

Workbook Questions: Writing of Torture, Trauma Experience

by Margaret Bennett and Jennifer Maiden

Sampler:

Preface

Expanded Sample of Dialogue

Sample of Six Questions

Preface

Workbook Questions: Writing of Torture, Trauma Experience is designed to facilitate survivors of trauma and torture in writing of traumatic experiences, even if complex or untold, by using clinically planned questions to create a space where the survivor's sense of self and identity can remain securely intact.

This workbook and its questions were developed by the clinician, academic and researcher Margaret Bennett, who, for a decade, was the Director of STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors), and by the acclaimed author Jennifer Maiden, who was their Writer in Residence, and has conducted over a thousand other literary workshops dealing with traumatic material. This book includes a far-ranging, informal discussion between Bennett and Maiden on the questions' genesis and the theory and clinical experience underpinning them. To retain the fast pace, formal punctuation is limited.

Maiden has noted the similarity between a professional firefighter extinguishing flames by focusing initially on the fire's outskirts, and the way in which this workbook's questions address traumatic experiences, by asking first about experiences on a trauma's outskirts - past emotions, events and sensations - but ultimately



asking about survivors' current situation, feelings and insight into what would help them thrive.

This workbook is designed for use by groups or by someone working on their own.

The original questions were devised over two decades ago for workshops of South American women torture survivors. It was suggested that sheets of paper could be given out separately to individuals or group members, should the whole set of questions not be given out at once. It was also possible for two people to work together, with one person writing down what the other person dictated of their experiences. It was stressed that trying to remember dates, geographical and historical details should not impede the describing of the experiences. The survivors were asked not to feel limited to the space made available, and to write as much or as little as they wanted for each section.

On the level of artistic expression, Maiden has observed that answering the questions in this workbook enhances writing skills, as the focus of the questions on visual impression, taste, smell, physical closeness and sentiment is also a literary technique which can be utilised to engage a reader.

Asked whether, from a literary perspective - since the sense of space and time intrinsic to a narrative link the past, present and future - the placing of experiences into narrative space and time could link the past, present and future for survivors, allowing them to look at traumatic experiences in the context of a past and of a future away from the traumatic experience, Maiden said she thought that this was so.

Whilst the genesis of the Torture and Incarceration Questions as such was in a therapeutic context, it is possible to use the questions in this workbook to write the reader's own story and experiences. The authors suggest that if you choose to do this - take time to answer all the questions to which you are drawn, and that it may help you to write about the sights, the sounds, the feel, the smells, and the tastes. They add that you should make sure you have space to write in a peaceful way. Sometimes writing about traumas can



trigger other memories. If this happens to you, the authors reassure that you should know that it is normal. If you have any distress, they suggest that you may also choose to phone a counselling helpline. Contact numbers for these are available at the back of this book before the suggested reading list.

Katharine Margot Toohey
Quemar Press

Sample from Conversations between Margaret Bennett and Jennifer Maiden in *Workbook Questions: Writing of Torture and Trauma Experience*

JM: I remember that it was over twenty-five years ago, and I had been Writer in Residence for the Torture and Trauma unit for some time. You were the Director, and we had completed a series of workshops with Southeast Asian men. They were likeable and highly articulate as personalities, but it was very difficult to prompt them to write fluently about their intense torture and trauma experiences. We eventually achieved our goals, but in a moment of comic exasperation, I begged you, 'Next time give me South American women singing freedom songs!' Magician that you always were, you provided these. They were warmly engaging women, who were eager to assist in the project. I had always continued my own separate workshops, which often included trauma survivors, who wished to describe their experiences, and from these I had also developed methods of facilitating memories that overcame inhibitions. I was lecturing, too, in the journalistic aspects of professional writing, and formulating techniques to show my students how to delve deeper and reach better results when they were interviewing. All of this coalesced into our discussion of what questions to ask in the South American workshops. Primarily, the best way of breaking through inhibitions about writing on personal trauma was to ease into the subject from reassuring peripheries. The first questions had to be easy to answer, on physical subjects that affirmed the sense of self from childhood, or from experiences non-traumatic in themselves. As torture experiences are specifically designed to destroy the sense of self,



our first task was to restore it enough for the survivor to begin to transcend the trauma by describing it.

