

Audergon, Arlene 'Daring to Dream: Learning about Community Trauma, Accountability and Building the Future in Post-War Forums in Croatia', chapter in Hart, Barry Peace-building in Traumatized Societies, University Press of America, 2008.

12

Daring to Dream: Learning about Community Trauma, Accountability and Building the Future in Post-War Forums in Croatia

Arlene Audergon

Trauma and injustice from violent conflict impact all of us, up close and at a distance. Dynamics around past trauma and injustice lead to new rounds of conflict. Outrage, pain and silence around injustice and trauma from violent conflict are combustible fuel. The fuel doesn't just blow up on its own. Throughout history, and in our current world scene, government and military state terror tactics readily exploit these dynamics, as do terrorist tactics, to stir new rounds of violence.¹ Grappling with community trauma and issues of accountability throughout society—so that we are less susceptible to such tactics—is of critical importance to peace-making and violence prevention.

Take a moment to think about how easily you can unconsciously fall into repeating rounds of conflict, at your own kitchen sink, especially where you've been hurt. Conflicts repeat with partners, family, colleagues or inside your own heart. If life teaches us something as individuals, it may be that just when you think you've worked out how to not fall back into an old pattern, it comes back once more. At the same time, life challenges us to become conscious and grow

into a sense of responsibility and choice in how we deal with even the most painful difficulties life brings.

Considering all the violence in our world, it is natural to feel a sense of despair or hopelessness. But, can we dare to imagine taking responsibility for our history and future? Can we seek justice and accountability without being taken into revenge? Can we find ways to include the tragedy and traumas of our personal and collective history into our hearts without repeating them? Can we imagine a world where we actively work with the history and conflicts from which we suffer, rather than fall into repeating them?

In this chapter, I suggest steps in this direction, with learning from large forums in Croatia from 1996-2001, and in 2006, where participants worked with issues of how to reconcile and move forward, given community-wide trauma and unanswered questions of justice and accountability.

I introduce the nature of the projects and how it all started. I discuss some of the ideas and methods of Process Oriented Psychology, developed by Arnold Mindell, in their application to conflict resolution and community building. I particularly focus on dynamics of community trauma and accountability, illustrating with stories from the forums in Croatia. I consider how community based work on trauma and accountability links with the work of tribunals, truth commissions, and other means that society has for grappling with its past and future, such as media or arts. I look to participants in our forums in Croatia, who modelled the possibility of grappling with the war, discovering how they played a part, and assuming leadership in building their communities and creating the future.

Worldwork: Daring to Dream for Croatia

It was 1994; the former Yugoslavia was at war. Two women from Croatia heard about an important method for working with conflict, developed by Arnold Mindell and colleagues, called 'world work'.² They travelled to Slovakia, joining 300 participants from 30 countries in an intensive conference over ten days, inside a gigantic gymnasium in the small town of Stupava, near Bratislava.

There were extraordinary and heated interactions, conflict and transformations as the large group and small groups worked together on a wide range of themes, including racism; gender; attitudes around sexual orientation; mental health; attitudes between east and west; and issues for central and eastern Europe after the fall of the former Soviet Union.

'World work' is based on Mindell's far-reaching concept of 'deep democracy'.³ Deep democracy refers to potential creativity within groups and communities when there is an opportunity to interact with facilitation among all points of view. Deep democracy also means including all dimensions⁴ of group life: the content and issues; the underlying polarization of roles; and the deepest creative and sentient level that underlies conflict.

One morning, the group turned its focus to the violence in the Balkans. Tanja Radocaj spoke about her distress and began to formulate a vision. Could it

be possible to bring these methods of facilitation to Croatia, to work with conflicts among Serbs, Croats and Muslims? Mirela Miharaja, also from Croatia, joined her in the dream. Tanja and Mirela then spoke to my colleague Lane Arye and me, asking if we would come to Croatia. We supported them to follow their dream and promised that if they got a group together, we'd be there.

