

Shared Trauma, Transgenerational Transmission and Societal Well Being

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International Conference on **“Healing the Wounds
of History: Addressing the Roots of History”**

Lebanese American University, Byblos, Lebanon--
November 11-13, 2011,

- I thank Center for Lebanese Studies, Lebanese American University and the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace for asking me to give this keynote speech at the University's beautiful campus situated in the ancient city of Byblos.
- It will be most gratifying for me if my speech plays a role, even a very small one, in understanding some societal problems in present-day Lebanon and in establishing constructive relations between its various communities.



OUTLINE: General comments

- The main focus of this presentation is **on the societal consequences of wars or war-like situations between states or within one state in subsequent generations.**
- Since wars and war-like situations result in tragic losses, individual and **societal mourning** (an obligatory response to loss) occurs.
- Because in wars and war-like situations people are subjected to actual traumas, they feel victimized, dehumanized, helpless and humiliated; **mourning becomes complicated.**
- The traumatized group that cannot effectively go through mourning will transfer unfinished psychological tasks to **future generation.**
- **Forgiveness and societal well-being will be possible when societal mourning takes place and “mental doubles” of lost persons and things become futureless but valued memories.**

OUTLINE: Topics to be discussed

1- Shared Traumas

2- Large-group Identity: Belonging

3- Difficulty in completing certain shared psychological experiences

4- “Depositing” and Transgenerational transmission

5- Consequences of generational transmissions

6- Putting shared mourning on the right track

7- The psychology of societal well-being

1-Shared Traumas



TYPES OF SHARED TRAUMAS

Natural disasters:

Earthquakes,
tsunamis, floods,
tropical storms,
volcanic eruptions,
famine etc.



Man-made accidental disasters:

Chernobyl, for example.



Assassination or
accidental death of large-
groups'

**“transference
figures”:**

John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King,
Jr., Giorgi Chanturia, Rafik Hariri, for
example.



Terror or oppression from above



Massive trauma at the hands of “others:”

Shared trauma that directly becomes linked to large-group identity issues

*There is a **deliberate** design to humiliate, render helpless, or kill the “other” **in the name of a large-group identity.**

*The enemy is **dehumanized** to one degree or another before being killed. When dehumanization occurs, a “license” is issued to murder the enemy without guilt.



Sometimes it is difficult to discriminate between different types of disasters.

1988 Armenian earthquake

1999 Turkish earthquake

2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka



Typical responses:

The large-group rallies behind the leader.

- If the leader cannot maintain “basic trust” severe splits and fragmentations occur within the large group.
- The large-group’s shared morality or belief system becomes increasingly **absolutist and punitive** toward those perceived to be in conflict with it.
- The large group uses extensive **introjective and projective mechanisms** and may experience accompanying massive mood swings from collective “depression” to collective paranoid expectations.

More typical responses:

- Large group members experience increased **large-group narcissism** (it can be masochistic or malignant narcissism), **magical thinking** (or **religious fundamentalism**) and **reality blurring**.
- Shared images depict enemy groups with symbols (or protosymbols) associated with **bodily waste**, demons, or subhuman traits.
- The large group focuses on **minor differences** between itself and enemy group.
- The large group experiences legal or geographical boundaries as a “second skin” (**BORDER PSYCHOLOGY**).

- **Large groups** (tribal, ethnic, national, religious or ideological) do not have one brain to think or two eyes to cry.
- When **tens of thousands or millions of members** of a large group **share** a psychological journey (such as going through a complicated mourning process after a massive trauma) what we see are societal/political processes that are typical as well as specific for the large group.

2-Large- group Identity: Belonging

Belonging to a large-group identity is part of human existence. In “normal” times it makes us not to feel alone, it increases our self –esteem and pride and plays a big role in shaping our individual identity.

What is large-group identity?

- Refers to tribal affiliation, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or political ideology.
- Is the subjective experience of thousands or millions who are linked by a persistent sense of sameness, even while sharing some characteristics with those who belong to “other” large groups.
- Does not change after going through the adolescence passage. Endures throughout a lifetime.