MB: The idea for the writing group had come to me as a result of reading about ways writing a secret can improve health. I had also instituted processes in my role as Executive Director at STARTTS - that each staff member had 3-4 hours a week to work on a project of value to the organisation, requiring skills different to one's main role. As my role was managing the organisation, and I had a previous background in group therapy and counselling, I would sometimes work on projects allowing me to use this skill. I had read some of the work of James Pennebaker from the University of Texas about ways writing could improve health of participants in his research. I discussed with Lucy Marin, our Spanish-speaking bilingual Counsellor, whether she thought there would be women she worked with in the centre who would be interested in a group therapy project incorporating art and writing, and she confirmed there were several women interested. So a project was born. Recognising that for many torture survivors, the act of storytelling had many potential uses - some with risks - some without - I incorporated some key guidelines and fundamentals into the project... some of the principles we incorporated into the project were - the women could write on their own, they did not have to tell others the story in the group, they could write in their own language. We also went to extensive lengths to find a translator whom the women knew and trusted. The fact that most of the women who attended had had a lengthy relationship with the service, the people and the counselling they had received, meant there was a basis of trust in the organisation and myself.

JM: Of course, the questions we formulated were not just for the South American workshops, but were designed for use in other circumstances to disinhibit torture and trauma survivors. One of the most interesting things about formulating these questions for the South Americans, however, was that, previously, I always had described an aim of my workshops, whether for STARTTS or the numerous other workshops for academic and community employers, as being to improve the literary skills of the participants. This was definitely the case with my earlier STARTTS workshops for you with the Cambodian, Lao and South Vietnamese men. Whilst one of the possibilities was for them to write about their traumatic experiences, there was no goal that they access and context any intense T&T material. Of course, they often did so, but my technique was to keep this within the safety net of developing their literary expression, as I would do in any other workshop. This was my agreed goal with them and as at least two of them were already counsellors this seemed to safeguard the sense of dignity that was vital in their cultures. Trauma revelations were ostensibly secondary. As this was the case, there was



no reason for you to be present at those workshops. We knew from the beginning that you would choose to be present at the South American workshops. The method would be that we devise the questions and the women would answer them in Spanish, they would be translated and I would see both versions, and then I would discuss them with the women in the workshops. There would be no literary focus. The writings would be described with the women's permission, and I would discuss the writings face to face with the writer, but they would not be open to any critical group discussion, although the group would be present in a supportive role. To focus again on the nature of the questions: while the initial ones are about sensory experience and family details, we have begun with the sense of sight (what did parents look like) as we perhaps judged this the easiest and most accessible entrance point for description? I think that may be because it has elements of both the personal and impersonal: distancing but yet specific and particular, and allowing for both 'safe' commonly used phrases and an independent observation that starts to revive the sense of self in childhood?

MB: I remember we debated where we should begin. What should the first writing pieces be? While you held the literary focus and your past experiences in writing groups, I held my knowledge and experience of wanting safety, wanting comfort, wanting it to be easy, not arduous for the participants. We knew the women had various levels of education. Most had not finished high school. We wanted them to feel a sense of their story being important. That was what we wanted. But what did the women want? They wanted to write. They wanted to speak. They wanted others to see. I think we were in my home in Lane Cove when we came up with the idea over lunch. Undoubtedly, our children were playing in the background. I know we had both spoken of our own trauma experiences. Never in any great depth but, somehow, we knew. Then we began to talk about - how does trauma affect people, and I remember saying something about 'it's always explained with senses'. It is never just a story of 'I got hit', then leaving it to the imagination. No, what I had noticed working with torture survivors was that, if the stories did come, they were graphic in metaphor and detail. Images that, as I listened, I could almost see. Our children were laughing, I think they were playing with My Little Ponies at the time, and I think you suggested - 'Let's ask a childhood question, a question that can conjure memory of times?' - and so it began. I remember we rattled those questions off pretty quickly. When I asked you, 'Why describe people?', you said, 'If they describe people, we get to know the women and restore their sense of self in the way they knew and remember things. The smell of your mother's cooking.' In the groups when the women were writing



their pieces, they never once asked what we meant by the questions. They just wrote...

