

When Disaster Strikes in Time of War: Traditional Healing and Psychosocial Training Help Divided Communities Mourn Together

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ABSTRACT

In December 2004 a tsunami destroyed the whole coastal line, killing more than 10,000 people in the district of Ampara alone and left many injured and homeless. But even before 2004 the whole population had faced 20 years of civil war, and in 2006 this war started again. People suffer from the separation from loved ones due to death or disappearance through natural disaster, man-made disaster and destruction, or separation from displacement out of poverty. A systematic long-term training program for trauma counseling in Sri Lanka was started soon after the tsunami in the beginning of 2005. Located in the Ampara District, a Center for Psychosocial Care was created to address the special needs of children and youth. The program taught basic developmental psychology, special affects of traumatization on children, sequential traumatization, and forms of psychological interventions and psychotherapeutic approaches. Western concepts were discussed in respect to case stories from eastern Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan cultural practices and beliefs. An amalgamation of Western theoretical knowledge and Sri Lankan traditions and history created a new, culturally appropriate approach for working-through trauma and grieving. Mindful intervention by Westerners and recognition of social and political climates, allowed for our students to own the program and individuals to control their own healing processes. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: natural disaster, mourning, loss, disappearance, ritual, cultural sensitivity

BACKGROUND

The second Christmas holiday in 2004 began warm and sunny in Sri Lanka. It was a Sunday and a “Pooya Day,” a Buddhist holiday in anticipation of the full

moon. This particular Sunday was to become the worst ever experienced for many countries in the Indian Ocean region. A devastating tsunami hit the region, resulting in more than 200,000 deaths. In Sri Lanka alone, more than 30,000 people lost their lives and more than 100,000 homes were completely destroyed (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2005).

But we cannot view the natural disaster in isolation when we want to understand the psychological impact of terrible events on Sri Lankan society. When the tsunami struck, 20 years of civil war (from 1983) had already had a severe impact on the social fabric and on personal and communal well-being. With civil war came the violence of battle, terrorism and counter-terrorism. Displacement and the death of loved ones constituted two forms of loss that Sri Lankans experienced prior to, during, and after the tsunami. These losses were devastating, but they were at least clear. In addition, Sri Lankans experienced ambiguous loss, in which people disappeared without a body ever being found.

At the time of the tsunami, thousands of families had already been displaced to keep them out of the line of fire. Many of these families were displaced again by the tsunami. After post-tsunami resettlement, the island nation was hit again by civil war violence. As a result many of the same survivors were displaced again, losing their homes and possessions for a third or fourth time.

In addition to displacement, death and ambiguous loss through “disappearance,” was also a feature of the civil war. Some death in war is clear-cut: the result of bombing, terror attacks, capture by one of the factions, or death in battle. In disappearance, people leave home and simply never return. “Disappearance” happens in different ways. Some people are taken to custody without families being informed. Some are combatants “missing in action.” Some disappear on their way to refuge in another country without any opportunity for family members to be informed. In all of these instances relatives are left somewhere between hope and despair without a chance to mourn. This experience is characterized as ambiguous loss.

During the first few days after the tsunami, the problem of ambiguous loss again made its appearance. At first relief workers simply buried or cremated bodies (as is the custom) without providing any documentation or evidence for the families to keep. Loved ones left home in the morning and were not to be seen again.

In the case of the tsunami, it took some days for relief workers to become aware of the needs of relatives. Eventually they began to take photographs of the victims’ faces before mass funerals. Relatives could now identify and know where the missing person died and what happened to the remains. Even though they had to struggle with the grief of loss at the very least they now knew where these loved ones were buried. They had a frame of reference for their late relative and the mourning process for those lost during the tsunami. Disappearances due to the civil war remain unresolved as of this writing (Preitler, 2006).

This article will describe a program designed to help a population in eastern Sri Lanka that was severely affected by both war and the tsunami to address the multiple losses that they suffered in the context of ongoing violence. It did this by taking advantage of the post-tsunami climate of support to strengthen an ongoing partnership between a university in Austria and a Sri Lankan clinic. The partnership was designed to train grass roots community “counselors” to facilitate programs, which supported the process of mourning among the bereaved population.

Unlike other efforts in this divided region, this program utilized the presence of outsiders to facilitate a process of mourning that included members of the community from all religious and ethno-linguistic groups, regardless of political persuasion.

