their own. Each person in a group of three contributed a short phrase to make a simple haiku. Each group performed their haiku to the circle. Our aim in using this “cut-up” method was to introduce the element of chance and to allow something to be created that was not solely personal. What emerged from this process was a feeling that was intimate, disturbing, and profound.

It is interesting to reflect on who was drawn to our workshop. Many of the participants were Jews, often with a continental history that included their forebears escaping from terror. We also noticed a number of non-Jewish therapists resonating deeply, bearing in mind their clients’ and their own histories of displacement, war, and fear.

Diaspora journeys

At this time, in 2015, the media was frequently focusing on harrowing scenes of displaced refugees in flight pouring across borders in search of safety. We started to think about diaspora journeys involving flight from terror and how we might develop this into an enactive and reflective process for groups. We drew on our interest in previous major diaspora journeys, for example those undertaken by displaced people in the aftermath of the First World War. Data from different countries suggest that at least ten million people were displaced either internally or as a result of fleeing across an international frontier. European literature of the post-1918 period is redolent with images of fear, loss, dislocation, yearning, betrayal, decadence, anomie, and spiritual suffering. The Second World War also led to major upheaval, relocation, and exile; many Jews including the Kinder have described their journeys in books and personal testimony (1,818 sound recordings to date in the British Library alone). The Reunion of Kindertransports organized by Bertha Leverton in 1989 provided one

26 Barry Coope, Jim Boyes, and Lester Simpson (vocals), “A Hill of Little Shoes”, lyrics Pete Atkin and Clive James, on *As If* . . . (CD, No Masters, 2010).

such focal point encouraging voices who had hitherto remained silent to speak out their diaspora experiences. In addition, around this time Associations of Jewish Refugees (AJR) sprang up around the globe; in some places their second-generation counterparts (Associations of Children of Jewish Refugees, ACJR) came into being too for the “Kind of the Kind” and their descendants, so to speak.

Many of the original Kinder’s journeys from home to station to boat to arrival followed a clearly marked route to safety. We had a particular interest in the less-told stories of others whose refugee journeys were of a different nature – journeys involving, for example, fleeing across mountains and rivers, navigating hazardous border crossings which presented challenges to body and soul for people of all ages and capacities. We wanted to include journeys of flight made by previous generations who had fled from pogroms and other genocidal threats. We planned to keep the journey generic in order to include refugee stories from global diasporas. Diaspora triggered by danger – as opposed to economic migration – has always been and continues to be a global phenomenon. In our work we are mindful of other diasporas including those from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere.²⁷

Witnessed Improvised Diaspora Journey Enactments

In 2016 we offered the opportunity to explore refugee experience through enactment to three groups of counsellors and therapists: the Association of Jungian Analysts (26 July), participants at a conference, The Psychic Impact of War and Terrorism (9–10 December), and a group of male Haredi counsellors-in-training.²⁸ We deliberately chose groups of professionals with their own personal support structures. We were aware that the material explored experientially in this way carried a charge that might trigger buried memories or overwhelm people through their identification with the trauma.

Our aim in these evenings was to invite participants to feel into the experience of being displaced, becoming a refugee, and travelling with uncertainty. As therapists experienced in working with trauma, we paid

27 Peter O’Neill and David Lloyd, eds., *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Noel Brehony, ed., *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

28 Association of Jungian Analysts, London, 26 July; The Psychic Impact of War and Terrorism, Confer conference, Tavistock Centre, London, 9–10 Dec. 2016.

close attention to building safety in order to contain the evocative material we were exploring. One aspect of this involved inviting approximately a third of those present to act as silent witnesses (about which more later). As facilitators we prepared in great detail our directions to the group so that the structure itself was part of the containment. This included having people speak minimally and in character and “de-roling” when the journey finished. At some points we participated in the enactment, at other times we gave explicit instructions as directors of the process. Each evening concluded with a group process to share and listen to others’ experience. What follows is a composite of the three different events.

The structure of the journey

Taking the archetypal refugee story, one of flight from danger with an uncertain ending, we decided to set up the journey in five “movements”. We used headings to frame the scenes and themes: (1) The Village/Shtetl; (2) Crossing Mountains, Rivers, Forests; (3) Around the Camp Fire with Stories and Song; (4) In Limbo/Sheol; (5) Aftermath. These represent both stages of the journey and distinct states of mind: (1) the disruption of the known; (2) challenge and adversity; (3) recuperating and re-affirming; (4) disorientation, confusion; (5) facing what’s happened and future uncertainties.