JM: One of the problems with tribal safety is that it can work in the reverse. This is revealed often by memories of school. Those children who would have wanted to belong but felt they were, or who actually were, excluded because of cultural, economic or racial reasons, or lack of academic expertise, or even lack of proficiency at games or supposed lack of social skills. The tribe can require the existence of outsiders - whether within or outside its ranks - who it can ridicule and demonise. Regarding this and moving ahead to later experiences of torture, there are torture victims who feel they have been tortured by an identified enemy and torture victims who have an additional, special problem, in that they were tortured by those they regarded as belonging to their own side. In both these later cases, of course, there is a deliberate attack on identity and a desire to instil guilt in the victim... Our next question, *'What was your first job?'*, is almost deliberately an easy factual one after the intensity of the previous ones, but the following, *'Were you happy?'*, is a monumental question, even if it is just related to a first workplace. One of its purposes here is to reinforce the sense of self by stressing that it is important whether the participant was happy at this job: that the participant's role was not just as a cog in an economic machine. Also, the questions have now emerged into issues of society as a whole. I think your observations about the disruptions and problems in normal work practices caused by political persecution is very pertinent. How severely traumatic do you think the disruption of sense of self by disruption of work practices, as such, can be?

MB: I think one's sense of self is so often connected intimately with work practices that losing the familiarity of work one loves, or even work that creates routine in one's day and life can be traumatic and unsettling. Wasn't it Freud who said something along the lines of one needing work and love? A poor paraphrasing, probably, but something like that. One of the points made at the Harvard Trauma and Recovery training I did in Italy some years ago was the importance of work to give meaning to life and by doing so helping people to overcome their trauma to some extent. In one of my work areas, rehabilitating war veterans, we see it in veterans who have difficulties after transitioning, not only because they have lost their mates and their connections with Defence, but also because many cannot transition well into civilian jobs. I have had several in counselling sessions talk about the irritation of working in 'civi-land', and the fact that people don't follow orders. Not sure how all that relates to your question, but it seems to me what we do work at, what we have worked at, and what we no longer work at, impacts our



sense of who we are. For the refugee women who had no work, they were able to have a solidarity with one another around their roles as wives and mothers - or so it seemed in the group we had. Yet, our processes with the women seemed to give them a new lease of life. The act of creating some meaning for themselves through their story and writing, and the act of sharing and being witness to their own story - I believe were profoundly healing and important tasks.

JM: Yes, Simone Weil said something about work being the medium by which we translate the imagination into reality, and I'm remembering also Keynes' idea that money is the medium by which we translate the present into the future. I think this also applies to work. There is a desperate sense in some people suddenly unemployed that they have lost their connection with the future. I think it is interesting that, when intelligence services, such as the CIA or those that tortured the South American women, plan to destroy a public persona they concentrate on that person's personal reputation and on their professional opportunities. I'm thinking of people like Paul Robeson and Jean Seberg, whose livelihoods were destroyed. It is axiomatic, of course, that Global Capitalism requires a level of unemployment to maintain low wages, but it can also be suggested that loss of work is a general way of intimidating dissent, as in the cases of academics who lose their jobs because of their opinions. In our context here, the action of writing about their own experiences offers participants a form of work that re-establishes their links to the future. The act of writing about work is, therefore, easier because it, in itself, takes place in a new, benign work situation. Having established an increasingly confident equilibrium, we could then move even deeper by asking about the participant's marriage. I think I should remark here that one of the things I remember about that is how surprising the facts about other people's marriages usually are. Tolstoy said that all happy marriages are the same and all unhappy ones are different, but it seems to me that most marriages are absolutely astonishing in their individuality, if not in their downright eccentricity. Once participants relaxed a bit, for instance, they often discussed complex histories involving more than one partner. But, in surviving torture experiences, one partner could also become a symbol of reassurance and endurance. Viktor Frankl, of course, observed that those who survived best in concentration camps were those with a sense that the experience had meaning. I'd also point out that sexuality is so profound a force that this meaning often takes the form of conceptual dialogue and conceptual reunion with a partner. The consequential question about the appearance of the partner was very important, therefore, as it established the physical incarnation of that reassuring concept, and could apply to the past or the present. Did you find



that there was also a conflict between the ideal of the partner preserved in a stressful situation and the everyday reality of the partner in post-stressful life? I'm thinking of the marriage difficulties experienced by veterans, for example?

