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This Place In The Ways

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The title of this chapter is derived from a 1948 poem of the same name, which was written by the activist poet Muriel Rukeyser in the middle of her life. In the poem, she expresses a sense of mysterious continuity between the passionate humanitarian impulses of her youth and the politically committed path she embarked on thereafter, and on which she intends to remain. Her idea that there was an essential thread that ran through the myriad transformations and upheavals in her life holds a special resonance for me as I attempt to reflect on my years of international work with survivors of torture and war.

My great-grandparents immigrated to New England in response to anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia, and my paternal grandmother fled the Ukrainian pogroms of 1918-21, in which over 100,000 Jews were killed. My maternal grandmother was a travel agent, and brought me keepsakes from distant lands. These aspects of my family background stimulated in me a curiosity about faraway cultures and peoples, and led me to develop an early awareness of the existence of ethnic persecution and an identification with immigrants and other marginalized groups.

I was born in Boston in 1963. My family moved to the suburb of Newton a year later. During my elementary school years, the civil rights and women's movements were in full force, and the Vietnam War was a subject of growing controversy and protest. The increasingly virulent expressions

of racism that characterized Boston's school busing crisis of the 1970s left an indelible impression on me.

Despite the lack of guidance or coherent explanations from the adults in my environment with regard to issues of racial violence, from a very young age I had an instinctive sense of moral indignation when vulnerable people were treated unfairly, and a strong empathic response to human suffering. I also had a naturally inquisitive mind, and questioned situations that others around me seemed to take for granted. In addition, whereas many people in my suburban milieu seemed repelled by difference, I was fascinated by the unfamiliar.

As a young girl, my perspectives on ethnopolitical conflict were informed by stories of the Holocaust. At age 13 I wrote a novella about a girl who survived a concentration camp through a combination of resilience, ingenuity, others' assistance, and luck. Throughout my childhood, I noticed magazine advertisements for NGOs such as CARE and Save the Children, requesting sponsors for poverty-stricken children. I felt moved by the images of these children, and yearned to find a way to connect with them on the other side of the globe. As I transitioned from childhood to adolescence, my passion for justice and the alleviation of human suffering, and my interest in other cultures, began to ripen. In the late 1970s, I encountered newspaper reports about the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. I wrote letters advocating for Cambodian refugees, and organized an educational event about the genocide for my synagogue youth group.

At Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, I sought to integrate my interest in individual/personal healing and transformation with my belief in the importance of social change, justice, and liberation. I majored in psychology, and earned a second degree in urban studies. I began to participate in workshops offered by the National Training Laboratories

Institute (NTL), an organization that has pioneered the field of cross-cultural human relations training; these served to deepen my understanding of the dynamics of oppression.

My father's tragic death when I was 12 and my having been kidnapped at gunpoint at age 19 were personal experiences that led me to peruse the scholarly literature on traumatic grief, orphaned children, hostage-taking, captivity, and the psychological consequences of violence. Thus, the development of my interest in the intersection between psychology and ethnopolitical violence was the combined result of life events, moral and political values, and aspects of my basic nature or constitution – what the Jungian analyst James Hillman has referred to as "the soul's code."

After completing my undergraduate education and working in social and community services in Worcester and San Francisco (where I volunteered in a program for Cambodian refugee women), I became part of a network of organization development (OD) professionals who were studying nonviolent large-system change. Through this network, I enrolled in a non-traditional master's program which used a student-designed, tutorial approach. My advisor was Jack Gibb, a pioneer in the field of human relations training who had particular expertise in group and organizational dynamics. Initially, I had planned to study community development and social change. As part of this plan, I made arrangements for a variety of international internship, volunteer, and learning experiences, beginning with a proposed three-week trip to South Africa.

One night in a San Francisco theater a few months before this scheduled trip, I saw a documentary film about the Highlander Center, an organization in Tennessee which had played a crucial role in the civil rights movement – in fact, it was the place where Rosa Parks had completed an interracial

workshop shortly before refusing to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery. I was so inspired by this film that a few weeks later I went to spend a week at Highlander and met its founder, Myles Horton, who was then in his 80s. Myles had spent his whole life opposing racism and working for social and political change. Unbeknownst to me until after I arrived there, Myles had just returned from a journey to South Africa, hosted by the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, and he encouraged me to visit there during my upcoming trip. More importantly, he reached out to his contacts so that they would welcome me in spite of the atmosphere of tension and mistrust that permeated the South African liberation struggle during the mid-1980s.

Wilgespruit was an ecumenical center near Johannesburg founded in the 1940s to resist the policies of apartheid by conducting interracial workshops and supporting programs that promoted social justice and human rights. In 1986-87, when I lived and worked there, Wilgespruit was overseeing a variety of community empowerment projects, and was also serving as a refuge for ex-detainees. Some staff and participants were aligned with the African National Congress and its newly formed affiliate, the United Democratic Front, but the center was also heavily influenced by the Black Consciousness movement, which emphasized psychological liberation, self-definition, community self-reliance, and mutual support.

