

# **Holding, Containing and Bearing Witness: The Problem of Helpfulness in Encounters with Torture Survivors**

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**The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture.**

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## Summary

*Presentations of extreme distress following horrific and traumatic experiences tend to evoke a powerful wish to be helpful and an associated fear of impotence. Helping activity, while not in itself unreasonable in appropriate circumstances can nevertheless serve the needs of the worker more than those of the client and obscure the more fundamental desire for holding, containing and bearing witness. This case is argued with special reference to work with victims of torture and organised violence.*

## What are we here for?

W. H. Auden once remarked that writers were guilty of every kind of arrogance except that of the social workers who say, "We are here to help others." "What", asked Auden, "are the 'others' supposed to be here for?"

I believe Auden here grasps a truth that is essential for us to recognise in our work with torture survivors. So I want to begin by asserting quite unequivocally that I do not believe we are here, or that we should be here to 'help' our clients. I believe we are here to bear witness. That is something quite different, and it is that difference that is the concern of this article. Furthermore, it is something we do for ourselves, for our own society, our own history and our own place in that history.

Let me make one or two more assertions. First, it is much harder to bear witness than it is to be helpful. Good intentions are not hard to come by; so trying to be helpful is easy. Nor is it difficult to convey a helpful attitude nor to find something one can do that a client might experience, in the first instance at least, as helpful. It makes them feel better and it makes us feel better. Bearing witness, on the other hand, may well make both ourselves and the client feel worse, at least in the short term. So it is a very powerful temptation for us to do our utmost to be helpful. But this helpfulness is in the long run of little real significance, certainly not historically. No more than giving alms to the poor, soup to the homeless, or shopping for a sick neighbour. It helps, but it doesn't change anything; certainly not history.

Second, the only person we are really here to help is ourselves. The extent to which we recognise this is the extent to which we may be of real personal value to our individual clients, and historically significant in the field in which we are working.

## What do our clients want?

Many of our clients come to us in a dreadful state. Putting them in this state has been precisely the intention of those persecutors from whom they have fled. The purpose of the oppressor is to place himself (or herself, though it is most often he) in the mind of

his victim. Such clients usually feel very helpless. They invite us to help them because they *feel* unable to help themselves. The problem is, that *being helped* is often a way of continuing to *feel* helpless.

What they feel behind the helplessness is usually rage; outrage at what has happened to them and a very primitive rage that goes with their enormous sense of helplessness, vulnerability and dependency. This rage is not mitigated by being helped. It is often driven deeper inside them: suppressed or repressed, because it is difficult if not impossible to express such rage at someone who is being very kind and helpful.

There is nothing at all wrong or pathological in our clients feeling this rage. It is a perfectly expectable and human response to what has happened to them. Nor is there anything wrong or pathological in them being angry or enraged with us. It may seem irrational, but it is also very human. To be human is to be irrational. There is nothing wrong with that.

I am a psychotherapist and I am aware that psychotherapy does not do much for anyone, apart from providing an opportunity for people to discover who they are and what they can do for themselves. Good social work and counselling do much the same thing. Most forms of psychotherapy, certainly the ones with which I am concerned, achieve this course of discovery through the pursuit of truth within a human relationship.

Truth is an elusive thing, and some schools of psychotherapy have taken to proclaiming that the only 'truth' is that there is no such thing as 'the truth', but only a variety of different versions, different constructions. However, one does not need to spend long in the human rights field to recognise the part played by lies, propaganda, obfuscation and the denial and repression of certain truths in any form of politically repressive society. Consequently 'truth' as Chomsky says, has a positive value in itself. Or as Martin Luther King claimed, "The truth will set us free." It is therefore my claim that to engage with our clients in the pursuit of truth is far more important than being helpful.

Political repression in general and torture in particular attempts to create alienation. It tries to alienate its victims from themselves, from their family, their friends, and their community: Our clients come to us seeking relief from that alienation. In the first instance they are seeking a non-alienating, non-exploitative encounter with another human being. Such an encounter is a hypothetical ideal that they and we are unlikely to achieve. Part of our clients will be seeking to overcome their alienation and exploitation, part of them will, albeit unconsciously, nevertheless impose their alienation on their relationship with us and seek to exploit us through that relationship. We in turn have our own alienation and our own needs and capacities to exploit others, and it would be fanciful to believe we can avoid bringing these parts of ourselves into our relationships with our clients. Nevertheless, the effort to transcend these limitations in ourselves and our clients is an effort worth making. It is an effort that is essential if the struggle for human rights is to progress, and if our clients are going to begin to transcend the horrors they have suffered.