COMPLICATIONS OF ADDRESSING GRIEF AND LOSS IN TIME OF WAR

As part of the normal process of loss, mourning allows us to deal with the chaos of death. Through this process people can move into a new phase of life in a constructive way. The end of a relationship with a deceased person must be accepted and integrated. This is a normal part of the life cycle and normally need not be address by treatment. However, in war and disaster that process is complicated by three factors: sudden and unexpected loss, ambiguous loss, and the role of anger, hatred and the blaming of the other.

In the case of unexpected loss, one is often haunted by quarrels that were not resolved, loving words that were not said, criticisms that were not answered. In the case of ambiguous loss it is the lack of positive proof that the person is indeed dead, which makes it impossible to stop hoping for the loved one’s return and often leaves survivors frozen in time, permanently bereft and unable to mourn.

An important part of the mourning process is the search for an understanding of cause and effect. This search is a particular feature of both Hindu and Buddhist cultural practices in Sri Lankan culture (Preitler, 2006). In the case of a natural disaster like the tsunami, the authorship of the catastrophe lies on some “higher power”, like divine wrath against which one cannot fight, or the result of events related to past life experiences. This can therefore be accepted as inevitable. Further, one can be angry at the sea without any fear that the sea will strike back. This gave the authors of this article the opportunity to engage with all sides in the conflict around the issue of mourning.

However, when the brutal violence of war results in death and loss, the mourning process, and the search for a cause is likely to breed both anger and hatred directed towards the political, ethnic or religious groups who are on “the other side” of the violence. Very often this anger and hatred is not openly expressed out of fear of sparking a cycle of retaliation and further violence.

Any form of healing from war related loss, and indeed peace building itself, has to first accept the hate and anger that is inherent in the understanding of

cause and effect in war and work with it. The reason for suffering is clear: the enemy is responsible. Every act of violence distances one community from the other. "Healing" the suspicion and alienation between communities is an essential part of the recovery process. Otherwise, "trauma treatment" and mourning is turned into an occasion to stoke the violence, not to understand it.

However, after the tsunami, the rift between communities was not aggravated, because all communities suffered to a greater or lesser degree. Common rituals with participants from all communities and religions in Sri Lanka were performed after the Tsunami in order to mark one month, one year, and etc. anniversaries. This situation created the opportunity to create a program for psychosocial healing that was not divided along ethnic or political lines.

INTERNATIONAL PSYCHOSOCIAL PROGRAMS IN POST-TSUNAMI SRI LANKA AND THE FORMATION OF THE CENTER FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL CARE

Soon after the Tsunami many psychosocial programs were created in Sri Lanka and other affected areas. Most were funded for a brief period and utilized Western trauma theory alone. These programs, created by well meaning outsiders who were unfamiliar with the complicated context, tended to do more harm than good (Center for Psychosocial Care, 2008). Recounting details of the traumatic event during short interventions did not support working through the events in the context of war and political violence. Many programs focussed on the symptom "avoidance of the sea" as a symptom of the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), without examining the understanding of the survivors, and missing the major sources of their distress. In addition, focusing only on the tsunami left the long-standing injuries and losses of the war festering below the surface (Lee, 2008).

Further, the programs may have victimized the most vulnerable as some of the poorest of the survivors were asked several times to retell their painful memories, and complied each time in the hope of receiving badly needed material assistance. (Material assistance was provided on the basis of need, and was not tied in any way to participation in psychosocial debriefing.)

After listening to the survivors and our Sri Lankan colleagues we learned that the major source of distress was not avoidance of the ocean, but rather the large number of deaths which had occurred suddenly, violently, and perhaps ambiguously, without the opportunity for farewell and ritual. In many cases three, four or more members of a family died or disappeared as a result of the tsunami, while others had died or disappeared as a result of war. Given that grieving was a central point for people in the areas where our program was working, it also became a focal point for our program. Our program did not promise or attempt to "heal" in order to return things to the way they were before the disaster. Rather it promised to accompany the survivors as they sought ways to work through their multiple experiences of grief and loss.

When surveyed about their programmatic needs in the psychosocial arena, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social workers, and medical staff around Sri Lanka all highlighted the lack of long-term programs including educational support for local professionals so that a psychosocial infrastructure could be developed (Center for Psychosocial Care, 2008).

