

Invited Article

The 'Tender Narrator' Who Sees Beyond Time:

A Framework for Trauma Integration and Healing

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Abstract

While trauma occurs in separation, healing happens in relation, where the inner dynamics of voice and expression play an important role in narrating a traumatic experience. In her acceptance speech for the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature, novelist Olga Tokarczuk envisioned a new form of a literary narrator, one who sees beyond a singular point of view to include the interrelatedness of the world and the interdependence of all beings. In this article, we present a framework for the integration of individual and collective trauma that is focused on creating safe, interactive group spaces for dialogue, group coherence building, reflection, and transformative practices. We illustrate the foundational role of narrative as part of this integration process in groups and programs led by the article's co-author, teacher and international facilitator Thomas Hübl. We examine the stages of the narrative process in trauma integration, observing the potential

shifts in points of view to listen for the voice of what Tokarczuk refers to as the “tender narrator.” We review the literature on trauma and collective trauma, and identify its impacts, especially its ubiquitous nature as part of every society’s social milieu. We also read part of a transcript of a dialogue focused on intergenerational and historical trauma, inviting us, as authors and readers, to participate in a practice of embodied witnessing. In presenting this framework, our intention as collaborators is to underline the urgency for healing individual and collective trauma through engaging in novel pathways of group experiential learning and integration.

Keywords

collective trauma; trauma; trauma integration; presence; collective healing

I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion.
These three are your greatest treasures.
Simple in action and in thoughts,
you return to the source of being.
Patient with both friends and enemies,
you accord with the way things are.
Compassionate with yourself, you reconcile all beings in the world.
– Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Introduction

At the end of his essay “Notes on Trauma and Community,” sociologist Kai Erikson poses the question, “To what extent does it make sense to conclude that the traumatized view of the world conveys a wisdom that ought to be heard in its own terms?” (Erikson, 1995, p. 198). To hear the specificity of trauma is to investigate “the story of a wound that cries out” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4) and that which is unspeakable (Herman, 1997).

Those who have experienced a traumatic event may suffer symptoms that range from hyperactivation of emotions to numbness and a shattering of safety and trust, all of which affects systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community (Herman, 1997), causing dysregulation, as well as distortions in time, space, and rhythm (Hübl & Avritt, 2020). One therapeutic intervention is articulating the “trauma story” (Mollica et al., 2014) to restore an individual’s dignity, agency, and relationality.

If trauma yearns to be voiced yet is unspeakable, from what point of view or perspective will the narrative of that story emerge? Is it possible, as the wound “cries out,” that it might convey a particular wisdom? In this article, we explore the inner dynamics of narrative voice as part of the Trauma Integration Process

(TIP) (cf. Hübl & Avritt, 2020), a *living*, iterative framework to guide the stages of trauma healing in group settings.

An interdisciplinary framework, the TIP draws from interrelated and disparate fields that study trauma: psychology, psychiatry, and sociology, primarily, but also trauma theory, neuroscience, epigenetics, peace and conflict studies, and social work. The practices of the TIP focus on self-reflection, dialogue, group sharing, and cultivating presence to generate what we view to be profound transpersonal development and collective shifts. If it's true that "we all live in societies constructed to a degree in a milieu of collective trauma" (Rinker & Lawler, 2018, p. 159), how do individuals access and express their trauma? Can a collective develop capacities to witness itself, and identify and express its trauma? These are the questions explored in a TIP.

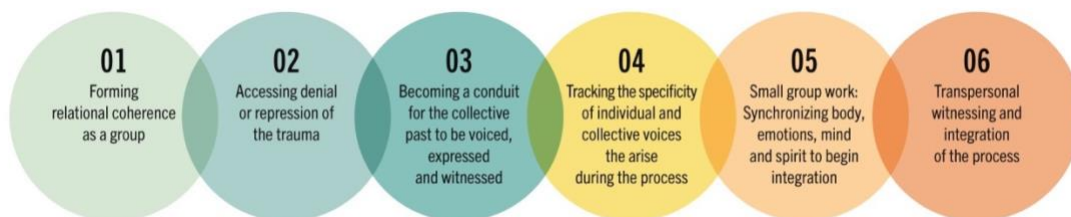


Figure 1: Stages of the Trauma Integration Process (TIP) ©2022 The Pocket Project.