I was assigned to the Urban Community Organizing and Development division, where I helped to coordinate workshops for young people who were in training to become community leaders. Additionally, other staff and I established a coalition of organizations concerned about the increasing numbers of homeless city-dwellers which resulted from the apartheid government's increasingly harsh enforcement of racist legislation. This organization, which we called the Witwatersrand Network for the Homeless, was selected by readers of the *Indicator* newspaper for the 1987 South Africa Human Rights Award.

My colleagues and supervisors in South Africa helped me develop a political consciousness and a familiarity with Marxism, African nationalism, and anti-colonialism. This period was the height of the apartheid government's violence against activists, and many of my co-workers had been harassed and tortured. A few months before my arrival, the police had raided Wilgespruit, and had detained many of the children who were in refuge there. As a result of the formative experience of living and working in that context, I changed the focus of my master's studies from organization development to the psychological effects of political violence. My thesis was an analysis of the experiences and coping strategies of South African political detainees.

Besides South Africa, I also spent four months traveling through Southern and Eastern Africa. Then, my deepening interest in the psychological effects of political violence led me to Nicaragua, where I learned Spanish and completed an intensive study program about the Sandinista revolution. I went on to spend four months traveling through Latin America, where I met with survivors' groups, and the mental health professionals working with them. Among the most influential countries for me were Argentina, Chile and El Salvador. The men and women I met during this period, from many different countries and of varying ethnicities, taught me much of what I know today about integrity and courage.

After completing my first master's studies, I went to Asia. There, in addition to personal travel in several countries, I completed a three-month volunteer position at the Children's Rehabilitation Center in the Philippines, an agency that

provided psychosocial care for children whose parents had been imprisoned or killed in state-sponsored violence. I also completed a volunteer position with an NGO in Bangladesh that worked to create "conscientization" groups among the poor.

A Bengali colleague of mine was facilitating feminist consciousness-raising groups. She and her associates gave me books about gender oppression, and taught me about the dismal living conditions of the vast majority of Bangladeshi women. More importantly, they shared their own personal stories – stories in which themes of wasted potential, lost opportunities, and gender-based violence were pervasive.

While traveling in Asia, I came to realize that I wanted to be a healer, that although I cared deeply about political action and social change, I also wanted to learn how to heal people who had been psychologically wounded as a result of systematic violence. Eventually I decided that a graduate program in clinical/community psychology would be a good way for me to synthesize my interest in larger contextual issues, my calling to work with the poor, and my desire to become a psychotherapist.

While awaiting admission to graduate school I spent six months as the kindergarten teacher in an Arab-Jewish cooperative village located halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, called *Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salaam*, and visited my paternal relatives in the Soviet Union. A cousin accompanied me to our ancestral town of Slutsk, and led me to the mass grave in the forest where nearly all of the town's 9,000 Jews were killed during the Nazi occupation.

After three years overseas, I returned to the United States and earned a graduate certificate in women's studies and a master's degree in clinical/community psychology at the University of Maryland, and went on to complete my Ph.D. in

clinical psychology at St. John's University. In New York, I was exposed to contemporary psychoanalytic theory, and became interested in the role of unconscious forces – such as projection, displacement, splitting, and identification with the aggressor – in ethnopolitical violence. Through my contact with the psychoanalytic community, I became interested in empathy and intersubjectivity, and came to appreciate the importance, in conflict transformation, of a capacity to recognize the subjective reality of the other.

Throughout my doctoral studies, I had sought practicum placements that allowed me to work with trauma survivors from underserved, ethnic minority backgrounds. I did my clinical internship in child and adolescent psychology at a community mental health center in Newark, New Jersey. I went on to complete a one-year post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, focusing on clinical interventions with traumatized young children. Concurrent with my graduate studies, I had become a registered poetry therapist through the National Association for Poetry Therapy, trained to use poems and expressive writing to promote insight, empowerment, and healing. Through this work, I had become part of the larger creative arts therapies community, in which drama, visual arts, storytelling, and dance are used as therapeutic tools.

After receiving my psychologist license, I spent eight months traveling through Africa and Asia, a time for reflection and reinvigoration after nearly a decade in graduate school. I visited West African sites connected with the Atlantic slave trade, and made a documentary film about the Khmer Rouge genocide and the experiences of Cambodian refugees. I returned to the United States to begin a position directing a creative arts therapy clinic in a low-income urban neighborhood in Boston.

