

# Conducting Large Groups: Making Sense of Being a Stranger in a Foreign Land

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## Abstract

When a conductor steps in to conduct a large group she steps into a singular place: a nodal point, that carries with it many unconscious expectations that need decoding in order to understand what is happening. This paper gives an impression of my experience of conducting large groups in Finland. It has been written in close cooperation with Aila Kauranen, a Finnish group psychotherapist. I paid 10 visits to Finland: one to the Arctic Circle and nine to Helsinki. On two occasions, after a regular pattern of visiting every six months, the expected return invitation did not arrive. Both times this break occurred I felt it as a painful shock. It led me into some deep thinking about why this had happened. After studying Finland's history and connecting my experience to the events both in and around the group, I realised that the unexpected and sudden breaks in continuity were perhaps the only way in which those associated with the workshops could let me know something of the deep social trauma they carried.

## Waitara

Inā hikoi he kaitaki ki te taki ropū matarahi, ka hikoi ia ki tētahi tūnga takitahi: he pūpeka, kawenga wawata o te mano mauri moe e mate pukuana kia mōhio ai he aha te aha. Mai i tēnei tuinga ka hoatu he hāraunga o aku wheako taki rōpū matarahi i Hinerangi. He mea tuhi i raro i te mahitahitanga ki a Aila Kauranen, he kaiwhakaora hinengaro rōpū Hinerangi. Tekau ngā wāhanga i haere au ki Hinerangi: kotahi ki te Awhio Raki e iwa ki Heretiniki. E rua ngā wā, i muri mai o te haerenga ia ono marama, kāre i puta mai te pōhiri hoki atu. Ia wā i whātia, tino kaha te taunga hihiko pōuri ki ahua. Ka huri ki te whaiwhakaaro hōhōnu mō tēnei take. I te mutunga o te whai mātauranga mō te whakapapa o Hinerangi me te whakahāngaitanga atu i aku wheako i waenga i te rōpū, ka kite au ko ngā whatinga whakahaere ohotata, ohorere hoki, te momo whakamōhio mai a ngā tāngata o nga rōpū awheawhe rā i te taumaha o te mamae e mau ana e rātou.

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## Introduction

People tell me, “You travel a lot!” “Yes,” I reply, “to conduct large groups.” On each occasion I am a stranger in a foreign land and in a unique position that carries with it many unconscious expectations. It is as Foulkes described, a key nodal point in the matrix, full of data that I initially do not understand (1964). It takes time, research, and thinking to decode. This paper describes this process.

Finland always held an evocative place in my mind so I was more than delighted when I was invited to work there. As an adolescent my music teacher often played Sibelius’ symphonic poem, *Finlandia*, to me. The music is rousing and turbulent, evoking Finland’s historical struggle against cultural and political domination, but the mood changes towards the end when the serenely melodic *Finlandia Hymn* inspires hope for a better future. I did not know then that it was composed for the Press Celebrations in 1899 as a covert protest against the increasing censorship imposed by the Russian Empire.

Over a period of 13 years I conducted 10 large group workshops for teachers, students, and graduates. My introduction to Finland came when I was invited to conduct a five-day workshop for professionals in Rovaniemi, a small town in the Arctic Circle associated with Santa Claus, in the late 90s. We met in a large cabin beside a lake surrounded by forest.

My main memory of this time was of a heavy, dream-like quality. The crisp, cold snow outside, the short dark days and the long silences inside that, although reflective, appeared to carry inexpressible pain. “Perhaps the lake represented a place to ponder the forces of the deep.” Almost immediately language and the fear of not being able to speak or to be understood came to the fore. Overtly expressed as a problem of not being able to speak English, this problem of language always featured. It was not until I met with the group in Helsinki several years later that I began to realise that speaking in Finnish had historical resonances with fighting for the right to speak their own language. People tended to speak very quietly, almost as though they were afraid of letting others know which language they might be speaking and what they truly thought and felt.

