

Collective Healing of Traumas: New Possibilities for Peace in Communities

A One-Day International Symposium

9.30 am – 5.30 pm, 24th September 2019
The RSA, 8 John Adam Street, London, WC2N 6EZ

In the wake of large-scale atrocities, such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, genocides, apartheid, and political oppression, human suffering can haunt families for generations. The harmful effects of violence may persist in different guises, including humiliation, anger and fear. At the same time as people experience the harms associated with past mass traumas, they may continue to be subject to social deprivation, persecution, institutionalised discrimination and other forms of injustice. These symptoms of structural dehumanisation can lead to hostile relationships between persons and groups, which deepen the effects of traumas.

Despite its importance, healing has not always been recognised as a significant aspect of peace. The healing practices available tend to be patchy and limited, and seeking such healing is often regarded as the responsibility of the individual rather than part of a societal peace process. This individualistic conception of healing ignores both the systemic dehumanisation at the root of mass violence, and the fact that structural transformation is necessary for the caring and fair systems in which people can heal and flourish. Without systematic healing processes, people may continue to live with the harmful effects of collective trauma, which could be passed on trans-generationally. They may continue to feel disempowered and alienated. Structural oppression can further perpetuate the relationships that once divided communities and drove people to violence. This makes reconciliation, trusting relationships and a culture of peace most challenging.

In this context, many communities have decided to bring groups together to explore collective healing. Collective initiatives can remove the blame and onus from hurt individuals, and empower those suffering from the wounds of a violent past to collaborate towards mutual healing. These community-based practices focus on initiating and facilitating psycho-social processes of healing through narrative sharing, listening, witnessing, dialogue and collaborative actions. They hold the promise that in acts of healing, a community can be re-energised through encounters and friendships, thus co-creating new possibilities for peace.

To better understand the significance of these community-rooted collective healing endeavours, the GHFP and the UNESCO Slave Route Project invite you to join us in an international symposium to explore these themes. This one-day event will bring together key scholars and practitioners who have experience and expertise in engaging communities in healing mass traumas.

The symposium will focus on three questions:

1. What are the typical psychological and social symptoms encountered in communities resulting from the experience and legacies of past atrocities?
2. What might constitute collective healing in these situations?
3. How do community-based processes and practices contribute to collective healing? (And how would the community evaluate collective healing? What are the relevant indicators that some healing has taken place?)

We ask each contributor to kindly prepare, before the Symposium, a written sketch of their thoughts (say, 2-4 pages in length) which helps address the questions posed. This sketch will be circulated amongst all participants on Monday 16th September. The underlying intention is that by articulating one's responses to the questions, and by sharing and reading each other's contributions, the dialogue would start prior to our face-to-face meeting.

The event will combine brief individual presentations in the morning with focused conversations in the afternoon. We believe that the dialogue will help strengthen the thoughts and practices of each contributor.

The GHFP will aim to put together a collection of the completed papers, and to disseminate them through a special edition or a book.

For further information about the Symposium, its questions and how to contribute, please contact:

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For information about the venue, logistics, and other enquiries about the event, please contact:

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