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Notes from the Field

Mitchell Kossak

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July 23, 2006

It is day one. We enter. Fear and trepidation is in the air. The war rages outside, out of control. The bombs are falling incessantly in Lebanon, katyushas falling in Haifa. One woman has two sons. One is on the border of Lebanon, the other on the border of Gaza, two wars, two sons, one mother. All have family and friends somewhere affected by what is going on outside and here I have come to teach. What could I teach? I am supposed to teach expressive therapies to a group of holistic studies students. But really what can I teach?

We take time to introduce ourselves and speak our truth. The anxiety is palpable. We start slowly. I lay out paper, long rolls all across the floor. I have a roll of string. I begin to pass the string on the paper marking a path. I pass it to another who marks a path and passes it on. One by one the path grows. Each one has a unique journey; each journey intertwines. In the end we have a collective labyrinth. We are marking territory; claiming space. We begin to walk the lines. We intertwine and intersect. We take our time. We form pairs and walk together; then in fours and sixes. We move as one. We dance our dance. We pair off and draw images on the laid out labyrinth; making our tapestry; telling our story; after all this is our home. We break for lunch. It was a good beginning; a time to reflect, a time to let go, a time to forget.

Sometime between lunch and coming back to our room, we find out that the air conditioning has stopped working in one of the other rooms. We are asked if we'd be willing to move to another building; a boarding school that is on holiday about two miles away. I'm thinking maybe it will be a good idea to get away to a quiet place where there is grass and open spaces. So we pack our things, roll up our tapestry. We start to emigrate like Moses across the desert. We leave the comforts of the familiar space, the café, the other students, the sounds, the smells. We arrive at our new home; an empty campus filled with empty concrete buildings.

I like the quiet. I think it has a calming affect. But by now the pressure of being uprooted is too much for the students. This displacement mirrors the anger brewing outside; brewing inside. There is an explosion. Not the kind you hear about on the evening news, this is an internal explosion that has been brewing for sometime. Here

we are alone, taken away from our tribe, from our home. It is now “us” against “them”, except I’m not sure if I am an “us” or a “them”! I am in control of the demilitarized zone lying somewhere between students and administration. I struggle to find ways to make this a learning experience. We sit and breathe; at least most of the group joins in. Others are still not going to settle; they’re still outside the room refusing to enter.

I suggest that we take some time to draw our feelings, or what sustains us in such uncertain times, anything that will help to focus the tense energies. One woman with breast cancer draws open spaces. She cannot take all the tension and has to remain open to herself and to her own healing. We try to breathe in her empty space. Another woman draws an intense demonic figure that spews anger and rage. We make the sound of anger and rage with her and feel the demon releasing. It is cathartic for her and she laughs and cries and laughs and cries, riding the waves of overwhelming anxiety. In the end the group insists that they must return (the right of return: how symbolic). We migrate back over the border, back to our home. We pack the materials, roll up our labyrinth tapestry and begin to move; again.

Someone else has moved into our classroom and has taken over our space. More emotions, more outrage. The only space available now is the library, a small room lined with a few hundred books, four tables, three computers and one disgruntled librarian. The librarian leaves, we move the tables and mark our space. We move the energy through breath and sound and movement. We shake rattles to a drumbeat and shout out our tribal chant. We reclaim our space. We shake and chant and dance—damn them all, we can still celebrate; who needs four walls. We are refugees and this is our home.

The war still rages outside. Back at my hotel helicopters pass every ten minutes over the serene beach … coming and going and coming and going … a constant drone … two more dead in Haifa; a dozen more in Tyre and Beirut. The madness never ends.
Background

This was a very brief summary of one class taught in Israel. While teaching during a war is not typical, the events outlined during the week do serve to illustrate some of the unique situations faculty often face while teaching in Israel. Below I will try to touch on some of the underlying factors that are always present, some psychological, some political and some cultural.

It cannot be overlooked that social, political and psychological realities of the Holocaust, the birth of a new nation and 60 years of constant threat have affected all Israelis. As educators, how we address the overt and covert consequences of this reality is paramount to our pedagogical approach. This is particularly important in a

program that is training future practitioners in the use of arts in psychotherapy. For example, in expressive arts therapy we use the arts in all its forms to address psychological states such as anxiety, depression, anti-social behavior and trauma as well as for healing and wellness. In this model, learning how to be present and empathic with another human being is essential. The ability to be empathic is what attachment theorists (Bolby, 1988; Stern, 2004; Trevarthen, 1977) call attunement or the ability to connect in a secure way. A person with a "pre-occupied" attachment style has difficulty with and is fearful of intimacy.

From an attachment perspective, research has shown that even after 50 years, traumatic traces of Holocaust experiences are present in the survivors (Sagi, Marinus, Ijzendoorn, Joels & Scharf, 2002). These long-term effects include chronic anxiety and depression, personality disorders, and unsatisfactory marital relationships.

Symptoms and psychiatric features of Holocaust survivors were also found to be present in their children (Barocas & Barocas, 1983). It has also been found that Holocaust survivors specifically face ongoing traumatic experiences called "sequential traumatization" (Keilson, 1992), which can include adjusting to a new culture and language as well as to new hardships involved in the struggle to maintain Israel's independence.