MB: I think Pauline Boss' work on ambiguous loss is extremely pertinent to your questions about idealising the other in relationships, especially when people have extended times apart... she defines ambiguous loss as having two main contexts: the first is that the person is physically present but psychologically absent - as may be the case if someone has an alcohol or substance abuse issue, or the person may constantly overwork and be absorbed at work while at home, or one of the partners has Alzheimers. Her other scenario where ambiguous loss may be present is when the person is physically absent but psychologically present. I am thinking here about veterans, asylum seekers and refugees. The person is not with you physically but psychologically is your whole presence... I suspect that behind most ambiguous loss the theme of 'waiting' may be consistent for many people. Waiting for the return of the other, waiting for the ending of what is keeping the person present but absent and vice versa. So, for veterans who are away - families do struggle with keeping psychological aliveness, then often, when the person is home from deployment, the person's thoughts may be on where they have been rather than home. I'm generalising, of course... In thinking through the questions we have been contemplating so far, I am aware our next round of questions focus more specifically on torture, imprisonment experiences. Our questions have been grounding people in very real memories which provide comfort and connection and context before we focus on the more challenging areas for them to write. Of course, research is now showing the importance of going slowly into trauma stories, despite some psychological processes demanding the story be told straight up. However, the sensitive and skilled practitioners I know help people to see their strengths before going into any trauma stories, even though it is the part that one feels the most shame and guilt about which needs to be released in the telling and witnessing. Often what we think may be the most shameful or guilt-producing part of a story I have found is often unrelated to what clinicians might think could be the worst part of a story. For example, I heard once about a man imprisoned and tortured with electricity. For him, the worst part of his torture was being sent some baby clothes of his new-born child sprinkled with baby powder. His wife had wanted to share this sensual experience for him but it enraged him, as he realised what he had lost and that he was not able to be with his wife and child. Of course, there may have been many other reasons for his anger and for finding this the worst part of his torture experience, but it has always cautioned me to never assume what is 'the worst' for another. I



often wonder, too, whether our own sense of 'the worst' also changes through life as memory changes and consolidates and re-consolidates... Suffice to say - the next stage of writings face the participants with writing what they do or don't want to know and tell. Always hard, I think, to tell the most difficult. Writing somehow, I think, holds it out to arm's length, where the voice we are hearing is the one in our own heads, and not the sound of our actual voice telling things. This is why some trauma theorists like Peter Levine insist that trauma can only be healed by knowing what happened in the body, and not just in the story as one tells it.

JM: It is interesting that you make that distinction between the spoken and the written word - that the written word may sometimes incarnate more, be closer to restoring the physical experience. Perhaps that is because it involves the writers speaking to themselves and not creating a new relationship with a conversation partner. It is the fact that people are so intrinsically relational that is their salvation, of course, but it is also a way of establishing endless new personae which can be a way of evading restoring the private authenticity that was damaged by the experiences of torture and trauma. I agree with you about the psychological problems caused by waiting. I wrote a poetry collection called *The Violence of Waiting*. And of course forcing people to wait is by itself one of the basic methods of abuse. I'm thinking, for example, of how this was even practised on Assange in the Embassy... I wondered how much the situation you describe about the baby powder wasn't organised with the imprisoning authorities. Families of torture sufferers are often encouraged by the abusers to bring in tantalising domestic 'comforts' to torment them and weaken their resolve not to inform and be released. Perhaps those physical objects also demolish the interior ideal the prisoner tries to retain of loved ones, by trying to prove that the interior ideal isn't real in comparison to these new physical events. It seems so important that our final bridging questions before we begin with the torture and trauma subjects are about the appearance of the spouse and children, and the current whereabouts of the parents. These are questions that are easy to answer - even if in the negative if there are no such relationships, or the relationships are much more complicated - and which link the past and the physical present, to position the trauma survivor in a place where they can approach the memory of what was inflicted upon them. I've found that there are two ways of strengthening a survivor in preparation: one is building their self-confidence by positive reinforcement and the other is to restore their sense of their own authenticity. The two things can reinforce or conflict with each other, which is why the survivor can be so angered by praise. Once we enter the difficult descriptions, it is vital that the survivor can address the actual nature of the suffering and its ongoing effects in terms of



harm to the individual personality, and not just a clinical recounting of abusive processes. Do you find that evasive generalising of their experience by the sufferers, even if sometimes necessary as a recovery position in the process, is ameliorated by preparation with questions like the ones we devised?...