Building Sustainable Community in the Aftermath of War

Osijek 1996

We went to Osijek, Croatia for the first time in Spring 1996. The four day forum was organized through the International Rescue Committee (IRC). It was made up of participants from all around Croatia, and also Bosnia. People later said that this gathering in Osijek was the first time Croats, Serbs and Muslims came together to talk about the war and how they could begin to go forward as a community. Years later, people still talk about the deeply moving and transforming experiences in that first forum in Osijek

Forums: 1997-2001

The work continued with a new project led by Tanja Radocaj and later Nives Ivelija, of Udruga Mi, which means Organization 'us' or 'we', a non-governmental organization in Croatia, with cooperation and financial support from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and other sources, including Open Society Institute (OSI), Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), USAID, Threshold Foundation, Office for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as several embassies. Udruga Mi, had a special role to bring together key players from all war-affected regions in Croatia. Lane Arye and I facilitated the forums. Participants were from 35 local and international NGOs (Non-governmental organizations), 27 government organizations, 12 Red Cross branches and 6 local governments. Four day forums occurred twice a year in Split, Stubicke Toplice, Trogir, Topusko, Brac, Dubrovnik, Supetar, Nasice, as well as an afternoon forum in Vukovar. Additionally there were regional meetings, a newsletter, and a training group.

Several hundreds of participants attended the forums. Each four-day forum had 70-90 participants. Participants included a wide range of people, from those directing organizations to those in grassroots services, from social workers to youth, and lawyers to mayors. They were a very mixed group of Croats, Serbs, Muslims, and other and mixed ethnicities

The idea was to bring together people working in the field with issues pertaining to reconciliation and community building. In a group of Serbs, Croats and Muslims, each with their own war experiences, the conflicts and issues they met in their communities were present among themselves. By not only talking about the problems in their communities, but working on their direct interactions, we entered sensitive and sometimes volatile territory, and the groups

found pathways forward as key players and leaders in rebuilding their communities. Their experiences in these forums were directly applied to their home communities, affecting communication and relationship between organizations, as well as the contributions of individuals and organizations in human services, reconciliation efforts, economic development, and community leadership.

Forum 2006

We returned to Croatia in November 2006. Udruga Mi coordinated a project to support regions in Croatia that had been hit the hardest during the war, and were struggling to survive, economically and to rebuild community. These communities had been devastated and many young people left these communities after the war. The project included support for economic community projects as well as this forum. It was supported by the UNHCR, and the Dutch embassy. This time Jean-Claude Audergon (an international facilitator of Process Oriented Psychology, as well as my partner), Lane Arye and I facilitated together as a team.

Welcoming and Deep Democracy

When we welcome people in forums, we usually say something about how the wisdom and direction forward is within the group. We say a few words about Mindell's concept of 'Deep Democracy',⁵ and the wisdom of communities, when all views, feelings and dimensions of our experience are included. We soon invite people to speak about issues in their community, what is on their hearts, and we go through a sorting process to find out how the group would like to focus, knowing that there are so many important issues, and we will not be able to do it all. We explain that the forum will involve large group discussion, small groups, as well as opportunities to work with specific issues or projects. We briefly share a few facilitation methods, so the group knows where we are coming from.

Roles and Ghost Roles

When facilitating, we sometimes represent 'roles'. 'Roles' help to represent a polarization of positions, and people can step into each spot to further differentiate these positions. Roles, however, are more than viewpoints. Roles also represent a deeper structure to the interaction or conflict. For example in most conflicts, we see the role of who is suffering, and the one who caused this suffering. In a conflict usually everyone identifies with the role who is suffering, and the one who caused the suffering is a 'ghost role'⁶. That means it is implied but not directly represented. It can be very useful, when someone is able to represent a ghost role, within the interaction

We also remind people that the use of roles is for the purpose of deepening the dialogue. While at one point, a role is further differentiated by people guess-

ing into it, in a kind of role 'play', at another moment these roles become extremely personal. By stepping very personally into these underlying roles that structure our conflicts and interactions, it is possible to relate more consciously with one another in community, rather than feeling swallowed up and at the mercy of repeating conflict.

Another reason to use roles is that a role is not identified with one individual. It is bigger than any single viewpoint and needs many voices to fill it out thoroughly. At the same time, each individual is bigger than any one role. This makes people freer to speak without being locked into one role. They can speak their mind and step out again, or even change to the other role. This helps individuals to become aware of their own wholeness, as well as supporting fluidity in the group dialogue.

