

Introduction

In: To breathe or not to breathe?

I have intentionally made extensive use of my own story, for a number of reasons. For one thing, my own stories are the ones I know best. As Thoreau said in *Walden*: 'I should not talk so much about myself if there was anybody else whom I knew as well.' Another thing. When I read a book . . . of healing, I'm engaged with the author in a personal way and want to know: How did she come to believe this? What in her life made her understand this subject in this particular way? I know I'm not alone in my nosiness. Most engaged readers of books on subjects like this one are voyeurs like me. The stories from my own life that you will read here will give you a sense of the ground from which this book sprouted (Greenspan 2004, pp. 6-7).

When I began writing this book some years ago I had serious troubles breathing. My symptoms included an inability to breathe freely, breathlessness, a crushing sensation and sharp pain in the chest, frequent sighing, yawning and gasping, and a rising terror, a fear that something terrible was about to happen. The experience was frightening and deeply unsettling. The more I tried to control my breathing, the more uncontrollable it became. Trying to not think about it, paradoxically, made it the only thing to think about. Distraction was futile. Several months and doctor's appointments passed and I did not have a proper medical diagnosis or any treatment to minimise the symptoms. Appointments with a psychologist to ascertain if there was any underlying psychological

cause also did not help. In fact, they somehow, albeit temporarily, managed to increase the symptoms. And so I started conducting my own research into the matter.

As I found out, the literature on the subject is abundant, and various causes and cures of my condition have been proposed. According to self-help author Louise L Hay, for example, the symptoms represent 'a fear or refusal to take in life fully' as well as 'not feeling the right to take up space or even exist'. In addition to her diagnosis of the main underlying causes of my symptoms she recommends a solution: create a 'new thought pattern' in your mind, along the lines of, 'it is my birthright to live fully and freely,' 'I am safe everywhere in the Universe. I trust the process of life' (1999, pp. 184, 201). One of my friends, though, thought I was simply hyperventilating and brought me a piece of paper describing some of the symptoms that closely matched my own. But there was nothing on that sheet about how I could stop them to get on with my life. So I resorted to an analysis of yet another self-help author, Ann Gadd, who writes, 'When we make a habit of hyperventilating it is an indication that we often assume ourselves to be in "fight or flight" mode, where our security is in jeopardy.' And if we are 'constantly finding ourselves in situations that make us afraid, it is an indication that we have deep-rooted expectations that things will go wrong rather than right.' Her solution? 'Find the source of your fear' (2006, pp. 40–45).

Not having much to lose, I sat down in front of an empty computer screen with one goal in mind. Can I find out what is behind my symptoms – my disturbed breathing and the feeling I might suffocate? Surprisingly, stories started pouring out of me. As they did, they astounded me. I wanted to know about *my* condition and I was thus utterly surprised that the first story took place in Slovenia and then in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, decades before I was even born. It was family history, and I was aware of scepticism towards historical narratives. For example, Brian Simon summarises this scepticism well: 'Why study history . . . at all? After all, it's all dead, gone, finished – what is important lies in the future . . . History . . . is boring, arid, defunct. Such as it is, it were better forgotten' (1983, p. 65). Mehni Khan Nakosteen,

on the other hand, proposes that history is 'always a study of ourselves, our problems, our hopes and dreams, our failures and successes, our joys and anxieties.' Therefore, 'so conceived, history becomes in a wider context the study of [hu]man[s] in the present sense and in the present tense' (1965, p. 13). Joseph Voros, too, suggests a rationale for reconciling past, present and future: '... historians, sociologists and futurists are all involved in pretty much the same work. The main difference [between them] is in the direction they look: historians look back, futurists look forwards, and sociologists look around' (2008).

My narratives, though, looked simultaneously back, forward and around, adding even more confusion to my already perplexed mind. They also oscillated between deeply personal narration and highly theoretical analysis, between local and global issues, and between historical, present and future times and various geographical spaces, making for a strange mix indeed. Furthermore, I was astonished to discover all these things that I never even *knew* I knew. At times it felt as if I was possessed by the spirit of my own and my family's past; as if the fractals of my ancestors' stories had to be depicted and announced to the world.

Writing my stories and their stories made me suffer, made me cry and made me struggle with how much I was allowed to reveal. It made me ask tough questions about authenticity and ethics, self-serving attributional biases and the politics of victimhood,¹ as well as whether I was a traitor or a truth seeker. At other times I wondered how much my ancestors were speaking directly to me. Did they perhaps speak through me? Did they project their fears on to me, or did I project mine on to them? What were these sentences describing events of the past that came out of me without much effort on my part? How did I know all these things? Where were the stories really coming from? Why am I writing in English? Who am I writing all this for? And, most importantly, can all these bits and pieces make for a coherent narrative?

Out: History, present, future

Not only is another world possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day,
I can hear her breathing (Roy 2003).

Breathing: Violence In, Peace Out investigates the long-term impact of transgenerational trauma and of personal and collective experiences with violence. As well, it looks at the possibilities for the emergence of more peaceful futures, including the individual/social practices necessary to bring them about. The text oscillates between a deeply personal and an academic tone of voice. The personal narratives, which I organised within the 'in' sections, are mostly employed for describing violent events and follow the loosely chronological order and thematic context around which the chapters are organised. The academic voice, the 'out' section, is used mostly for reflection, analysis of events and for making sense of the various experiences.

