

Visiting memories together

This document was created during a workshop in Srebrenica from 5-9 April, 2010. It was hosted by Crea Thera (www.creathera.com) and facilitated by David Denborough, Susan Shaw and Johan van de Putte on behalf of Dulwich Centre Foundation International (www.dulwichcentre.com.au)



Today we met in Srebrenica. We are a group of practitioners from Bosnia, from the Netherlands, from Belgium, from the USA and Australia. This morning, we all headed to Potocari to visit the genocide memorial. This is located at the site where Dutch peacekeepers were supposed to create a safe haven for Bosnian refugees, but where instead the greatest massacre in Europe since World War II took place. Together we watched a film that conveyed the events that occurred in 1995. We heard from mothers who had been separated at gunpoint from their sons and husbands, and then lost them forever. We saw film footage of refugees, young and old, fleeing and trying to seek sanctuary. We heard of tears flowing like rivers. And we sat in the building where thousands of bodies, which had been excavated from mass graves, were laid in rows before they were reburied. We also visited the 'wall of memory' which lists the names of those killed and we wandered amidst the headstones looking at the ages of those thousands of people whose lives were lost. At times, some of our group members were overcome and had to take some time alone. In the afternoon we all came together again to speak about what had been most significant about visiting this memorial together. We were all invited to consider the following question:

Please consider what was particularly important for you in visiting the memorial site today. What aspect of your time there do you wish to carry with you throughout this week? This may relate to a particular image, or thought, or memory that was sparked.

The visit to the memorial centre might have confirmed a commitment you have, an obligation that you carry with you. This might be linked to the work that you are doing. Please turn to the person next to you and discuss whatever it was that was most important to you about the visit and why it is important to you to carry this with you throughout our meeting this week. Of course, there may also be memories that arose, thoughts you had, that you do not want to remain with you, that you wish to forget. At this time, please just focus on those images, ideas or thoughts, that you do want carry with you and why these are important to you.

This document records what we then spoke about. We are a group of people from many different perspectives, but we all found the experience of being together at the memorial highly significant. We speak in different languages. At times there were three-way translations. Here is some of what we said:



For the grandchildren

There is one particular picture from the film we watched that hurts me. It is the picture of the small boy holding his white rabbit. He was so tender and caring to this rabbit in the midst of chaos and terror. This image reminds me of my grandson. It represents to me a picture of murdered innocence. To remember this image is important to me. It will help me keep working to create a better future for our grandchildren.

Realising we are walking on the same ground

When I left the building where the memorial film was shown, I took a walk. I am not from Bosnia. I am from Belgium. The events that took place became my history only when I was 27, when I first visited here. Today, after watching the film, I took a walk along the side of the building in order to make a connection to the ground. While these things happened 15 years ago, they happened on the same ground that I was walking on today. Somehow this helped me to get a different sense of time. I want to take this different sense of time with me throughout this week. While we are here, we are walking on the ground of the past. The ground on which we are walking, it is the same ground where these lives were lost. I want to remember this throughout all our discussions.

A strong impulse to live and to survive

I am from Bosnia. I was a child during the war and as I was visiting the memorial it was as if sharp objects were inside my chest. I was feeling very intensely. Even though I don't have anyone who was killed in Srebrenica, I have the feeling that all the mothers are my mother. All the fathers are my father. And all the children are me. I cannot understand how this happened. I cannot accept it, but I must hold it and trust that together we can carry it. What I carry with me from today is that I am glad that people from other places are here. We are not only Bosnians here this week and this supports me. It is weird but it is supporting. There is one more thing. Today, after visiting the memorial, I have such a strong impulse to live and survive in the name of everything that happened here.

Shedding tears with all of you releases me

I would like to speak next because I am from Srebrenica. And today I saw the movie at the memorial centre for the first time. The reason why I left the screening, the reason that I was crying so hard, was that we were all looking at the film, but I was seeing different faces. I was seeing the faces of my family who died, those who survived and so on. After a time I just couldn't stand it anymore, I wanted to leave the room. I am glad that I cried. And I am glad that I shared this with all of you. Somehow this releases me, the tears release me, sharing this with you releases me. Now I have the wish to kiss my children, to celebrate that we have life.

To be together, open to each other

Although I am from Belgium, I now live here in Srebrenica and this is a very important moment for me: to be sitting all together in front of the screen and now to be open to each other, listening to each other. I am sure there will be other moments like this throughout the week. This is what I wish to take forward, not only this week but into all other events we hold here: this sense of being together. It relates to what happened in this place. I want to find ways in which we can be together in relation to what happened here.