Hot Spots

We also mention that while facilitating we will notice 'hot spots'.⁷ These are points where something is said that is sensitive or controversial. The 'hot spot' sizzles. It may be subtle or strong. Everyone intuitively recognizes such moments, where everyone goes silent, changes the subject, or tempers may flare. When ignored, hot spots return, and may become volatile if ignored over time. They are points where conflicts escalate, cycle, or where people retreat and go hopeless. What is exciting is that hot spots are also points of potential transformation. They are doorways. A hot spot can also be understood as a point of instability that appears to lead to chaos, and with awareness is a turning point from past (the repeating conflict) to the possibility of a different future.⁸

Community Trauma and Accountability

Imagine a group gathered after the war, to talk about how the country will reconcile and move forward. How do you begin to talk among people you don't know or trust? But how will you ever trust and work closely with colleagues to rebuild community if you are not able to talk about the central issues shaping your lives and work? How do you talk together in a group filled with people who were fighting on the opposite side of a war, and "when we know that all men of a certain age were involved in the fighting"?

Especially in the early forums, people did not want to say their names, because it would indicate if they were Serb, Croat or Muslim. People formulated what they wanted to say in carefully chosen words and such complex sentences that it was hard to understand, in order to avoid touching hot spots or sensitive or volatile issues.

Questions needed to be asked: Is it good idea to open such potentially volatile issues? If so, how do we do it in a way that won't just set things off again? Is it safe? Can it make it worse? Is it better to just try to forget? And if we do not find forums to process the violence of the past, what then?

Distance, Museum Pieces, and Weeping

People were hesitant and terrified to touch anything to do with their war experience or ethnic/national background, because it might stir up conflict and touch their own or other's pain. They did not want to touch upon the pain, for fear they would cry. And they were afraid to cry for fear their tears would never stop.

There's a story from our first forum about distance to our emotions and one another, and bridging that distance. It is also a story that reflects the well of pain around community wide trauma. During our first gathering, there were several participants from Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. At one point a woman from Sarajevo said to the other participants 'You hold us apart. You treat us like museum pieces. You look, but don't touch'. She and her colleagues had recently suffered from the terrible violence as Sarajevo was under siege. There was a silence in the room, and then one woman stood up and crossed the room, and sat on the floor facing her. She said 'It's true. I keep you at a distance. I saw images of Sarajevo on television. At that point the war in Croatia had stopped, and though I lived less than a couple hundred kilometres away, I watched, but I couldn't feel it. And I remember I was glad it was there and not here.' Both women now had tears in their eyes and then everyone in the room began to cry, too. I remember looking around the room and seeing tears streaming on everyone's faces. Lane and I were crying too. The group continued to share their experiences of distance, and pain. The interpreter cried, too, and was very upset with herself, because she felt this was not professional. When we told her it was okay, she broke down and wept, as others pitched in to interpret.

By acknowledging the distance in that moment, the distance was bridged and an extraordinary sense of connection grew. Everyone recognized how they had kept distance to their own pain and to one another. And everyone recalled their feeling of isolation, as the world, at a distance, had sat by and watched it all on television.

Hot Spots, Touching Community Trauma and Accountability

Hot spots are not only charged and potentially volatile points of conflict. If you touch a hot spot in a region that has been at war, you touch a vein of community-wide trauma.⁹ When facilitating groups and communities who have experienced violent conflict it's important to understand how hot spots touch dynamics of community trauma and how to work carefully with them. Hot spots are also a direct link to history, unresolved and open questions about what happened, the missing people, and who is accountable.

When you hear about community trauma after violence, people sometimes refer to psychological illness. While it may certainly be useful to recognize and treat psychological symptoms in various ways at an individual level, thinking only in terms of individual pathology can exasperate the sense of distance, misunderstanding and isolation. It misses the fact that we are not talking about a community of ill people, but rather a community of people who have been at war, or a community of people who have suffered atrocities, and are trying to come to terms with their community story, as well as individual stories.

