

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder PTSD or Posttraumatic Growth PTG?

By Micaela Sauber, storyteller, Hamburg, Germany

Storytelling of different kinds can be helpful for migrants and displaced people. It can also be problematic if naively we approach a person with a traumatic experience. Many different aspects are to be regarded. This article offers a small basic information for storytellers about Trauma. The situation of so many migrants with and without traumatic experiences arriving in Europe is touching us and many would like to become active out of our profession.

From those who arrived in Europe not everyone is traumatized, but for sure there are many who have suffered violence or loss of relatives, who have been victim and/or perpetrator or who had incredible stress to come here and are now mostly living in unsure situations. It is important to offer help, otherwise millions of biographies would be damaged and many of those who could not transform their traumatic experiences are not only suffering but might develop enormous problems to society. We storytellers might humbly take initiative and try to offer reconnection, re-remembering and healing through storytelling.

We should be prepared about other cultures, religion and intercultural behaviour, of course this is normal for professional storytellers. This may prevent us and our listeners from unnecessarily bad experiences. I always search for traditional tales of the people I visit before meeting them. I try to meet them with open heart, smiling, and on the other side with self confidence. I am aware that many, children and adults, have suffered traumatizing experiences which caused abnormal behaviour. It is often not easy to recognize „abnormal“ behaviour as result of trauma and distinguish from cultural difference. Dealing with trauma is also different in different cultures, so we should hold back opinions. Also we should be aware about our limits and be aware when professional therapeutic help is needed.

Here is a small background about trauma as I learned it from different lectures and workshops by doctors of medicine, psychiatrists and trauma-therapeuts and have reflected it on my work.

Trauma causes deep fragmentation and dissociation of everything, from loosing home to being unable to controll body and soul. The task is to offer connection and re-remembering through different kinds of action. Storytelling can be a strong support between other commitments.

Trauma can be transformed into Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) instead of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is important to know.

Great artists or other well known personalities have transformed Trauma into Post Traumatic Growth.

Pablo Picasso, who has been first time in his life traumatized when he died at his birth and came back to life when an uncle by accident let hot ashes from his cigar fall on the small body. Other traumatizing experiences followed later when he was already an artist. All his great art was born by a healing energy in himself caused by his trauma.

An outstanding fighter for childrens' rights is Malala who got the Nobel price for her bold humanitarian dedication to education of children. She had been shot into her head – and what she is doing now for humanity can be called post traumatic growth.

Claude AnShin Thomas („At hells gate“), who as a Vietnam war veteran was a killer, and is now an ordained Soto-Zen-Priest, has transformed himself since he came into the vietnamese monk community of Thich Nhat Hanh. He is working for understanding, peace and healing of wounds from violence and war.

Inspite all what we can know about trauma and how to recognize and approach traumatized personalities, there is one important result of researches to know: Man made traumata are much deeper then traumata caused by natural catastrophes and – man made traumata can only be eased or even healed by man. The main and first help and ease is the encounter from human being to human being, from eye to eye with an empathic person. Broken basic confidence can only be – if at all – rebuilt by human commitment.

Peter A. Levine describes this „In an unspoken voice“ and other books.

Here is a door open for us storytellers if we are ready for a humble empathic encounter.

Oral storytelling, the human voice, the full presence of the empathic person, the archetypal images of traditional tales of humanity are a golden key to meet from heart to heart and give healing a chance in an encounter, in which both are involved and also might change roles: the listener and the teller. Mostly not at first aid after the incidence, but as second and third one and as a bridge to the other person. An inner attitude of respect is important and we have to dismount our horse for this encounter, to meet the other on the same level.

There is something else to be aware of: We can easily be afflicted by a *secondary trauma*, caused by what we see, hear and share and this has to be recognized and treated shortly after it had happened to us. Like the first help after trauma help should be offered shortly after the incident. It makes much sense not to go alone to work with traumatized people with storytelling, but as a team. Sharing experiences since impressions are fresh should be made possible. In Hamburg we have a doctor of medicine in our team, to ask for help if needed.

Archetypal images and healing processes of the traditional tales from all over the world are recommended to be told. They will awaken archetypal images in the depths of unconsciousness and may connect broken parts, re-membering.

It helps people in need more to remember their own traditional stories and discovering their lost roots in these stories, then telling in a chaotic way about their experiences. The latter can be necessary to ease the pain of the soul, but should always be guided professionally by a therapist. If true life stories of migrants and refugees shall be collected to create tales to be told in public, storytellers who work in this direction should be able to guide the telling in a way that positive stories will be created and traumatic experiences avoided. This prevents those who are afflicted from falling into retraumatization and flashback experiences (A flashback is an uncontrolled appearance of a traumatic event).

If Trauma was not to be changed into PTG, it might end in mental and physical diseases which cannot be healed any more.

Naive approach to refugees with traumatic experiences can cause problems and more pain for those who have suffered much.

It is important to offer trauma pedagogy including storytelling as early as possible after the children arrived in the camps. It helps them stabilizing and after 4 weeks, but for sure 3 months results of stabilization and re-connection of body, soul and spirit can be attested.

If nothing is offered, the symptoms of trauma will become stronger and more obvious. Socialization and integrating will become more and more difficult.

The effects of Trauma and PTSD are revealed often later, when a sort of shelter and settlement, regular visits of Kindergarten and school has taken place in the lives of the children.

What to tell? When everthing in ones life is upside down, body, soul and spirit torn apart, traditional stories with strong images where fragmentation is healed are recommended. Many classical fairy tales are dealing with healing a crisis into a growth.

We find migration stories with good end in many traditional tales like the type of Bremen town musicians or the pancake who ran away to feed hungry children in the end.

More details to recognize trauma and how to work as storyteller with people afflicted by trauma and post traumatic stress disorder will be offered by Tellers without Borders in workshops from 2017 on. Please express your interest and send your email-adress for informations.

About me:

Born 1945 in the last days of the war during alarm, I became a professional storyteller since the 1990ies, after theological studies, curative education, journalism. I initiated the network Tellers without Borders which is a growing network in Europe and worldwide. Outstanding activities as storyteller and teacher for storytelling in Bosnia during and after war, Dubrovnik/Croatia after siege, Palestine/Gaza strip and Westbank, North Iraq, Libanon. During the last 3 years I attended many lectures about trauma, its origin and healing, by doctors of medicine and therapeuts in Germany. I am travelling with emergency pedagogues to countries in crisis, giving workshops for storytelling. Friends of Waldorf education who have developed effective missions in emergency and trauma pedagogy worldwide since 2006 are my main cooperation partners.

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Article by medical doctor Martin Straube about Trauma:

www.tellers-without-borders.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Trauma_article.pdf

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