

# **Compassionate Witnessing and the Transformation of Societal Violence: How Individuals Can Make a Difference<sup>1</sup>**

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In the Kenyan village of Enosaen, comprised mostly of mud huts, it is the expectation that Maasai warriors will respond effectively to any emergency. In May, 2002 villagers heard that this had not been the case for Willson Kimeli Naiyomah, a warrior who was in New York City at the time of the attack on the World Trade Center. A pre-med student at Stanford University, he had been in New York to visit Kenya's U.N. ambassador.

Kimeli had been in an unusual position for him: aware that people desperately needed help, but unsure how to be helpful. He said, "Being in New York, I could not respond and I felt a little uneasy having done nothing, so I carried this pain in my heart and I wanted to do something" (*The Nation*, 2002).

He knew he needed to talk to his people. Many of the villagers had not heard about the attacks, but when they learned about them from Kimeli, and he explained to them that buildings could be so tall that people could jump to their deaths from them, they were deeply saddened and troubled. "They decided to give the gift of solace," Kimeli explained: 14 head of cattle, the Maasai's most prized possession and precious gift (Rosenberg, 2002).

Tribal elders presented the cows to the acting American ambassador at a formal ceremony attended by hundreds of Maasai holding banners, some of which read, "To the people of America, we give these cows to help you" (Delio, 2002). And the gift *did* help.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *COMMON SHOCK* by Kaethe Weingarten. Printed by arrangement with Dutton, a member of Penguin Group (USA). Copyright (c) Kaethe Weingarten, 2003.

It initiated a remarkable process of connection, dissolving both physical and cultural distance. While their daily lives may be far different from Americans, their feeling for the tragedy clearly was not. Their symbolic and literal act was understood all over the world as signifying a deeply felt sense of common humanity. Their acknowledgment of American suffering and sorrow evoked a reciprocal appreciation, drawing disparate peoples into a more intimate awareness of each other.

I call the feelings and actions that Kimeli and the Maasai people expressed intentional, compassionate witnessing. It is founded on an ability to recognize and express a common bond with another, perhaps the ability we most urgently need in this age of globalization. Crucially, this is not the same as feeling similar to or identified with the other. Quite the opposite. As Michael Ignatieff states it: “what defines the very identity we share as a species, is the fact that we are differentiated by race, religion, ethnicity, and individual difference.... We understand humanity, our common flesh and blood, as valuable to the degree that it allows us to elaborate the dignity and honor that we give to our differences... (Ignatieff, 2001, p.25). Compassionate witnessing helps us recognize our shared humanity, restore our sense of common humanity when it falters, and block our dehumanizing others.

### “Otherness”

Whether in relation to people we will never meet, or strangers we are about to meet, or those who become “strange” through the wear and tear of everyday life, recognizing our common humanity confronts us all. It is at the heart of compassionate

witnessing and, simply, it is a biological, psychological, interpersonal and societal imperative if we are to survive as a planet.

When we experience people as wholly different from us, other, it is possible to feel a wide range of negative emotions toward them, such as disgust, revulsion, contempt, rage, hatred, or terror. These feelings not only contribute to our experiencing them as other, but justify categorizing them as other. The category then justifies continued expression of these feelings. Over time, the person becomes dehumanized. Dehumanization, the process by which people are viewed as less than human, a process that individuals, groups and nations all do, obstructs caring about the other.

Examples of dehumanizing abound. Read the newspaper and one can find instances of dehumanization in the ways estranged family members speak about each other, members of one community talk about a rival community, and citizens of one nation speak about people from “enemy” nations. The dynamics that turn a ten year-old’s best friend into her antagonist have elements in common with the process that pits one neighborhood against another. The parent at his son’s hockey game who demeans the other teams’ players is engaging in speech acts that are similar to those of hostile governments’.

In Erich Marie Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the narrator, 20 year-old Paul, a German soldier during World War I, talks to a soldier he has stabbed and held in his arms until his death. His speaking maps the process of dehumanization and the return through rehumanization (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002).

Comrade, I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do it, if you would be sensible too. But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth an appropriate response.

It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. (Remarque, 1982, p. 223).

