

# Psychotherapist for Refugees or Refugee from Psychotherapy?

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## 1 Introduction

The author has practiced psychotherapy with numerous refugees and asylum seekers in Switzerland over the past ten years. Between 2001 and 2002 he spent one year away from this practice in order to study collective grief in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Métraux, 2004).

His contribution to this book is divided into two distinct sections. In the first he offers a theoretical overview of the topic of grief in its individual and collective dimensions. He emphasizes the central role that grief, both that of the patient *and* that of the psychotherapist, invariably plays in psychotherapy with refugees.

In the second part he shows, via an anthropological and social interpretation of the psychotherapy of one of his refugee patients, that the grief process experienced by the therapist leads to a radical revision of some of the seemingly immutable principles of psychotherapy. Depending on what type of reception this infringement on revered principles receives, and on our profession's tolerance of inconsistency, the refugee's psychotherapist may become a refugee from psychotherapy! Let us hope that this will not be the case.

## 2 From the grief of the refugee to the grief of the therapist

When the topic of psychological problems in refugees is evoked, the focus is usually on trauma, or post-traumatic stress disorder. This diagnosis, which has become quite fashionable with many psychologists and psychiatrists, has also been adopted by the public and become a stake in both the political and legal arenas. The issue of whether or not it is acceptable to send a refugee suffering from post-traumatic stress back to the country where the trauma occurred is an example of the debate surrounding this concept. Each of us answers this emotionally charged question in accordance with his or her own ideology.

However, focusing on trauma prevents us from seeing much of the reality of the psychological problems of refugees, and perhaps even from recognizing the core issue, that of *loss* and *grief* (see Moser and Robertson in this volume). At times the subject of grief is brought up in the literature, for example in connection with those who disappeared at Srebrenica, yet the importance of this concept is never fully acknowledged. I will therefore go against the current trend and explore the many positive aspects of grief for psychotherapy.

When we speak of grief in connection with asylum seekers or other exiled people, what first comes to mind is the multiple losses that these women, men and children suffer, both when they leave their homes and when they are obliged to return (which amounts to a second migration). The losses we imagine are that of their town, their house, their family, their friends, their school, their job, their language, etc.

However these obvious losses are not the only ones that those in exile endure. Let us consider traumatic experiences such as torture, the witnessing of a massacre or humiliating experiences. Although in these cases the resulting trauma is undeniable, it dissimulates loss, that of a *sense* of self, and of the world, crushed by unspeakable experiences. The concept of grief opens the door for the semantic interpretation that which senseless.

First and foremost grief, contrary to the lethal nature of trauma, can generate creativity. Looking for the loss beneath the trauma allows us to remove the funeral mask that plunges many of those in exile into a starless night, and may even permit a few rays of sunshine brighten their future.

## 2.1 Trauma and grief: an irreducible opposition

Even though post-traumatic reactions and grief have already received much attention from specialists, certain characteristics have often been ignored or misunderstood. For instance, many authors still consider loss to be a type of trauma. But trauma and loss, or post-traumatic reactions and grief, should be differentiated – and even opposed.

First of all, at a phenomenological level: trauma consists of an excess of new and unknown sensations that flood the canals of perception, saturating them and leaving no place for other perceptions. Trauma then becomes the standard for future perceptions, whatever they are (Ferry, 1991). Inversely, loss implies that a former source of sensations, and its associated perceptions, has irreversibly vanished.

This first opposition is not the only one, nor is it the most important for our present discussion. Trauma always has a destructive impact. It

destroys existing meanings and even threatens the human ability to confer meaning. The highly valued concept of resilience dissimulates this reality. Although many people survive traumatic experiences and adapt themselves to unspeakable events, such coping never indicates an absence of impact, as the physics etymology of the word would suggest. Described as a *prototype of resilience* by Boris Cyrulnik<sup>1</sup>, Stanislas Tomkiewicz, a psychiatrist who spent his adolescence in the Warsaw ghetto and his youth in concentration camps, said that although he had succeeded in coping, it did not help him recover his lost adolescence (Tomkiewicz, 1999). Furthermore, coping mechanisms may give out at any time (Tisseron, 2003). As adaptive processes, they may break down when the context changes and requires new adaptation.

Losses, on the contrary, are creative tragedies. Grief processes sow the seeds for the creation of meaning. Early child development is directed by the *original grief*, consecutive to the child's first separations from the mother (Winnicott, 1975). Obligated to leave its omnipotence behind, the baby cannot yet imagine that *he is the world*. Archaeology has also discovered that the first cultural objects that were left behind by all ancient societies are linked to funerals, such as graves. Thus, grief seems to constitute the matrix of the individual and of societies.

Trauma and grief have very different impacts on memories. To remember something, for both the individual and the community, first means that the experienced event has disappeared and it is now *absent*, and secondly, that we were been able to *create* an image of it which is now *present* in our minds (Ricoeur, 2000). The disappearance of a past reality associated with the creation of an image constitutes the exact definition of a grief process (Métraux, 1991), provided we add that this image of lost reality never stops transforming itself, during and even after the grief process has been worked through.

In order to understand how *grief is the creator of memories*, of all memories, a short review of individual grief processes is useful. According to John Bowlby (1980) and Michel Hanus (2001), they involve three main stages:

- a) the "state of shock" (Hanus), "a burning wish to find the lost one again" (Bowlby), characterised by the negation of death's irreversibility and alternating efforts to find the deceased again or to forget her or his death;

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<sup>1</sup> Author, among other titles, of *Un merveilleux malheur* (Cyrulnik, 1999) where he defends the concept of resilience.

- b) the stage of “disorganisation” (Hanus), “despair and depression” (Bowlby), which requires a *clear acknowledgement of the irreversibility of loss*, the definitive absence of past reality;
- c) the stage of “reorganisation” (Hanus) or “restoration” (Bowlby). This is reached when memory previously focused on loss itself, on the gap created by loss, turns towards experiences shared with the lost person that nurture the future of the one left behind. This new *image* articulates past events into a single narration, and thereby re-creates *narrative identity* (Ricoeur, 2000).

I personally like to name these three stages respectively:

- *closing stage* or *denial stage*,
- *opening stage* or *depressive stage*
- *memory stage*.

Often grieving follows this process without too much difficulty. However the grief process may *fossilise* indefinitely at either of the first two stages (Métraux, 2000a), thereby inhibiting its creative potential.

Trauma, on the other hand, produces both irretrievable memories of unspeakable facts and the repetitive resurgence of traumatic events, known as *flash backs*. Survivors express the understandable wish to forget the unforgettable pain that invades them day and night. The present, stuck in the past, becomes its endless repetition. There is no feeling of absence, no transformation of previously experienced reality into genuine images, no possibility of changing, colouring or enriching the narration of the past, no evolution or change in accessible images. In other words, *trauma prevents true memories*.

Thus, trauma and loss lead to radically different conceptions of time. Trauma congeals time and amputates the narrative identity (Métraux, 1999). Victims are not yet able link their personal history, prior to traumatic events, to their present life. Articulations, of any kind, are totally absent. Memories of past experiences also become inaccessible.

In contrast, working through grief gives the affected person time to breathe. By creating memories, grief links past to present and allows past experiences to be used as bricks to construct the future. This is undoubtedly essential during periods of social reconstruction. Furthermore, by integrating all significant life events into a unique and coherent narration, this process reconstructs narrative identity after a critical event. Grief is even the best medicine for curing identities broken by trauma (Métraux, 2001a).

In the particular case of refugees, in order to make their creative integration in the host country possible, a double grief process is required (Métraux, 2001b). The capacity to unite the values of the culture of origin

and those of the host country is essential to this creative integration. This type of integrative process is always creative because it requires originality and relies on the resources of the imagination. In truth, creative integration is the only remedy against assimilation in the host society, a process that robs migrants of the sources that nurture them. It also guards against ghettoisation, being shut inside a social and cultural ghetto that rigidly mimics the migrant's own society, a society believed to be immune to the corrosion of time. The double effort that is needed to attain creative integration must be sustained through the memory stage. This double effort consists of, on one hand, the refugee's reconstruction of his or her own sense of meaning, from the remnants the meanings she or he has lost. On the other hand, it requires that the people of the host country, *in particular psychotherapists*, admit that the meaning they give to the world, to sickness, and to suffering, is only a limited vision of reality.