Language was also a problem for me. Finns are thought to be a special people with their roots both in the East and West (Singleton, 1998, p. 1). Their Finno-Ugrian language is not related to any of the European Romance languages and is unlike any other language in Europe. Even knowing this it was also a shock to discover that everybody had a name that I had never heard before. Many people told stories about the names, the beliefs, and the expectations they were born with. “Is it possible to be understood without speaking?” someone wondered. I felt it as a silent plea. “Speaking here is very painful and full of things I want to say but I’m unable to say.” “A shaman just understands once he has the person’s name,” I was told. I knew that in this part of the country, Lapland, there are many shamanistic practices.

In this first workshop there was a rumination that stayed with us for each of my visits. “Was this a place where change could be possible?” A story was told that cued me into the history. “For 50 years a couple had lived together and the wife had given what she felt was the better half of bread to her husband but on their 50th anniversary she decided to give

him the other end of the bread and he said I have waited 50 years to get the best piece of bread!" Fifty years ago, in the late 1940s, Finland was still an agrarian country. The population, recovering from war, was traumatised and starving (Singleton, 1998).

## Touching the Deep

Conducting these groups taught me that behind the tranquil present lies a turbulent past. An oppressively painful presence kept drifting into my consciousness. Every time I tried to gently touch this presence I felt gently rebuffed. It was as though I was making strong but unwanted ripples in a nervous surface calm. I see now that with each visit this pattern of being in contact with something ephemeral and being pushed away increasingly established itself until it was clear that the group had to stop working with me. The fact that many of the participants were students and were expected to join these workshops as part of their training inevitably reinforced any natural ambivalence about working in a large group.

Endings always seemed to be problematic. After a pattern of regular visits, there were long breaks that were neither planned nor announced in advance. The return invitation just did not arrive. There was no opportunity to say goodbye. After the first break, I was puzzled and very upset. When it happened the second time I began to surmise that I was being forced to deal with the sudden death of a whole community that I had grown to know deeply. Perhaps they could only let me know about their experience of the sudden loss of their community through unconsciously engendering the parallel experience in me (Bion, 1975).

To make sense of my experience I researched the history of Finland while reviewing the notes I had made at the time. I found new insight into the extent of loss that Finnish people had experienced and the corresponding ambivalence about seeking to understand its influence on present day life. My assumption is that by creating a story out of material of experience, meaning is given to "what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings" (Arendt, 1995, p. 104). So I was not prepared for the deeply contradictory situation I found myself in. The more I searched for meaning, the more it seemed that the groups strangely resisted it. I began to understand that when meaning has never been found for devastating pain that can only be avoided, a situation arises that has been described by a group of pioneering family therapists as the "uncanny experience" of encountering the "denial of denial" (Schaffer, Wynne, Day, Ryckoff, & Halperin, 1971).

Although my own exposure to the history of this part of Europe was limited as I had grown up in New Zealand, I was used to thinking about the connections between confusing behaviour in the present and unacknowledged trauma from the past. As the daughter of a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, I understood the impact of the persecution inflicted on my father and its long-term influence on me. My own experience has taught me how pervasively the unthinkable past is prevented from being consciously contemplated (Freeman, 2002). These thoughts were reinforced serendipitously last summer when I participated in a group working on political trauma at an international congress. A Finnish woman introduced herself by saying that she lived in a society that was so traumatised it could not face its past.

## Finland's Past

With a population of about five million, Finland is a small nation. Its remote location, close to the Arctic and sandwiched uncomfortably between East and West, made it vulnerable to the imperialistic control of neighbouring states. Its early history is usually told in the form of legend. One story is that King Erik of Sweden, accompanied by Bishop Henry of Uppsala, led a crusade to the area in 1155 to initiate the organised church and extend the kingdom of Sweden. Russia also had designs on it and finally succeeded in defeating Sweden in the Finnish War of 1809. For the next 100 years or so, the Duchy of Finland lived under alternating regimes of reforming and repressive tsars, all with the intention of maintaining Finland as an integrated part of Russia.

Even as part of Russia, the Swedish language continued to be used for public administration and education. Official documents were still written in Swedish so Swedish speakers, usually the educated middle and upper classes, maintained power over the economy and higher education (Singleton, 1998). Many people still see the use of the Swedish language as a symbol of class oppression in Finland. Not only has Finland endured almost continuous wars being fought over its territory but it also had its own bitter civil war. Civil wars leave a particularly difficult legacy; in their aftermath, nobody quite knows who was on which side with the consequence of a heavy and untouchable silence between neighbours and within families.

