

16 Growing Up on the Front Line: Coming to Terms with War-Related Loss in Gonagala, Sri Lanka

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On the night of September 18, 1999, a platoon of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (also known as the LTTE or Tamil Tigers), armed with scythes and machetes, quietly crossed the rice paddies that separate the largely Tamil district of Batticaloa from the ethnically diverse district of Ampara, in eastern Sri Lanka. Moving through the paddies toward the Sinhalese farming village of Gonagala, the Tigers split into two groups, one composed solely of men, the other of both male and female cadres. As the two groups approached the houses closest to the edge of the rice fields, the villagers slept, unaware of the massacre that was about to unfold.

By morning, fifty-four people had been murdered, including twelve children. According to survivors, the group of male Tigers only killed men, while female Tigers were actively involved in the killing of women and children. In one house, twenty people had been participating in a religious ritual to mark the death of another villager three months earlier; all but one person in the house were killed during the attack, including nine members of a single family.

After the massacre, many families, particularly those living closest to the border, began leaving their homes at night, afraid of another attack. They sought shelter in the homes of family, friends, or neighbors farther from the front line; in some cases, when no other shelter could be found, they simply cleared a spot in the jungle where they could spend the night. Just before sunrise, they would return to their homes, so that children could attend school and parents could work in the rice paddies or in their homes. This nightly migration continued on and off for nearly eight years, stopping during a temporary cease-fire, restarting when the cease-fire collapsed, and then stopping again when the Tigers lost their military base in Batticaloa in 2007.

The massacre in Gonagala occurred three days after the Sri Lankan air force bombed the marketplace in the Tamil community of Puthukkudiruppu, killing twenty-two civilians including two children.

Although it has been suggested that the attack on Gonagala was a retaliation for the air force bombing, the actual motivation for the massacre remains a matter of speculation. Gonagala was by no means the worst of the numerous massacres committed by the Tigers; the list of their mass attacks against civilians is long and victims numbered more than one hundred in some instances. These massacres must be viewed against a backdrop of prolonged civil war over LTTE demands for a separate homeland, a demand that arose after peaceful attempts at social change by Tamils were met by increasingly intense state-sponsored violence. The civil war in Sri Lanka was prolonged and bloody, marked by rampant violations of human rights on both sides, by the militarization of Sri Lankan society, by recurrent suicide attacks engaged in by so-called Black Tigers (an elite unit of the LTTE), and by the disappearance, torture, and killing of suspected LTTE militants and sympathizers by government forces. By the time of the LTTE's military defeat in 2009, more than seventy thousand people were estimated to have died in the war (BBC, 2009).

The documentary film *Unholy Ground* (www.unholygroundfilm.com)¹ explores the impact of the Gonagala massacre on six survivors, all of whom lost family members during the attack. The film crew was primarily Sri Lankan, including two residents of Gonagala, who worked as an interviewer and a photographer. Another key partner was the staff of a local organization, the Centre for Psychosocial Care (CPC). CPC has provided psychosocial assistance to Gonagala and other war- and disaster-affected communities in Ampara District. The participation of these local actors with strong ties to the village was critical to our ability to make the film, given the villagers' understandable wariness toward outsiders asking questions about a terrifying and deeply painful event and the impact it has had on their lives.

In addition to examining the ways in which villagers' lives were changed by the massacre, *Unholy Ground* explores the diverse pathways that the survivors have followed in coming to terms with their experiences of loss, in a context of ongoing vulnerability and continual disruption. We also examine the pivotal and at times complex role of Buddhism in helping to shape the community's understanding of, and response to, the deaths of their loved ones.