## 2.2 Frozen grief

If, in spite of producing accurate descriptions of both trauma and loss, theoreticians have often missed the opposition between the two, as well as the creative potential of grief, they have also omitted other essential elements. They have not noted that grief over lost meaning follows the same stages. They have paid hardly any attention to collective grief, except in the specific cases of family grief and extreme situations such as genocide (Hanus et al., 2003). Even when collective grief has been touched on, no clear definition has been given for it, nor has it been distinguished from collective trauma. Finally, most theoreticians have not grasped that in situations of extreme poverty, wars, and even during post-war periods, when people in mourning must struggle daily for survival, grief processes usually *freeze* before they begin (Métraux, 2000b).

For the man or woman who only hopes he or she will still be alive at nightfall, the working through of losses represents a risk that is too dangerous to undertake because the depressive stage weakens the vigilance that is constantly necessary to detect and face threats. This explains why depressive symptoms, a sort of luxury, so seldom occur during wars and early post-war periods (Friedman, 2003). *Frozen grief* is characterised by a fixation on the present, or hypervigilance, and by giving priority to identity survival over physical survival.<sup>2</sup> Fixated on their present fate, people are totally unable to conceive any future project: refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons

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<sup>2</sup> See also Moser and Robertson in this volume.

can neither envisage going home,<sup>3</sup> nor a long-term stay in the host region or country. The community, on the other hand, receives more attention than the individual. Homogeneity is required to maintain the collective identity and later transmit it to survivors' children. Individuals are bound by this collective imperative: they do not have the freedom to choose to do things their own way, or even work through their grief before the whole community begins such a process. In communities where missing persons are numerous, where there is no corpse to attest to the husband's, the father's or the brother's death, the postponed acknowledgement of irreversible loss makes this focus on collective identity survival even more evident.

The concept of frozen grief helps us understand many of the problems refugees have to overcome. Learning the language of the host country can be very difficult because it implies projecting oneself into the future. Integration in the host country is difficult because the person must deal with questions like "How is it possible for me to taint my inherited identity with meanings borrowed from the host country, when my cultural identity is the only crutch that keeps me from collapsing?". Refugee children encounter difficulties at school because by embracing the language of the host country, and the foreign values that are transmitted at school, they may endanger the homogeneity of the family and of the community. However is also impossible, in many cases, to contemplate returning to the home country, no matter how relevant the objective reasons given for this are. These reasons may be, for example: if I decide to go home, when the companions of my misfortune consider this to be suicidal, I may alienate the last surviving members of my shattered community; To even be able to consider returning to my devastated village, first I must accept that it has been irreversibly transformed, which means that I must undertake the painful grief process.

Recognizing frozen grief also has important implications for therapeutic practice. It means recognizing that the "damned of the Earth" have the "right to silence" (Métraux, 2000b), and not imposing, *manu militari*, forms of debriefing that force individuals to thaw their grief, thereby undermining their survival mechanisms.

### 2.3 Collective grief

In communities condemned to struggle for survival, individual and collective grief processes cannot be separated. This idea suggests that every stage of

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of Srebrenica, the politics of Republika Srpska, which does everything it can to prevent returnees from coming back, reinforces this tendency, but does not explain the whole phenomenon.

individual grief has a counterpart on the collective level. We must therefore study collective grief in contexts characterized by the horrors that cause collective grief processes to become frozen, as well as in more secure environments, where individual grief processes are permitted.

First we need to define collective loss and grief. A conjunction of individual losses, even if they happen simultaneously and are similar in character, is insufficient. In such cases each affected person works through his or her personal grief related to the loss of a particular object, person or meaning. Emotions may be more or less the same for all concerned, but this does not obligatorily indicate a collective process. For this to be the case there has to be a loss of a *common* object. In an organisation of widows or mothers of missing persons, each member lost a husband, son or daughter and works through her *personal* grief. Collective loss, on the other hand, concerns the absence of evidence relating to the fate of the missing, and to the absence of corpses, which is shared by all the women, and even constitutes the sense of their association. This means that *only a community*, defined by the presence of collective self and shared meanings, may experience a collective loss.

I will illustrate this definition and the difficulties it implies with the tragic case of Srebrenica, in Eastern Bosnia. To whom does the expression *Srebrenica Community* refer nowadays? The city's previous inhabitants, most of whom were killed or are now dispersed all over world? The numerous people who fled Bratunac and nearby villages before enduring the siege in the martyred city? The present population, mainly Serbs, who occupied the empty houses after the slaughters? The difficulty we encounter in attempting to define this group attests to the complete disruption of the original *collective self*. Split up into an infinite number of micro-communities, haunted by the ghosts of so many missing persons, the survivors can only think of their community as a dream or a nightmare.

Furthermore, this group's *shared collective meanings* have also disappeared, to the point that today it is nearly impossible to discover what they were. We can only identify the new meanings that have replaced them. Among these new meanings, there are some, probably most, that are specific to each micro-community: to refugees in many different countries, to asylum seekers, to displaced persons, to returnees, to old women, to young orphans and so on. Other new meanings, such as searching desperately for the lost collective identity or creating a myth of return – “all former inhabitants will one day return” –, attempt to restore the fiction of one united community by offering an identity of substitution, a shared collective meaning by default.

Consequently, there are two main categories of collective loss and grief<sup>4</sup>: the *loss of collective self* and the *loss of collective meanings*. Because as the current community never is the mere copy of past and future communities, as meanings die, change and flourish, as each community has a memory of its past meanings articulated by collective narratives, we can deduce that *collective loss and grief are frequent in any community, even when its history has not been an endless succession of tragedies*.

#### 2.4 Grief of the collective self

The community is not the same as it was before. The *we* is not the same *we*, it does not have the same borders, does not include the same people. In the case of Srebrenica, the death of so many men and the rape of so many women seriously compromised the very possibility of a collective self for future generations. Missing persons of whom there is no trace, undiscovered and unidentified corpses, as well as the dispersion of survivors all over the world, have disrupted the real as well as the symbolic links so that the community today seems spectral or mythical. In losing its former foundation, a common patch of land, a common landscape, the collective self has also lost its physical anchoring.

Collective grief follows a similar process to individual grief. The stages are the same and both kinds of grief may *fossilise* during the *closing* or *opening* ones. But, because of characteristics specific to the psyche and to social organisations, and also because of the permanent interaction between individual and collective grief, their dynamics differ.

In *frozen grief* – or *stage zero* – we have already observed that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between individual and collective dimensions. In the *closing* – or *denial* – *stage*, the community *fabricates* an artificial self which maintains the illusion of permanence. A typical case of fossilisation is that of families in mourning, who *fabricate* a substitute child to replace the dead one (Poznansky, 1972), even giving him or her the same first name. In broader collective grief, there are different kinds of “fabrication”.

Firstly, there is the re-writing of genealogies in order to claim blood ties with mythical ancestors: this type of *fabrication* has been observed from ancient Greek genealogists to imperial Japan in the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Macé, 1994),

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<sup>4</sup> There are three kinds of individual losses (Métraux, 2004): a) loss of external objects or persons, in other words *the loss of another*; their grief leads to the construction or reconstruction of *self*; b) *loss of self*; this grief leads to the construction or reconstruction of *meanings*; c) *loss of meanings*; this grief leads to the creation of *personal values*.



from Indonesian Bugi-Masar in 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hamonik, 1994) to contemporary nationalist and fundamentalist movements all over the world.

Secondly, there is the illusion of permanence that can be attained by the construction of monuments dedicated to the memory of dead and missing persons, such as the recently inaugurated monument in Potocari, a few kilometres from Srebrenica, or the Yad Vashem, constructed half a century ago as a memorial for the victims of the Shoah in Jerusalem. Although such a fabrication helps the community and its members to acknowledge their loss and to later enter into the depressive stage, sometimes collective grief remains paralysed at this phase making “abuses of memory” (Ricoeur, 2000) a real threat. In order to reduce this risk, some artists have proposed memorials in movement, progressively disappearing or perpetually re-constructed, even re-created, by subsequent generations (Robin, 2003).