“We are Apaches”
“We are Maronites”
“We are Arabs”
“We are Polish”
“We are Hindus”
“We are Muslims”
“We are Communists”
“ We are FFVs
(First Family of Virginia)
“We are White”



In a large group most individuals will never meet each other during their lifetimes. Yet, they share, beginning in childhood, language, religion, nursery rhythms, food, songs, dances, sentiments and **mental representations of history.**




They also share **cultural amplifiers** -- concrete or abstract symbols and designs that are only associated with a particular large group – (Finnish sauna or Georgian Tamada [თამადა], [the toastmaster at a Georgian Supra (feast)], for example) and are usually accepted as superior and a source of pride.

THE TENT METAPHOR:

Imagine a **canvass extending from a pole** out over tens of thousand or millions of people, **including the leader**, forming a huge tent.

The canvass represents large-group



- 
- If the tent's canvass shakes or parts of it are torn, people become preoccupied with the canvass [**large group identity**].
 - They will do anything to stabilize, repair, maintain and protect it.
 - They will tolerate extreme **sadism or masochism** if it helps to protect and maintain the large-group identity.

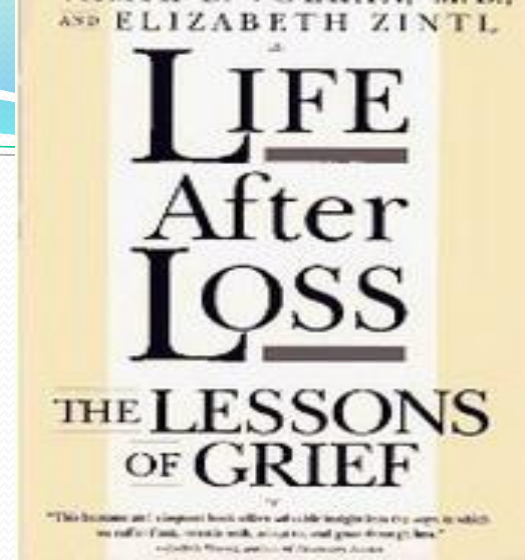
3-Difficulty in completing
certain shared psychological
experiences:

- 1-Sense of victimization and feeling dehumanized.
- 2-Sense of humiliation and (hidden) shame.
- 3- Sense of survival guilt.
- 4- Inability to be assertive.
- 5- Increase in externalizations/projections.
- 6- Exaggeration of “bad” prejudice.
- 7- Increase in narcissistic investment in large-group identity,
- 8- Envy toward the victimizer and (defensive) identification with the oppressor.
- 9- Sense of **unending mourning**.

On Mourning

- Crises grief period, which begins the moment loss occurs or is threatened
- Our bodies and minds balk
- The crisis period ends as we “accept” the reality of death
- We begin the second stage of subtle and complex negotiations required to convert the relationship into memory that no longer preoccupies (**The work of mourning**)

The work of mourning



- Assessing the relationship to the mental images of the dead person
- It can be exhausting.
- Keeping images and letting them go
- Investment in “new” objects
- “Remembrance formation”

4- “Depositing” and Transgenerational transmission

*When a traumatized large group cannot reverse its feelings of helplessness and humiliation, cannot assert itself, cannot effectively go through the work of mourning and cannot complete other psychological journeys, it transfers these unfinished psychological tasks to future generations. (**CONCEPT of DEPOSITING**).

* All tasks that are handed down contain references to the **same historical event**, and as decades pass, the shared mental representation of this event links all the individuals in the large group and evolves as a most significant large-group marker (**CHOSEN TRAUMA**).