Setting the scene

We used simple props to set the scene – rivers made of swathes of material, mountains fashioned from freestanding flip charts covered with sheets, and orange and red scarves used to make a “fire”. Other props included an old-fashioned camera and tripod, maps, torches, old personal documents, precious items and religious icons, suitcases, real cooking utensils, and dried food. We chose simple instruments made of wood, skin, gut – the kind that might be found in a village.

While participants were arriving at the venue, we played music from a variety of cultures that evoked uncertainty, confusion, yearning, and heartache (to respect Haredi culture wherein it is not customary for men to listen to women’s singing, instrumental music only was used on that occasion). These included “Homeless” by Ladysmith Black Mambazo – “Many dead tonight, it could be you. And we are homeless, homeless”;²⁹

29 Ladysmith Black Mambazo, “Homeless” on *Peace & Love*, CD compilation (Marks & Spencer PLC, London, 1999).

Roshi Nasehi's "Pache Leili", a haunting Farsi love-song punctuated by dystopian percussion;³⁰ *Mayn Rue Platz* (My Resting Place), a Yiddish song by the a cappella group Vocolot;³¹ and "Chand/The Moon" by Garam Masala, a hypnotic poem recited in Hindi and English with clarinet and sitar accompaniment.³²

The enactment

The enactment began with the group listening to the opening bars of an instrumental recording, "Long Road out of Eden".³³ This begins with the sound of desert wind, followed by plaintive tones from an ancient flute. A bell tolls. With the participants now in touch with the sombre mood, we introduced the enactment and gave instructions for the first scene.

We began by inviting participants to draw lots for roles (baker, scribe, farmer, religious leader, disabled elder, and others), taking paper slips from a hat. Encouraging each fully to embody their role, we then focused on establishing a moment of celebration in village life. The "local photographer" (Roz) gathers everyone for a picture. As she raises her hand to activate the (imaginary) flash unit, suddenly – boom! – there is a major disturbance. A shepherd (Jon) runs in shouting warnings of danger and the need to flee at once. This was completely unexpected: chaos and confusion ensue as everyone grasps the situation. Some props are on hand. Shouted instructions tell people to "Take what you need and move fast – NOW!"

The next scene involved travelling at night through unknown and treacherous territory. We had already set out the environment using props to make rivers, mountains, and obstacles for the groups to navigate. Lights were switched off and we gave out torches. In two of these events we used several rooms and corridors to create the sense of an epic journey. People had to huddle, squeeze through gaps, and help each other over obstacles. We wanted to create a sense of urgency and uncertainty. Drama arose spontaneously as group members wrestled with conflict over who should make decisions, whether to go back for a missing family member, and

30 Roshi Nasehi with Graham Dowdall, "Pache Leili" on *3 Almonds and A Walnut*, CD (GEO Records, 2013).

31 Vocolot, featuring Linda Hirschhorn, *Mayn Rue Platz* (My Resting Place, 1911, lyrics by Morris Rosenfeld) on *Behold!* CD (Baby, 1977).

32 Garam Masala and Samia Malik, "Chand/The Moon" on *The Colour of the Heart*, CD (Debut and Arts Council of England, 1998).

33 The Eagles, "Long Road Out of Eden" on *Long Road Out of Eden*, CD, producers Richard Davis, Stuart Smith, Scott Crago, and Bill Szymczyk (Polydor Recordings, Portland, ME, 2007).

over food shortages. In one group there was a strong challenge between “believers” and “unbelievers” regarding the religious leader’s entitlement to lead the flight.

The camp fire scene provided an opportunity for the group to recover slightly. We introduced poetry, prose, and song to deepen the connection to refugee themes. The readings represented many diaspora experiences: stories of pain, heartache, and loss from Syria, France, Somalia, Austria, Poland, and Pakistan. Participants drummed or sang folk songs in mother tongues, some were bitter, others achingly beautiful. There was a tension between those wishing to sing more and rest, and those anxious to move away for fear of encroaching danger. The group moved on in uneasy silence as “dawn” rose.

We called the next stage “Limbo”. The Torah also refers to a place called Sheol which Kabbalists view as a stopping point for all souls on their journey from this world to Olam Habah, the next world. It is often connoted as a place of uncertainty, often of high anxiety and dread. Here is an excerpt from our directions:

Stop moving. We’re now in limbo. This is a space between worlds . . . You can’t go back . . . You don’t know what lies ahead. . . .

