

Spiritual Resources During Times of War: Experiences of a Group of Women From the Former Yugoslavia

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Although spirituality and religion have played an important part in the human psyche for thousands of years, these important dimensions of the human experience were ignored by social workers for most of the twentieth century (Canda & Furman, 1999). More recently, the social work profession has recognized that spiritual and religious beliefs can be powerful forces that strengthen people's ability to confront challenges (Greene, 2007).

Spirituality has been described as "the basic human drive for meaning, purpose, and moral relatedness among people, with the universe, and with the ground of our being" (Canda, 1989, p. 573), whereas religion refers to a system of specific beliefs and practices. The ability to assign meaning and purpose is now recognized as an important dimension of the human experience, and social workers take the spiritual aspect of their clients' lives seriously (Sherwood, Wolfer, & Scales, 2002).

The meaning that people ascribe to their lives is shared through the stories they tell (Sherwood, Wolfer, & Scales, 2002). Life stories provide an understanding of how humans experience their world, and they are an expression of the individual's "construction of self and the world" (Von Hassell, 1993, p. 550). Through listening to people's accounts, we deepen our knowledge of individual experience and of truths concerning the human condition.

People need to believe in a predictable, comprehensible world over which we have some measure of control (Zulueta, 1993). Traumatic events shatter our sense of an orderly world where human interactions proceed along agreed-upon lines. Often as a result of these events, people turn to spirituality as a means of finding solace.

Since the last century, the number of conflicts around the world, both between and within countries, has escalated. The result has been a major displacement of people. Current estimates place the number of refugees at 9.2 million persons (UNHCR, 2005), the majority of whom are women and children (Levine, 2001; Martin, 1995). Studies of refugees have discussed what we can learn from them in terms of maintaining health: physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually (Arcia, Skinner, Bailey, & Correa, 2001; Blair, 2001; Drachman & Halberstad, 1992; Herberg, 1993; Fine, 1991; Rumbaut, 1991; Williams, 1990; Zhou, 2000). The majority of these studies, however, focus on issues of refugees' adaptation in refugee camps or in countries of resettlement. This article discusses the experiences of a group of women trapped in the former Yugoslavia during the civil war of 1991-1995.

Methodology

I conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study to examine the lived experience of a group of women from the former Yugoslavia who had resettled in a Canadian city (Wilcke, 2002). The study explored their experiences of the war and as refugee immigrants.

I interviewed each respondent and taped our conversations. After transcribing the tapes, I conducted a second interview to clarify confusing statements and to make sure I had understood their meaning correctly. New information or clarifying statements were incorporated into the final draft of each interview. The transcripts were then examined and divided into statements, a process of "horizontalization" (Creswell, 1998, p. 55). These statements were then organized into clusters of meaning, or essential themes, using a cut-and-paste method, and then, through a process of writing and rewriting, I reflected on these themes to interpret what it was that they rendered meaningful (Van Manen, 1990/1994). I paid close attention to statements that rang true, that were haunting, or that showed the phenomena in a new way.

An important theme that emerged concerned the types of traumatic events that participants had experienced during the war and the strategies they had used to help themselves to endure and to find meaning in the midst of disaster. In writing about his experiences during the Second World War, Primo Levi (1985) talked about those in whom he "recognized the will and capacity to react, and hence a rudiment of virtue" (p.viii). Although not interned in concentration camps, participants' accounts do provide us with a glimpse of the strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Participants

Through contacts in the community, a snowball sample was obtained of ten women from the former Yugoslavia, ranging in age from 30 to 45 years. All had been resident in the country of resettlement for a period of six months or more, and all spoke English. All participants were married, except for one widow; all, except one, had children living with them; and all, except one, had a higher education degree. Participants were either of Serbian or Croatian background, or a mixture of the two, except for one participant from Bosnia who identified herself as Jewish. Husbands were also of similar backgrounds, except for two who were respectively Muslim-Serb and Serb-Slovene. All participants were originally from Bosnia or Croatia.

