

KEEPER OF THE FLAME: Healing Inter-Generational Trauma Using Focusing-Oriented Therapy

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“And our ancestors are always close at hand.” — Shirley Turcotte

INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to experience the traumatic symptoms, feelings and beliefs of others, even when the trauma was not experienced directly? Hundreds of publications on the subject of inter-generational trauma transmission argue that the answer is yes (Kellerman, 2001). Vicarious traumatization can be defined as the experience of having disturbing and/or debilitating cognitions and emotions that closely resemble the traumatic symptoms of a close relative or friend. The idea was first conceptualized in the 1960's, in response to research findings regarding the psychological impact of the Holocaust on Jewish survivors and their families (Schiffer). The body of research has since expanded to include many other forms of psychological trauma, such as persons with close emotional ties to survivors of the Indian Residential School System in Canada, Japanese Internment camps, war, and all forms of domestic and familial abuse (Frazier, et al, 2009, as cited in Schiffer).

How is trauma transmitted and absorbed by someone who has not experienced it firsthand? One explanation, among many, comes from the human brain's hard-wiring. Physiological structures such as the mirror neuron system facilitate attachment and empathy, (Goleman, 2006, as cited in Schiffer), providing us with the means to attach to others who then may be able to nurture and sustain us. Our predisposition to feeling other people's feelings also means that we can absorb and carry others' traumas as a natural part of the attachment process.

Shirley Turcotte describes the phenomenon of vicarious traumatization as evidence of “the sensitivity and compassion of the human spirit...one of the most important ways in which people help carry each other through the world.” (Schiffer, p.10). Those who are willing to co-carry the burden and implicit wisdom of trauma, however, can take on unresolved wounds that can be passed down through the generations (Personal notes from Turcotte, 2012).

In this paper I hope to demonstrate, through sharing my own journey as the keeper of my grandmother's Holocaust story, how Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT) can be used as a modality to treat inter-generational trauma. FOT can be a useful tool to help unburden us from what we have carried unconsciously for our ancestors, and perhaps help end the cycle of inter-generational traumatization.

“INTERACTION FIRST” AND INTER-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

In *A Process Model* (Gendlin, 1997), Eugene Gendlin proposes the concept of “interaction first”: that is, we are interactive processes that are constantly changing as a result of interacting with others and our environment. As “interactions,” rather than “individuals,” we are highly influenced by those we interact with and how we interact.

In their paper, “Aboriginal Focusing Oriented Therapy”, Shirley Turcotte and her son, Jeffrey Schiffer, connect to Gendlin’s philosophical orientation by citing the long-held relational ontology of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. People are “not conceived as separate from the world around them, but embedded in and constituted from relationships within the world, people, language, landscape, and so on” (p. 50). From this point of view, vicarious traumatization is expanded upon to include inter-generational trauma, which is defined as “a collection of traumatic experiences that inform our minds, our bodies, our emotions and our spirits” (p. 51). Aboriginal Focusing Oriented Therapy (AFOT) has been particularly effective in addressing the complex inter-generational trauma related to “the Indian Residential School System, Aboriginal child welfare, and the aftermath of the legacy of colonization in Canada more broadly” (p. 48).

I was first introduced to AFOT in December of 2012, when I attended an introductory workshop on Focusing-Oriented Therapy and Complex Trauma. I have been struck by how its tenets have intersected with and validated my own experiences of inter-generational trauma using Focusing-Oriented Therapy. The writings of Turcotte and Schiffer regarding Complex Trauma have moved and inspired me to continue unpacking the inter-generational baggage I have carried for my ancestors.

MY GRANDMOTHER’S STORY

I am the granddaughter of Sarah Chinsky, a Polish Jewish immigrant who escaped from Poland to come to Canada in 1933. She was brought to Montreal through the efforts of her Uncle Mayer, her mother’s brother. A worldly, educated and generous man, he had anticipated the growing negative sentiment towards Jews in Eastern Europe and left Poland for New York in the late 1920’s. He brought with him his parents and siblings, leaving behind his sister Beilah, my grandmother’s mother. At the time, it seemed too great a risk to Beilah and her husband Shimon to leave with their children for North America where their ability to practice their religion seemed uncertain. As time wore on, however, it became apparent that their shtetl of Trestiner in Eastern Poland was not safe, and my great-grandparents began to organize ways to get their children out of Poland. Beilah asked her brother Mayer to help her oldest daughter, Sarah, and he obliged by paying a woman in Montreal to pose as a fictive aunt, who then received her at the Canadian border. Once in Montreal, my grandmother found a room to rent and worked in a garment factory, making ten dresses a day by hand and barely a living.

