



3-30-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Ngwenya, Dumisani (2016) "'Our Branches Are Broken:' Using the Tree Of Life Healing Methodology with Victims of Gukurahundi in Matebeleland, Zimbabwe," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 23 : No. 1 , Article 2. DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2016.1314

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## "Our Branches Are Broken:" Using the Tree Of Life Healing Methodology with Victims of Gukurahundi in Matebeleland, Zimbabwe

### Abstract

Between 1983 and 1987, an estimated 20,000 people from Matabeleland and parts of Midlands Province in Zimbabwe were killed by government forces in an operation code-named *Gukurahundi*. Since that time, no official apology, justice, reparations or any form of healing process has been offered by the government which was responsible for these atrocities. Many people still suffer trauma from the events of this time. The overall question that this research project sought to answer was whether a small group of survivors of *Gukurahundi* could heal via participation over time in a group action research project directed at their healing.

This article assesses the effectiveness of the Tree of Life healing approach, which was one of the methodologies tried during the course of the research with a small group of survivors of the 1980s atrocities. We found that while the approach was very helpful to the participants, it was difficult to talk about "total healing" due to the fact that the perpetrators are still in power. In addition, no effort had been made to even acknowledge the harm done, and the participants still felt marginalized politically and economically, while the perpetrators appeared to be care-free and enjoying life. Participants agreed that, given the circumstance, this approach offered them a measure of relief and that it was still necessary to address healing holistically. It was however acknowledged that some form of relief was better than a lifetime of painful memories even if systemic change remains to be seen.

**Keywords:** *trauma healing, violence, Gukurahundi, Zimbabwe, Participatory Action Research, Tree of Life*

### Author Bio(s)

Dumisani Ngwenya (DTech 2015) is a doctoral graduate from the Peacebuilding Programme at Durban University of Technology and this article derives from his doctoral thesis. His research was supported by the Canon Collins Educational Trust. He is Director of Grace to Heal in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, a faith-based NGO dedicated to peacebuilding, reconciliation and healing.

## **"Our Branches Are Broken:" Using the Tree Of Life Healing Methodology with Victims of Gukurahundi in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe**

**Dumisani Ngwenya**

Between 1983 and 1987, an estimated 20,000 people from Matabeleland and parts of Midlands Province in Zimbabwe were killed by state security agents, mostly from the Central Intelligence Organization and a specially-trained battalion of the Zimbabwean National Army, during an operation code-named *Gukurahundi* (a Shona word meaning “the rain which washes away the dirt”). The main purpose was to deal with those thought to have sympathies with Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZPRA) and Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), its political wing. In practice, this involved violence against Ndebele individuals and communities, the story of which has been documented by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP, 2007).

No apology or any form of healing process has been offered by the government. If anything, the government has contributed to ongoing pain by actively suppressing any such initiatives. As a result, individuals and communities in these areas have never been afforded opportunities to openly talk about their experiences or to seek relief for their painful memories of the past. This article investigates the effectiveness of the Tree of Life (TOL) approach to community healing. Following a process which took place over two years, the participants reported that they experienced “a measure of healing.”

A comprehensive discussion of healing after violence may be found in Ngwenya (2014) and only a few general points will be made here. Healing can come about in a number of ways, which are not mutually exclusive: some individuals manage the healing process from their own inner resources; some receive help from family and friends; some are helped by traditional or faith-based rituals; and some benefit from face-to-face counseling (pp. 65-96). This research is based on another option, where traumatized individuals come together in a group to seek healing.

According to some scholars, (Agger & Jensen, 1996; Lemaire, 2000; Erickson, 1995; Edkins, 2003; Staub, et al., 2005) state repression, ethnic wars and political violence do not only affect individuals. They tend to disrupt communal and family support and coping mechanisms in an effort to break down any political resistance that a unified community can present. While violence might appear to be targeted toward individuals, its overall purpose is to break down the social fabric and support systems; as such, this form of violence affects the whole community. In other words, a whole community can sometimes experience collective

trauma due to the violence experienced by its members. Therefore since the *Gukurahundi* violence was meted out in communities, communal healing of memories could be crucial in a situation like this, where collective traumatization has taken place. As one scholar observed, “Men, women, and children in traumatized communities must heal together, if they are to heal at all, because their lives are bound up with one another” (Pintar, 2000, p. 64).

