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# Psychic trauma and group identity: is the culture of forgiveness and reconciliation possible?

*Uraz psychiczny a tożsamość grupowa — czy możliwa  
jest kultura przebaczenia i pojednania?*

## Abstract

*In taking into consideration the culture of forgiveness and reconciliation processes, the essential idea was to describe them within the dynamics of deep narcissistic wounds, the sequence of confrontation with trauma and the mourning of losses, thereby allowing forgiveness and possibly even reconciliation to occur.*

*In conclusion, I underline the mourning process as the most important precondition for the capacity to believe to reemerge, and the forgiving process to develop. That process should unfold in four stages: confrontation, mourning, forgiving, and then reconciliation, as well as a five step process that should unfold on both sides in a conflict. Besides individual psychotherapy, group modalities in dealing with severe stress situations are recommended as the approach of choice, enabling open talk about traumatic experiences and their consequences and thus opening the possibility for restoration of the capacity to believe, and for the mourning, forgiving and reconciliation processes to develop.*

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**Key words:** *severe psychic trauma, culture of forgiveness, reconciliation, group psychotherapy*

*Poslije svakog rata  
netko mora počistiti.*

*(Po každyj wojnie ktoś musi posprzątać)*

*The poem: "Koniec i początek"*

*(Wisława Szymborska, 1993,*

*translated into Croatian: "Kraj i početak")*

## Introduction

Psychosocial help and psychotherapeutic processes, always bearing in mind the therapeutic aim of attaining the level and creating the space for a culture of forgiveness to develop, open up possibilities for reconciliation within oneself and with others.

I recommend that these (therapeutic) processes should be accompanied by the parallel task of mourning of

losses and unattained wishes. I suggest that forgiveness and reconciliation can only become attainable achievements and constructive aims of psychotherapeutic and psychosocial interventions via a thorough mourning process.

## Enemies, conflicts and armed clashes

To speak about ongoing hostilities is quite a complex and difficult task, as is the necessity of coexisting with enemies of all kinds. It is always possible to ask ourselves, time and again, whether there can be a space for the mutually exchangeable and recognisable phenomenon we call reality, and how we enter a space filled with prejudices, judgemental positions and cultural stereotypes that obstruct curiosity and questioning, very often providing the space for aggressive and destructive expressions. At the beginning of the war in Croatia in 1991, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, it was very popular to quote the Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times." These times in Yugoslavia started to evolve

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a decade before the war broke out, culminating in the armed conflict. The 'usual' dynamics of life became 'interesting', bringing about deep changes, leading to death and destruction in personal, social and cultural spheres, as well as in the construction of some new independent states, different organisation of these societies, and the possibilities for them to reaffirm their specific cultures and cultural heritage. Coping mechanisms of all kinds were set in motion, and many people were unable to confront such deep and even radical changes in an efficient way.

There is a wise old saying that time heals all wounds. It might be said that PTSD is the result of a failure of time to heal all wounds. The memory of the trauma is not integrated and accepted as part of one's personal past. Instead, it comes to exist independently of previous schemata [18].

### **Clinical example 1**

#### ***Escape from Bosnian Hell***

From the refugee camp, one 18-year-old man was referred because he was overwhelmed with great fears that he would become mad and no longer responsible for his behaviour. At first, he was unable to speak; he could not even glance at me, and his entire body was shaking. It turned out that he was Muslim, from eastern Bosnia. Serbian nationalists had encircled the small town and started to kill the population and rape young women. He was living in a large family. He joined one group that found their way out into the mountains. There, in a small valley, was a farmer's house. They rushed to find some shelter, but someone from inside started to shoot at them. Eventually, they discovered friendly people from the same town that let them enter. There, he found his eldest brother, armed and badly wounded in his right arm. He was trying to adjust the machine gun to point toward his head to shoot himself. The brother shouted that they were encircled by enemy soldiers, that for him there was no escape, and was urging his young brother to help him shoot himself and then to try to escape. He refused to help his brother to shoot himself. Shooting started, a shell exploded, and the youngster found himself in the woods again. After three days of wandering through the woods, he was found by some people and brought to a gathering point for refugees. Helped by the Red Cross, he was brought to Split, but he did not know exactly where he was. Desperate, not knowing the vicissitudes of other family members and whether anybody had survived the massacre, he confronted his dilemma: should he

have helped his wounded brother to die, or rather left him to the mercy of enemy soldiers; how could he have killed his own brother? Would he ever be able to find family members, and where to go now?

