

From Trench to Bench and Back: The Revisiting of Trauma in the Personal and Professional Story of a Psychologist

David Senesh (Szenes), Ph.D.

Levinsky College of Education, Tel Aviv, Israel

JTS, New York City, NY, USA

Reviewing the core truisms of trauma and moral resilience through personal and professional lenses, makes it possible to sequence their impact along a timeline starting well before the time of the traumatic event. In this case, the author's family history as a second generation of the Holocaust, through war and POW experiences, followed by a long period of adjustment and coping with its consequences, to their present day expressions. It is through a lifelong inquiry and quest for growth as a researcher, psychotherapist, teacher and an active member in various human rights groups, that a life story is constructed.

The combined personal and professional narratives start with the author's own personal trauma as a veteran and prisoner of war some 40 years ago. In this presentation I will suggest the use of the self as an agent of meaning making for oneself and others, and the interfacing of personal experience and professional knowledge.

Resilience is measured by the capacity to read meaning into post-traumatic life. The reciprocal contribution of personal narratives and professional knowledge may serve as a powerful engine in promoting both personal equanimity and professional potency for the benefit of self and others.

Weaving of a life story is an ongoing project of reading meaning into a succession of events and the construction of the narrating self. The self is both an active agent in sense making and a product of its own endeavors. Therefore it is the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of self through narratives as they are told by and to oneself and others, that the self emerges and changes. However, when the trajectories of being are frequented by crises and traumata, the narrative may lack coherence and be burdened by intrusions, biases, defenses, repressions and dissociations, mostly in the service of survival, some at the price of pathology.

Since the construction of any experience is the joint venture of the narrator and an event, the question is what takes precedence in the story: the protagonist or the plot? Contrary to Aristo's claim and common knowledge, a recent study published at the journal of Cognitive Neuroscience suggests that the psychological makeup and relationships among characters in the story are of primary importance, over and above than the plot. Furthermore, the field of discourse analysis describes the conditions and contingencies of what, when, where and how stories are told. This depends largely on the power relationships the narrator and the listener and other contextual and social contingencies.

Thus the evasive process of narrating the self actually takes place even now in this very moment while retelling my story to you. How would the impressions of this session be registered in your mind, within your own narratives and self-constructions, is yet to be explored. Indeed, the construction of a specific story form, within the web of multitude possibilities for self-narrations is a mystery and can only be studied retrospectively through reflection and research. In order to draw your attention and allure your empathic responsiveness, or maybe even to activate your mirror neurons in my favor, I hereby suggest an autobiographical detail that is relevant to our gathering here today. There is no tactic better than a buildup of narrative suspense, in the hope that the delivery of my story will reverberate in you and find in you an attentive even captive audience.

Stories have many layers of meaning, embedded in a zigzagging timeline. Some are overt others subliminal and unconscious, most are past oriented, few are prospective and teleological. There are personal stories of mythical magnitude that extend the boundaries of the self and become a collective story for masses of people within a tribe, a society or a nation. In regressing to a "time before my time", we evoke a narrative thread of a 100 years starting here in Budapest, where my father was born on Bimbo Utsa, continues with the tragic mission of his sister to save Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust, and ending with my lecture here at this conference, for the first time as a Hungarian citizen.

The first question I wish to explore is why do people care at all to communicate and share their traumatic events? Since one of the common definitions of a trauma is that it is an event which is psychologically beyond containment and communication (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Valent, 2012), there are both obstacles and payoffs for their narration. The beneficial outcomes of narrative psychotherapy were commonly described (White and Epston, 1990; Ferrara 1994), but the preconditions for telling traumatic stories outside the confines of psychotherapy are not as widely discussed. A recent publication by Shneior, Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2018) describes the full range of narrative acts by traumatized people from being totally muted by repression and dissociation, to a burning 'narrative desire' to tell their stories to no end. They analyzed the narrative responses of 12 Israeli prisoners of war according to five dilemma dimensions: (1) Who to tell my story to? (2) What to tell, (3) How to tell it? (4) What for? and (5) What might happen if I tell my story? Two meta-questions seem to govern the process: their confidence in their own efficacy to tell such experiences and their witness's ability to understand and empathize.

