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Armand Volkas Keynote Speech

(Members of The Living Arts Playback Theatre Ensemble open Armand Volkas's keynote presentation by publicly naming their cultural identities and articulating the feelings that come up in response to this act. The ensemble improvisationally responds to each offering with a sound, movement and word fluid sculpture. Using other elements of the Playback Theatre form, The Living Arts Playback Theatre Ensemble responds to the ideas and emotional content of Armand's speech throughout his presentation.)

My name is Mary Elizabeth Saudargas. I am an American of Northern European and Lithuanian descent. What comes up for me when I say this is an awareness of the combination of both privilege and disadvantage from which I come.

My name is Merry Beth Ross. I am a Jewish woman. When I say this I feel proud, but I am also aware that people make stereotypic assumptions about me.

My name is Maria Enriqueta Gonzalez Barron. I am a Mexican-American. When I say this I feel lucky because of the added dimensions that living in two cultures gives to my life and sad because one of my cultures is considered so much less than the other in this society

My name is Victoria Antoinette Dello Joio. I am an American lesbian whose heritages are Jewish and Italian (with some Arab background). What comes up for me when I say this is that naming my cultures still feels risky and that it is only in the last several years, after a lot of inner work that I've come to feel that this mixture might be a strength instead of a liability.

My name is John Chung. I am a Korean. What that means is that day in and day out, I have to make the effort to understand you, because you may not make the effort to understand me.

My name is Christine Joy Kalb. I am an American of Scandinavian and German descent . . . mostly German. What comes up for me when I say that is . . . it's always been easier to say the Scandinavian part, because even now, more than 50 years after the end of World War II, when I say "German," (a lot of) people equate it with "Nazi."

My name is Armand Volkas and I am a Jew

I am Jewish

I am a Jewish American

I am an American

Je m'appelle Armand Volkas et je suis Français

I am French

I am the son of Polish and Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust survivors and Resistance Fighters.

It is an honor to have been invited to share my work with you, as well as my vision for our profession. But I cannot do this without sharing some of my personal story, for my work with cultures in conflict and my personal story are deeply intertwined.

I was born in France to two remarkable people who had, somehow, managed to survive unspeakable humiliation, degradation and trauma with their dignity intact. I absorbed their story through osmosis, through my mother's milk, through their silences, through the flood of stories, sense memories and affective memories poured onto my plate each evening at the dinner table. I swallowed these stories whole. Whether I chose to take on their story, or whether I was chosen does not matter at this point. The fact is that their stories are within me. They are part of my very fabric. I can choose to ignore them, which I do, and need to do, in order to live my life. But the images of heroism, fear, degradation, humiliation and death cannot be erased from my mind. What I can choose is how I interpret their story and transform it into constructive action in my own life. My work as a drama therapist, helping diverse cultures integrate a legacy of historical trauma, has been a part of my attempt to master and accept what I cannot erase or change. I have sought to use my historical wounding to inspire acts of creation and acts of service in myself, and in the clients with whom I work.

My work with historical trauma is about a search for meaning. It is about memory and remembering. It is about sharing personal story and being witnessed. It is about how trauma is passed from Generation to Generation. It is about working through and integrating the complex emotions that arise when we face history in a personal way. It is about exploring what happens when the personal and collective come together----when one person's story becomes the story of an entire people. It is about grief and mourning. It is about remembering and honoring the dead. It is about acknowledging and owning the potential perpetrator in all of us. It is about building bridges between cultures. It is about cultural and national identity and self-esteem, for we all have a need to feel positive about the "tribe" to which we belong.

My father was born in Lithuania. Driven by the anti-Semitism that he experienced and the economic and social injustice he saw around him, he became an activist. In 1936 he joined the

International Brigade and went to Spain to fight against Franco, the fascist dictator. At the end of the Spanish Civil War, he returned to see his family, which was to be for the last time. He learned after the war that his entire family had been forced to dig their own graves and were then murdered by the Nazis. In 1942, at the age of 26, he volunteered to parachute behind the lines in White Russia and organize resistance. Of the 12 people who parachuted, he was one of only two who survived the descent from the sky. He was a partisan for a year organizing resistance in the Jewish Ghettos. He was arrested as a Jew and deported to Auschwitz. He survived the initial selections for the gas chambers and was forced into slave labor. He searched for his lover who had fought with him in the resistance and had been deported before him. He learned that she had taken one look around Auschwitz, and had chosen to throw herself against the electrified barbed wire rather than face life in the camp. He joined the underground in Auschwitz and was part of the group that blew up the crematorium. Only three people ever managed to escape from Auschwitz. My father was the one who devised the plan to help two of those people to escape. One got to Moscow and the other to London, but no one believed their reports of unimaginable horrors.