By the beginning of the 20th century, agitation for more political democracy in Russia was mirrored in Finland. In 1906, universal suffrage was initiated and a Finnish parliament, the *Eduskunta*, was established but while Finland was tied to Tsarist Russia these democratic rights were felt to be at risk. With independence in December 1917 these rights began to feel relatively secure but existing internal rivalries between the political interests of the land-owning middle class of the north and the factory workers of the south became more intense (Singleton, 1998). Little more than a month after independence, a very bloody civil war ensued between the army of the right, non-socialist, conservatives called "Civil Guards" or "Whites", with military assistance from the German Empire, and the army of the left, "Red Guards" or "Reds", supported by the Soviet Republic. Three months later the Whites declared victory. Out of the population of three million, about 37,000 people died, of whom 5000 were Whites, nearly 30,000 were Reds, and around 2000 others were of unknown affiliation. The war did not end for the Reds; many were put into concentration camps and starved to death. Almost every working class family had direct experience of suffering or death at the hands of the Whites. Some sources suggest that 40% of the population was affected (for example see [www.socialisterna.org/](http://www.socialisterna.org/)).

As is usual the White victors wrote the history of this war and Red families lived with the subtle stigma of "having committed treason" until the external threat of Soviet Russia forced this finger pointing underground. It was not until 1960 when Väinö Linna published *The Uprising* (1960/2000) that the Red perspective was written. Linna's work generated considerable controversy. He described the passion and class conflict that erupted by evoking emotional experiences of the fear and pain borne by the Reds. Talking about the Civil War is still not easy. At a dinner party in 2011, I asked the assembled group what they knew. "Oh don't take it seriously. Many people did not even know which side they were on. It was just a case of which uniform they were given." In one of the workshops, one person,

responding to someone who was ashamed of being a communist in the 70s, told us that as one of her parents was a Red and the other a White, she was pink. No one responded.

Independence also brought a significant shift in Finland's economic progress. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Finland had achieved 100% literacy (Edwards, 2007, p. 29).

Finland fought three wars, the Winter War (1939-40), the Continuation War (1941-44), and the Lapland War (1944-45), with profound consequences. Not only were around 88,000 men killed in action leaving 30,000 war widows and more than 50,000 war orphans, 44,181 children under 15 years of age died and large numbers of the population were displaced (as cited in Korppi-Tommola, 2008).

With its long and indefensible border of over 800 miles with the Soviet Union, Finland, feeling under significant threat, declared its neutrality during the Second World War. Even so, the Soviet army attacked in November 1939 and forced Finland to relinquish large parts of its territory (Singleton, 1998). Finland called for help but Germany, with strategic designs on the Soviet Union, was the only country that came to Finland's aid. It is also thought that up to 10,000 Swedish volunteers fought alongside Finnish soldiers despite the Swedish king publicly rejecting Finland's pleas for military intervention (Leskinen, 1999). Those Swedes who came to Finland's aid continue to be acknowledged as we learnt in the last workshop.

As part of the negotiated peace after the Winter War the Soviets demanded Karelia. The civilian population, some 400,000 people, moved, taking with them what possessions they could carry as they trekked westward (Singleton, 1998). The Finnish parliament decided that there would be no refugee camps. Everyone would be resettled. No one would be left behind, not even soldiers who had been killed. Legislation was passed to ensure land was available for the refugees from the state, the church, and big landowners. Even so it was not easy to be an evacuee when other Finns had to make room for them. Post-war legislation was dedicated to helping those who were poor, did not have land, or jobs: an altruistic attitude that lasted until the late 1980s when those who had survived the wars lost their influence through age or death.

If the experiences of the workshops are any indicator, it appears that the historical experience of being evacuated from Karelia is part of the history of a high proportion of people who eventually become psychotherapists in Finland. As if this mass evacuation was not enough, 65,000 Finnish children were sent to Sweden during the Winter War (Korppi-Tommola, 2008). Although many children returned home during 1942 and 1943, they were sent back in the spring of 1944 when heavy bombing started again. This too is an experience that featured in later workshops.

