

Dialogus

"A Free E-mail Newsletter – Furthering the Dialogue to Better Serve Survivors of Torture"

Volume 4, Number 1, March 2001

Dialogus provides a forum for members of the torture treatment centers in the U.S. who serve survivors of torture to participate in a dialogue about innovative approaches in their work with survivors as well as share resource information, news, and solutions to challenges we face. We hope that you will enjoy being part of this forum and community. However, if you wish to unsubscribe to Dialogus in the body of the text, just type: Unsubscribe (your e-mail address).

This edition and all earlier editions of Dialogus will be archived on PTV's website at: <http://www.ProgramForTortureVictims.org/Dialogus/>.

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Editorial:

Dialogus as an Avenue for Informal Sharing of Experiences

Dialogus was launched back in August of 2000 with the intention of creating a vehicle for an on-going dialogue amongst interested staff of torture treatment centers in the U.S. We wanted to encourage people to write about their experiences, their observations, and their quandaries while working with survivors. Dialogus is now in its fourth volume. We would like to take this opportunity to clarify that submissions need not be lengthy or formal articles, such as those that might be submitted to journals. We are all very busy in our work, and may not have time to write such pieces. Rather, our intention is to encourage people to share their experiences, for example: "My client fell in love with me, what should I do?" or "The thin line between friendly rapport and friendship with clients;" or "I went to the court four times on one case. I'm frustrated. How can I help my client if I am even more upset than him?" Sharing these types of challenges and questions can stimulate valuable exchanges that can enlighten our work.

Article:

“A New Center Emerges!”

(Editor’s note: Dialogus does not take responsibility for the accuracy of the material that follows. However, we have verified that the training did occur as stated, and the people mentioned did participate as described. We thought it wise to identify the people whose names follow in case further substantiation proves necessary. “Melinda” is Melinda Czia, Director of Training at the Center for Victims of Torture, Minneapolis, MN. “Melissa” is Melissa Griffith from the Center for Multicultural Human Services, Falls Church, VA. “Karen” is Karen Hanscom from the Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma, Baltimore,

MD. “Alex” is Aleksandar Ljubicic from Safe Horizon/Solace, Jackson Heights, NY. “Rosa” is Rosa Garcia-Peltoniemi, the Clinical Director of CVT, Minneapolis, MN. “Andrea” is Andrea Northwood, a psychotherapist at that same Center. The author in question is of dubious reliability, his writing excessive, at times even inflammatory, and he pleaded to remain anonymous. We reluctantly acceded to his request, when he wailed, “But they mustn’t know who wrote this! Their secrets will be exposed, and I’ll really catch it.” In spite of his ranting, and in the interest of following accepted publishing practice that encourage a free expression of opinion, we present the “article” as e-mailed to us. Dialogus and its staff request that it be held harmless from any legal claims.)

It all started when we floated backwards down the Mississippi River. And we were surrounded by alligators, and had to fend them off with our oars, shoes and whatever else was handy. Well, everything except arms and legs.

The day had started very innocently while we were attending a CVT training in Minneapolis. The workshops were quite intense, and nervous energy aflow. Melinda mentioned a cool, fun float down the River. Hey, we were ready! Melissa, Karen, and I in one boat, and other courageous companions in five other craft. We all leaped, so to speak, at the chance. As you will see, the urge to leap mounted over time during our “fun” float.

I want you to know that the Conference organizers were smarter than we had thought. The topics had dealt with a variety of ways to improve our therapeutic practice with torture survivors: Theoretical insights, bodywork, and strategies to apply self-care and avoid vicarious traumatization. Well, the planners knew exactly what they had in mind when they advertised the canoe trip. Such clever CVT strategy!

You must understand. We were not to float down just any river. This was the Mighty Mississippi! The bland and innocuous offer proved to be an ordeal through which those of us, oblivious to the implications of said expedition, had to pass in order to enter the work.