There are many students in our program who are children of Holocaust survivors. Difficult stories often surface in the classroom setting, revealing terrible and often unimaginable histories. Our students also go out to field placement sites where they are working with people in distress and often suffering from their own traumatic states. One student recently who was interning at a prison later revealed that his father was a prisoner in a concentration camp. This reality triggered many difficult memories. The lingering affects of a collective trauma history however does not always present so clearly. Whether or not a conflict is actively alive (Lebanon War, intifadah, Holocaust) the effects of living through and with conflict is an underlying reality in this culture.

And, it is not just that the awareness of trauma is passed down from generation to generation, but the symptomatology is also passed on. For example, the effects of war, conflict, and terror attacks remain in the consciousness and show up at unexpected times. These are not abstract concepts that only exist in theory. These realities appear constantly throughout the teaching day and week. These realities show up in class experiences in difficult interpersonal exchanges and in external realities that supersede what is planned for in the syllabus. In the years I have been teaching Israelis, both in Israel and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, these external realities have included bombing attacks on the day of or during class, ongoing conflict such as the Lebanon War in 2006 or just the constant threat of attack. This reality

could also include roadblocks as students travel to class in the morning or as they are going home at night. When there is a bombing somewhere in the country during the day of a class the planned activity or lecture has to stop and the focus needs to be on the immediacy of feelings, fears, and anxieties present. And these are not unusual occurrences. These "usual" occurrences have been a constant reality throughout the teaching experience.

In class a simple experiential experience can also trigger a traumatic memory. For instance, I will never forget my first teaching experience with Israeli students in Cambridge. It was the summer of 1995 and I was teaching a mixed group of 22 Israeli, Canadian and American students. The majority were Israeli who had left their families and come to Cambridge for four weeks of intensive course work. Around the third week of teaching I introduced a mask making exercise to explore the Jungian concept of polarities, where one side of the mask was a positive aspect of Self and the other a negative or shadow aspect. I had asked students to create a mask with two sides, demonstrating the idea of polarities. While the class dove into the experience with creative energy, I noticed one woman quiet and by herself. She was not moving and then she began to cry. Others began to notice her and we stopped the exercise. She was able to tell us that when she was a little girl her small village was attacked one night. She and her siblings hid under a bed. All she could see were men with masks. Many in her village were killed.

This stark memory surfaced from this seemingly innocuous exercise that I have used many times in the past. The class was able to be present and empathetic with this woman and it turned out to be a useful training experience. Solomon, Garb, Bleich and Grupper (1987), have found that individuals will demonstrate acute stress responses when exposed to stimuli that symbolize an original traumatic event. This is only one instance of what can come to the surface at any time. But what about what does not surface so clearly? The woman in the mask making exercise was still living with the trauma 20 some odd years later. How many more "stories" were embedded in the lives of these students, yet to surface?

All stories are not held in secret. When I first came to Israel I was struck by the presence of military on the streets and monuments all over to honor the war heroes. The road to Jerusalem, up a windy mountain path, is literally marked with the bombed out jeeps that participated in the "liberation" in 1948. So, how does this affect teaching and learning? This is not an easy question to answer. And, it is not just the Israeli students and the cultural and political realities that must be factored into the equation. I am also affected and my internal realities as well as my cultural biases affect the way I teach.

Journal Entry July 19, 2006

I'm heading to Israel again. I'm very confused. I cannot come to terms with the fact that I am heading into another dangerous situation. At least that's how it looks on the news. My father is lying in a hospital dying from cancer. I feel guilty I am leaving him. My son says "this is stupid don't go." He has never expressed his opinion before about going to Israel. My daughter asks how long I will be gone. This is a first for her as well. "I'm going off to do my job," is the rationale. I am going to experience the danger, to be close to the fear— mine! I am sitting in the British Airways terminal. My flight leaves in one hour. There is still time to turn around. I can't concentrate. "It will all be fine," I tell myself. I take off. Twenty-three hours later I land at Ben Gurion. The news is not good. There are more bombs dropping inside Israel. Helicopters fly by the hotel every five minutes or so. And yet all around appears to be normal and peaceful. I walk the beach. It is crowded with families and lovers. Runners pass by. One boy around 11 puts out his hand as he passes to slap me five. Is there some meaning in this gesture? In times of high stress I tend to look in to things more, see it all as a sign. The sun is setting just as it always does. The moon will soon rise. The last two helicopters came and went, disappearing somewhere in the distance. Were they coming or going—killing or transporting? Madness is alive.

I sleep, jet lagged. I drag myself out of bed to orient to the sun—eternal time; on the street people pass by. There is no sign of trouble. Four very young looking soldiers pass, 9 machine guns strapped over their shoulders. They smile and laugh. Where are they going? They look to be about 18 or 19. This could be my son and his friends—geeks at war! It all seems so strange and surreal as if I am living in a Salvador Dali painting. The helicopters still pass by one by one, two by two. Their sound shakes me from my sleep— is this Viet Nam? Have I entered a dream of a war I opposed and would not serve? I try to sleep; but, I cannot tell dream from reality.