What does it feel like? What have you lost?

What do you notice if you listen to your body? Steady your breath . . . Notice if your heart is beating fast or slow. . . . Which way does your body want to move?

Notice the angle of your head, the shape of your mouth. . . . What is going on in your feet?

What are your hopes and fears?

Now open your eyes . . . look around . . . Notice where others are in this – who are you connected to? Who are you prepared to give energy to, or not?

Close your eyes, go back into your body, let your breathing deepen.

What story is emerging? Whose story might you be taking on?

Hold onto the images even if they are uncomfortable.

These prompts were delivered while a music piece entitled “Reminiscence” was playing in the background. The piece begins with ascending notes on the violin resembling a series of haunting cries: these cries help move the participants into the new unknown territory, the place of Limbo. Here the quality of participants’ movements, guided by our words and the music, becomes slow, heavy, and weary. People hang their heads, avert

their gaze, reflecting the sorrow and mixed feelings that appear to pull them almost literally towards the ground.³⁴

In reality we know this state of Limbo/Sheol can persist for months or even years as people are unable to find refuge and are held in camps or forced to travel on and on. Even when relative safety is reached this is not “a place like home”.³⁵ This creates a prolonged crisis that opens questions of faith, of meaning, of failure, of possibility, of fear and hope.

The fifth stage we titled “Aftermath”. Here we slowly brought participants out from their deep internal state into “the new reality”. We played Arnalds’s “Letters of a Traveller” (2015) to facilitate this.³⁶ Here the smooth cello conveys a devotional sense like the sound of a *bracha* (blessing) uttered slowly through exhaled breath. The experience of this phase, for some, is like waking from a dream. Participants re-orient and are encouraged to reconnect with each other simply, though gesture and glance. Some participants embraced, others remained on their own.

Our aim here was to enable a gentle return after a long inner journey. To aid the transition we rolled out long rafts of wallpaper into the communal space. Participants and witnesses drew intently. Some made marks with pastels on their own, working side by side; several interacted with others to co-create a kaleidoscope of images, words, symbols, and poems. The emerging result was an impactful montage containing beauty and pain. We invited everyone to walk round the artwork slowly, taking in the images and words.

We completed the return by taking everyone, including witnesses, through a process of de-roling. The first phase was physical: shaking off the tensions in the body, freeing up breathing, and feeling the floor under their feet. Then we asked each person to say out loud their true identity. For example, “I was the doctor in this enactment. I am not the doctor, I am Aaron, a student”; “I was a witness to what took place. I am not a witness any longer – I am Jane, a teacher and therapist.”

‘After Such Knowledge’

This is the title of Eva Hoffman’s book, whose sub-title is *Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (2003): she explores the historical, psychological, and moral implications of the second-generation

34 Hellinger, *Love’s Hidden Symmetry*, 100, 106

35 Papadopoulos, *Therapeutic Care*.

36 Ólafur Arnalds and Alice Ott, “Letters of a Traveller” on *The Chopin Project*, CD (Mercury Classics, 2015).

experience and examines the subterranean processes through which private memories of suffering are transmitted.³⁷ Next in the enactment we gathered together, sitting in a circle. In this final stage we maintained the emphasis on mindfulness, spaciousness, and speaking from the heart. The atmosphere was hushed and respectful as participants began to share their experiences. The pace of speech was unforced and people spoke simply and in a deeply emotionally connected way. Many shed tears or seemed profoundly moved. Participants reflected on how taking part in the enactment resonated with their lives, their family history, and/or the history of the clients or community with whom they worked. For reasons of confidentiality we have changed names and identifying details. The following illustrate some of the responses:

Chaim vowed to break a ten-year silence with his brother.

Aileen was moved to find motifs in her family's history that linked with others' diaspora stories.

Avram expressed remorse for discounting his grandparents suffering.

Astrid shared her vulnerability as she recognized how precarious her ancestors' lives had been. Her mother could so easily not have survived.

Nkosi talked of finding commonality between his family story and white diaspora experience.

Janusj suddenly understood his parents' decision to emigrate from war-torn Europe to Australia; "we've never spoken about their lives back then".