Finland's close proximity to the Soviet Union continued to influence its politics after 1945. Different commentators have contrasting views about whether Finland was forced to acquiesce to the Soviet Union. It is significant that between 1956 and 1981 Urho Kekkonen was the only president and he employed a policy of political deference known as "national realism" (Ford Cooper, 2001, p. 45). This period was never referred to in any of the workshops despite it being a period of enormous change and within living memory of many people in the group.

Fear and hatred of Russia persists. I was once told that St Petersburg is less than an hour's train journey from Helsinki. Actually it is about three hours but the message let me know

how close the two cities feel. During a workshop in October 2002 a man described a nightmare: he was driving with his son near a town on the west coast called Bear's Village in a Volkswagen Beetle. Listening to the dream, I had a strong feeling that it was connected with the allegiances of World War Two: the Russian Bear and Hitler's people's car. I did not know then that the bear is also the symbolic animal of Finland adding a confusing component to Finnish identity. The dream went on to describe a bear trying to attack a mother and her baby in her car. The group offered no associations to the dream.

## The Large Group and History

The large group expands on the experience of the small group, transposing whole socio-political situations from the "there and then" into the "here and now", enabling a space for encountering and thinking about the influence of the social past on personal history and current lives.

Every group I conducted in Finland pointed not only to enormous loss and devastation in previous generations but also to a powerful ambivalence about whether these experiences could be talked about. I discovered, just as I discovered when working with generations after the Shoah, that the mechanisms of denial had been transmitted along with the trauma itself (Schlant, 1999). I suspect that fear of open conflict based on old enmities breaking out in the workshops constrained the dialogue. Shifting allegiances to Germany and the Soviet Union during the Second World War, bound up with the class allegiances that led to the Civil War, probably also made it difficult to talk freely. In some groups, daring to talk about the war and afterwards was actively challenged. In others, these experiences along with the conflict about whether or not to talk were not openly shared but "communicated below the radar".

I wonder whether meeting at six-monthly intervals without guaranteed continuity of "leadership" or time reflected, not only a reticence about discussing what past generations had endured and how that might be influencing the present, but also that this structure was a re-enactment, or "transposition" of that past (de Maré, 1991, p. 103). Although never made explicit, I later discovered that there had been a series of visiting large group conductors before me. How did workshop participants experience this changing "leadership"? Was replacing the large group conductors on a regular basis not only an unconscious way of denying dependency, but also a way of ensuring that the extent of social trauma could not reach conscious acknowledgement. This denial of denial appears to resonate with the silence that persisted after the Civil War in Finland until *The Uprising* was published. I suspected that when this material emerged directly, I would not be asked to return. Given the shifting domination by neighbouring powers it was also understandable that accepting consistent "leadership" by a foreigner such as me would be resisted.

With such a complex painful history, it is not surprising that acknowledging the past in the present appears to be almost taboo. My experience is that by just sitting within the context of a larger group forces the revelation of what feels forbidden from the social past. As participants tell stories and listen to each other they can help each other to make sense of what emerges together. Gradually a new, shared narrative replaces the inhibiting

silence that existed previously and a more open context emerges that facilitates a shared understanding of “who we are and what we and our ancestors have endured”. Lost stories are resurrected and spoken about, often for the first time. The new social context begins to repair the original fragmented experience of transmitted trauma descendent generations are often left with (Bar-On, 1999).

In one group a woman talked about her grandfather committing suicide on the way back from the Eastern Front and, as a result, her brother had decided that he did not want his son, who was still a little boy, to go into the army. A day later she discovered that a relative of hers was in the group and she felt that she had exposed a terrible family secret by talking about it. I asked her, “What was the taboo?” She replied, “All those dead people. I have been to so many funerals.” Her relative said, “I am the relative and what you said is safe with me. It feels a relief that you have spoken about this.” I told them that their story had moved me as it demonstrated the long-term legacy of war and perhaps that is something that society does not want to acknowledge, perhaps that is the real taboo. Even though these events had really happened and had affected many of their families, they were now like skeletons locked away in the social cupboard and made invisible as if they had not occurred.

