

# The Use of the Arts to Work with Trauma in Israel

*Ilene Serlin, Ph.D.*

In April of this year, I had the opportunity to participate in an extraordinary event in Israel sponsored by Lesley University. The goal of "Imagine: Expression in the Service of Humanity, Creative Approaches to Dealing with Conflict in Groups" was to bring together Israeli, Palestinian and Bedouin healthcare professionals to listen to each other's experiences and build bridges. Presentations included collaborations between Israeli and Palestinian drama therapists, panels of musicians, including Zubin Meta, Pinchas Zuckerman, and a young Palestinian pianist, and ongoing process groups run by the society of group analysts. Despite some tense moments, it ended on a note of optimism and the desire to build on what was created there.

I was delighted to be asked to return to Israel in late July to teach a masters class in group leadership development through the arts. I prepared a syllabus covering kinaesthetic awareness and empathy, and about the role of creativity and the arts in healing trauma. The class was going to focus on the four major existential themes of freedom, commitment, aloneness, and death.

Then, in mid-July, the fighting started between Israel and the Hezbollah. I was nervous about going on July 20. Every day I stayed glued to CNN, and I checked in with the Israeli consulate, my rabbi, the Jewish Federation, and my Israeli friends. My friends and family urged me to stay, some people identified with the spirit of solidarity with Israeli and the desire to help. Some spoke about the identity issue: yes, I'm Jewish, but an American one. Israelis have chosen to stay and thus live with ongoing threat. But I had to sort out my guilt for feeling like a privileged American who hasn't had to suffer bombardment or live with a daily threat to my existence. Despite my uncertainty, on Wednesday, July 19, I brought my suitcase to work with me in case I left the next day.

I left. I was nervous and excited. My mind was full of CNN images of flaming cities and fears of violence. Yet, once there, there was little sign of being at war. I was staying in

Netanya, just north of Tel-Aviv. It had been safe so far, and families were strolling on the beach and having Shabbat meals. Life seemed normal—except for the helicopters circling overhead and being shown the bomb shelters when we checked into the hotel.

Classes started on July 23. By then the fighting had gotten more intense, and some of the students from Haifa were staying with friends in the middle of the country. But, characteristic of Israeli resilience, life went on as normally as possible. The students were touched that all the American faculty showed up, and I felt deeply grateful to be able to be there in solidarity.

As the students worked with group dynamics, the movement helped them bond, create a safe circle, and feel. Many of them had children being called to the front, or husbands who had been killed in the army. They were able to let themselves feel and process sometimes years of repressed grief and fear. They were able to face existential issues of death, and discover what Rollo May called "The Courage to Create" in the face of the void.

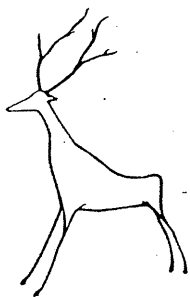
The following are descriptions from one student illustrating her experience of kinaesthetic empathy and creativity. This piece integrates comments about my own experience in Israel with the voice of a student in a class I was teaching on group leadership development using the arts.

When I'm thinking in a retrospective way, I realize now how detached I was from my body. I used it as a tool, in order to walk, work, but rarely as an expressive tool. Only after the first day, I started to connect to my feelings through my body and my movement. Only through par-

ticipation could I understand the meaning of it, and was able to differentiate and name it.

As I moved [during class], I felt a growing amount of energy and power emerging from my body. . . I started to communicate with movements with some members of the group. I remember that T. and I developed a deep and touching and intimate conversation in movement. We talked to each other without words and it was a very touching conversation for both of us. T. started crying and I was shaking because it was so real and profound. To use your [Serlin's] words, I think we were engaged "in a non-verbal language of trust-building." Posture sharing, particularly when it includes not only body position but also movement effort, operates as a clear statement that participants are "in the same position" and "sharing a similar perspective" on which basis an alliance is formed.

I want to discuss a very profound experience I had during the course. It was a time of war, a time of fear, a time of a lot of anxiety. We could not concentrate only on the here and now and the war outside kept crawling to the group space. My son was fighting in the north, and although I knew he was all right at that time I was much more worried than I allowed myself to admit. We talked about death and I cried a lot and I was invited. . . to tell about my feelings. . . The group approached me, reaching their hand to me and we stayed that way for a long time. I started to sing a sad song (although an optimistic one) and the group sang with me. I felt like a small child, a frightened child but at the same time a child with a protective mother, a containing mother. I could feel the energy flowing into my body. I also felt part of a "oneness" as I felt the energy of the group. I was not alone any more. First I could feel it physically and then I could process it emotionally. I was never held like this by my mother and it felt so good. It helped me realize once again during this course the importance of non-verbal communication and also the strength of the group. It gave me hope again. I found myself standing in the circle and reaching my hand to my group, inviting them to dance with me. . .