I have used the rhythm created by inhaling and exhaling as it symbolically reflects not only how we 'take in' life and the world but also what we 'give out' to the people around us. This in-out pace models efforts to understand the links between violence-peace, self-other, individual-world history, personal-political, trauma-healing, experience-sense making, stability-change, safety-threat, oppressing-freeing, perception of reality-reality and past-future. To make it easier for readers I have used different fonts for personal narratives/stories and the academic analysis of those events. At times, as is so often the case in life, the in and out narratives overlap. This becomes more so towards the end of the book, which focuses mostly on psychological processes.

Breathing: Violence In, Peace Out is therefore a result of an inquiry into my own condition of feelings of impending suffocation as well as into the possibility of changing the inner landscape of our collective thinking amid so much pain and suffering in the world now and in recent history. Up until the beginning of the actual writing of this book I was unaware how important the stories of the past and the stories of my ancestors had been in my life. Once I was engaged in the task of peeling away the metaphoric onion layers

for the purposes of writing a reasonably coherent storyline, I discovered all sorts of memories that existed within the inner layers of my psyche. Like most other children and grandchildren of traumatised people I remember those memories in ‘bits and pieces’ (Danieli 1998, p. 5). Like many other children and grandchildren of traumatised people I did not realise nor appreciate the burden they carried. I would like to acknowledge their resilience in the face of trauma by dedicating this book to them, to the three generations of people that came before me, people who are still alive in my mind, and people who, for better or worse, help(ed) make me the person I am today.

Neither those who came before me nor I exist(ed) in a vacuum, so the following chapters are also an inquiry into the links between my own and our collective personal histories and world events – how they shape and are shaped by each other. Large sections of the book analyse various ideologies and worldviews that have marked the twentieth century, the century when the events in the stories took place and which still influence the landscape of our thinking around issues of peace, conflict and violence. Lastly, this book is also an inquiry into alternative futures – a range of personal and global future possibilities.

Chapter 1, ‘Communism, utopia: The personal is political’, starts with a story of my great-grandfather who left Slovenia for the Soviet Union to avoid prosecution and to build a better future for him and his family. Events take place mostly in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and, towards the end of the chapter, in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY or former Yugoslavia). This chapter deals with a totalitarian state and society’s oppression–terror and seeks alternative understandings behind such oppression as well as for the ingredients that may prevent it in the future. The out section starts analysing the ways in which politics is not an abstract concept but ‘a real and very powerful force influencing people’s everyday lives’ (Drakulić 1991, p. xv), which is a theme that runs throughout the book. Chapter 1 also starts an inquiry into another central theme: the ways our individual and collective images and views about the future impact on our actions that, in turn, help manifest particular preferred futures. Other topics discussed in this chapter include the raising of children, worldviews and ‘othering’ – all crucially important

to understand the events described in this chapter as well as the practices of waging terror, or alternatively, of building positive peace.

Chapter 2, 'War, dystopia: The holy trinity of militarism, imperialism and nationalism', describes the impact of the Spanish Civil War and Second World War on my grandfathers as well as on one of my grandmothers. It gives context to my indirect dealings with these massive events of collective violence, the impact they had on me as a child, and on my family as well as our society. While the Second World War experiences are also touched on in Chapter 1, there I focus more on totalitarianism and repression by the state. Chapter 2 continues with these topics while predominantly focusing on wars and inter-ethnic conflict. Chapter 2 introduces yet another major theme within this book: the analysis of some of the mechanisms behind acts of collective violence and the devastating, long-term impact they have on the fabric of a society. As is apparent from the subtitle of this chapter, the three themes given most attention here are those of (social) militarism, imperialism (including the issue of 'balkanism') and nationalism.

Chapter 3, 'Feminism, eutopia: Challenging patriarchy and androcratic masculinities',² discusses the role gender identities play in the waging of war and other acts of collective violence. Some long-lasting debates on the gendered division of life-giver and life-taker roles are reflected upon, introducing the latest concepts from gender studies that are relevant for rethinking of gender-war/violence-peace connections and describing alternative nonviolent ways to conceptualise gender roles and identities. This chapter connects the social practice of androcratic-hegemonic masculinity with the doing of war, arguing that the 'doing of gender' remains one among several key variables in the doing of war/violence. The in stories are the personal experience of some members of my family, providing links between the personal and the political and showing again ways in which themes discussed in this chapter manifest in the lived experiences of concrete individuals.

Chapter 4, 'Living trauma, eupsychia: The political is personal',³ deals with the long-term and ripple effects of violence and includes an investigation into the ways in which previous unhealed traumas impact political events. In addition to showing the depth and width of destruction

of a society through war and violence, the question of the long-term impact of trauma on people's mental and physical health is also raised. As with all previous chapters, the analysis is followed by an inquiry into alternative futures – the range of nonviolent future possibilities, including for healing and post-traumatic growth. Again, events in the former Yugoslavia are provided as case studies. Some experiences of (post-)Yugoslav refugees, displaced persons and migrants are also brought into the discussion. The last in section of the book takes place in Australia. The analysis, however, is broader and global, linked to the specific theme and the current research that best explains the violence–peace dynamics behind these events.

Despite the many heavy and dark stories presented, it is my hope that *Breathing: Violence In, Peace Out* will help bring a little more light into the world and into the lives of its readers. Perhaps life is simply a balance of inhaling and exhaling, taking and giving, and receiving and releasing. If there is but one thing I would inhale, take and receive more of, it would be more inner and outer peace. If there is but one thing I could exhale, give and release, it would be sharing that inner and outer peace with others. May we all make better and more informed choices – including choosing the right thought patterns – to get us closer to more peaceful present–future realities.

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