In the face of such despair, it looked like an impossible task to try to help with any possible word or action. It is my belief that what can connect people in these situations can be deep compassion, containing, listening and understanding. But words prove to be far too weak to enable a real dialogue. Perhaps an example from besieged Dubrovnik is another episode indicating how in situations of extreme danger and destruction, it is only despair, vengeful needs and feelings, and survival strategies that allow survival through collapsed space and time. I was impressed by the bitter comment of one citizen when we were talking with them in a meeting: "If we survive, we should put a stone memorial with all the names of enemy soldiers beside the road they took to destroy the city and to annihilate us, in order to put lasting shame on them, to make their children and grandchildren feel shame about their fathers' misdeeds". In these cases, empathic listening can be critical in preventing vengeful fantasies from being acted out.

### **Clinical example 2**

#### ***A Dream: Enemy Soldiers Are Running after Him***

In the group setting, one veteran of war was in deep silence for most of the session. Then he found the courage to share with the group his dream from the previous night. He had been in the woods, alone and feeling fearful and insecure. In the middle of the woods was a phonebox. The phone was ringing; he knew it was a call for him. Next dream picture: he was surrounded by ten Chetniks (enemy soldiers). He started to behead them, one by one. Next dream picture: ten of their heads were on spits.

This image was in accordance with the tradition dating back to the centuries of Turkish occupation, when that way of treating enemies and traitors was customary. In dream spaces, it remained vivid, drawing on many transgenerationally transmitted notions, pictures and attitudes, as well as the long-dreamed fulfillment of needs for revenge for many family members who had perished, or had been killed in previous wars or in the repressions that followed those wars.

Such expressions block the unlearning processes, so that new knowledge and insight are unable to enter the situation. Thus, ghosts of the past and present often

occupy a place where open-mindedness would serve much better.

UN statistics show that there are more than 100 armed conflicts and wars going on in the world every day. What a remarkable monument to uncontrolled human aggression! As of 2004, a total of 228 armed conflicts had been recorded in the 59 years since World War II, 118 of those coming after the end of the Cold War.

In Europe, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by two world wars, clashes of two totalitarian ideologies and the rise and fall of empires of various hues. It was believed that the lesson about unleashed human aggression had been learned and that another war in Europe was highly improbable. The former Soviet Union and the former Czechoslovakia had dissolved without a bullet being shot. Nonetheless, Europe had to pass through another war experience during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia. The unimaginable had become a reality.

### Reactions of people under extremely stressful conditions

"War is the woe of human nature," wrote Marin Držić [5] a Renaissance writer from Dubrovnik. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Croatian and Bosnian and Herzegovinian populations had to pass through another woe of this kind, after having endured two world wars and three entirely different political and social systems.

### Clinical example 3

#### **Mirroring of War Experiences Setting: The Dream of a Female Soldier**

In the session from the beginning of group psychotherapy for war veterans, a female group member recounted her dream. *In that dream, there was a football stadium filled with spectators. A football match was taking place. She turned with her face away from the stadium, and yet she knew, because she was looking with something like the third eye, what was going behind her back. When she turned herself towards the stadium, a very strange scene appeared to her: all the players of both teams were lying dead on the grass, the referee wasn't doing anything, and the spectators were leaving their seats in silence.*

*Commenting spontaneously on her dream, she said that after awakening she was feeling confused and angry — confused by such a scene and angry because nobody was apparently doing anything to clarify the situation.* It was obvious enough that the dream reflected the attitudes of the international community toward the

war in Croatia. The interpretation was that the dream reflected intuitions and perceptions that were very common in Croatia at a time of the circumstances that encouraged conflict to start and develop (a kind of social dreaming). The group had some difficulty in accepting that kind of understanding because it seemed that some members, at that level of the development of group process, couldn't fully follow the symbolic way of expressing emotions and facts, especially through a dream.

In trying to understand post-traumatic stress more fully, I would like to quote a proposal expounded by Joseph et al. [13]: "A traumatic event presents an individual with stimulus information which, as perceived at the time, gives rise to extreme emotional arousal but interferes with immediate processing". Representations of these events/stimuli are retained in the memory due to their personal salience and the difficulty they present for easy assimilation with other stored representations.

