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The Scream and the Silence



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During the feedback session at the end of our conflict transformation training, two words were repeated by many participants: “Scream” and “Silence.” Both words referred to a powerful enactment of a terrible story from the Bible found in 2 Samuel 21, a story that was awful and healing.

I was in eastern Ukraine in the city of Dnipro (formerly Dnipropetrovsk, a Soviet city that was not on maps because it was the center of nuclear missile production). Dnipro is the center of an arc of eastern Ukraine, and though it hasn't been in the war zone of the ark around, it is the nearest place for people to flee, or in this case come from the war zone to a safe place for training. My co-facilitator was Veronika Voloshyna, a former student of mine at the Ukraine Evangelical Theological Seminary and a graduate of our 10-day intensive Training of Conflict Transformation Trainers. She is pastor of a small house church in Dnipro (we had her ordination after the training—another story!) and does counseling and peace-building training. We had done a two-day training two years ago. This time we repeated that workshop for new participants then added a three-day training with far more material for those from the two 2-day workshops.



Participants at our 2-day training in Dnipro



Our training group

We did the story of Rizpah from 2 Samuel 21 (you can catch it on my website in the training videos by [clicking here](#)), beginning with participants wrestling with the text. Then Veronika interviewed two characters from the story, participants entering into the role of first “Merab” (or Michal), a mother whose five sons were executed by David and the Gibeonites, and then “Mr. Gibeon,” a representative of an ethnic minority group which experienced genocide at the hands of King Saul.

The Silence was what the woman acting in the role of Merab presented to us. As Veronika tried to interview her she said nothing for such a long time. Finally she gave monosyllabic answers, looking down. Those in the room who had been living through the war with ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine supported by Russian “volunteers” and sophisticated military hardware knew the anguish expressed so eloquently in the silence of sorrow being expressed.

Then came the Scream. I have to back up to tell this part of the story. Before the groups studied the text I ask for a woman volunteer to help with a drama. Olena volunteered not knowing what she would play, but she had been tapped for this role not by me but by the Holy Spirit. She knew nothing about the role, and I knew nothing of her story. But the Holy Spirit knew it all and was doing a work of inner healing in Olena.



I share one of the cycles related to trauma

After the interviews and technical presentations about responses to trauma (which you can catch in the training videos on my website) we acted out the story. I played David, and with “Mr. Gibeon” we selected and “slaughtered” the 7 sons (and grandsons) of Saul. After I went back to my “palace” Olena came forward as Rizpah. She began in silence, but then this deep emotion came bubbling up—you could see it in her face, then she screamed as she came to her dead sons. It was an incredibly uncomfortable but riveting moment.



David meets Rizpah, the mother of the sons he had slaughtered

She acted out Rizpah’s vigil, a vigil that the Bible says lasted months. Finally David heard about her action, so as David I came and met Olena as Rizpah—an encounter of the grieving mother and the man who had ordered he sons murdered. We lived the intensity of that encounter to some degree, with the pain, sorrow, and hope etched on Olena’s face.

Together we “buried” the “bones” of those killed along with the bones of Saul, Jonathan, and others sons of Saul killed in battle. After this God brought healing to the land.

And God brought healing to Olena. She came to me afterward and said that this had been her work to do here. She is from Donetsk, the major city in the war zone. The battle for the airport in Donetsk had been one of the most ferocious struggles. Olena had bottled up all her grief, rage, and sorrow. That scream was not an act but was her opportunity to let it all out, and she did. She felt a journey of release and a step, a big step on her own journey toward healing. She later shared how special this moment, and the entire training, was to her.



After the Rizpah story participants did “people sculptures” to memorialize the war in Ukraine

I love doing this kind of training. It has such a rich value, and we see the appreciation for it from people coming from some of the toughest places. If anyone can judge the value of what we do, it’s those coming out of war and severe conflict. But time and again I see that my co-facilitators and I are not the leaders of the training team. The Holy Spirit is at work, often in ways we can’t see until the mysterious work of God bursts into our stunned sight. Such was what happened with Olena. We were witnesses to what God was doing through our training efforts, but God took it further than we ever could. We joined Olena in praise for God’s work in that training.

Peace,
Dan

P.S.–You can check out more about this story, trauma, trauma healing, and using these tools at my website: www.danbuttry.com.