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Learning to Live with Fear: Negotiating Life After a Tsunami Disaster A first-person account of doing trauma work with the survivors

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4,000 dead, another 2,000 missing. “No, no, that number is wrong,” the man in charge of UNICEF’s disaster management team insisted to me, his eyes begging me to understand the magnitude of what he had recently lived through, the remnants of the hell he was still living in—“there are at least 6,000 dead and at least 5,000 missing.”

6,000 dead, 12,000 dead, 9,000 missing—the numbers swirled in my consciousness, until they ceased to have significance anymore. Everyone was giving me different numbers, tossing them like pennies into the sweltering, humid air. Numbers that hung heavy on the weary shoulders of relief workers, doctors, and nurses, and that eventually came to lie like mortar across my own. And I shamefully admit that I began to embrace a fascination almost macabre for the exact number of people dead. The question “how many dead?” had, in an incomprehensible manner, become the first question I asked. And strangely, “a thousand here or a thousand there” became irrelevant after the first few days. Soon, they were just that—numbers. Numbers that because of their concreteness were somehow able to offer odd relief from the ineffable bewilderment brought upon by trauma, grief, and psychological shock.

It was only late at night, when my eyes would refuse to rest and my mind simply would not stop, that I would realize the meaning of these numbers. These were numbers of human lives taken. Numbers of human people missing. Never to be found or recovered. Ever. Swallowed by fifteen minutes of the ocean’s incensed dysregulation. These were actual numbers of people dead. Even today I labor to find a way to comprehend these irreversible facts. How on earth does one begin to understand the relevance of this event? How is one supposed to reconcile its meaning, to integrate a despair so catastrophic that recovery seems almost a naïve fantasy? Who is to blame and to whom can the survivors turn their unprocessed depression and inevitable vengeance against? The ocean? The very ocean that once sustained and fed their children? The very waters that nurtured their existence before but that has now ravaged all they know to be familiar—how are they supposed to accept this? How does anyone begin to make sense of that which is beyond understanding? These were the questions that burned for answers and, most of all, for healing acceptance.

“I left with the clothes on my back. I ran uphill as fast as I could go, but the water kept running after me. I didn’t look back, I didn’t stop running for two hours. I didn’t go back to the shore for three days. I was scared to. And when I did, I did not recognize anything. My house, my belongings—they were all gone.”

—Krishna, age 32

“My husband picked up his mother on his back—she is over eighty years old—and I grabbed my son’s hand and we ran up the mountain. My son was crying because his favorite toy was swimming away and he wanted to catch it. He began to run behind it. I had to slap him really hard.”

—Sunita, age 24

“We have nothing now. Nothing. When I first came to the island in 1974 I at least had a few clothes and the utensils that my mother had given me. Now I have nothing. I need to start all over. I don’t know what to do. Should I go back or should I go to the mainland? What will become of my children?”

—Ramesh, age 47

“The wave was huge, it was black, as high as that tree over there. I have never seen anything like it in my life. I was screaming at my neighbor to run, run, run. She did not hear me. She did not even see the wave. I ran as fast as I could run. I do not know what happened to her. She was never found.”

—Anand, age 38

INVITED PAPER

“All the water went back. There, as far as the road over there. No, even further than that I think. I could see fish dead, lying there, so many fish. We did not understand what was happening. But my husband told me to get far away from the water. So we did. And I am so glad we did. We went uphill and kept going. I never went back to the shore. Only my husband went. I was too scared to go there. I have not gone to the shore again since that day. I never saw what happened to my house or my things. My husband says that everything was wiped out. Everything. My daughter is young, only three. She doesn't know what happened. All she keeps saying is, 'Let me play in the water, let me play in the water.' How do I tell her that we can never play in the water again? I get angry with her. I hope she will forget about the water forever.”