We have therefore to think very hard about our inclinations to be helpful. Helpfulness may be a very natural and human response as part of a real relationship. However it can easily become a means of exploitation whereby we use another's need and vulnerability in order to fulfil our own need to be helpful and to feel good about ourselves as a result.

## Holding and containing

These terms originate, as James (1994) points out, in the work of two psychoanalysts: 'Holding' in the work of Winnicott; 'containing' in the work of Bion.

### *Holding*

Winnicott's concept of holding is rooted in the physical relationship of mother and infant. The infant feels secure or not in its mother's arms, which are presumably an extension of the 'holding' of the developing foetus in the womb. Winnicott extends 'holding' to the total emotional and physical environment created by the mother and to her capacity to hold the infant in mind and respond intuitively to its needs. It is a way in which the mother conveys love, concern, acceptance and interest in the infant. On the basis of the security which the infant experiences in being 'held' by the mother and the nurturing environment, it can begin to separate itself from the mother and discover itself and the world into which it has been born.

Winnicott is much concerned with the development of a true or a false self. The latter seems likely to result from the infant having to accommodate to its mother's needs; to acknowledge and express only those aspects of itself which are recognised and accepted by the mother.

Although Winnicott pays much attention to the physical environment and needs of children and adolescents, and to the need to be cared for and nurtured that distressed adults might experience, the major import of such provisions is not the provisions in themselves but the communicational value they have. That is, the message they convey about a recognition of who the person is and what they feel. "Insanity" he suggests, "is not being able to find anyone who can stand you." In the context of adult psychotherapy he suggests that:

... a correct well timed interpretation ... gives a sense of being held physically that is more real (to the non-psychotic) than if real holding or nursing had taken place. Understanding goes deeper and by understanding, shown by the use of language, the analyst holds physically in the past, that is, at the time of the need to be held, when love meant physical care and adaptation. (Winnicott, 1988, pp. 61-62)

This is vitally important for our work with people whose integrity as persons has been severely violated and whose sense of being held or having been held in a benign way has become precarious if not actually disintegrated. Because of the extent of their physical and material needs combined with their sense of helplessness, it is easy for us to feel and to believe that a holding environment is one that meets those physical and material needs. It is an ongoing debate, as part of our work, how much physical and material provisions we need to deliver to our clients. The point I want to make here is that the delivery of these provisions does not in itself constitute holding. The essence of holding is not the *material* but the *emotional* environment. It is the reliability of our presence and our recognition of who the person is and what they feel.

Furthermore, it is not our pity, sympathy, compassion or desire to be helpful that is required, though all those feelings may have their place, but our recognition and understanding. It is through the communication we have with our clients, through attempts to put into words with them their experience, their feelings and their sense of who they are in relation to us, that they are going to feel held.

### *Containing*

Bion's concept of containing is based on the idea that the infant projects into its mother feelings that are distressing, frightening, painful or in some other way unbearable. The mother experiences the feeling herself, and is able not to act on it but to contain it and return it in a modified and contained form to the infant, so that the infant can reclaim it and reintegrate it as its own. It is not the infant that is contained as such. It is the *feeling* that the mother experiences in relation to the infant that she has to contain. The infant may develop an overall sense of containment as a result of a multiplicity of such experiences of having a specific feeling contained and returned. But the mother's focus is not on the containment of the infant, but on the containment of the specific feeling projected into her by the infant at a particular time.

Bion is particularly concerned with the way the infant deals with rage and frustration. It is through the mother's capacity to contain these projected feelings that the infant develops the capacity to think, to contain its own feelings and to use them as a basis for thought.

Torture survivors who have been subjected to extreme experiences of pain, terror, abandonment and rage are frequently in the position of finding it difficult to think. They are particularly unable to think about their emotions. Often these emotions are kept out of consciousness altogether, and are not therefore available for contemplation. When they come into consciousness they do so with such overwhelming force that thought is rendered impossible. Thus, irritating behaviour by their children or conflict with their spouses can provoke unmanageable anger and rage. Recollections of dead relatives or friends, or lost communities and ways of life can bring unbearable sadness and grief.