Danger arises from all sides. As you know, if you float backwards, you cannot tell what is coming up—a singularly effective way to keep us from seeing the alligators until the last minute when they surfaced with mouth gaping, teeth glistening, and eyes bulging. And then you must apply all that you have learned in the

workshops. Remember, this boat is a safe and secure environment! Keep in mind, that when it starts sinking, do lots of bodywork as you bail as quickly as you can! And think about your family, and friends as sheer terror engulfs you as a means to avoid secondary traumatization!

Even when you are lucky enough to float forward, you find yourself careening toward the opposite shore. Those are the times you are ready to leap. The safe harbor of the boat refuses to respond to direction. The more you scream, “Go straight, boat!” the more defiantly the ship hurdles toward the huge rocks off shore. Even the piranha just below the surface promise more chance of survival than the whirlpools and rocks ahead in the River. So it seems safer to go with the flow—backwards is just fine. Simply thrust out those oars, throw those sandals, whatever it takes to keep the sharks at bay! And soon one comes to accept the trauma; to enter an alternate reality; dissociation suddenly makes sense. Oh, those devious CVT people! Designing as well just the experience to model some of the terrors our clients go through.

I am still not sure how we survived. I can only thank the bravery of my companions for the fact I live to share this harrowing tale with you. And Alex’s strength. Alex, he of body strong, and hearty smile—Alex who was our Solace as he grabbed our careening boat, fought off the terrible and huge octopi, and grounded our boat in a safe harbor. And I proudly stepped off the keel of the boat—proven, determined, now fashioned by the trauma of the trip—and promptly fell back into the River! Again, mighty Alex fought off the beasts, righted us on our feet, and spoke the memorable words: “Wasn’t that fun?”

Yes! He was right! This was our rite of passage. Our true entry into the brother-sisterhood of the Coalition! Oh, sweet River; clever and ingenious CVT staff; honorable and brave sisters and brothers who shared that trip! And smart fellow participants shrewd enough to avoid the CVT blandishments. I salute you all!

A ceremony of passage completed and crowned our harrowing trek—the Solemn Swearing upon the Oar. Ingenious Rosa, and crafty Andrea: You fashioned such a labyrinth of subtleties! That final time we gathered in the Conference room, and took measure of each other’s bruises, contusions and fractures. But we had survived, and in surviving were emboldened to pledge upon the Sacred Oar our commitment to the work, honor toward each other, and respect for the River. Having been tested by the wild waters, we now were prepared to join the ranks of trusted companions, revered consultants, respected therapists. We had

mastered the River! Only now could the work of our new Center begin. Alligators would surround us. Sharks would threaten the venture. Octopi would try to squeeze our every effort. Piranha would school against us. But ever in front of our eyes we were to envision the Mighty Mississippi: The bravery of our companions; the strength of Awesome Alex; the Solemn Spectacle of the Oar; the astuteness of the training team. Yes, their courage, might and guile have served us well!

It is in retrospect that the full measure and meaning of the ordeal reveal itself. For the newly hewn bark of our Center is underway and welcoming to all comers! And already I'm floating backwards and crying out, "Go straight, boat!" as we try to figure out how to complete the hiring process, manage the need, and engage our clients. I really did get what you meant, didn't I? We've got Melissa and Karen at hand if we need help. And Awesome Alex is there to catch us if the cascading waters are about to overwhelm us. And if all else fails, the CVT staff is there to clamber into the truck, careen down the road, and rescue us before we disappear over the falls. I did get it right, didn't I?

Article:

"An Ideal Victim: Idealizing Trauma Victims Causes Traumatic Stress in Human Rights Workers"

by David P. Eisenman, M.D., Sharone Bergner, Ph.D., & Ilene Cohen, Ph.D.

**This article is an excerpt from a longer version by the authors, and was shortened by permission of the first author. **

Contemporary writers on secondary traumatic stress (STS) focus on the imbalance between the survivors' compelling needs and traumatic story on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the workers' ultimately limited resources for help and capacity to absorb the story. Or, STS develops from the sense of helplessness, powerlessness, and failure individuals may experience when faced with overwhelming senseless suffering. Still another explanation is that trauma induces a disruption of one's sense of logic, reason, and predictability of experiences—our sense of self that is reliant on explanation and reason as organizing principles. However, these explanations ignore the additional, pernicious, contributing factor to the development of STS—namely, the tendency to idealize the torture

survivor. It is our contention that the complex and subtle dynamic of idealization of the victim contributes to STS.