Dehumanization depends on the felt experience of distance, which is subject to sudden reversals. A young Israeli who fought in the Lebanon war in 1982 told of an encounter when he and his comrades were shooting PLO fighters in a refugee camp. Two refugees came toward them carrying an object and shouting at the soldiers. Because the men were only 20 yards away, the Israelis could discern that the object they were holding was a crate of Pepsi Cola and their shouts were “invitations to have a drink! The [young Israeli] later reflected: ‘If they had been 200 yards away, we would have shot them and been glad to hit them.’ And he asked: ‘How far does a human being have to be before he becomes a target? How close must he be before we see he is human?’” (Landau, 1996, p.65).

### Passing Enmity To Successive Generations

These questions, framed in the metaphor of distance, beg the question of how a person or a people become “distant” to us. The fact that this happens is incontrovertible: some of the greatest works of literature record the creation and consequences of enmity throughout the world and recorded time. We also know that the enemies of our fathers and mothers can become ours. That is, hatreds in one generation seem to “pass” to succeeding generations.

In my book, *Common Shock: Witnessing Violence Every Day: How We Are harmed, How We Are Healed*, I explore biological, psychological, familial and societal mechanisms that can account for how enmity is passed along. In this essay, I want to focus on one societal mechanism, drawing on the work of noted scholar and psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan.

“*Chosen Trauma*”: Volkan and his colleagues have worked for decades to understand ethnic, religious and national conflicts. They believe that these kinds of disasters, which commonly produce enmity among people, can massively disrupt individual and group identity, transmitting trauma from one generation to the next. Volkan asserts that each person has a core identity that is comprised of both a personal identity and a large group identity. He likens the large group identity to a canvas tent. Commonly, the people in the group choose a leader who acts like the tent pole and keeps the tent erect. Under normal circumstances, one is not aware that one stands under the tent, but in the event of a threat to the tent, should the canvas start to shake, the individual is motivated to secure the stability of the tent. The individual is protected by and defends the tent with thousands or millions of other people who share the same large group identity.

Another aspect of the group’s identity is what Volkan calls “chosen trauma.”

Within virtually every large group there exists a shared mental representation of a traumatic past event during which the large group suffered loss and/or experienced helplessness, shame and humiliation in a conflict with another large group. The transgenerational transmission of such a shared traumatic event is linked to the past generation’s inability to mourn losses of people, land or prestige, and indicates the large group’s failure to reverse...humiliation inflicted by another large group, usually a neighbor, but in some cases, between ethnic or

religious groups within the same country. (Volkan, 2001, p.87).

When a large group is not under threat, the “chosen trauma” is commemorated with traditional rituals designed for this purpose. Under threat, the group experiences the “chosen trauma” as if the past were in the present and members of the group react to current events with an intensity of response that is fueled by the feelings associated with the “chosen trauma.”

In the Middle East, Palestinians and Israelis evoke events that occurred half a century ago as if decades had disappeared, and in the Balkans, Serbs, Croats and Kosovar Albanians speak as if centuries had collapsed into the present moment. Volkan’s work emphasizes the centrality of humiliation to the large group’s experience of trauma, noting that psychic energy builds up in succeeding generations to reverse ancestral humiliation. Volkan suggest that it is as if later generations are assigned the “task” to avenge the honor of their ancestors. When there is a current threat, the motivation and energy available to complete the task is immense.

Kosovo presents a recent example of the phenomenon of “chosen trauma.” Kosovo is a region in the Balkans about the size of Kentucky. I have worked in Kosovo twice, in September, 2000 and May, 2001, as part of a team helping Kosovar Albanian mental health professionals work with a traumatized population following a decade of oppressive rule by Serbians, a military assault by Serbia in 1999, and extensive NATO bombing<sup>2</sup>. One month before my first visit, an article appeared in the journal of the

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<sup>2</sup> I worked with the Kosovar Family Professional Educational Collaborative, a partnership among the University of Prishtina School of Medicine and the American Family Therapy Academy (AFTA); The Center for Genocide, Psychiatry, and Witnessing at the University of Illinois at Chicago; the University of

American Medical Association, *JAMA*, whose purpose was to establish the prevalence of psychiatric problems and to assess social functioning following the war among ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Among their findings, 89% of men and 90% of women reported having strong feelings of hatred towards Serbs; 51% of men and 43% of women reported strong feelings of revenge; and 44% of men and 33% of women stated that they would act on these feelings.(Cardozo, Vergara, Agani, & Gotway, 2000)

During my two visits, my team and I met people who told us stories primarily from the period of March through June 1999 when, following the NATO intervention, Serbian forces expelled 1.3 million Kosovar Albanians from their homes, most becoming refugees in Macedonia, others internally displaced within the province itself (Chomsky, 2000a and b; Knightley, 2002; Power, 2002). They had witnessed first-hand brutal, systematic ethnic cleansing, including the separation of men from their families; the murder of thousands of men and boys; and the destruction of homes, property, and personal documents.(Power, 2002) The Albanian Kosovars we met described these events in heart-breaking detail. Often the women's eyes darted wildly as if they could still see the scenes they were recalling. In family after family, children were at the women's sides, sensing, as we did, that the events of the previous year were somatically alive in their mothers' and aunts' bodies; the events were not receding into distant memory.