MB: I think the issue of questions, as such, is not a simple one for trauma or torture survivors. Think of the myriad of ways a torture survivor must answer questions, including questions during their processes of torture, which were often in contexts of impossible choice - such as when a nun is asked, 'Shall I rape you or murder your priest?'. Impossible choice. This is one of the real psychological abuses. Somehow the victims have become implicated. They made a decision for which they were partly responsible. Who can they blame? So, then, they have ongoing questions for themselves: 'If I had done x...maybe y wouldn't have happened?'... I think the act of writing responses to our own questions had already been established by the way we worked with the women, and by the trust built, as well as the freedom to write whatever they wanted and in whatever way they wanted. This meant, I think, less fear about the questions to come. The act of talking out loud to someone or to oneself in writing is profoundly therapeutic, I think... On a general matter, I think we also need to remember that the subtlety and sophistication of torture practices have continued to evolve. I often say how creative torturers are in their cruelty. There are so many, vexed questions about who does what to whom and for what purposes. At one time, people would only rarely criticise the many Special Forces around the world about their processes of 'extracting information', but Abu Ghraib did shake the world up, as we discovered it was those on our side doing it to other people - the water boarding, the insults, the degradation. Yet, did this stop torture in the world? It didn't. Regarding the workshops, I know some of the processes we implemented in the group therapy part of this project were also meant to facilitate ways in which the women felt more comfortable about the writing they were going to do... One of my favourite book-writing mentors, Natalie Goldberg, talks about the importance of witnessing. Our stories and experiences need to be witnessed. For the torture survivor this can be a double-edged sword, I think, for often torture occurs in a social context. During the initial ordeal, there may be other victims hearing your screams, witnessing your pain, being part of your torture and trauma story. Of course, later, these events can also lead to a different co-experience and a bond with others. We are torture survivors, or trauma victims or survivors, or child abuse victims or survivors. In this shared event, people hope because of shared meaning. However, each event is also unique to the survivor and to their own experience. I think this uniqueness is what the act of writing supports... Writing about one's own torture experience - what



the guards looked like, what things they said to you - these questions... gave each woman the opportunity to write the same story (they were responding to the same questions), but they were able to have the story in their own way. An act of reclamation of their own experience.

JM: When I was referring to 'evasive generalising', I was thinking not of dissembling or fabricating a story, but of a survivor describing the torture or trauma experience in overly objective, formal or clinical language, which depersonalised the experience. For example, I just remembered how in another, different workshop, an Asian lady described having been beaten by her parents, and said, 'And the belt would...!', as if the belt were the abusive agent, not the parent. Survivors describing state-inflicted torture will often tell you in technical detail how it was done in general, but shy away from describing their individual experience of it, and the physical, psychological and emotional results in them. On the subject of veracity, I find it important that the survivor be reassured of several things, including that complete accuracy about details and sequences need not matter, but that their story in essence will be regarded as true, and that it can be part of the agreed process to help them access that truth as much as possible. That last possibility can sometimes be very important, as they can be grateful for a calm, investigative atmosphere, where ascertaining what actually occurred is significant to you and to them. One of the effects a torturer desires to achieve, of course, is confusion, and dispelling any such confusion is a useful process for the survivor. The process of writing down experiences can aid clarification and prioritisation of events, because it allows time for reflection. Also, as you've indicated earlier, this chosen prioritisation may not be in the order one expects. My Kokoda Trail survivor wanted to explain to me that one of the results of the cruel incompetence of the Army was that the Army assumed that New Guinea was a tropical climate, and only provided tropical uniforms, so that the men remained freezing cold in the New Guinea Highlands. He went on to describe unnecessary death and suffering, and that the enemy were forced to resort to cannibalism due to their own lack of supplies. He told of his belief that he and his men were then sent to the Islands so that they would perish and not tell their story of the Kokoda events, but it was vital to him that I understand the importance of the wrong uniforms, so that all other negligence would be credible, too. On another issue, when you are discussing how adept torturers are at involving the victim in a feeling of complicity, it is worth noting that the intense sexual nature of torture - you mention Abu Ghraib - is also incredibly problematic for the victim. Several profound attacks on self-respect can be involved in torture, including the destruction of one's trust and confidence in one's own sexuality, the destruction of one's self-esteem



about withstanding pain, the destruction of one's trust in one's own ethical integrity. I think asking what the survivors discussed with their gaolers has an extra significance in this regard: the question accepts that there was normal human communication in the traumatic milieu, that the survivor need not adhere to over-simplistic versions of good and evil. The physical descriptions of people involved in the incarceration process and of prison conditions can also be helpful in this regard, as well as serving the other recounting purposes. And, of course, the questions we've reached now are set directly in the midst of the torture and trauma environment...

