

A Path To Freedom: Healing the Trauma of War
Plenary Speech
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It is a great honor for me to speak today, December 9, 2022, in the opening ceremonies for the Association for Psychologists and Psychotherapists of Ukraine. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my beloved friend, colleague, and translator, Dr. Olha Serha, and to another dear colleague, Dr. Tetiana Komar, Associate Professor of Psychology at Vinnytsia State Pedagogical University, who will be sharing my thoughts with you across nine time zones.

“The Path to Freedom” is an evocative title for us to contemplate. What is freedom, and what moves it forward? This title is all the more powerful now, at this time in Ukraine’s history. Your nation has been in an ongoing battle for your freedom and sovereign existence against a brutally aggressive neighbor, a regime that has gone mad in its excessive and sadistic authoritarianism. You are fierce freedom fighters: whether citizens, soldiers, educators, or psychotherapists.

In your strength and courage, I am reminded of the United States First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s speech from 1958, which defined in simple terms, a broader understanding of what is meant by human rights and what is encompassed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights formulated by the United Nations in 1948. Ms. Roosevelt wrote:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he/she lives in; the school or college he/she attends; the factory, farm, or office where he/she works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.” (Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958)

There can be no mental health in a nation without human rights. Ukrainian citizens whether on the ground, on the frontlines, or in the diaspora are fighting for the soul of your country, for your nation’s right to exist. You have committed yourselves to training in the field of psychology so that you can more skillfully work with trauma, ensuring that the fight itself does not destroy you. This fight for freedom is the very reason we have gathered together to reflect, share, and learn from each other over these next three days.

The Ukrainian clinical community is a deeply dedicated and remarkable group of psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, group psychotherapists and social workers. I have had the privilege of training many of you over these long months since the invasion, as part of the Support Ukraine Initiative -- a trauma training collaboration between the International Association for Group Psychotherapy and the International Center for Mental Health and Human

Rights where I serve as Clinical Director.

I have come to know your community. You have demonstrated your clinical excellence and your determination to continue in the training programs offered, while a war rages on all around you. Millions have fled your homeland, now many Ukrainian colleagues are joining us from the diaspora. Psychologists from Mykolaiv have continued to attend our training despite power outages caused by Russia's relentless attack on infrastructure. Several psychotherapists from Kyiv had to leave in the middle of a workshop... to escape yet another round of shelling. Social workers from Zaporizhzhia have joined us online despite the illegal annexation, anxieties about the nuclear power plant and under martial law. Students and their professors joined us from Vinnytsia, even after the missile strike on the medical Center that killed twenty seven staff members. Among them, two of the top child and adult neurologists in the country. At our home in the mountains of New Mexico, almost 10,000 kilometers away, we lit observance candles to honor Pavel and Natalia and all those that lost their lives that day.

This weekend, we also have with us many equally dedicated graduate students in psychology and social work. I want to acknowledge you today. You are the next generation of Ukraine's psychologists. All of you will be called upon to bear the spiritual and psychological weight of the nation's healing process for decades to come, a sacred duty to help heal the wounds -- visible and invisible. Your work ahead will be to intervene on the conscious and unconscious echoes of this war and the risks of its potential epigenetic and multigenerational impact. It may sound like too much to bear, and some days it may feel like that, but look at all the faces on our video screen here. You are not alone. We are on this path to freedom together. Do not give up! Your country needs you every bit as much as your brave soldiers on the frontlines for this is also frontline work.

Dr. Anna Ornstein, a Hungarian American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, worked closely with Heinz Kohut until his death in 1981. Almost thirty years ago, she gave a plenary speech in New York City at the American Group Psychotherapy Association. I was lucky enough to be in the audience. She and her husband Paul Ornstein, like many Eastern European psychoanalysts, came as refugees to the United States after the Second World War. She was one of the youngest child survivors of Auschwitz. She lost her father and her brothers to the concentration camps. Only she and her mother survived. She looked out at the audience and said, "The Nazis didn't know they gave us the very thing we needed to survive..." Then she paused. ... "They gave us -- each other -- bunk by bunk".

Years later, I was leading trauma training for several social service agencies in Dharamsala, a Tibetan refugee community in the Himalayan Range in Northern India. Many of the Tibetan refugees were former political prisoners who had been tortured in the Chinese prison system. I interviewed many men and women. I asked them what had been helpful in their healing process, their path to freedom. Several cited their meditation practices, which allowed them to calm themselves and find freedom in their own minds even as prisoners. Many expressed

that it helped to view the prison guards with compassion. They felt that with this freedom they could maintain their humanity. French philosopher and psychoanalyst Marilia Aisenstein, MD, in writing about therapeutic action in 2007 said, "Analysis is uncompromising...more than bringing relief from a symptom, it aims at aiding our patients to become, or to become again, the

principal agents in their own history and thought. Am I too bold in insisting that this is the sole inalienable freedom a human being possesses?"