The six survivors featured in the film include a woman who lost three of her four children; a man who lost his wife and three children; a man who lost his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and infant grandson; another man who lost nine family members who were attending the community ritual mentioned earlier; and two girls who both lost their fathers. In

the remainder of this chapter, we focus on the two girls, Sharmali and Samanthi. Our aim is to illustrate briefly three points:

1. Despite exposure to a similarly terrifying and painful event (the murder of their fathers), the two girls have followed very different paths and reached quite different places in the healing process. This underscores the important point that knowing about a potentially traumatic event does not, by itself, permit us to predict a particular mental health or psychosocial outcome for any individual.
2. Key factors in their social environments have either fostered or impeded the healing process for the two girls. Any understanding of the mental health effects of organized violence must take into account the social ecology of survivors, and in particular the ways in which aspects of that ecology may promote or impede the healing process and foster or undermine people's resilience.
3. Although the focus in much of the literature on mental health in conflict settings is on PTSD, the salient and enduring mental health difficulty in Gonagala, eight years after the massacre, is persistent grief, and in some cases, clinical depression. As a growing number of writers have begun to argue, the fascination with PTSD may at times reflect the interest of Western researchers and clinicians more than it does the priorities of particular war-affected populations (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006; Summerfield, 1999). This is not to suggest that PTSD symptoms were not widespread immediately after the massacre; by all accounts they were; however, trauma symptoms have largely abated with the passing of time for most villagers, while intense sadness – and for some people, other symptoms of depression – persist.

Struggling with Grief

Sharmali is a sweet, shy, and soft-spoken seventeen-year-old, who was ten years old the night her father was killed. She has vivid memories of the event:

That day it was only my dad, mom, me, and my younger brother at home. Around 2:00 AM we heard a sound and when we tried to go outside we saw someone flashing a light. Then all four of us went into one room and because we could not go outside we closed the door to that room really well. We didn't know who was coming. First they broke down the back door and came inside the house and then kicked the front door and broke it. Then we closed the door and placed the bed in front of it, and Mom and Dad leaned against the door. Then someone came to the door and we heard speaking in Tamil. They tried to open the door but

they could not. They started to cut the door. Then they saw my mom and asked us to come out. Then once we came out they asked us to give them money and they put the mattress from the other room in the middle of the room we were in. Then two people held onto Dad's hands. Mom screamed, saying, "Please don't do anything!" Then they held a gun to Mom's chest and said, "If you scream we'll kill you." Then my younger brother and I hung onto Dad's hands. They said they would send him home in the morning, and told us to go to sleep. We could hear sounds from the outside. Two people took him by his hand and left. Then we saw him only in the morning [crying]. We even heard gunshots from houses in the upper part of the village. In the morning the police had come, somehow the police came and they went over to the paddy fields and fired shots. Then several people came and that is when we saw him there, by the jackfruit tree.

After the massacre, Sharmali's family left their home each night for about four years, until a local armed militia, called the Homeguard, was formed to protect the village. The presence of the Homeguard provided a greater feeling of safety to the village, and many families, including Sharmali's, began staying in their houses at night. Unable to work the paddy fields without her father's help, Sharmali's mother rented out the fields to generate income. Their small house is dark and sparsely furnished, and there is a heaviness that pervades it. Sharmali said her grief has not abated much since the incident, and she thinks about her father constantly, especially when she is at home. Her paternal grandmother recently died but was alive, though in poor health, when we made the film and lived with the family. When we interviewed the grandmother, she could not speak about her deceased son without weeping to the point where she was almost unable to talk.

Sharmali described her relationship with her mother as quite conflictual, and her mother readily acknowledged hitting Sharmali when she becomes angry with her. Sharmali is quite sure that her father would not be so harsh with her:

He didn't drink, he never yelled at us, and he took us to school in the morning. When Mom yells at me, I think of my father. I think if Dad were here he wouldn't yell like that.

Sharmali has friends with whom she speaks freely, but since she recently dropped out of school after scoring poorly on her O-Level exams, she now spends most of the day in the house. She would like to attend a vocational school; however, her mother does not allow her to leave the village as she considers it too dangerous, because young men might flirt with her and thereby damage her reputation. Sharmali was unable to articulate any plans or hopes she might have for the future.