My mother was born in Poland and experienced terrible anti-Semitism in her youth. She left Warsaw and came to Paris in the early 1930's with her first husband seeking a better life. In 1940, the Nazis marched into Paris. Pregnant with my half brother, she escaped to the South of France to give birth to him. She then returned to occupied France where all Jews were forced to register by the Nazis. Her husband, who had joined the French army, had become a prisoner of War. She joined the French resistance, smuggling guns and leaflets and helping Jewish children escape to Switzerland. She was almost arrested by the collaborationist French police but jumped from a two-story window and escaped. She dyed her hair, changed her name and her identity papers and continued to do her clandestine work. But she knew that her days as a resistance fighter were numbered. She gave my brother, who was then 2 1/2, to a French family in Normandy and, soon after, was arrested by the Nazis and taken to Drancy. She was beaten and tortured to give names of other resistance fighters. My mother was then deported to Auschwitz with a group of women and ended up on the infamous "Block 10" where Dr. Josef Mengele and Dr. Klauber performed sterilization experiments on women like human guinea pigs.

My parents met in Auschwitz concentration camp. My father worked processing the leather goods of the people who had already been gassed. He heard that my mother needed boots. So he smuggled them to her. In the midst of the horror around them, their spirits found the resilience to love.

In the death marches that followed Auschwitz, where inmates were moved from camp to camp, my father, half-dead, ended up in Buchenwald where he was recognized and nurtured back to health by a German political prisoner who had fought with him in Spain. My father was liberated in Buchenwald April 11, 1945 by the American army.

My mother, who had been transferred to many other camps after Auschwitz, escaped into the woods on April 15th, which she considered her liberation day. My mother made her way back to France and found my brother alive. The French family in Normandy she had left him with had hidden my brother and protected him during the War. Her first husband, who had also survived the War, and my mother were reunited. But 5 years and Auschwitz between them proved too much of a chasm and they divorced.

After the War, my father was a man without a family and without a country. He came to Paris looking for my mother, where they met again and chose to reconstruct their lives together. I was born in Paris after the War. Wanting to leave the blood soaked earth of Europe behind them my mother, father, half-brother and I moved to the United States to start a new life.

How does one work through a legacy like this?

PLAYBACK FLUID SCULPTURE

It was theatre that gave me a way to begin to address the existential and identity questions I struggled with as a result of my legacy. After graduating with an MFA in theatre from UCLA, I created a theatre piece with other post-War Jews of my generation on the legacy of the Holocaust. I began to feel that the greatest revenge against Hitler would be to create new Jewish culture. So I created an experimental theatre company in Los Angeles that explored Jewish culture and values through theatre. At the same time, in the mid-70's, sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors in the US began to discover each other and compare our

experiences. This was helpful at first, but after a while, I saw that the children of survivor support groups were only serving to perpetuate our victimization. I was interested in transforming my victimization, not wallowing in it. I began to wonder about the Germans of my Generation. What were they thinking and feeling? Were the children of perpetrators struggling with their legacy like I was? In 1975 I began working as a drama therapist in a psychiatric Hospital and at California Institute for Women at Frontera where the Manson women were incarcerated. I wanted to understand the perpetrator in all of us. Is it tamable? If so, then how? In 1986 I was asked by a public defender to work with a 21-year-old man who had murdered two adults and an 18-month-old child with a knife. Over the course of a year I worked intimately with this man, and in so doing, I immersed myself in the mind of a perpetrator. Using drama therapy I went with him into the moment he took the knife and stuck it into the bodies of his victims. I was driven by a need to understand him. I wanted to know how someone could dehumanize others enough to torture them, rape them, or kill them. I testified on his behalf at his death penalty trial and in the end the jury, when interviewed after the sentencing, said that it was my testimony that humanized this “quote” “ monster” enough to save his life.

After working with this man for more than a year, I felt compelled to continue my work with other perpetrators. It was almost a spiritual need. I felt driven to understand the evil behind the Holocaust and knew that the closest I could get to working with Nazis was to work with their children who knew them intimately.

In 1989, I invited seven children of Holocaust survivors and seven children of the Third Reich to spend several days together exploring the legacy they carried from the War. I led these groups through a series of exercises in which they enacted each other's stories and dreams, explored specific memories and dilemmas, and created rituals to help each other find some closure with particularly painful experiences. We argued. We yelled at each other. We drew. We painted. We created poetry. We created characters. We grieved. We held each other. We played together, reclaiming childhoods that had been lived in the shadow of the War. At the end of the workshop, what struck me most were the deep bonds that had been formed. Something profound and transformative had taken place. There was a feeling of redemption. I realized this work was very powerful and that I could make an impact on the world. I had found my life's work.

Playback Fluid Sculpture

After this experience, I conducted multiple workshops in Germany and the United States on the legacy of the War. Over the next several years my work evolved. In France, I began to work with the legacy of French Collaboration with Nazi Germany and the Algerian War. I have brought together Palestinians and Israelis, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans on their legacy of World War II, African Americans and European Americans on the legacy of Slavery, Blacks and Jews on their frayed alliance and Deaf and Hearing Cultures. I will soon be organizing gatherings with Native Americans and European Americans on the legacy of the genocide of Native American people.