A case scenario illustrates how a narrative that is created with a victim who is idealized by the worker promotes the development of STS. A lawyer came to one of us and told us about her work with her client, Rosa, a woman in her early 50's, who had been a victim of torture, including genital mutilation. The lawyer was a woman in her early 30's who had always gravitated towards human rights and especially the plight of abused women. She recalled, "Rosa reminded me of my maternal aunt. There was something sweet, warm, and reserved, and her story was so awful." The lawyer's depiction of her client's tale of mutilation painted a vivid, horrifying picture. Rosa described being tortured for her affiliation with an opposition party in a Middle Eastern country. She said that she was "cut" by a local "barber", while being held down by three men in a prison cell. As Rosa spoke in the lawyer's office, tears came streaming down her face. "They just held me down and cut," she told her lawyer, leaving the latter with a visceral understanding of the raw, unprocessed pain, betrayal, and humiliation her client had suffered. Rosa told the lawyer that she had been emotionally numb for years, backing away from potential intimacy, in order to shove memories of her trauma far out of her mind.

The lawyer described the interview with Rosa in the same palpable, vivid detail she attributed to her client. Then she said: I stayed at my desk mulling it over, after Rosa left, and was very late to meet my husband. Noting my distress, he asked what had happened. But I said I didn't want to think about it and, willing myself to disengage from Rosa, I forgot about her for the rest of the evening. Later that night, in bed, I found myself shrinking back from my husband's touch, jerking myself away.

At my next meeting with Rosa, when she cried, I was very moved again, and it was difficult for me to end our meeting, even though I had to be in court the next day, and had a lot to prepare. Being a woman, I felt I was on an important mission, with Rosa as my companion or even, in some spiritual or ethical way, my guide. I felt fortunate to be working with Rosa. After all, she had been a political activist, and my involvement with her and with other asylum seekers was my own way of being politically active. When Rosa cried and said she felt weak and pathetic for crying, I pointed out that in fact it was her strength that got her into trouble in her country. I saw Rosa as a morally righteous activist, a courageous, selfless, and committed woman. I hoped she could now derive strength from seeing herself this way too, so I asked her to tell me in detail about

her political work before the torture. That session she spoke with conviction and knowledge.

When, in our next meeting, Rosa referred to the moral corruption of a neighbor who is--she whispered--living with a black man, I gasped. I felt enormously disappointed in her, let down, angry. After our meeting I put off writing my notes. I felt betrayed.

In order to understand the path the lawyer traveled from a position of professional witness, to a stance of aloneness and disengagement from her husband, and finally to feelings of anger and violation by her client, consider the nature of a coming together of survivor and interviewer. Survivors of torture are survivors of trauma that is deliberately inflicted by fellow human beings. When victims of such “man-made trauma” (Laub & Auerhahn, 1993) begin to tell their story to a benign other, they bring with them the experience of having been touched by intentional malevolence. The narrative they struggle to tell involves what Laub and Auerhahn (1993), writing of the Holocaust, have termed “failed empathy.” That is, in their confrontation with brutality, these survivors encountered fellow human beings who did not treat them with the kind of basic, empathic, responsiveness people grow to expect, and to need, from others. Such survivors bring to the encounter with a benign interviewer hope, purpose, and a sense of having been failed by others.