In the initial stages of a TIP, a group is guided through a *synchronization* and *sensing practice*. As we attune to one another, we become aware of our interdependence, and how together, seeing and including both the muteness and expression of the wounds of trauma are fundamental to relating. These wounds may be silently held but can be sensed. They may be held uniformly across the collective body itself or fragmented throughout. As the group continues this synchronization process, new layers of trauma and stress may emerge with accompanying emotions, all of which is guided by a skilled facilitation process. Throughout this article, we will interweave the TIP as we investigate trauma, collective trauma, narrative voice, embodied witnessing and the potential emergences of the "tender narrator."

This article is a collaborative venture. It is based both on Thomas Hübl's body of work as an instructor, spiritual teacher, and international facilitator over the past 20 years, and the writing and research Lori Shridhare has done on trauma, which includes reporting on Thomas's work for several news publications (Shridhare, 2020a, 2020b) and her practice as a senior student in his training programs since 2017. In addition to her freelance writing and journalism, she is a communications director at Harvard Medical School, where

she has collaborated with Thomas as a volunteer to support his courses, workshops, and medical school talks.¹

In this collaboration, our intention is not only to translate insights and learnings from our work together, but also to invite the reader into an exploration and discovery of embodied witnessing. In this way, we invite you to observe your inner state as you take in the various points of view in this article: the voices of scientific literature, the experiences of a retreat participant, and the shifting lenses through which we narrate this text. We offer this article in a spirit of compassion and self-care. When reading about trauma, proceed gently.

Origins of Process

To step into Thomas's story is to reflect on how "collective trauma found him," through "learning from the phenomenon itself in such a way that it becomes its own explanation," (Bortoft, 1996, p. 45). In Thomas's words:

In the early 2000s, I returned from four years of a meditation retreat to lead retreats in Austria and Germany. In these groups, which included mostly Germans, participants began expressing strong emotions, often spontaneously, as if they were digesting unspoken grief and suppressed fear, shame, guilt, and numbness. As this process unfolded, together we began to unlock deeply held grief, confusion, and anger that had been passed on through the last generation in the wake of World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust. Unexpectedly, I was experiencing, along with the group, the impact of historical trauma. To access the roots of their sadness, we began to explore the group's felt experience of living in bodies as descendants of World War II.

As this work unfolded over the years into praxis, defined as being "concerned with reflection in the here-and-now as it is with reflection before or after the experience" (Sunitha, 2018, p. 839), Thomas wrote, "Each group that I taught throughout Germany was in fact instructing me. I began to witness a profoundly recursive pattern, emerging again and again in groups of all types and sizes" (Hübl & Avritt, 2020, p. xx). Soon after, the group demographic expanded as Israeli and other Jewish participants discovered his work.

In recent years, Thomas's programs have become increasingly international and racially diverse. His organization, Academy of Inner Science, makes

¹ Harvard Medical School first invited Thomas in 2019 to speak on collective trauma. He has continued to present workshops and teach as guest faculty on trauma, resilience, relational competencies, and meditation, including at Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard teaching hospital, where he has offered workshops for physicians in the department of medicine (2020, 2022) and at Cambridge Health Alliance where he has served as guest faculty for a continuing medical education course on traumatic stress (2021).

available a signature foundational program, Timeless Wisdom Training (TWT)², which takes place over two years as a series of in-person and online group retreats.³ All retreats, courses, and programs include principles of the TIP, which are intended to create a safe and generative environment for sharing and reflection. However, the programs also include content, dialogue, and group work not directly related to trauma. A team of therapists and other professionals support these programs.

Identifying Trauma

According to psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997), psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless, where the victim is “rendered helpless by overwhelming force” (p. 33). Traumatic events are extraordinary, she suggests, not because they’re uncommon, but because they “overwhelm the ordinary human adaptation to life” as well as “the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (Herman, 1997, p. 33). “The effects of unresolved loss or trauma can be disorganizing and hidden from conscious awareness, resulting in disturbances in the flow of energy and information in the mind” (Siegel, 2020, p. 406).

While Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is diagnosable, “*many more individuals will exhibit resilient responses, subclinical symptoms, or consequences that fall outside of diagnostic criteria*” [emphasis added] (SAMHSA, n.d.). Referring to the multiple and often confusing uses of the word *trauma*, Erikson emphasizes that more important than the event that causes the trauma is *how people react to it*, and he makes the point that to “serve as a generally useful concept, ‘trauma’ has to be understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discrete happening” (Erikson, 1976, p. 185). While therapeutic interventions are necessary for treating PTSD and other trauma disorders, group spaces dedicated to the TIP can fill the remaining gaps, nurture the growth of trauma-informed cultures, and focus on prevention.

Collective trauma is caused by natural and human-made disasters and is a “cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society” (Hirschberger, 2018, p. 1441). While sociologist Kai Erikson (1976) referred to individual trauma as a blow to the individual psyche, he defines collective trauma as a “blow to the

² See www.timelesswisdomtraining.com

³ The first two-year program began in Germany in 2008, followed by six consecutive programs there. In the U.S., the first program was launched in 2015, followed by a two-year session from 2018-2020 until the current one launched in 2022. This iteration, 2022-2024 is a global endeavor, with meetings for both the European cohort (200) and U.S. cohort (200) online throughout the year, and two retreats for each cohort per year in person. Dozens of countries are represented in both groups, with translation in Spanish and German available. Scholarships are always offered, and diversity inclusion around race, gender, ethnicity, and disability is an inherent value in all programs.

tissues of social life that damages the bonds linking people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson, 1976, p. 302). Collective traumas such as a mass atrocity or genocide lead to dehumanization, and healing is a “holistic overcoming of the act of being dehumanized and as a coming to terms with its harms” (Thomson, 2021, p. 46). In this article, we include all forms of group experiences of trauma, including ancestral, intergenerational, and historical under the category of *collective trauma*.

Since 2020, our global state of trauma has been compounded by the pandemic, a collective trauma of unprecedented magnitude (cf. Holman et al., 2022), and in the U.S., through a series of incidents that surfaced and made visible the legacy of unhealed race-based historical traumas (Silver et al., 2020). Situational factors (cf. Taylor, 2020) that lead to traumatic experiences or exasperate existing trauma include colonialism, slavery, racism, ableism, class, caste, scarcity resources, genocide, war, migration, and gender violence, all of which continue to be addressed in TIPs. These impacts can be traced back to cycles of historical and intergenerational trauma stemming from the social and cultural environments in which children are raised as well as epigenetic transmission (cf. Siobhan, 2020).

While trauma, we argue, is ubiquitous in nature and has permeated our global culture, the burden is not shared equally, and disproportionately affects people who are not members of the hegemonic power structure, such as those who identify as Global Majority and Indigenous populations. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, of University of New Mexico, developed the Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grief Intervention for American Indians to heal their historical trauma, which she defines as “the collective, cumulative psychological wounds of massive, repeated, transgenerational group trauma” (Brave Heart et al., 2020, p. 2).

Trauma Integration

While trauma research has become more comprehensive in the last decade, what is missing are references to a holistic process of trauma integration. Integration can refer to narrative memory, proposed by psychologist Pierre Janet as the forming of constructs to make sense of an experience. Herman (1997) notes that the fundamental premise of the trauma story is in supporting integration, which, according to van der Kolk & van der Hart (1995), occurs when the narrative of the trauma experienced is “made part of one’s autobiography” (p. 178). In the TIP, verbal narration is only an initial step to access what is most essential to this process: the energy, emotion, and information beyond the words.

A TIP may focus on one event or a constellation of experiences. Participants often reflect on their habits, stress patterns, challenges, and other life circumstances, including how the environment in which they were raised impacted their development. As Thomas leads this discussion, he invites the group to contemplate how each of us has been born into a world impacted by collective trauma.

On suffering, Brave Heart et al. (2020) write, “Contemporary individual suffering is rooted in the ancestral legacy and continues into the present. Traditionally, one cannot be separated from the influences of ancestral suffering. Time is nonlinear, circular, and simultaneous” (p. 3). Due to its cyclical—and often historic—nature, collective trauma can manifest as both a root cause of current conflicts, and as a consequence. Restoration means integrating past, undigested trauma into the present. In doing so, the boundaries of what is perceived as individual, ancestral, and collective experiences become fluid, dissolving our perception of time.