Even in situations where it is not possible for members of victim and perpetrator groups to reconcile or forgive each other, it is still highly desirable that those who have experienced violence and suffering be given an opportunity to heal for their own sakes so they can move on with their lives (Villa-Vicencio, 2004, p. 202). Healing is necessary, not just for the relief of wounded individuals and communities, but for the prevention of future violence that might be caused by survivors taking revenge.

Healing is multidimensional and multifaceted, so holistic healing processes need to address both the causes of the pain and the resultant symptoms. The socio-political context is a vital element in the recovery process, and healing should utilize the various individual, political, social, and cultural responses to a traumatic situation and its aftermath (Hamber, 2003, p. 78). In addition, people need to feel safe if healing is to occur. Where their lives are still under threat and the environment around them continues to remind them of their traumatic experiences, complete healing will be difficult to attain (Staub, et al., 2005, p. 302).

### **Research Methods**

A participatory action research (PAR) approach was used for this research because it provided for both knowledge production and action. The PAR included the participants who were in charge of the research process, with the first researcher (the author) acting as a facilitator. An invitation was extended through the ZPRA Veterans Trust (ZVT) for volunteers to take part in the research, which involved no monetary reward and required long-term commitment. The research findings were based on the experiences and attitudes of nine ZPRA ex-combatants (three females and six males) and three peace studies students from Solusi University who were acting as interns with ZVT. Ethical clearance for the research project was granted by the Durban University of Technology’s ethics committee. The participants’ involvement was confidential and no individual has been identified in reporting the research.

The research consisted of six dialogue sessions and two actions: a Tree of Life (TOL) workshop and the writing of the participants’ life stories (participants underwent a half day story writing workshop). A review of the TOL workshop was done two weeks after the workshop. The dialogue sessions were held between January 2012 and May 2014. These

interactive sessions, which included group discussions, argumentation, and consensus meetings, were the prime tool for data collection. Dialogue typically played a central role in PAR because participants were able to better understand their own reality from the critical analysis of their own particular situations and problems. Participants engaged in informative, reflective, and interrogative discussions concerning their experiences and actions during the sessions, and were able to devise solutions or consider new actions. The discussions were held in a mixture of *isiNdebele* and English which were recorded (with the permission of the group) and later transcribed to facilitate data analysis. One limitation of this way of capturing data was the loss of much of the nonverbal aspects of the conversations, which usually added a critical dimension to the understanding. Having a transcribed record of the discussions was important because these could be shared with the participants, not only for their records and use, but also for verification purposes. This article focuses solely on one aspect of the PAR, namely the TOL workshop, and seeks to evaluate its impact on survivors of mass political violence. Although an inductive content analysis was used, an a priori theoretical framework and personal interests and preconceptions influenced the approach to the analysis, for I was both PAR researcher and program designer. This carries a risk that researcher bias might influence results and conclusions reached. In PAR, one of the ways to guard against this is to ensure that there are “appropriate communicative structures in place throughout the research and action which allow participants to continue to associate with and identify with the work of the collective project change” (McTaggart, 1998, p. 225). The preliminary results of the research were brought to the group for verification and discussion, and the final results incorporated a number of comments made at this stage of the research. In the final analysis, the extent to which participants identified and felt they truly owned both the process and the final product was the crucial indicator of credibility.

### **TOL: Quest for Healing and Empowerment**

The Tree of Life was originally designed to work with unemployed youths and was adapted in 2002 to the needs of Zimbabwean political refugees living in South Africa; it was introduced to Zimbabwe in 2004. In both countries, the participants were mainly victims of the political violence emanating from the farm invasions of 2000 and the subsequent elections in Zimbabwe (Reeler, et al., 2009; Templer, 2010). The workshop was a two-and-a-half-day residential program, led by survivors who had undergone training in the methodology. It was a healing and empowerment workshop that combined *storytelling*, healing of the spirit, re-establishing a sense of community, and self-esteem and reconnection with the body. The process centered upon a series of circles resembling the traditional village