—Suman, age 23

As I wandered through the narrow, winding streets of Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, I wondered how it used to be before December 26th. I imagined the streets bustling with loud music that blared from tiny transistor radios, kiosk stands busy selling the hot oily snacks so enjoyed by most Indians, and the boardwalk alongside the calm, blue waters, crowded with families enjoying the ocean's resplendence. On this day however, the boardwalk was barren, and the streets were muted with a silence completely uncharacteristic of an Indian city. The doctor who was giving me a tour shook his head as he looked out into the ocean. “No one comes out any more. Children are afraid to come near the water.” He then told me how the entire tide system had changed since the Tsunami. While the locals could predict the change of tides accurately before, now they were left befuddled by its unpredictable nature. The tides, he said, changed every few hours now. “Very strange,” he muttered to himself. Later, when I walked along the beach, my feet constantly bumped into twigs, branches, rubber, and other debris. “None of this was here before,” the doctor said. “It was clean, clear water. No rubble then.” And then he told me how on Jan 2nd there had been a rumor that another Tsunami was going to strike. “The entire city was terrorized,” he said. “Two people died in the chaos that day. Everyone was running like mad. No one knew what was going on; all they knew was that they had to run as far from the water as possible.”

I later discovered that rumors of more Tsunamis had become a rampant and almost weekly occurrence, constantly barraging any hope for a secure psychological recovery for the inhabitants of these islands. “Even without the rumors,” the doctor wisely told me, “the people would still be terrorized. Whenever they hear the word ‘water,’ they run. They don't even wait to hear the entire sentence, just the word ‘water,’ and there they go like crazy chickens,” he laughed nervously. And he, like many others I met, now lived a life overshadowed by a nervous tension painted with the timorous strokes of an unyielding agitation and a desperate uncertainty about the future. Today, they dwell in new bodies, and live new lives. Bodies that have changed, for some, in drastic ways reminiscent of classical PTSD; for others, in ways more subtle—so subtle as to be imperceptible. Until one probes a little deeper. And then they reveal that their lives are no longer theirs to feel control over, their future no longer theirs to dream of. Their nightmares are strange, and their dreams are filled with mental chaos. Their relationships are skewed, forced, unnatural. Their very selves seem to be split, part of them clutching to the lives they lived pre-Tsunami, and part of them desperately searching for meaning in an unfamiliar world since. To laugh is toilsome, to cry terrifying. Neither offers relief. No, nothing is the same anymore. Simply put, their entire worlds have changed. Irrevocably.

The Tsunami disaster has been the worst natural disaster in over a hundred years. Entire communities have been wiped from existence. They have been shaken from their foundation. They have been uprooted with nowhere to turn. There is no one to blame here, no evil “other” person or race. Here, it is nature that turned against humans. Is nature then evil or benevolent, or both? How do the survivors integrate this tragedy into their lives and learn to live with, not run from, the fear that has now enshrouded their psyches? And while we all say that one should ‘move forward,’ can you tell me how it is that they should move forward with their lives? I ask you this, because this is what I was asked. “You tell me,” they would demand, “how am I supposed to understand this?” “Please explain to me what I am supposed to tell my children,” they would implore. “Faith! what faith should I have, in whom?” “Hope, you say? Tell me what hope can I have, when my sister lives each day with the memory of her children being swept into the ocean?” Yes, these were the searing unknowns that I was presented with each day of my stay there. Some of the eyes that searched deep within me were filled with resignation; others, with confusion, even anger. Yet most faced me with hope—hope that I would actually be able to put this tragedy into perspective for them. That I, fresh-faced and full of optimism, would somehow tell them that it would all be over soon, that the fear they lived with would soon fade, and that the Tsunami would never dare to touch their pristine island again. Yet when I looked back at them, I knew that I couldn't give them any of this. I couldn't assure them anything. All I could do was look back into their eyes as deeply as I could. And tell them that I understood. I understood their helplessness, fully felt their fears, and equally longed for their lost sense of security.