The Tender Narrator

In this section, we apply the concept of the “tender narrator” as a device for exploring and identifying emergent voices that express both the trauma narrative itself, and the *wisdom* behind the trauma.⁴ Traditionally in English literature, the narrator is situated in one of three points of view, first (“I/we”), second (“you”) or third person (“he, she, they, it”). In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Tokarczuk (2019) suggested the introduction of a fourth point of view, that of the tender narrator whose perception crosses the boundaries of time and space:

Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different kind of responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture “here” is connected to a gesture “there,” that a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable. (p. 21)

When the first-person point of view is narrated, “the individual performs the role of subjective center of the world” (Tokarczuk, 2019, Nobel Lecture, section 2, para 5). In psychotherapy, this point of view is essential for healing, as the individual forms and narrates their “trauma story,” which psychiatrist Richard Mollica defines as “stories told by survivor patients of distressing and painful personal and social events. Sharing these stories serves a dual function not only of healing the survivor but also of teaching and guiding the listener—and, by extension, society” (Mollica et al., 2014, p. 4). Expressing a first-person narrative therefore becomes a critical step for an individual in healing trauma. In a group setting such as a TIP, this singular perspective can begin to expand beyond a singular point of view to become a tender narrator. As a participant speaks, fragments of the trauma story form into a coherent whole. This emergent voice

⁴ The “tender narrator” is not a framework used in the TIP as a programmatic element; it is a device for this article’s investigation of potential shifts in points of view and experience that can emerge through a TIP, and is utilized here solely for the purpose of reflection on the process.

can be witnessed by both the speaker and listeners. We might envision this tender narrator as that voice which speaks *from the whole*, that which, in its essence, is inherently connected to a greater wisdom.

Accessing the Unspeakable

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth (1995) writes, “If trauma is unspeakable, it is because it eludes memory, as it *escapes* full consciousness as it occurs” (p. 153). Personal horrors—as well as those on a collective scale such as gender violence, war, and genocide—erase and delete words, creating a chasm where memory ceases to exist. We are unaware of the unconscious impact of trauma that colors our perceptions, ways of seeing the world, and one another. “The knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness, but is rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, dissociation operate on a social, as well as an individual level” (Herman, 1997, p. 2). In 2022, it is not possible to be “periodically” intruded upon by the news of horrible events. The question for our collective responsibility then becomes how do we face our denial when collective trauma is pervasive and persistent?

“Trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge” Caruth continues (1995, p. 153). She writes about Claude Lanzmann, the late film director of the documentary *Shoah*, which documents accounts of the Holocaust from survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators. While speaking at an event, Lanzmann “precisely began with the impossibility of telling this story, suggesting that historical truth may be transmitted in some cases through the refusal of a certain framework of understanding, a refusal that is also a creative act of listening” (p. 153). This act of refusal, she posits, is not a denial of the past, but a way to “access knowledge which has not yet attained the form of ‘narrative memory’” (p. 154).

To bridge the phenomenon of trauma that exists within the realm of the unspeakable, unknowable, and unthinkable requires a narrator who observes, but does not conclude, who asks questions, but does not offer solutions. We imagine this narrator gently circling all that is beyond the realm of conscious reach, holding a higher source of wisdom that even within the absence, the numbing, and the denial, leads to an opening. Tenderness, Tolgarcek (2019) said:

is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time. Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. (p. 24)

This quality of tenderness often emerges in the TIP, as participants perceive less distance between themselves and others, demonstrate greater compassion, and become attuned to the “we” of the group experience, shifting into the interconnected perspective of what we might call the tender narrator.

Sharing and Embodied Witnessing in Groups

In a TIP, many participants have some familiarity with complex, stressful, or traumatic experiences of their past. Others may discover that the surfacing of their memories is triggered by current events which open their awareness to previously buried ancestral, intergenerational, or historical trauma. The focus is on all that spontaneously arises for the participant who is sharing, not on achieving an outcome.

In a TIP, there are several stages that can be observed as a participant shares an experience with the larger group, guided by the facilitator. The stages outlined exemplify only a *potential* process; each share is unique and unfolds organically according to infinite variables and factors as unique as the participants themselves.