In 2011, Jampa Monlam, the Director of the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, shared personal stories with me about his imprisonment and the torture endured. Then he looked at me and said, "You know, the Chinese didn't know that they gave us the one thing we needed to heal--each other. In having each other we could feel support, in caring for each other our compassion was not destroyed." I told him about the psychoanalyst Anna Ornstein and what she had shared in her speech in New York. He didn't know what a psychoanalyst was, but he knew that he and Anna had traveled similar paths. We cried together, sharing something so deep and so painfully true. Jampa, like Anna, was not alone in knowing something of the power of "each other."

As American Psychoanalyst Robert Stolorow writes, "It isn't the trauma, it is being alone with the trauma that destroys us."

Yet every analytic theory or theorist has its own limitations. Freud, in his eagerness to substantiate a scientific basis of "objectivity" for the acceptance of the Oedipal Theory, denied the psychological impact of the Holocaust to survivors, even though so many members of his own family had perished in concentration camps. He was silent as to the reality of a Jewish genocide or to the impact on so many European analysts. This "silence of the forefathers" has kept us overly focused on intrapsychic conflict, family of origin issues, family history, developmental trauma at the exclusion of socio-cultural trauma or the profound exigencies of multigenerational trauma.

When I was a young psychology graduate student in 1980, Bessel van der Kolk and his team developed the term "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." It was then approved as a diagnostic category in the US, replacing older inadequate terms such as "war neurosis" and "shell shock." Based on research from American soldiers after the VietNam war, it named, identified, and made sense of symptoms related to the outcome of overwhelming stress. Finally, the silence was broken!

Our awareness of trauma and our intervention options have been revolutionized through research and innovation. We have seen powerful developments in trauma informed psychotherapy, neuroscience, somatic experiencing, and EMDR. The contemporary psychoanalytic schools such as self-psychology, the relational and intersubjective school, and phenomenological-contextualism have moved beyond an intra-psychic model. Socio-cultural trauma is no longer silenced and is now explored. There has been a growing development in psychoanalytic literature in the area of cultural trauma and its impact. Psychodrama, Group Analysis and Group Process work have provided powerful breakthroughs for individuals struggling with avoidance, depression, isolation, and the feeling of being alone with their trauma, often leading to addiction and suicidality. Results from clinical trials in Psychedelic Assisted Psychotherapy for "treatment-resistant PTSD" prove promising, highly impactful, and cost-effective. We find compelling neuroscience

research on the calming and self-regulatory effects of contemplative practices derived from Buddhist meditation when integrated into daily life. We have come a long way to more fully understand trauma and its array of symptoms. This helps us to provide a path to freedom.

Over the last forty-five years, as a Buddhist and as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, I have had the privilege of training with remarkable teachers in the fields of contemplative practice, trauma-informed psychotherapy, neuroscience, and contemporary psychoanalysis. Throughout this time, I have also had the privilege of training remarkable students. When I train my students, I know I am teaching skills for what they will need in their work for their own healing as well as their patients, both present and future. Working with trauma is at once inspiring, heart-breaking, enraging, transformative, and deeply connecting for the patient and the analyst, whether in the quiet of an office, on the battlefield, on a Zoom call, in a refugee camp, or in post-conflict communities. I am in solidarity with my Ukrainian colleagues. We are together on this path to freedom. And as Martin Luther King taught us to say during the days of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, “We shall overcome!”

Within Buddhism there is a belief that we are not free until we are all free. Through simple practices: breath work, grounding, mindful awareness, and compassion, we cultivate skills to strengthen our capacity to calm the nervous system, psyche, and soma. Ukrainian clinicians -- whether on the ground, on the frontlines or in the diaspora -- face ongoing and cumulative acute stress. In working with our own calm, we gain the capacity to help others do the same. As William James wrote in his groundbreaking work from 1870, *The Principles of Psychology*,

“The greatest thing in all of this education is to make our nervous system our ally not our enemy.”

But we must begin with ourselves, by calming our own nervous systems, if we are to offer a calm path forward for our families, our loved ones, our soldiers, our communities. This calm is essential for clinicians. Calm creates calm. As analysts -- or psychotherapists -- we work with a wide range of emotions and states of mind, within ourselves, in our patients, and in the relational space between us. When we are calm, we can listen deeply, and help our patients identify and name the difficult feelings of grief, shame, rage, envy, terror, horror, and their manifestations in addiction and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. In listening from a calm nervous system, we can also help our patients make room for positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, awe, inspiration, altruism and love.

There is profound freedom in a mind calm enough to attune to the suffering of another -- or our own -- and not to be overwhelmed by it. This calm can also give us the ability to attune with and validate positive emotions as they emerge in ourselves or our patients. In order to do so, we must have the ability to be “present” or in other words, to be “in the here-and-now”. We cannot proceed on a path to freedom without that basic skill of being able to find calm in the present moment.

Regardless of differences in individual psychological organization, developmental history, or clinical training, Ukrainian psychologists and psychotherapists share a deeply profound context with their patients: the context of WAR. As clinicians, you are required to find language and non-verbal resonance to the intense emotions and unimaginable realities.