In “Healing the Wounds of History” workshops, when people gather to do this work they have the opportunity to transform the feelings they have inherited, so that they are no longer imprisoned by them. The cycle of rage, shame, and guilt is broken. People feel less burdened and depressed, more able to manage difficult cross-cultural interactions in the world. Very deep bonds are forged.

The transformation that occurs profoundly affects the participants, but the influence of their work together doesn't stop with them. The work also provides social therapy for the larger community. It ripples out, changing perceptions and providing a powerful model for dealing with racial injustice, cultural hatred and genocide. There has been no model available for how to integrate a history of perpetration. When these things happen, people get entrenched in hatred and a desire for vengeance. There aren't models for how to hear each other, work through rage, or access goodwill when you still want revenge. No one has taught us how to reach out, to grieve, and to remember. If we don't learn how to do this kind of healing, then conflicts will only escalate. If we don't work through these deep hurts and tame the potential perpetrator in all of us, the human race is doomed to destruction.

Part of what I do is to bring this work out into the public through film, public performances and commemorations. I do this in order to show people that this kind of healing is possible. I'm saying that it can be done. It is possible to move from being entrenched in hatred to being allies, and here are some possible steps to do it:

The first step in bringing cultures in conflict together is breaking the taboo against speaking to each other. Often there is an invisible barrier preventing contact. Speaking to the

"enemy" is often perceived as a betrayal. But when two polarized groups break the taboo and engage in honest dialogue, they can begin to work through the layers of unresolved feelings they carry about each other. I work with the emotional pioneers who pave the way for others to follow.

The next step is humanizing each other through telling our stories. When members of cultures in conflict listen deeply to each other's stories and hear each other's pain, they begin to care about one another. Their feelings of empathy and friendship become more powerful than the historical imperative to hate each other. Drama therapy, Playback Theatre and Psychodrama are powerful tools in the art of role reversal. They help to create double binds which participants must resolve. How can I hate this person and have empathy for them at the same time?

When there is enough trust, I move into a phase in which we explore and own the potential perpetrator in all of us. In order to reconcile, people need to acknowledge that under extreme circumstances, we all have the capacity for cruelty. Accepting this truth is the great equalizer. It levels the playing field.

The next phase is moving deeply into grief. Grieving together and giving each other permission to grieve is essential. People carry their parents' and grandparents' and their ancestors' pain, and until that pain is grieved fully, the legacy continues to be passed on to the next generation.

Another step is to move towards creating performances, rituals of remembrance and integration. Groups in conflict create commemorative rituals and performances to publicly acknowledge the complex, difficult history they share. These rituals provide a way for people to channel their feelings in an aesthetic form. These public presentations serve to extend the healing effects of the reconciliation into society by touching the lives and consciousness of others who did not participate in the workshops.

The final phase of this work involves making commitments to acts of creation or acts of service. When people carry a legacy of historical trauma one of the ways to master it is through acts of creation and acts of service. This is done through sharing stories, creating poetry, art,

theatre and transforming the pain of their past into beauty. Or they need to channel their energy into service: working with political refugees, helping survivors of rape, or doing other work that helps to end injustice.

In 1995, fifty years after the end of the War, I made a pilgrimage to Auschwitz. I saw Block 10, where my mother had been operated on. I visited the gas chambers. I walked around the camps. In Birkenau concentration camp, I wandered around the place they call “the burning fields.”

At a certain point in the War, there were so many transports bringing in Jews that the gas chambers couldn't kill them fast enough. So they created huge piles of bodies and burned them for weeks on end. What struck me, wandering around the burning fields, was the fact that they were alive with the most beautiful wildflowers that I'd ever seen. I was struck by the way nature was able to transform such horror into beauty. This spiritual reality motivates my work.

Playback Theatre Fluid Sculpture

My parent's stories of heroism and survival became allegories with messages, values and lessons for me to live my life. From their experience I learned that :

In the face of injustice and oppression it is important to take action.

I learned that even in the face of overwhelming odds it is important to hold on to hope and resist. I learned that there can be no political solutions to the ills of humankind until we understand the nature and the needs of the human being.

We live in extraordinarily frightening and dangerous times. We need innovative solutions to the social, cultural and political issues that face us. We as drama therapists have powerful tools and with these tools, we have the ability to create intimacy, empathy, community and resourcefulness in realms that most people would consider hopeless. I believe, as Jacob Moreno did about Psychodrama, that drama therapy has the ability to transform society itself. We, as healers, are the resistance fighters of our time parachuting behind the lines to fight against violence, hatred, dehumanization and alienation in our society. I encourage you to take

action, even in the face of overwhelming odds! Find the courage to create **your** vision of a better world!