



STARTTS

*“The therapist is not just working for a particular patient,
but for himself and his own soul...”*

Carl Jung

On Becoming a Person

*Positive Changes from Working
with Trauma Survivors*

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Working with trauma survivors brings rewards and challenges. There has been a bulk of literature on the challenges. Not as much perhaps has been written about the rewards. I myself wish to bring my own experience of years of working at the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) in highlighting the secondary gains I have obtained out of these years of service.

I came on board with little preparation for the job – for understanding the far-reaching dimensions of the human mind and spirit, for exploring the depths of human pain and suffering, and especially for handling my own emotional reactions to painful client stories.

To use the concept of gift and gift offering² to describe my contribution to the job, I joined with fewer gifts of the head, but more of the heart – my interests, enthusiasm and passion. These gifts were highly valued by the first service for refugees in Australia, STARTTS, whose mission is to help them deal with their past traumatic experiences and build a new life in the new country.

To make up for the gaps in my theoretical knowledge, clinical skills and therapeutic experience, I set upon reading relevant literature, seeking advice and wisdom from colleagues, taking internal and external training, committing fully to the job and pursuing my goal with a strong determination.

As time passed I worked, learned and grew personally and professionally. I have changed a great deal, for the better, in several respects. But before talking about it I should acknowledge the pain, anguish, sorrow, distress and despair suffered by my clients. What I have learned and how I have changed is owing to the privilege of witnessing those uncomfortable feelings in their souls. I appreciate their kindness in giving me permission to “enter their worlds for a time and join them on their journey”.³

Indeed, I have gained and grown in the cradle of relationships with clients. Most of my clients were boat people and a few were land people. The Western media and literature have described the means and routes they used in search of a new land and a new hope.

This implies the unprecedented risks and dangers they experienced in this search. The sources of these

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mishaps were the stormy sea, the unseaworthy boats, the unscrupulous pirates, the scattered minefields in the jungle, the hostile guerrillas, the mere shortage of food and drinks, and on top of that the lack of necessary preparations for the sea voyage, or the foot journey, on the part of participants as well as organisers.

If there was any preparation at all, it was a preparation in abnormal clandestine conditions. It was in these real extraordinary circumstances that the refugees experienced or witnessed the fragility of human life, the helplessness of physical strength and the powerlessness of moral courage.

Many of them in such circumstances had recourse to their religious faiths. Perhaps never in their lives had they felt so deeply the significance and importance of a genuine relationship with their deity as when they were desperately adrift at sea or lost for days in the jungle. There and then, in the hour of an impending death their beliefs about spirituality, including questions about God and faith came into the foreground.

It might be relevant to say that the god they prayed to was not a god of power and might, but a god of mercy and love. The Christian Virgin Mary or the Buddhist Qwan Yin were invoked most of all. The refugees believed that these motherly figures would respond to their urgent needs and would come to their rescue in this time of crisis. They prayed, silently or vocally, individually or together as a group, and in most occasions witnessed the miracle of surviving their ordeal.

I myself believe that by listening to their experiences of the working of the spiritual, my spiritual connection was reinforced.

After the ordeal of escapes, the refugees were resettled in Australia. Many of them quickly re-established themselves while some others did not. For the latter group, their long arduous perilous journey had not yet finished in this lucky country. While many problems of theirs had come to an end, other problems emerged – the pain and distress of coming to grips with their multiple losses and grief and severe traumas experienced in their original country and/or en route to Australia.

The after-effects of trauma and loss on my clients are numerous and diverse and in many cases very serious and incapacitating. It is to do with their inability to stop the intrusion of their past, the hurtful or

terrifying events, to concentrate, to remember and learn new things, to have enough sleep undisturbed by nightmares, to manage their anger and irritability, to have happy family dynamics, to make or maintain social relationships and to have a productive, useful or satisfying life.

It was really painful to see how the effects of loss, torture and trauma have rendered people chronically sorrowful, helpless, hopeless, physically scarred and mentally disabled.

Working with these issues of my clients, I could not help reflecting on myself. I feel lucky that I can still use my brain, learn and adjust to changes, that I can still work and study and that I have not suffered the enormous pain they have, nor lost as much as they have lost.

I should admit that I feel lucky, but at the same time feel uneasy or even guilty about this feeling of luck. I just hope that my suffering clients would forgive me for this nasty comparison.

Along the way, whilst I have strived to overcome the effects of my own trauma, I feel that I am getting closer to my clients, and I am connected more deeply with them, which is an essential ingredient of therapy. This sense of connection goes along with an increased respect for their resilience and a greater appreciation of their efforts to recover.

I have witnessed not only the unremitting entrenched problems and difficulties of my clients but

also the growth and positive change in quite a few of them resulting from their struggle with many horrendous experiences and the lasting consequences. The areas where people show growth are various.

Some people have seen new possibilities and are able to choose an option deemed to be best for them in life and work. Some have achieved a new understanding of how their lives have changed after trauma and have begun to consider future plans and hopes in accordance with this understanding.

Some have been able to grieve and accept what has been lost and make sense of their experiences. Some have been able to re-establish attachments and trusting relationships with humanity. Still others have been able to go out of their way to help “people in the same boat”, or participate in community-building activities, or even engage in religious training with the purpose of providing for the spiritual needs of many.

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STARTTS Vietnamese group in 1992. Photo courtesy of STARTTS.

While in the process of working with my clients I could not help feeling deeply saddened by their sufferings, I anyhow found precious encouragement, motivation and inspiration seeing them moving beyond their trauma and moving forward to a new goal. It was this that was for me an effective anti-burnout strategy and much more.

What has been my experience of all this work with clients in my personal journey – their positive changes, their experiences of becoming “stuck”, or their faults and failings?

Above I have linked my gains with the milestones in my clients’ lives. There are still rewards that seem to come, day by day, little by little, which only become evident upon my self-reflection and reflection on my working years at STARTTS.

Looking back over many years now I can see I have grown into someone better than I probably would have been without having worked with trauma survivors. I am not sure if I have become a stronger person, but I am pretty sure that I have become a more compassionate, more human person, more sensitive to people’s feelings, more ready to help and better able to reach

out to their needs. Though an unconditional positive regard towards people is still far from being achieved, I find myself less demanding and judgemental, while more empathic and accepting, and better able to put things in a broader perspective.

To sum up, it is a blessing to be involved in trauma work. Indeed working with trauma survivors has provided me with many opportunities for growth in my profession and my personal journey. To be honest, I should point to several factors that have had an influence on the positive effects of this work for me. It is that over the years I have received precious support from the community, the organisation, the team, the supervisors, colleagues and friends. R

- 1 The title of this article is a borrowing of Carl Roger’s *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy*.
- 2 Ted Smeaton, *Assets-based Community Development*, ABCD handouts.
- 3 Allen Ivey et al. *Counselling and Psychotherapy – A Multicultural Perspective*, 1993, p2.