While there is certainly controversy about whether the genesis of the struggles in Kosovo can be laid to ancient enmities or whether it was "manufactured" to serve the interests of unprincipled politicians, effectively acting like gangsters (Hedges, 2002),

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many commentators do see the war in Kosovo within a larger historical narrative (Judah, 2000; Power, 2002; Volkan, 2001). This narrative goes back 600 years, when the Serbian kingdom lost power to the encroachments of the Ottoman Empire. One battle, the Battle of Kosovo, fought on the Field of Black Birds outside of Prishtina in Kosovo, on June 28, 1389, came to symbolize Serb defeat and decline. During this battle, Ottoman Turkish Muslims killed the Serbian leader, Prince Lazar. His body was mummified and buried near the site of battle. However, about seventy years later his body was removed to Serbia to keep it “safe.”

The Battle of Kosovo became the Serbs’ “chosen trauma.” Prince Lazar came to represent both the Serbs’ victim hood and also their glorious efforts to achieve independence in relation to Muslim oppressors (Volkan, 2001). Kosovo itself symbolized precious land that rightfully belonged to Serbs. In 1912, the Serbs won back Kosovo from the Turks. A Serbian soldier, standing on the Field of Black Birds, was quoted as saying: “We feel strong and proud, for we are the generation which will realize the centuries-old dream of the whole nation: that we with sword will regain the freedom that was lost with the sword” (Judah, 2000).

Seventy-five years later, the chosen trauma was activated again. In April 1987, Slobodan Milošović was attending a Communist party meeting in Kosovo and Serb demonstrators were loudly protesting their treatment by the majority Albanian Kosovars. Milošović was riveted to the demonstrators’ stories of victimization. He promised that the Serbs of Kosovo would never again suffer the experiences of a minority (Power, 2002; Volkan, 2001).

In 1989, to commemorate the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, the Serbs exhumed the remains of Prince Lazar. His coffin was placed on a wooden cart and sent to every village and town in Serbia, reactivating the multiple losses he symbolized and re-vivifying Serbian hatred of Muslims. Prince Lazar's ashes were brought to the Field of Black Birds where a large memorial had been erected. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1989, Milošović flew into the site by helicopter. To the large crowd gathered there he delivered his message: "Never again would Islam subjugate the Serbs" (Volkan, 2001).

At the same time, Milošović and his party removed autonomy from Kosovo and began systematic oppression of the Albanian Kosovars, then 90% of the population. Albanians were removed from jobs, Albanian schools were closed, and Albanian health care professionals were unable to practice in public institutions. Parallel education and health care systems were developed to meet the needs of the Albanian Kosovars. Throughout the decade of the nineties, the oppression by Serbs of the Albanian Kosovars had profoundly different meanings to each group. While the Albanian Kosovars experienced themselves as victims of the Serbs, the Serbs saw themselves as avenging their losses and reversing their humiliation at the hands of their Albanian, that is Muslim, perpetrators.

From this perspective, one can see how the dynamics between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians could be viewed as the contemporary manifestation of a group's "chosen trauma." Serbs perceived the Albanian Kosovars as "perpetrators," when most of the world saw them, and the Kosovar Albanians saw themselves, as "victims." Were the Serb soldiers fighting against the Kosovar Albanians acting on behalf of *their* ancestors, fulfilling a task that they had been assigned? Will Kosovar Albanian children be

“assigned” the task of avenging the honor of their parents and grandparents? What role do those inside and outside a region play in moderating the effects of historical events that are deeply traumatic to those who lived through and learn about them?