Around 1935, she received word that her father Shimon, a merchant, had been killed. He had been out peddling his wares in Bialystok, when his wagon had gotten stuck on the railroad tracks. He was struck and killed by a train while trying to get the wagon clear. My

grandmother, however, never really believed this story. She suspected that anti-Semitic gentile Poles had somehow orchestrated his death. At this time in Poland's history, her suspicion is entirely possible, but may also have been informed by the fear and distrust that she felt growing up in Poland. After my great-grandfather Shimon died, my grandmother Sarah's brother Avram, who had been studying Torah in a yeshiva outside of Poland, came back to the family shtetl of Trestiner to be with his mother and sisters. Not long after he returned, Leah and Zeva, two of his five sisters, escaped Poland through fictive marriages arranged to men living in Israel, in 1937 and 1938 respectively.

Safely in Canada, my grandmother Sarah, the oldest child, felt a responsibility to get her remaining family members out of Poland. She married my grandfather, Moishe Ross, a chicken salesman who made a decent living, hoping he would be able to help get Beilah, Avram, and her youngest sisters, Razeleh and Dvorah, out of Poland. My grandfather Moishe tried his best to help, saving his money to pay their passage to Canada, but by the time he had enough to send them, the war had broken out, and the borders had closed, and the money he'd saved never got to them.

As Poland succumbed to Nazi Germany, my great-grandmother Beilah paid a Polish family to hide herself and her children for several years. But when she ran out of money, they were forced out into the street. Then, three days before the war ended, they were killed by marauding Poles intent on shooting any Jews they found.

TRAUMATIC LOSS AND ITS EFFECT ON MY GRANDMOTHER

I was 17 years old when my grandmother Sarah entrusted me with her story. We had a close relationship, and she was nurturing and loving with me in a way she wasn't able to be with her own children. At the time, it felt like an incredible honor and privilege to receive her confidence in such an intimate way. Never before had she spoken to anyone about the tragic deaths of her family, not even to her children — that is, my two aunts, uncle and father. Whenever her children had broached the subject with her in the past, she had shot them a pained or angry look, and they, respectfully, had backed off in response. They saw her as a “Pandora's Box”, trying to keep a world of pain stuffed inside an already fragile heart. Sarah's children were all relieved when she opened up to me about her family, hoping that it would give her some relief from the suffering she had held inside for so many years.

Sarah's children remember her as always being unhappy and overwhelmed by her emotions, occupying herself with household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing, but never enjoying anything she was doing. Even though my grandmother was well provided for, with a loving husband who supported her through tears and depression, and four wonderful children who only wanted to please her, she could not take in these beautiful blessings. Her trauma kept her in a trance of unworthiness, locked in a world of the past.

Growing up with my grandmother, I too noticed how she'd never allow herself any pleasure. When she told me about her family's fate, she trembled and shook as she conveyed her deep suffering that she was unable to save her family of origin. She admitted her belief that because they had died, she did not deserve to be happy, for to be happy would

be to dishonor the traumatic deaths of her family members. My grandmother's confession answered questions I had always had about her: how she didn't allow herself to laugh or enjoy the moment during joyous and rowdy family occasions.

Perhaps I had been chosen for the role as keeper of our family's ancestral flame because I was three generations removed from the Holocaust and therefore the emotional charge when sharing with me — as opposed to sharing with her own children — was a lot less intense. My experience is consistent with numerous studies and interviews with Holocaust families conducted by Dan Bar-On, an Israeli psychology researcher and professor. In his book *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust*, he shares his findings that it is often members of the third generation who are entrusted with the stories of the ancestors and preservation of the family legacy (1995). They hold the 'memorial candle' for those who were lost, and tend to the flame of memory.

JOURNEY TO ANCESTRAL LANDS

My grandmother's story touched me deeply, so much so that I wanted to connect more directly with the lands of my ancestors, which included Poland, Byelorussia and Latvia. I set out on a yearlong journey through Eastern Europe, visiting one concentration camp memorial after another as I moved across borders. As part of this trip, I volunteered with the organization Service Civil International. Staying in the former SS barracks at Buchenwald and its outposts with other German, Russian and American volunteers, we excavated the site of the former prisoners' "hospital" and worked in the memorial's archives, gathering stories of the atrocities committed by the Nazis to minorities.