STAGE	PARTICIPANT	FACILITATOR PROCESS/ LEARNING	PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE	DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING
1	Speaks before group (shares or asks question to facilitator)	Articulating and hosting a space of safety and compassion. Observes individual as an expression of the whole, fluid relationship with group field	Establishing comfort with speaking, somatic awareness, hearing/ sensing one's own voice, discovery of emergent narrative	Authenticity, vulnerability, expressing needs; <i>being</i>
2	Further reflection and articulation of experience or question	Opening the field of listening and creating space	Intention/self-contact	Observation of initial connection with facilitator while speaking (or not); <i>becoming</i>
3	Deeper reflection of opening into experience or question	Observing the group's energy as they begin to listen and attune to speaker	Narrative, and the energy behind the narrative	Higher levels of awareness/seeing
4	Access emotions/ inner state	Engaging with flow of movement of process, not fixed on a prescribed outcome or assumed goal of dialogue	Emotions: Anger, fear, joy, sadness, shame, or numbness may emerge, mental activity fades to greater awareness of somatic and emotional sensing	Being with what is, sensing both what can be felt and the nature of what is hidden or numb
5	Deeper awareness and articulation of inner state	Listening to the 'voice of the past' which emerges through narrative	Attunement	Self-regulation and co-regulation
6	Tracking of inner state in attunement process	Allowing the possibility of non-resonance, continued guidance of tracking with speaker	Narrative voice of tracking and attunement with facilitator	Awareness of relational attunement, or not
7	Completion or move to next step in cycle as new layers open	Observation of specific manifestations of individual, ancestral, collective experiences/trauma in speaker	Listening for the voice of: individual, ancestral, and/ or collective, possible interconnection of all	Steps towards integration, self-reflection, witnessing the process of sharing narrative with group; <i>belonging</i>
8	Regulation	Assess the need for additional support from facilitation team	Support	The group field as co-regulating power
9	Pause and reflect	Introduce pause and meta-reflection process of witnessing experience to entire group	Digest, reflect, integrate	Observe new awareness of integration, also the experience of being listened to/ witnessed by the group

NOTE: The order of stages represents a potential flow of the process; each participant dialogue is organic and unique.

Figure 2: Stages of Facilitator-Participant Experience ©2022 Lori Shridhare.

First, participants are invited to raise their hands if they want to ask a question or share a personal experience in dialogue with the facilitator, who then invites the other participants to practice observing their emotions as they attune to the person speaking. The facilitator supports the speaker's emergent process of sharing, gently guiding the flow by asking questions of clarification and by transmitting an interiority of spaciousness and openness. Throughout the time the speaker shares, and the dyadic process unfolds (15 to 50 minutes), the facilitator provides pointers for the speaker to reflect and focus on their somatic, emotional, and mental states. Together, the speaker and facilitator conclude the dialogue, returning the speaker to a regulated state for further reflection, which may include support from the assistant team. Figure 2 outlines these possible stages.

As the participant and facilitator engage in a dyadic conversation, the wider group of participants—which can range from 100 to 1,000 people—practice becoming embodied witnesses. The TIP involves creating spaces, in Otto Scharmer's words, "at a level that can really hold the complexity of very difficult and traumatic experiences of the past. And that has to do with the deeper capacity of unconditional witnessing. And then, as we deepen this process toward the open heart, there is this holding of the other" (Scharmer & Hübl, 2019).

When each participant of a group engages in this "holding of the other," we can listen for an emergent voice arising from the collective, speaking from a source of realization that illuminates and updates our understanding. This "voice of the collective" may be loud or subtle. In becoming aware of the possibility of this voice we begin to expand our dimensions of listening together, attuning our energies to that which seeks to be released, the "wound that cries out." Together, we may learn to identify the distinct, *direct* voices of individual, collective, intergenerational, and historic traumas.

With the permission of Dasha Gaian, a writer and photographer who lives in Mill Valley, California, and a participant in TWT who attended an in-person retreat in April 2022, we share an excerpt of a 3,300-word transcript of a 30-minute dialogue with Thomas. Dasha raised her hand in the opening session, after Thomas invited shares that related to the war in Ukraine.

Dasha: I'm very nervous because it's the first time speaking to such a large room full of people. I am from Ukraine and I have connections to Russia and Ukraine. Both of my parents are half-Russian, half-Ukrainian. And I grew up speaking Russian and Ukrainian. And I feel like if the planet is my body, then some parts of my body are fighting right now, and it's terrifying.

And I've been avoiding throughout my life anything that had to do with the military. I found people who choose a military career to be strange or traumatized or not fully respectable, and now it's the exact opposite. I have so much respect for people who are defending their country, or my country.