### Constructive Action: From Passive Witnessing to Effective Action

At the heart of many intractable conflicts – at the familial, community and societal levels – is just such a radical difference in point of view as displayed by Kosovar Albanians and Serbians, with each party to the conflict perceiving themselves as acting defensively from the victim position to correct injustices wreaked by a cruel perpetrator. Distortions in the perception of time create different temporal sequences for the two sides, such that what is seen as provocation by one side, is seen as retaliation by the other. To the witness on the outside of the conflict, it may look like the two parties are engaged in a victim-perpetrator oscillation, such that victimization justifies aggression leading to activities that create perpetrators out of former victims.

What impedes these oscillations and interrupts cycles of violence, and how can individuals play a part in doing so? How can individuals make a difference in shifting the legacies of chosen trauma? (Staub, 1989; Volkan, 1997). These are key questions of our time, for peacemaking requires interrupting these cycles. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the apparent enormity of many geo-political conflicts, whether between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs, Indians and Pakistanis, Israelis and Palestinians or the United States and its “enemies.” It is understandable that we may think we should let politicians and diplomats work at their levels to solve these ferociously intractable

problems. However, there is plenty of work for ordinary people to do, in our homes and in our communities, that can make a difference.

Our job as caring individuals is to acknowledge losses, to support mourning and grief, to humanize the enemy, and to witness individual and collective pain with as much heartfelt compassion as we can muster. In the immediate aftermath of societal traumas, this work is much more complex than it is decades after traumatic violence, but it is better to start, better to try than to not try.

*Mourning:* Many experts point to acknowledging and mourning losses as essential to the interruption of cycles of violence (Botcharova, 2001; Kogan, 2000; Volkan, 1997). Clearly, this is not easy to do, either for individuals or societies. In the aftermath of societal violence, people are left with intense emotions of fear and rage, hatred and humiliation. People must find ways of managing these charged emotional states at the same time as they tend to the tasks of immediate survival. Without support, both from people who have suffered the same losses and from those who have witnessed the losses from afar, it is common for people to suppress or deny the depth of the pain and the loss, as a short-term solution to the complexity of the realities they now face (Botcharova, 2001; Kliman & Llerena-Quinn, 2002; Sider, 2001). People who fail adequately to mourn their losses and to work through the pain of their suffering are more likely to repeat their past. This is as true for societies and nations as it is for individuals, who after all are the citizens of nation states.

Mimoza Shahini, M.D., is a child and adolescent psychiatrist who was trained in Kosovo after the war. She has worked to incorporate Western psychological ideas about grief into Kosovar Albanian culture, which values stoicism, especially in public.

Children are also protected from death, and this means that they are often excluded from traditional rituals of mourning.

In her work with traumatized children who had at least one family member who had died during the war, Dr. Shahini held group sessions in schools in which the children were able to express their grief openly. To prepare the way for these sessions, she talked with the children's parents and teachers, explaining why mourning together would be helpful to the children. To her surprise, one teacher even asked to participate in the group. Dr. Shahini wisely noted that she was trying to balance the children's emotional needs as well as the "needs of our culture for its stability"(Shahini, 2001).

By working with grief she is providing a path for another kind of cultural stability. Every parent and teacher who meets with Dr. Shahini is learning that there is something that they can do to help themselves and children; they can allow themselves and their family members to grieve. In the context of massive societal trauma, grief is hard to do, but crucial. Nor can grief be done as easily alone as it can be done with others. Sharing grief with others makes the pain more tolerable.

*Re-humanizing the Enemy:* Decades, even centuries, after massive societal violence, individuals can choose to adjust their thinking and action in relation to people their families have considered threatening or enemies in the past. I had a vivid personal experience of this several years ago when I was teaching in Pretoria, South Africa. During a workshop I was making a rather simple point: societal trauma leaves imprints on individuals in a myriad of ways. To illustrate, I used an example that was not in my notes: the story of my name.

As I understand it, my mother named me “Kaethe” after the German graphic artist Kaethe Kollwitz, whose work greatly moved her. (Kollwitz & Kollwitz, 1988) Kollwitz primarily depicted workers, and mothers and children. She combined her professional work with devotion to family, a life choice that was especially meaningful to my mother. Apparently, when my father came to the hospital and she told him that she had chosen “Kaethe” for my name, he asked her to re-consider this choice, telling her that he feared it would be unwise for a post-Holocaust Jewish child to have a German first name. Persuaded, my mother and he decided to call me “Kathy.” So, I had informed my South African audience, even a name can bear the imprint of macro-societal traumas. I looked down, searching my notes for the example I had intended to provide.