One reason people usually try to avoid touching the hotspots of their interactions is the fear of triggering trauma. Ignoring hot spots, however, leaves you at their mercy, creates stress, and increases danger of escalation. Choice and awareness is needed. Rather than waiting to fall into the dynamics surrounding hot spots, it can be protective to go directly and carefully to these spots with choice and with special tools of facilitation. In the forums we would often speak about the group's wish to protect itself, and encourage this, by going slowly at these hot spots, by including the group in a sense of responsibility and choice about how to go forward, and inviting everyone to join us in the facilitation.

Accountability and Conscience

During one forum, there was an atmosphere of high tension surrounding unanswered questions and suspicions. Where were you? Why did you stay? Why did you leave? One man became very agitated, broke into a sweat and in great distress jumped up to leave the room. His trauma was triggered. He said he was frightened that touching on these volatile issues would be too much. We were able to ask whether he wanted to stay or go, and if he wanted to stay, what would he need to be able to? And also what would others need so that we did not exclude anyone? He said he very much wanted to stay and for this discussion to happen, but did not believe it was possible. He wished there was a way that could take care of everyone there, and the trauma so many have suffered.

We thanked him for his protective message. At this point a woman spoke about the terrible tension in their home communities, from the constant questioning and accusations. On top of the traumatic experiences suffered, you had to also endure suspicions. She then said something that led to a transformation in the group. She said "The roles of the questioner and the questioned are both inside of me". She then told about a terrifying and traumatic story, in which under threat of her life she made certain choices that put her friend's life in danger along with her own. They lived through it, but the painful self-questioning about the risk she'd taken with her friend's life had never stopped. As she spoke, a stillness came over the room, as everyone realized how they suffered not only from the suspicions among them and within their communities, but from their constant inner questioning. One by one people shared very personally about their own inner accusations and doubts, how they grappled with their own conduct under the pressure of the times. Several people said the most difficult thing was the constant doubts about whether they made the right choices that affected

their loved ones, families, and communities. Several people said if it was only their own life in danger, that would be okay—but it was the sense of responsibility for others. One man spoke very personally about being in a public position and having to make decisions that could affect the lives of his whole community.

The explosive atmosphere, the panic, jumpiness, and fear of setting off trauma, was transformed, as the group actively entered a shared process of reflection, conscience and accountability. The person who had been so anxious was profoundly relieved, saying he had not dreamed that this kind of dialogue could possibly happen in a group of Serbs, Croats and Muslims. At one point he told me he needed to make sure he was not in a dream.¹⁰

One Part Goes Forward and One Part Replays

A dynamic of trauma is that people may feel distant or cut off from their emotions, unable to touch the subject for fear of triggering painful and traumatic memories. In individuals, this ‘splitting’ is a well known characteristic of trauma. A person may feel simultaneously cut off from the experience, and at the same time at the mercy of the experience that takes over in outbursts of emotion, or repeats in flashbacks, nightmares and visceral symptoms.¹¹ At the point of the traumatic experience, one part of the person went forward, to function, survive. There was no time or capacity to feel, react, or deal with the magnitude of the experience. Life appears to go on, but the traumatic experience is there just below the surface, and replays, without choice.

A way to understand why trauma repeats in visceral experiences, flashbacks and nightmares is that the story is seeking a witness, some part of ourselves who can perceive it. At the point of the traumatic event, it was not possible to include it into the narrative of the person’s individual experience. There was no part of the personality able to take it in, react and in some way to integrate it into life. It replays as if waiting to be heard, seen, responded to and included. This is simultaneously a psychological, social and political process. The traumatic experience belongs not only to the individual’s personal story, but to the community’s story, and our world’s story.¹²

A way to understand the dynamics of community wide trauma or collective trauma is that similarly to how one part of the individual goes forward to survive, while the traumatic story remains locked in time and replays, the whole community also has to move forward to try to rebuild, and the community wide trauma remains and replays. One form of replay is in the traumatic experiences of large numbers of people in community. Another replay is in outbursts or new rounds of violence or retribution. Community trauma needs to be included into the community narrative or collective history. The untold stories need to be told. The holes in information need to be filled. There needs to be a process of accountability and there needs to be a community grappling with its conscience.