SETTING UP OUR LONG-TERM TRAINING PROGRAM IN “TRAUMA COUNSELING”

It was in this atmosphere that our colleagues in the war torn and tsunami affected northeast of Sri Lanka requested the “Trauma Counselor” training program. Our task was to both accept the expressed needs of our colleagues and to facilitate the kind of intervention that would not stoke hatred and begin a process of “working-through,” even as the war continued.

The program was created by a Sri Lankan psychologist in collaboration with a team from University of Klagenfurt, Austria, with whom there was a history of ongoing exchange. The author of this article is a member of the team, and uses the word “we” to refer to the team, and I to refer to her personal experience as a team member.

The idea of the course was to train psychosocial counselors who lived in the area, and therefore would be able to meet the special needs of the residents beyond the years of the programs duration. This meant working mostly with people who had undergone different traumatic situations during the years of civil war and through a natural disaster, and who may not have had previous training as social workers or psychologists. The war made the area difficult to access, and made it almost impossible for groups of mixed ethnicity to travel reliably, hence the shortage of trained professionals in the area.

After the tsunami funding became available for psychosocial support (as it had not been during the prior war years), and therefore it was now possible to design and implement an ongoing multi-year training program that could give depth and continuity to psychosocial work in the region

Therefore, we decided to start a psychosocial education program as quickly as possible. We chose the Ampara District in the east of the island as our program site as it was severely affected by war and was the worst hit by the tsunami. In order not to inflame the political situation and in the hope of a genuine process of working-through, we decided to include members of all ethnic groups and political persuasions in the training.

The program focused on the specific needs of people grieving multiple losses. In a dialogue between Western concepts of mourning, psycho-traumatology, and psychotherapy on the one side and Sri Lankan cultural, social, and political constructions on the other we tried to find the best solutions for the presenting problems. We had to take into account the harsh practical realities of life in a contested war zone, as well as the preconception on the part of our Sri Lankan colleagues that “West is best.” Because our colleagues were aware of many

Western supported trauma training programs in the region, they requested that we start with this specialty.

Starting the Training

In February 2005, six weeks after the natural disaster, 30 young people from the Ampara District were invited to our initial three-day program to introduce “trauma counseling.” Nineteen participants from the first seminar were selected to work with the program on an ongoing basis, and the Center for Psychosocial Care (CPC) was born. During the following three years all staff members participated in the academic training program that followed.

Team members were young women and men from all three ethnic groups in the area. The Sinhalese are the majority in Sri Lanka and were not as gravely affected by the tsunami in the Ampara District. The Tamil are a minority group living mainly in towns and villages on the southern coastal line in the Ampara District, which made them heavily affected by the tsunami. Muslims are considered their own ethnic group and were hit by the tsunami particularly in the northern coastal side of the Ampara District.

Tamils and Sinhalese are distinct languages and often members of one group do not know the language of the other. Muslims often but not always speak both. A common language among educated people is sometimes English. However, these students were largely high school graduates without university degrees. They had very few English language skills. Their selection was predicated on their voluntary work during the first weeks after the tsunami. The trainer’s knowledge of Tamil and Sinhalese was minimal. Therefore, the classes were conducted in the three languages of the communities who were represented: English, Tamil, and Sinhalese. Despite the fact that this required plenty of concentration and patience from the whole group, it still worked, and may have been useful as students struggled to concentrate and understand one another.

The participants were initially shocked when walking into the seminar hall for the first time. They were stunned that members from all three communities were present instead of a homogenous group of their own community. At the end of the program, one of the participants commented: “When I first saw the audience I wanted to leave immediately. I did not expect Tamils and Muslims in the same class. But I am glad that I stayed and now I feel very comfortable with this group.”

COURSE CONTENT AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Besides basic knowledge in psychology, trauma counseling techniques, child development, and community health, we also had special courses on working with grief and mourning. Due to the pressing needs of the then current situation

we began with the more specialized courses first. It was only later on that we could go back and discuss the more theoretical impacts and basic courses.

We tried to discover which parts of the training could be covered by lectures with Sri Lankans and which could be taught by outsiders. Unfortunately, it was difficult to secure Sri Lankan teachers. Most local colleagues became so busy in and around Colombo that they could not travel to Ampara. It was also too dangerous to take our multi-ethnic team of students to the western coast of Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, more classes than originally planned were taken over by trainers from Europe.