As I left Germany for Poland, it didn't escape me that I was riding on the same tracks that my grandmother Sarah had ridden out of Poland; the same tracks that had taken too many to untimely and brutal deaths in extermination camps. The story of my grandmother's family came to life most powerfully at Auschwitz. There I stood, dumbfounded, amid the exhibits of the prisoners' personal items — the toothbrushes, canisters of cold cream, eye glasses, crutches — reading their stories and looking at their photographs. Heartbroken, I moved on to an exhibit detailing the efforts people made to survive, including those who went into hiding. I thought immediately of my great-grandmother Beilah and her children, hiding for four years, holding out hope for so long, only to have their lives snuffed out senselessly.

Emotions hit me hard, and I felt like I might collapse. I hastily left the building. I sat out on the steps of the memorial and began to sob uncontrollably, until I felt a presence behind me. When I turned around to see no one there, I suddenly was grasped by the conviction of the presence of my great-grandmother Beilah, with me in that moment. It was as if she sensed the pain I was feeling and had come to comfort me. I felt love, awe, gratitude, and the sense of a circle of connection that was closing. It was then that I made the decision to take my great-grandmother Beilah's name as my own, leaving behind my given name, Bethany. In that moment, Beilah and I established an enduring connection, which, in turn, brought me closer to my grandmother Sarah. It seemed that this act of journeying back to our ancestral lands was the evidence my grandmother Sarah needed to feel that I had truly heard

and had empathized with her experience. My grandmother could rest assured, now that I had taken her mother's name, that the story of her mother's resilience and bravery would not be forgotten, for it would be shared whenever I was asked about my name's origin. What I could not anticipate, in weaving this web of love and connection to my ancestors, was that I was also making myself vulnerable to entanglements with my grandmother Sarah's thoughts and feelings. This I discovered later, during Focusing-Oriented Therapy, as I unraveled reasons behind my feelings of unworthiness and their manifestations in my work and personal life.

MY GRANDMOTHER'S STORY, ALIVE IN ME

As a therapist in private practice, I found myself taking on an unnecessary amount of responsibility for my clients and their problems. I worked long hours, yet it seemed that no matter how hard I worked, how drained and exhausted I was, there was the sense that I wasn't doing enough. I felt burnt out, depressed, and unworthy of the rest that would restore me to balance. I started to examine the etiology of these cognitions and emotions in my own FOT sessions. In exploring the felt sense of my feelings around work, I discovered I had absorbed my grandmother's survivor guilt that she was not able to save her immediate family during the Second World War. In my desire to ease her pain, I had unwittingly taken on my grandmother's emotional burdens. My love and empathy for her, it seemed, had resulted in my identification with and unconscious absorption of her sadness, worthlessness, and devastation, as well as her belief that she was not entitled to happiness in life. What I found in my FOT sessions was that the felt sense of my ancestors was very much alive within me. Turcotte and Schiffer speak to this in their article "Aboriginal Focusing-Oriented Therapy", where they define the felt sense as "a bodily experience of interconnected emotion, energy and sensations that are an expression of knowledge of collective experiences through time." (p.51).

MY HEALING JOURNEY WITH FOCUSING-ORIENTED THERAPY

Of these many sessions I had with my Focusing-Oriented therapist and my longtime Focusing partner, I will share four that served as important moments on my healing journey. I will switch my language to the present tense, which best conveys, in my opinion, the experiential quality of FOT.

Session One:

The dialogue with my ancestors begins with the classic Focusing question: "What's between me and feeling fine?" In response, an all-pervasive sense of unworthiness descends upon me: a sense of not being entitled to happiness, leisure and pleasure in my life. When I ask where this felt sense comes from, I receive images of my great-grandmother Beilah, her son Avram, and her daughters Dvorah and Razeleh. I immediately want to turn away, finding myself filled with shame and fearing their reproach because I could not save them. I am surprised at my reaction. My therapist suggests that I imagine myself at a comfortable distance from them and then see what comes. When I feel able, I turn towards them and see

my great-grandmother and her children look at me with accusing eyes as if to say, “How could you have left us to die?...Why didn’t you help us?”

The feeling of shame comes again; I have not lived a life worthy of their sacrifice. This shame turns into a driving pulse in my body. So *this* is the feeling behind my workaholism! In this moment I see how my perceptions have been colored by the guilt and feelings of helplessness I have absorbed from my grandmother. This feeling of always having to strive and help others in order to have a right to exist are my grandmother’s, not my own.

