

# Strengthening Resistance:

The use of narrative practices in working with genocide survivors

**A workshop facilitated for Ibuka:  
The National Survivors' Association in Rwanda**

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## PART TWO

### SKILL DEVELOPMENT – NARRATIVE RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

In the next part of the workshop, the facilitators described some of the key principles of the narrative approach to responding to trauma. This involved assisting the group to develop particular skills for trauma counselling.

#### a narrative approach: the stories of our lives

Narrative approaches to therapy and community work are vitally interested in the stories of people's lives, and how stories can be told in ways that make people stronger (Wingard & Lester, 2001; White, 2007). It is possible for counsellors to invite people to tell and re-tell stories in ways that can offer hope and sustenance. With the use of narrative practices, we seek to honour and acknowledge the stories of trauma, loss, and horror that people have experienced. And at the same time, we make it possible for people to tell other stories of their lives as well, stories that bring strength and possibilities (see Denborough, 2006b).

#### richly acknowledging the effects of the problem – the story of trauma

In order for those we are working with to have a sense that their experience is being recognised and responded to, it can be very important to find ways of acknowledging the effects of the problems that people are experiencing. One of the ways that we can start when working with someone who has experienced trauma is to make a list of the effects of that trauma. Once we have made this list of the effects of the trauma, then we can start to notice when and in what ways the person is reclaiming their life from the effects of the trauma.

Some of the effects of genocide that were mentioned by participants included:

- Nightmares
- Feelings of despair and hopelessness
- Alcohol problems (for men)
- Anger
- Severe headaches
- Choking
- Reluctance to have relationships with others (after experience of rape)
- Problems of memory – memory loss or flashbacks (painful memories which return).
- Not being able to sleep
- Grief
- Fear
- Suicide attempts
- Difficulty swallowing
- Isolation

We can't take away the experience of genocide and all that goes with it. But we can find ways of acknowledging it. When we make a list of the effects, we document how the trauma is affecting a particular person or group of people. This document can be added to throughout our conversations with people. For instance, if someone says, 'I shouldn't have lived when so many have died', we can say, 'So one of the effects of the genocide was to make you question your right to live?', and then add this to the list of effects that they are struggling with. Using this structure often helps people see the problems as *effects* of trauma, rather than as something about them. This creates a clarity that can be useful in counselling conversations.

With this list richly acknowledging the effects of the trauma, we can then organise the counselling by searching for stories which are a 'counterpoint' to these effects. We can seek out and build upon stories of resistance. One of the key ways we do this is through a skill called 'double-listening' (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007).

### double-listening – listening for more than one story

In our role as counsellors, we listen carefully to understand the experience that someone is telling us. We listen so that they know they are not alone. Often this means listening to, responding to and acknowledging a story of trauma or loss or hardship.

We also want to listen to things that might take us to places that would not be predicted by the story of trauma. We want to listen to how people have *responded* to the trauma. We want to listen for what people value, what they hold precious despite the hardship that they have been through. We want to listen for moments when the effects of the trauma are not complete, when the person may have reclaimed some small aspect of their life. These are all openings to a second story.

We call this form of listening 'double-listening' because it involves listening not only for the story of trauma, but also for what the person holds precious, how they have responded to the hardship, and times when the effects of the problem might not be total. This particular skill of double-listening can be developed by counsellors with practice, over time.

One of the reasons that we are interested in double-listening is that exposure to trauma can rob people of much of their experience. Their experience can become very narrow. Many of the events of their lives are forgotten, or no longer seen as relevant, because they are overshadowed by the effects of the trauma and loss.

And yet, if we can notice how people have responded to trauma, what they hold precious in life, and times when the effects of the problem are not complete, then this can be the starting point to develop other stories of life. These other stories might make a difference in how they experience life.

This way of working involves developing 'double-storied testimonies' (Denborough, 2006a). These are testimonies that describe the trauma and its effects on their lives but, at the same time, they also include rich descriptions and stories about what a person values in life and how they are engaged in reclaiming their lives from the effects of the problem.