court, but in this court, all were equal and participants utilized a “talking piece” to give each other turns to speak. Over a number of circles participants used drawings of trees to talk about different aspects of their lives. For instance, participants discussed their roots (ancestry), trunk (childhood), leaves (important features of their lives), and fruit (family and future plans) and explored their connectivity and benefits of diversity. The “trauma circle” was the most important part of this process; here participants were given an opportunity to talk about their traumatic experiences in a friendly, respectful and loving environment. Every morning participants conducted a session in body work, which consisted of breathing, balancing and stretching, and relaxation exercises. This was meant to allow participants to reconnect with their bodies, especially those who had experienced physical torture. At the end of the workshop, participants gathered around a living tree to study and discuss similarities between their lives and the tree. Facilitators chose a tree that had seen the worst but was still alive and striving. The TOL approach is very flexible and can be adapted to fit any context. It is also relatively inexpensive and does not require highly trained professionals. It is focused to provide healing through group therapy, using nature as a means for healing. This method has also been used in Australia with a young refugee from Liberia (Schweitzer, et al., 2013).

In Zimbabwe, prior to this research, most of the work done by TOL was in Mashonaland and involved cases of organized violence and torture dating back to the year 2000. Reeler, et al., (2009) carried out a quantitative assessment of TOL’s work in Mashonaland. According to the research, a sample of 73 persons who had attended the TOL workshops were surveyed, but detailed data was available for only 33, and these revealed that 36 percent of the participants had shown significant clinical improvement, while the sample as a whole showed significant changes in their psychological state. A smaller sample of 19 had more complete data, and from these it was deduced that 39 percent showed significant improvement. During the follow-up done a few months after the workshops, the researchers found that 56 percent reported coping better, while 44 percent were still experiencing difficulties, with most (72 percent) experiencing economic difficulties. Only 9 percent reported health problems, while most of the respondents still had connections to the groups with which they had participated in the process. The researchers reported that all the participants felt the process had helped them find new things about themselves and had changed the way they felt about their traumatic experiences. They concluded by saying, “The Tree of Life appears to be a useful, cost effective, non-professional method of assisting torture survivors” (Reeler, et al., 2009, p. 180). I was therefore curious to find out if this

method would be appropriate and effective for 30-year-old trauma experiences. At this stage of the research, our discussions and the current events had confirmed something I already knew: that there was an unofficial socio-political system in place to deliberately marginalize and suppress the people from Matabeleland. In addition I had become wary of programs that encouraged victims of violence to “forgive” their perpetrators in order to heal, but fail to deal with the systemic causes of the violence. Such an approach, I now felt, left people vulnerable to further abuse by the state, as such a process simply served “to heal lambs for the slaughter” (Wessells, 1999, p. 6). As I pointed out to the participants during the workshop review:

...I have been a bit concerned that I did not want to do something that will make you forget that there is a system that still needs to be dealt with. That we would say ok, fine, let’s get healed and let’s go on with life, whereas there’s a system that is out to actually continue to destabilize...

I was therefore concerned that the TOL workshop would be a tonic for continued suppression of the traumatized communities because of a reckless push for a “forgive and forget” type of philosophy, at all costs. We will return to this question below.

### **Results and Discussion**

During the dialogue sessions participants indicated that a lack of healing carried negative consequences for them as individuals, their community, and the country in general. They felt that it was important to explore available approaches that could contribute to the healing of their past hurts. This study sought to contribute to a better understanding of the impact of group therapeutic approaches on survivors of historic torture (that is, violence committed over thirty years ago) through the use of the Tree of Life healing methodology. Nine out of the twelve participants attended the workshop which was conducted by two of the TOL facilitators in a secluded environment that allowed for maximum interaction between participants and nature.

#### **Effectiveness of the TOL Workshop in the Context of This Study**

The workshop’s effectiveness was evaluated by tracing and comparing some of the sentiments expressed by the participants before and after the workshop in a process of qualitative induction. This paper discusses the contents of the workshop evaluation meeting and the follow up interviews that took place about eighteen months after the workshop with some of the participants.

When we met on 28 June, 2012, to analyze the workshop, the atmosphere created by the retreat was still present and people were still excited about their experiences. The first question was, “What had been helpful and what had not been?” While the entire process had

been helpful, the one exercise that stood out above the rest was the discussion we had around the tree about its resiliencies. Our discussion was not linear: certain responses triggered reactions that veered the discussion in other directions or connected to previous discussions, after which we would come back to the original question—and so the process went. For instance, in answering the above question, participants started off talking about what had been helpful to them, but before all could contribute to the question, the conversation moved to how the TOL could be used to help the rest of their members. During that discussion a debate arose about whether it was possible to correct the past, leading to another detour about what exactly could be changed or corrected about history, before the conversation turned back again to the initial discussion regarding the Tree of Life, to which we turn below.