To this day I marvel at the synergy of events that led to my going to these islands. I first heard about the possibility three weeks before I actually went there, giving me little time to change my mind or succumb to the endless doubts I had about my capacity to actually do such a training. I remember oddly wishing for the flights to be full, or for something drastic to happen—anything that would relieve me of this awesome responsibility, yet not make me look like the coward I really felt like. “I

am not a trauma expert,” I told myself repeatedly, and then, to provide the illusion of solace, I would look up the portfolios of “trauma experts” on the internet and feel relieved when they had pictures attached to the resumes. “Ah, perhaps I look more interesting than that man there,” I would think, or, “this person doesn’t look like fun,” I would say. Unhealthy compensatory tactics, admittedly. But they helped momentarily. I remember feeling nauseous for most of the time prior to my workshop. I couldn’t sleep and was wired. I just wanted to go and be back in the safety of my family and home. I had no idea what I was going to do. I felt despair and much sadness just thinking about all that I would witness. I was nervous as hell. And then one day it shifted. It shifted when I realized that here I was merrily, vicariously traumatizing myself, transfusing my silly mind with all sorts of depressing energy. I had, in effect, forgotten to give myself the permission to enjoy this endeavor. I had mistakenly assumed that I needed to be all serious or sad. And then I got it: this is what I would bring to the people there—the permission to be joyful. The permission to laugh again, to love life again and to “be” again. We would dance and sing. We would write poetry and play games. We would build sand castles and write letters. Or we would cry together. But most of all, we would simply *be*. It was then that I relaxed into my own being and allowed myself to be organically oriented to this journey. It was only then that I let go of my need to be an “expert” or “a very serious person,” and instead simply be me. But be fully me. Open and ready to be transformed.

More than any of my egotistical insecurities being quelled however was, I think, my unshakable conviction that I simply could not pass up an opportunity to be part of this event. This gave me the courage to go. I knew in my heart that I would learn so much, that I would grow, and that I would so push my internal envelope of comfort that it was worth the consequent agony and moments of illogical anxieties. And it was. I truly did receive far more than I could have ever given. So much so that I do not even look at what I did as anything but a truly self-fulfilling endeavor. Helping others was an unspoken and organic concomitant of my agenda, not something I even paid heed to. I went there with one purpose: to show up. To be present. To take risks and to grow. I wasn’t going to change or heal anyone. I wasn’t on any such mission. I was going to ask questions, to share stories, and most of all, to listen. And in this process, it was I who was healed and I who was helped—the most.

I had a two-fold task in training over 60 doctors, nurses, and counselors in two 4-day workshops. The first was to train them in the understanding and treatment of trauma, and the second—because they themselves were victims of the tragedy—was to actually conduct psychological processes with them. Together we were to create our own framework of what this trauma meant to us, how we could process it, how we could integrate it, and, the most challenging, how we could transcend it. My goal was to provide the group with an educated understanding of trauma and to demonstrate psychological processes—both individual and group—that they could later implement in schools, health centers, and relief camps.

My orientation to running this group was inspired not only by my psychodynamic training at Teachers College, but also by my training in the Creative Arts. I received my Masters in Drama Therapy from the California Institute of Integral Studies in California, where I received training in how to run groups using the power of the arts as the primary mechanism of healing. The main premise behind the use of the Creative Arts in therapy is not to minimize verbal introspection, but to accelerate and often even deepen it through a constant focus on the here and now. The moment right now is of supreme importance, and the therapist’s task is to find a vehicle by which this moment can be best expressed by the client in an active and fully present manner. With its focus on spontaneous expression and the release of the creative spirit, this type of therapy helps clients enter a new realm of experience and feel the present moment in an entirely new way. As such, I utilized art, poetry, drama, and movement in this group to bring the clients into their bodies in as holistic a manner as possible, hoping to provide an experience of integration and to allow them to actively embrace that which was previously latent. As inexplicable as the use of the Creative Arts in healing work can be, it has an imitable sense and rhythm behind it, following the group’s beat and listening to the sounds of their experiences. Every psychological intervention I used with the group, in some small way or another, utilized the arts, creating a circle of healing and creativity that most had never been exposed to in their lives thus far.

