

WE DON'T SPEAK OF FEAR
Large-Group Identity, Societal
Conflict, and Collective Trauma

Edited by

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and M. Gerard Fromm***



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* * *

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Introduction

M. Gerard Fromm

A few years ago, three International Dialogue Initiative colleagues—two from Israel and one from Palestine—met informally with a senior diplomat working with the Israel–Palestine negotiating team. At some point in the conversation, one colleague asked the official what happened in the formal negotiating discussion when people on either side talked about their fears. This very experienced diplomat seemed surprised. “We don’t speak of fear,” he said, later adding that he could see the potential usefulness of trying to address fear during negotiations, but that the team did not know how to do this. As we shall see throughout this volume, powerful emotions, like fear, and powerful defenses against these emotions are at the heart of intractable conflicts. The IDI, in its practice and now in this volume, works toward a framework for understanding these intense feelings, so that they can be brought into speech. Some of the concepts behind that understanding and some of the “know how” for talking are to be found in the pages that follow.

The IDI was founded by Dr. Vamik Volkan in 2007. Dr. Volkan is a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst whose study of societal conflict was galvanized by two moments: the first when his friend was killed in the civil war in Cyprus; the second when Anwar Sadat, then president of Egypt,

said that the trouble between Arabs and Israelis was “seventy percent psychological.” Volkan, in the midst of a career in clinical practice, immersed himself in learning and in projects related to international conflict, over many years working closely with Turks and Kurds, Israelis and Arabs, Estonians and Russians, and a number of other groups in conflict. At the University of Virginia, where he held a medical school professorship, he founded the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction, through which to organize this work and share the learning from it. That learning came to include a theory of large-group identity, of the intergenerational transmission of trauma and of societal regression. It also included a methodology called the Tree Model, which maps out the back-and-forth dynamics of working with enemy groups, the outcome of which prepares the ground for future negotiations.

When Dr. Volkan retired from the university, he joined Edward Shapiro, the medical director of the Austen Riggs Center, and me at Riggs’ Erikson Institute in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Austen Riggs is a psychiatric hospital, devoted to the in-depth psychotherapeutic treatment of seriously troubled people in an open therapeutic community setting. The clinical data from this work—the generational stories of trauma, the intimate struggles and risks within the treatment relationship, the unlocking of creative potential—is unusually rich, and sadly all too rare in today’s mental health world. We felt it was essential that we bring this data into conversation with others. So we founded the Erikson Institute, which I directed for many years (Fromm, 2022) and which included, among other things, a program of Scholars-in-Residence, one of whom was Dr. Volkan.

Erik Erikson, for whom the institute was named, was one of the most important psychoanalysts of the mid-twentieth century. His own history, as the illegitimate child of a German Jewish woman and a Danish gentile father, whom he never knew, had predisposed this sensitive young man to the silent fault lines in a person’s identity and to a restless search to know his true origins. Trained in psychoanalysis—with only a high school degree—Erikson contributed enormously to our understanding of developmental crises throughout the life cycle, to our knowledge about the effect of social context on how that development unfolds, and, perhaps most importantly, to a recognition of the power of identity disturbance in the young adult.

Here is Erikson sixty years ago speaking to us today. For example, about radicalization:

Such vindictive choices of a negative identity represent ... a desperate attempt at [the adolescent's] regaining some mastery in a situation in which the available positive identity elements cancel each other out ... [I]t is easier to derive a sense of identity out of a *total* identification with that which one is *least* supposed to be than to struggle for a feeling of reality in acceptable roles which are unattainable ... Many a late adolescent, if faced with continuing [identity] diffusion, would rather be *nobody*, or *somebody bad*, or *indeed dead*—and this totally and by free choice—than not quite somebody. (1959, p. 132)

Or about destructive polarization: “Where the human being despairs of an essential wholeness, he restructures himself and the world ... an absolute boundary is emphasized ... nothing that belongs inside must be left outside, nothing that must be outside should be tolerated inside” (1959, p. 133).