As a former POW I have participated over the years in similar research projects conducted by Prof. Zehava Solomon and her associates on Israeli veterans and prisoners of war. While doing so, I found myself using my own story as an informant and as a co-researcher, moving back and forth from bench and the trench. Thus I

believe, my insights from the research helped me infuse meaning back into my own war and prison narratives, and at the same time contributed to my practice and to my research and writing on PTSD for the benefit of others.

In most cases the objectification of experiential stories into research data makes them less lively and appealing but enables the delineation of their inner structure and the rules that govern them. The same is true for the chain of stories I am sharing here today. These form a meta-story that describes how personal experiences and professional learning interface. Hence, I will refrain from dwelling into their detailed description, which is known to be most dramatic in stories on traumas (i.e., intrusive flashbulb memories, change in perspective, complicated plots, temporal shifts, etc'). Based on Labov's (1972) method of discourse analysis, I will only highlight the coda of the stories, that is, what did I learn from each story and how it affected the course of my personal and professional development.

At 19 my lifeline was abruptly interrupted. I was a young Israeli soldier positioned on the Suez Canal, facing the mighty Egyptian army. We were only 4 soldiers at midday. Today I realize this reflected our vanity, sense of invincibility and disrespect for the Arab enemy. The war that broke out that day was known as the Yom Kippur war (Day of Atonement war, a surprise which is also known as the "Israeli Pearl Harbor"). It caught us completely unprepared mentally and militarily. This was a part of a greater scheme of groupthink and misconception resulting in arrogance, overconfidence and underestimation of the enemy. The lesson so painfully learned was that arrogance and disrespect may lead to numbness and disregard for impending danger. From that time on, in my mind, pride, arrogance and boastfulness serve as premonition for a pending disaster. One of the lessons learned was to take to the bench and try to act in a 'responsible' manner, which in the Hebrew language means 'responding to the other'. The other, whoever he might be, deserves to be treated with the respect and dignity. In recent years I further elaborated on this in my research on

Restorative Justice among indigenous people of Canada. Their teachings reinforced this dictum and taught me to never hold a sense of omnipotence (Senesh, 2009).

Taken as a POW and the encounter with 'near death experience', stirred a growing interest to study psychology and focus on the field of Thanatology and examine therapists' responses when dealing with death related issues (Senesh, 2013). In earlier years when I interned and practiced psychotherapy I encounter the morbid experiences of maltreated and abused children. It was for me a revisit to the trenches. Judith Herman in her iconic work 'Trauma and Recovery' (1992) employs the term trenches to describe the family as a battle field, and the child as a captive caught in a cross fire between his or her conflicting parents.

Imprisonment in an Egyptian jail for 40 days, in total helplessness and hopelessness led years later to a dissertation on depressive cognitive styles, prevalent among the aged in reviewing major life events (Senesh, 1988). The failure of many of my elderly sample to liberate their psyche through constructive positive thinking captivated and inspired me at that time. During the early years of professional practice as a child clinical psychologist, I was struck by similar self-defeating strategies employed by abused children in trying to emerge from abusive and devastating conditions in their families. I found a striking resemblance between the abusive relationship and torture I experienced in the Egyptian jail, and those re-enacted in therapy with abandoned, neglected and abused children. It appears that similar and enduring complex-PTSD symptomology are found among POWs. This similarity has dawned on me while I was serving on the board of directors in Israel's leading agency for the protection of abused children in Israel (ELI) for over a decade. I felt that my personal insights from my own ordeal can serve in the treatment of unprivileged, devastated clients (Senesh, 2000)

My interest in recent years has shifted from looking at the sheer psychological survival during and following trauma, to moral resilience in situations of social unrest, low intensity intractable conflicts and political uncertainties. The domain of relational transgressions and violence often borders on ethical, moral and legal dilemmas. I have been focused on trying to apply principles of aboriginal restorative practices researched in Canada to Israeli-Palestinian conflict dialogue groups (Senesh, 2012). Lately I merged my interest in the psychology of witnessing and human rights with the study of vicarious and secondary trauma. I joined a medical psycho-legal group of experts who work in the service of psychological assessments of torture victims according to the 'Istanbul Protocol'. The practice and art of compassionate listening is the core challenge of the present phase in my personal and professional journey in working with refugees and other suppressed minorities. Telling about torture requires courage on their part. Witnessing these accounts requires expertise, benevolence and compassion. In this context Traumas are often referred to as "relational" or "betrayal trauma". They constitute the chronic syndrome known as Complex PTSD as mentioned before. The personal and professional challenge is now focused on finding ways to nourish resiliency and empathy while witnessing toxic, "radioactive" accounts. (Senesh, 2015).

Throughout years of studies, teaching and research in Israel and in North America, I was often asked about the interface of my professional and personal stories. On face value, my clinical practice and my teaching of psychology in academic settings in Israel and the USA were kept distinct from my personal experiences. However, my research, writings and presentations, such as this one today, are often a cross fertilization, and often requires travelling back and forth from Bench to Trench.

The topic of my presentation today is a fitting demonstration of an interface between personal and professional trajectories. I have lectured previously in Hungary on the accounts of my personal and my professional expertise. However, this is the first time as an Israeli scholar and a Hungarian citizen I venture to integrate the personal and professional components in storytelling on trauma. These compounded elements which make up my personality and my professional personae resonate with the formative story about my aunt, which I mentioned before and will briefly tell about now: The late Hannah Senesh (Szenes), a young Jewish poet volunteered to return from British ruled Palestine to Nazi Hungary in 1944 on a secret mission to save the remaining Jews. She was captured, incarcerated, interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo in their Budapest central headquarters, tried and sentenced to death by a Hungarian martial court, and executed at 23 by a Hungarian squad. In the past 70 years Hannah has become a symbol of martyrdom in the joint Jewish and Israeli mythology. She is an inspiration worldwide, her story recounted in countless books, movies and plays in more than 30 languages. The blueprint of my late aunt's story weaves a narrative both professional and personal, inspiring me to tell my story as well as to listen to other people's tales with awe and respect.

We live our lives forward, retrieving wisdom as we go. Our life story evolves into a coda realized in hindsight. This is a gap, and while it gradually reveals itself, it allows ample space to learn and weave our unfolding plot.

References

- Labov, W. (1972) **Language in the inner city**. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ferrara, W. F. (1994) **Therapeutic ways with words**. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Herman Judith (1992) **Trauma and Recovery**.
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992) **Shattered Assumptions- Towards a new Psychology of Trauma**. New York: NY Free Press.
- Senesh, D. (1988) Later life depression: Attributions of control and causality and control in the life review of depressed elderly. **A doctoral dissertation**. University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- Senesh, D. (2009) Restorative Justice in Education. **Bamichlala Journal of Levinsky College of Education**, Tel Aviv October 2009, pp. 35-39. [in Hebrew].
- Senesh, D. (2000) Applying narrative techniques of control reattribution in the psychotherapy of abused persons. **Constructivism in the Human Sciences**, (Vol.5 No. 2) pp. 153-156.
- Senesh, D.(2012) Restorative Moments in a Dialogue Group: From First Nations people in Canada to conflicts in an Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue Group. Ch.9 in: Charbonneau, B. & G. Parent (Eds.) **Peacebuilding and Subjectivities of Peace: History, Memory, Politics**. New York: Routledge Publishers. pp 163-175/
- Senesh, D. (2013) Emerging Sense of Continuity when facing Death and Trauma. Ch. 4 in Kreitler, Sh. & H. Shanun-Klein (Eds.) **Studies of Grief and Bereavement**. New York: NOVA Pub, pp 53-66.
- Senesh, D. (2015) Facing evil: Is it possible to evaluate tortures with professional measures? **Psychoactualia Journal of the Association of Israeli Psychologists**, April 2015, pp. 29-32. [in Hebrew].
- Shneior, R., Stein J. & R. Tuval Mashiach (2018) Developments in narrative research in coping with POW traumas. **Israel Studies in Language and Society**, **11(2)**, 95-112 (In Hebrew)
- Valent, P. (2012) Definition of Trauma. In C.R. Figley (Ed) **Encyclopedia of Trauma**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 676-679.
- White, M. & D. Epston (1990). **Narrative means to therapeutic ends** NY: WW Norton & Co., Inc.