When I first began to speak of trauma and traumatic symptoms, not once did I use the term ‘PTSD.’ Not only because I didn’t want to use the word ‘disorder,’ but also because I simply wanted to refrain from jargon and diagnosis, at least in the beginning. Because of all that they are newly experiencing, trauma survivors feel distant and strange, and it just didn’t feel right to label them with a term that could further perpetuate their sense of isolation. I also didn’t yet fully understand the meaning they would attribute to this diagnosis. So instead, I wanted to focus on process, and on group sharing and dynamics. I wanted to use the language of the group—the words *they* used to describe their experiences. In order to do this, I asked them to share *their* stories, through exercises such as automatic writing, sentence completions, and letters to themselves. From their sharings, I elicited the themes, metaphors, and analogies that would shape our understanding of the trauma each was experiencing. For example, when I asked them to think of their lives post-Tsunami, I asked them to think about it in colors. Most of them chose dark, dismal colors, bereft of warmth or energy. So we talked about trauma being like ice or ashes, freezing or burning up one’s inner resources, solidifying or crumbling habitual defenses and calcifying courage. All the symptoms we talked about came through their stories—and people had plenty of stories to tell. Each one knew of someone who had lost someone. There were four members who had directly lost a loved one—one had lost her father, another, her two nieces, another, an uncle, and the fourth, her friend. In an automatic writing exercise, the very first day, a woman began to cry. She said, “I didn’t think I was traumatized. I didn’t even realize that I was feeling this way.” And this became a persistent theme—the understanding that all of them in the room

INVITED PAPER

were traumatized in some way or another. Many thought that they should be brave and deny their own feelings of trauma because they had not directly experienced loss. We quickly dispelled this myth. We soon came to accept that each in the room had experienced trauma, regardless of the level of impact. Slowly, very slowly, the group began to give each other the permission to experience what had been previously split off. This became possible, first, through the poignant realization that “Yes, I *do* experience trauma reactions, and I have every right to,” and second, through the understanding that this experience is normal. Normalizing the trauma became a large part of the work we did together. However, it was only when I shared my own “abnormal” reactions to stress that the group finally opened up to sharing theirs. So I found myself, without meaning to, telling them very personal secrets of my own “dark side.” Yet, when I saw the group relax and ease into their own sharings, I felt that perhaps my own dark side wasn’t so dark anymore. Perhaps I learned to normalize my own abnormalities in this process as well.

We saw trauma as constricted energy within the psyche and soma. Consequently, the inter-relatedness of the psyche and soma was repeatedly emphasized, and releasing this pent-up energy became a focus. Exercises from the Creative Arts were tailored to help them experience their bodies in new ways and begin to integrate their experiences. I asked the group to begin to honor what they were feeling in the moment, in the here and now. Towards this end, we did many creative exercises that grounded them in the present moment. We meditated, we did breathing exercises. We did movement exercises that zoned emotions in the body. We played drama games that challenged them to hone in on what they were experiencing through visual representation. We drew images that centered their experiences in a very concrete, yet creative, manner. These exercises, all of which aimed to both center experience in the here and now and to free up the creative spirit, helped participants to share their experiences in a very free-flowing and natural manner. Before they knew it, they were sharing very personal stories with each other, revealing their post-Tsunami experiences—sometimes crying at all that had never been expressed, sometimes giggling uncontrollably as a way of release.