I arrived in Boston on September 10, 2001, and was horrified by the events that unfolded the following day. Soon after, I enrolled in a one-year postgraduate certificate program in Trauma Studies conducted by the Boston Trauma Center. The same year, I completed a postgraduate fellowship in contemporary psychoanalysis. The following year, I obtained a position at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (a major teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School), as the primary clinician in a program that provided psychotherapy for people who had lost loved ones in the September 11th attacks. In the summer of 2003, I completed a summer postdoctoral fellowship in ethnopolitical conflict at the University of Pennsylvania's Solomon Asch Center.

In early 2004, I was offered a job with the Center for Victims of Torture, a Minneapolis-based NGO which has been working in West Africa for several years. The job was as a psychologist/trainer for Liberian survivors of torture who were living in the refugee camps of Guinea. I had first learned about CVT's work in West Africa during my fellowship at the Asch Center, because Jon Hubbard, who had been the primary developer of CVT's West Africa programs, was one of our instructors. So, in April of 2004, I left my position at Beth Israel Deaconess, put my possessions in storage, rented out my Cambridge condo, and set out for Guinea. As I landed in Conakry and then traveled 10-hours by road to Kissidougou, in the forest region, where the CVT program was based, I felt a deep sense of revitalization. This initial intuition turned out to be prescient, because my year in Guinea was a period of tremendous personal and professional renewal.

The program provided trauma counseling services and capacity building for Liberian refugees. I was part of an international, interdisciplinary team, and there were innumerable opportunities for mutual learning. The 30 Liberian paraprofessional counselors whom we were supervising were extraordinary people who were grateful to have been selected and exceedingly eager to learn. They were role models of dedication and resilience, and I drew inspiration from their example. The Liberian clients with whom we worked were remarkable people. Their stories were filled with tragedy and loss, as well as a capacity to endure. Their lives represented the reality of the indestructibility of the human spirit. Their love of singing, dancing, ritual, and prayer enriched my understanding of the process of healing.

We also provided training for the wider refugee community, thus I had contact with community and religious leaders, health-care personnel, teachers, and cultural workers. In addition, we conducted community sensitizations on a variety of social problems, such as rape, torture, and war trauma. Hence, I was able to integrate my work as a clinician and trainer with my background in community psychology. In Guinea, I also managed to fulfill my longstanding goal of learning French. My six colleagues from CVT-Guinea and I were presented with the 2006 American Psychological Association's International Humanitarian Award in recognition of our work.

Though my primary work was as a psychotherapist, clinical supervisor, and trainer, I also felt a moral imperative to refer refugees for resettlement in a third country if they were genuinely at risk. For example, I had several clients who had given birth to children as a result of war-time rape; these children were labeled "rebel babies" and both they and their mothers were often threatened and physically assaulted. I submitted referrals that resulted in 25 of these families – comprising over 100 people in total – being accepted for resettlement in Western countries.

As the UNHCR implemented a mass repatriation of the Liberian refugees, CVT-Guinea closed. A few months later a new CVT center was launched in Liberia, and I provided several weeks of training for counselors in this program. During the period when CVT-Guinea was preparing to close, I obtained a position as the psychologist in the UN-backed war crimes tribunal in neighboring Sierra Leone.

The Special Court was created jointly by the UN and the Sierra Leonean government to try those who bear the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on Sierra Leonean territory during the country's brutal civil war. My job, which I began in May 2005, involves providing psychosocial care for witnesses before, during, and after their testimony. I train and supervise the Court's 10-person psychosocial support team. Before witnesses testify, we conduct a psychosocial assessment and courtroom briefing, so that we can be aware of their potential vulnerabilities and so that they know what to expect in the courtroom. During their testimony, we have counselors available to offer emotional support. After they testify, we provide debriefing as well as follow-up regarding further psychosocial needs.

The Court exemplifies a turning of the tables, in which leaders who at one time presumed their omnipotence and impunity are at last being held accountable, and individuals who were once helpless victims now command the attention of the courtroom and the world as they tell their stories of violence, loss, and perseverance. The witnesses are exceptionally courageous individuals. Among the many valuable lessons they have taught me is that protecting human rights requires a willingness to take risks and a mixture of compassion and indignation. Perhaps this is what Muriel Rukeyser meant when she wrote, in the poem mentioned

earlier, that after years of working for justice and human rights, she found both "love and rage."

In recent years, my interest in writing and literature has become a more central feature of my personal and professional identity. Through a grant provided by the Asch Center, I conducted a study of literary and artistic responses to the Cambodian genocide, in which I interviewed Cambodian poets and performing artists who are using their creative work to bear witness to atrocities. I am now a senior instructor in the graduate program in expressive therapies at Lesley University, an institution based in Cambridge, Massachusetts which also offers degree programs in Israel. Through a program Lesley established in July 2006, as ethnopolitical violence swept the Middle East, I led workshops for Palestinian graduate students at Al Quds University in the West Bank, on the utilization of poetry and the creative arts in healing traumatized communities. Currently, I am exploring new ways of honoring the part of my self that wants to write. This chapter represents an important step on that path.