MB:...I do agree with you that many survivors do not see talking about what happened as being as difficult as clinicians think it will be. Bessel van der Kolk talks about how the part of the brain that tells the story is the journalistic part of the brain, it is not the part of the brain that heals the story. At least, that's my summary of notes I took at his talk some years ago. I think we didn't just ask people to write about their torture experiences, we also put these questions into a more 'normal' context. For example, when we asked people, 'What did you talk to your torturer about?', we placed the context of writing about torture into that day to day, normal style that had been happening up until that point... Of course, for many people who are torture survivors and childhood abuse survivors - in fact really for any trauma survivors - there is frequently more than one story. In our context, there were also the stories that had to be told about how one left that situation - what are the things people first notice when they leave the confines of a prison or incarceration, and does that meet the fantasy that assisted them to survive their experiences? Then, of course, the stories of moving on, travelling through - whether that is metaphorically or physically, like moving to a new country, or a new place to live, or a new home to live in. I am constantly surprised in my work with adults and children about the number of conversations that never happened around traumatic events. I don't mean so much the actual events but the queries children often had, such as: 'I don't know why we moved there then, just that dad/mum/the dog was no longer there'. I come back often to the absolute personal response to trauma events...

JM: It seems to the observer of the traumatised to be such an urgent thing, finding a remedy for each individual trauma when one witnesses it, and when one fears both the short-term and long-term consequences. There is a psychological condition called 'decompensating', which simply means that a dysfunctional person can't compensate in themselves for adverse experiences, but remains transfixed at the point of the loss. But another problem can be that efforts to compensate are erratic and self-damaging. As you'll have observed often, many survivors of concentration camps and prisons try to balance their



deprivation by extreme sensual gratification afterwards - such as deliberate multiple repetitions of over-eating, drug-taking or sexual use or abuse. Even on an emotional level, one trauma survivor described how he would compulsively and frequently fall in love and then discard the current love object ruthlessly once erotic brain chemicals subsided. When I was first considering the nature of trauma, I developed - as you know - a theory (not a demonstrable thesis) that one of the results of trauma was to destabilise sufferers so that they changed levels compulsively in their personal and professional hierarchies. They were often either remarkable for their abjectness or for their ascendancy, and these could alternate rapidly. I thought this might be because the processes of abuse and torture absolutely de-legitimise authority as such, and that faith in stable hierarchies established in childhood (even that of parent and child) are also destroyed by the process. That is not inevitably a bad thing, of course. It may be that finally being confronted by an undeniably damaging hierarchy may no longer allow the sufferer to accept rationalisations about previous negative behaviour by authority figures. One interesting thing about trauma survivors is that they seem just as likely to question all things as to subjugate themselves and accept all things. One of my suggested solutions to hierarchical insecurity was to actually find outlets where the survivor could practise reversing positions in a hierarchy in benign situations like art or sex. In sex, there can be quick alternations between being in control and being helpless, and in art: the artist can change between being in control of the milieu and being suspended in the reactions of the audience. These are still potentially very dangerous emotional situations, though, and again all concerned should be aware of that. As you say, there are a myriad of possible remedies for trauma, just as there are a myriad of sufferers. How much do you think the *process* of discursively analysing and suggesting solutions with the survivor is helpful in itself, including sometimes the use of their writing? Even from a hierarchical point of view, does this provide a balancing sense of equilibrium, as both the participants are equal in trying to investigate the nature and effects of the damage - in which they are both, in their own way, experts, but both also at a loss? Is there an equality in solving mysteries? I was particularly intrigued by your reference to the unanswered questions about unspoken absences. Is part of the soothing process finally to try to figure out what the hell did happen to mum/dad/the dog? To restore some of the power over information and certainty, or at least over debated likelihood?