All of our program concepts were originally based on Western theories and case studies from the field in eastern Sri Lanka. Discussions ensued on how these theories and case studies might be synthesized in order to create useful models in the Sri Lankan context.

Our training program used the concepts of Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and his model of the grieving process as well as T. Rondo's (1993) "6 'R'" process. Using these descriptions of the typical Western mourning process as a starting point, we also discussed forms of complicated grief (Rando, 1992/1993, 1993), avoiding grief (Stroebe, 1998), grief and dissociation (Kaufman, 1993; Zepf, 2001) and traumatic loss (Krystal, 1968; Preitler, 2008).

At first it was strictly these Western concepts that our students were interested in learning and applying. However as the concepts began to take on actual meaning for the participants, they found that they recalled other ways of understanding. Slowly, the students reached into their own history, culture, and ideas to introduce and to integrate profoundly meaningful processes that they had known all along. "Trauma counseling" gave way to a more complex, meaningful and integrative process.

All the members of our group had several stories of multiple losses under terrible circumstances in which young people had died suddenly and violently. Some were confronted with dead bodies, while others had to cope with loss without evidence. Often, relationships were interrupted and the loss occurred without any possibility of farewell. All of the members of the training program had clients who suffered from multiple losses; some times even people who lost their entire extended family.

INTEGRATING SRI LANKAN RITUALS INTO THE PROGRAM

A body of literature has grown from Western trained psychologists in post-colonial Africa on the integration of traditional concepts of death, loss, and healing in the aftermath of war and violence. Honwana (1998, 1999), a Mozambican medical anthropologist, and Monteiro (1996) an Angolan psychologist both found that in order to be effective in addressing the effects of war and disaster, it was necessary to include traditional mourning ceremonies in their programs for healing. Boyden (2002) has expanded this thinking to look at the needs of children in Sri Lanka. However, the specific role of Sri Lankan

traditional mourning in psychosocial treatment during a time of war, when ethnic conflict complicates the use of tradition, has not yet been discussed in the literature. Therefore I will introduce it here.

MOURNING RITUALS IN SRI LANKA

Cultures and villages have their own rituals and traditional functions to deal with trauma. Funeral rites like *eddu chelavu*, *anthyetty*, *andu thuwasam*, *thuwasam* and similar anniversary observance are powerful social mechanisms to deal with grief and loss. (Somasundaram, 2003, Indigenous coping strategies section, para. 2)

Sri Lankan cultures from all religious backgrounds have several psychologically useful forms of mourning rituals. It is common to keep the dead body at home during the period between the death and the funeral when the home is then called the "funeral house." The house is open to visitation by everyone, even at night, when relatives, friends, and neighbors offer condolences to the grieving family and pay their last respects to the deceased. For community members, visiting the funeral house is one of the most important social obligations. I missed several official appointments in Sri Lanka with the excuse that people had to go to a funeral house.

It is also common for family and friends to take photographs with their deceased loved one during the mourning period. When I first saw these pictures I experienced a strange sense of counter transference. My Western perspective of ethics has taught me to hide information and remembrances of death. My culture does not take pictures of the dead and we avoid speaking about it openly. It was only when I became a psychotherapist that I realized the need for this evidence of loss and how helpful these pictures might be in the mourning process especially in the denial phase (Preitler, 2008).

Somasundaram (2003) describes the Sri Lankan village in this way:

In the various rural communities, the village and its people provided organic roots, a sustaining support system, nourishing environment and network of relationships. The village traditions, structures and institutions were the foundations and framework for their daily life In war, when due to the disturbed situation, rituals are not possible or improperly performed, the trauma of war is never fully accepted or put to rest . . . (Community section, para. 3)

Regardless of the ethnic group whether it be from the perspective of Tamil villages or traditional rural Sinhalese areas, all these villages have very clear funeral rites, and rituals.

Rituals start immediately after the news of death and give clear roles and duties to relatives and neighbors for the few days before and after the funeral. After the funeral it is common to perform further rituals (*dhane*). The *dhane* are performed after seven days, again after three months, and then every year on the anniversary of the death. These important acts are believed to free the dead spirit from this world. If the ritual is not performed the "spirit" (ghost) will

hover around the earth without opportunity for liberation. These rituals allow the bereaving family to fulfill its obligation to the dead by releasing the dead from the bonds of this earth.