For some these dawning recognitions were profound and incontrovertible, for others there were tentative or disturbing discoveries. A common reflection in the group was of being the sole person who consciously identified with their family's story (Wardi's "memorial candles"). Many expressed relief at being with others and able to share, thus undoing the "conspiracy of silence". Some found resolution for questions thus far unanswered, while for others the questions – and real intergenerational dialogue – were just beginning. Counsellors and psychotherapists gained a deeper understanding of their own and their clients' ancestral experience. Many commented on the sense of wonder, grace, and connection to others, and themselves.

We ended with a poem (see the end of this article) and by lighting candles to acknowledge and mourn familiar and hidden losses. We had

37 Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003).

a sense that people were departing in peace having journeyed through adversity together and survived.

Key aspects of the methodology

The “Field” holds the stories

We can understand what arose in these enactments in terms of responses to ritual, music, dramatic structure, and conscious intention. In addition we understand the process in terms of what is called “Field” phenomena.³⁸ During the years we were facilitating these enactments, we were not familiar with the psychotherapist Gianni Francesetti’s article “Transmission and Transformation of Psychopathological Fields between Generations” (2016). However, he captures so beautifully both the theory and the practice of working with Field phenomena in intergenerational work (though he is not writing about group enactments) that we draw on his words here. Francesetti describes the Field as “an atmosphere that impregnates spaces and can appear and disappear, or remain stably present – like a musical ground note – in a given context. It is . . . a co-created perceptive phenomenon”. He adds, “The Field is the actualization in the here and now of the there and then”.³⁹

The Field includes everything in the room at a particular moment including all the participants’ own processes and intergenerational histories, the contextual set-up (music, props and so on), and the conditions (including conscious and unconscious wishes and intentions). It is also shaped by current events (the news in 2016 focused on closed borders, capsizing boats, and refugees in a desperate search for a new home). The Field both shapes and is shaped by improvisation. For example, one participant drew the lot of “a disabled man” and a rich story emerged around this, with discussion of how the community might meet his needs. In the Limbo scene, in one of the groups, when the word “freeze” was used in the instructions, the whole group instantly dropped to the floor. Various conflicts arose spontaneously: two mothers fought over a bag of dried food, scrabbling for the remains when the bag burst. The Field is constantly in flux and can shift dramatically as the balance of conditions changes. While there were similar themes and feelings in each of the enactments, the emergence of these particular mini-stories was specific

38 Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory of Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*, ed. Dorwin Cartwright (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).

39 Francesetti, “Transmission and Transformation”, 220, 221.

to each event, and what different participants, different buildings' spaces, smells, lighting, and other elements evoked.

The role of witnesses

We drew inspiration for the use of witnesses from our respective experiences of Authentic Movement and Playback Theatre. The witnesses acted as a container, the concept of “containing” based on Jung’s idea that the therapy process can be likened to an alchemical container in which the “chemicals” are the thoughts and feelings of both patient and analyst, which have to be held safely.⁴⁰ Witnesses’ containing added safety by their quiet attentive presence, and “a relational home for . . . the unspeakable, the inexpressible and the overwhelming”.⁴¹ This contrasts with one of the defining criteria of collective trauma, which is the experience of the world as an unresponsive bystander.⁴² Authentic movement is a discipline that focuses on embodying both individual and collective consciousness.⁴³ This form of group work involves witnesses acting as a containing circle for participants who move with their eyes closed, tuning into their inner sensations, images, and impulses. Afterwards, the movers may draw or write and then there is a clear framework for putting words to what has been experienced. The mover talks first, aiming to verbalize their own phenomenological process. The witness responds by owning the subjectivity of their experience through phrases like “I saw . . . I imagined . . . I felt . . . I heard”.

Witnessing of a different kind occurs in playback theatre, a non-scripted, spontaneous drama medium rooted in storytelling and the oral tradition.⁴⁴ A form of community theatre, it draws inspiration from psychodrama, American stand-up and Eastern ritualized theatre. In a playback performance a troupe of actors and a musician work with a mediating “conductor” to instantly “play back” stories volunteered by an audience, without recourse to props or staging. The cast, with a little dramatic licence, attempt to portray faithfully key aspects of the scenario or dilemma being addressed. In both authentic movement and in playback

40 Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 16: *The Psychology of the Transference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946).

41 Francesetti, “Transmission and Transformation”, 217–18.

42 Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done to: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (London: Routledge, 2017), 235.