When I spoke with Erik, late in his life, about what he hoped for from the Erikson Scholar program, his response was characteristically humble, but also stunning from such an accomplished man: “Only that a promising person gets a real chance: the one that I had when I came to Riggs.” Erikson was not interested in our enshrining his theory but rather in our holding to his stance, a stance in which he kept one foot, so to speak, securely in the clinical situation: the situation of disturbed relationships, of overwhelming feelings and ingrained defenses, of trauma and identity crisis, with its potential for resolution in creative and destructive directions. But Erikson placed the other foot in anthropology, history, or some other field to see what might be learned in that boundary area. In a notoriously isolationist profession, Erikson made psychoanalysis interdisciplinary, as though agreeing with the observation of his friend—the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—that “Nothing worth doing can be accomplished alone.”

In mid-career, Vamık Volkan took the chance to step into the field of societal conflict and attempt to contribute to its understanding and resolution. He brought people from various disciplines together to

work at this, and many of his concepts—like the way in which a society’s “chosen trauma” gets organized as part of a compelling, but deeply defensive, large-group identity (Volkan, 2013, 2020)—are extremely important successors to Erikson’s. He was a perfect choice to be our Senior Erikson Scholar, and for several years, Vamik spent snowy winters in Stockbridge, writing a book every year. With the help of a seed grant from the Dart Foundation, he also created the IDI, which, at first, was a project of the Erikson Institute. While Volkan had long since fulfilled his promise as a clinician, theoretician, and practitioner in the fields of clinical work and international conflict, his taking up again the leadership of an organization studying societal dynamics gave a new generation the chance he had—and used so well—back in Virginia.

The IDI is now an independent group of about twenty members from various parts of the world and various professions whose task it is to develop psychological understandings of international events and conflicts, and to consider possible interventions. It’s actually a network of support, learning, and consultation for the work that individual members carry out, whether that be Dr. Volkan’s teaching, or Lord John Alderdice’s consultations to governments, or Robi Friedman’s and Regine Scholz’s large-group interventions in areas of conflict. We meet at least yearly to share reflections and develop our thinking, summaries of which are available on our website at www.internationaldialogueinitiative.com.

At our annual meetings, we also try to learn about and contribute to whatever issues our host city is dealing with. In Berlin, we heard from NGO and clinical leaders about their efforts to bring mental health assistance to refugees. We took up a related topic in Vienna and also heard about and consulted to informal dialogues between professionals whose Middle Eastern countries were in serious conflict. We developed a Volkan Scholar award to recognize the next generation of psychologically informed societal conflict workers, and joined them in the study, for example, of the process of radicalization and of the traumatic legacy of World War II in Eastern Europe. Throughout our work, we pay attention to the particular emotional obstacles to a society’s progressive movement, especially in its dealings with “enemy” groups. We hold to a “How are they right?” stance—that is, from what sociohistorical context might a given phenomenon be understood?—while “listening with

a third ear,” so to speak, to the particular emotional urgency beneath the surface.

We also try to use the process of our discussions—during which each of us functions inevitably as an informal representative of our own nations—to generate hypotheses. I recall a discussion in which members from Iran and the US became increasingly stuck in a heated and repetitive argument about Iran’s nuclear program. No one else intervened, or even participated at all, until a female professor from the UAE said with feeling to the man from Iran, “Don’t you realize that in a nuclear conflict we would be collateral damage?” This plaintive comment unlocked the dialogue and seemed to permit other representatives from Middle Eastern countries—all men—to say, “Yes, we would be too.” Finally, what felt like a defensive silence among the “brotherhood” had broken, allowing more personal speech, including expressions of guilt from Israeli members for their country’s role in the conflict. Quietly, the US faded out of its regressive inter-group role as the “big man” and necessary enemy.

That it took a woman to break this dynamic—and a guest at that—was striking, which led to a hypothesis about the role of gender in negotiating this regional conflict. This idea gained some support when a female professor from Istanbul said passionately, “Who gave us this name, ‘Middle East,’ anyway? That’s not how I see Turkey.” This second protest by a woman, now about the traditional role of being named by someone else, joined that first plea to profoundly shift the dynamic and to open a dialogue that had seemed closed off behind the silence among the men. How to understand that silence and how to understand the role of women in breaking it were next level questions.