Because I view trauma as creating splinters within the self, much of the focus was on articulating this split as it represented itself within each participant’s psyche. The more ways I could help them visualize this split, the better. I asked them to choose objects from nature to represent themselves before the Tsunami, at present, and in the future. Then the group together made a collage of the objects from nature. In another task, I asked them to pair up and make sculptures of their partners representing their inner emotions during the Tsunami and at present. This was again designed to provide a concrete and visual representation of their emotions at different time periods in connection to this event. And then I asked that we create a “group sculpture”—again, to give the participants a visual representation of their collective emotions. They were asked to write letters to the people they used to be before this event describing how they have now changed. Here, they found themselves saying goodbye to parts of themselves, but also welcoming new parts of themselves, some fear-ridden, some full of new-born strength. Again, each person in the group shared their writings with the others. So while the work was individual on many levels, it was always made collective, so that the individuals always felt a sense of connection to the larger group. These exercises are an example of how I used the arts to illuminate a self that, rather than being congealed—describable only in terms of the trauma—, was in actuality still multi-layered and complex. I found that many of the participants referred to themselves in unidimensional terms. As if all they were now were victims of this tragedy. Piecing apart the many layers of their selves became an all-important focus that allowed them to see that yes, there are huge chunks of me that are paralyzed and rooted in trauma, but that there is that slightest possibility that there a part of me that is free from it, perhaps still hopeful, perhaps still available for growth. Emphasis, in all of these exercises, was in expression and integration. Recognition and awareness. And most importantly, acceptance and hope.

While I cannot give enough details of what we actually did, what I hope to offer is a qualitative gist. What our eight days together was really about was the creation of a common language. This was perhaps the most empowering element of our time together. Identifying emotions, while easy for us to do, is often particularly hard to do in the aftermath of a trauma. For the trauma survivor, emotions are often coagulated, foreign, and unidentifiable. Much of the work then gets focused on creating a language to identify emotions. Much like children with the “smiley chart,” here too, each emotion and behavioral correlate needs to be spelled out. Just in the labeling of emotions—“you are feeling worthless, I know,” or “you are angry, this is so natural,” or “you feel your future is bleak”— helps in relieving the pressure of these scary emotions within the trauma victims. So it was through the creation of a common language that the participants began to give themselves the space to exist—emotional melt-downs and all.

Many of the participants said that they simply never went to the beach anymore. They missed it, yes, but their fear of even the possibility of another Tsunami was just too overwhelming. As much of the work in trauma is on desensitization and integration, I thought to myself, “Well, if they don’t go to the beach, I have to bring the beach to them.” So, on the last day, I went to the beach and hauled buckets of sand to the workshop. I then asked participants to take the sand in their hands, and I conducted a visual imagery exercise with them. They were asked to close their eyes and imagine their childhood again, a childhood where they were friends with the sand, the ocean. Because the imagery of trauma as an “ice-like” experience was so consonant with many of their stories, I asked them to imagine “golden” and “warm” thoughts around their feelings. Then participants were asked to write letters to the ocean, and it was here that the group came full-circle. They wrote about their feelings of betrayal and confusion. How they felt like they had lost one of their biggest allies, as most of them had spent their free time on the beaches. Many felt like their children had been robbed of the opportunity to live without fear, and this angered them. Yet, towards the end of

most letters, they wrote of their deep love and appreciation for the ocean. Their forgiveness towards it. And for some, their acceptance.

In this space of openness and creativity, we also explored our role as “helpers.” Many of the participants had never counseled before, so the basics of counseling were also talked about: how does one empathize, how does one be in-tune, how does one offer brief counseling? Many of these “helpers” were feeling overburdened by their feelings of inadequacy in the counseling field. They were running out of solutions to offer. It was a great relief to them to hear that they didn’t in fact have to offer any solutions. Yet, for many this was a cause of great resistance. They could not wrap their heads around the concept of “simply being with another.” Only after four days of experiential work and “being” with the others in a very open manner were they able to glimpse what it meant to enter into another’s space and join. For many, this was the first time that they had ever allowed themselves to enter into their own inner space.

