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Coming to the United States from Bosnia, one of the most difficult things is the transition from animal to human. —Cohen (1995, p.32)

THE 20th century has been distinguished by warfare and political violence on a scale that is simply unprecedented in human history. In her recent volume Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness (1993), Carolyn Forche observes that “monstrous acts have come to seem almost normal. It becomes easier to forget than to remember, and this forgetfulness becomes our defense against remembering—a rejection of unnecessary sentimentality” (p. 32). Weine and colleagues’ paper brings to our attention the existence of what by any standards can only be considered extraordinary cruelty and violence as structural elements of a state campaign of genocide. Human response to systematic campaigns of domestic violence (on the state or family level) typically involves profound disbelief and bewilderment: How could this be happening? How could the other, who has been our relative, neighbor or trusted public official be “capable” of such acts? What motivates a person or groups of persons to so viciously turn on former friends and family? Is this what evil is? How can we engage an effective fight against evil when mere location of evil so often remains elusive?

Variations in human response to widespread political violence raise a host of other vexing questions: How can it be that events and conditions of political violence are experienced and characterized by some individuals as “extreme” or “extraordinary,” on the one hand, and as “mundane” or even “normal” by others, on the other? Besides variations in human recognition of the nature and severity of the problem, it is also intriguing that conditions of extremity apparently do not invariably evoke psychopathological responses. What we have seen instead are truly remarkable instances of human resilience and irrepressibility. How is it possible for persons not only to survive extraordinary and sustained exposure to human horror but also to demonstrate phenomenal strength, courage, and dignity in its wake?

One thing seems clear. Time-honored constructs in social science and psychiatry such as “adjustment” or “adaptation” do not adequately plumb the depth and complexity of human response to conditions of extremity. As Weine and colleagues have demonstrated, it is important to distinguish between short-term and long-term processes of response among refugees and that may be usefully accomplished by using notions of adjustment and adaptation, respectively. But psychiatry and social science have been slow to take up the project of analyzing...
the full force of human response to genocide and warfare. It may turn out that concepts and paradigms developed for more ordinary human situations pale when applied to a global landscape of violence where some 19 million refugees now flee their countries annually.

Certainly the impress on self and memory in the wake of traumatic experience has long been central to psychiatric science. Janet and Freud have left rich legacies of thought on the intricacies of emotional and cognitive features of remembering and forgetting. But these formulations do not address the larger social and collective dimensions of trauma. As this paper on Bosnian refugees makes clear, the therapeutic and adaptive effects of forgetting may not necessarily be considered psychopathological. In the context of a family's biographical narrative of widespread political violence, the therapeutic effects of what families remember and what families forget remain unknown. As observed among other refugee families, the conflict for this Bosnian family between "remembering" and "forgetting" is central. Traumatic memory of political violence in relation to "improvement" or "deterioration" over time will constitute an important area for future study.

There may be gender and generational differences in these memory processes. On the surface, males and children appear to adopt strategies that eschew directly thinking about the past whereas women seem less interested in active strategies to forget. Whether in daily thoughts or nightly dreams of beloved others, women report active cognitive and emotional involvement with their natal homelands and with relatives left behind (Jenkins 1996a, 1996b). Independent of gender differences that may be operative here, the perceived need to sever one's biographical trajectory and dissociate "past" from "present" would surely seem to threaten the coherent, integrated narrative of being in the world with respect to social world and natal landscape.

Disbelief in the possibility of campaigns of extreme violence contribute to the conditions of possibility for their long-term sustenance. This is what (among other factors) allows for the denial of the existence of the Holocaust and the now-numerous other global projects of mass genocide such as have occurred in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Guatemala. The narrative of the 16-year-old boy in this case study eloquently highlights what happens when the ground shifts and there are betrayals from former teachers, neighbors, and friends. When the violence fully engulfs his family, the terror is at once acute and stupefying:

"We were taken away to a camp on a vehicle. There we saw so many corpses in the fields. The first dead person I saw was covered with flies. The stench was terrible. My mother, sister, and I had to spend the night hiding in a field. I slept in a ditch next to many dead bodies. I am sure that some of them were bodies of people I knew. I could not sleep. Just lie there and ask how it could be happening."