And I'm curious: is this numbness when I feel like I'm okay, I'm safe? Am I just numb to what's going on? Or is it resilience? With the anxiety that arises and then I have a peaceful moment and then I feel like things are okay, for me at least.

Thomas: So what do you think? What's your feeling? You know your process.

Dasha: I think it's possibly a little bit of both. I think that I had to develop—my nervous system had to adapt—because I've seen so much disturbing footage that I am glued to it all day long. I think about it all day long. Before, I couldn't watch violent films, knowing that it's a film, and now it's real life. Homes that look just like the home I grew up in that are destroyed. And people who look just like my neighbors or my family have died.

Children who look just like my children. And yet I just keep watching, I can't stop. And there is this anxiety that pulsates in my solar plexus. Worry. Fear.

Thomas: Maybe you said it now yourself, you see that you are not numb because it has a lot going on in you. You said it right now. And maybe we just, let's make a moment, because I think we are practicing how we as a community can witness each other's process, how we can be mindful of what's going on in every one of us and learn from each other, because you're sharing with us something that we can also learn from. And so maybe if you make a space for this, for the anxiety and this shivering inside, and maybe we take a moment to just allow that to be, instead of it being a disturbance. That what comes up in us right now is part of the issue, not something that is only separate from it. So since you have such a strong connection to the country, it's very natural that you will surface what you feel. Maybe we can just allow this to even have a bit more space.

Dasha: It's like pulsating really strongly.

Thomas: And also when you say there's a lot of fear coming up in you ...So maybe we can together—that you and I and whoever is feeling you right now—that we can soften a bit into the fear. Because often we try to get away from fear, and what we want to do is actually almost the opposite, to make some space and allow it to be, so that your system can digest it rather than just get away from it or keep it in place. So often we keep those feelings in place and then they just stay there. Right.

And if you soften a bit the way you feel the fear, you make it a bit softer and allow it to be assimilated. Right. And the same with this

pulsing that you feel, that you soften a bit your nervous system, the way you feel it.

Dasha: It's almost challenging to stay in the body. I've developed this superpower to go into the mind and analyze everything.

Thomas: Exactly. Yes, exactly.

Dasha: It was easier when I closed my eyes to go inside, to go into that area that's in the solar plexus that's so active, and I saw this vision of thousands of voices screaming for help. And a lot of them are female voices and children, and they're just calling, "Help us!"

Thomas: And then to see when you connect to your inner sensations and you check in, what's happening to our relation, when you are connecting to what you feel? Do you have a sense that I'm here or do I feel a bit at a distance?

Dasha: Feels like a bit at a distance. It's like I developed a layer of protection. I'm growing to overcome it, but it's almost like I feel alone in this.

Thomas: Exactly. And I would like us not to try to overcome it, but to include it. That the distancing is something you feel, it's part of your perception. And I would like us just to include the distancing, so you feel scared, afraid, and distant, and a bit alone. Alone means a bit retracted towards the inside. Right. And that we just include that without trying to overcome it.

Dasha: It's like my sense of me is growing into these boundaries that seemed far away before.

Thomas: Exactly. It made immediately a difference, you saw it, it immediately opened some of your energy when you included it. Right. The distancing is part of your intelligence, it's not something that we want to get rid of. It's something that we want to include and then see how it grows, how it changes. Exactly as you're doing it now. And you feel that it makes a difference?

Dasha: Yeah. It's also me, but like I retreated into a shell. The shell is me as well. It's part of my body. But it's ...hiding.

Thomas: Exactly. And then now—since that opened up more—you check in again how your relation to me feels now. It changed a bit, this sense, then you include the new state again, as we did it before.

Dasha: Yeah, I feel more present and I feel the connection more active.

Thomas: And then let's include the connection. That's also how I feel. I feel now like a step more included when you look at me. Like as if you feel me more; I feel more felt. And then you can see if the fear is still there. If some of it is still there, then to feel both; your inner activation with what's going on according to the global situation, and us being related at the same time. That fear exists within a relational context.

(Dialogue continues)

After the completion of a complex share that touches upon both individual and collective trauma, the larger group reflects together or divides into triads. In this case, the group reflected together by pausing and sensing the impact of this share on their mental, emotional, and physical states.

Reflections Following the Dialogue

Six months after her dialogue, Dasha shared her reflections in response to questions that Lori Shridhare posed to her.⁵

As you were sharing this experience, did anything surprise you as you heard your own voice?