Participants struggled greatly with a dilemma researchers in this country grapple with—to repress or to express. In their own sophisticated manner, the group came up against this dilemma themselves. I asked that they hold off on the question until the very last day of the workshop. I never presented what my opinion was, because I can honestly say that I do not have a fixed one. And then, when I asked them on the last day what they thought of their initial dilemma of repression versus expression, one of them wisely summed up the group’s consensus: “I guess repression helped right at the beginning, because we just had to survive. We had no electricity, no water, for weeks, we just had to survive. But now, I needed to talk about my feelings. I needed to get it all off my chest. It was driving me crazy.”

Much of the work was also about shaking people’s level of complacency, or perhaps fear. Much of our time was spent focusing on our own fears of confronting another’s pain, especially traumatic pain. Many of the doctors and nurses there felt burned-out and unable to give of themselves anymore. Many of the teachers there had come from affected areas and could not bear to go back. Fear had kicked in old defenses—perhaps rightfully so—and they were extremely resistant to opening themselves to vulnerability again. In fact, many of them had not even gone to the relief camps, not even once—so great was their resistance, so desperate their need to shield themselves from pain. So while honoring where they were was important, so was reinforcing their courage and inspiration to serve. Somehow, we needed to get to their core, beneath the logic or illogic of their defenses. I didn’t do this directly—that would have seemed too patronizing. Instead, I had the group enact out their resistances. As one example, I divided the group into two. One group played out all the fears and resistances. They were asked to amplify these defenses. The other group had to motivate and inspire them. I made sure to put the more resistant folk in the group that was supposed to motivate the other group. Once the “motivators” saw how difficult it was to “motivate,” and how frustrating it was to come up against well-formed defenses, they began to have insight into their own rigidity and unwillingness to confront their fears. One of my more resistant participants said to me, “They were so difficult to convince. I hope I am not like that.” My stance therefore was to refrain from being “the educator” or “the inspirer”—sure, I was a facilitator, and I was extremely active and directive in this role—but I really wanted the answers to come from the group members themselves. They were to together negotiate strategies and solutions, of course within the framework I provided. But that framework was loose—I simply provided the creative circle within which avenues for expression were paved. I still remember how one teacher said to me at the end of the workshop, “You know, I have always wanted to go and play volleyball with the children in the relief camps, but I have never gone. Now this has given me the courage to go. I am going to go every Sunday and play with them.” A nurse, while reading out her “personal commitment statement” (which each participant was asked to create), said, “I have avoided talking about this with my children. I am scared to. Now, after this workshop, I can go back and really help them understand what happened.”

Many feelings were stirred within me in the course of my time there—some included the usual “am I doing enough, will I ever do enough?” feelings, and some were less familiar, such as my countertransference feelings of harboring extreme expectations of my workshop participants. I found myself to be inordinately invested in *their* level of commitment to the process. If I was committed to this work, having traveled the seven seas, then by the same right, so should they. Right? It was only when I became aware of my zealous attachment to this rather ridiculous expectation that I let it go...stubbornly. I had to accept that each person would walk away with his or her own level of inspiration and commitment to this process, sparked by the unique events in his or her own life. I couldn’t expect anything more of them besides their attention at my workshop, if even. Yet, this expectation was hard to let go. It still is. But none of my feelings were as dramatic as the ones that were evoked when I would visit the relief camps. The quotes presented at the beginning of this paper were from some of the people I met there. Here, I would see the true impact of the Tsunami. Folks sitting on tarps, with one or two boxes of belongings, sometimes none, sitting in the scorching heat for months with no one to talk to, no one to offer hope, and, most of all, no one to simply listen. Their eyes would light up when I would visit, yet, unselfishly, they never burdened me with their expectations. No, I made sure I did that for myself.

Today, my own life has subtly shifted. I am blessed to have a larger framework for events than I did before. Where before narrow concerns of my limited existence were all-consuming, now they are processed against the backdrop of all that I have recently witnessed. And the ravages of the Tsunami, while devastating to glimpse into, have given me resolve and a renewed commitment to the work that most of us in the field of psychology are passionate about. It is in moments like these that I am so grateful to do this work—work that is excruciatingly demanding, yet gloriously fulfilling.