Thirdly, another sort of fabrication is the constitution of Truth and Reconciliation commissions, reports and actions. Once again these initiatives testify to awareness, and the intention of overcoming denial. Now and then, as in South Africa, it succeeds, provided that, once the commission’s formal purpose has been achieved, one allows for the possibility of entering into a new stage. This condition implies the necessity of accepting, even if it is painful, that a perfect truth can never be attained, that any reconciliation is by definition a creative and unpredictable process. But, if Truth and Reconciliation becomes some kind of mythical ideal, an ever-present objective to which the community indefinitely dedicates all its endeavours, these ethical imperatives transform themselves into figures of denial. This is because the word *Reconciliation* implies the illusion of being able to restore the lost collective self. At the same time the idea of a unique Truth, linked to a distant past, fossilises the collective narrative identity, excluding most events from the more recent past – nearly sixty years in the Israeli case. The long-term search of a “true Truth”, when a traumatic “past does not go past”<sup>5</sup>, creates the phantasm of being able to *master* a past impossible to master. Then another kind of denial, linked with another fossilised grief of meaning, will impregnate society. Let us also mention that in many organisations of missing persons’ families, members dedicate all their energy to finding *all* lost evidence and demanding that authorities restitute *all* corpses. Even if this objective is politically understandable, even if the identification of skeletons facilitates the family members’ individual grief, we cannot ignore that the restitution of all the corpses of missing persons is impossible. If we do, then, as in Argentina, grief over the lack of traces of the missing will remain stuck in its first

<sup>5</sup> An expression from the historian Henri Rousso referring to what he called “the grief of Vichy” after World War II in France (Rousso, 1987).

stage for twenty-five years or more. The ensuing danger is that the artificial collective self that is “fabricated” will include the missing persons and their family members but tend to exclude the other survivors, the people who could bury their murdered loved ones or did not lose anyone. New divisions will tear the social fabric. Of course, the authorities’ usual efforts to promulgate the people’s amnesia strengthens the tendency towards hypermnnesia; both are symptoms of collective denial.

We can say that fabrication – of cemeteries, monuments, Truth and Reconciliation commissions – constitutes a necessary step in any collective grief process, in order to allow communities to acknowledge their irreversible losses and later begin the transition towards the depressive stage. But, at the same time, if the grief fossilises at the denial stage, the fabrication becomes a goal in itself, bringing with it numerous dangers for any society.

In the *opening* – or *depressive* – *stage*, that is after the acknowledgement of an irreversibly lost collective self, new configurations and representations of collective self *emerge* in the community whose members are submerged by emotions, such as sadness and culpability. But, for community survival, it is too risky to allow all members to enter their own depressive stage simultaneously, some must remain vigilant while the defences of others are weakened. This leads to a differentiation of members. Cohesion lessens. Solidarity may even disappear. Sometimes, in true conspiracies of culpability<sup>6</sup>, some members form a coalition and accuse others of expressing too little or too much sadness. Internal conflicts, even social splits, may follow. In our previous example, if all members of the organisation of families of missing persons simultaneously acknowledge the impossibility of finding the trace of *all* missing persons, and then enter together into the depressive stage, their vigilance towards the government’s passivity, amnesia or hypocrisy would lessen. The risk of losing their ethical fight would dangerously increase. That is why it is useful, for the survival of their association and their struggle, even for the entire society, that some people remain at the denial stage while others become aware of the irreversibility of their loss, that some traces will never be found and the community will have to deal with the *missing* of its former self one day. But this awareness, at least if it is publicly expressed, will hurt other members, who are still fixated on their unique demand. This could lead to the formation of a conspiracy of culpability against the iconoclasts who dared “to accept the unacceptable” (emergence of new representations), and even their exclusion (emergence of a new configuration). The organisation might then quickly split into two or more factions.

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<sup>6</sup> Analogy with a figure observed at the family level (Tooley, 1975).

The depressive stage explains the dissatisfaction in South Africa over the Truth and Reconciliation process. This dissatisfaction does not mean that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not perform its work well; it means that the Commission has finished its work and that the society has entered into a new stage. But it also shows that the depressive stage is the most dangerous period for any community. Many societies prefer never to cross the threshold.

During the *memory stage*, the community *creates* new *collective meanings* adjusted to its new self. Lost traces of missing persons give birth to memories of traces, to symbolic substitutes of real traces and funerals which sow the seeds of the future. This is what empty stretchers did, more than 2400 years ago, in Pericles' well-known funeral oration (Thucydide, 2000), a most beautiful hymn to a democracy which does not usurp its name (contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists should be a bit more modest!). As testimonies to the irreversible, such substitutive rituals already further the individual's working through of individual grief for missing loved ones. They also allow for the identification of other kinds of traces: the breath of the *agora*, the whisper of mistreated dignity or other muzzled voices. The demands for corpses and their identification then take on a new meaning: the re-creation of a collective memory drawn from the tragedies of history. And this new meaning can be shared by all survivors, even by those who still have not worked through their individual grief of traces. Since the dawn of humanity *collective grief has been the melting-pot from which collective meanings have originated*, the spring of cultures and the fount of identities.

## 2.5 Grief of collective meanings

As communities are the sole creators of their shared meanings, only the community can decree their demise. When outsiders call on a community to undertake the grief of their past ideals, it amounts to an abuse of power, and is furthermore an injunction that is impossible to fulfil.

On the other hand, human beings are semantic creatures, who cannot live without meaning: the Hungarian writer Imre Kertész showed that this was true even after the hell of Auschwitz (Kertész, 1995). Therefore, a new meaning is immediately substituted for the lost one and this new meaning bears the imprint of grief. This implies that all meanings are part of a *matrix of meaning* which reveals the stage that the grief of prior meaning had reached. I name these matrix *collective Values*<sup>7</sup>, which are analogous to *imaginary significations* in Castoriadis' language (Castoriadis, 1975). They

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<sup>7</sup> I put a capital letter on Values in order to designate this specific kind of values.

articulate past and present meanings and interpret the change of meaning throughout history.

*What does this mean concretely?*

When grief of meanings remains *frozen*, mainly in a context of day to day survival, communities dedicate all their strength to the preservation of their collective identity and the community prevails over individuals. Present meanings, supposedly eternal, are considered to be exactly the same as those of the Ancestors. The illusion of permanence remains even though meanings change. *Survival*, as a collective Value, may be recognised in nearly all “archaic” and “traditional” communities, from their structure of parenthood to their origin myth.

During the *closing* – or *denial* – stage, communities do not acknowledge the loss of meaning that they themselves decreed. This is what we find among ex-militants of lost revolutions, whose new discourse, totally in tune with today’s ruthless globalisation, actually reveals the endlessly postponed mourning of their past ideals. Communities tirelessly endeavour either to resuscitate lost collective meanings – denial of their demise – or to erase their shadow from the collective memory – denial of their past existence. In order to fulfil these unrealistic requirements, they *fabricate a hallucinatory world* or a *hallucinatory self* in accordance with their unreasonable hopes. They interpret the history of their collective meanings, the articulation between present and past ones, as a *linear and uninterrupted progression* towards their hallucinatory conceptions of world and self. *Mastering* – of nature, time and anything else (for example the mastering of history and of the future) – then becomes the new collective Value. These communities consider the present to be an improvement on the past and the future the expected improvement on the present. The values proclaimed by modernity thus interpret the history of social meanings to be constant progression since the birth of humanity. These linear scales of progress towards a hallucinatory future imply an increasing differentiation among the members of the community. Whether fast or slow, strong or weak, right or wrong, modern or traditional, dominator or dominated, each individual performs for better or worse his or her task of mastering. Others cannot simply be different with their own *Weltanschauung*. Individuals, as a result of an optical illusion, thus seem then to prevail over communities.

A comparison between Survival and Mastering shows that the apparent emphasis put on the individual or on the community by a society – *individualism* versus *holism* according to the vocabulary of Louis Dumont (1966) – is determined by feelings of security, versus feelings of insecurity. As community

survival is far more precarious in Eastern and Southern countries than in the West, unpretentiousness is once again required from western societies. Furthermore, we can see that the now obvious origin of individualism is nothing but collective grief fossilised at the first stage, thus metaphorically still in its diapers!