In their relationships with us, our clients are likely to project into us some of these feelings, especially the ones they find most unbearable and of which they are least conscious. Thus we experience in some small, or perhaps more substantial way, the feelings they are unable to feel, express and think about. If we can be aware of these feelings and find some way of beginning to put them into words, then we begin to create the possibility of our clients reclaiming those feelings, beginning to think about them and integrate them into their sense of themselves, their identity and their history. If we are not able to do this, then the feelings are in some sense lost to the client. A chunk of her experience goes missing or remains as a lost memory, emerging only in nightmares as intrusive thoughts or somatic symptoms.

Thus containment is not about responding to a client's expressed needs. It is not about relieving their anxiety by providing help or reassurance. Nor is it about providing medical treatment, money, equipment, houses, holidays or advice about their political, civil or welfare rights. All these activities may well be valuable in their own right, but they are not 'containment.' Containment takes place in a dialogue which seeks to find words for hitherto unspeakable feelings and experiences as they are projected into the

counsellor, social worker, psychotherapist or whoever. thereby becoming shared and available to the intersubjective field of that dialogue.

### **What happens when we meet with our clients?**

Our clients present themselves to us in a great variety of ways which it is not possible to summarise adequately here. They may be flat and passive, acutely distressed and anxious, aggressive and demanding or even smiling and grateful; making light of their terrible experience. They may tell us horrifying stories or they may be very vague, unspecific or unforthcoming about what has happened to them. But what concerns me here, is how they leave us feeling. Often they leave us feeling very uncomfortable, with a powerful sense of urgency that we must do something, which may be accompanied by a fairly clear idea as to what we can do. They may alternatively leave us feeling hopeless, helpless and useless, with a sense of futility and a belief that there is little or nothing we can do.

What is important here is our capacity to reflect on the feeling they have left us with. And this is often a very difficult thing to do, because we may feel overwhelmed by the feeling and we may try very hard not to feel it, or at least to alleviate it as quickly as possible. One way we can avoid or alleviate such feelings is to focus on the client instead of on ourselves. We can come up with all sorts of explanations about the client and her needs which we can then busy ourselves trying to meet - a whole range of ways of being helpful readily present themselves to us. Or we can come up with another range of explanations about the impossibility of meeting the clients' needs and we can either place responsibility on the client, on some social or political system, on our organisation, our colleagues or ourselves. This is not to say that social and political systems as well as we ourselves should be freed of responsibility for all sorts of problems, but simply to point out that such recourse can at times be a way of avoiding those difficult feelings our clients have left us with.

Often this sort of process is what we call an assessment, in which we believe we are assessing the clients' needs and responding accordingly. What we are actually doing is failing to assess our own relationship with our clients. And what we do subsequently has at least as much to do with alleviating our own feelings as it has to do with any rehabilitative process in which the client can actually and actively engage. While we believe we are 'helping' the client we are actually disengaging from her and engaging ourselves in activities which are not holding, containing or bearing witness. We are helping ourselves to feel better after our clients have made us feel awful.

I do not intend this to be accusatory or condemnatory. I offer it as an observation about what we all do at some time or other. I offer it as a way of trying to recognise the nature of much of the stress, distress, urgency and despondency that often permeates our work and our feelings about our clients, our institution and each other. I offer it as a possible way of thinking about how we can develop processes and ways of working that allow us to feel less besieged and which facilitate real empowerment for our clients, which involve them in an active process of rebuilding and developing themselves as subjects of their own experience.

Holding and containing are not something we can do to clients. They are collaborative processes which can only happen through the communication and dialogue we have with our clients.

## **Holding and containing ourselves**

It is worth applying the victim-persecutor-rescuer triangle to the work we do with torture survivors. This work provides us with clearly demarcated victims and persecutors and inherently offers us the role of rescuer. However, this triangle tends to exist inside all of us as human beings. We all have the capacity at some level to be victims, persecutors or rescuers, and indeed we have probably been all three at some time in our lives and we probably continue to be so.