Needing a sense of separateness, I connect down into my body. I ask myself, “Is there something that I need to say to my ancestors to heal my relationship with them?” An answer comes, and I decide to address my great-grandmother Beilah, because of our pre-existing relationship. I express my broken-heartedness about what she and her children have suffered. I tell her how much she has inspired me and acknowledge her resilience and strength to endure in hiding for so many years under such challenging circumstances. Beilah responds with gratitude, moved by the depth of what I feel for her family. She goes on to say, however, that my efforts to restrict my experience of happiness have no impact on the suffering they went through. To see me suffer only brings her back to her own traumatic memories. It will give more meaning to her death, and the deaths of her children, if I live with more joy.

After that session, I feel a sense of love and harmony again with my great-grandmother, as if the weight of the tragic past is no longer interfering with our relationship. As Shirley Turcotte so aptly puts it: “Just because someone is no longer with us does not mean the relationship can’t be improved or made better” (2008, p.13).

Session Two:

To honor my great-grandmother’s wishes for me to live a happier, more playful life, I dedicate my next FOT session to investigate whatever is in the way of that. What comes in response is a heavy sadness and demoralization that I have not been able to bring my grandmother Sarah the happiness I so deeply want her to have. As if to punctuate my failure to uplift her emotionally, an image comes of my Grandma Sarah sitting in her subterranean parlor watching soap operas, feeling useless and despondent. I want to comfort her and connect with her, but she is like a zombie in front of the TV — unreachable. Whatever I do to engage her, I cannot diminish her sadness. As I keep her and this feeling company, the words come: “Perhaps it is *the Sarah in me* who feels useless.” I ask myself: “Is there something in me that feels like it does not belong to me? Something that I might have absorbed from my family, the history of my people?”

Then comes the fear of falling into the same pit of darkness in which Sarah lived her life. It seems I no longer feel I have a distinct sense of self, but rather an identity that is mixed up with those of my ancestors, in a dense and sticky dough of some kind. I ask, “What’s needed for Sarah to recover from her trauma?” An image comes of my great-grandmother Beilah with her hands on Sarah’s shoulders. Beilah looks at me and says: “We’re still working on her. She took everything so hard and blamed herself. What we went through was awful, but I want the suffering to stop. I don’t want you to hold yourself responsible like she

did. You have a chance to break free. It's her stuff; it doesn't belong to you. Enjoy your life, and trust that by doing that, it will be healing for her."

I tell my great-grandmother Beilah that I can't leave my grandmother Sarah like this — in her current state. At this point, it seems the therapist in me takes over. The thought comes that Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) might help my grandmother: that if Beilah and I provide bilateral stimulation, we may be able to bring my grandmother back to life. I ask Beilah if she'd be willing to be part of a healing team with me, and she agrees. We administer EMDR by blowing in an alternating fashion into each of my grandmother's ears. After we do a set of bilateral stimulation, my grandmother Sarah blinks open her eyes and asks: "Was I sleeping long?" I respond by saying, "Yes Grandma, you've been sleeping a long time. But by sleeping through the bad moments, you slept through the good moments too. Now you have an opportunity to take in the good, and I want you to try to allow yourself to, if you can. Remember that time when all your kids and grandkids came over for Passover? You had cooked all this delicious food, yet you were too busy in the kitchen, cleaning up while we were eating, to take in how much everyone was enjoying each other and all the amazing dishes you had made. Try if you can to return to that time; look around you and see if you can allow yourself to take in your blessings. You have two sons who are doctors and two daughters who are mental health professionals. Your kids and grandkids are successful and happy. No one is living in fear of persecution. We love you so much and want more than anything for you to be happy. Can you please try to take that in, Grandma?"

She pauses, then sadly and slowly shakes her head no. "I know I should be feeling joy, but I can't feel it because this sadness about losing my family is too big. There's no room for any other feelings inside of me." Beilah and I do another set of EMDR, after which I morph into Sarah, and embody her, sitting at the table. My great-grandmother Beilah looks to Sarah and says: "It's not your fault. You did the best you could to try and help us, and for that we are grateful. There was nothing more you could have done."

