In the current climate the issue of asylum seekers is highly relevant. It is important to distinguish between migrants, who have left their countries of choice, seeking to move towards a better future, and refugees who are fleeing away from great danger, even death. At the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture we are concerned exclusively with the latter, and indeed only with those who are also victims of torture.

Refugees risk losing connection with their roots and suffering all the concomitant psychological difficulties. Victims of torture brutally forced from their homeland are flung into a terrifying void, with no initial relational possibility.

From countries as diverse as Ethiopia, Iraq, Cameroon, Afghanistan, Iran, the Ivory Coast, Algeria and the Baltic Republics, our groups comprise strangers in the most profound sense. The thread connecting them is that they are all victims of torture.

The complexities of working with so many different nationalities in one group are enormous; their cultural and political backgrounds bear significantly on their intra-psychic life and can be replicated in the group. But vital though it is to retain an awareness of their personal psychopathology, the overwhelming event for each is the impact of their torture.

Central to my concern about imposing a Eurocentric western analytical model is a question about the devastating impact upon the psyche of man’s inhumanity to man. Torture seeks to annihilate identity and systematically destroy personality. It plunges its victims into a terrifying void, beyond theory or logic.

Bahman Nirumand quoted one prisoner: “The blows don’t just strike your body; they strike much more at your soul, your spirit, your reason. Pain and emotion bore their way through the entire body until they reach your soul, your ego . . . . screams come from the gut and push through to the throat, but they are held back by reason, self-consciousness, pride, so that you nearly suffocate. It is a struggle between body and soul . . .”¹.

After victims escape, they are likely to sink into a silence about what has been suffered, carrying deep within them their own terrible secret. It becomes virtually impossible for them to speak of what they have endured. A series of symptoms can follow: sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, depression, powerlessness, anger.

Should they achieve fleeing into exile, they are immediately beset with new difficulties, which can rekindle their trauma. In England a refugee can be detained in a camp, full of all too familiar uniforms and barriers. Often he finds himself in degrading circumstances, poor accommodation, destitute. Inverting normal justice, where one is assumed innocent until proven guilty, he is now suspected to be an economic migrant, and it is his task to prove otherwise, that his life back home is in danger.

A further complication is that he has to recount in minute detail to the authorities, the very experiences he has tried so desperately to banish from memory. The slightest discrepancy in his testimony could lead to refusal of his asylum application. Small wonder then that he might be reluctant to engage in the “talking cure”.

Crucially, what sort of modification in approach might be appropriate in working with this client group? As practitioners, how do we go about healing a broken spirit?

¹ At the Side of Torture Survivors (p xii).
The Natural Growth Project

The fundamental precept of the Natural Growth Project (NGP) is to use nature as a metaphor for life, and as a way of healing and reaching the soul. The cycles of life, death and rebirth are evident in the sowing of seeds, the growth, harvesting and dying back which nature provides. In all the strangeness that our clients encounter, the one language common to us all is that of nature; everywhere in the world, the earth and its cycles remain constant.

At the project we work across language; although an interpreter might be used during assessment, once a client begins with us the work itself becomes the language, though there may be people in the group who help with occasional translation. Ostensibly far from a Western analytic model, as therapists we work alongside our clients, constantly seeking links between external nature and the inner landscape, combining horticultural work with psychotherapy. It is important to state here that our objective is not to create a beautiful garden: the work undertaken is always directed by the clients’ material.

Entering a new group is much like entering a new country, and people come with all the usual relational difficulties, magnified many times by their experiences. Although their stories may never be explicitly discussed in the group, they all know that they share the common experience of torture. As they work with the landscape, slowly they find cohesion in a common object outside of their trauma. In time they begin to thaw; now they can start to trust again, slowly finding friendship and mutual purpose in shared tasks.

Many are housed in tall apartment blocks, estranged from the earth. A client wept when he first touched the soil, explaining it had been five years since he felt the soil in his African village. Although many clients come from agricultural backgrounds, we also have professionals who have never engaged with the land before.