In these workshops, even though memories did emerge the force of denial meant it was difficult for connections to be made that could help to develop a shared experience. Schaffer and colleagues (1971) suggested that in this situation there is likely to be a clash of cultures, where representatives of each culture fight for their life. Any attempt to gently suggest a meaningful relationship between the there and then and the here and now was, on the whole, quietly ignored.

## Some Clues in the Snowy Forest

Group members often told stories that carried other stories like metaphors or allegories. In the first workshop in the Arctic, one woman told us that she had been treated for breast cancer three years previously and still had check-ups every six months. She said she had been afraid of dying but now she was also afraid of living. The grief in the group was palpable as many described important colleagues and friends who had cancer or who had died of cancer. At the end of that day I had indigestion. It helped me to recognise not only how unbearable the origin of their suffering was but also how unbearable it was not being able to speak about it, the feelings could not be metabolised. The tension between understanding the nature of the “dis-ease” and pretending that there was nothing to understand was a theme throughout my visits.

The theme of cancer stayed with us. I learnt that it was a way of describing a creeping pain that could not be identified. Like transmitted trauma, cancer is insidious; it seeps into present-day life, silently and invasively, and the group was being used to bear witness to experiences that had not been talked about previously. Cancer is usually hidden away, treated in hospital, and there is rarely an opportunity to speak about how it feels. War too is often hidden away in the past and buried in stories of heroism. There are rarely occasions when one can talk about its aftermath.

The next day the group cast about trying to discover the words to say what needed to be

said. “Who else is ill?” And then almost as if this was a cue to divert the group from facing something too difficult to face, three men started to talk and just kept on talking, filling the space. Finally the women broke in and talked about the impact of the Second World War. One asked, “Was my father a Nazi? He doesn’t talk about it.” Then a dream was recounted of a chessboard being turned upside down and I saw an image of black and white pieces falling all over the place. At that time I did not know about the Civil War between the Whites and the Reds. Now I can see how the bitter fighting upset the previously clearly defined class structure in Finland, divided families and neighbours. There was a question about whether it was possible to speak about what had happened in the small group in the large group. I heard this question as, “Can private grief or conflict be brought back into the public sphere?” I suspect that almost every family in Finland has felt the impact of war and oppression, yet the idea that it could be helpful to have a public place to talk about what happened then and there appears to be too difficult to entertain.

This first workshop taught me about deep pain that at times could make one wish for death as a relief from the struggle of life. The legacy of survival leaves a deep residue of suffering. “What can be done with all this grief if it is not buried and denied?” was a recurring theme through all my work in Finland. It created a tension between facing pain and avoiding pain, or living life and wishing for death.

## Connecting People

Three years later I was invited to Helsinki to conduct a group for the first time. The group opened with a conversation about one missing member who would call on her mobile when she arrived outside. Someone joked about Nokia’s strapline, “Connecting people!” We were immediately encountering the results of Finland’s rapid post-war manufacturing and design development, but it was difficult to connect in the room.

Someone said they were glad to have a woman conductor as they now had a woman president in Finland. The previous president was a man, a superman. I asked myself, “Had the previous large group conductor been a superman?” I was probably the first woman who had conducted their large group. Someone in the group then asked, “Can a woman be strong and a man weak?” I guess they were wondering, “Was I up to the task?” I knew that many believed that the president had only been elected because she was a woman so reference to her indicated some ambivalence about me.

A rumination about oppression emerged. The discussion carried with it a kind of hopelessness. “Language can be oppressive.” “Women can oppress men and men women.” “Silence can be oppressive.” “Can we sit in silence for the whole time?” “What does it mean to be the silent majority?” There was an allusion to me as the conductor “forcing” them to sit in this difficult group, being like an oppressive mother who stuffs her children with food they do not want. There were stories of other unwanted experiences: being in the army; sitting at the back of the room in school, so as not to be noticed and not daring to say anything; being bullied as a child for not getting it right. One man said that he had recently seen the film *Schindler’s List* and found himself identifying with the doctor who chose who was going to live and who was going to die. When he was in the army he had to decide who could join and who to refuse. It was like



being part of a machine that he did not feel able to question. The atmosphere in the group felt very uncomfortable and ended with one woman saying that she was wondering what messages she had on her mobile. It was a sharp reminder that brought us right back into the present and to where we had started.