### **Away from a Need for Revenge: Change in Tone of Language and Attitude**

During the dialogue sessions and before the TOL workshop, there seemed to have been a general consensus among the participants about the need for revenge. This issue specifically, as well as other similar sentiments, was discussed robustly. Several of the participants appeared to favor the exaction of vengeance in one form or another, if given an opportunity. They could not see any other way of dealing with the situation besides getting their own back. “T” succinctly summed up the hopelessness of the situation as he perceived it: “I *can’t* see the way through. The *only* way through is the way in. The way we got in is the way we will come out” (italics added). At the workshop review, this tone of language and attitude had changed significantly and the focus had shifted to healthier ways of dealing with the hurts. The discussion indicated that there had been a notably diminished desire for revenge by most participants. As noted by “T:”

I for one had that mind that if one day, if I’m given that chance, I would do it. But looking at this workshop, the way things were laid out, I had or maybe I gained a positive attitude...I noticed that after this I just had a positive mind...

He further indicated that, whereas previously he saw nothing good in the offender, which is a step away from the dehumanization of the offender (see Oelofsen, 2009), he now tried to *re-humanize* or, as he put it, “view the person with a positive mind.” “T” added: “...I think it’s what I said before, that the violent manner has left, and in the end I also realized that for this thing to end I should not solve it violently...” Several participants expressed similar views.

While a few had specific individuals in mind when it came to the question about to whom the vengeance would be meted out, by and large the indication was that vengeance would be targeted at ordinary members of the “offending” ethnic group. In my past, I had encountered this attitude among countless survivors and Ndebele activists over the years, so I



found this somewhat disconcerting within the context of this group, because the sentiment was coming from people involved with peacebuilding, and students studying peace and conflict at a high level. It appears that when people have no outlet to express their hurts and anger, they will channel their revenge or desire for revenge against innocent members of the group from which the offenders originate (see Botcharova, 2001). This phenomenon is similar to displaced aggression theory in psychology, wherein the target of the aggression is not the source of the initial harm, and is usually less powerful than both the initial offender and offended (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Kramer, 2000; Finch, 2006). Of course this dynamic can entrench long-term cycles of violence and revenge, hence the need for victims to be assisted to deal with this desire for vengeance constructively.

### **Motivation to Resilience**

The issues of resilience and agency arose as some of the benefits participants had gained from the workshop. Resilience could be defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity or, according to Rivas (2007), the “ability to respond positively to a stressful event or negative conditions” (p. 1). On the other hand agency could be defined as the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live, rather than being shaped by them (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Abele, et al., 2008). I surmise that both these aspects are necessary to transform from being a victim to a survivor. One is about internal fortitude and the other goes further to influence the status quo to one’s advantage.

In our case, lessons were drawn from an actual tree we spent some time studying. This tree had one of its boughs sawn off, several scars on its trunk, and one branch which at one time seemed to have been growing downwards but had managed to grow upwards again. This particular tree presented an excellent analogy of the type of life experiences through which participants had gone. While analyzing this tree and comparing it to our lives, it became clear to all just how much adversity the tree had endured, and this became an inspiration to the participants of how it was possible to overcome their personal adversities and live victoriously in spite of their circumstances. Following were some of the attributes of the tree which participants thought instructive. Firstly, the tree continues to grow healthily because its roots— the centre of its life--are intact. “E” concluded that:

It helped me a lot, because when I observe, the tree won’t die if you cut it and leave its roots. That is the first thing I realized: that as long as the roots are not removed the tree will not die...As long as it has roots it will always grow, this is one of the things I liked. If I am cut..., but then still you as a

human being, how is your nature, it is to continue going forward, you must not go back and say I have been cut and then stay there and limp.

“B” took this analogy further, saying:

People would say but I am more than a tree, you see. If you cut the tree and it continues to live, why can't I be the same? That's the way of trying to forego the past and continue focusing on the future, because the tree has a future, ...to us this is a double advantage that we had, in the sense that we got to yield ourselves as individuals and also we obtained a vehicle or we acquired a vehicle which we can institute in our quest to develop this, this face, you see which we always have.