Accountability throughout Society

The ability for people during the forum to reflect internally upon their personal conscience and accountability does not replace looking to community relationships and accountability issues between Serbs, Croats and Muslims.

Rather, it was a part of grappling with justice and accountability and community trauma at all levels. The learning from these forum experiences helped us to begin to formulate a vision that justice and accountability and community trauma need to be grappled with at all levels of society: there is a need for an international process of criminal accountability, such as the International Tribunal; there is a need for forums and methods of dialogue throughout community to work with conflict and accountability between groups; there is a need for discussions and questions about responsibility for one's own group; and an internal grappling with conscience and sharing of these stories. All levels are needed and each impacts the other. Most of all, there is an uncanny source of wisdom and direction in community, when interactions can be followed carefully and accurately.

In the forums, we often heard pleas for accountability, for the atrocities committed. People wanted someone on the other side, to stand opposite them, and say that they/or their community did this terrible thing. With this was a plea to assume responsibility for one's community, in order to talk to people, find the still missing graves, and missing information. As in conflicts everywhere it was difficult for people to take accountability. Everyone identified more easily as the one who suffered, who was part of a group who had been hurt by the other side. The one creating the suffering or who can assume any responsibility became a 'ghost role'.

Croats spoke of the 'ethnic cleansing' and atrocities in 1991. When Croatia announced its independence from the former Yugoslavia, Serb paramilitaries living in Croatia, backed by the Yugoslav Army (JNA), took over the Krajina region of Croatia, accompanied by forcing out Croats, atrocities and killing. Serbs spoke of the killing and ethnic cleansing when the Croatian army came in 1995 and seized the area back. Now Serbs were forced out and killed. And in discussing this cycle of violence, discussions also quickly returned to open wounds and lack of accountability for what happened in World War II, World War I, and to the 14th century.

I remember in one forum discussion, a conflict cycled between Serbs and Croats living in Croatia. Some were despaired, others cynical, that we would ever emerge from this mess. Then two women spoke, one Croat and one Serb, one after the other. They were both elders in their community, who had personally suffered great loss and tragedy. Each spoke so personally and eloquently that the group was riveted and very moved in their hearts. The Croat woman spoke about the atrocities committed in her villages by Croats. A Serb woman spoke about the atrocities in her village carried out by Serbs. That they spoke about the crimes of their own group, with such a deep sense of sorrow and remorse, made a profound impact.

Tribunals

As the question of sending war criminals to the Tribunals came to the news, we noticed discussions about accountability were more possible in the community forums. There was a need to differentiate criminal accountability from what it means for a society to grapple with its conscience and issues of responsibility at a community, relationship and personal level.

One purpose of a criminal Tribunal is to create the possibility for society to have this dialogue. By bringing those most responsible to the International Tribunals, the rest of society might begin to discuss what happened and their part.

When the question arose of sending Croat war criminals to The Hague, we could see that some people in our forums (and some people throughout society) believed that no Croat should be held accountable for what happened in the military operation and ethnic cleansing of 1995. They felt that these were defenders and heroes, in relation to what had happened in 1991, and that even atrocities were excused within this context.

But many believed that warlords on all sides must take criminal responsibility. For some the Tribunals brought a sense of hope that there would be accountability and closure, and a chance to put the war behind us. Some felt that once criminals were held accountable, there would be no more need to talk about accountability—that accountability was only a criminal matter. Others felt that it was insufficient to leave all matters of responsibility on the war criminals, and that criminal accountability was only one level of a much broader discussion that was needed throughout society. In relation to broader community discussions, some felt that we should only be responsible for our personal actions. Others felt that it is essential that we assume responsibility in some way for our own group's actions.

An important learning is that while many people think that this sort of debate and these differences in views might prevent a process of accountability from going forward, it is in fact, this kind of debate throughout society that is an essential part of the process of grappling with accountability.

Truth Commissions

Tribunals make an essential contribution to society's recognition that accountability is needed, that there needs to be a bottom line. This bottom line is that having power is not an excuse for impunity. Everyone must be accountable.