Despite their radical differences, combinations of Survival and Mastering do exist. When, for any reason whatsoever, a society governed by Mastering fears for the survival of its nuclear value, a syncretic figure appears. This was the case of Germany which was constrained to survival by the Versailles treaty between the two World Wars, *Survival of Mastering* offers a fertile ground for totalitarianism. Also, when communities formerly founded on Mastering switch to Survival after recent losses of meaning, they may use their old techniques of denial in order to impose their present goal – the survival of a threatened identity – on members and neighbours. This type of *Mastering of Survival* may be observed in many fundamentalist, nationalist, racist and extreme right-wing movements.

During the *opening* – or *depressive* – *stage*, communities painfully feel the empty space left by lost meaning. As in our contemporaneous Western societies, they tend then to idealise past enchantment, and feel nostalgic as well as guilty for having dismissed past meaning. Some communities believe that God, the Gods or their substitutes – such as Reason – have abandoned them. They interpret their Gods' withdrawal as a punishment for not having worshipped them enough. Others lose all hope of being able to interpret the world. Thus, it seems nearly impossible to fully understand the transition between past and new meanings. This leads to the belief that the hand of Destiny must somehow move human puppets. Hazard and luck are thought to govern the future. *Balanced unbalance* or *Unbalanced balance* could be appellations the resulting collective Value: the unbalanced community searches for a new balance; and its precarious balance is continuously threatened by unbalance. Since the eighties, this Value has spread in Western societies where unlimited globalisation and undifferentiated meanings are coupled with an increasing belief in the laws of chance. Despite public discourse claiming the contrary, neither communities, nor individuals as subjects, are really valued. Outsiders are either included in the globalisation process or excluded, and marginalized, by society.

After reaching the *memory stage*, communities manage to articulate prior and actual meanings in the same collective narrative. They come to realise that memories of old meaning nurture new ones, without reducing actual meanings to former ones. *Creation* then becomes the central Value. The past is a seed planted in the present to allow a new future to flourish. The community and

the individual are both highly valued. Outsiders are considered to be rightful members of a common humanity, and their differences are recognised as a testimony to the creative imagination present in all societies. Unfortunately, no society has ever really been founded on this Value: one could say that Athens in the fifth century BC managed this to a certain extent, although its women and slaves were excluded from the *agora*. The zapatist movement of the last decade in Chiapas might be another example.

In the case of Bosnia, the main actors of the war were ethnic fundamentalists impregnated with Survival. Encouraged by the decline of communism, occidental societies such as Germany, steered by Mastering, were very quick to recognise the independence of Croatia and Slovenia. At present, as social reconstruction is desperately sought, the world stage is becoming dominated by the panegyrics to globalisation that Unbalanced Balance inspires. Could the course of history be the mere translation of collective grief processes?

This analysis reminds us, above all, of the *unspoken dimension* of social reconstruction. What kind of reconstruction do we strive for? A reconstruction in terms of Survival: do we wish to rebuild a society as it was before the war? A reconstruction in terms of Mastering: would we like to build societies, houses and bridges stronger than before, more adapted to the today's world – including its wars, terrorism and counter-terrorism –, with the illusion of being able to master the future? A reconstruction in terms of Balanced unbalance: would we prefer to bet on the economic games of national and international capitalism? Or a reconstruction in terms of Creation: would we dare undertake a (re)creation inspired by experience accumulated over the centuries, respecting the right to a true otherness, focusing both on communities and individuals?

## 2.6 Paradoxical dynamics linking individual and collective grief

The working through of collective grief of meaning is the key to social reconstruction. But the difficulty and the slowness of this process is striking. The Value of Creation, this testimony to collective working through, has been so rare throughout history! Nuclear Values so seldom change! If we look at concrete examples, this extreme slowness strikes us even more. In Athens, 403 BC, the *polis* locked itself in a long period of denial after the loss of meaning that accompanied the fall of the Democracy the previous year (Loraux, 1997). During the next century, the Philosopher Plato sowed the seeds of *Mastering* that engulfed the Occident up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Castoriadis, 1999). In France, after the Second World War, it took more than fifty years to work through the grief of common republican meanings buried in Vichy (Rousso,

1987). (Has this grief been worked through at present? The controversy over wearing veils in French schools shows that this is still not the case.) In Yugoslavia (1939–1945), the disintegration of collective meaning, in the bloody battles between Partisans, Ustashis and Tshetniks, was also denied and it took the fratricidal wars of the last decade for it to be tragically remembered. Even torture camps such as in Omarska, one of the worst Serbian crimes of the last war, were set on the exact spots where Serbian elders were once slaughtered by Ustashis. But, as is too often the case, human beings did not learn from history. The societies of ex-Yugoslavia consequently fell into yet another period of denial – over the loss of past socialist meaning – illustrated by the will to forget and to silence it. For example the public mention of Tito’s time only emerged again two or three years ago.

The extreme slowness of collective grief processes outlines, in post-war periods, the necessity for planning very long-term actions. Reciprocally it stresses the irrelevancy of short-term or middle-term psychosocial programs. It also strongly questions most of the emergency actions performed by NGOs running *avec armes et bagages*<sup>8</sup> from one area of conflict to another.

The *paradoxical dynamics of individual and collective grief* may explain this extreme slowness. Indeed grief is, firstly, a remarkable competency of the *psyche* and this jewel of humanity resides in our brains. Thanks to individual jewels, the possibility for societies to work through collective grief, to create collective meanings and Values exists. But, reciprocally, frozen or fossilised collective grief inhibits or retards individual grief processes. As frozen grief homogenises a community, a member who works through his or her own loss represents a danger for the society. When collective grief is stuck in the denial stage, individuals who personally acknowledge irreversible loss strongly threaten the society’s belief in its hallucinatory world. The community will often banish such adventurers.

But, in spite of this Damocles’ sword, there are always some individuals who do start their personal grief process, even though frozen collective grief holds their community in its icy grip. Some grandmothers returned to Srebrenica and the surrounding area and planted splendid flowers around houses with no electricity or running water. They even took pleasure in bathing in the Drina river. Although very few young people returned, in June 2003 some of them organised the “Days of Srebrenica”. They invited popular music groups to the commemoration, even though the widows’ associations felt this was an insult to Memory of those lost. Contrary to grief, History never freezes!

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In French in the text.

## 2.7 Let us work through our own grief!

The central role of collective grief of meanings has troublesome consequences for our theories and practices. Our proclaimed and hidden priorities as mental health professionals, as well as the priorities of NGOs, governmental and international agencies, are also grounded in collective Values<sup>9</sup>, revealing a grief process of meaning and the stage at which it got bogged down!

Our blindness prevents us from seeing the radical differences that oppose post-traumatic reactions and grief. Our focus on trauma which often leads us to consider losses as a simple category of traumatic events; our limitation of the definition of loss to people, land or objects and forgetting the loss of meanings (which is the nightmare of post-war periods); our persistent incapacity for identifying the creative potential of grief, our insistence on the resilience and the extreme adaptability of human beings; our stress on individual and lack of interest for collective processes, all these trends confirm our difficulties with our own collective grief of meaning. The expression “*to master trauma*” does not succeed in dissimulating our denial of uncontrollable realities, our meagre appreciation of the *radical imagination* of human beings.<sup>10</sup> These terms, as well as our emphasis on individuals, suggest that *Mastering* too often remains our central Value. This means that our own grief of meaning is frequently stuck at the denial stage!

If we consider the attitude of host societies towards refugees, this theory can help us understand the source of their xenophobic reactions, of asylum policy in Switzerland and the Schengen countries, and our persistent vision of integration as solely dependant on the migrant’s personal will to integrate, independent of political and environmental factors. There are, of course, economic factors that are partially responsible, but they are not alone, nor are they the principal basis for these attitudes. They also originate in a grief process that is rooted in denial, the refusal of the members of host societies to lose what they have already lost. In short, any transformation in the attitudes of Northern societies towards the causalities of economic growth in the South, the East or elsewhere, will necessitate a period of collective grief. Associations defending the rights of refugees should be attentive to this.