What the interviewer brings to the relationship can, for the purpose of clarity, be split into two parts, which are, in reality, inseparably intertwined: personal history and professional role. We take for granted the notion that the interviewer’s particular, personal, past may influence her reasons for choosing the line of work in which she is a witness. The interviewer was once a child, who, unknowingly, took into herself the legacies of her family and her community. She may have grown up a witness or victim to suffering she felt powerless to alleviate. Now, motivations and feelings that may be unconscious to her fuel the interviewer’s professional role. She may unconsciously identify with the victim or associate him with someone personally significant to her. Meanwhile, the interviewer’s professional role defines her as a benign, interested other whose task it is to be responsive to the survivor’s tale, and, sometimes implicitly, to the larger political context in which this tale is spun. Because it is the interviewer’s responsibility, her job, to receive the survivor’s story respectfully, she represents the very kind of empathic other whom the survivor sought to--but failed to--elicit in her dealings with the torturer. In the interaction that unfolds between the interviewer and the survivor, then, there is an implicit, or sometimes explicit, task-oriented contract, which states that the interviewer will recognize and name the malevolence that fueled the survivor’s man-made trauma. To facilitate the

implementation of this humane and ethical contract, the interviewer attests to the fact that the survivor has been touched by evil.

To name the perpetrators' actions as evil is to take a moral stance. But it is a stance that also has psychological ramifications for the survivor-interviewer pair and for the interviewer herself. Given the extreme nature of so many survivors' experiences, the survivor-interviewer pair that seeks to establish the level of trust required for a working relationship is often called upon to declare that the evil that has been recognized and named is located outside of the survivor-interviewer pair in a world the two of them, together, can denounce. Against the backdrop of such a pact, which is felt to be representative of a moral good, it is often difficult for the interviewer to recognize the presence of some other than purely good qualities or feelings that emanate from within the survivor-interviewer pair. After all, upholding an alliance in the face of what is thought of as pure evil is the interviewer's job, and it is natural to want to counteract the presence of pure evil with proof of the presence of the opposite, pure good.

What we are suggesting is that it is difficult for the interviewer to avoid constructing a stance in which she idealizes the survivor. Such an idealization, which is a byproduct of forming an alliance against evil and failed empathy, as well as a function of the interviewer's personal history, ultimately leaves the interviewer at emotional risk. How can she allow herself to feel anger at the survivor for something the survivor has said or done? How can she feel critical of or impatient with the survivor when the survivor behaves immorally, manipulatively, or voraciously—and ungratefully—needy? An interviewer who idealizes the survivor and therefore does not give voice to her own emotional experiences, which may be conflictual and are bound to be complex, is depriving herself of necessary solace.

Not naming her own difficult reactions, she is liable to come to feel detached and alone, since she herself now feels that the breadth and nuance of her experience is hers to bear, alone. She herself cannot entirely comprehend her reactions, some of which give rise to a vague sense of guilt. Suddenly, she feels unsure of the possibility of true communication. She withdraws and, like the victim, expects a certain failure of empathy. She herself now needs help.

To summarize, the idealization of torture victims leads to the collapse of the space necessary for self-reflection and self-care on the part of the worker. Elevation of the survivor's needs and feelings leaves insufficient room for the interviewer to recognize and to think about the complex reactions and feelings sparked through

the work. As a result, selective features of the survivor's experience are focused upon and emphasized, while other features, which contribute to the interviewer's less visible feelings and reactions, are excluded. When such a situation develops neither the survivor's nor the interviewer's experience is fully acknowledged.

Initially, simple steps will help us confront our idealizations. First, we can recognize that we pursue our work--as in any field--with an admixture of motivations.

While we are accustomed to viewing human rights work as fueled by altruism, it is important to recognize the fuller range of motives and reasons that move us to act in this arena: intellectual interest, a personal history underlying the need to rescue others, ambition, even voyeurism and, for some, a desire for adventure.

By the same token, we are accustomed to citing sympathy, compassion, and a sense of dedication as our prevalent feelings around torture victims. So in the second step, we must recognize the fuller range of motivations and behaviors of victims and our consequent experiences of working with them. They may embellish stories to support asylum claims. Others may antagonize their service providers by demanding special appointments, assistance, and cancellation of fees when payment is possible. At its most extreme, some workers may suspect or discover that the victims themselves were torturers in the past.

Even victims can be arrogant, ungrateful, demanding, exploitative, entitled, and manipulative. It is time to admit that we can also feel anger, resentment,