Truth commissions, particularly the famous model from South Africa, provide a model that accountability is not only about criminal justice, but also about telling the full story. It is not only about acknowledging what happened, and providing the necessary missing information for people to learn what actually happened to their loved ones, but also about showing remorse for one's actions. In South Africa, many also were given the possibility of amnesty, if they came forward in this way to bring out the truth. Behind the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission was the idea that the whole society needs to find a way to tell and grapple with its story, for everyone to be able to move forward.

One of the essential characteristics of the South Africa Truth commissions was the input and support in their design came from many levels of society. It was not something that was imposed on community. It engaged many people and the hearts of the country. It also reflected the vision and determination of Mandela to free both the oppressor and the oppressed, in order to go beyond the oppressive system in trying to build a new country and different future.

Vision of Facilitated Community Interaction in Tandem with Tribunals and Truth Commissions

A vision emerges of facilitated community forums, using the principle of 'deep democracy'. Such forums, in tandem with Tribunals and Truth Commissions, would support societies to get to know their histories and conflicts, with opportunities to process community-wide trauma and issues of accountability and to connect in community to our creative resources and leadership. Such forums would be one part of a wider trend of communities reflecting on the past and future, through media, arts, education and more.

Facilitation and Eldership

For this to happen, facilitation is needed. This includes not only designated facilitators able to deal with hot spots, and support all sides of conflict. Facilitation also needs to be fostered as that part in all of us that is interested and cares for the potential creativity and direction that emerges out of a real conflict among all parts, rather than one side dominating another. Mindell sometimes refers to 'eldership'¹³, as that quality that cares for the past and future, takes all sides, and is able to make a stand. It is that part of us that can transcend the polarizations, but welcome and facilitate conflict.

Trauma and the Missing Witness

We need to ask ourselves in society if and how we will deal with past atrocity and trauma, and if not, what then. First there is no time to tell and respond to the story, as one must move forward to survive. Later it may feel too late. There is also a wish to move forward, and leave the tragic past behind. Those who would rather not consider their accountability may say, it's in the past, so let's forget it. This augments the original split from the story, which in turn augments its intrusive symptoms. People say there are so many people who have problems worse than me. People say I can't hear another story, there are too many. Some say they don't want to burden their neighbours, who have more than enough of their own troubles. Sometimes the stories are too horrendous—it feels unspeakable.

Or, someone wants to tell the story, but there is a lack of response. Some will say they have heard too many stories, or are exhausted or cynical. Or, the reaction in the listener is frozen, mirroring the lack of response in the teller, who is also cut off from her feelings. Silence may be from shock, from caring but not knowing what to say, and sometimes from indifference. Silence in turn reinforces the trauma. The story in search of a witness continues. The distance and silence make for a missing feedback loop. So the story replays and replays, without closure.

Collective Trauma and the Privilege to Forget

When thinking about dynamics of collective trauma, the part that goes forward may be the part of society that can go forward and forget. The part that remains and replays is represented by those who suffered the injustice and atrocities, who must go on telling the story. Those who would like to forget the story say isn't that a long time ago? Isn't it time to stop talking about it? This has nothing to do with me. For example, you see this dynamic in the USA, where although each of us has our own opinions and input about such broad and important collective issues, it is usually white people who say its time to forget about our treatment of Native Americans and African Americans, though there has been no real process of accountability or bearing witness to the atrocity and corresponding trauma, nor recognition of how privilege has been built on the backs of those who suffered. In this way 'forgetting' or splitting off our atrocious history is a part of the dynamics of collective trauma.

To Talk about Trauma or to Not?

In our recent forum in Croatia, our hosts thought that people may not even bring up the war, focusing on other matters of community building, now that it has been many years since the end of the war. But, at the first opportunity to choose the topic, the group spoke about war and the problems of reconciliation and moving forward.

Someone suggested that society needed to make space to talk about widespread trauma. Others disagreed and said it was important to not tread upon old wounds.

We made two roles, to bring out these two positions further. One role was 'It's essential to talk about community trauma'. The other role was 'It's essential to forget the past, so that we can move forward.'

The side that said we should not talk about traumatic experiences thought that bringing up old wounds would keep us stuck in the past. They said we needed to pull up our boots and get on with it. Several people, speaking from the first role responded saying 'the reason to talk about trauma is not because we want to stay in the past, but so that we can heal and move forward'.