Even a declared faith in human creativity or community psychology does not change this diagnosis. In the East and West, South and North, many governmental institutions, NGOs and civil associations publicly plead in favour of their beneficiaries’ *empowerment* (but here the root “power” already reveals the mystification), acknowledgement of the social dimension, attention to

<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere I have called collective Values *Qualities* (Métraux, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> A concept taken from Castoriadis (1975).



collective memories and inherited culture, respect of others' human rights and reciprocity. Their discourse is a theoretical barometer of Values and grief. In some organisations, at the time of their foundation, their proclaimed meanings even seemed to be in harmony with the wishes of the communities they work in or with. However the environment changes quickly and objectives, projects and meanings constantly need to be adjusted to the evolution of the social context. Let us take the example of an organisation whose primary goal is to give psychosocial care to adolescents affected by war. During the post-war years, as time passes, the main problem these young people face often ceases to be war-related losses and becomes socio-economic, for example they experience enormous difficulties in finding jobs.<sup>11</sup> The organisations' adaptation to this new situation requires the collective grief of meaning. But, in such circumstances, some organisations feel that the external changes are threatening their existence and they then develop survival mechanisms. Like any community, they begin to focus on themselves, on their internal functioning, and attempt internal homogenisation. The needs of others sink into the well of denial: they force their point of view on their supposed beneficiaries, thereby breaking their oath of promoting autonomy and reciprocity. If the beneficiaries resist, they are quickly considered ungrateful. As denial cannot be equal in all members, and the voices that bring up the painful losses the organisation is trying to forget threaten the collective negation, organisations frequently disown their democratic principles, give more attention to power than to participation, and reform their structure to hide dark, undesirable memories. Thus, the present world-wide focus on management instead of meaning, on dysfunction instead of loss, might be interpreted as symptoms of the denial stage in the collective grief of meanings.

Further working through implies other serious perils: the related change of initial meaning may disappoint the donors, international NGO or governmental organisations, who will, in turn, face a grief of meanings! Perceived obstacles may lead to the denial of local realities, and the temptation to cut off subsidies or impose orientational and structural changes from the top. Once again, in spite of a rhetoric stating the contrary, reciprocity is squelched and collective memory suffocated. In consequence, all organisations involved in humanitarian or development programs, and not only in the psychosocial domain, should give priority to their own grief of meaning, if only to comply with their declared intentions!

Psychotherapists, psychologists and psychiatrists can not escape the need to revise their principles in order to comprehend the therapeutic relationship

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<sup>11</sup> See also Moser and Robertson in this volume.

in terms of reciprocity, to introduce the collective dimension into one-on-one sessions with their patients, and to look at their own grief of meaning, both individual and collective. There is still a lot to be done.

We should accept to be the first clients of our programs!

### 3 Gift of Memory, Memory of a Gift<sup>12</sup>

It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay deep in snow. Nothing could be seen of Castle Hill, it was wrapped in mist and darkness, not a glimmer of light hinted at the presence of the great castle. K. stood for a long while on the wooden bridge that led from the main road to the village, gazing up into seeming emptiness.

Then he went to look for somewhere to spend the night ...

Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

Experience has shown me that the prefix *ethno-*, which is so much in vogue today (i.e. ethno-psychiatry, ethno-therapy), should not be used to mask a social reality that is more resistant in psychotherapy than the culture under interpretation. The cultural and social aspects of psychotherapy, to which one must add more strictly anthropological dimensions on one side, and political dimensions on the other, are not irreconcilable. Memory, both individual and collective, is the bridge that connects them, and this bond can not forgo gifts and counter-gifts. In case we have forgotten this, I would like to refresh our memory through the example of the psychotherapy that K., a Kurdish refugee from Turkey, undertook with me.

#### 3.1 The martyred arm

K. was told the he needed psychotherapy by a general practitioner who found himself incapable of treating K.'s sick arm. Since an unfortunate work-related accident, a fall from a ladder that required a reduction of the fracture, K.'s right arm seemed to have withdrawn from the world, lodging itself in his mind, disproportionately swelling at the base of his thoughts, its pain irradiating throughout his life. As in many similar situations when a physician is convinced that he or she has tried every trick in the somatic bag, K.'s doctor turned, as a last resort, to an expert in the realm of the psyche. Ordinarily in these cases, at least in my experience, all the art and skill that the experienced mental

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<sup>12</sup> The second part of this text was published under the title *Dons de mémoire. Lecture anthropologique et sociale d'une psychothérapie interculturelle* (*Psychothérapies*, 1999, 19, 4, pp. 225–234). I have, however, somewhat modified this version.

health professional possesses also rapidly gives way to a sense of helplessness upon being faced with his or her own violent reaction to the patient's obvious physical suffering. In K.'s case favorable circumstances and the patient's own creativity won the battle between the physical and the psychological. The story of K.'s psychotherapy, which is in many ways exceptional, deserves to be told. I think it can help us overcome the cursed helplessness that we so readily relegate to the margins of our textbooks, margins that amplify the echoes of those where our society banishes its demons.

K. had spent the past two years of his life in Switzerland looking for the gate to the "Castle". I decided, at the onset, not to give him false hopes. From the very first minutes of our first meeting, as soon as the introductions had been translated by the interpreter (an Armenian woman from Turkey who had sought refuge in Switzerland 20 years earlier), I declared to K., as clearly as I could, my conviction that his physical suffering was real and that I was totally incompetent to heal a sick body. "I know that perfectly well", he said, "and I only came here to make my doctor happy". Then he added, "I never believed that a psychiatrist could cure a broken arm". Our cards were on the table. Remember that Kafka's hero, a surveyor, was trapped by his mission to measure the lands of the lord of the Castle who was too miserly with his secrets to allow him access to them. I had about an hour, the duration of the consultation, to build a therapeutic alliance. "Let's talk about something else", I said to him, "Let's see if we have something to say to each other". I spoke for a long time about my sketchy knowledge of the suffering of the Kurdish people throughout history. "Moreover", I concluded looking at the interpreter, "several decades earlier the Armenians were obliged to drown their own ottoman hell in their memory".

K. agreed, "You're right. I'll tell you my story. My eldest brother was killed by Turkish soldiers disguised as Islamists. I was, myself, suspected of collaborating with Kurdish militants and rotted for several years in prison. But rotted isn't really the right word, the guards used to take me out of my cell from time to time to throw me to some hungry vultures. The vultures took sadistic pleasure in torturing me. Afterwards, the guards would take me back to my cell and abandon there, with a bowl of festering wounds as my only nourishment."

Our session continued in this manner, the patient's oral pen inscribing a horrifying testimony on the pages of the therapist's memory until the therapist could support no more. "Thank you", I said, "I will carefully conserve the gift of your story that you have given me". Then I asked, "By the way, was your arm also abused by your torturers"? Abruptly K. recounted an episode that had suddenly broken out of the labyrinth of his forbidden memories to

the interpreter and me. He had been hung by his arm and assaulted until he lost consciousness. When he came to the only trace of what had happened was the severe dislocation of his right shoulder, I took a gamble and said, "Could the unrelenting pain you are now feeling be denouncing this terrible outrage?" A smile lit his face, which at 40, had been aged by his misfortune. "That's interesting, I must think about it", he answered. We fixed another appointment.

### 3.2 Weddings and funerals

K. left and Mrs. C., the interpreter, informed me that she already knew this endearing man. She had, for example, taken part in the medical visits for his daughter's congenital deafness. She felt it was important to share certain information she considered to be vital to the progress of our psychotherapy with me. (I immediately accepted this gift of experience because I was convinced of the validity of her judgment). During their first meetings, she had learnt that K. had been obliged to marry his eldest brother's widow, and at the same time, accept custody of his two children, who are now young adults.

Two weeks later, when K. came back to see us, I could not keep him in the dark about what I had learnt because the secret would have tarnished the confidences he had entrusted to me. I shared what Mrs. C. had told me with him and he confirmed what she had said. Then he launched into a long account of his life.

When he was very young his father's premature death obliged his eldest brother to take on a paternal role with his younger siblings. He fulfilled this duty admirably and won the respect of his mother and of his extended family. He married and had two children, a boy and a girl. Little by little he became involved in the Kurdish resistance movement. One day he was surprised, in the company of other Kurdish militants, by a group of armed men. They were taken to a dry river bed and massacred, their bodies mutilated.

