

*Why survival is not enough:*

## Prevailing as a psychotherapeutic imperative for victims of torture

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### Abstract

It is widely recognized that torture is among the most destructive and psychologically corrosive of acts. However, to date, the response from mental health professionals has generally focussed on notions of psychological survival and have largely ignored the effects of the fundamental intent of torture on the concept of self.

The paper will argue that if psychotherapy for victims of torture is going to be truly effective, it must begin to address issues of meaning and purpose, both in terms of the intent of torture and therefore, the goals of healing. If it is able to do that, it may allow victims of torture not just to survive the experience, but to prevail over it. Finally, it will introduce the concept of prevailing over the experience of torture as a psychological and spiritual state in which personal meaning, purpose and truths are integrated into a person's notion of self.

*Key words:* prevailing, survival, torture, therapy

### Introduction

The descriptors of those who have been tortured are indicative of a framework around

which the psychological and physical effects are constructed. It is common parlance to speak in terms of "victims" of abuse becoming, if they are fortunate, "survivors". However, it is proposed that there may be another state in which the experience is fully integrated into the conception of self and is seen to be able to reveal meaning, purpose and truths for the individual. This state may be called prevailing.

Each of the above states is seen to have certain characteristics. They all describe the individuals relationship to the experience of torture, its continuing effect on the individual's sense of self, the relationship with engagement with the outside world and, by implication, the extent to which any meaning and purpose can be found. Furthermore, these characteristics place distinct and important limitations on the nature of any therapeutic intervention.

### Victims, survivors and prevailers

In victimhood a person is clearly still oppressed and invaded by the experience. The physical or psychological wounds have not healed and still handicap normal functioning to an intolerable degree. The physical damage aside, the person may still suffer from symptoms characterized by post-traumatic stress disorder. Furthermore, there may be additional factors such as shame and anger,

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grief over incalculable loss, and guilt over acts committed under coercion or even simply being still alive when so many others are dead.

In a state of victimhood a person's life remains shattered and inconsolable. The person is raw and exposed to the world and has no sense of self-mastery or control over the influences that dictate life's course. There is either no ability to properly protect the self from the outside world (no effective barrier to vicissitudes of fate) or there is a total inability to interact or engage with the world. In the latter case the person may well completely withdraw into severe depression and be unapproachable to reasoned cognitive treatments. The self is fragile and storm-tossed and in constant peril. The experience of torture is a mark of shame. Victims are in a state of anxiety with the experience and, in effect, perpetuate the oppression, perhaps even becoming their own oppressor.

It seems to be assumed that there is an almost linear relationship, as if on a continuum, between victimhood and becoming a survivor. It is as though if the experiences are carefully and gently explored, brought to full consciousness and eventually confronted, a kind of psychological reconciliation will occur. It is assumed that confrontation will itself engender this, although it may take a great deal of time, many, many visits to the same site of pain, and some terrifying and awful re-experiencing of the ordeal.

The survivor, by contrast to the victim, has learnt a degree of self-mastery but remains dominated by the events. The first degree symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder may be under control, or non-intrusive, but the survivor is still in a self-definitional relationship with the trauma. The trauma has been conquered, or at least subdued. The language used betrays the underlying sympathies. The event is one to be sur-

vived, like a battle (which of course it may have been in many ways).

As a survivor, the protection of the sense of self may be strong, but it can be inflexible. The barriers erected to protect may also constrict growth. If a victim has no walls to protect him or her, a survivor may find that the walls not only keep the world at bay, and it can be a dangerous world as he or she may have discovered, they also keep the person locked firmly inside. The very things that protect the individual also constrict any future growth. What may be the greatest strength of a survivor can also be the greatest weakness. Survivors have great strength, but it may be brittle and inflexible. Furthermore, always seeing oneself as a survivor may lead to the torture becoming a perverse block to continuing psychological integration of experience, purpose and meaning. The survivor's sense of self wears the survival like a badge of honour, or at least a medal of valour. A survivor is in a state of intensity with the experience.

It is necessary to move beyond mere survival of the trauma to a state in which meaning can be ascertained. Being a survivor is a state in which a person is less oppressed by the trauma than in victimhood. They may be thankful, rather than guilty, over the fact that it did not actually kill them. But survival is not enough. It does seem that there is another, and as yet unexplored, reaction to the awful experience of torture. Can we postulate another state, that of prevailing?