Alms giving are another important ritual for the dead. Social activities are organized in the name of the deceased for this purpose. Alms giving are a crucial psychosocial event. They bring the entire community together and create a time when differences and conflicts are forgotten, at least for the duration of the alms giving. This might be an invitation for meals in the name of the deceased, while other items like household goods and school materials will be given to those who need them. Everyone contributes and participates in the event (even small children), which includes the giving of dry rations for cooking, cookware, distribution of alms, vigil and preaching by the monk, and so on. This social activity allows participants to remember the dead and is a means to provide assistance to those in need.

Complications Relating to the Efficacy and Performance of Mourning Rituals in Wartime

Perera (1999) interviewed women in southern Sri Lanka who were widows or the wives of “disappeared” men. According to Perera, while religion and rituals represented a coping strategy that women utilized immediately after the loss they were not necessarily sufficient, nor did they represent an uncomplicated solution. Problems ensued due to the high cost of some religious ceremonies and rituals. “When loneliness and emotional distress remained unchanged, the added financial strain of having to perform various rituals increased their worries” (Perera, 1999, p. 114) and they abandoned them. The abandonment however, also left them bereft.

Further complicating their financial worries, wives of disappeared men could not perform the rituals in their communities due to fear of political retaliation, which transformed religious traditions into a stressor instead of a release mechanism (Thiruchandran, 1999).

From a psychosocial perspective, this made it clear that the actual importance of the rituals, beyond the economic and spiritual aspects, lay in the way that they provided a resource for a grieving person to be supported. The rituals in and of themselves were not the salient feature. It was the community mourning and solidarity that accompanied them that gave the rituals their power and effect (Perera, 1999).

TRAUMA AND LOSS IN GONAGOLA: A CASE STUDY

In September 1999 the village Gonagola was attacked by a group from the Liberation Army of Tamil Elam (LTTE), the chief anti-government force in the civil war. Forty-four people were killed in this incident, the survivors left shocked and distraught. Helene Pek, a psychology student from the University

of Klagenfurt visited in 2006 and conducted interviews with CPC members a full six and half years after the massacre took place. Gonagola is the home village for two members of CPC and Helen was able to interview them about their personal memory of this massacre.

Conflicted Experiences of Ritual Mourning: One Survivor Tells Her Story

When a community has had to face repeated traumatic events like the people in the village of Gonagola normal forms of grief can be obstructed and the mourning activities that appear to be the means of traditional solace are rendered ineffective. To illustrate the unresolved nature of the traumatic memory of the massacre I am including a short transcript of the interview between Mrs Pek (I) and the student K:

K: Around 12 o'clock at night they came to Gonagola village. Before the *dhane* day they went to Gonagola and they killed 17 people in one house.

I: In one house?

K: Yes. And then they went to the neighboring houses and they took the jewels, money and some goods from the houses. And then they killed the house owners also. They killed pregnant ladies and also baby children very... brutal ... they are like animals ... Very heavily they killed them.

I: Very heavily means?

K: Very heavily means: cut their necks and cut the arms and head also. They cut the pregnant mothers in the areas of their stomachs. They killed them. Both, mother and child are dead. Lot of bleeding. And they raped and abused most of the women and then they killed them. Women and girls. They went to some houses and called boys only and then ...

I: Called?

K: No no caught ... and killed them ... cutting ... throat or neck ... like this ... From 12 to 4 o'clock in the morning they were taking the money and jewels and raping and killing. (Pek, 2008)

Men, women and children saw the dead bodies of their relatives and neighbors. They knew that their own survival was purely a matter of luck. K remembered the situation in the village the day after the killing:

The next day, after the attack, the Secretary Minister along with several other ministers and monks visited that area assessed the incident and made an arrangement for our protection from the LTTE. They did the funeral. We buried the dead bodies. Funerals by the monks. They did our cultures. Monks came and did the Buddhist ceremony. It is our custom called: "pirit panca culi." They did like this. And then all bodies buried in the earth ... the same place. (Pek, 2008)

K describes the funeral as something "they" – outsiders – did. She only used "we" when it came to the mechanical work of burying the dead bodies. The way K recalled the aftermath of the massacre sounds very passive from her side. She was very much involved because she knew all the people who were killed as neighbors and relatives. K and the others in the program had been children at

the time of the massacre, which had remained in their minds in an un-integrated form.