(A personal echo: This story reminded me of the newspaper stories I had read several days earlier concerning the murders that were committed in the Kosovar village of Racak, where most of the male population of the town had been killed. There was controversy over who was responsible for the massacre, with the Serbs denying any involvement. In response the international community sent a commission, which included forensic experts, to investigate. As for the Kurdish people, has history forgotten them, I wondered?)

At the time of his brother's death K. was only 18 years old. He was deeply affected by the loss of the brother he so admired. He was very much taken aback when his grief was interrupted by his uncles who came to him

with a proposition, which actually seemed more like an order. They said that they could not abandon his brother's widow; therefore they had decided that K. should marry her. Out of respect for his martyred brother, K. accepted and did what was expected of him. From one day to the next he found himself with a wife and two children, at the time three and four years old. This union was the product of multiple and irreducible influences: cultural, social, familial and personal in nature. K. laughed as he told his story.

(A new echo – The film *Black Cat, White Cat*, by the ex-Yugoslavian director Emir Kusturica, is a superposition of a wedding and a funeral which takes the form of a flamboyant gypsy ballet. The music, composed by Goran Bregovic and performed by the Wedding and Funeral Band, is pure magic that floods the screen. The film's characters create a canvas pulsating with humor and life. K. reminded me of these *actors*, of the mistreated gypsy people).

K. saw from my face that I was lost in the memories his laugh had prompted and added soberly, "In the beginning it was difficult, as much for my wife as for me. Her first husband, my brother, was always there between us. But we got used to it and today we're a real couple".

The hour has flown by on the wings of K.'s story and it is already time to say goodbye. I share with K. the echoes that his story brought to my mind and thank him for the impressive gift of memory that he has conferred upon me.

He informs me that he wants to come back.

But his arm remains silent.

### 3.3 Death and fertility

"Last time I only started to recite my 'Book of the Dead'", said K., as he sat down at the beginning of our next session.

He spoke of another brother, who had also been assassinated, but in very different, murky circumstances. K. had just turned eight when the world of his childhood was changed forever. The son of the head of the village, a young man who was afflicted with a psychiatric illness, shot and killed K.'s brother. The perpetrator's father refused to let his son be brought to justice for the crime. Worse still, K.'s family was obliged to flee the village, forcing them into internal exile. Next in the book was his father, who never got over the death of his young son. His health began to deteriorate and, in spite of his illness, he refused to be treated. His death left his wife and children to wander through their exile alone.

However, they were not the only Kurds who were fleeing from oppression. At the time the list of villages burnt by the army grew longer each day.

(Who will recount the memory of these people?) One of K.'s uncles, who had also been forced into exile, had a wonderful idea. He remembered there was a small valley surrounded by mountains where the elders used to take their livestock to graze in the summer months. In the winter, the rains caused a lake to form, which disappeared in the summer, dried up by the heat. As a result the earth in this valley was soaked with humidity, creating – through some miracle of fertility – green pastures in this extremely arid region. A long journey on foot brought some 60 families to this haven of peace, far from civilization. They built houses and cultivated the land, growing vegetables that would be sold for a great deal of money during periods of drought. For several years their prosperity made their future look bright.

K. related his memories of this period with much enthusiasm, describing to us a wonderful tree that seemed to come straight out of a legend, the original architecture of the houses they built, the luscious fruit that was sold in the market stalls, and the vigor of the pioneers that settled the area. It all came out in an inexhaustible flow of words. K. spent the rest of his childhood and his adolescence in this special place.

Suddenly remnants of sadness chased away the joy that had been visible on K.'s face. He explained, "The death of my brother brutally broke the charm of those years. Once again the Turkish army forced us to flee. They destroyed everything, all of our crops and all of our houses. I don't think there is anything left there today."

I corrected him by saying "Your memory, and the story that you have just written on the walls of this office, remain. It is not just any memory, but that of the fertility that the deaths of your childhood were not able to wither, and that of the fertility that you carry inside of you."

The interpreter asked if she could share a personal association with us. Considering that her intervention would be useful to our therapy, I allowed her to intervene. Several years earlier she had been with K. and his wife on a visit to a doctor they had consulted about their infertility. They had not been able to conceive since the birth of their deaf daughter, even though they wanted to have a second child together "for the sake of balance with the elder brother's offspring". Mrs. C. associated the fertility that I had just evoked with that episode. K. concluded by saying, "And in the end we did get that second child!"

Our hour together came to an end without any mention being made of K.'s arm.

### 3.4 Prison – torture – exile.

K. began our next session by introducing the topic of his arm. “The first time I came here you connected my damaged arm to my torture. You may be right, even if my accident happened ten years after I was tortured. But what good does it to me to know that? My body has not stopped crying out in pain since,” he said. As up until now, at each of our interviews, K. held himself as though an invisible sling affixed that arm to his torso, I shared this impression with him, without expecting a response. Then, judging the moment to be right and our alliance solid enough, I asked him to tell me more about his experiences in prison.

K. had never really been an activist for the Kurdish cause, much less a combatant. He just spent his evenings in bars talking with his numerous companions of misfortune. From time to time a more militant individual would join in these conversations. On these occasions K. could feel his Kurdish blood coursing through his veins, more for the heavy toll his family had paid with their blood, rather than out of any real ideological affinity with Ocalan’s<sup>13</sup> PKK. The guardians of Turkey, that mono-ethnic, moderately secular state, saw conspiracy everywhere and would retaliate against any place thought to be a base for plotting against the government. K. was thrown in prison, with torture as his only companion. The months passed and the repeated twisting of his arm imprinted pain on every fiber of his muscles. When he was finally liberated because of the lack of evidence against him, he chose exile over his homeland.

Yet when he reached Switzerland, what did he have to keep him going? He imagined his children, but his eldest daughter’s infirmity and the torment of his couple’s unexpected infertility stifled his dreams. He imagined his fellow compatriots, but the thought of the horrors they had shared only made his suffering worse. With each day his hopes for a better future receded. He imagined finding work, but that cursed ladder had him nailed to the ground. What was he to do? This question followed him into exile.

“Up until now I never told my troubles to a ‘stranger’”, he said, punctuating his monologue with a sigh.

Again I expressed my gratefulness for his impressive gift of memory. I added, “I understand. Until now the immobility of your right arm was your only memory of the offenses to which you were subjected. If it had healed more quickly, who is to say that this memory would not have disappeared?”

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<sup>13</sup> Leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan, detained by the Turkish authorities since February 1999.

For the time being, it is better that you stay ill.” Then I proposed another appointment, which K. accepted.

### 3.5 Language and memory

In spite of having spent nine years in French-speaking Switzerland, K. had only acquired a few words of French. It was still a foreign land to him. Without an interpreter, any discussion between us would have been impossible. So, logically, we broached the subject of language. “I would like to learn French. Do you know where I could find French classes that aren’t too expensive”, he asked at the beginning of our next session.

I told him about a leisure center, adjacent to a trade union, that offered language classes for a token fee. “I’ll go there this week”, he promised, and he kept his word. A few months later he hardly needed an interpreter any more.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, I decided to move from the oral to the written. Here is the ensuing dialogue:

*Therapist:* “By the way, do you ever write?”

*K.:* “Rarely.”

*Th.:* “...?”

*K.:* “Only grocery lists when my wife asks me to go to the supermarket.”

*Th.:* “Are you left-handed or right-handed?”

*K.:* “Right-handed.”

*Th.:* “And what about your arm?”

*K.:* “It doesn’t bother me for that sort of thing.”

*Th.:* “Have you ever thought about writing your memoirs? You have so much to tell.”

*K.:* “No, but I could try.”

*Th.:* “I encourage you to do it. Your memories are precious. I’ve learned so much during our sessions.”

When K. came back to see me one month later, he carried under his arm a notebook containing his hand-written memoirs, made threadbare from use. Session after session the interpreter translated his story which was now immortalized in ink.