## an example of double-listening offered by Jill Freedman

*A woman I worked with in the USA had contracted HIV. She described this as a result of betrayal. She was very bitter about being betrayed and being given a life-threatening illness as a result. I spent time listening to her and trying to understand what her experience was like. When I believed I had a sense of her experience, I told her that something that stood out for me was how she had talked about 'betrayal'. She could have talked about fear, about anger, about despair, but what she talked about was 'betrayal'. So I wondered how this was so important to her. I began to listen for what was 'absent but implicit,' what she was contrasting this betrayal with. In listening for what was 'absent but implicit', I asked if trust and honesty was something that she really valued. She began talking about how trust was particularly important to her. She told stories about the history of trust in her life and her relationship with trust. Through those conversations, she became linked again with the people and places where there had been trust and where there still was trust in her life. She later told me that these conversations were a turning point for her. When she was back in touch with 'trust', she could be more connected to various people who were important to her. This changed the focus of her life away from thinking about betrayal and death to thinking about how she wanted to live the rest of her life and be joined with those people she could trust to help her do this. This is an over-simplified account of our work together. It didn't just happen in one conversation. It happened over time in many conversations – but if I hadn't engaged in the double-listening (which included listening for what was implied that she treasured), I don't think I would have ended up talking with her about trust.*

## comment from a participant

At this point, one participant offered the following reflection:

*I think we use this double-listening all the time – but we don't realise that we are doing it.*

## looking for openings to a second story

Once we have made a list with the person of the effects of the trauma, we can start to notice together any small steps that they may be taking to reclaim their life. If one of the effects of the trauma is feelings of hopelessness, even a brief feeling of hope may be a small step in reclaiming their life. In doing this, we are on the lookout for starting points for stories. These may be very small to begin with. Even being willing to talk with a counsellor may represent a little hope, a wish, a small act of reclamation. We are looking for openings to different story-lines of a person's life, anything that is different than the story of trauma, anything different than the effects that have been listed. There will be ways in which people are responding to the difficulties they are experiencing. We can explore this 'resistance'. We can ask people to tell stories about this. And as people tell and re-tell these stories, it makes it possible for them to take more actions, take more steps that have to do with reclaiming their lives and resisting the effects of problems.

Both sides of the story are very important. Often it is only an acknowledgement of the pain of the past that provides a foundation for noticing and recognising 'resistance'.

We can be on the lookout for:

- ways in which people have held onto certain hopes or wishes despite hardship
- ways in which people are seeking justice
- ways in which they are protecting or assisting others
- moments when they do something even though fear or hopelessness could have stopped them
- small examples of ways in which they are taking back their lives, or reclaiming their lives from the effects of the trauma.

These small actions are openings to a second story-line about a person's life.

Within the document, *Survivors resisting the effects of genocide*, there are many examples of openings to second story-lines in people's lives. These included acts of:

- encouraging others
- using art
- seeking justice
- caring for orphans
- honouring the memories of victims
- joining with others in dance, song and laughter
- resisting denial
- faith
- learning new skills
- taking care of yourself
- joining with others
- publicly speaking out
- displaying photographs
- developing new forms of family
- supporting other survivors.

As practitioners develop skills in 'double-listening', it becomes increasingly possible to notice these openings to second story-lines.

Here is another example from Jill Freedman:

*I was working with a woman in the USA who had suffered a lot of violence growing up. We made a list of the effects of this violence in her life and it included many of the same effects from the list we just made together in this workshop: nightmares, feelings of despair and hopelessness, grief, and fear. Another effect of the violence that she talked about was that it made her fear being alone. In order to deal with this fear, she always scheduled many things to do so that she was rarely alone.*

*One day we had a conversation in which I learnt that she had gone somewhere alone. When I asked about this, I discovered she had enjoyed sitting by herself and reading and thinking. Now, I knew that the violence had previously robbed her of enjoying time alone. I knew that the violence had given her fear of being alone. And yet here was an example of something different. So I asked her to*

*tell me more about this and we developed the story of what led up to her deciding to do this, how she did it, and what it was like to have this feeling of enjoyment that she didn't know she could have. I then asked her what this story was about. It wasn't 'the story of trauma' that we had been talking about. It was another story. She called it a story of 'enjoying time alone'. This was a story that stood outside the story of the effects of the violence. It was a story about taking some of her life back, a story of reclaiming one aspect of her life from the effects of the violence.*

*Once we had identified this other story, she started to get in touch with other moments of being alone that were not dominated by fear. She realised that there was a history of this that she had forgotten. For instance, she realised there were times in which she had listened to music alone that she had enjoyed. I asked her if these experiences were 'anti-violence' experiences or 'beyond violence' experiences. She said they were both. And so we began to get a history of a whole range of experiences of being alone that had to do with her reclaiming her life. Because we had made a list of the effects of the violence, this was a meaningful experience. Something that could have seemed very small became meaningful. And our conversations made her feel more in charge of her life.*