43 Janet Adler, “Who is the Witness?” *Contact Quarterly* 1, no. 12 (1987): 20–29.

44 Jo Salas, *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre* (3rd edn., New Platz, NY: Tusitala Publishing, 1999; repr. 2003).

theatre, making eye contact at the end of the movement or drama is part of the ritual, and underlines the importance of recognition – “I see you”. Typically, we invited a third or more of participants to act as witnesses. Many were grateful for being given the choice. We encouraged them to feel – and to share in the discussion at the end – their emotions, perceptions, associations, and images.

Music as mediator

Music played a vital part in the enactments, helping with the containment of difficult feelings, with embodying and holding mystery, and with continuing to support people in a meditative state. Its ability to build connection and facilitate entry into altered states has been well documented elsewhere.⁴⁵ Throughout the enactments the music assumed a range of functions. Some of the recorded music was chosen to support the process of crossing the threshold from everyday reality into another world. Sounds of an ancient Middle Eastern flute and a deep, tolling bell from “Long Road out of Eden” set the atmosphere. The music invited the groups to step back in time, enabling participants – both protagonists and witnesses – to explore historical landscapes while connecting with their personal “felt sense”.⁴⁶ In certain moments participants appeared to synchronize in response, resonating with and orienting to the music and to each other. This temporal locking effect of music is known as “rhythmic entrainment”.⁴⁷

Later, music making provided opportunities for self-expression round the camp fire. Up to this point several of the participants had not voiced or otherwise expressed their experience. “Musicking”, together with reading aloud and listening to accounts of other diaspora encounters, broadened the group’s awareness of and connection to a range of flight experiences undertaken across the globe.⁴⁸ On several occasions spontaneous drumming, playing, and singing arose.

45 Gary Ansdell, *How Music Helps – in Music Therapy and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2015); see also Helen Bonny, *Music and Consciousness* (Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers, 2002); Paton, *Lifemusic*.

46 Eugene Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), viii.

47 Michael Taut, Gerald McIntosh, and Volker Hoemberg, “Neurobiological Foundations of Neurologic Music Therapy: Rhythmic Entrainment and the Motor System”, *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (18 Feb. 2015), www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01185/full (accessed 17 June 2019).

48 Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Jon Blend, “I Got Rhythm: Music-Making in Therapy with Children and Adolescents”, *International Gestalt Journal* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 165–81.

At key points in the drama recorded music served to keep people immersed in the unfolding story without the distraction of words, both sustaining and deepening feeling. One participant spoke of how Arnalds's desolate music seemed to pull at the heart like a slow musical shiver.⁴⁹ His musical motifs – some spartan, some hopeful – returned variously in higher or lower registers, introducing new images. These reverberated then fell away suddenly, evoking for the listener parallel journeys through hazardous winding paths and uncertain terrain.

Movement

The structured scenes of the journey invited different kinds and qualities of movement. Initially some participants struggled to hold the tension between responding to instruction and finding their own way into the emerging improvised story. On two occasions we invited actors from local playback theatre companies to help move the action on and heighten the sense of group vitality in role.⁵⁰

In the first two sections (The Shtetl and Crossing Mountains, Rivers, Forests), the action was quick, at times confusing, and highly charged. This changed to a sense of arduous travel over difficult terrain, which involved crouching, reaching, pushing, climbing, and searching. The Camp Fire scene provided a pause during which the “villagers” could rest briefly. Some tried to sleep, some cooked, some comforted children. Others kept watch.

In the Limbo stage there was another distinct shift. We gave instructions to shape the choreography, explicitly directing protagonists towards stillness and going deep into bodily experience. Here we wanted to encourage participants to tune into internal movements, fragments of association or memory, and subliminal images. We invited them to close their eyes and to become aware of their sense of interconnectedness in time and space. This was an invitation to enter a state of liminality. In anthropology, liminality (from the word *limen*, meaning threshold) is the quality of disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete.⁵¹

49 Arnalds and Ott, “Reminiscences”, “Written in Stone”, “Letters to a Traveller” on *The Chopin Project*.

50 We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the playback actors Andi Haase, Tara Jafar, Dvora Liberman, Dan Skili, and Thelma Sharma.

51 Victor Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology”, *Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974): 53–92.

The balance of “staying with” unfolding moments and yet also moving through semi-structured scenes was designed to help participants maintain fluidity and connect deeply with what was emerging without getting stuck or lost in the process.