Sharmali's mother, now forty-three, was also interviewed for the film. Throughout the interview, she smiled at unexpected times, laughing as

she stated that “sadness is for weak people,” and “there is no point in being sad.” When asked why she thought her mother-in-law and daughter were still so grief-stricken eight years after the massacre, she shook her head, reiterated her belief that sadness was for weak people, and said simply that Sharmali is still so sad because she thinks about her father so much of the time. As Sharmali sat nearby listening to the interview and crying, her mother explained her reaction to the death of her husband within a Buddhist framework:

I don't have any sadness about anyone. The Tigers attacked. We exist and then we don't. We too will die someday. There is no point in being sad. For some people it is because they have attachments that they feel sad. After the Tigers attacked, even children were mutilated. It happened because they had *karma*. Because we didn't have *karma* it didn't happen to us. The Tigers had held a gun to my chest and told us not to scream. If I had died it would have been over then. It is because I didn't have *karma*. It is because of *karma* that it happened and I feel no sadness about anybody. There is no point in crying.

Other people interviewed for the film also suggested that sadness, according to their Buddhist faith, should not be enduring, because attachments are transient and experiences of change and loss are inherent in life. Yet most of the people we interviewed also recognized that strong attachments do develop within families, and that deep sadness is a natural reaction to the loss of loved ones, especially in such a premature and violent way. One man, who lost four family members (including an eighteen-month-old grandson) in the attack, described his struggle between his understanding of Buddhism and the reality of his distress in this way:

When you think about the Buddhist faith, it is not something that we should be really upset about. There is not a lot of sadness that we should experience. They had committed some sin and somehow received its negative consequences. When I think about the other side though, my heart hurts. They were brutally killed. It was not like they had grown old. The sadness is still there. I live like a human being. I eat and dress and live. But when I remember it, when I come home from the fields, my heart stings.

In framing her negative view on sadness within a Buddhist framework, Sharmali's mother revealed a religious understanding that is quite selective, for Buddhism also prioritizes compassion and a gentle acknowledgment of one's experience. Indeed, one of the village monks, interviewed for the film, described how he comforted villagers after the attack by sharing with them a popular story about the Buddha, meant to illustrate the Buddhist belief that grief is a common human experience (and not a sign of weakness, as Sharmali's mother asserted). According to the story, the Buddha sought to comfort a grieving mother by encouraging her

to go through her village and find a family in which nobody had died. The woman returned to the Buddha comforted by the realization that loss, though painful, was also a shared experience and that she was not alone with her experience of grief. The story resonated with many villagers, who stated that they found comfort in the realization that they were not alone with their grief in the wake of the massacre. Unfortunately, in Sharmali's home there is still very little space for grief. Paradoxically, this may have had the effect of keeping her grief (and that of her grandmother) alive and salient in her ongoing experience. In refusing to empathize with Sharmali's sadness, and indeed criticizing it as a sign of weakness, her mother may be unintentionally helping to maintain in her daughter the very emotional experience she so dislikes.

Transcending Tragedy

Samanthi was also ten years old when her father was killed in the attack on Gonagala. A bright, playful, and outgoing adolescent of seventeen, she, like Sharmali, has vivid memories of the night of the massacre and the murder of her father:

That day the Tigers came and they broke the door down and came inside our house. They took our father and asked for money; they took him away, saying they would return him in the morning. But they didn't return him in the morning and they took the money as well. So that day, Father was there in the porch, all cut up.

Although she becomes visibly sad when speaking of her father, Samanthi said that she is normally happy, an observation confirmed by her mother. Samanthi said that she becomes sad when she remembers her father, and that in those moments the sadness feels as strong as it did eight years ago. When that happens, she talks with her mother, a warm and compassionate woman who cried quietly when talking about the death of her husband and the challenges of raising the three children by herself: "Since her father is not there, everything that is done by a father and by a mother, I do for my children." Samanthi is quite close to her mother and finds comfort in talking with her, whether about sadness related to losing her father or any other problems she might have.