From the back of the room, a woman shouted at me: “But you are Kaethe.” I remember freezing. This woman’s father had been a leader in the South African Defense Forces during the Apartheid years. She had chosen a different path, working with dedication to improve the lives of all South Africans, and working to dismantle her own racism. Her comment stunned me, pointing out something that was obvious to her but hidden to me. I *had* tried to construct a life that was consistent with the values expressed in the life and work of this fine human being my mother so admired.

I realized that I had an opportunity to dismantle my own family legacy, one of anti-German sentiment, to “re-humanize the enemy” by using my own name as a bridge between two peoples, German and Jew. By re-claiming my originally given name – as inconvenient as that would be to family, friends, clients and colleagues who were used to calling me Kathy – I could take a small step in resisting the ways societal violence and its aftermath seep into our lives.

I have since developed a set of questions that I have used in workshop settings all over the world that takes people through a series of steps similar to the ones that got set in motion for me in South Africa. People work in small groups to talk with each other about their responses to each of the questions. However, I have also had people tell me that reading the questions on their own, and thinking through their responses, has had powerful effects. These are the questions:

1. What is your large group identity (choose a religious, ethnic or national group identity)?
2. What is your group's historical or "chosen" trauma?
3. How has the knowledge of the trauma passed to you?
4. How do you pass it to others? Exactly? With modifications? What aspects of it are you aware of? What ways might you pass it of which you are relatively unaware?
5. What effects are there of passing on the large group's chosen trauma for
  - You?
  - Your family?
  - Your community?
  - Your country?
6. What would you wish to do with regard to passing on the historical trauma?
7. Whose support and what kind of support would you need to enlist to accomplish your preferred relationship to the chosen trauma?

*Dialogue:* These questions help individuals consider actions that they may take to interrupt the unthinking ways that they pass on antagonistic impressions of another group. The questions stimulate self-reflection about something we often think very little about: the many opportunities we have to inflame or bridge differences by what we say and do. These questions assist in rehumanizing the other.

In many parts of the world organizations have taken up the work of promoting dialogue between groups of people who have had historical enmities as another method of rehumanizing the other. These dialogue processes, as fraught as they are, as hazardous

and miraculous, are also a means by which the passing down of trauma from one generation to the next can be interrupted. The fruits of these dialogues can radiate reconciliation out into families and communities devastated by societal traumas (Bar-On, 1989; Blair, 2001; Volkan, 1999).

In some areas, dialogue participants are members of groups who have both persecuted each other over centuries. In others, for instance, dialogues between the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and Nazi perpetrators, the victimization has been unidirectional. In some instances, violent oscillations form the larger background to contemporary struggles that have been genocidal by one side against another, as is the case with recent dialogues between Bosnian Serbs and Muslims (Green, 2000). Whatever the historical and political context, dialogue between individuals who are members of groups that have caused or endured horrific suffering is a fateful enterprise. No one emerges the same, not participants, not facilitators (Bar-On et al, 1998.)

The goal of such dialogue processes is sincerely to hear the other and, in doing so, to enter into some form of acknowledgment. Whether dialogue occurs between individuals who have recently survived catastrophic turmoil or takes place between descendents of those who did, people speak from bodies that are super charged, that is, with nervous systems whose activation is easily accelerated and hard to slow down. In these exquisitely sensitive states, people know that they each have the potential for “flying apart” or “coming together,” just as they bear responsibility for harming or healing others. It is momentous to confront within oneself whether one truly wants to reach out, touch and be touched, bridge or promote difference. The choice is ours.

*Witnessing Oneself as Victim, Witness or Perpetrator:* The ability to reflect on one's experience is a key capacity that fosters resilience (Fonagy & Target, 1997). It allows one to witness the self and to witness others. It allows one to be aware. Without this ability we are much more likely to repeat the past. If the past is replete with violence, violence will permeate our future. The capacity to witness the self can be compromised at any point in our lives, and also nurtured. To develop the capacity to witness the self, the infant and young child must be treated with kindness and respect by someone who recognizes that the child's needs are different from her own. Later, the capacity to witness the self is linked to having an appreciative listener, someone with whom one can share honestly. Finally, horrific events and experiences can obliterate the capacity to witness oneself, as one feels that what one has suffered is too awful to bear (Felman & Laub, 1992; Langer, 1991). ).