MB: I am frequently intrigued by the ways people need to visit and revisit throughout their lives events they have experienced - as though there is never any settling. Of course, there is the other extreme, too. People who forget



entirely details of events and need to rely on other's stories of what happened. I think this latter can be destructive at times, as the person is relying on another's authority for their own experience. This can lead to someone else's perspective overtaking their own inner knowing. This is when 'body work' may sometimes come into its own. Working with the clients' breathing and helping them become reconnected to experiences in their own bodies. In looking at the healing modalities of many cultures, it intrigues me how similar are many techniques for overcoming trauma. The use of the breath to centre, sometimes the re-experiencing in the body of felt sensation and emotions and other feelings, the establishment of some ritual to 'remove' the problem - whether this is by a 'purging' process or by employing a witch doctor or shaman, and then a re-interpretation and re-explanation of the earlier trauma. In some cultures, this may be explained as karma: your soul's journey. In our western methodologies, we focus so much on the talking, though it is clear in the last twenty years or so how much 'the body' is now also the focus in trauma treatments. The work of Janina Fisher, Babette Rothschild, Peter Levine, Bessel van der Kolk all come to mind, and many others. Perhaps it is through trauma work that we sometimes move as clinicians into more holistic frames of reference. Let's re-explore the questions we used. In the capture and torture and prison sequences of questions, we focused on the ordinary. What did you eat; what were the smells like; who else was there; what did you talk about?... In recognition that not all torture survivors were imprisoned, we used similar questions for camp experiences. These could be re-education camps, as were common in Laos, Vietnam or Cambodia - but the questions equally can be used for people who were in refugee camps or border camps, prior to resettlement in other countries. I am sure those on Manus and Christmas Island, or possibly those First Nations people with histories in camps, could equally complete these questions. This says, I think, that, despite the different circumstances, there are huge similarities across the world and across cultures about what can and does happen in these interned contexts. Again, these questions were a focus on the day to day. The ordinariness of some questions re-ignites memory. I have often worked, too, with clients from different cultural backgrounds who have found it extremely difficult (even when they were fluent in English) to speak in English about some early childhood memories, or to find the words to tell experience. I ask them to tell me the story in their own language - knowing I don't understand a word they are saying. A sensitive clinician, I believe, 'gets' the emotion and depth of pain in that telling. After this, I have found the person can speak in the present in English more easily. To return to the questions we devised, they then progress to focus on the participants getting to Australia and their first impressions, and



again the sensory experience of the taste of food. Personally, I was almost ten years of age when I arrived in Australia, by boat. A month-long journey with my mother and younger sister. The day we arrived in Australia - in Melbourne - my father waiting on the dock, Easter Sunday. My mother asked me to go to the ship's post office for any mail. I came back to where she was sitting in the ship's restaurant, handing her a letter. She opened it, read it and began to cry. Her father had died the week after we left Scotland. My father, though, met us delightedly with: *'They have milkbars here. We can have milkshakes. There is a refrigerator where we are going to live. Wait till you try watermelon.'* My response to each of these pronouncements was: *'What's that?'*. Coming from a supposedly English-speaking background, with no recognition that I had grown up learning and speaking Scots, there was still so much unfamiliarity. For many, many, many years I would continue to sleep at night with heavy blankets, for sleep meant the need for weight on my body. The deafening sounds of cicada summers drowning thoughts, and the freedom Australian children had here to bike-ride and play outside all day, were unfamiliar to me from inner city Glaswegian greyness and concrete slum dwellings. To return to the subject of hierarchies, I have been thinking of late about the world of work and the ways many employment settings create traumas for people, as they negotiate hierarchies that are also open to abusing people, to treating others contemptuously, or to organisational changes that occur without full disclosures or clarifications. How in our work spaces do we make sure we do not implement processes mimicking the lack of choice and authoritarian directions similar to other human abuse contexts? This I think is particularly relevant when we look at how many companies and organisations and bureaucracies are headed by those with military backgrounds, who may have imposed abuse situations on others at other times in their lives and careers. I don't mean to suggest this is true of everyone - it is simply a question in my mind regarding the more common slaveries accepted in the work force.