Synchronicity, liminality and the right hemisphere of the brain

The key elements of WIDJE – improvisation, entrainment through music, close attention to body sensation, images, and movement, witnessing, ritual, and dramatization – are largely non-verbal. This is crucial for shifting to a right-hemisphere dominant state, which enables “a greater capacity for openness, curiosity, associated thinking, making links, making whole.”⁵² As psychotherapists we know that talking can actually get in the way of deeper connection to one’s story. The psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist has argued, drawing on current neuroscience, that “activation of the right hemisphere broadens our field of perception, enabling us to experience . . . something other than what we already know”, and further, “virtually all aspects of the appreciation of time, in the sense of something lived through, with a past, present and future, are dependent on the right hemisphere”.⁵³

This right-brain activation also enhances awareness of and sensitivity to the Field, enabling participants to experience resonance in certain moments, a heightened feeling of recognition, akin to Jung’s idea of synchronicity.⁵⁴ Chance elements – the drawing of lots, the use of “cut-up technique”, the inclusion of objects (satchel, identity papers, old cooking utensils) and music – become prompts for free association, creating meaning that is synchronous with that which is implicitly known of a person’s story.

“Every crossing is a pilgrimage”

From a trauma perspective, for the Kinder and other refugees, it is not just the sudden loss of a home, community, and country that leaves a long-term and transgenerational wound. The journey shakes the survivor community to the core, disrupting family networks, identities, and bonds.

52 Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 27.

53 *Ibid.*, 4, 76.

54 Carl Gustav Jung, “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle”, in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 8: *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 872–915.

Harsh choices have been made and have to be lived with. The experience can feel like an assault on the senses and the soul. There is a suspension of all known boundaries and ways of being, often for long periods.⁵⁵ While refugees may outwardly appear to have adapted, outsiders “paid no heed to the canker within”.⁵⁶

So is what is needed for healing a “relational home” in which dissociated experience can be recognized and/or transmuted and processed? As Francesetti puts it: “A pain that does not find a relational home will be transferred from generation to generation in different but always faithful ways, until it finally finds a clearing it can inhabit in a relationship”.⁵⁷

The WIDJE method recognizes that revisiting a story or an archetypal journey does not always involve new factual information. However, the experience may lead to new awareness of the impact of a personal trans-generational story. What is different about doing this in a group context is the opportunity to explore this with others who are similarly affected. People come together in a common space where they can risk feeling vulnerable yet also experience feeling understood, with minimal need for words. What was apparent for many participants following these enactments was an opening up of psychic spaces they had formerly been unaware of or unable to articulate. These related to losses, shame, loyalty binds, and gaps in the family narrative.⁵⁸ In liminal moments of heightened “communitas”⁵⁹ it felt as though we were relating to each other on a profound, even soulful level.

To recapitulate: we paid particular attention to creating safety, aiming this work at those who had already worked with their histories in psychotherapy. We were especially keen to broaden psychotherapists’ understanding of the impact of collective trauma. As we get further away from the direct history of the Holocaust it behoves us as a society to take good care of those carrying collective trauma, of whatever generation and refugee descent.

We concluded each evening with the reading of a poem, “To Speak

55 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992, 2015).

56 Martha Blend, untitled poem, in *The Art of Dis/appearing: Jewish Women on Mental Health*, ed. Leah Thorn (London: Inspire Productions, 2000), 13.

57 Francesetti, “Transmission and Transformation”, 9.

58 Wardi, *Memorial Candles*, 214–15.

59 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 273–4.

of Distance” by Ruth Padel.⁶⁰ Her evocative lines seem to sum up the archetypal nature of the diaspora journey:

To speak of distance and the sanctuary lamp,
 something you have to do or find
 and a darkness to escape. Never mind
 rumours of an immigration gate. Revamp
 the passport. Speak of hope, that anchor bird,
 born on the site of loss, with a thousand
 resistance strategies frosting her wings
 like mica charms or ancient pilgrim songs
 embossed in the Book of Psalms. The task
 is to assimilate, to move between languages –
 in your case Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek –
 and map your journey to the shrine.
 Every crossing is a pilgrimage. The hard thing
 is to pass: harder still to fold those wings
 and drop the mask. Just do it. Translate old words
 into new. Through cliffs of fall
 and fields of black basaltic lava, take
 fresh bearings for the crossing-place.
 This is the exodus. Here are the moon and sun
 appearing upside down or double. Here are stars
 in satellite positions never seen before
 struggling for their music to be heard.

60 Ruth Padel, *Learning to Make an Oud in Nazareth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014), 47.