While survivors mutter in bewilderment that they simply cannot believe such acts are actually happening, perpetrators prepare for the next round. And, as any survivor of horrific human acts knows well, the disbelief of the Other is particularly acute. Survivors are often doubted and mistrusted: What can be their motive to burden others with such ugliness? Often, disbelief of the Other is accompanied by the certain conviction that, even if such "abnormal" acts had actually occurred, the personal scarring and damage that would accompany such experiences renders the "survivor" a "hapless victim" who can invariably be expected to demonstrate severe psychopathology. Accurately sensing the social and clinical risk of being on the receiving end of such pathologizing indictments, it is little wonder that persons who do survive may choose to keep their personal horrors to themselves. The shame and the loneliness of such strategic decisions is well documented in the psychiatric literature on trauma (Aberbach 1989; Westermeyer 1989). Talk show exhibitionism aside, survivors of trauma typically do not wear their pain on their sleeves.
A critical area for further investigations is the extraordinary resilience refugees show. From a North American point of view, I have personally been impressed with the extraordinary courage and strength of Central American refugees fleeing political violence. In the face of massive carnage and destruction, many of these refugees not only manage to escape and survive their war-torn countries but even appear to thrive. The somewhat enigmatic process appears to involve more than merely "survival of the fittest." Processes of "miraculous" recovery come to mind, but while miracles may be possibilities in a Latin American cultural repertoire the same can hardly be said in Euro-American psychiatry. What is involved, I suspect, is what we in psychiatric research circles appear to know or (at least) talk little about, that with which filmmakers and novelists seem quite taken: the indomitable of human bodies, minds, and spirits.

This is not to deny the painful lasting effects of trauma that so many millions of persons suffer. Survivors of torture, for example, are not likely to experience healing in the absence of sophisticated and long-term therapies developed specifically for that purpose. Sadly, the ever-increasing tide of refugees has required an ever-increasing number of treatment centers worldwide to counter the devastating effects of torture. The overall point I wish to make is in accord with that made by Weine and colleagues: Profound resilience is as much at issue as is severe psychopathology, and we must work to close the gap in our relative understandings of each. As summarized by Weine and colleagues, there is a serious discrepancy between clinical reports by psychoanalytically oriented authors who invariably found psychopathology in the children of survivors. Weine et al. caution: "We must allow for the possibility of survivors (including children of survivors) becoming ever more resilient and (even) creative." Given the state of our current knowledge on the subject, perhaps for the moment we must also allow for the possibility of miracles for which at present we have little elaboration or explanation.

Introduced but not elaborated in the Weine et al. paper is the complicity and silence of the world community that allowed the Bosnian tragedy to escalate so dramatically prior to intervention. As reported by Winter (1993) for the U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey:

In 1992, the first full year after the "Soviet empire collapsed like a dynamited old skyscraper," the European Community, confronted by genocide in Bosnia, showed itself to be morally spineless. . . . Unfortunately, in the case of Bosnia . . . humanitarian responses became an excuse for not addressing root causes. Key governments—Britain and U.S.—for example, in Bosnia let humanitarian efforts become a stumbling block to stronger, preventive measures. And many governments routinely used humanitarian efforts as a smoke screen, a front to their own concerned citizens that they were adequately responding to a human rights outrage. (p. 2)

It is incumbent on the mental health community not only to continue to cross-culturally document and treat but also to speak out against the consequences of ethnic violence and genocide. This would be a minimal contribution to preventive mental health care so that families, such as in the Bosnian case outlined here, may some day not need specialty mental health teams to help them endure being wrenched from natal homeland and history.

REFERENCES

RESILIENCE AND REMEMBERING AMONG BOSNIAN REFUGEES


