

The Trauma of Cultural Displacement

TONY WALSH

It is important to address the multi-faceted nature of the trauma of displacement and the challenges of rebuilding life in a foreign culture if we are to gain insights into the processes involved in building culturally diverse community.

DISPLACEMENT

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

To become a refugee is to become dislocated, often separated violently from home, loved ones, work and community, and from all that is familiar and predictable. Physical, cultural, psychological and emotional displacement is at the heart of the experience.

Three distinct phases emerge as central elements of the trauma. Firstly, what is often perceived as the central axis of the experience, the actual physical uprooting, frequently takes place against a background of years of uncertainty, oppression, violence or persecution and economic deprivation, which will have taken a profound physical and emotional toll. Then comes the actual violence of physical, psychological and cultural displacement. Thirdly, this is inexorably followed not so much by the arrival in a safe haven as by the compelling necessity of engaging with an alien and often inscrutable new culture.

Such a trinity constitutes deep human trauma. It has the effect of radically disrupting the normal coping mechanisms as well as rupturing the very core of personal identity. Robert Jay Lifton, whose work on the psychological accompaniments of crisis is seminal, suggests that in a real

way the survivor of such violence suffers a death: the death of the self.¹ Nothing can ever be quite the same again. What eventually may begin to emerge is a sense of survival which translates itself into the task of rebuilding identity, and the recreating of a range of relationships, and connections in which this can happen – a difficult task at the best of times but more so in a totally new world.

Relational

The psychological sequel of any trauma includes a sensed violation of the connection with meaningful others. And the questioning whether important human relationships are real, or of their quality. The trauma of refugee displacement adds another layer to this relational aspect.

Many refugees will have to cope with real as well as perceptual difficulties in relationship. Generally, they will, quite literally, have been torn from core relationships through removal. They may also have been forced to question existing relationships following political intrigue and subsequent betrayal in their country of origin. Some will have experienced torture at the hands of fellow nationals or even family members.

In their new context there will be difficulties as they interact with officialdom, or experience threats, rejection and negativity from existing residents. At times, there will also be the attitudes of fellow refugees to contend with as they, acting out their own saga of pain and frustration, scapegoat vulnerable newcomers and vent their anger on them. Such experiences inevitably provoke questions not only about the reliability of others, but also tend to destabilise a secure sense of self, promoting internal questioning, insecurity and an undermining of confidence and appreciation of one's own value and abilities.

Meaning

Human beings operate within a range of accustomed belief systems which give meaning to their lives and offer generally acceptable explanations about the world and its happenings. Such belief systems offer a framework through which sense can be made of the variety of events which we encounter. Belief systems can be political, ideological or, indeed, theological. They generally encompass value systems and assump-

1. R. J. Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 1991, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

tions about how to live life, and are very connected to the values and cultures in which we live. While they vary enormously from culture to culture and from individual to individual, their function is central in creating a sense of shared order.

Trauma frequently has the result of inviting a profound questioning of these assumed values, and the world of values and belief systems rarely remains intact; it must be re-worked and re-ordered to include and make sense of both past and recent events as well as newly emergent realities.

Sudden cultural or relational displacement can also create a huge perturbation through which we recognise that our former value systems are unshared in the new context, as well as no longer functioning adequately in the task of making sense of the events of our life. For refugees, the world view developed within their home community may well need a radical re-interpretation, if not re-invention to encompass the trauma of displacement and the world of new realities, beliefs and behaviours encountered in the new cultural milieu. This constitutes the removal of another bedrock and poses the challenge of rediscovering a more useful and effective way of sense-making. Until this can happen, individuals are often cast adrift on a sea where there seem to be no certainties, no values and no certainty whatsoever.

Resources

The creation of a new sense of security and stability is dependant on an ability to recognise, access and utilise both internal and external resources. To be able to appreciate the internal personal resources and to recognise external resources as familiar and accessible is of prime assistance when faced with difficulty. Classical crisis theory, however, suggests that trauma results in a sense of being cut off not only from the sense of the core of self but also from one's awareness of internal resources which fuel coping mechanisms in situations of challenge. When external resources are masked by unfamiliar language, inaccessible and bureaucratic processes and difficulty of access, this add to the difficulty.

REBUILDING

Profound as all these influences are, those who have been displaced almost without exception enter into a process of rebuilding their lives in the new context. For some, depending on their personality, their previ-

ous life experience, their level of adaptability and the level of their trauma, this will be easier than for others. There are those who will need to engage with their new world very slowly: for them the prime task may be the need for safety and security. Hence their energies will tend to go into re-creating and conserving as much as possible of the familiar. They may rarely venture outside their family, or the ethnic social or community group which they have discovered. Others will feel much more able to adventure and will have sufficient energy to engage with the new society, develop relationships and engage in creative networking.

All, however, are in a process of adaptation. Their energies for new challenges will tend to be uneven; the process of human healing is never uniform and has its own ebbs and flows. There will for years, even for those who appear strongest, be areas of huge vulnerability which, as in grief, can be brought to the surface by the most unlikely events. And people will tend to be particularly sensitive to events in the home-land and to losses or changes within the family or community of origin from whom they are now physically separated. Whether rapid or more gentle, the process of rebuilding life does have a number of particular facets.