It seems a viable assumption that one of the things that draws us to this work is our own more or less conscious wishes to resolve this internal conflict. At the same time to inhabit the role of victim, or to experience oneself as a persecutor can be an acutely uncomfortable if not terrifying experience. Of the three positions, that of rescuer is likely to be experienced as the most comfortable place, by some considerable degree. If we can externalise or project the victimised and persecutory bits of ourselves then we can obtain some relief from these internal tensions by experiencing ourselves primarily as rescuers. The victim and persecutor bits are contained for us, and fed back to us by our clients and their persecutors. However, the maintenance of these projections relies heavily on the extent to which we can maintain ourselves in the rescuer role; which requires that we actually manage to do some rescuing. When we fail as rescuers we are left with our own experience of our clients and what they present and represent (re-present) for us.

It is here that their experience resonates with repressed, denied or disassociated bits of ourselves. We become a sort of echo chamber and our problem becomes how to contain our own feelings. It is here that we look to our working environment, our colleagues, our institution and its structures, to contain the feelings that we ourselves find overwhelming.

However, in a group of people all committed to the rescuer role, it may be difficult for any one member to admit to feeling not like a rescuer but like a victim or a torturer. The possibility of containment lies in the readiness of others to acknowledge these feelings and to admit that they too have them and also find them frightening and difficult to contain. But in a group of dedicated rescuers such admissions, without which there can be little real empathy, may be rare and hard to come by. The alternative scenario is that the person feeling like a victim or torturer appears as the only one feeling this way and the others set about rescuing her. She thereby becomes the victim of the group's need to be helpful, being 'counselled' by her colleagues while at the same time being made to feel increasingly strange and deviant for having these feelings. Once this scenario has occurred on one or more occasions, the danger of recognising and expressing such problematic feelings becomes generally perceived, and if it cannot be spoken of, then it becomes embedded in the unspoken or even unconscious meaning system of the group.

What is necessary for holding and containing is a group matrix in which the feelings and experiences of being victim, persecutor and rescuer can be expressed freely and can circulate with some fluidity. They can become recognised and understood as part of the range of human experience involved in doing this work, and not definitive of identity. Thus a worker who feels or acts persecutingly is not defined as a persecutor, nor is someone feeling a powerful urge to rescue defined as a rescuer. The feelings and experiences are real and powerful but also contingent.

However, there is likely to be considerable resistance in all of us to acknowledging these feelings and experiencing ourselves in these roles. These resistances are not only internal (intra-psychic) but may be projected outwards to constitute the institutional structures in which we work. We may then experience these structures as persecutory and ourselves as victims of them. And they may indeed be persecutory, not only in their imposition of certain patterns upon our work, but also in their failure to hold and contain. One of the ways in which structures tend to do this is by failing to recognise and incorporate our need for holding and containing. Instead of facilitating and institutionalising a communicational matrix in which these thoughts and feelings can be talked about, they institutionalise our defences against such a dialogue. Specifically, in so far as they deny the need of this dialogue they institutionalise our denial of that need in ourselves.

Also denied is the demand placed on leaders, the nature of the need for leaders to provide holding and containment, and the projections of the staff onto the leadership and of the leadership onto the staff. Leadership readily becomes equated with rescuing, and judged according to its success at *alleviating* rather than *recognising* staff distress. Staff become perceived by leaders as in need of rescue from anxiety and uncertainty and judged according to their readiness to accept rescue. Behind this scenario lies a more persecutory scenario in which both leaders and led feel persecuted by each other but cannot find sufficient institutional time and space to develop a communicational matrix to address these experiences. Helpfulness then provides an ideal escape in that everyone can busy themselves behaving 'helpfully' in relation to clients thereby maintaining the fixed institutional dynamic.

### **Bearing witness**

Bearing witness is a personal and a political activity. It is to constitute ourselves as some sort of testimony to the history with which we are engaged.

At the personal level we bear witness to who the client is and what their experience has been. We provide a recognition of what has happened, how the client's life has changed and how they have come to feel about their lives and themselves. It is through this context of recognition that the client can piece together the shattered parts of her subjective continuity and recover her sense of integrity as a whole person. This necessarily involves the integration of the past with the present. We need therefore to recognise the past in terms of what has happened and how it was experienced, and we need to recognise the present with all its conflicts and confusions which includes the persistent re-emergence of the past. The present always contains the past and the possibility of the future. What we are often dealing with is a present which is overwhelmed by the past: a past that contains the present and the future, holding them in abeyance in a state of induced terror, grief and outrage. As witnesses in the present we can begin to constitute a present which moves out of the past. It will bring the past with it, but it will *contain* the past rather than be bound by it.