In the following discussion, I have attempted to render the immediacy of the experience as I encountered it during our conversations, and for this reason have reported accounts verbatim without correcting the grammar. Participants' actual words are written in italics.

War Approaches

People in Bosnia were living stable, settled lives. As war approached, they could not imagine that they would be affected, as they had lived peacefully together for over 40 years, with many mixed marriages. When fighting did break out, some found it hard to believe the reality of what was happening. The first few days of war even evoked romantic images of heroism and a feeling of excitement at the opportunity to witness a momentous event: I was even glad to experience war during my life: I am 33 years old, and I am telling myself: "This you can enjoy";

Reality did not seem real, but rather like some kind of film. Soon denial was replaced by the knowledge of the reality of events, and participants found themselves at a loss: you don't know what to do.

Physical deprivations soon followed. Food became scarce and hunger a constant presence. Lack of water led to the spread of diseases, and people were forced to live in dirty and unsanitary conditions. When winter came, conditions worsened as a result of the intense cold: Sometimes I cried because it was so cold during the night. Foraging outdoors for basic necessities like food, water, and fuel was perilous and could result in death. Every day, people were killed on this bridge but it was only way to get water…

Stupid Starts to Talk

One participant quoted Nobel Laureate Ivo Andich: "Every war is the time when stupid starts to talk and smart stop to talk, and criminals become rich." Atrocities witnessed included people being murdered for their national or religious affiliations or their possessions, with no consequences for the perpetrators. Speaking out in protests could result in death, so participants stayed silent. One described being haunted by the memory of listening helplessly for three days to the sounds of women being raped in the nearby prison: Sometimes I remember just this sound, this screaming.

As life became increasingly precarious, fear became a part of daily life, along with a sense of injustice at being caught up in uncontrollable events not of their choosing: What did I do in my life that I deserve something like this?

The disruption of society, and the accompanying destruction of all the familiar signposts and routines of a stable life, led to questioning the very essence of existence. Some experienced a sense of desolation and of great existential loneliness:

In the war, I was alone with me and nothing was around, and I said, "There is nobody who can help. I am by myself, alone in whole cosmos." And I felt such loneliness, because there was nobody who can help me; hopeless, absolutely hopeless.

Resistance

Participants described living through a multitude of traumatic events. At the end of my conversations, I asked: "How has your experience changed you? What helped you to endure?" A variety of strategies emerged that indicated respondents drew on a spiritual dimension to create a sense of meaning, purpose, and transcendence.

Participants found themselves in harsh, dangerous, and unpredictable situations, yet they maintained a sense of dignity and integrity through small acts of defiance. This could entail establishing a daily routine of going for a walk, regardless of dangerous external circumstances: We decided to go out every day, never mind bombs, shells falling down or not. If the bombing raids began, one remained calm: If you run, never mind; if you stay, never mind; it's the same. So they walked.

Other means of resisting fear were also used: I feel better when I read book. If shells, if it is bombing, I read my book and keep my mind busy…I try not to cry, trying to read books, because we didn't know what to do with all this time, just sit in prison and read books. It's good and useful, and keep your mind fresh.

Recognition of a shared destiny with others helped give perspective to individual suffering: There were so many people with horrible, horrible stories, so my situation, I can't really complain. Gratitude for family being alive helped buffer the trauma of losing a home: So many of my friends, they lost family; people died during the war, illness, or they were killed. Thank God we are all alive. Participants also gained comfort in connecting their experiences to those of other populations under similar circumstances: Jews during the Second World War; Russians or Chinese at the beginning of last century.

How we see ourselves and how we want to be seen involves a process of self-presentation: the creation of a public persona. Presenting a persona that transcends dangerous and degrading circumstances is an act of resistance, a refusal to let a drab environment dictate how one should appear or behave, and a reaffirmation of individual dignity. One participant described going shopping:

I got new skirt and new jacket …and new shoes...and it was the 2nd of May, after the huge bombing. I was dressed up in all that, with makeup; and my mother-in-law says, "Sweetheart, where are you going?" I said, "To stand in line for bread." She was laughing, "Oh, that's good, that's really good."