Re-learning

Refugees by definition consistently find themselves in places that are culturally, linguistically and racially alien.² An important response is to engage in a learning project which encompasses three distinct but overlapping phases. There is the new learning that is geared towards acquiring new information. Secondly, there is the learning that is related to the development of new coping mechanisms for the new context. Finally, there is a re-viewing of one's old assumptions and ways of seeing the world.

Arrival in a new country where one is unfamiliar with the language and has little knowledge of how to access supports and no awareness of cultural norms, can pose problems for mere survival. Learning how to find accommodation, food, money, a job; how to acquire suitable clothing or even how to ascertain what clothing might be necessary in an unfamiliar climate, are all central. Focusing on how to become appraised

2. L.A. Camino and R.M. Krulfeld. 1994. 'Introduction', in L.A. Camino and R.M. Krulfeld (eds) *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning; Refugee Identity, Gender and Cultural Change*, 1994, London: Gordon and Breach Publishers.

of one's rights, even how to discover the new norms of behaviour; how to learn a new code of behaviour and communication are among the challenges to be engaged with.

Examples of difficulty are legion. One sixteen year old African, escaping from the threat of ritual murder, arrived in Dublin alone and vulnerable on a freezing February day. He spent three nights sleeping in a phone box, because he did not know where or how to find help.

A forty year old Congolese pastor, as soon as he was able to access the basics of survival, spent as much time as possible in bed during his first six months in Ireland. Nothing in his previous life had prepared him for the cold of an Irish winter or the pain of violent separation from his wife and children; the idea of meeting and interacting with new people was too much. So he learned to cope by withdrawal. At least when he slept he could escape the pain of separation and block out the cold; so he learned to deal with the first phase of engagement in the new context.

Even when the necessities of survival are attended to, the larger and longer term questions of how to grasp the cultural norms, values and expectations of the host culture remain. Learning how to engage with the obliqueness of a strange culture, with its hidden meanings, implicit norms and unclear expectations is a huge challenge. Learning to respond appropriately is even more challenging. There are few easy ways of engaging with such subtle layers of complexity.

And then there is the subtler level of re-learning one's view of the world or the self. Sahr Yambasu gives a vivid example his own experience of having to re-learn at that more delicate level

[L]ike a revelatory experience it suddenly occurred to me one day...that perhaps success in life is not necessarily about a constant upward climb ... but is about how successfully one manages both the upward and downward trends, and also the curves. It was the dawn of a new way of seeing and being. It issued in a profound rethink of my circumstances in Ireland that led to the decision to engage in positive action with the hope of re-building my capacity for the society that I was now living in.³

3. S. Yambasu, 'Interrogating Displacement', in A. Ryan and T. Walsh (eds.), *Unsettling the Horses*, 2004, Maynooth: MACE, p. 38.

Re-inventing self

The demand is not just to make sense of a new culture; rather it is to do something much more radical. It is to re-invent the self in keeping with the demands, norms, messages and expectations of that culture.

This is always a complex and delicate process; but it is essential to finding a way of being that fits and brings the desired rewards of conformity with the new context. Even for privileged newcomers to any new culture, such as diplomatic personnel who may have an entrée to personal coaching, positions of influence and a ready-made community of support, a steep learning curve is always implied. For those without these facilities, and already rendered vulnerable by their dislocation from home, the project is particularly difficult. Behaviours and values seen as acceptable, even honoured, in the country of origin may result in misunderstanding, anger and rejection in the new. Learning to cope with such reactions as well as developing new behaviours seem essential to the process of adaptation and long term survival.

Resourcefulness

For those undertaking work with, or entering into relationship with refugees or asylum seekers, developing an understanding of the enormity of the displacement experience is important. This, however, is only part of the picture. In achieving an understanding of such circumstances it is essential not to be seduced by the disempowerment of sympathy alone. It is also vital to recognise the creativity and energy that can also be embedded in the experience. Most of those seeking refugee status have survived huge trauma; the fact that they have survived at all underlines their strength, adaptability and potential for continued growth and development. Esther Edeko, a Nigerian nun reporting on her research among a group of African refugees in Ireland, emphasises the profound resourcefulness which many refugees bring to bear on the huge tasks with which they are faced: '[D]espite having been violently uprooted from their home, the participants in the study demonstrated capacities for innovation and survival ... they manifested the vitality to create and negotiate new roles and behaviour.'⁴

4. E. Edeko, 'Wading into Uncharted Waters' in Ryan, A. and T. Walsh (eds.), *Unsettling the Horses*. 2004, Maynooth: MACE, p. 49.

The challenge for refugees, then, is to engage in a process of recreating the self in a way that fits with the new society, with a view to creating personal stability and economic and social security. An essential part of this endeavour is to draw on the internal resources and potentials created by their whole life experience, and the resources and supports that can be marshalled within their new environment. The ability to analyse and critically reflect on both old and new cultures as well as on previous life experience are important in developing ways of responding to and managing the fresh context. The availability of support groups from the country of origin, or a community of long term residents, or a mixture of both, willing to provide a safe context in which to learn, question, experiment and explore such areas, is of huge importance in this process.