There appear to be two aspects of reconstruction of the self in prevailing. First, a person may begin to find an appreciation of the trauma. There may be a realization that there are things that can be learnt from this experience that could not have been learnt in any other way. And although the circumstances in which they were learnt are regrettable, perhaps terrible to an unimaginable

degree, and would not be wished for again, they have allowed the person to realize something that would not have been possible in any other way. As Frankl<sup>1, p11</sup> puts it, such things can “make sense out of ... apparently senseless suffering”.

Prevailing may be when a person is able to fully and seamlessly incorporate and integrate the experiences and circumstances of the torture into a re-formed sense of self, and be able to see meaning in it, or draw meaning from it. Here a person, fully and with open consciousness, is able and willing to engage with the world, and often the world that damaged them so badly. The risks of engagement are taken in full awareness. When in a state of prevailing, people are able to recognize how they became who they are. They know and do not struggle against the circumstances of their life, including their torture, for the experiences made them who they are. An explanation which satisfies the person of why the events happened as they did may be found, but that does not necessarily mean that they were justified. The ability to hold this position is shown in prevailing.

Prevailers co-exist with a humility that knows they cannot alter or change the experience but they can use it in some way in their future interaction with the world to extract meaning from life and, importantly, a sense of purpose; and the two are always in a reciprocal relationship. Prevailing needs no external validation of identity, it is characterized by a certainty and serenity of purpose. Fundamentally it means engaging with an identified purpose, through which meaning may be gained. It can take many forms. There is no prescription of set expectation. Meaning and purpose can be found in being a good parent or great leader. The imperative is that people know who they are through the act of what they do.

Prevailing is demonstrated in a greater sense of self-awareness, a greater control of and mutual accessibility with the influences of the outside world, and a lived or articulated balance of protection and engagement. The prevailer has a secure and stable identity and sense of self, and is not in bondage to the torture or the torturer. The prevailer has not only reclaimed, but enhanced his or her own voice. The experience of the torture is neither minimized nor aggressively brandished, but is as much accepted a part of the make-up of the person as any other. It is not as though something is simply “tacked onto a person” but rather completely integrated and made into something more than it was before. The pain of the event has its place, and stays there. It does not inappropriately seep into or unwantedly invade areas of the person’s life. When it is brought into consciousness, it is done so deliberately.

A state of prevailing also allows the developed realization that being human does not always mean being humane. The generosity of spirit recognizes that black and white thinking, with no degree of compromise, with no prospect of shades of grey in human behaviour or motives, is constricting rather than liberating. Although profoundly able to question and inquire into abominable behaviours, prevailers, unlike victims or survivors, are not threatened by the answers they find. It is not that they accept things without disagreement or opposition, but they are able to achieve balance and focus on their layered and deeply textured response.

Prevailing may not come easily, and may be enormously difficult for an individual, but can be seen as the full realization of a meaningfully informed sense of self in the world. There is a humbleness that puts aside the narcissism of the self-definitional relation-

ship with the trauma that, even when wholly understandable, still characterizes the world views of victims and survivors.

### The goals of treatment

The psychological treatment of the effects of torture have most commonly been within the spectrum of those recommended for post-traumatic stress disorder and related concepts.<sup>2</sup> “Effective treatment involves helping the individual to systematically confront experiences, memories and situations associated with the traumatic event”.<sup>2, p.276</sup> But to what purpose? Confrontation in itself is not enough. There must be a meaning to it. As Frankl argues, “facts will be significant only as far as they are part of a man’s experiences”.<sup>1, p.24</sup>

Most treatment and rehabilitation approaches have been multidisciplinary, recognizing that individuals who have been tortured often have a combination of medical, psychological, social and legal problems. Within these, many psychological treatments have been tried, although evaluation of their effectiveness is often limited.<sup>3-5</sup> Of course, the complex nature of the problems caused by torture can make controlled research very difficult, but it is pertinent to examine the therapeutic imperatives that drive some of the psychotherapies.

By and large, “services have utilized knowledge and skills developed in mainstream mental health services and assumed that they would be equally effective” in treating those who have been tortured.<sup>3, p.17</sup> However, in practical application they vary widely in duration and intensity. There are many approaches and all have their virtues but, as Elsass<sup>6</sup> notes, in general, Western psychotherapy is egocentric in orientation, being concerned with the “forces of the individual psyche”, and do not emphasize social and cultural contexts to the same degree.