Therefore, K, with others from the program, set about to create a ritual that commemorated the seventh anniversary of the massacre. The community component of these rituals set them apart. Together the entire village prepared for the anniversary ritual for nearly half a year. The CPC located in the district town was part of this effort as well. CPC team members from Gonagola had the idea for the ritual, but the entire organization helped supervise the preparation process and perform the ritual itself. This would be something meaningful that “we,” the community members did, not the official outsider “they.”

This sense of collective action and support was important to the community as it helped them to overcome phases of depression and resignation during the planning process.

In situations of traumatic loss children are most vulnerable. “In the immediate aftermath of exposure to violence, children may endure a range of distressing physiological symptoms directly connected with extreme shock” (Boyden, 2002, p. 52). Normally, adult reactions are the means by which children are able to integrate their understanding of violent events. But, because they live with relatives who are also overwhelmed by the economic, physical, and emotional strains of the conflict, they have little means for gaining solace and no control over how the events are addressed (Boyden, 2002).

The seventh anniversary ritual in Gonagola involved the entire village including the students who were now grown up and the children who had all experienced this massacre or another violent event in the course of the war. In preparation, the entire CPC team visited the village. Community members had the opportunity to tell their stories about their grief and suffering to outsiders and trainees in counseling. Children also had the chance to ask questions and express their feelings about the traumatic aftermath in their village.

Remembering the Dead: Transforming an Old Ritual in to a New One

We should not of course imagine that social memory necessarily carries “truth” in a pristine form. Remembering is a purposeful activity: as time throws up new circumstances and demands, the meaning we give to our memories may change, and perhaps the memories themselves. (Summerfield, 1998, p. 23)

The remembrance of people who died in a traumatic way is often fixed in the moment of horror. Relatives are only able to think about them in the moment of death.

In Gonagola, the central object of remembrance was a photograph album. The outside of the album looked like any other photograph album for a wedding, birthday, or fondly remembered family party, but this album was full of death and trauma. The photographs displayed those who had been killed.

Most of them were hacked to death, so the pictures were full of blood, destroyed body parts and faces forever left in shock.

The first time I saw this album it was soon after I had arrived in the Ampara District. Whenever I visited Gonagola the pictures were part of my schedule. Helene Pek (2008) was also confronted with this album. After analyzing her counter-transference she wrote:

I was not sure if I should really see these pictures. I had the confusing concern that these images might hit me deep inside and follow me in my future The scenes are so brutal that I got the feeling that it is not real. (Translation by the author)

After arriving in the village for the seventh anniversary ceremony the album was there yet again. The community members and students were constantly reviewing these pictures and becoming horrified by the disfigured bodies.

Here I – the Western psychotherapist – made an intervention to the ritual. I asked the group to hand over the album to a person of high esteem, like the head monk to the temple where the ceremony would take place. They could ask him to find an appropriate and undisclosed location for the album. It is important that people know that there is documentation of what happened in September 1999. But there is no need to revisit those pictures so often. The album should remain in a safe place and be used for the documentation of Human Rights violations, but it should be out of their day-to-day context.

I encouraged people to create a new album with older pictures of the same loved ones who had passed away. I suggested including photographs of happier moments in their lives, like weddings, parties, and birthdays. Unlike the first album, this second album could be part of daily life in Gonagola and help in the mourning process. People in Gonagola who had nearly forgotten life before the massacre could hopefully recover the past and with it some happier memories from the older photographs, in order to use them, along with their grief, to transform the future.

September 2006: Ritual for the Seventh Anniversary

The originally planned ritual was cancelled for security reasons. In August 2006 the situation in eastern and northern Sri Lanka had become very precarious so a smaller form of the rituals was decidedly a better choice. The village people, monks, and the team of CPC decided on services for two days and one night in the main Buddhist temple of Gonagola.

The ceremony began with cooking. The community members, along with our students, came together on one side of the temple to prepare special meals for all participants in the ritual. Cleaning vegetables and fish in groups gave them the opportunity to talk to each other.

At dawn everyone went to change their attire. White is the color used to symbolize grief. We all dressed accordingly in white and other light colors. The female members of our training team wore traditional saris as a sign of respect.