Many torture survivors begin to relate again through connecting with the seasons. Planting seeds means investing in a future - this is sometimes too difficult for some. Failure can be unbearable, but can also provide access to feelings of loss and isolation suffered in exile. Slowly their difficulties will emerge; inner turmoil can be expressed in over-watering a plant or brutally cutting back a shrub. The work demands constant vigilance and attention, or key pointers to an internal landscape can be lost.

The Natural Growth Project has two main schemes; the Allotment Project and the Remembrance Garden.

1. Allotments

We have two sets of allotments in London. These are inner city areas of land, rented at low cost to individuals for cultivation.

The refugee experience is to have the ground pulled from under one. The NGP provides clients with a piece of land roughly 4m x 50m, as a step towards a new grounding, and a way into a new community.

Once we see that a client has engaged with the land, we will help them to build a shed. This is either in kit form from a garden centre, or built from materials he finds. Either way, this becomes a group task; we remain in the background, facilitating the group in doing its work.

We provide support, a therapist assisted by an organic gardener visiting only once a fortnight to work with clients for the whole day. Beyond this, clients spend as much time as they wish on their land. They therefore need to be fairly robust, both physically and psychologically.
Our work with clients may be individual or part of a group task. Lunch is a large and often noisy affair, with clients bringing their own traditional food to share. Every six weeks a joint meeting allows all members from both allotments to be together. Both of these median groups are of course full of many cross currents, providing an interesting opportunity to reflect on the groups’ dynamics.

On allotment days we work alongside clients, digging, planting, cutting back, whatever is required, continually talking with them, seeking to find connections with their inner world and exploring effects of their brutal uprooting.

For example, a new client complained to me of how weeds kept coming up no matter how well he thought he had cleared them. I suggested that they were like Saddam Hussein who had wrecked his life, still dominating his nightmares and his moments of deep depression. Speaking at length of his time in prison, he began to understand his need to tackle his weeds repeatedly, until their force is reduced, similar perhaps to his terrible memories. After this session he picked some lavender from his plot, saying he wanted to take some of the calm he felt on the allotment back into his home, where he otherwise quickly sinks into depression.

As there is no brief given to a client, much is revealed in how each chooses to use their plot. For example, one created a fence around his land composed entirely of old windows; this shaky barrier reflected his inner fragility. Once the mayor of his home town, his pompous demeanour gave few other clues to his true state. After some time he voluntarily removed this fence, leaving only a small area enclosed by his windows, forming a type of greenhouse – a more appropriate use of the glass.

Clients’ choice of what to grow can be very revealing. There is much heartache when plants indigenous to their countries, such as aubergines and peppers, do not flourish in the wet English summer. This provides the opportunity to talk again about what has been lost, about how much home is missed. Eventually it is understood that there needs to be an adaptation in what can be grown.

While clients work on their plots, the experience is essentially one of sharing life within a community, of learning to co-operate again. Victims of torture suffer a complete loss of confidence; the task of tackling an allotment plot and bearing responsibility for its development does much to restore this.

For some, the task is too daunting, they are unable to engage with it, and they leave. I was working with very damaged young man, leveling the ground for his shed. As we did so I spoke with him of laying the foundations of his new life. To suppress weeds, we laid old carpet on patches of his land. Now he described how he had lain hidden under many layers of carpet in an old wagon, bleeding and seriously injured by his torture, as a friend drove him to escape and exile. Did he feel unable to engage with those memories, was the thought of a new life too painful? He left, and resisted all attempts to contact him.

A challenge on the allotments is learning to relate to the host community. Frictions develop over differences between how our clients see their plots – as a place to relax with all their family – and the local people, who see them essentially as places to quietly cultivate their crops. This can lead to conflict and overt racism, material we can usefully work with.