Beilah's message doesn't penetrate. I feel a weariness and deep sadness, as I think about how war and genocide have affected so many generations of humanity. Just then, the images of our Passover seder turns from color to black and white in my mind's eye. A foul odor overcomes the room. It's like a smog has rolled in and is hovering over my grandmother's table. The thought comes: "It's when you sit down and stop, that's when the depression sets in and the smog that smells of murder. And then it feels as if you can never weep enough." Sarah's grief has merged with mine to the point that it feels as if my own mother, father, sisters and brother have been killed. An unbearable ache comes in my heart and a tightening comes in my throat; it's like being strangled. I realize then that I can no longer run from this feeling if I want to be free and happy. For so many years, I've been too terrified to really rest and let go of control, fearing that if I do, everything in my life will fall apart.

But I have learned in my years of Focusing that there is no feeling that can destroy me if I just give it space and accept it as it is. I remember that if I can employ the Focusing attitude and hold that felt sense with friendliness, receptivity and compassion, it will soon shift and transform into something much less scary and intimidating. With patience and

kindness, I keep the strangled feeling company until my throat releases and feels more free and open. I remember Gendlin's seminal premise that every human experience has an inherent forward movement within it (Gendlin, 1982). I am comforted, and have faith that Focusing will carry me forward to what is to come.

Session Three:

I come in to this FOT session overwhelmed with what I perceive as the demands of clients in my private practice. I ask myself, "What steps can I take towards living a life of joy and balance, rather than seeing my clients' problems as my own and always feeling that it's my job to solve them?" The thought comes that I need to create boundaries around myself: a safe place or refuge where I can be free of the sorrows and burdens of others, where I can be alone to recuperate and regroup from the demands of life. This sanctuary is a one-room cedar cabin on an island in the middle of a lake. I see myself seated in an overstuffed chair by the fireplace, sipping tea and watching the loons and herons out the window. As the sun beams in through a skylight, I experience the sun as the warmth of Beilah and Sarah's love streaming into my heart. I see them looking down at me with their arms around each other, saying with relief and contentment, "She's happy! She's happy." They seem fulfilled to see me at peace; it is like a miracle to them. Now that they know I am cared for, they can let go. Now that I know they have reconnected and are taking care of each other, I can stop taking care of them, and focus on myself without feeling selfish. I no longer feel crowded by my ancestors' emotions, and experience their presence as a source of inspiration and strength.

Session Four:

In my last FOT session, I think about what to do with the remaining and unwanted emotions I have absorbed from my ancestors. I remember Shirley Turcotte's suggestion that we find a way to set them down in a ritualistic manner.

I don't want to return this pain to Sarah and Beilah because I want to fulfill Beilah's wish for the suffering to end. I don't want to give it to Earth because She is carrying too much already. So I decide to give it to Space. I imagine throwing these residual burdens up in the air where they transform into glimmering stardust, moving out and dispersing into the infinite expanse of Space. A great felt shift comes in my body, and I feel a lightness inside as never before. Moving forward, I know that I need never feel alone with my pain again, that my ancestors are living life with me as a shared experience. I see that the individual healing I do on myself can ultimately influence and be healing for others. As Turcotte states: "If Time is all here right now, the work I do will benefit my ancestors. Healing the present I heal the past. (Personal notes from Turcotte, 2012.)"

CONCLUSION

The Focusing attitude creates a sacred space in which inter-generational wounds can be honored and attended to. Within this safety, I have communicated in a kind and compassionate way with my ancestors. My grandmother and my great-grandmother have reconciled with each other and I with them. I have experienced a felt shift in how I relate to and carry them, and the strong sense that this profound change will be of benefit to their spirits. FOT has helped me identify and honor my unconscious drives towards self-sacrifice and productivity and given me an awareness of how my grandmother's beliefs of unworthiness have contributed to my workaholicism in my career as a therapist. Finally, it has enabled me to find concrete and creative ways to clear space between my emotions and the emotions of my ancestors.

As I close this chapter in my healing journey, I am reminded of an image that came early on in my Focusing on this subject: an orange tree rooted in Israel's soil. The roots of my family tree — that is, the resilience and strength of my ancestors — create the stability needed for our trunk to grow tall. We are all together now in safety as a family, allowed to be who we are as individuals. As part of this tree, I have the right to forge the breadth and direction of my own branch. I have the right to be here and take care of myself, to take my legacy and be creative with it, and turn it into something new. And, in my practice as a Focusing-Oriented therapist, I can draw on my experiences with inter-generational healing and FOT to help others on their journey to wholeness.

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