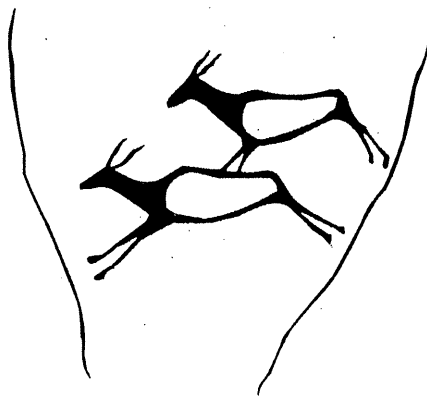
She was able to face mortality and still choose to create. Out of this confrontation came her idea of a book:

It was the first day of the course. The war outside was making me more sensitive to myself, more sensitive to noises from outside. Suddenly I knew, out of the movement, that freedom is not enough for me. Going with this theme of freedom all my life, trying to find freedom in everything I was doing, in myself, this new thought was a surprise to me. "Freedom is not enough," I said, "I want to create something out of this freedom." This sentence did not come from my head, from my mind. It came from somewhere else inside me. . . I was working with my hands. Suddenly it was there, striking like a lightning, like a boost of extra energy. The book was in front of me, between my hands, real as much as a non-existing object can be. Out of so many planned projects, I clearly knew at that moment the book is the thing that I so badly wanted to create out of my freedom.

Reading a bit about Rollo May I understand that the anxiety regarding this project—**not knowing where to start, what is the process and what the outcome may be**—is also the beginning of an ability to seek new ways, an opening for creativity, for moving ahead despite self-doubts, and discouragement. My decision now is to move through these feelings in order to create the book that now exists only in my dream.

This book is about Israeli widows who lost their husbands while serving in the army, the IDF (Israeli Defense Force). Many of them are war widows; other husbands were killed during other operational events, like training accidents, car accidents while on duty, and so on. It is the story of many powerful women who found themselves in an unbearable situation and found inside them the power to live, not just to survive, the power to create, not just to keep things as they are. Some of those women are Holocaust survivors; many were born in Israel. Many women are immigrants. They come from all parts of the Israeli society, all socio-economic levels, all religions. I know many of them and admire them for their way of going through life. Their story has never been told.

It is also my own story. This is the reason why I was so full of uplifting energy to realize



that THIS IS THE PROJECT I should now start.

The most important theme as I see it today is the death[n]mortality one. Many years ago, I faced the feeling that time is over for me, and that there is no reason to go on living, no meaning for life. I chose, with full awareness, to live. For many years since that trauma and that decision, I had a fruitful life. Now I am facing a second round of the "black hole." The new phase is influenced by a combination of personal development, the war, loss of close people, fear regarding the three soldiers I love so much, and above all the influence of studying at Lesley. . . Having more ability now to handle difficult and strong emotions, I choose to tackle the dif-

ficulty and create new meaning to my life, now in a different context. I choose now to collect all my abilities and my power to create this contribution to the community, through writing this book.

The conflict in Israel and the Middle East is ancient, intense, and frightening. While political and strategic options remain unclear, the arts provide a direct road to human emotional experience and a way to work with repeated and overwhelming trauma. Through creativity and the arts, my student was able to let herself feel, reclaim her life, and turn pain and suffering into art.

*"Creativity is the process of bringing something new into being . . . creativity requires passion and commitment. Out of the creative act is born symbols and myths. It brings to our awareness what was previously hidden and points to new life. The experience is one of heightened consciousness—ecstasy."*

—Rollo May

Ilene Serlin, Ph.D., is in private practice in San Francisco and Sonoma County. She can be contacted at 415/931-3819.

## New Licensee Announcement

Shelley F. Diamond, Ph.D.

I am pleased to announce that I recently learned my license (PSY20818) and have opened my private practice in San Francisco.

I attended Saybrook Graduate School after previous careers as a reporter for National Public Radio and managing editor of the medical journal *The American Journal of Human Genetics*.

In a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute on Aging, I did psychotherapy in home visits with elderly and dependent adults. Prior to that, I worked with a research team at Stanford University on the benefits of therapy for survivors of rape and childhood sexual abuse, and on another research team at the SF Department of Public Health studying the results

of deinstitutionalization for people with severe and persistent mental illness.

My areas of expertise and interest include but are not limited to: chronic illness and disability, aging and eldercare, rape or other trauma, sex or gender issues, and adolescence. My theoretical orientation is grounded in existential-humanistic values and integrates contemporary psychodynamic principles, cognitive-behavioral approaches, Gendlin's Focusing technique, and other perspectives.

I have offices in the Richmond District and the Financial District, and do home visits within San Francisco. For more information, please look at my website: <drshelleydiamond.com> or call 415/263-0374.