

Responding to hard times in Srebrenica Special skills and knowledge in Bosnia Herzegovina

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Here in Srebrenica we know about hard times. Fifteen years ago, the genocide that took place here was devastating and its effects continue. If you look around the city you can see the damage everywhere. There is high unemployment and much poverty. Then there are the problems of human pain. Not everyone who was missing has been found. Many families still do not know what happened to their loved ones. And each generation has its own symptoms. Sometimes sorrow shows itself in our bodies. Many people experience headaches and physical pains. There has been a big increase in physical health problems. 29 year olds are now having heart attacks. And suicides are a huge problem. In forty days in this area, in just two villages, we have had six suicides. Here in Srebrenica, we know about hard times. But we know much more than this.

During this week, as we have been meeting together, we have been talking about some of the special skills and knowledge of Bosnian people. We have shared stories of some of the ways we have responded to hard times here in Bosnia Herzegovina. This document describes these skills and stories. We hope these are of assistance to others who may be facing significant hardship.

These are some of the ways we respond to hard times here in Srebrenica. This is some of what gets us through.

Becoming a better person

For some of us, losing our loved ones the ways in which we did has changed us. I didn't say goodbye to my uncle before he was killed. And this has made me determined to be a better person. I am determined to be a better daughter to my mother, a better mother to my children, a better wife to my husband, a better friend to my friends. This is the way I respect my uncle and all those who have passed away. When I see a poor person on the street, I must say something nice to them. I must be good, especially to my mother. Maybe tomorrow, my mother will not be with me. Maybe she will die. You never know what will happen the next day. I don't want to miss anything. I want to give myself so that when she passes away, I will have a normal grief. When she will die, I want to be able to say: 'I did so much'. I did not say goodbye to my uncle before he was killed and I am still learning from what happened. Some of us have responded to the hardest times by becoming better people.

Prayer

In tough moments, some of us turn to prayers. This means a lot to me. When I ask God to give me strength to go on, I feel his presence and it helps me. It calms me. It's a refuge. This started when me and my sister prayed with our grandmother. We asked 'God help us'. That is what we say every night before going to sleep. Acts of prayer give me hope that everything will be okay. I feel this in my heart and in my chest. I was seven when the war began and I remember that we prayed a lot at home and also at school and church. This is a tradition from every generation of my family. It is something we pass from one to another. For some of us, prayer provides consolation in difficult times.

Dance as a freedom of movement

When hard times are around some of us turn to movement, to dance. To me, dance is a form of freedom. I don't have any blocking or stopping when I dance. I started with salsa. This is not from our culture and it was a discovery for me. At first, I felt a rhythm within me and I didn't know what it was. A friend told me to close my eyes and let go to the rhythm. That is when I realized that dance was a part of me. I danced spontaneously as if I had done it before. I didn't learn steps, those moves came on their own. In tough moments I would go to dance salsa and for me that was enlivening. I kept saying to my friend, spin me around. This is connected a lot with the way I live. Spontaneity and a sense of freedom are important to me. The feeling of dancing is fantastic. That sense of freedom is like I am in heaven.



Music

For some of us, music is significant. When I have bad moments music helps me to think. The guitar has been important to me for a long time. When I was five, I was arguing with my sister. She threw my slippers out of the building. I went down and I wanted to throw it back, but as I tried to I broke a window. I was very scared about what was going to happen and hid myself under the table. There I found a small plastic guitar and played it and started to sing. This made me feel calm. My fear went away. Sounds make me calm. Everything gets lost in the music. I see light and possibilities. My mother sings. My grandfather played, and my great great grandmother also. Through music they passed on hope and existence. I think everything has its own music, even leaves and trees. They all send out some kind of vibrations. People say that when I talk it sounds like I am singing. They think of my voice as calming. When my kids were little I put them to sleep by singing them songs. For some of us music supports us through life.

Another one of us spoke about rock and roll. During high school I was involved in Tai Kwan Do and once, one girl during the fight hurt me so much that it injured both my hips. This happened in 2000 and I had to go to operation in Belgrade. During my time in the pediatric department of the hospital, I listened to rock and roll music. Before going to surgery, I listened so much that I felt adrenaline which kept me going. I was increasing the volume until I could feel the music through my veins. This gave me strength. While I was listening, my hair would go up. I did the same after surgery and continue today. It is like a power. It's been ten years since my injury and I can't run but when I listen to music it is like I am flying. This is in my family. My mother used to listen to this music when I was a kid. She still does and it wakes up strong feelings inside of me. I can move to the music. When I am sad and I listen, I become alive. It makes me strong. I feel energy, I feel young. One of my favourite songs is 'It's a Wonderful Day' and 'The Birds are Singing Hallelujah'. I listen to Wild Strawberries and EKV and all famous bands from this region – Bosnia Herzegovina. The tradition of this country is rock and roll music. Rock and roll is not dead, it is part of my tradition and it helps some of us through hard times.

Another one of us spoke about starting to sing and how this brings a warmth inside. The last weeks here in Srebrenica have been tough. It is winter, people have been depressed and it was difficult to find joy around. When our landowner committed suicide the atmosphere in this small town also changed and became more heavy. My colleagues were also occupied with that heaviness and the atmosphere was not nice to connect with. It was difficult to find release. I got mixed thoughts and I was feeling more sadness and apathy. During each week that I work in Srebrenica the tension builds up in my body. I feel that my body gets stiff and I don't feel the connection with others anymore. I become a little bit out of touch with everything. Then I went to Sarajevo one weekend. Nobody can hear me there so I took my guitar and started to sing. I started softly, to find my voice. At first it was not easy. But I allowed myself to make ugly sounds and then, gradually, I started to connect to myself again. My shoulders got less tense and I started to see the world more clearly, in more details. Most importantly, I started to feel warmth inside. I think this has a long history. One day some years ago I was at a campfire and a girl was singing a really beautiful lullaby. I was surprised how much it affected me. Later I got to my parents' house and when I tried to find the notes to this song on the piano, my mom recognized them. She told me that she sang this to me when I was a baby. We call these sleeping songs. They are a way to rock a baby to sleep. They bring comfort and that atmosphere that everything is going to be fine. I think that's what happens to me when I start to sing and my body feels warm again.

For many of us, music is significant.

A special place

For others of us, there is a special place that we return to again and again. For me, it is my balcony, with my blanket. There I am high above everything. I listen to the sounds of the river flowing by. I listen to the silence, to the rain. I breathe the fresh air and this brings to me a feeling of freedom. I think about the problem alone and breathe deeply. My family used to sit on a balcony to chat with three generations. Together we would listen to noises, breathe freely and independently. Sitting in my special place brings my memories back to me, memories of good moments. In hard times, some of us have a special place that we return to again and again.

To be in nature

Some of us turn to nature. For me, this can be a park in a big city or an open space in a wood, or some other place in nature. I used to do this with my mother. It is linked to her. We would go together to the forest where there was a space and a very large tree. Now, when times are hard, I listen to the sound of nature and it takes me to a clear space.



Humour

For many of us, it's humour that carries us through. In toughest moments, when I am with my friends, I act totally unserious. I twist the story around so everything turns to be funny. It is my way of escaping from the situation so I can see it more clearly later. I remember when I was a child that everyone around me used humour in situations of strong emotions. For example, if I was very angry they teased me so I would get more angry! I guess that I got that from them. If my mother is angry at my father she tells that to him through a joke. She also does that with me. I think this is a part of Bosnian culture, we always make jokes about bad situations. No matter what happens we laugh.

Another one of us also spoke about humour. For me, every evening I like to watch a Spanish soap on television. It's quality humour. Srebrenica is small and claustrophobic sometimes. When things get depressing it makes a difference to me that this show is on every evening. It is something to look forward to everyday. It's like a medicine. There's a particular character in the show that I can relate to. He is always in trouble, unlucky. He

has all kinds of problems like I have, financial, with women, with no women! And he has a funny face. Watching this show is like a ritual. There are plenty of traditions of humour here. Sometimes we put in a lot of effort in order to make other people look ridiculous. I remember when I was young we would set people up with fictitious dates with girls. We'd find a girl to make a fake phone call and then watch as our friend would go to the 'date'. As students we would laugh a lot. So much so, when I was living in a student house in Tuzla a Swedish girl came to visit and she said "This is a student house but I've never actually seen anyone studying!"

Humour is big here, It's our way, Bosnian way.

Rocking to sleep

When I am upset, when there is something I have to deal with, I know sleep is a way for me to recover. Pain doesn't go away straight away, but sleep is soothing. So I rock myself to sleep. My mother helped me that way. She is not verbally emotional, but whenever I was upset during my childhood, she would take me in her lap, and hug me, rock me slowly. I would cry until I fall asleep. This has lasted my whole life. It lasts today. In tough moments, my mother doesn't ask what is it, or what hapened, but she takes me to her lap and hugs me, and sleeps in the same room as I do. My mother was her father's favourite daughter and even I remember that he held his daughter in his lap. In every culture, I believe that mothers make their children calm with that rocking movement. Maybe it has something to do with when are inside our mothers being rocked by water and in constant movement. This rocking is passed on down the generations. In psychiatric clinics I see children with difficult traumas who rock themselves when there is no one to calm them down. In Islam, within Sufi philosophy there are rocking movements that are used to come closer to God. For some of us, in hard times, it is rocking that comforts and carries us.

Appreciating the small things of life

Sometimes when you have lost people you love it makes you appreciate life more. It makes you appreciate existence. This is true for me. Since the war, I now enjoy the sunshine, or having hot water or electricity. These things are so much more appreciated now. I have also learned to enjoy the moment. Things may not always be like this. Those we are with now may not always be with us. I have learned to say to my mother: 'I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. You are my queen'. When you have lost people you care about, when you have been through a war, some of us appreciate existence differently. We appreciate the small things of life.

Rituals of memory

The mothers of Srebrenica have a religious ritual of memory and healing. On the 11th of July each year they gather and find their own ways to be together. Islamic practice is a part of this. Some of the members of our group are looking forward to learning more about this, to joining them in these rituals. Other group members spoke about how women in their community used to meet together in churches during the war to support each other and share their losses. The women of Bosnia Herzegovina know a lot about how to come together in times of hardship and how to use religious practice as a part of this.

Drinking coffee together

In the morning here in the neighbourhoods women come together and drink coffee. It's a big process and ritual. The cups we use, how we pour the coffee, how we share it, what we talk about, all of these things are important. The Bosnian sweet biscuits that we eat with our coffee, rahat lokum, these are important too! This is a ritual of Bosnian women. It helps us through hard times.

There are other ways that we also spoke about. Some of us write down our feelings and this helps us to see them from another perspective. Others of us sometimes cry alone in our bathroom, and after that just tell friends part of the story. Or we write songs. Or we play football which helps us to defreeze our bodies and spirits. Physical exercise is important to some of us.

And some of us focus on the future. We have been through hard times here but we must live together now. We must work together for the future. And as one of the Mothers of Srebrenica said during the silk screening workshop yesterday.

“The purpose of my life and those who have lost so much is to help others. It gives you a sense of being useful, to be satisfied in your soul.”

Here in Srebrenica, we know about hard times. But we also know about so much more. We hope this document may be of assistance to others.



Responding to this document

If you would like to send responses to this document, please do so c/o daviddenborough@dulwichcentre.com.au. If you would like more information about the collective narrative practices which informed the development of this document see www.dulwichcentre.com.au For more information about the work of Crea Thera see: www.creathera.com