Honesty

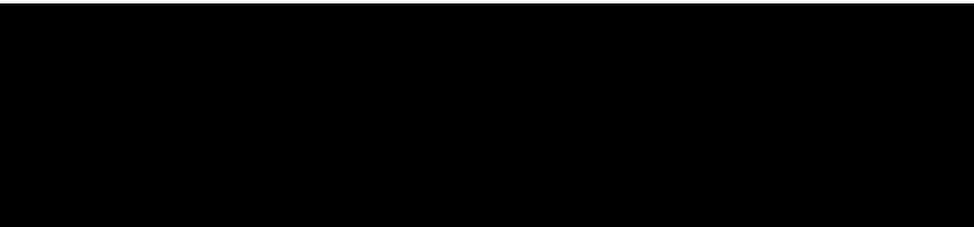
Here in Srebrenica, when the UN declared that this region was to become a protected area, everybody was happy. They cheered. They rejoiced that there was going to be safety. But this became a trap. It was not real. I want to keep this memory with me. It will remind me of the importance of honesty, of speaking only what will be followed through, of ensuring that promises do not become traps. This day will remind me of the significance of honesty.

The strength of trauma and the strength of survivors

Today, I have a strong image of the opposites of life and death. Love and hope is on one side, and cruelty and murder is on the other side. I see the picture of the boy on a wall crying and holding himself. This is what I remember most strongly. It is an image that brings admiration for those who have survived it all. I have worked for many years here in Bosnia with children and trauma. On one side I feel the strength of the trauma as pain. On the other hand, I feel the strength of those who survive, who find life again. I want to carry both these sentiments with me.

Never again

My heart is thumping because I went through the war here in this country and I lost many people who I cared about. It is also thumping because during that time I lost all my friendships with Muslims. For a time it was impossible to be friends across the divisions. Now we are trying again. Through these five days, I want to go only with one thought: Never again. With the help of the younger generation we must learn not to hate each other. I work with children with special needs – Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. I make no distinctions. All of these are like my children. Let us work to ensure 'never again'.



Understanding the 'other side'

My heart is also beating fast and it is very hard to speak, because all this time I was also on the 'other side'. Regardless of that, I feel with people who survived all that happened here. It was specially touching watching when mothers were saying good bye to their children and husbands. I was putting myself in their place, trying to understand. I'm glad that I am here now so I can try to understand more how it was on that other side. It is important for me. Since I was small, I lived with only one story, now I am here to understand the stories of others.

To be aware that we could be on the side of doing great harm

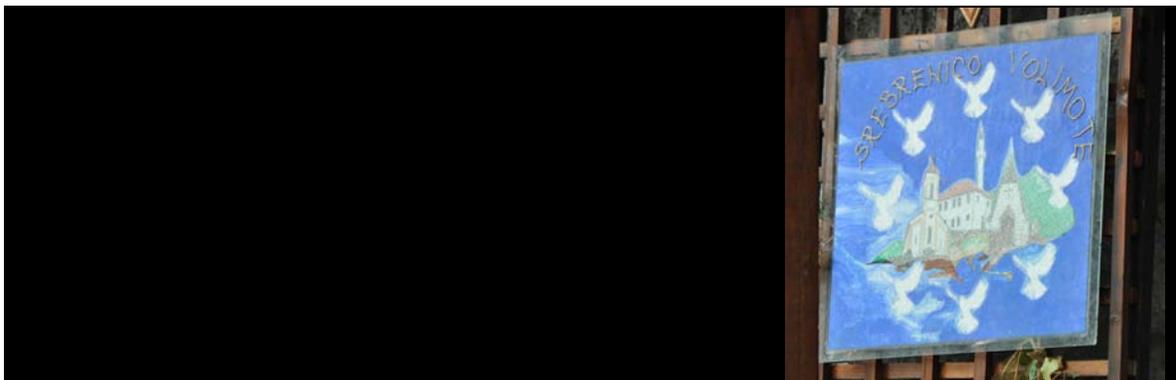
When I was 11, growing up in Belgium, I read a book written by a Jewish man about how he survived Treblinka. The book changed my life. It made me realize I couldn't be sure that I would never end up on the wrong side. Morally, it made me think that one day I might end up being on the side of doing great harm to others. So back then, when I was 11, I committed to really try to always stay aware of this and to do all I could not to participate in doing harm. Today I felt again this awareness and this commitment. I want to carry this through this week and into the future.