A surprising thing happened at this point. Those who adamantly said we must not talk about traumatic events began to talk about the traumatic events

they had suffered—as if in passing. One told of having seen all his relatives killed in front of him. Another told of having to take a live grenade from a small child's hand. A young woman spoke about losing her father, which she never knew what happened, and his body was never found.

The stories came out so fast that in the telling and hearing of these stories, there was no emotional reaction. They were told as if it's just a normal, everyday thing, and it is—so many people have had such experiences. This lack of emotional reaction to the terrible experiences is a feature of community trauma, however, and can support the splitting off of traumatic experiences, which leaves them to replay. We therefore slowed things and asked people to express feeling reactions to these personal stories.

Those who had told the stories stayed with their position, saying that we all just needed to toughen up and not become emotional over these things. When someone expressed sorrow about the young woman losing her father and that his body was still missing, she said 'what difference does it make—the only thing that matters is going forward with an active life.'

While the group had taken two sides on the question of whether they felt it was a good idea or not to talk about trauma, the traumatic stories had come forward. The two sides spontaneously formed a circle and everyone listened to each other now with respect, realizing that although they did not agree, what they shared was that each had a personal way of grappling with the trauma, and each shared the same goal of being able to move forward in their individual lives and as a community.

Being Personal—Responsibility and Love

The group went on to look at participants' specific projects in these regions that had been hit hardest during the war, and had important group interactions around the relationship between NGOs and Government organizations, and issues in community relationships between Croats, Serbs and Muslims. At the last session, people gathered closer together in the large circle, and several people said how important it was for them to have been able to talk about issues in the forum that were normally not discussed. One man said 'when we arrived in this room, it felt like sitting on nails, and now it's like sitting on a sofa together'. People began to say thank you to one another in very personal, felt ways. Then a man said that he would like to especially say a word of appreciation to the young woman who had spoken about her missing father, for her active contribution to the forum. He then spoke about an organization he had established, to help families look for the bodies of those who were missing in the war. After appreciating her contribution and spirit, he said to her without hesitation or doubt, "I will find your father." She burst out crying, and at first ran from the room. Someone checked on her. We could see that she had been deeply touched by what he said, and how he said it. She came back a moment later, saying how moved she was by the whole experience. She thanked the man who said he would find her father and they hugged. Everyone present felt the impact of this

clear and simple step of what it meant to stand for one another, to step into the role of the 'missing' elder and care and take accountability for our past and our future.

Trauma and Beyond: Our Future

In one of our forums in Croatia, people spoke about how they all felt blocked from any attempt to build bridges between communities, Serb, Croat and Muslim. They described an attitude, a 'ghost role' that says "How can you associate with them. You are betraying loyalty to your own group." As people experimented with how they might deal with this situation, 'this ghost role' refused to allow it, and people became exhausted and despaired. It reminded them of the situation just before the war, when their loyalties had been manipulated into violent war. Yet they realized how they still perpetuated this notion of loyalty and betrayal. At this moment, two people sat on the floor, and said "We are your children". They were making a 'role play' to represent the children who suffered from their block to reconcile and move forward. Speaking very intimately and personally, others stepped into this 'role' and began to talk about their children. They spoke about the details of the traumatic scenes their children had endured. Some spoke about how their children had known only war. They spoke about their worries and attempts to keep them safe. As they reached out to each other as parents, the group grew very close. And they vowed to each other that when they went home, they would be loyal to each other, their children and future.

I have been touched again and again by the ability some people have to meet and transform the most difficult situations. There is nothing more personal than a traumatic experience that has shaken you to the core, and nothing more private than the journey towards finding contact to our deepest sentient and creative resources to find our way forward. At the same time these stories are not only personal and it is a collective task to find our way.

Our societies need to also make that journey to find our deepest collective resources and direction, in dealing with collective trauma and accountability. It is essential that we ask ourselves in societies everywhere what we will do with our histories of oppression, injustice and atrocity, and the community-wide trauma and unanswered questions of accountability in the wake of violence. Discussions have started and many more are needed in the fields of human rights, international development, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, journalism and media. Peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and their relation to dynamics of accountability and trauma involve the whole society and the whole of us, from psychology and personal development to spirituality, from education to law, from tribunals and truth commissions to community forums and town meetings; from journalism, film and the arts to personal relationship.