American psychoanalyst Robert Stolorow, author of *Trauma and Human Existence*, describes what he calls the “loss of absolutism” when our perception of a safe and secure world is

shattered overnight. We become “siblings in the dark” with one another. These experiences need to be named,” turned toward” instead of “away from”, without reassurance or platitude. Catastrophic experience can threaten to overwhelm both your patient’s and your own capacity

to cope,

to calm,

to think,

to hope,

to care,

to laugh,

to cherish,

and even to love.

The therapeutic action of naming is like carrying a lantern along a path in the dark of night.

I am reminded of the famous poet and dissident, Anna Akmatova. Born in Odessa, Akhmatova wrote *Requiem* in the days of the Stalin terror from 1935 to 1940. She describes a scene outside the prison in Leningrad, freezing in the cold of winter, where her son and husband were being held and tortured. Her first husband had already been executed by Stalin. This is her preface:

“In the awful days of the Yezhovshchina, I spent seventeen months in the outer waiting line of the prison visitors in Leningrad. Once, somebody identified me there. Then a woman, standing behind me in the line, which, of course, had never heard my name, woke up from the torpor, typical for us all there, and asked me, whispering into my ear (all spoke only in a whisper there):

“And can you describe this?”

And I answered:

“Yes, I can.”

Then the weak similarity of a smile glided over what had once been her

face.” ~ 1957, Leningrad

When Anna said she could describe the experience, this meant she could bring language and meaning to their shared suffering. In imagining this, the woman could once again come alive. A whisper of a smile came across what once was her face... She was -- even if only briefly -- restored to inhabiting her face, her unique smile, her own mind. She was no longer alone.

The path to freedom requires these lanterns, the felt sense of connection, combined with affectively resonate language that captures, identifies, and symbolizes the experience. In one of our recent trainings for psychologists in Mykolaiv, a psychologist asked, "Is it damaging to the patient if I cry?" We cannot help but to bring our subjectivities along on this shared path to freedom. It is through knowing our own subjectivity that we are truly able to connect with each other. But we must come to know the difference among emotional contagion, empathy, and compassion.

Recently in another of our training sessions, a young male psychologist, connected to the military, volunteered to be in a small demonstration process group. The topic was suicide and hope. The group members bravely shared about their experiences of feeling suicidal and losing hope. They broke their silences. They brought language to their shared suffering and to the shame of secrecy. In the debriefing, the young man spoke, "Now..." he said, "I have wings."

We must learn to strengthen our capacity for compassion -- even fierce compassion -- in the face of suffering. We begin the practice of compassion with ourselves. Only then can we truly extend to loved ones, difficult others, our patients, the stranger on the street, the soldier, or the mother, the grandmother, the grandfather, and children of the diaspora. We come into a reckoning of the vulnerability of being human. Perhaps at some point in the future, we may even find compassion for our enemies. Compassion is more important than forgiveness. Compassion is the light in the dark when empathy fails. Compassion allows us to widen back, providing an embracing perspective on suffering, and paradoxically enables us to stay "turned toward" each other. Compassion is a shared responsibility which makes possible a path to freedom.

I believe a comprehensive approach to human liberation is possible through contemplative practice, trauma informed psychotherapy, and contemporary psychoanalysis. I see it every day, in my own life and in the lives of my patients.

My dear Ukrainian colleagues:

Even from before the recent invasion, I have witnessed your courage, resilience, and strength. I have seen your determined commitment to your training and education, I am humbled by your altruism to be of service to psychological and spiritual healing of your nation. And I have been deeply impacted by your dignity, your resolve and capacity to fight for freedom, in your small towns, your cities, on the frontlines and in the diaspora. Democracy, and the freedom it affords, is a fragile experiment at best, your fight for it a model for the world.

I will close with these last words from American poet, William Stafford, "Being a Person" 2010

"How you stand here is important. How you listen for the next things to happen. How you breathe."

Gaea Logan, LPC-S, CGP is the Clinical Director and Founder of the [International Center for](#)

[Mental Health and Human Rights](#), and its project, the Support Ukraine Initiative in partnership with the International Association for Group Psychotherapy.

Gaea has offered contemporary psychoanalytic psychotherapy to individuals, couples, and groups as well as clinical consultation and supervision for over forty years. She is a Certified Group Psychotherapist, a Fellow of the American Group Psychotherapy Association, and an alumna of the Harvard Refugee Trauma Global Mental Health Program.

Her evidence-based trauma protocol, *Contemplative Based Trauma and Resiliency Training*, has been adapted for utilization in UN Peace-Keeping Missions throughout the Middle East, in Lebanon, Turkey, Africa, the US as well as Ukraine. She is passionate about clinical prose and poetry and has co-authored two books, *Examining Social Identity and Diversity Issues in Group Psychotherapy* and *Self Regulation for Kids K-12:: Calming Minds and Behaviors*.

In recognition of clinical excellence and humanitarian outreach, Gaea is a past recipient of the Social Responsibility Award of the American Group Psychotherapy Association and the Visionary Leader Award in her local affiliate group psychotherapy society. She is a 3rd year psychoanalytic candidate at the Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles.