

Trauma-Informed Mindfulness for Refugees

with Juditta Ben David, 1st June 2019

'Home' is a powerful word. Try saying it to yourself...how does it sound? Where is the place it takes you to, and who are the people you find there? No wonder we hear metaphors of grounding, of earth, of rooting and uprooting so often as Juditta Ben David talks about her work with refugees and trauma. To be a refugee, of course, means to be far from home. But to experience trauma can add a second kind of uprooting – when your own body no longer feels like a safe place to be.

As well as the traditional 'top-down' models for treating trauma with counseling or psychotherapy, in recent decades somatically-oriented 'bottom up' approaches involving breathing, movement and working with the body have also established themselves, along with 'energy psychology' techniques like EMDR and EFT. In a career which she describes as an extended 'zigzag' through numerous disciplines, Juditta has woven many of these together to create a trauma-informed mindfulness course, deeply influenced by her study of Somatic Experiencing and more than 25 years of Buddhist meditation, including Vipassana, Mahayana, Tibetan and Zen. Raised in the USA and living in Israel, the zigzag has taken her to work with troubled communities in South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Galilee and now with Syrian refugees in Greece and Turkey.

Mindfulness in Arabic

Along the way she has built an impressive team of specialist volunteers, many with their own mind-body practices, to create the first free online mindfulness course specifically for Arabic-speaking refugees and front-line aid staff. 'Mindfulness in Arabic' (MiA) grew out of what she calls 'a delightful meeting' of women of different cultures and faiths, who themselves used non-violent communication, mindfulness and trauma-informed emotional skills to find ways of working together despite deep cultural and political difference.

Developing the Mindfulness in Arabic course required this same sensitivity to culture and language. Translating English-language mindfulness into Arabic, Juditta says, has been 'a joyful aspect of the project involving a lot of trial and error. Arabic is a very rich language, with many different dialects. For example, it has quite a few words for compassion, whether it's for your child, your community, or the compassion of God. Also we have to translate the images and metaphors: instead of the raisin meditation we have the olive meditation, and to be 'overwhelmed' or 'flooded' by emotion is not a metaphor that works in Arabic – it's more like an electrical storm. Then there's the invitational language we use in English, which does not fit easily into the more direct and hierarchical sentence structures of Arabic. Culturally too, we found that it's generally really good in the Middle East to have either male or female groups. Even one male in a female group changes the ability to discuss things.'

Is Mindfulness Safe for Trauma?

Since meditation can itself bring old trauma to the surface, how do you make it safe to bring mindfulness to traumatized communities? Juditta readily admits that this is work-in-progress without many proven answers yet, but one thing she emphasizes, and demonstrates with great care in the meditations she guides us through, is the enormous importance of simply *meeting* the other person – meeting them fully, through eye contact, listening, the quality of one's voice and embodied awareness, and making sure they feel safe in that meeting before beginning any formal mindfulness practice at all.

Another key piece in working with trauma, she says, is something she learned from Somatic Experiencing and EMDR – when anything uncomfortable comes up, to work with very small chunks of that discomfort, and to encourage the person to go back and forth repeatedly between that experience and a sense of something safe and positive: 'Something we call a resource. There's something very wise about coming back to the body,' she says, 'but with trauma sometimes a person really doesn't want to. Sometimes people say that's too painful. Sometimes they will say that's taboo in my faith or my family, or that they really do want to go there but nothing wants to come up. So there are various ways to tease out the obstacles in going into the body. Even 'nothing wants to come up' is something. You can stay with that. It's playing, it's a game, and that's important because that in itself is part of healing. We're joining together in order to follow what's coming up.'

Building Resources

So rather than beginning by noticing the body or the breath – which could itself trigger traumatic memory – participants start by re-connecting with something positive, or at least something stable, or something that gives them a sense of value, as a kind of safety net. This first step is common to many types of trauma therapy, but Juditta points out that it doesn't always work. Long experience has taught her that the first resource that people think of can sometimes be too abstract, or simply what the person thinks the therapist or society wants to hear. So she starts by asking, 'Is there anything you can think of as a resource in your life that's coming to you right now: someone you know that respects you, a man, woman or child, an animal, that in their presence you feel loved or kindness, a quality of yourself you can rely on, something you believe in or a divine entity?'

Gently putting the brakes on, she reminds us: 'You can decide that this is not the place to go any further,' and only then asks how that resource resonates in the body. Then she asks if this first resource really does make us feel 'safe and loved and calm'. If not, she invites us to invoke some other quality or resource and to notice how it feels in the body. Then another invitation – starting from the periphery – to notice feet, hands, heat or cold and specific bodily sensations.

Coherence and Resilience

One of Juditta's earliest teachers was Aaron Antonovsky, a Brooklyn-born Israeli professor of medical sociology who, instead of studying the causes of disease asked the much more interesting question – what causes health? What makes some people resilient to potentially traumatic events? Studying Holocaust survivors who were now living healthy and meaningful lives, he developed the concept of 'Coherence': that resilience to stress depends on three factors – how much a person can a) Comprehend, b) Control, and c) Commit to the life that they are living.

For example, people who show amazing resilience surviving in war zones when they can still live in their own home and their own community, speaking their own language may, as refugees with all these things taken away, find their sense of coherence slipping away. Uprooted, travelling, unwelcomed and

unwanted, exposed to disease and fatigue, they can suddenly find themselves in a much more fragile state, where unprocessed trauma is more likely to surface.

Weaving the Carpet

In her final meditation, Juditta shows us how she might work with this, inviting us to start by listening to sounds: 'This can be very beneficial for people who are in a state of hyperarousal – their sensitivity to sound is very high, and to accept that apprehension makes it easier for them to come to the body and sensation'. Then she invites us to re-connect with that positive resource again, 'something that when you remember it, when you make contact with it, brings feelings of calm, joy, of being respected, loved, taken care of, or maybe just some amount of stability'. Then she makes us an 'offer' – one we're free to refuse – to connect with something uncomfortable and to stay with that, noticing what changes might happen in our posture, breath or body, and knowing that we can re-connect with the positive resource at any time. After returning to the resource, and noticing how the move back manifests itself in mindfulness, she closes the meditation with a specifically Arabic metaphor, inviting us to 'come back to just listening to sounds, noticing any patterns in these sounds, like the patterns in the weaving of a carpet, patterns of possibility'.

As one woman says in a video on the Mindfulness in Arabic website, 'We Arabs have suffered much violence and trauma and suffer still. Mindfulness helps us shine a softer light on...traumatic experiences that threaten to take over and rule our life.' Juditta's voice conveys the sound of that 'softer light', and brings to mind the words of Emma Lazarus, poet, activist and herself the ancestor of Jewish refugees. More than ironic in current times, they are still inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty: 'Give me your poor, your tired/Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free...Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me'.

– *Nick Pole*

To find out more about Mindfulness-in-Arabic or to make a donation go to: <http://www.mindfulnessinarabic.org>