### **The (therapeutic) mirroring of traumatic hatred**

After having suffered severe traumas and being deeply wounded by them, the essential question arises of how to understand, approach and help healing processes to start and develop. Some clinical vignettes will illustrate the different dimensions of wounds of warfare and their long shadows that influence the entire human personality and society.

### Clinical example 4

The Bosnian director Jasmila Žbanić's film, 'Grbavica' won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. It is a story of the worst possible war atrocities — the destiny of raped women and the consequences for the next generation. Even 16-year-old girls were raped and released from concentration camps only in advanced stages of their pregnancy. There are no confirmed numbers of raped women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but their number was estimated to be between 2,000 and 20,000. Many of them feel so ashamed that they are not willing to expose themselves to new shame and humiliation in front of their social worlds. Some had brought their children with them, but most of them had left those babies behind. These crimes were consciously planned in order to humiliate people and to break down connections between various ethnic groups and individuals. It might be asked what was their guilt that deserved so much hate. The young director of that film posed an open question in her TV interview: what kind of personality, and what kind

of society is it where men experience sexual arousal out of hatred?

After the war, it is possible to feel more or less repressed pain. I remember in the autumn of 1995 going to besieged Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina. There were no more shootings and the Serbian army was withdrawing. Some parts of the town had been destroyed, some others severely damaged. Only two main streets were lit, and the town was cast into darkness every night. It looked like a ghost town. I was asked to help re-establish the University teachings. The hall was filled with students who either couldn't stop talking or were obviously very distracted. I realised that the special situation called for a special approach. I said to the students that I had come to Sarajevo to talk to them but once there I had realised that it would be better first to listen to them. They were very eager to share with me some of their wartime experiences, and they were pointing out many nice and touching moments between going and coming from battle lines, finding friends and family members again, or staying in couples the whole night embracing with just one bottle of plum brandy and having fun and feeling closeness and happiness. As a matter of fact, they were in constant threat of death. Life was very cheap then, and the joy of survival immense. Then we made an agreement: I would lecture according to the timetable and afterwards we would take two hours to talk as the group. By the third day, space among us had been created as well as inside us. That evening, this space had become a very friendly encounter, able to stimulate and to contain horrible yet highly intimate personal stories.

One town, two absolutely different experiences. Some citizens of the town were attacking and destroying it, while the other part was defending it. It all depended on which way you approached, either from the side of hatred and loathing, or with love and in a humane way. Somehow, it was a similar experience I had from the therapeutic setting. Many times, the unconscious reparatory processes were finding their ways of expression first through dreams.

But, first, some intriguing thoughts: the English essayist William Hazlitt (1778–1830) in his work 'On the Pleasure of Hating' wrote: "Nature seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions of men" [2]. And: "Love turns, with a little indulgence, to indifference or disgust: hatred alone is immortal. Our feelings take part with our passions, rather than with our understandings".

Once again, we must address the question as to where human hatred, violence and other aggressive behaviours come from, and what provokes and supports that way of relating to others? Also, how to articulate all the therapeutic procedures to enable the grieving process and the forgiving process to unwind, in order to try to heal deep narcissistic wounds, and the destruction of self and interpersonal relations? In other words, how to reconcile with oneself and others?

### **On the culture of forgiveness and the possibility for reconciliation**

*To forgive means to free the heart  
from feelings of vengeance*

*(Pope John Paul II ending his first visit to Croatia, 1994)*

*... there will be always the need for the process of  
forgiveness and reconciliation in order to repair splits  
that emerge in relationships: that is an inevitable fact  
of the human condition.*

*No future without forgiveness*

*(Archbishop Desmond Tutu [1999])*

McCullough et al. [14] highlighted a fundamentally **psychosocial** element in forgiveness, defining it as "intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context."

The fundamentally interpersonal basis of forgiveness may be pivotal in our evolving understanding of forgiveness's underlying dynamics. Forgiveness is generally seen as a response to unfair treatment that includes a reduction in resentment and the advent of beneficence toward the offender [6].

Worthington et al. (e.g. [22]) make the distinction between **decisional** forgiveness, in which motivations change, and **emotional** forgiveness, in which negative emotions are replaced with more positive, otherwise-oriented emotions (e.g. empathy).