### double-storied testimonies

Double-listening makes it possible to develop double-storied *testimonies*. These are testimonies that include *both* the story/effects of trauma *and* also the story of healing/resistance/reclamation/honouring (see Denborough, 2006a). These double-storied testimonies can be gathered from individuals and also from groups.

double-storied testimony	
<p>Story of trauma/loss/genocide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effects of the trauma/loss</li> <li>- The injustice of the trauma/loss</li> <li>- Obstacles that are continuing to keep alive the trauma</li> </ul>	<p>Story of resistance/healing/reclamation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ways in which person has responded to the trauma/loss/genocide</li> <li>- What the person holds precious despite the trauma (hopes, wishes, values, commitments)</li> <li>- The history of these hopes, wishes, values, commitments</li> <li>- Other people who are joined in this resistance</li> <li>- Acts of resistance/healing/reclamation the person is taking</li> <li>- Ways in which the person may be taking steps to protect, care for, or assist others</li> </ul>

Please note that these testimonies include both the stories of the continuing effects of the genocide *and* the stories of 'healing', 'resistance', 'response', 'survival' or 'honouring'. The aim of double-storied testimonies is always to generate and acknowledge both sorts of stories. It is not a matter of just talking about 'resistance and survival', but always also acknowledging the real effects of the hardship, losses, and trauma. It is the balance between the two that can be richly acknowledging.

## summary

This second part of the workshop:

- introduced the narrative metaphor and what it makes possible in trauma counselling
- provided a method for counsellors to richly acknowledge the effects of hardship people are enduring
- introduced the concept of 'double-listening'
- provided the opportunity for participants to consider ways of noticing opening(s) to 'second stories'
- provided a framework for generating 'double-storied testimonies'
- linked these concepts to the document produced earlier in the workshop: *Survivors resisting the effects of genocide*.



## PART THREE

### STRENGTHENING STORIES OF RESISTANCE/HEALING/RECLAMATION

As mentioned earlier, many different initiatives or actions can be the starting point for developing rich stories of resistance/healing/reclamation. To explore how this can be done, participants engaged in an exercise in which each person picked one of the forms of 'resistance' in the document that they felt connected to, or that was meaningful to them. In groups, participants then interviewed each other about the particular theme that they had chosen.

These interviews were organised around the following five categories:

- Details
- Time
- Meaning
- People (points of view)
- Knowledge, skills, abilities.

Each person was asked questions from these categories about the example of 'resistance' that was meaningful to them. Asking about these different categories can make a story of resistance/healing/reclamation grow richer and stronger. Examples of questions in each category are given below. These are only meant to illustrate the kinds of questions that may be helpful.

#### details

We want to be able to paint a vivid picture of what is actually being described. So we can ask questions that will enable us to see or hear or feel or sense the circumstances being described. This will help us to imagine what it was like; it will also assist the person to remember in more vivid detail the particularities of examples of resistance. We can also ask ourselves what else we would like to know, to see, hear, and imagine what the small act of resistance was like. Asking this can help us develop questions to ask the people we interview, such as:

- How many people were there?
- What was the look on that person's face at the time?
- Where did this happen?
- When did you realise this was important?
- What was it like?
- Can you describe step-by-step what happened?

## t i m e

A story has a past, a present, and a future. So we might ask:

- What was the history that led up to the event that is being described?
- What made it possible?
- What laid the groundwork?
- Who from your past would have predicted this? What did they witness that would have led them to predict this?
- Was there preparation that went into this?
- If we look into your past, does another event come to mind, that could have something to do with the roots of this or the beginning of this possibility?

We also want to speculate about the future:

- Now that this event has happened, what might be further steps that may build on this?
- If this was a turning point, what did you turn toward?
- What do you think might be the next step in this direction?
- What did this make possible for your future or for someone else's future?

## m e a n i n g

The next sorts of questions facilitate meaning-making:

- What does it mean that you have taken this step in your life?
- What have you learned from this experience?
- What does this say about you, your family, your community that you could do this?
- Does this reflect what you stand for?
- Does this reflect what you or your community give value to?

These are questions asking people to take a step back from the stories they have been telling and to reflect on what this means about their lives.

## people – points of view

Stories have people in them. So the next sort of questions ask about the role of other people in some way:

- Who joined you in this?
- Was there somebody (living or no longer living) who was an inspiration or a support to you in doing this?
- If I could talk to your friend about this, what would they tell me that you did that was important to them?
- Who did this draw you closer to?
- Did your doing this contribute in some way to other people?
- Who noticed this? Did anyone say anything about it?
- Who would support these kinds of initiatives if they knew about them?