It is now the next day. I enter the classroom. It all seems normal until we begin to do a check in. "Why are you here? What would you like to get from this course?" It all seems so normal until they begin to speak. "I am a teacher. I have two children in the army." "I am also a teacher. Why are we here? I need to be home with my children and family!" "I have breast cancer and I am glad to be here, to forget about what is going on outside—out there. Here it is quiet and I can rest and heal." They teach me a song. It is called "Lo B'chai eem velo Behoach": "Not by army or by force, but only with my spirit says the Lord of hosts." We sing and dance this chant that has been sung since the beginning of time. It is our refuge from the madness. I write a poem:

My path runs deep through still waters Joining many rivers, streams, oceans, lakes.
Today I am filled with tears flowing deep, internal, constant as if it will never end,
Never end Never end.

And yet all I can think about is the end.
Life begins. Life ends.
I am closer to the end, the swell of endings is near and I don't like it.
I'm angry it is here.
It rips at me, tearing layers I never knew.
In all these years, in all these workshops I still don't get it.
I still don't know how to embrace it, accept it, say yes to it.
All I see, All I hear, All I know is fear and pain.
Pain and fear – madness – terror – anger – anguish – denial, Deep water I cannot breathe.
Deep water I cannot swim.
Deep water I cannot understand.
Deep water I cannot. . .cannot.
The dreams have stopped, distorted memories.
The dreams are dead. . .I cannot.
The dreams of youth, so far away.
The dreams of yesterday. . .gone. The water does not flow –
stagnant, deep, smells, deep I cannot breathe.

The reality of this week of teaching sets in. The students are overwhelmed. I find out that each night many go back to their homes in the north and enter the bomb shelters with their families. This is the reality. The bombs do not cease on both sides of the border. The news on TV and radio become more and more inflamed. The news in the States is even worse. Students, faculty, administrators, the guy in the café, the janitor—everyone is glued to the news. Finally it becomes too much. Faculty and administration have decided it is best to relocate. We pack up our bags and move from the hotel on the beach, where the helicopters never cease, to individual's homes. It is gracious of them to open their doors. We are wanderers, bags over our shoulders.
Opening doors to family, friends and acquaintances is the way things are done in the Middle East. We spend the night and plan to leave the country earlier then expected.
I arrive at class the next day and explain the situation. There is a rumble of anger and fear and condolences. There is also confusion: "Why do you get to leave and we have to stay?" It is a very difficult moment. We all struggle with our situation. We all show our humanity. The only thing I can think to do is to teach them a chant. It is a very old Hebrew chant. I am told it is sung everyday at the wall in Jerusalem. The words are "Ana El Na Rafanala." It comes from the story of Moses praying to God to heal the wounds of his sister Miriam. It is a very slow chant with slow movements (hands up to heaven, bowing down to earth, spinning). We chant and dance for 30 minutes—what else is there to do? We pray for peace, for healing, for ourselves, our families, our people and all oppressed people around the world. We pray to stop the madness. The chant ends and I leave for home.

About a month later I begin to get the papers for the class. In my 14 years teaching Israelis I would have to say that the students have an enormous capacity for empathy and are extremely resilient. Papers over the years reflect this sensitivity and depth. This year is no exception. Many of the papers talk about this difficult week—the split between school and the outside world. One woman writes a particularly poignant essay. She talks about traveling to the north after the cease-fire occurs. This is a place where she usually goes to camp and be in the tranquility of nature. She writes about the rain close to the Lebanon border, as if the sky is crying and washing the smell of the war. She is an artist and wants to create something. In her searching she found two big basalt stones sooty from the bombs and found pebbles washed by the river flow to create a circle of peace and harmony. She added soft branches and leaves "I found on the ground as if they where painted by angels."

Conclusions

There are no real conclusions, but perhaps only observations. I am left with an overall feeling of peace and hope. I know this might sound strange given the difficult situations I write about and the obvious difficulty to find real and lasting peace in the region. I base my sense of hope on the students I have the honor to teach. Living in this region is not easy, nor is it tranquil. However, the students always demonstrate their passion for their work. The reflective inquiry from students is most always very poignant, passionate, insightful and alive. As the above example illustrates, their work speaks louder and goes deeper into the psyche and soul then I could ever anticipate or imagine.

I have written this article from the personal perspective of teaching Israelis. I understand that it is one specific and subjective perspective. The focus has been on the more acute situations that I have experienced because these are the ones that stand out the most and the ones that demarcate the uniqueness of the classroom teaching. These examples also exemplify the resiliency I always find. It is because of this resiliency that I continually return. It is this resiliency that feeds me in some way and restores my sense of what it means to feel alive. The arts in general always have at the core the intent to define the human condition. This goal of awakening and illuminating the human condition is always embedded in the teaching and training of expressive arts therapists. In Israel this sense of awakening is always present. Maybe one day the artists and educators will prevail and we will find lasting peace. In the meantime I will continue to return and be enlightened.

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