***The chosen trauma makes thousands and millions of people designated – "chosen" – to be linked together.**

Examples of Chosen Traumas:

- **Russians:** The Tartar/Mongol invasion
- **Greeks:** The fall of Constantinople (Istanbul) to the Turks in 1453
- **Serbian:** The Battle of Kosovo in 1589
- **Czechs:** The Battle Bila Hora in 1620
- **Scots:** The Battle of Culloden in 1746
- **Dakota Indians:** The decimation at Wounded Knee in 1890
- **Crimean Tatars:** Deportation from Crimea in 1944

- Some chosen traumas are difficult to detect because they are not connected to one well-recognized historical event.(For example, the **Estonians'** chosen trauma is related to constant dominance [Dutch, Swedes, Germans, Soviets] for hundreds of years)

5-Consequences of
generational transmissions:
Entitlement ideologies

Time Collapse

- * The conscious and unconscious connections between a chosen trauma (and other past historical event) and contemporary threat that emerges.
- Shared anxieties, expectations, fantasies, and defenses associated with the past **magnify** the image of the current conflicts.
- If the large group is powerless, a shared sense of victimization is reanimated.
- People become psychologically prepared for sadistic or masochistic acts, and perpetrate monstrous cruelty against “others.”

Entitlement ideologies

- Entitlement ideologies refer to a **shared sense of entitlement to recover what was lost in reality and fantasy** during the collective trauma that evolved as a chosen trauma and during other related shared traumas.
- They may also refer to **the mythologized birth of a large group**, a process which later generations idealize.
- Each large group's entitlement ideology is specific.

Some entitlement ideologies are known by specific names in the political literature.

- **Italians:** Italia Irredenta (irredentism).
- **Greeks:** Megali Idea (Great Idea).
- **Turks:** Pan-Turanism (bringing all the Turkic people together from Anatolia to central Asia).
- **Serbs:** Christoslavism.
- **Americans:** American Exceptionalism.

***Entitlement ideologies may last for decades or centuries and may disappear and reappear when historical circumstances change and chosen traumas or other past historical images are activated.**

*** They accompany the re-activation of chosen traumas.**

***They contaminate diplomatic negotiations.**

***They may result in changing the world map in peaceful or, unfortunately too often, dreadful ways.**

***They may result in **purification**.**

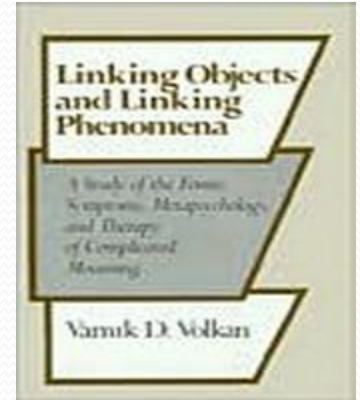
PURIFICATION

(Examples from Greece, Turkey, Latvia, the United States and Serbia).



6-Putting shared mourning on the right tract

We never let someone or something important to us go. Because the unconscious is timeless, once we have invested emotionally in a person or thing, we keep its psychic double in the recesses of our minds.



- **Opening up the societal mourning process:** arts, music, poetry, movies, conferences, etc (without humiliating the other)
- The concept of **“Linking objects”**
- Building **Reparative Monuments:** Shared linking objects.

7-The psychology of societal well-being

Assessing and responding positively to danger signals:

- Provocation from the “other.”
- Reactivating chosen traumas.
- Inflaming an entitlement ideology (reactivating complicated mourning) .
- Asking “who are we now” that may lead to extreme purification. (**The Serbian example**).
- Political leader’s psychology dovetailing with large-group regression.
- Inability to maintain the two principles.

Two Principles

Two unalterable and intertwined principles are evident in relationship of large groups in conflict:

- 1. Maintenance of Non-Sameness**
- 2. Maintenance of a Psychological Border**

Maintenance of societal well-being:

- Maintaining the two principles.
- Having **time and space to “play”** (the Berlin Wall example).
- Building **“healing” monuments**.
- Truth and Reconciliation type activities.
- The Tskinali experiment.
- Opening Communications between the opposing groups without inducing humiliation
- **(The Tree Model)**.