Collective Conscience

I had assumed at one time that the worst trauma accompanied gruesome unspeakable tragedies, and this is sometimes true. But, I learned that often the most serious trauma comes from haunting self-questioning, and feeling of guilt, conscience and responsibility. I remember one man who was very traumatized and unwell. His story was that a close friend (a Croat) had come to him (a Serb) in a state of great distress, saying he had heard that there were people being killed—should he flee? The man had assured his friend that he would be okay, and believed due to his position he could personally see to it. He could not, and it cost his friend his life.

One way for society to help those who wrestle with their conscience, and to reckon with collective trauma, is for the wider society to join in the soul-searching process. Collective trauma needs a collective conscience, interested in our future—interest in accountability for our own actions, and assuming responsibility for one's own group and others.

Closing

Whether we have experienced personal trauma, or have had the fortune not to have had such experiences, as a world we have all taken part in the collective dynamics of trauma. Whether we talk about violence from the past, or from today, it is still fresh. We have taken part both in pain and silence that is passed through generations. We have taken part in shock, and in the privileges gained through others' suffering, and we have been a part of groups that inflicted suffering on others, and/or have suffered as a particular ethnic/religious/national group and as a human being. We also take part through our compassion, through our wish to make a difference.

The forum participants found room in their hearts for the most painful experiences, and heated issues of accountability, and for a renewed sense of life and possibility, that people often said they did not expect to feel again. The level of friendships that grew from these forums was profound and continues. And we still hear of how forum participants took their learning into further work, taking on a sense of leadership and eldership in their own communities.

Depending on which side of the bed I get out of, I can envision a world that brings awareness along into our social and political interactions. I see a great need and trend for us to recognize the relationship between dynamics of collective trauma, accountability, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, in relation to the atrocities and conflicts in our world. I also see a trend and great need for us to explore the interplay between personal, relationship, community and collective processes, and to find room in our hearts both for our brutal history and for the possibility we can shape a different future.

Notes

1. Audergon, A. (2005) *The War Hotel: Psychological Dynamics in Violent Conflict*, London: Whurr/ Wiley.
2. See www.worldwork.org
See Mindell A. (1995) *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*, Portland, OR, Lao Tse Press; Mindell A. (1993) *The Leader as Martial Artist*, San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins; and Mindell A. (2002) *Deep Democracy of Open Forums*. Charlottesville VA: Hampton Roads See also Audergon, A (2005) *The War Hotel: Psychological Dynamics in Violent Conflict*, London: Whurr/ Wiley and Totton N. (2000) *Psychotherapy and Politics*, London: Sage Publications.
3. Mindell A. (1993).
4. Mindell, A. <http://www.aamindell.net/deep-democracy.htm> (April 2007).
5. Mindell A. (1993) *The Leader as Martial Artist*, San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins.
6. Mindell A. (1993) *The Leader as Martial Artist*, San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, p. 25; Mindell A. (2000) *Quantum Mind*, Portland OR: Lao Tse Press p.550.
7. Mindell A. (1995) *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*. Portland, OR: Lao Tse Press.
8. Audergon A. (2005); Audergon, Arlene '*Hot Spots: Post-conflict trauma and transformation*' *Critical Half* Vol. 4, No 1 (July 2006), Women for Women International.
9. Audergon, Arlene: 'Collective Trauma: The Nightmare of History', in *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, Volume 2, Number 1, 2004, Whurr/Wiley Publishers Ltd London.
10. Audergon A *The War Hotel: Psychological Dynamics in Violent Conflict*, London: Whurr/ Wiley 2005.
11. Hermann J (1997) *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence-From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York: Basic Books; Audergon A. (2005) p. 173-207.
12. Audergon A. (2005).
13. Mindell A. (1995) *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*, Portland OR: Lao Tse Press; Mindell A. (2002) *Deep Democracy of Open Forums*, Charlottesville VA: Hampton Roads.