At first, we were extremely sad; we had an unbearable kind of sadness. After a little time had passed, it's not that we forgot, but nonetheless, with the strength I got from my mother, I was able to mend my heart a little, and did my schoolwork and lived. My mother – now when such things happen, when I have a personal problem, I take it to my mother; my mother tells me how to solve it, in this way.

Samanthi said that talking with her mother, and sharing her sadness in this way, is quite helpful, and allows her to move through the sadness and shift back into pleasurable activities and a happier mood. She loves to dance, which she does at school, and dreams of one day being a dance teacher. She also delights in helping her younger sister with her school-work and is an avid reader.

Now when I recall the incident when my father died I get very sad, but at other times when I'm spending time with my mother, my older brother, and younger sister, I live happily. When I get to school I get together with my friends, and when I'm exercising, when I'm dancing, I'm happy.

Like many families who lost members in the attack, Samanthi and her family found comfort in the religious ritual of *dane*, an alms-giving ceremony in which the family prepares a meal for the village monks, who in turn offer guidance and support in what is generally a two day communal gathering. *Dane* is meant to earn merit or good *karma* for the deceased, so that they will never again suffer such a terrible fate in a future life as they did during the massacre. *Dane* is a source of great comfort to those families who can afford it.

To this day, since my father's death, every year we give alms; even if we can't do so at home, we give alms to the temple – at least a meal – in a way that we can afford. For about three years we did it at home, then considering my mother's economic condition, we did it in a way that we can afford. I think that by giving alms like that my father will receive at least a little bit of merit. According to our religious beliefs we think so. So because we love our father a lot, we give alms and in that way we mend our hearts a little.

Samanthi lives with her mother, brother, and younger sister, who was born soon after the attack. Their simply decorated house has a warm and inviting feel, enhanced by the frequent laughter of Samanthi's nine-year-old sister. Although they are poor and had to sell some of their land to raise money, they still have enough land to grow rice and other food for their own consumption; Samanthi made a point of noting that the family is able to live within its means. Her mother does not conceal her sadness and is comfortable supporting her children when they become sad. Although this does not seem to lessen the intensity of the feelings of grief when they arise, it does create a space in which Samanthi's grief can be experienced, arising and diminishing, so that it is neither pervasive nor constant. Having experienced the brutal murder of her father as a child, Samanthi has a delight in much of her life and hopefulness for the future that reflect a genuine process of healing, fostered by her mother's consistent support, her family's capacity to engage in *dane*, and her own internal resources.

Summary

The different developmental pathways followed by Sharmali and Samantha following the massacre likely reflect a constellation of factors at different ecological levels. Individually, each has allotted her own coping strategies, strengths, and vulnerabilities to the monumental task of grieving the murder of her father and moving on with life. Sharmali and Samantha are friends, and Samantha wondered aloud whether perhaps Sharmali has had a more difficult time because she is shy and does not talk readily with others about problems she is having. In contrast to Samantha, who is outgoing and clearly at ease in social situations, Sharmali is quite introverted, a characteristic that may have made it difficult for her to reach out for emotional and practical support over the years.