The present argument is not about therapeutic techniques, but about the inclusion of questions of meaning and purpose in the goals of treatment. If a state of prevailing is possible, what questions must be asked to facilitate a person reaching it? What drives the therapeutic imperative?

Good clinical and ethical guidelines and manuals for clinicians<sup>2,7-9</sup> are likely to consider strategies for the delicate and particular circumstances of those who have been tortured, and other traumatized refugees. Issues of cultural sensitivity and confidentiality, the fragility and fear of the client, are emphasized, but do not critically analyse the assumptions made which dictate the course of the therapeutic imperative. Perhaps for some, these matters seem too spiritual, and yet spirituality is what gives many people a fully realized sense of meaning. Perhaps they are too philosophical, yet we all have a profound, if sometimes unarticulated, philosophical construction of the world.

Little attention is paid to the way in which such traumatic events can, or should, change a person. It seems unrealistic to presume that the person will return to an individual state of status quo ante bellum and yet that often appears to be the aim of therapy. Denford describes it as a form of mourning, and speaks of being able to “bury [losses] as dead”.<sup>10, p.160</sup> However, constructive mourning is the gateway to another life stage in which previous experiences are integrated and synthesized; it is not a full stop. Bamber<sup>11</sup> underlines freeing rather than curing the person as the principle of rehabilitation, yet does not explore the role of meaning in this (it is seen as more of an unyoking). As Frankl<sup>1</sup> has indicated, the search for meaning is a primary motivational force. Meaning is what sets you free. He paraphrases Nietzsche as saying that a person can bear anything so long as there is a why.

It would appear that revisiting the facts, even if done with the utmost care and with immense skill and gentleness, is not enough. Yet, prevailers would seem to ask themselves, whether overtly or not: "What happened to me and who is now in control, the torture or me? And if it is me, what am I going to do with this experience?" Although there may be an appreciation of the opportunity presented by the experience for meaning to be gained, advantage of the opportunity must be taken. There is a sense of hope, rather than hopelessness, and, as Seligman<sup>12</sup> has indicated, hope may well be a significant indicator of the way in which a person explains the world. Hope lightens the burden of despair. Meaning is further characterized by a sense of purpose through which the experiences can be used in such a way that the prevailer finds reason to engage with and actualize a place in the world.

Being a victim, survivor or prevailer should not be seen as fixed states of being or strictly linear. It is probable that individuals move between them frequently and rapidly. Nevertheless, the further towards a state of prevailing individuals may be, the less likely it is that they will slip into a state of oppression, and when they do the duration and severity will tend to be less. The state of prevailing may be a life goal.

Is it possible that we limit outcomes based on the goals set and the questions asked? Could it be that we not only limit our clients' expected outcomes, but also our own belief system of what can be achieved? The answers one gets are dependent upon the questions one asks.

Might it be argued that actively considering questions of meaning and purpose at such an intense period in ones life, when everything has been dismantled, when one has been stripped down to the most basic of fundamentals and beliefs, that these ques-

tions are the only ones which might offer satisfaction?

A search for meaning is a lengthy one. It might take place while in therapy. It might take place following therapy. It might even take place irrespective or in spite of therapy (and we have to consider and be prepared for that possibility as well). Neither victimhood nor survival are really sufficient for a fully congruent, integrated and stable psychological reconciliation of the effects of torture. Prevailing may be a state in which that insufficiency has been addressed.

It suggests that although the good intentions of current and conventional treatment programs and, in many respects, their outcomes should not in any way be minimized, there is the possibility of gaining something more from treatment than tools for survival. It may be possible to reach a state in which meaning and purpose can be taken from the most traumatic of experiences of torture in a way unachievable without that experience. It may be possible not just to enable victims to survive, but to be able to transcend that in a qualitatively significant way. This may be called prevailing. That is why survival is not enough.

### Conclusion

The paper offers prevailing as a new perspective on the therapeutic imperative for those who have been tortured. It argues that current treatment modalities do not address ways in which people learn to integrate and re-form their experiences into a new sense of self, and so therapies may be enhanced by an orientation towards the realization of a sense of meaning and purpose that can be drawn from the experience.

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