This use of group dynamics to develop societal hypotheses comes in part from work in what are called group relations conferences, first developed at the Tavistock Institute in London. In my experience, these conferences function, among other things, as societal MRIs, illuminating, in a given moment and at a visceral level, the currently prevailing dynamics within that society. I recall conferences in which, for example, Northern Europe’s turn toward nationalism was suddenly evident, or in which Israel’s struggle with irreconcilable identity elements was right there in front of us. More importantly, these dynamics were available for examination because they had been allowed to come into a learning

environment, in which a sturdy and trustworthy framework made intimate, even risky, conversation possible. The IDI includes learning environments of a similar sort among its interventions.

In recent years, the IDI has begun a training program, initially at the request of an experienced negotiator who felt that something “clinical” was missing from his own training. To the degree that past trauma plays an active role in current conflict, embattled groups could indeed be said to be “ill” with intense feelings and irrational reactions, even though the individual participants, of course, are not. It’s this “illness” that needs “clinical” understanding, without which negotiations and other interventions may go terribly awry or simply lead to exhaustion and futility. Participants in conflict resolution work inevitably and largely unconsciously bring these troubles with them, with some degree of hope that they will be acknowledged, contained, and understood. This is the focus we bring to our training workshops, one of which uses a case conference model to illuminate societal dynamics. We include in each workshop the three basic elements of psychoanalytic training: didactic lectures, application to cases, and self-reflection groups, the last of these extremely important for members’ visceral understanding of large-group identity in their own lives and in the lives of those they work with.

Indeed, the understanding of large-group identity at a personal level is a core aspect of the IDI’s regular meetings as well. Its members have come to know each other over the years. We have spent informal time together, adapted to local customs, encountered the unforeseen in the various places we’ve met, been exposed to each other’s personal and national histories, and visited each other’s families. Our dialogues have deepened our learning about who we are to ourselves and to others. And we have inevitably learned to face our reactions toward the “otherness” within our own group—toward not only our members’ differing values and points of view but also to the language and habits of thinking that are as much a result of the group’s interdisciplinarity as its internationality. The chapters that follow were mostly written by those of us involved, broadly speaking, in psychology, but others were written by IDI members whose expertise includes political science, sociology, history, journalism, and the law. It’s our hope that the challenge this may present to the reader will be offset by the exposure to new information,

new perspectives, and the opportunity to explore some of the ways that psychological concepts are being brought to an understanding of real world conflicts.

One of those horrific conflicts has erupted since this book was written: the brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It is not at all clear when and how this destruction will end, but it is all too clear that its pain will be deep and lasting. There will be lessons to be learned—including, once again, the way that historical trauma plays out in the life of a people and its leaders—and disturbed relationships to be slowly, painstakingly rebuilt. That is for a future we have not yet reached. For now, many of us are doing what we can to support Ukrainian clinicians in their work with traumatized patients and in their efforts to prevent trauma with vulnerable children.

A few years ago, an IDI intervention in Northern Ireland began with an informal communication from one of the participants, who told us, during a coffee break, of a tattoo she had seen on the shoulder of one of her clients, a young girl whose father had been shot during the Troubles: “Bullets don’t just travel through skin and bone. They travel through time.” The reader will learn more about this intervention in a later chapter. For now, we will simply note that this wrenching, volatile, but also binding truth—this core statement of the “clinical” trouble—is something we in the International Dialogue Initiative think about a great deal. That thinking is the core of this book. The truth in that young woman’s tattoo is a truth about traumatic experiences that happen to a family, but also to a society and to the large-group identity that has shaped that society unconsciously over long periods of time. It’s also a truth about the way that trauma plays out between generations and between countries, and, in one way or another and in one place or the other, it’s a truth that animates all of the chapters to follow.

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