DOI: 10.1002/ppi.1536

ARTICLE

WILEY

The lived experience of a psychologist activist

Dean E. Hammer

Antioch University New England, US

Correspondence
Dean Hammer, Antioch University New England, 40 Avon Street, Keene, NH, 03431, USA.
Email: dhammer@antioch.edu

Abstract

This essay reflects upon the role of activism for psychologists in these times and future decades. The author's lived experience as a transgenerational Holocaust survivor, prisoner of conscience, and clinical psychologist serve as the springboard to explore how psychologists can help to address the current threats to human survival. The article highlights the interface between the healing of individual and collective trauma. The transparency demonstrated in the exploration of the author's lived experience aims to encourage a parallel openness and vulnerability in attending to the collective trauma sustained in the twentieth century, the age of genocide. The article concludes with a proposal for a conspiracy of hope, in which psychologists can play a unique role as advocates for human survival.

KEYWORDS

activism, climate catastrophe, genocide, holocaust, hope

> Will the human spirit grow faster than intercontinental missiles with nuclear warheads? . . . This is the wager of our generation. (Camus, 1960, p. 246)

This special issue of *Psychotherapy and Politics International* is an invaluable opportunity to reflect upon my narrative in conjunction with exploring the role of activism for psychologists in the twenty-first century. This essay highlights a sense of urgency given the precariousness of our times. The exploration focuses on “what the values and practices of psychotherapy can bring to the dilemmas of modern times, this crossroads in the evolution of the human species” (Fay, 2016, p. 80). The threat of nuclear annihilation and the impending climate catastrophe, named as the apocalyptic twins (Lifton, 2017), represents a daunting challenge. However, we can win the wager of our generation if the human family grows beyond the Faustian bargain with nuclear weapons and the chronic degradation of the ecosphere. Psychologists have a unique role to play in this time of global crisis. The exploration of my narrative serves as a springboard to imagine a macro-scale psychotherapy

 © 2020 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

practice—one that can attend to the societal psychopathology manifested by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and the abuse of the planet's ecosystem.

At the age of 42, I discovered critical new information about my family story when I interviewed my parents to complete a genogram for a Family Systems course during my doctoral training. My father disclosed that some of my paternal family members "died in the Hitler thing." This revelation was a vital breakthrough, shattering the silence of my family trauma. The impact created a cascade of connections and new insights. The strong melancholic undercurrent that I experienced with my paternal grandfather made more sense. This unbearable family grief, never uttered, tremendously impacted the formation of my worldview and moral framework. My history of resistance against nuclear weapons now is more understandable. Unknowingly, my public witness to prevent the unleashing of a nuclear Auschwitz created solidarity with family members held captive in the concentration camps—rendering a paradoxical consolation during my jail time. The cascade of insights from unveiling my family trauma continues to inform the exploration of my lived experience and the intersection between individual and collective trauma.

My path to becoming a licensed psychologist was not a straight one. As intended, my studies at Yale Divinity School (YDS) grounded me in a spiritual orientation to counseling before my training in clinical psychology. Unexpectedly, three mentors emerged during my time at YDS and catalyzed life-changing experiences. Philip Berrigan shared his story of resistance to American militarism at a Yale teach-in in 1977 and invited me to join the nuclear weapons resistance movement. Daniel Berrigan (Phil's brother) taught a poetry course at Yale University in 1978. He exemplified the integration of spirituality, scholarship, and activism. Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and clinical psychologist, drew me into Christian spirituality as he taught pastoral counseling and celebrated the Eucharist. These three treasured teachers remain central in my cloud of witnesses, providing me with guidance and inspiration.

This path of many surprises led me to join the honored company of David Dellinger, who marked the way from *Yale to Jail* (Dellinger, 1993). He served three years in federal prison for his conscientious objection to the war in Vietnam after his studies at Yale. My participation in acts of civil resistance protesting nuclear weapons (1977–90) rendered a scope into the tyranny of the United States military-industrial complex, prison, and judicial systems. I have struggled to translate my lived experiences in jail into a coherent and meaningful part of my narrative. There were times when I wondered, "What's a guy like me doing in a place like this?" Admittedly, there continues to be a surreal quality in the memory of my time as a prisoner of conscience—a *strange privilege* to be a participant in history and not just a spectator. Activism for nuclear disarmament is a way to live true to the conviction that humanity cannot coexist with nuclear weapons. At some level, this part of my story is an inexplicable gift.