Some who have lost their capacity to witness themselves are fortunate to meet others who are dedicated to restoring the capacity to witness even to those who have endured unimaginable suffering. They do so by communicating their profound commitment to try to imagine what cannot literally be imagined and by acknowledging that what they suffer from imagining what the other has suffered in no way compares to the suffering itself (Hatley, 2000). The knowledge that some people are willing to provide compassionate witnessing reactivates the capacity to witness oneself.

Honing our ability to witness others is, therefore, something we can all do that actively affects the transformation of violence. Likewise, the ability to witness the self can have profound effects on others, be they intimate others or citizens whom one leads.

One evening in my friends' home in Pretoria, tired after a day of teaching, I was reading a book of commentaries on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. I was reading quickly and not carefully when suddenly I became electrified. I straightened up in the chair, my heart started racing, tears came to my eyes, and I placed my hand over my mouth. I was reading a "confession" from F.W. de Klerk, "spoken" at Nelson Mandela's inauguration in 1994. Reflecting on his role during the Apartheid era, witnessing his actions and those of his party, understanding that he had been a perpetrator of massive crimes against humanity, de Klerk makes explicit what he is asking forgiveness for – "the harm and pain our policies had caused...that we were fundamentally and completely wrong...I also ask forgiveness from the young people who died unnecessarily for an indefensible cause, and especially from their parents" (James & v.d. Vijver, 2001). I burst into tears at the exact moment my skepticism and yearning, disbelief and hope collided into the author's statement that the speech was his dream.

Such a witnessing of the self, had it happened, would have changed the course of the history of the world. Had deKlerk, a perpetrator, an "architect" of Apartheid, been capable of witnessing himself to the extent that acknowledgement and apology were forthcoming, it would have had massive repercussions on the lives of millions and millions of people. Acts like this take place every day, in living rooms, on sidewalks, between ordinary people, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, who confess to each other harms they have committed and endured, forgive and are forgiven. In this intimate scale of witnessing, no less than at the national level, disconnections that have torn relationships can heal.

The willingness to repair what has been rent in relationships is one of the most precious gifts we can give to others and ourselves (Weingarten, 1991; Weingarten, 1992). Hurt creates an opportunity to repair and make stronger what has been torn by harm. Failure to do so creates a second injury. The vitality of family life and the well being of family members depends on the ability of all members to re-establish connection after disconnections have occurred. The work of repairing relationships extends forward in time, affecting generations of the future. Private misery affects public life. (And the converse is so as well.) Family life and civic life are intimately connected. Healing work in families creates a more robust citizenry to participate in communal life.

#### Letting Successive Generations Be Compassionate Witnesses

All over the world, there are communal memories of violence, a phrase used by African-American psychoanalyst Maurice Apprey (Apprey, 1999). Often, the response to these memories is further violence. For those of us who work toward the end of violence, we think constantly of how to transform what Apprey calls “the toxic errand of extinction, humiliation, massacre, a legacy of ashes” passed on over generations to a “positive errand” (Apprey, 1999).

How can children honor their ancestors -- their parents, grandparents and beyond -- and not use violent means to do so? What positive errand is thinkable if you are a Bosnian Muslim son and hear the story of your mother’s rape in a Serbian camp? How does an African-American girl commit herself to a positive errand when she reads slave narratives and hears her own great, great grandparent’s stories?

What are the processes that transform legacies of violence in such a way that history is honored without repeating it? How do we link histories of violence to unrealized possibilities of peace in the past and bring to fruition in the present what was neglected – or couldn't be accomplished -- in the past? How do we help the wounded living release their younger kin to repair not avenge relationships?

To build peace, we must recognize that we all live with legacies of violence. It is up to us what we do about them. Our children and grandchildren have powerful wishes to honor their ancestors. This is wonderful. It is up to us though to create opportunities for children to honor their elders by actions that promote healing not revenge. If compassionate witnessing becomes a method by which the assigned “task” of previous generations is fulfilled, then the task will be completed without perpetuating violence.

When we do compassionate witnessing, we are compelled to remember what the other wants us to remember. We are immersed in memories of the past for the purpose of fulfilling the future of the past in the present (Ricoeur, 1996). This form of remembering does not “perpetuate hatred,” as Elie Wiesel informs us, but undermines it. Wiesel's logic is straightforward. If one is true to memory, one rejects anything that might distort it, which hatred invariably does (Wiesel, 1990). Thus memory, truth and compassionate witnessing serve the past, the present and the future.

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