I have very little experience with public speaking, and usually even the thought of it brings about some of the most intense emotions I've ever felt—a mix of fear, anxiety, excitement and joy, a mix so powerful that it takes extreme effort to stay in the body and to stay coherent in my expression. As I heard the recording of the process, I was surprised that my voice sounded clear and my speech was mostly coherent, with only occasional inaccuracies.

How did your awareness shift from your somatic sensations, to your intellect, to your emotions throughout your share?

As I was going through the experience, my point of view kept shifting between various angles.

First was the richness of my inner process—sensations, emotions, thoughts, images. I would open up to the intense sensations in my body, then my mind would get activated and draw all the energy of my awareness upwards, working on analyzing what was happening. It would take conscious effort of shifting my focus to once again feel my somatic sensations and emotions, and I remember occasionally closing my eyes and retreating deeply into

⁵ Interview conducted via shared document on Oct.8, 2022

my inner world in order to maintain awareness of what was happening beyond my intellect.

What was it like to share your fear while relating, in dialogue?

I would become aware of my interaction with Thomas, as his gentle guidance brought me out of my internal bubble, reminding me that this is a shared experience, and there is an open invitation to not have to go through it alone, as I was conditioned to do through my developmental trauma. Growing up with mostly loving parents who had no awareness or training on how to help a child navigate the wide spectrum of human emotions, where my expressions of negative emotions were met with either a disproportionately strong outburst of more negative emotions and violence—or worse, sarcasm—caused me to retreat deeper into my inner world, to become emotionally self-reliant too early and to mistrust interactions with others.

Yet, my interaction with Thomas was entirely different. Partly because I have already witnessed him leading dozens of processes with other participants in various contexts, both online and in person, which led me to develop a deep trust for his presence and approach, and partly because of how he interacted with me in the moment. By using a gentle, kind, tender voice to calm my nervous system and by allowing ample space and time for my process to unfold, he created a safe container within which I felt secure enough to share my emotional experience—my fear—not only with him but also with the group.

What was the experience of being witnessed by others?

It was only occasionally that my awareness included the group of more than 200 participants as well as many experienced assistants and trainees that held a coherent field of active presence around me, the safe resonance body that intensified my process. For a significant portion of time, I almost forgot that others were present, my nervous system canceling out the group to not overwhelm me. Yet, at a subconscious level, I still felt the warm, soft, attentive field that allowed for me to be vulnerable, surrounding our interaction with a womb-like boundary.

One memorable moment that has been unfolding for months after the experience was Thomas's invitation to "soften a bit into the fear," instead of my habitual responses of either fighting it with a variety of techniques or turning away from it—both with unhelpful intensity.

Another deeply impactful outcome of the process was when Thomas brought into my awareness the fact that I was withdrawing from the shared experience, and invited me to include this layer of protection, this impulse to retract inward, instead of trying to overcome it. Including him and our interaction into my awareness, far beyond the small space I've grown accustomed to occupying, initiated an alchemical process inside my nervous system and my energetic field, which has transformed my interactions with the outside world, familiar or unfamiliar circumstances, groups small or large, and continues to unfold today, six months later.

Many aspects of the TIP can be noted in Dasha's reflection, as well as shifts from various points of view, into a voice we might recognize as a tender narrator. She demonstrates a competency to utilize all her senses, not only her intellect, to track her interiority and emotional process which manifests through her body. While she speaks from the first-person point of view, there is a sense that the voice of the collective, and possibly her ancestral lineage, emerges through her experience around the war, appearing as images and somatic sensations. She also becomes aware of how a lack of emotional co-regulation in a traumatized family system can generate a protective mechanism of inward retraction as a child. As an adult, this pattern can become so habitual that it escapes conscious awareness, until the experience is witnessed in relation, which can facilitate a transformational shift. In this way, Thomas's listening becomes an entry gate to understanding her childhood experience, as the past becomes present. Dasha also reflects on how having the space and time to engage in this dialogue created a sense of safety in her nervous system, allowing her to process fear.