The same author has also stated that in addition to the work of mourning to retrieve the lost libido, the patient must do the work of hating, to liberate his aggression from continued service to the past. Forgiveness is accomplished by recovering the aggression that had been pre-empted by the desire for revenge and redirecting it toward a new goal. The work of forgiving allows for the symbolic blending of aggression and libido into an endeavor created to replace a hated object.

With forgiveness, the blocking introject loses its significance. The goal of revenge passes. Comfort in a stronger ego affords the patient the prospect of a future freed of the hatred from the past. I support the idea that freedom from hatred from the past signifies a regained ability to sublimate aggressive feelings, thus allowing human relations to continue in a more productive and positive way.

Although no 'gold standard' definition of interpersonal forgiveness exists, there is general agreement among theorists and researchers about what forgiveness is not: it is not pardoning (a legal term), excusing (this implies a sound reason for an offence), condoning (implies justification), denying (implies unwillingness to acknowledge), forgetting (implies failed memory, something outside conscious awareness), or reconciliation [14].

As such, forgiveness involves both the reduction of unforgiveness and an increase of positive emotions and perspectives, such as empathy, hope, and compassion.

#### Clinical example 5

##### ***Some experiences from the Centre for Psychosocial Help in Sarajevo, 1995.***

1995, the end of the war, Sarajevo was looking like an entirely devastated town. It was still besieged, but there was no more shooting. 'France Libertes', the organisation for psychosocial help, was helping to organise the University activities and was establishing a small network of Centres for psychosocial help. At that time, this was a much-needed initiative, because the whole social life of the town had been ruined by a thousand days of siege and waves of refugees coming from other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It happened that in one of those Centres, one young man set off a grenade, wounding himself and endangering the lives of two helpers at the Centre, a young man and a young woman. They were so scared that they wanted to abandon psychosocial work immediately. I was asked to try to help them, as well as the whole Centre, to overcome the trauma by working it through if possible.

When we met in the Centre for the first time, I was told by the whole team that they were not intending to proceed with their work because their lives were threatened. But they accepted my proposal that I would talk individually about experiences with every member of the team, and that we would have group meetings of the whole team, together with the French helpers and organisers, in order to understand better their work and their motives for it, as well as their fears. The proposal was accepted. In the meantime,

the young woman in question was re-traumatised by encountering the aggressor in the Court of Justice. At our final group meeting, the whole group was able to work through the trauma to such a degree that they promised, regarding leaving their psychosocial helping activity, to think it over and to give their final decision in two days' time. Their decision was to continue with their helping activities in the Centre.

It might be said that some work on reconciliation with the threat and uncertainty was done by all members of the Centre. But in order to attain the possibility of reconciliation, especially under very difficult circumstances, the process of forgiveness had to take place, and some grieving for the loss of some earlier idealisations of themselves and their aims. There are limits for everyone and for everything, they had to admit.

However, within the forgiveness literature, there is a three-dimensional model of dispositional forgiveness which, aside from **forgiveness of others**, identifies **forgiveness of oneself** (forgiveness regarding one's own previous transgression against others) and **forgiveness of situations** (a tendency to accept and seek closure around a negative life event beyond one's control, such as an earthquake or illness) [22].

#### The neuroscientific model

##### ***Neuroscientific research is developing the Neurological Model of forgiveness [3].***

The cornerstone hypothesis is that before forgiveness takes place, memories periodically arouse fear stemming from the amygdala. This fear drives a pattern of anger and fight-or-flight readiness.

Under appropriate circumstances, the frontal cortex interrupts this pattern and quells the fear response in the amygdala. The resultant relaxation of muscular tension signals to the cortex that forgiveness has occurred. In addition, the memory pathway from the rhinal cortex and hippocampus to the amygdala is inhibited.

Finally, a tangible act confirms that the memories no longer stimulate the amygdala and the pattern of anger and stress does not recur.

Forgiveness may be a prerequisite for reconciliation, but it is a different process.

"The fact that monkeys, apes, and humans all engage in reconciliation behaviour means that it is probably over 30 million years old, preceding the evolutionary divergence of these primates. Instead of looking at reconciliation as a triumph of reason over instinct, we need to begin to study the roots and universality of the psychological mechanisms involved" [4].

### Mourning losses

All loss first must be mourned. Not only the dead.. The loss of self-esteem, of certainty, of group charisma, of physical power, of the rights and privileges associated with a particular phase of life, must all be acknowledged (acc. [12]).