After sunset the ritual started with what is called *Bodhi Puja* and continued later with preaching (*Dhamma Discussion*). The night service ended with a meal for all the participants. Some participants remained in prayer and meditation all night in the temple. The next morning began with a small ceremony and continued with more cooking. At noon the prayer and alms giving began. This was to be the essential portion of the two day program. Alms were given to poor children and medicine was handed over to the local pharmacy, in the name of the 44 victims. The community meal marked the end of the ritual.

The whole ceremony was held in a mournful but peaceful atmosphere. The CPC team was warmly welcomed by the community and well accepted as assistants and supervisors.

Months later our students from the area reported the positive impact that the ritual had in village life. People now felt freer to talk about the deceased and their own ideas and feelings about what happened. In September 2007, the community members themselves organized rituals for the eighth anniversary of the massacre.

Ritual of Mourning and Peace

As has been stated, the CPC team is multi-ethnic. For the Sinhalese village people of Gonagola this meant accepting Muslims and Tamils in their village while they remembered and mourned the dead killed by a group associated with Tamils. During this entire process, it was possible for team members from other ethnic groups to learn about the Sinhalese situation. Perhaps most importantly, the war affected Sinhalese village people could also experience empathy and solidarity from the other groups as they shared their tragic stories; something that they had not imagined possible.

The CPC team also planned mourning rituals in Muslim and Tamil areas where mass losses have taken place during the last few decades. Unfortunately, since mid-2006 the political situation has become too tense to organize a ceremony in which a large amount of people are involved. Out of the positive experience in Gonagola the hope still exists that people of all ethnic groups may come together and mourn for the losses of the past. At the time of writing the war has been declared over, with a new round of grave violence. The team hopes that it will soon be possible to enter these communities and begin to assist all of those who have experienced loss to mourn together. In this way, trauma healing can provide an important foundation for the creation of a peaceful future.

DISCUSSION

Our work in eastern Sri Lanka began with collaborative efforts with local experts who invited us to work with them. We went to Sri Lanka with Western concepts as well as the desire to learn more about the people of the region. We

knew that to do this effectively we would have to commit ourselves to working over an extended period of time. We asked our Sri Lankan students and colleagues about their concepts of mourning and interfused these ideas with our Western theoretical framework in order to assist people coping with familial losses, and repeated exposure to violent death that remained un-mourned. As a result of this collaboration local counselors turned to the use of an old ritual and contextualized it, in order to create an atmosphere in which new dimensions of healing appeared possible.

Violent deaths in war torn areas disconnect communities from their normal forms of grief. In this case study international and local “outsiders” mutually developed new interventions that were informed by tradition and faith. Given that the mourning rituals came from local traditions, ownership of this grieving process was firmly in the hands of the community, which in turn encouraged continued engagement in the process. This ownership created a sense of empowerment within the village. This in turn accomplished the emotional grief work that had informed the Western ideas that the young counselors believed necessary to communal healing.

While mourning is an important component of surviving the trauma of war, when it is done in purely religious and cultural terms, it can inadvertently be used to perpetuate the rage and hatred that fuels the conflict that caused the loss in the first place. Outsiders may unwittingly become drawn into these scenarios especially as they are attached to the discussion of war trauma, which may be used as a code for the crimes of the enemy.

While taking caution, outsiders can also have a critical role to play by drawing disparate communities together to explore their common grief, mourn their losses, and move forward into the future. In this case, the profound importance of outsiders in respecting the rituals, but also in changing them so that they can accommodate a more hopeful future, delineates a new and vital role.

In post-colonial societies, psychosocial work is most often done by a young generation well trained in Western methods, who work from a Western theoretical frame. This example shows how such workers can find the psychodynamic value of their pre-colonial traditions and incorporate them into an effective, mixed method, post-colonial process that creates changed traditions moving forward. In the process, empowering them to use their traditions in a contemporary way so their traditions are instruments, not of preserving a violent past, but of creating solidarity with others to imagine a peaceable future.

AUTHOR NOTE

Dr. Barbara Preitler, born 1964 in Austria, is a psychologist and psychotherapist. Dr. Preitler is a founding member of HEMAYAT – Organisation for Support of Survivors of Torture and War in Vienna, with whom she has worked as a

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