Both young women have found comfort in the religious ritual of *dane* and the belief that by giving alms, they are earning merit for the deceased fathers (on the centrality of bereavement among Cambodian refugees who survived the genocide, and the importance of rituals for the deceased in trauma recovery, see D. Hinton, Peou, Joshi, Nickerson, & Simon, 2013). The village temple is nearby, and clearly it has played an important role in the healing process of all of the survivors of the Gonagala massacre. However, Sharmali and Samantha have experienced quite different environments within their families. Samantha's mother has sought to support her daughter's (and her own) grieving process, while encouraging her academic achievements and her growth as a dancer. In contrast, Sharmali's mother has had a more difficult time managing her daughter's sadness and supporting her efforts within and outside school. Both women (mothers) are practicing Buddhists, yet their understandings of Buddhism have shaped their reactions to the experience of loss in very different ways. For Samantha's mother, the Buddhist emphasis on *compassion* was clearly a central element of her faith and her approach to life; for Sharmali's mother, the concept of *nonattachment* was particularly salient and was instrumental in helping her minimize the emotional impact of her husband's death (on the use of Buddhist doctrine and practice to recover from trauma among Cambodian refugees, see Nickerson & D. Hinton, 2011). It is interesting to consider that Buddhism also speaks of the danger of *aversion*, the avoidance of unpleasant feelings and experiences. Aversion may lead to an inability to experience one's own difficult emotions or to tolerate the painful feelings of other people; this in turn may impede healing from experiences of loss or emotional injury (Kornfield, 1993).

In making the film *Unholy Ground*, we were struck by the remarkable strength of many of the people we met. Many of the villagers we

interviewed had put their lives back together and found new sources of meaning and hope following a profound tragedy that initially left everyone we met in a state of despair. At the same time, we were also struck by the enduring nature of people's grief, and the vulnerability that some individuals, such as Sharmali, continued to experience eight years after the massacre. The persistence of such grief and vulnerability may suggest the limits of the extent to which people can fully heal in the wake of mass tragedy. However, we also believe that effective interventions can foster the healing process significantly, by supporting survivors and their families economically, psychosocially, and spiritually. For example, livelihood support to lessen economic distress within Sharmali's family, coupled with spiritual guidance and emotional support to help her mother tolerate feelings of sadness with greater compassion, might have lessened Sharmali's grief and enabled her to reengage more fully with life.

The various pathways followed by the survivors of the Gonagala massacre illustrate the complexity of predicting mental health and psychosocial well-being solely on the basis of knowledge of prior exposure to potentially traumatic life experiences. Although the correlation between war exposure and level of distress is consistently positive, exposure by itself is a highly imperfect predictor, rarely accounting for more than 25 percent of the variance in levels of distress or symptomatology (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Numerous factors influence the ways in which people react to, and are affected by, exposure to organized violence, including extreme acts of violence such as the massacre described in this paper. Although signs of extreme distress (i.e., symptoms of trauma, depression, and anxiety) are ubiquitous in the immediate aftermath of such experiences, there is growing evidence that for the majority of people such distress diminishes with the passing of time and a supportive environment; that is, healing – a “mending of the heart” as the Gonagala survivors described it – seems to be the rule rather than the exception. It may be an imperfect healing, with moments of pain and vulnerability resurfacing as reminders evoke distressing memories. And because experiences of loss change the social and material environments of survivors, emotional pain may relate as much to ongoing experiences of social isolation or poverty (when a breadwinner is killed) as they do to the original experience of loss. In any case, our experience making the film *Unholy Ground* underscored for us the importance of honoring the capacity to heal from the most devastating events, while also recognizing that holistic, culturally grounded assistance may also facilitate the healing process.

It is also important to consider the variability that exists within any cultural context when examining the influence of culture on experiences of loss and healing. Theravadan Buddhism as practiced in Sri Lanka was

clearly a critical force in shaping the reactions of Sharmali and Samantha, as well as their mothers, to their experiences of war-related loss. Yet a variety of individual factors in turn shaped the ways in which Buddhism was understood and utilized in responding to those losses. Certainly, an understanding of Buddhism is critical to comprehending the impact of the Gonagala massacre; however, it is also essential to explore variations of Buddhist belief and experience among the villagers, as well as a host of other individual and familial factors (e.g., temperament, prior trauma history, family support, financial circumstances) that invariably influence the process of healing from trauma and loss.

NOTES

- 1 The film was directed by Ken Miller and coproduced by Ken Miller, S. Manohaari Habaragamua, M. A. J. Ranawake, and Gaithri Fernando.

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