JM: Our questions (which we were always aware had much wider uses than the state-implemented torture or internment fields), of course, allow the participant to focus back on the body, whether that is to facilitate verbal description or discussion, or to encourage the participant and/or conductor to focus on 'body' symptoms as such. One thing that makes me judicious about continuing focus on the body in the session is that it can tend to disempower the participant if the counsellor becomes the interpreter of the physical symptoms for the participant. Babette Rothschild's method, for example, is sometimes to explain to the participant why their body symptoms are at odds with their spoken words, and to elucidate from them what hitherto under-rated traumatic events in their history might cause these physical effects. I think that



in everyday, rather than clinical, discourse there is more of such contrast between the spoken or written word and body language - such as someone saying they don't want more of a food when their physical being looks eager for it. Interestingly, however, my own experience of participants specifically recounting their traumas, including through discussing their writing of it, is that their physical trauma symptoms tend to be compatible with the events they are describing or are about to describe, and don't need any intervening explanation. Reaching verbal exposition is their desired method of gaining power over their lives, including the physical residue of the trauma, and they see the conductor, even if providing a second critical faculty, as a means to that end, and someone who can be redirected or instructed by them. A focus on healing direct physical symptoms is admirable, but I think it can lessen attention to the overall social effects of the trauma. Our questions were designed to allow the participant a safe re-incarnation of the experience, including the earlier life of the survivor, and to re-integrate it into its social significance on a personal and general level. I can see, however, that it would meet certain traumatic needs for a benign authority figure - represented by the counsellor - to replace the haunting malign or betraying authority figures who have tormented the survivor, especially when that counsellor offers sympathetic not accusing explanations. One of my best compliments from a workshop participant, however, was that I 'didn't impinge', and in regard to that our questions were meant to restore verbal autonomy. Many physical methods, whether interpreting the body's behaviour or actually treating it by physical healing, involve the participant yielding power to a practitioner. I am always concerned that any hierarchy established in addressing trauma will result in the trauma survivor re-defining, over-idealising or rejecting that new hierarchy as well. Carrying forward reassuring habits need not be an undesirable symptom, of course. Your poignant account of yourself as a child immigrant, needing the weight of blankets to sleep in the Australian cicada summer, because that weight reminded you of frozen Glasgow, is a case in point. Your necessity was using the incarnate to preserve the sense of self in the wider potential incarnation of the seemingly more free-moving Australian environment. Again, the uses of taste and food data are ambivalent. Your father attempted to use food references to reassure, but to the child they increased bewilderment in the already confusing context that being obedient and useful by fetching the mail had resulted in the mother's sudden grief. Your widening the discussion on to 'the slaveries of the workforce' is very valuable. There, we're looking at military-style corporate structures, sometimes designed by people with military or defence-agency experience. These people have often been subjected to some sort of trauma themselves, and been trained



to repeat it. As more and more jobs are provided by the military-industrial complex, the problems in this corporate or organisational structuring become more difficult and prevalent. As you say, one of the most powerful characteristics of these hierarchies is the use of secrecy and the non-lexical (or the illogical lexical) to maintain power. Again, simple, but complexly contexted, logical questions such as ours can counteract those forms of continuing trauma. Your comments also make this individual and specific within the structure: 'How in our work spaces do we make sure we do not implement processes mimicking the lack of choice and authoritarian directions similar to other human abuse contexts?'. Whilst it is often axiomatic that we need to humanise the workplace, I was wondering how often you have actually encountered hierarchies that continued to welcome this process once it might represent any sort of threat to their power? I'm excited that we are discussing the nature of trauma as related to power. Do you think it can be redressed through less rigid power structures, so that social impotence is not compensated by the ability to torture? The bitten dog that bites another dog? And how often is it just a deliberate political technique? And I was thinking once more of the problematic but important theories of Wilhelm Reich: how teachers such as A.S. Neill and Sylvia Ashton-Warner were inspired by his methods to become non-punitive and non-authoritarian. Does this fit in again with your references to various prevalent techniques regarding 'the body'? ...

Sample of Questions:

From *First Questions for Survivors of Camps and Incarceration, and for Torture and Related Trauma Survivors*

What food did your mother cook best, and how did she make it?



From *General Trauma Questions*:

What are your very first memories of the place you lived in?

How old were you?



What did your mother or primary care-giver look like?

What did she or he do that made you happy?

What did other people do that made you happy?



Counselling helplines

Lifeline *Telephone Number: 13 11 14*

Beyond Blue *Telephone Number: 1300 22 4636*