In a way the participants were saying that, although they had been “cut down,” their life's essence had not been snuffed out or completely destroyed. Like the tree, they still had what it takes to regain their agency and live fruitful and fulfilling lives. It gave them hope and a fresh perspective on life as they realized that the scars and the wounded-ness that had been inflicted upon them and which had been hindering their well-being, did not necessarily mean the end of a future they might have once dreamt.

Secondly, the tree has adapted to its adverse environment; that is to say, the conditions under which it is striving have not necessarily changed to favor it, yet it apparently is growing like any of the other trees around it. If it did not have the visible marks of its adversarial experiences it would not stand out from the other trees. Here is how “T” thought it benefited him:

Looking at the tree... how it gets to adapt to the environment, all those things... that tree resembles my life, how I've managed to go through all those things and found it helpful because this gave me the strength to keep on keeping on ...but looking at this workshop that we had... I think it was really helpful, a good benefit to me... So I took it upon myself that if the tree can survive under all those conditions, then I can also live under these conditions...

Lastly, although the tree was hurt, because of its nonviolent nature, it did not retaliate. As “B” saw it:

...If you take the symbolism of a tree... We all stood by it, we touched its branch... that tree was nonviolent, ok, that tree of course it's not a human

being, it has got feelings cause it bled by the time it was cut... it didn't go out to retaliate because it's a tree... Now as human beings we have got feelings and we have got motives...But if we re-align our brains as human beings, ah, let us behave like trees so that we can then be able to reconcile with ourselves.

This deduction made about the tree being nonviolent by nature was intriguing. It might have had to do with the fact that the issue of revenge had featured prominently in our dialogues and was an issue with which several of the participants struggled. The tree's apparent inability to react could have also been interpreted negatively under different circumstances. The fact that the group interpreted this positively could be an indication of the effectiveness of the process and the atmosphere under which the workshop was held. While acknowledging the power of their emotions and motives for revenge, they also realized that as human beings they were superior to the tree in the order of creation and, as such, they had a moral obligation to resist reacting violently towards those perceived to be the perpetrators.

### **Facing the Everyday Realities**

Further to the tenets discussed above, a few more lessons were drawn from the tree. The first one, which is related to the above-mentioned tree's ability to adapt, was that the tree lived positively with its everyday realities. That is to say, the tree was not in denial about the realities of its situation. "V" put it this way:

We have a saying that, when the tree is cut, the axe will forget but the tree won't. It's another lesson, that tree will always have that stump and so even us as people we live with the reality of our stumps, our branches are broken.

This was in reaction to the question posed about whether the participants were finding what they had learnt at the workshop helpful in their everyday situations. They agreed that there was a positive transformation but also acknowledged that they faced real obstacles as they tried to apply lessons learnt. "M" stated it this way:

Let me say that it's relief, because it is a short term relief, because, yes at that time you will be relieved, but then you come back to the real society now; you come back and as soon as you arrive you realize that you are still part of the system... in the same environment which cut you down.

After having listened to the debate, my contribution to this point was as follows:  
...When we were there it was almost like a mini paradise. Problems here are not problems there, we are all in solidarity you know, we are crying with

you... you come back to the real world... you still have to struggle with the same environment. Like that tree is still surrounded by the elements that hurt it, but how is it surviving? I think that is where the big challenge is.

Having discussed the reality of their struggles, the participants unanimously agreed that the process had been worthwhile and that they still found it helpful as they tried to adopt a new perspective in their lives. We settled on the analogy of *positive living* used by persons living with HIV/AIDS. As “E” expressed it: “You are not denying the fact that you are infected, but you have ways of living with it, not as a victim of it, but being able to contain it, to have victory over it.” The point was that while circumstances had not changed and were unlikely to change in the near future, participants had been equipped by the workshop to live, not as victims but as something above that. This process is similar to that described in a study of breast cancer survivors (Sherman et al., 2012) who learnt that they had to develop a new mind-set which, while not dismissing their experiences of cancer, required a new way of thinking about their experience and its impact on life in terms of relationships with oneself and others (p. 263). I understood the participants to be saying that, in the same manner as the cancer survivors, they needed to create a “new normal” they had control over, using the coping and self reflection skills learnt at the workshop. Data, as reported just above from the study, seems to indicate that most of the participants gained an ability to cope better with their circumstances.