To connect with others in these memories

This was my third time to visit the memorial and it meant a lot to me to go with other people today. While we were there, I felt fear and anger. It comes in my body. I then have a lot of questions about human beings. And at that moment, I try to keep on moving on the inside and the outside. My way to keep moving is to try to connect with the people in the pictures, to imagine their lives, their feelings, their hopes, their dreams, their fears. And then it is important for me to feel connected to other human beings, to others in this group: to feel other people's energy, to be able to connect with it. This sense of connection is important to me. I want to carry this through the week.

In a split second realizing what it means to be so fortunate

The moment for me was walking down the cemetery – the graveyards. I was looking at the headstones and seeing the years of their birth and the dying date. There was one boy who was twenty years old. In that split second, I realized how fortunate I am to be 27 years old and not having been through war. I saw in that split second that this has always been my motivation to do work I want to do in the future. I know that I am very fortunate and I just want to use that luck to help other children live their lives.



Recognizing each other

My heart is beating loudly and I need to speak in my language about this. I am from this country and was a refugee during the war. Somehow today was very important to me because we are so mixed here. In the film, there were Dutch people on the screen – the peacekeepers who did not keep the peace - and there are Dutch people here today. We are all watching the suffering of others together. When I go to the memorial centre I always talk to those dead people. I always say, I can see you. It is as if I go through a hard difficult cloud, but after talking with them I always come out again and see life. We don't know what the future brings, but I don't want this to ever happen again to my country. I love so much this country and the people in it. Today I see that by living together, by recognizing and seeing each other, as we are doing now, there is a way it will never happen again. We must continue to do this.

Too much for me

The experience today was too much for me: the image of the burned hand, the stories of the women. I don't know yet the meaning of my participation here but I am glad to be here. I hope to give something with my presence.

Creating something together

The image that I am holding with me is of eighteen people standing with the guide, outside in the memorial, when he was telling us the stories and the histories. I can imagine all the different people we are connected to. I can picture them around us in a wider circle, and then all those that they are connected to. This is not an image of demolition. It is an image of creation.

Extending the circles

The stories that we heard, the pictures we saw today, I can link them all to my story. They are the stories of my people, my family. After today, though, I am wondering whether I should also visit the sites where the so-called 'other side' commemorate their victims. Not to belittle or lessen what we have seen in the memorial today but in order to widen the picture, to extend the circle. I am afraid that our country is still dealing with the divisions that we went through before and that led to the war. I believe that extending the circle might be a way to make a real breakthrough in recognition. This is what I will carry with me this week.

Realising the effects of the war on my life

Watching the movie reminded me of my childhood during the war. I started crying when I saw the mother saying goodbye to her son. It made me remember saying goodbye to my father during the war. I will never be the same after being here in Srebrenica. That's a good thing. After I cry for a while, I am going to understand so much better the pain of the people. And by understanding the suffering here, it helps me to realize more what I went through as a refugee, what my family and everyone around me endured. This is a good thing.

The responsibilities of those of other nations

I did not know that Srebrenica was the world's first UN 'safe protected area'. To think that such a massacre could then take place here is profoundly shocking to me. My country is a part of the United Nations. This makes me think about the responsibilities that my country and every country has in supporting the people of Bosnia and Srebrenica now, to play some part in responding to the injustice of this situation.

Acts of care and love in the midst of horror

What was most significant to me during the film and memorial, were the acts of love, bravery and care that people were taking in the midst of horror. The men carrying each other as they fled through tracks through the hills, the tears being shed for loved ones' lost, and the mothers' love for their children. There were also the glimpses of what people have been doing since the genocide. The tireless efforts of women trying to find ways to bury their loved ones, the ways in which people are still dreaming of those who have passed away, and how they are carrying on their memories. These acts were all very significant to me. In amidst the greatest horrors, when human beings are treating others with such hatred, there are also acts of care, acts of love. I want to remember this throughout this week. I want to remember not only the horror that happened here in Srebrenica, but also the love of mothers, the images of men trying to carry each other to safety.

There are 18 of us here, from Bosnia and from different countries. This morning we visited memories together. We shared the memories of this place, Srebrenica. Now, we are trying to create something together, and to find ways to support future generations.



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