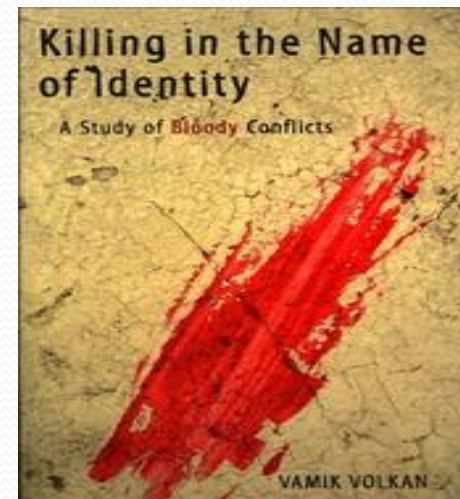
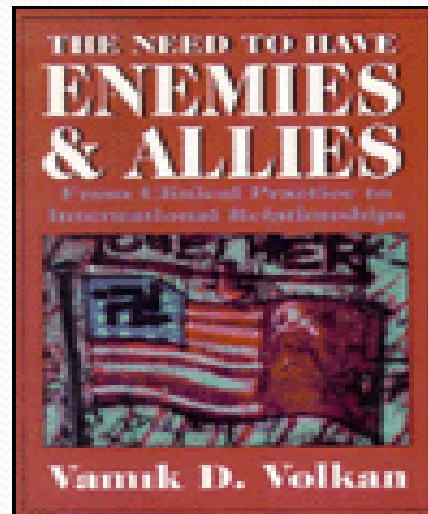
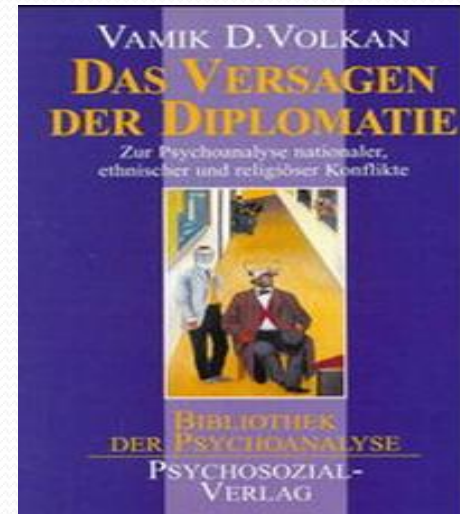
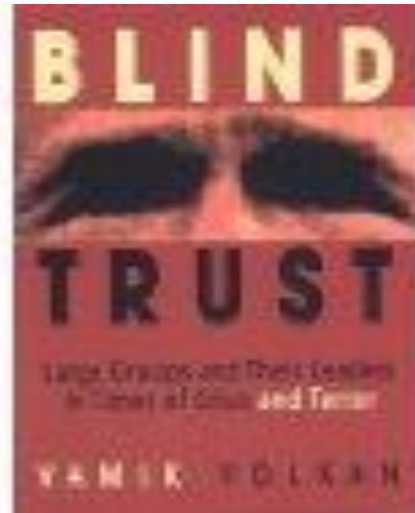
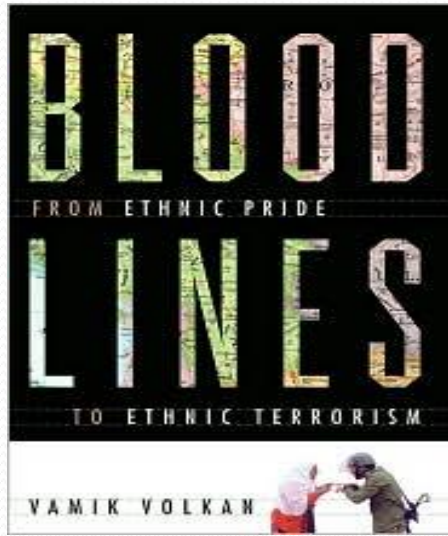
TREE MODEL



This methodology has three basic components or phases:

- ❖ Psychopolitical assessment of the situation (representing **the roots** of a tree)
- ❖ Psychopolitical dialogues between influential members of opposing groups (representing **the trunk** of a tree)
- ❖ Collaborative actions and institutions that grow out of the dialogue process (representing **the branches** of a tree)

For further information:



THANK YOU FOR LISTENING TO ME

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