### **Agency**

The second lesson, related to the above point, was the issue of agency—that participants could still take charge of their destiny in spite of the debilitating circumstances around them. One participant “T” expressed it this way:

So the thing I am trying to say is fine, all these things happened, but we should not glue ourselves to those things and say that all those things happened and my life ends here. No, you can still live within that situation...

His point was that being at the TOL workshop had been like receiving counseling and becoming equipped to live through their circumstances. For him, whether a sick person healed or not depended on that person’s attitude. One may receive the best medical care, but if he/she has already given up on life, he/she will not heal. “B’s” concern was that:

...At the end of the day, is for our people to be healed...to be empowered to be able to live the next day without acrimony, without hurt ... because as long as we remain with hurt ... we may not be able to live with history of the past that which is distorted...

“B” further pointed out that, even though at some point one of the tree’s branches had been growing downward, it had found enough resources within itself to grow upward again and, in comparison, he thought that it was important for one to acknowledge one’s pain but then decide on the next course of action in order to move forward.

### **Reconciling with Self**

Another lesson learnt from the tree by the participants was the ability, or need, to reconcile with oneself. Traumatic experiences caused by organized or political violence tend to leave individuals alienated from both themselves and their community (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008). So when the participants spoke about the need to be reconciled to the self, they were referring to the journey traumatized people must make back to themselves and their community. As “V” pointed out:

...we have to be *reconciled with ourselves*. ...I think it is a departure point  
...we can find a correct, *straight path to healing and personal empowerment*,  
because as long as we remain with hurt we will not be able to forgive,  
whether forgiveness is necessary or not... (italics added).

This process of “reconciling with self” is called *reclaiming life* on one’s own terms by Sherman, et al., (2012) or meaning making by Casey and Long (2002). According to Sherman, et al., the cancer survivors revealed that breast cancer survivorship is a process marked and shaped by time, the perception of support, and coming to terms with the trauma of a cancer diagnosis and the aftermath of treatment. The process of survivorship continues by assuming an active role in self-healing, gaining a new perspective and reconciling paradoxes, creating a new mind-set and moving to a new normal, developing a new way of being in the world on one’s own terms, and experiencing growth through adversity beyond survivorship (p. 258). One way of achieving this is through storytelling as a way of creating meaning out of one’s experiences, and as noted above, the TOL methodology places great importance in storytelling, not only through the “trauma circle” but throughout all the other sharing and dialogue circles as well. The other circles include the introductory circle, where participants talk about themselves, their history and family backgrounds, hierarchical and cooperative forms of a power circle, and the one around a living tree, among others (Reeler, et al., 2009; Templer, 2010). In addition to TOL, the dialogue sessions and the written life stories also provided participants more storytelling opportunities. (See Ngwenya, 2014, p. 168, for a fuller discussion on the participants’ views of narratives as healing).

## Embracing the Future

### The Students

Approximately eighteen months after the workshop and the initial post-workshop review, I met with two of the students who had taken part in the research as interns with ZPRA Veterans Trust. The aim was to determine the long-term impact of the TOL process given the hostile environment the participants faced almost on a daily basis. So I wanted to find out how they had been coping and to hear about their experiences in the “real” world. Overall they were still finding the workshop experience helpful. They had apparently developed buzz words such as “moving on, positive mind, positive attitude,” and so on. In fact, in a six page transcript of the interview the phrase “moving on” and its derivatives was mentioned 17 times. While not much can be deduced from this, in terms of generalizability, it was nevertheless intriguing to note the frequency with which these two participants used these phrases. It does however; suggest that at least participants had internalized the language learnt at the workshop. Both participants indicated that they had had to learn to move on. This was said in the context of what it means to heal. “N” equated moving on with having a “clean heart” and, for her, it meant the application of the life skills learnt during the TOL workshop. The other, Participant “L”, expressed it thus:

So the most important thing I learnt is that we have to *move on* sometimes.  
...sometimes we don't get an apology from someone who has hurt us but we have to *move on*. We have to *go on by ourselves*, it's not about the other person, it's about you personally... if you don't heal by yourself, you will always be living in the past; and if you hold on too much to the past, you tend not to grow as a person; it causes trauma to you... (italics added).