Those trapped in Sarajevo did not give up hope. They were determined to survive, and interpreted this determination as the strength of will over fate: I think I am the type of person that if I am telling myself, "You will survive," nothing can stop me. This determination was accompanied by a sense of a special destiny, of protection by a higher force. One participant described two incidents in which she felt she and her husband had been saved by either intuition or a sense of premonition. One time they were to go out shopping, but she kept delaying, because I felt like I had to stay there. A moment later, a bomb exploded, killing people in the bakery where they would have been. Another time, they spontaneously decided to try a new market. Five minutes later, their usual market was bombed and several hundred people died. She commented: Several things like this happened to us; it looks very unusual, but is happening.

The sense of a benign force protecting individual destinies did not mean a refusal to face the real brutality of the surrounding environment. Another participant described forcing herself to acknowledge and be aware of events around

her:

I try to have experience of the war; I try to be aware of everything, even if it is rude. I try to see with open eyes, just see and accept again. When you go out and you see killers and you see death and you see everything what is happening, you say: "That is reality."

She had a carefully thought-out reason for her unflinching gaze:

...if you don't look, you don't know what is truth, what is not, and you are starting to make in your head preconceptions what is, what could be, what couldn't be, what will be, what not, and it's not good … if you lose your consciousness, you are dead inside.

Being Changed

The experiences that participants endured changed them in profound ways. Participants' attitudes toward material possessions, once deemed indispensable, changed, and being alive became more precious: We started to think that everything what is material is not important, just life, only life, this is the most important what we have. Along with a change in priorities, participants described becoming more down to earth in their approach: I don't think about stupid things, you know. I am just focused more on my life, on my baby, on my work…and that's it. This uncompromising and reflective honesty included self-examination. One participant described how she forced herself to examine her own ideas and prejudices: In my spirit a commitment to break wrong rules and to establish right rules; breaking prejudice, breaking wrongly made rules or opinions, ideas.

Participants were prisoners of outer circumstances. But this did not mean that an inner, spiritual freedom couldn't be cultivated: They can keep me physically, but they cannot keep my mind, they cannot keep my spirit: it cannot be destroyed. I have freedom inside; it's mine.

Some participants developed religious faith. Out of the experience of desolation, helplessness, existential loneliness, and absolute hopelessness, grew a seed of faith:

I am by myself, alone in whole cosmos, and I felt such loneliness because there was nobody who help me; hopeless, absolutely hopeless, I have never felt this. It was a bad experience. And then I read Bible: I saw it's something, I understood that there is someone who maybe can help, just one person; this is someone that you cannot see and touch, but exists....

Discussion

A spiritual journey entails a stripping away of old thoughts and habits, a reexamination of desires and prejudices, and the embracing of a new reality. Joseph Campbell (1990) refers to the hero's journey, which involves leaving home, undergoing trials and tribulations, including descent into the realm of darkness before returning home victorious, having been irrevocably changed. Jung (1968) discusses a similar inner journey, in which the spirit, or consciousness, descends into the depths, struggles, and emerges into a new, more holistic consciousness.

Participants in the study described a process of inner development in the face of external danger and chaos. When external circumstances prevented or restricted freedom of behavior and speech, participants had to find alternate means of asserting their humanity and dignity. In the process, they were forced to examine their existing likes and preconceptions and develop a new way of being in the world.

Spiritual values and beliefs can be powerful forces that clients can draw on when faced with traumas that they need to overcome (Baskin, 2002). Through listening to clients recount their experiences and opening up a dialogue about the spiritual strengths they perceive as helpful to them, social workers can assist them in empowering themselves to face the challenges in their lives with stronger resources. At the same time, social workers are able to become more sensitive to the subtle but forceful ways spirituality manifests in people's lives, and the power for transformation that it embodies.

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