**The mourning process is the most important precondition for the forgiving process to develop.**

### The four stages of forgiving

1. HURTING: we feel hurt — we can only forgive people, but we can't forgive nature or systems. Forgiving is always a personal event.
2. HATING: We hate — hate is our natural response to any deep and unfair pain. It is hate and not anger that needs healing.
3. HEALING ONESELF: We heal ourselves — forgiving someone for hurting us gives us a new insight. The truth about those who hurt us is that they are weak, needy, and fallible human beings.
4. COMING TOGETHER: We come together — with truthfulness you can make an honest new beginning.

How do people forgive?

- Slowly!
- With a little understanding!
- In confusion!
- With anger left over!
- A little at a time!
- Freely or not at all!
- With a fundamental feeling! [17]

According to Gruchy [10]: "Reconciliation begins when, without surrendering our identity or who we are, but opening up ourselves to the 'other,' we enter into the space between, exchanging places with the other, in a conversation that takes us beyond ourselves. In doing so, we find ourselves in vicarious solidarity with, rather than against, the 'other,' willing to do to the 'other' only what we would want them to do to us. Furthermore, in the process our self-understanding begins to change". Siassi [16] wrote: "One of the fruits of forgiveness is a '**forgiving attitude,**' which is also a developmental accomplishment allowing some people to be more forgiving than others, vis-à-vis oneself and the rest of the world. As the process of mourning carries a person from anger to sadness, the superego softens. The work

of forgiveness further continues this softening as the residual narcissistic anger in the relationship gives way to understanding and a longing for rapprochement — to make good the lost relationship".

I believe that to free oneself or one's society from hatred and other hard feelings, the path leads through the processes of four stages: confrontation — mourning — forgiving — reconciliation To heal the undeserved wounds on personal, social and ethnic or national levels, there is a path that I understand as a five step process that should unfold on both sides in a conflict.

### Summary

There is a five step process that should unfold on both sides in a conflict, in the frame of **confrontation — mourning — forgiving — reconciliation** dynamics:

1. Becoming conscious of the problem complexity (confrontation with many different realities and experiences).
2. Developing deeper understanding of its manifest and especially latent contents (the mourning process).
3. Working through the newly gained insight.
4. Renouncing vengeance and making forgiving possible.
5. Creating the space for reconciliatory processes to unfold, with oneself and other(s) (i.e. restoration of the capacity to believe).

The first three steps correspond to the well known usual psychoanalytically informed attitude/work. The fourth and fifth steps, besides rational and emotional components, include ethical, philosophical, spiritual/religious and cultural contents.

Group modalities in dealing with these psychic issues represent the approach of choice, enabling open talk about traumatic experiences and consequences, offering the possibility for mirroring of suffering and of traumatic hatred in a group (therapeutic) setting, thus opening the possibility for restoration of the capacity to believe and for the mourning, forgiving and reconciliation processes to develop.

*I believe that the process of reparation from traumatic experience should unfold starting from confrontation and mourning processes for suffered losses in order to promote the culture of forgiveness — leading to reconciliation with oneself and other(s).*

**Streszczenie**

Rozpatrując kulturę przebaczenia i proces pojednania, należy je opisywać w kontekście dynamiki głębokich ran narcystrycznych — sekwencji zdarzeń od konfrontacji prowadzącej do powstania ran, po której następuje żaloba po stracie, będąca punktem wyjścia do przebaczenia, a może nawet pojednania.

Podsumowując, w niniejszej pracy podkreślono znaczenie procesu żaloby jako najważniejszego czynnika warunkującego zdolność do odzyskania wiary i przejście do kolejnego etapu procesu prowadzącego do przebaczenia. Ten proces powinien obejmować cztery stadia: konfrontację, żalobę, przebaczenie, a następnie pojednanie; może to być również pięcioetapowy proces, w którym uczestniczą obie strony konfliktu. Oprócz indywidualnej psychoterapii jako metodę z wyboru zaleca się terapię grupową ukierunkowaną na radzenie sobie z poważnymi sytuacjami stresowymi, w czasie której można otwarcie rozmawiać o traumatycznych przeżyciach i ich następstwach, co otwiera drogę do odzyskania wiary i rozpoczęcia procesu żaloby, przebaczenia i pojednania.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** ciężki uraz psychiczny, kultura przebaczenia, pojednanie, psychoterapia grupowa

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