I was then curious to know what they actually meant by this term: moving on. I felt that this was perhaps a key concept in the whole process, and their understanding might provide insights into how they made it work in their lives. Participant “N” had this view:

... there are some conditions that have to be met for you to like heal;  
...because when you say you are moving on with life, it's not like just looking forward and going looking ahead. You have to like look back at the past: That's ok—this is what went wrong... so instead of focusing mainly on those parts that pull you down in life, you focus on the positive.... It means you are no longer burdened by those burdens from the past, but then it's looking forward to challenges in the future.

“L” pointed out:

‘Moving on’ is not necessarily forgetting what happened in the past, it is being strong to move on: that is healing. Healing for me is that, that wound which has been there shouldn’t be a stumbling block to where you want to go; it should give you power to move on to the future...

Their views represented a higher level of perception and mirror Papadopoulos’ (2007) Adversity-Activated Development theory, or what Carver (1998) called *thriving* and Tan called (2013) *posttraumatic growth theory*, which implies that sometimes adversity can make a person become better than they were before after undergoing that particular traumatic or challenging circumstance. In fact, that is exactly what I perceived from the conversation with the students. I understood them to be saying that the workshop had helped them to discover the potential of growing everyday through the adversities they faced.

### **Trauma and Healing Disassociated Memory: Interview with “J”**

Trauma, of course, has severe psychological impacts. “J” was a female member of our research group and had exhibited a phenomenon that is very similar to a theory that Romero-Jodar (2012) espouses. According to this theory, after a traumatic experience which may lead to PTSD, an individual is deprived of the mental defenses that normally allow him or her to arrange past memories and provide a linear perspective of life. These memories become dissociated and are stored in the subconscious where they remain buried until another apparently unrelated incident brings them to the fore. Furthermore, this theory posits that there are two types of memory in a traumatized person: a *narrative memory* and a *trauma memory*. Narrative memory allows remembrances of past happenings to “be organized and arranged sequentially, thus granting a narrative, coherent sense of the passing of the subject’s time” (Romero-Jodar, 2012, p. 1002). On the other hand, trauma memory includes “the memories of extreme events which cannot be assimilated by the mind, and therefore, surface to the conscious as dissociated images which find no logical place in the lineal structure of the narrative memory” (Romero-Jodar, 2012, p. 103). Consequently, these memories tend to return unexpectedly to afflict a traumatized mind that is unable to integrate them into the structure of the narrative memory. Therefore, these fragmented memories allude to the destruction of the conception of time as a linear continuum in the individual’s daily life. One of the results of this destruction of the linear is a distorted coherent perception of existence. The affected individual struggles to organize his/her narrative in a linear progression of time, as he/she must come to terms with two different timelines: the linear perception of narrative time and the fragmented memories of traumatic time (Romero-Jodar 2012).

During the introductory session of the first research dialogue, “J” informed us that she was a victim of *Gukurahundi* and at that point could not proceed to narrate her story to the group (due to choking with emotion). When interviewing her I expected to hear a horrific account of what had happened to her during *Gukurahundi*. However, she narrated a different incident that happened to her in the 1970s when she and a number of her school mates were abducted by some ZPRA guerrillas and forcibly taken to join the war. There were four soldiers, and in the group there happened to be only four girls. The soldiers raped the girls all the way into Botswana, and this had severely traumatized “J.” Although they were taken aside, the other students could guess what was being done to the girls, even if they could not talk about it. In contrast, “J’s” *Gukurahundi* experience was comparatively mild because the most she suffered was being locked up in the army detention barracks for two months. It would appear then that prolonged and sustained traumatic events caused what Lopez-Corvo (2013) calls *trauma entanglement*. “J’s” two major traumatic experiences had been enmeshed into one another and, because *Gukurahundi* had occurred after her rape incident, she viewed it as her source of pain and hurt, as it had elicited emotions that echoed similar emotions to her previous experience. It is possible therefore that the fragmented nature of her traumatic memory at this point precluded the development of a narrative, sequential account of her experience (Kaminer, 2006, p. 485).