My endurance in miserable prison conditions is a powerful lived experience of freedom and dignity. Jailhouse experiences illuminated these two precious attributes deep within me. In the darkness of solitary confinement for a week and many months in various jail cells, I came in touch with an *élan vital*, an internal life force that was not under the subjugation of the prison system. "My dungeon of shame was transformed into a haven of freedom and human dignity" (King, 1966, p. 27). The peace community supporting my jail walk provided a second critical ingredient "to doing jail." Feeling the love of friends and seeing the growing movement to resist nuclear weapons was incredibly uplifting. This remarkable experience of freedom and dignity, combined with my social support network, enabled me to transcend the bars and barbed wire.

Given my rather unorthodox path of activism, translating my lived experience is challenging. Raised in Philadelphia suburbia, educated in the ivory towers of Trinity College and Yale University, and led to peace and justice work at the margins of our society—soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and prisons. These encounters jolted me into a new awareness of a disenfranchised population and their extreme suffering. What drew me to this sector of marginalized ones? The exploration into my lived experience has stirred several significant memories that shed light on this question. The immersion into scenes of the horror and brutality of the Holocaust during my childhood religious formation inscribed an emblem on my soul. While the concentration camp movies that

portrayed the piles of bones and the mass killings of prisoners were traumatic, this became a source of solidarity with those who are dispossessed. I still struggle with the anguish that cries out: "Why was this done to people simply because they were Jews and other minority populations?" My inherent sympathy for disenfranchised persons stems from my experiences as a transgenerational Holocaust survivor and my journey at the margins of society.

Rozmarin (2017) captures the challenge to decipher and articulate my narrative: "The work of the translator aims to uncover the scattered fragments, to help us restore our ability to tell our stories . . . to restore the truth to history" (p. 412). The revelation about my transgenerational trauma continues to haunt me. Attempting to make sense of the brutality of the Nazis' genocide and the threat of global annihilation due to WMDs has provoked great perplexity and angst. The awful death my family members suffered in the concentration camps and the dystopian aftermath of nuclear winter and climate catastrophe are dreadful and outrageous images to ponder. The melancholy transmitted by my grandfather still impacts my interpersonal and clinical relationships. The unharnessed outrage about weapons of mass destruction and potential climate catastrophe tends to overshadow the peacefulness of my activism. Attending to the fragments of unresolved grief and indignation is a critical task in order for me to be able to tell my story more fruitfully and illuminate the parallels between the Holocaust, nuclear warfare, and climate catastrophe. "A good and healthy mourning" process (Frawley-O'Dea, 2014, p. 607) is at the heart of the healing needed at the individual and the societal level.

The disclosure of my vulnerabilities demonstrates the importance of transparency in the psychotherapeutic process. There is also a significant interface between individual and collective trauma. The process of healing my transgenerational family trauma is interwoven with the collective healing of the genocide that permeated the twentieth century (Smith, 1987). The transparency that I am practicing in this exploration of my lived experience needs to be matched by the process of repairing the wounds of history (Salberg & Grand, 2017). Something happened in the twentieth century that made it morally, psychologically, and legally acceptable to commit mass murder (Rubenstein, 1978). The moral compass of civilization was shattered in the twentieth century, and brutal mass killing was normalized. Healing this moral injury depends upon a macro-scale psychotherapeutic process focused on transforming the genocidal mentality (Lifton & Markusen, 1990) that pervades the military policy of the superpower nations.

The malady of genocide threatens the survival of the human species. Young-Bruehl (2012) delineates a collective, cumulative traumatic stress disorder that undergirds this vicious cycle of genocide that has spilled from the twentieth century into the twenty-first. What is so haunting and horrific is that individuals are commissioned by governments or ethnic leaders to commit wanton acts of violence on a large devious scale. The technological development of weaponry has not only made mass killing more efficient, but the progression of WMDs surpasses the brutality of the Nazi genocide exponentially. Auschwitz was a legally constituted national event in German society, and the nightmare of Auschwitz will be reborn to unthinkable proportions if nuclear weapons are unleashed. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has recently moved the Doomsday Clock to 100 seconds until midnight. This Clock, created in 1947, was designed to warn the public about how close we are to destroying our world with dangerous technologies of our own making. However, in my experience a doomsday approach is not an effective method to motivate change. Overriding the fear created by this ominous admonition presents a significant challenge. The metaphor of a *jailbreak* is integral in my clinical casework, and provides a key perspective for my work as a practitioner-activist (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). From a narrative therapy orientation (White & Epston, 1990), a client presents with their dominant story of distress. Severe levels of psychological disorders create emotional imprisonment, cognitive distortions, and problematic behaviors. The jailbreak metaphor helps to guide the assessment process, which identifies areas that confine clients due to their dysfunctional thinking, feeling, and behavior. A primary goal of the treatment is to help liberate clients from their emotional captivity and maladaptive ways of coping with stress and adversities. A positive outcome develops from living one's "preferred story," a story of release from the presenting problems. As global citizens, we are held hostage to the threats of nuclear war and climate catastrophe. We need to develop and implement

a vision of liberation from these threats. Just as clinicians help clients reauthor their personal stories, psychologist activists (Nadal, 2017) can help to rewrite the human family's collective story—envisioning and facilitating release from the terror of WMDs and climate catastrophe.