However, it is not only individual lives which are disorganised and fragmented by torture and organised violence. It is whole communities, societies and political movements. It is also cultures, belief systems and ideas. Bearing witness involves a recognition of these processes as they bear on individual clients and families and as they



change the shape of the world in which we all live. This is a movement from the personal to the political which is rooted in a recognition of the political process in the personal experience.

To engage in bearing witness, we constitute ourselves in a dialectical relation to our clients: a struggle in which we seek to recognise each other. If we simply try to be helpful, to accommodate and meet their needs, there can be no opposition and therefore no dialectic. If there is no dialectic there can be no synthesis.

It is out of this synthesis of our otherness to our clients and their otherness to us, that we have a basis on which to constitute ourselves in dialectical opposition to the forces of oppression. But this will only be a true dialectical opposition if we can recognise within ourselves and within our clients those oppressive forces.

Martin Buber (1951) in his essay on 'Distance and relation', re-identifies the twin movement of the human person: the setting of ourselves at a distance from the other and the entering into relation with the other as the separate beings created by that primary act of distancing. He goes on to assert:

The basis of man's life is twofold, and it is one - the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow-men in this way ... actual humanity exists only where this capacity unfolds. On the other hand of course, an empty claim for confirmation, without devotion for being and becoming, again and again mars the truth of the life between man and man. (p110-111)

He goes on to claim that this can only happen in genuine meetings.

Human life and humanity come into being in genuine meetings. There man learns not merely that he is limited by man, cast upon his own finitude, partialness, need of completion, but his own relation to truth is heightened by the other's different relation to the same truth - different in accordance with his individuation, and destined to take seed and grow differently. They need and it is granted to them to confirm one another in their individual being by means of genuine meetings. But beyond this they need, and it is granted to them, to see the truth, which the soul gains by its struggle, light up to the others, the brothers, in a different way, and even so be confirmed. (p. 112)

Central to a genuine meeting is an event which Buber described as 'making present' which involves what he calls imagining the real: "the capacity to hold before one's soul a reality arising at this moment but not able to be directly experienced." This means that:

I imagine to myself what another man is at this very moment, wishing, feeling, perceiving, thinking, and not as a detached content but in his very reality, that is, as a living process in this man ... so called fellow-feeling may serve as a familiar illustration of this if we leave vague sympathy out of consideration and limit the concept to that event in which I experience, let us say, the specific pain of

another in such a way that I feel what is specific in it, not therefore a general discomfort or state of suffering but this particular pain as the pain of the other. This 'making present' increases until it is a paradox in the soul when I and the other are embraced by a common living situation, and (let us say) the pain which I inflict upon him surges up in myself, revealing the abyss of the contradictoriness of life between man and man. At such a moment something can come into being which cannot be built up in any other way. (p. 112)

There is no reference in all of this to 'helping'. Buber is concerned with the bringing forth of humanity through an encounter with and recognition of the experience of the other, and we imagine it and understand it through our own experience of being who we are.

While our clients' expressed wish for 'help' and our manifest offer of 'help' may be the starting point of our relationship with them, it also limits the possibilities of that relationship for as long as it persists. In so far as our clients have had their humanity violated then we can realistically imagine them to be seeking a context and a relationship in which their humanity can be reaffirmed through the kind of meeting and making present that Buber describes. The request for help is in a sense a pretext, an opening gambit which introduces them to us and us to them, a starting-off point which we should always be seeking to move beyond.

The helper is ultimately witness to nothing except her own helpfulness. In 'helping' we affirm ourselves. Or more precisely, we affirm that part of ourselves that wishes to be helpful; we affirm our own need to be helpful; and if we affirm only that part of ourselves, we affirm only a partial self, a false self even. In holding, containing and bearing witness we affirm the other. We affirm the other in relation to ourselves and ourselves in relation to the other in our respective totalities, as persons in the process of becoming.

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