I returned to Helsinki four more times at six-monthly intervals. On my third visit one woman told us that she had been practising her English so she could be more active. By my fourth visit a pattern of continuity had established itself; some of the group had met to discuss what had happened after the previous meeting.

A dream was told: "I was standing at the top of the stairs staring down into the dark cellar where I could not see but I could hear and touch. How long have I been in this position in my life?" There was a question, "Are we talking about the taboo between generations?" There were many stories of fathers dying early and surviving parents becoming alcoholic. This workshop had a quiet quality and people reported feeling exhausted. The journey together had been long and hard. That same night a woman had a dream that kept repeating about an open door that disappeared when she got up. Perhaps she had a premonition that I would not be returning for a long while to hold the door open for them.

## Death Comes When You Least Expect It

When I did return after a break of 18 months we started with the news that a bus had collided with a lorry killing 24 children. It was the worst bus accident in Finnish history. The bus had 33 passengers, the same number of people as in the group. The group wondered: "Did the bus crash signal the beginning of a catastrophic journey for the workshop?", "Why do we put ourselves through this?" The ambivalence about participating in these workshops was still present. I noticed that everything that people said seemed tantalisingly disconnected. Any linking would have conveyed suffering that could not be spoken about yet (Bion, 1959).

I returned six months later. The ambivalence about revealing the traumatic legacy of history began to surface overtly. We started with a shocking revelation that a friend of one of the participants had drowned while drunk. In the silence that followed, I pondered that over the years I had heard many stories of relatives who had either committed suicide or had taken the slow route of drinking themselves to death after the war. Trying to divert attention away from this painful issue, one person told us that she talked to avoid the "hostility of silence". I wondered where the idea that silence was hostile had come from.

Towards the end a woman told a moving story about her father who at 16 was too young to fight but nevertheless went to war. His job was to pick up dead bodies; not Russian bodies, only Finnish ones. After the war he took a year out to go to sea, "to adjust and digest his experience". She felt that he was the wisest man she knew. In this story we heard a small hope-giving example of the benefit of taking time to reflect on the possibility of finding some meaning in the face of enormous destruction. Now I wonder whether this "time out" was an attempt to forget experiences that no young man should have had to witness to enable him to continue to live his life after the war. Increasingly

my understanding is that these large groups threaten to destabilise the delicate balance between what meaning can be made after such terrible suffering and what had to be denied in order to continue living. This is the legacy the next generations find themselves wrestling with.

## Trauma Lives On

On arriving for my next visit, I was met at the door by one of the participants holding a roll of white plastic bags usually used for lining small rubbish bins. She was handing one bag to each person as they entered the room saying, "These are for your shoes." I was puzzled, did they want to protect the white floor from black scuff marks? As I sat down I looked around the room. Some people were trying to keep their feet warm by placing them on their hats or gloves. Others had warm woolly socks on while others kept their shoes on and tied a bag around each foot over the top of their shoes. I had put my shoes in the bag as instructed and my feet were cold.

As I sat there, becoming increasingly aware that the icy cold in my feet was spreading up my body, I commented that we seemed to have created a very alienating environment. It was then that one person remembered that when people were taken to concentration camps they had to remove their shoes along with all their clothes. A memory emerged in the group of being evacuated to Sweden as a small child, being forced to take clothes off, being washed from top to toe and having hair disinfected to get rid of lice. These two stories finally breached the protective mechanism of denying denial, but perhaps they communicated more pain than the group could face at the time.

Although the removal of shoes into plastic bags was an action designed to protect one person's allergy, perhaps they were also letting me know that they were allergic to these large groups. As it turned out this was my last visit to Finland for six years. I returned to Helsinki in January 2011 to conduct a workshop on the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Swedish colleagues were invited and three came.