Through these questions, we are trying to find some way of including other people in the story.

## knowledges, skills and abilities

The last category involves asking about knowledge, skills, and abilities. This relates to the special skills that a person has been using in their actions of resistance:

- What knowledge are you drawing upon?
- What skills did you develop?
- What abilities does this show that you have?
- We often take for granted our own skills. What might someone else name as a skill you used?
- Were you surprised that you could do this? Was there knowledge you drew on or a skill that made this possible?
- Now that you have accomplished this, are you aware of an ability you used that made it possible?

In this section, we want the person to name the particular skills that are an important part of the story. As this is the last category, we then ask the person if there is anything else they would like to say to bring the conversation to a close.

## reflections from participants about experience of the interviews

- *When I was having the conversation with my friend, especially the questions related to the people who contributed to making the event happen, it made me think about things I don't usually think are important. It made me think about who has been helping and contributing to my life. The conversation was so important that I have now decided to go back and say thank you and express my gratitude to the people to who assisted me at the time of the event. I am very grateful to a particular woman who helped me a great deal when I was pregnant with my baby. When this woman knows how her good deeds have been recognised, she will probably work to help other people also.*

- *As the conversation went on, it enabled me to do an introspective analysis of myself and to think about things I have not thought about lately. The questions that asked for details enabled me to review my life in a good way.*
- *This was a very meaningful exercise. The conversation we shared in our small group focused on the resistance that is showed when students who are survivors form small organisations so that older students can take care of younger ones. These are situations where older students play the role of the parents and making sure that younger children go through their schooling as smoothly as possible. This is something that happens mostly in educational settings but through our conversation together we realised we could draw lessons from this particular example into other areas of our lives. When the conversation focused on the notion of ‘time’, we sought out information about how the students first started to play the role of the parent. When we asked about ‘meaning’, we learnt that the orphan students feel like they have a parent and are not alone. And the one who plays parent feels he has a responsibility to give a good example, and is no longer being an ‘irresponsible’ student. When we enquired about ‘people’, we discovered that there are many people who think these acts are a positive thing. To see that one student has helped his mates to have a family and a good working environment is favourable. Most people in his life support him in doing this. As for the ‘skills and knowledge’, the students who are gaining support from fellow students are concentrating on their education, and keeping focus, because they know that someone is looking after them. And the one who is responsible will not only go on with his education but also is in charge of the orphans’ education. It is a double role, with double skills. And this relationship gives them both the hope for the future. It also spurs both people on to work harder as they have responsibilities to each other. Doing this interview made it clear how we can develop richer stories about the ways in which survivors are resisting the effects of the genocide.*

## strengthening the second story / the stories of resistance

Once a second story, a story of resistance/healing/reclamation, has been identified, it is possible to find ways that this can be strengthened. There are many different ways of doing this, including:

- The person can be invited to generate and tell stories that relate to the second story (including the details, time, meaning, people, knowledge, skills, abilities).
- Other significant people in the person’s life can be invited to witness the telling of these stories.
- The story of resistance/healing/reclamation can be documented. Just as we can make a list of the effects of trauma, we can also create written records of the other stories of people’s lives.
- These documents can then be shared with others. In this way, skills and knowledges of survivors can be shared and their lives can become linked. This is an antidote to isolation.

- Importantly, this can enable one survivor to make a contribution to other survivors. Enabling contributions is a significant way of strengthening the second story. When one survivor, who is having a difficult time, experiences making a contribution to the lives of other survivors (who are also facing difficulties), this can go a long way in strengthening hopes, purposes, and reasons to live and thrive.
- Rituals can also be organised that celebrate and strengthen the story of resistance/healing/reclamation. Clearly in Rwanda there are many skills in ritual-making and celebration. These skills can be put to work in honouring acts, abilities, and stories of survival. We witnessed the ways in which the colour purple is used to signify remembrance of lost loved ones. Sometimes people wear purple around their wrists or use purple to adorn buildings. A similar use of colour and symbol could be developed to represent certain individual's or groups' actions of resistance, survival, and reclamation.
- Sometimes songs can play a powerful role in strengthening stories of resistance. It may be possible to write and sing songs about people's acts of determination, courage, defiance, kindness, care for others, and so on, despite the ongoing effects of the genocide and continuing hardships.

These are just some of the ways in which second stories (stories of resistance/healing/reclamation) can be strengthened. Discussions took place with the workers from Ibuka about various options that they will be able to put to use in their context.