Finally, she reflects on the presence of embodied witnesses. When 200 people are *dialed in* to Dasha's process, the strength and intensification of attunement is greater than a dialogue with just one person. As the speaker shares, participants in the larger group are invited to practice tracking their somatic, emotional, and cognitive shifts as they listen, sense, and attune to the speaker's inner state, and to notice any shifts in the group field as the interactive dialogue with the facilitator unfolds. When triggering content is shared, a range of inner responses can emerge, some of which lead participants to request support from the assistant team. Figure 3 outlines in more detail the potential stages of the group process.

STAGE	LARGE GROUP	PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE	DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING	FACILITATOR PROCESS/ LEARNING
1	Large group comes together for a retreat (ie TWT) or TIP (dedicated trauma integration process)	Meditation, 3-Synch, group attunement; presencing	Listening, witnessing, sensing as "we." When virtual: Scrolling through gallery view to practice connecting with various people	Observing the energy and coherence of group space at start of event
2	Content talks by facilitator, practice sessions, writing exercises, and triads	Participation/focus, receptivity, listening, authenticity	Individual: Tracking the emerging emotions in relation to this group experience. Group: Reflection practices on becoming aware of the "we" space and changes	Opening the field of listening and creating space
3	Participant-facilitator sharing and questions (See figure 2)	Group field attunes to the narrative, and the energy behind the narrative	Deeper levels of awareness/seeing	Supporting group container
4	Sharing continues: Access emotions/inner state	Individual participant: Witnesses their inner narrative, and any emotions in response to sharings. Anger, fear, joy, sadness, or numbness	Being with what is	Supporting group container
5	Sharing continues: Deep listening of potentially sensitive or traumatic experiences	Group attunement, "waves" of emotions and/or somatic experiences such as fatigue, heaviness can move through the space	Group as conduit for collective past to be expressed, voiced, and witnessed	Observes group for shifts and any emerging needs for support
6	Group attunement & regulation	Witnessing the voice of: individual, ancestral, or collective material	Moving beyond "other", empathic listening, belonging	Observes group for shifts and any emerging needs for support
7	Triad or small group work (See figure 2)	Exploration of resonance with talks and group sharings, how <i>the center of presence held within the larger group field unfolds for each individual, deepening this awareness throughout the triad process</i>	Meta-reflection	Listens for the specificity of individual/ancestral/collective trauma in the sharing and in the energy of the group field
8	Participants in triad return to large group space for meta-reflection			

Figure 3: Stages of Group Experience ©2022 Lori Shridhare.

In Conclusion: Fluidity of Integration and Group Healing

In individual healing, sharing one's trauma story, usually as part of psychotherapy, is a key initial step in integration. In the group healing process presented here, we conceptualize how this first person point of view might expand to encompass greater awareness of the whole. In practicing together as a coherent field, the point of view of the narrating, embodied speaker can shift, illuminating potential paths for insights and perspectives for self- and group reflection.

At the conclusion of her speech, Tolgarcek invited authors to "tell stories honestly in a way that activates a sense of the whole in the reader's mind, that sets off the reader's capacity to unite fragments into a single design, and to discover entire constellations in the small particles of events" (Tolgarcek, 2019,

Nobel Lecture, section 6, para 7). Her siren call to step out of the confines of singular points of view applies to all of us who are called to create—and to heal—and to move beyond speaking *about* to speaking *from* a state of presence. “There is no purely intellectual point of view, and there is no view from nowhere, there is only an embodied point of view” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 36).

Trauma integration is the process of awakening the parts of ourselves that have been split off and fragmented in the past, reconstituting our awareness of their separate or muted existence, and allowing these aspects of ourselves to be seen and held in relationship, witnessing this totality come into presence. Beyond the simple act of verbal narration and the biology of seeing, this process invites layers of holding, denial, and defense to unwind, returning us to our original energetic voice, which speaks beyond the boundaries of time, space, and the confines of a singular perspective.

While collective trauma (including the study of it) can be overwhelming in its power to contract and distort, the witnessing capacity opens space to host the world *as it is* within us. To see healing through a wider lens, where the limits of time and borders of *mine* and *yours* dissolve, is to become a tender narrator. While this narrator may embody a fluidity of seeing the interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity, and all of nature, the seer is not overwhelmed, but empowered. As responsible, informed citizens and leaders, we are charged not only with becoming trauma-informed, but trauma-integrated. We are charged with accepting this responsibility and practicing with self-compassion, caring for ourselves and others, and approaching the delicate membrane of our composite of traumas with gentleness, even with joy.

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