To prepare, I collected images relating to the history of Finland hoping these would enable people to find words for their experiences. To begin I spread them over the floor. It was fascinating to see how each person gathered images in clusters, using them to construct their family stories. One woman picked up two images; one of two war-weary soldiers walking past a burnt-out tank in the snow and the other of a mother and daughter sitting in the ruins of bombed-out houses. She told us of how her grandfather had been killed in the first battle of the war leaving her grandmother a widow and her mother without a father.

These slowly emerging and deeply felt stories; being evacuated from Karelia, being sent to Sweden as a child evacuee and losing fathers, uncles, grandfathers to the war or to suicide were punctuated by, "I didn't have any trauma so why should I be here!" and, "I've heard all these stories before, what can we take from all this trauma?" I noticed that one speaker, sitting with her back to the group, telling us the stories were irrelevant, kept falling asleep. Another woman claimed that she had not engaged in the group because she was "unconscious" after a busy week. She then told us just before lunch that she had to leave early. The tense ambivalence that I had experienced all along was emerging more

directly and so was fear and prejudice. One woman said that she was appalled at the number of Russians in Finland and that none of them learnt to speak Finnish. Someone else pointed out, "But we don't learn Russian either."

Then we were informed, "Did you know that the Finns deported Jews to Germany during World War Two?" One person argued, "They weren't Finns and it was only eight people!" The air started to get very hot and almost on cue, another woman showed an image of Martin Luther King, saying, "The 60s was such a time of hope!" I felt a rush of anger and thought, "Here we are back with the powerful ambivalence we have been working with all along!" I responded with, "I'm not so sure! The 60s was also a difficult time. The Red Army Faction was violently drawing attention to the veil of silence that had been drawn over what their parents and teachers had been doing during the Nazi time. Not long after that Martin Luther King was assassinated, as were the Kennedy brothers around that time." This moment epitomised the "tug of war" between those who wanted to keep the past buried and those who wanted to talk about it.

Towards the end an example of the kind of gift that can become available in the large group emerged. One of the visiting Swedish women talked about how her father had responded to Finland's cry for help when threatened by the Russians during the Winter War (Ford Cooper, 2001). The only people who responded were the German military and some individuals like her father. She told us that he had not talked about his experiences so he had always been a remote puzzle to her. All he ever said was, "There are no heroes in war, everyone is afraid". Many of the Finnish people in the group responded with gratitude for what her father had done, which surprised her as she had never thought of him doing anything good. Her experience in the group led her to look more closely at who her father was. She subsequently discovered the medal he had received for this service and developed a new and more accepting view of her father.

## Thinking On

Patrick de Maré always said that it is necessary to learn to hate and stay in the large group (de Maré et al, 1991). Most people have an instinct to run away when they find themselves hating or being hated. This natural resistance makes large groups fragile instruments and difficult to maintain. Each time we met the group of people present was different but something of the foundation matrix persisted from one workshop to the next and wove itself through the changing dynamic matrix that developed as different participants shared their experiences (Foulkes, 1975). The process was similar to the way a weaver prepares the warp for weaving in the weft. My role was to contain and use the hatred induced in me and to stay with the difficult feelings. I provided the warp until I was invited back to enable another small piece of weft to be woven in.

In the last workshop, held specifically to think about transgenerational transmission of trauma, ambivalence about accepting the presence of the past in the present persisted. It also emerged more directly through the organisational planning as the number of sessions was reduced at the last minute without explanation.

Despite many doubts over the years, I maintained my belief that the unconscious transmission of trauma across generations was influencing the work of both the group

process and the arrangements for our meetings. My own history of growing up as a daughter of a refugee and an immigrant, where enormous loss was denied, left me very sensitive to denial of denial but it also helped me to stay with this process despite the interruptions. Trauma passed on from previous generations is usually disguised and denied. For years there are no words, just the silent and often deadly mechanism of projective identification. The next generation is left to manage painful feelings with unclear origins that were passed to them with an unconscious instruction “not to know and not to question”. As we know from the well-documented post-war history of the Shoah these individual experiences have massive socio-political consequences (Schlant, 1999).

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