At the same time his arm no longer needed its invisible sling. For the first time it moved freely, punctuating K.'s sentences with precise gestures. His memory had discovered a new territory, the blank pages of the notebook. His withered limb had become a pencil. It seemed that the therapy had accomplished its goal. The heavy labor, which used to be his daily lot, became impossible for the joints that were now moved solely by memory. The laborer had become a writer, an Author of Memories.

From that moment on, the process followed its course. Several weeks later, with summer and the grazing season approaching, K. talked about a vacation, about returning to his home, to his sources. He announced that his wife and children would return, after a decade of absence, to the place where tragedy had occurred. If nothing went wrong, he would do the same the following year. His memory had also become physically accessible.

Finally, the icing on the cake. K. informed us that he and his wife, who were, until then, only married under common law in accordance with the wishes of their families following his elder brother's death, had decided to confirm their union with an official civil ceremony. A new story was about to commence.

### 3.6 Gifts of words

This psychotherapy made it necessary for the therapist to take a look at himself and ask, who am I? What virtue do I hide under my professional cloak? Even if my professional function is normally to diminish and cure suffering, I denied I could do it. I told K. from the very beginning, "I can not cure you and I will not pretend that I can, but maybe we have something to say to each other." What is the status of the words spoken in this context?

The answer can be found between the lines of the preceding paragraphs. The words spoken are secrets, a gift and a memory, a *gift of memory*. Or, more precisely, gifts of memories, plural gifts, plural memories. The gift of weddings and funerals, of history and culture, the gift of impotency and infertility, the memory of violence and fertility, the gift of a life lacerated by screams, the memory of a life drowned in tears.

It seems strange that psychotherapy, which is in essence an anthropological discipline, has paid so little attention to what was probably anthropology's most important discovery, the gift. But then again, nothing is surprising. Psychoanalyst and client, for example, share the same frame of reference, or we could say they live in the same house. The gift of money and associations are balanced on the scale of exchanges by their symmetrical counter-gift of benevolent neutrality and interpretations. But this is not the case with migrant

patients who sport the brand of exclusion. Money is elusive and neutrality becomes the weapon of the powerful, free associations wound their fragility when interpretations awaken their paranoia. The gift, from then on, merits words, recognition.

However, psychotherapists can claim numerous extenuating circumstances for eclipsing the gift. The main extenuating circumstance is that anthropology itself, except in some footnotes<sup>14</sup>, never considered words to be an object of exchange worthy of study. Yet my psychotherapeutic experience with migrants suffering from exclusion has led me to imagine the benefits that this type of analysis could yield. Here I will only expose a few premises as the bulk of work in this area must still be undertaken.

Mauss (1925), the undeniable precursor of the theory of gifts, identified three periods in each exchange: the act of giving, the act of receiving, and the act of giving in exchange (the counter-gift). When one substitutes a word for a concrete object, the act of receiving becomes complicated, even perplexing. I can ostentatiously refuse a present, but the refusal of a confidence can not be so clearly expressed. (Except by covering my ears, something that no one but the monkey who does not want to hear would actually do). It is very difficult to verify if someone is really listening to what is being said, which explains why we so frequently use banal phrases like “Did you hear what I just said?”. To be confident that someone is listening requires the certainty that this person listens in principle, or oral confirmation that the person is listening. The therapist often forgets this, wrongly assuming that the person knows he or she is there to be listened to, and is not in the habit of confirming what was heard. This silence, which is legitimate when both protagonists know what to expect of and to give to the other, becomes an infinite source of misunderstandings when the psychologist or psychiatrist is identified by his or her socio-cultural label of dominant or excluding before being thought of as a care-giver. This happens, in spite of our best intentions.

This type of omission might not be too important if the therapist, full of self-importance, did not forget the initial gift in order to concentrate on dissecting the commas of the counter-gift, seen as an offering graciously bestowed upon the patient. The majority of the literature in our field concerns our interventions, our words and silences, which we consider to be therapeutic and helpful. The annulment of the initial gift puts both partners of the exchange in antagonistic positions, in spite of their formulated intentions. To

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<sup>14</sup> Such as in the work of Maurice Godelier which will be discussed later on in this text.

borrow another phrase from anthropology, we become *powlatch*<sup>15</sup> enthusiasts, without really being conscious of it. This means that through our giving, the person suffering from exclusion who has, by chance, landed on our couch or armchair, is becoming irretrievably indebted to us. On top of this we are also earning a substantial dividend in power (see Sahlins, 1976; Métraux, 2001c). The therapeutic alliance, however, suffers considerably, which explains why there are so many untimely ruptures with these patients.

And yet, what can we learn from anthropological readings? That our therapeutic alliance necessitates a balance between gift and counter-gift, in quantity certainly, but more importantly in quality. Godelier (1996) points out that the value of an object can be perceived in three fundamentally different ways : a) in terms of currency, an alienable object of which the possessor is considered to be the owner and has the right of user. A paradigmatic example of this is the can be found in the words we exchange with the cashier at the supermarket; b) in terms of a loan, an object that remains the property of the giver, but which the receiver is free to use as he or she wants. An example of this is an emotionally charged confidence or a confession that the receiver can not divulge without betraying the giver; c) objects that are considered sacred, never to leave the possession of the individual, family or community because their identity depends on them. In this case an aura of secrecy prohibits access to these objects. Under this classification, the account of misfortunes, the confession of emotions, disclosure of information concerning the family or culture of origin, all constitute precious objects, precious gifts that warrant a counter-gift that is just as precious for the recipient. This requires a declaration by the donee (in this case the therapist), that clearly assures the donor (in this case the patient) that they will not be stolen or revealed. The patient's silence about humiliations, injuries and torture, which is common, at least for a certain period of time, should be understood as evidence of a legitimate refusal to part with sacred words. It is as if the unspeakable had become embedded in the ravaged identity, having even become a substitute for it. It could be said that the first confession requires the patient to have absolute confidence in the therapist, and the intimate conviction that what was *sacred*, which has suddenly become *precious*, will not be blasphemed.

When protagonists are positioned on opposite sides of the barrier of social exclusion, it is not enough to reaffirm our professional secret as, because

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<sup>15</sup> This term, which is taken from the anthropological studies of certain North American Indian communities, describes an exchange in which the overabundance of gifts prevents the possibility of providing an equivalent counter-gift and therefore any type of reciprocity. This type of exchange endows the giver, from that moment on, with infinite and uncontestible power.

the therapist's skin color and social status, she or he is first considered to be another potential instrument of exclusion.

The following are illustrations of how we look down on K. and others who are excluded from the castle:

- we generally react as if the gift of precious words is normal in the psychotherapist's office, forgetting the person's fear that we are going to steal their last valuable possession, which results in mistrust and silence;
- we tend not to appreciate the real value of words we have received, their preciousness. We often do not recognize the reality of claimed physical suffering, considering it to be a psychological or psychiatric problem.

In any case, the social exclusion of any patient, migrant or otherwise, makes it essential to recognize the gift of words and its just value. This social recognition is the first therapeutic act.

This was what I did in K.'s therapy. I systematically verbalized my recognition of the gift of memory this mistreated man so graciously offered me. I recognized it in both senses of the term: I identified it for what it was and I then expressed my thanks for the offering. The act of receiving was expressed in words (a reference to Mauss).

We still need to clarify the enigma of the counter-gift. What was it in the case in point? I continue to believe, and am supported in this first of all by the work of Amati (1989) and Viñar (1989), that my engagement on the patient's side, against injustice, ("several decades earlier the Armenians were obliged to drown their own ottoman hell in their memory"), specifically communicated the driving force behind my intervention, causing it to become precious. Thus our exchange was conducted on equal terms, in a country of unequal exchanges.

### 3.7 The community dimension

The analysis of the exchange of words in therapy in terms of gifts allows us to reintroduce the community dimension in an interaction that is generally imagined to only involve two individuals. In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (1925) introduced the concept of *total services*, explaining that certain exchanged objects are, and always will be, the property of the entire society and the giving of such an object engages the whole clan of the giver as well as the whole clan of the recipient. This is the case in K.'s example. The information he disclosed concerning his family history engaged his whole family, the information concerning the mistreated Kurdish people, engaged his entire

community of origin, and his account of the injuries he received engaged, whether we like it or not, the entire community of victims. To deny the community dimension would have made K. a traitor to his group.