Sometimes sheds are vandalised, quickly triggering feelings of danger and unsafety. When this happens English neighbours have provided great support. Advice is offered, and kindness shown towards these outsiders. Real connection with the local community is much valued by our clients, who see this as a measure of their integration.
2. Remembrance Garden

More fragile clients need to be in an environment over which we have more control. We are fortunate to have offices in a house in North London, with a large outside space. This is known as the Remembrance Garden: a place honouring memories of many clients of the MF. Frequently small circles of stones placed by clients mark a sacred space.

Groups run here begin inside, but move as quickly as possible into the garden to work with material brought by the group.

Some clients are too frightened initially to move beyond the patio immediately outside the room; they work here until they are ready to move into the garden. A client’s first response on entering the garden is crucial, revealing much about his inner state. One woman told me she saw no colour, only black; slowly over a year her sense of colour returned, as she worked in the garden and with her memories and her acceptance of her terrible experiences.

Plants are highly evocative, providing an instant link to the past. We often see a look of painful recognition as someone stoops to smell a flower; and then can perhaps speak about some aspect of their past. Others in the group can then join in; it could take years in a conventional setting to reach this point of memory in a group, particularly with this degree of trauma.

The Healing Garden is only for medicinal plants. An ex-client now runs a herbal clinic once a week for clients of the Medical Foundation, but sometimes the group will decide to tend this space, often arising out of an individual’s need for healing. Similarly a decision may be taken to work on clearing the paths of weeds if someone is struggling to find their way forward.

Early in her work with us, a client discovered a conifer which, while looking healthy from one angle, had been burnt away inside. Speaking almost no English, she indicated to us that this was how she felt; seemingly fine in her external appearance, but dead inside. This brought many tears, but one day she noticed tiny new green growth appearing on some of the burnt branches. This was a turning point; she began to have some hope and interest in the future. Thus we can work sometimes almost without language.

In a recent departure from the normal garden activity, a group became involved in making a small sculpture. A member brought in a large wooden template of a foot, requesting that it be put in the garden. Thinking about the lives of everyone in the group, it had seemed to him that enormous courage was needed to take the first step. So this foot would represent the first steps everyone needed to take to change their lives.

Almost all of our clients have suffered the additional trauma of the death or disappearance of family members. Unable to openly acknowledge this and to mourn, they remain trapped in a state of suspended grief. A member of the group began, while working in the garden, to plait strips of drying iris leaves together. She developed this into a wreath; with many tears, she told the group for the first time that she had lost her twin sister, her father and her mother within a very short time, and that she had never been to visit their graves.

Constructing this wreath with the help of the group, she hung it on a wall, turning it into a kind of memorial shrine. She said it was there for herself and others who had similar problems; people could add flowers to it, and sit in private contemplation. She herself did this throughout the winter, but the regularity of her visits decreased as she slowly accepted the deaths of her family and mourned them openly. Finally she asked for a photograph of the wreath, to send back to her country. In time, the physical presence of her wreath will become irrelevant.
3. Winter project – Tree of Life

Knowing that in the depths of winter our clients become depressed, unable to work much outdoors and connect with nature, we have developed various winter projects. The most recent was the Tree of Life, staying close to the natural inspiration which sustains us all. Clients were encouraged to work with textiles, producing work reflecting their current state.

The resulting work provided fascinating testimony to the creativity and tenacity of the group. The fabric pieces became in some sense transitional objects, through which clients could express their feelings, and then move on to a new place. When complete, it was hung on a branch of a tree which had fallen in the garden during a storm. It will eventually be permanently mounted, a quiet testament to their courage and an inspiration to others.

Concluding, I can only say that the trauma victims of torture have to endure, reaches so far beyond the realms of our normal experience that I have learnt to approach this work with great humility and flexibility. Some of the groups I work with at the MF are run on conventional group analytic lines. Today I have presented you with a very different model. This allows groups of severely damaged clients to relate to life through the universal metaphor of nature.

I end with lines written by Hugh Lewin after seven years in detention:

When I get out
I’m going to ask someone
    to touch me
    very gently please
    and slowly,
    to touch me
I want
    to learn again
    how life feels.

Bibliography


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2 Poets to the People – South African Freedom Poems (p. 50)