Given the challenging odds in the wager of our generation, we require a conspiracy of hope to galvanize a transformation of global consciousness and action. The Holocaust, nuclear weapons, and the climate crisis are three forms of transgenerational violence that created collective traumas. Clinical psychologists have unique skills to treat these traumas in the global emergency room. We need to demonstrate the compassion and liberation that a psychotherapeutic process can provide at the macro-scale level.

Hope is a lived testimony that demonstrates the benefits of the *preferred story*. The proposed conspiracy of hope encourages a campaign to rehabilitate the global systems that perpetuate the threats of ecocide and omnicide. Just as I discovered the precious gifts of freedom and dignity in my jail experience, the global family can reclaim our humanity by renouncing the malignant normality of mass killing and ecological blight. We can derive hope from being creatively maladjusted (King, 1966) to societal psychopathology. This type of healing requires the care of an emancipatory psychotherapy practice for the global family. Camus' exhortation remains very poignant:

> Since atomic war would divest any future of its meaning, it gives us complete freedom of action. We have nothing to lose except everything. So, let's go ahead . . . it is better to have stood on the side of those who choose life than on the side of those who are destroying. (Camus, 1960, p. 246).

The human family can overcome the genocidal syndrome if we “win” the evolutionary challenge of renouncing the legitimacy of mass killing and the abuse of our planet's ecosystem. Psychologist activists have a vital role in the twenty-first century: to promote the abolition of WMDs and to foster ecological wellbeing. Our therapeutic skills can contribute to healing societal wounds and dysfunctions. This frontier is crucial to pursue as advocates for human survival.

REFERENCES

Camus, A. (1960). *The wager of our generation*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Dellinger, D. (1993). *From Yale to jail: The life story of a moral dissenter*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Fay, J. (2016). Psychotherapy and global transformation. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, *14*(2), 76–83.

Frawley-O'Dea, M. (2014). When mourning never comes: What happens when individuals, institutions, or nations fail to mourn after trauma. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, *50*(4), 593–608.

King, M. L. (1966, May). Don't sleep through the revolution. Ware Lecture delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly Hollywood, FL. Retrieved from https://www.uua.org/ga/past/1966/ware

Lifton, R. (2017). *The climate swerve: Reflections on mind, hope, and survival*. New York, NY: New Press.

Lifton, R., & Markusen, E. (1990). *Genocidal mentality: Nazi holocaust and nuclear threat*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Nadal, K. L. (2017). “Let's get in formation”: On becoming a psychologist–activist in the 21st century. *American Psychologist*, *72*(9), 935–946. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000212

Prilleltensky, I., & Nelson, G. (2002). The making of a critical practitioner/activist. In I. Prilleltensky, & G. Nelson (Eds.), *Doing psychology critically: Making a difference in diverse settings* (pp. 63–74). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rozmarin, E. (2017). The task of the translator. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, *27*(4), 406–413.

Rubenstein, R. L. (1978). *The cunning of history: The holocaust and the American future*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Salberg, J., & Grand, S. (Eds.) (2017). *Wounds of history: Repair and resilience in the trans-generational transmission of trauma*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Smith, R. (1987). Human destructiveness and politics: The twentieth century as an age of genocide. In I. Wallimann, M. Dobkowski, & R.L. Rubinstein (Eds.), *Genocide and the modern age: Etiology and case tudies of mass death* (pp. 21–39). New York, NY: Syracuse University Press.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.

Young-Bruehl, E. (2012). Civilization and its dream of contentment: Reflections on the unity of humankind. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, *32*(6), 543–558.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dean Hammer received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Antioch University New England (AUNE), his master's degree in religion from Yale Divinity School, and his bachelor's degree from Trinity College. He has taught in the clinical psychology department at AUNE since 2009 and practices as a licensed clinical psychologist in Vermont. He continues to pursue his special interests in social justice, practitioner activism, clinical supervision, and spiritually oriented psychotherapy.

How to cite this article: Hammer DE. The lived experience of a psychologist activist. *Psychother Politics Int*. 2020;18:e1536. https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1536