If we consider my own words in the perspective of *total services*, we can see that they also engaged my whole community, not my professional community, but my socio-cultural community. The therapeutic value of this community engagement is illustrated by K., who, after having spent many years in Switzerland, finally learnt French with remarkable speed. Inversely, my words also represent my own engagement towards my community. Driven by a sense of duty to remind my own people of the torments of foreigners in my country, by pronouncing my words I assumed a future role of guardian of memory. Before undertaking any therapy with those who are reviled by our society, we must be sure that the information we receive will be put to good use. I hope that, by writing this chapter, I am fulfilling this obligation. Psychotherapists, our social responsibility is great!

K.'s community gifts, or total services, were many:

- *the gift of culture* enriches the knowledge of the in-group, of which I am part. Without the explicit recognition of the social dimension of K.'s story, his marriage to his eldest brother's wife would remain an object of ethnological curiosity, passively offered up to the ethnokleptomania of researchers looking for material;
- *the gift of sacred resources* – the water that fell upon the earth to produce the miraculous lake K. described is shared sparingly by a tongue that does not wish to have its gold stolen away.
- *the gift of memory and of suffering* – it has been affirmed and reaffirmed by victims of concentration camps like Primo Levi (1989) and Jorge Semprun (1999), that the account of the Shoah requires an ear that will listen.

Each of these gifts deserves to be put to good use.

Contrary to preconceived notions, sharing and secret do not go hand in hand. The social or community dimension can not be ignored in our therapeutic practice.

Coming back to my interventions in the sessions with K., they were conceived as counter-gifts from the fortunate to the damned of the earth. They made an alliance between a count and a surveyor possible. This was probably their most important therapeutic virtue.

My intermediary conclusion is that any ethno-therapist who permits, either by design or by negligence, a gift to be sacrificed on the alter of super-

fluous science, is a thief who makes the dream of interculturalism that much more inaccessible.

### 3.8 Cultural or social mediation?

A third party, the interpreter, also directly intervened in K.'s psychotherapy. Since in our profession, at least in French-speaking countries, therapists still balk at the idea of allowing an interpreter to take part in a consultation, we must examine the questions that have been raised concerning the role of the interpreter in this setting: does the interpreter assume the position of the therapist's rival as far as *interpretations* are concerned, or on the contrary, does the interpreter maintain a role that is complimentary to that of the therapist, which is termed, too imprecisely, *mediation*? The general consensus amongst authors in this field is that *mediation* is the appropriate term,<sup>16</sup> but what kind of mediation are we talking about? Is it cultural or social?

I would like to make three preliminary observations which are, in fact, tautological. First, undertaking a psychotherapy in the mother tongue, supposing that it is possible, makes interculturality and the community dimension of the gifts that are exchanged impossible (on a practical level, for example, K.'s access to the French language would have probably been delayed). Second, the absence of an interpreter between two people of different mother tongues implies and even reinforces inequality between gifts and counter-gifts (and, coming back to our metaphor borrowed from Kafka, renders the Castle inaccessible). Third, equal access to healthcare for men and women who have not yet sufficiently mastered the language of the host country demands, whether we like it or not, the collaboration of interpreters.

How can we conceptualize the role of Mrs. C., that welcome intruder, in K.'s therapy? By bringing to my attention certain elements, as well as words, that had come up in my absence and that were useful to my task, she affirmed her place, at my side, as a member of a therapeutic community. By affirming her multiple origins, as a member of a minority that was also mistreated by the Turkish state, of a language community, having a history of exile and the status of refugee, she retraced the outlines of the affiliations that the patient also shared. In short, she was placing herself on both sides at once, and demonstrating her multiple identities. The sense of her mediation was rooted in this double affiliation, affiliations that differ more according to social status than according to culture.

If we look only at the level of the exchange of word-gifts, the interpreter's function is that of a conveyor of gifts and counter-gifts, at the same time

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<sup>16</sup> See Weiss and Stuker (1998).

both donor and donee. A more profound reflection on the subject would be out of context in this chapter. I will only make one remark. As an absolutely literal translation would be virtually impossible in this context, if only for linguistic reasons, each time around the interpreter steals some words, or at least a part of their meaning. If no compensatory gift is authorized, such as the initiatives I allowed Mrs. C. to take, the interpreter will progressively indebted her or himself, both to the patient and to the therapist. In consequence the interpreter will feel the need to do too much and naturally burn-out.

Even if it is undoubtedly necessary to dig more deeply into the preceding hypothesis, there is no question that the role of the interpreter in the exchange of gift-words is essential. At the same time both donor and donee in a process that often tends towards potlatch, this role is decidedly social.

The case in point, that has the particularity of using an Armenian interpreter for a Kurdish patient, reinforces the preminence of the social over the cultural, without causing any apparent damage.

### 3.9 Pain-memory, word-memory

Before becoming a gift to the psychotherapist, words are frozen in deeply buried memories. Before becoming words, memory remains trapped in the body, expressing itself through the pain whose own cries are also stifled. This helps us to understand the sudden liberation of K.'s pain by his ulnar fracture, several years after having been tortured. Of course the unbearable suffering caused by that inhumane experience was not going to fade away with the reduction of the fracture. It helps us explain the pain's omnipresence from solstice to equinox, the ineffectiveness of pain-killers, and its frequent intolerance to psychiatric care. It also explains the impotence felt by our colleagues, wonderfully translated by their stammering nosographies. Remember "transalpine syndrome"<sup>17</sup>, and, more recently, "sinsitrose" (a French appellation for systematic pessimism)? Do such labels not also betray the pilfering of precious, even sacred words, which may be punishable (who knows?) by the statutes of some anti-racist law?

The pain-memory expressed by a patient has the intensity of an experience that can not be translated into words. The therapist's interpretation, the counter-gift, must always be capable of putting the indelible fracture that this experience inflicted on the patient's life into words. Only then can we hope to see the slow transformation of the pain-memory into a word-memory.

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<sup>17</sup> In the 1960's and early 1970's Swiss doctors defined "transalpine syndrome" as the "chronic somatoform pain disorders" presented by migrants. It should be noted that the large majority of foreigners living in Switzerland at the time were Italian!

But for this to happen, the therapist must first *receive* and *hear* the physical pain of the patient, and not belittle it by reducing it to psychological pain. The therapist must also hear the inhumanity, injustice and torture, but there is nothing more difficult than this. Jorge Semprun (1999) remarked that it took 20 years for ears to start listening to the survivors of the concentration camps. Why should psychologists or psychiatrists be any different than anyone else? The therapist must also hear the silence that accompanies the long and necessary convalescence when one breaks free of horror. Also, the patient must have surpassed this phase in order to receive the therapist's words, the interpretation that is the counter-gift. This was K.'s case.

As I said at the beginning of this text, and I think you will all agree, such positive and rapid progress this type of case is rare. A therapeutic alliance, based on an equal exchange of gifts and counter-gifts, in conjunction with solidarity in the endless fight against injustice, is a prerequisite (we must give up our habitual potlatch). Very rarely, one session is sufficient (but even if this is not the case, the first session could very well be the last). The interpretation must also translate the patient's life story. Even if the therapist has a flair for this, or is just lucky, I must admit that the traumatic events at the root of the pain are rarely as precisely sketched out by the patient as they were by K. Lastly, the patient must receive the interpretation, which means that he or she must believe that the therapy is beneficial, that the psychotherapist is not neglecting the his or her resources, and convince her or himself that she/he is on fertile ground (which was superbly illustrated by K.'s lake metaphor).

One must never resign oneself to, or simply take note of, the horrifying accounts that we hear. The act of putting a heartrending experience into words, in this case torture, can not, in itself, numb the pain of the experience. There is also a need for social recognition of the unspeakable. Until that happens the pain of K.'s wounded arm will remain, rendering it unfit for hard labor. However, this did not prevent K.'s arm from becoming an actor in his memories, and actor in his writing. This did not prevent the future from being ripped from the quagmire of the past either, thereby permitting a poetic second wedding to his wife of longstanding, as well as the sudden acquisition of the French language.

Maybe one day the K.s of this world, those excluded from the castle, will seize the keys to the kingdom.



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