As with other participants, “J” also found the experience around the tree liberating. When asked about her most significant experience during the Tree of Life workshop, she replied:

You know, the thing that made me bold enough, the very day we learnt about the tree, ...that tree was cut and it felt pain but the tree did not dry up, life goes on and so I said, ‘I am a human being whatever happened, I too will live my normal life.’ For me the thing that did it was the tree... I said, ‘Aah well I am alive, I am alright then I will move on... So it is possible to bury your past and talk about it, and heal...’

More significantly, narrating her story in an environment that both honored and acknowledged it, provided a definite cathartic effect for “J” and contributed significantly towards her healing. According to her, she was the first to volunteer to narrate her story to her group (as she had missed the workshop organized for the research group and attended a subsequent one with other members of ZVT). During the interview it was clear that something momentous had taken place in her life, as she was able to narrate her story without breaking down. Her countenance, demeanor— she appeared happier, more self-assured and



freer— and several of her statements during the interview, bore testimony to this. As she pointed out:

It was as if there was something pushing, saying, ‘Just speak, speak out, till everything is finished.’ Just like that, as if there was a person pushing me saying, ‘Talk, talk, talk,’ because when I started I didn’t stop. I cried until I had finished, but I had courage to say it, you know, eeh... After opening up, you know, it was as if I was a new person....I cried a lot to the extent that everything came out. Then the following day, I could even talk about it without feeling the pain I used to feel before this day.

This points to the importance of creating a conducive and enabling environment, which Staub, et al., (2005) and Mitchels (2003) say is important if narratives are to have a healing effect. The Tree of Life methodology emphasizes the importance of creating an environment that honors the stories and experiences of the victims in an affirming manner. The absence of such an environment could do more harm than good to the participants. “J” found the process to be so helpful that she sent her domestic worker, who was in a very abusive relationship, to the next workshop. According to “J,” this young lady had been so affected by her husband’s abuse that she barely ate and looked as if she was sick. The domestic worker claimed that, when she came back, she had changed and could open up, and for the first time tell “J” what had happened to her. She even had courage enough to stand up for herself against her abusive husband. Asked about the possibility of a relapse, “J” responded,

You think it will recur? Aah, I don’t think so, I don’t know about others but to me, no, it’s now water under the bridge. It went just like that, I am very happy now... it’s like someone going for baptism. I don’t believe that..., when I came from there I said aah, I’m born again now.’

While there is a real danger that respondents will sometimes say what they think a researcher wants to hear, I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of these participants. I tried my best to interrogate their perceptions, but they seemed to believe that something in them had indeed been transformed to a certain extent.

### **Conclusion**

It would appear, therefore, that the participants benefitted from the TOL workshop. The workshop, to a great extent, began the process of addressing the pain caused by the participants’ traumatic experiences, such as feelings of disempowerment, the desire for revenge, misdirected anger and pain. Participants appear to have been internally fortified and their resilience levels increased. In some cases, posttraumatic growth had taken place, or at

the very least, the foundation for thriving in adversity was laid. What is crucial is that this process did not create a false sense of hope based on intense emotions. I found that the TOL process was designed to assist participants in finding strength from within themselves so they could face the realities of their circumstances. While some of the sessions were clearly emotional—especially the trauma circle—facilitators did not try to play on emotions; they were acknowledged, honored, and accepted with a sense of reverence and respect for each individual’s experiences. The TOL process did not focus on the need to forgive and reconcile with one’s “enemies” as a precondition for healing—important as this might be—it was up to the individual to choose how he/she related to the external circumstance, after dealing with the inner self. The process did not ask participants to acquiesce to the injustice around them; rather it sought to assist participants in dealing with themselves, so they could address their injustices without being blinded by their pain and desire for vengeance. In this regard my fears that the workshop would make participants more open to further oppression and abuse by their perpetrators were allayed. The process set the participants on a road towards a measure of relief and gave them the courage to face their daily realities, not as bitter, defeated victims, but as victorious survivors. As “B” put it,

Tree of Life gave us an insight into how we can heal as individuals and also empowered us in our quest for resources that would obviously sober down and give us a direction of inducing the rest of the communities around to do the same.

This action also brought to the fore the need to back up such processes with broader and nationwide activities, such as truth-telling, apology, acknowledgement, seeking justice, and even change of political status quo, if healing is to be far-reaching and more effective. Nevertheless, as interim measures, processes such as the Tree of Life and similar group-based psychosocial storytelling approaches have a crucial role to play in the search for healing in communities affected by organized violence.

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