

Psychotherapy In the Shadow of War and Gang Conflict

The author is a PhD candidate here in the U.S. who elected not to list an institutional affiliation in order to enhance confidentiality of these detailed cases.

by
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It was somewhat unnerving when Katya (a pseudonym) would preface her sessions with "Are you okay?" "Are you sure it is okay to talk about this?" "Is this upsetting you?" "Does this give you bad dreams too?" "I am not sure I can tell you about my life...I think you will get hurt..." I imagined that she had experienced all kinds of horrific experiences, especially in light of the news coverage and her editing of material in the therapy. "Sometimes, after we talk, I feel worse...my dreams, my worries scare me even more than before. Do you get scared sometimes when I talk?" "I want to talk with you. I don't want to lose you too..." And talk we did... Sometimes, she would also ask me directly if she had hurt me—so great was her fear (or, perhaps, her unconscious aggressive wishes).

I want to tell Katya's story, based on some of what she told me in therapy, and I want to tell the story of my therapy with Katya and her relationship with her friend Angel, an African-American teen who had already been in therapy with me.

Katya and Her Journey

Katya is eighteen years old. She and her parents fled to Germany when the war hit their

Bosnian town. The military took control of their home. When her father left to find work, she and her mother were separated from him for a long time. During this time, she felt that he had abandoned her mother emotionally. (Katya's insight into her mother's feelings can also be seen as Katya's projection of her own feelings of abandonment by her father.) A bright young woman, Katya understood this and she noted that the separation likely fostered the close mother-daughter relationship and negatively affected her ability to get along with her father. In her father's absence, she was the 'spouse,' her mother's partner and only friend. Even today, she gets angry with him for not being there when they needed him.

Katya is an expert at both verbal and non-verbal communication. She is a polyglot and converses in five languages and writes in three of these languages. When she moved to the United States, she maintained straight A grades. Her parents do not speak English and she is a parentified adolescent who interfaces with our American institutions on behalf of her parents.

Before coming to the United States, Katya went to school as a refugee in Germany. There, she said they treated her

like she "was the lowest form of life. To them, I was nothing. They discriminated against me and set out to hurt me. I experienced severe loneliness. I joined a gang to have friends and to keep myself safe. I was lucky that my mother never knew about my secret life. My gang initiations included sex, violence, drug use, and other illegal behavior. I want to forget about these things. I am so ashamed of my past."

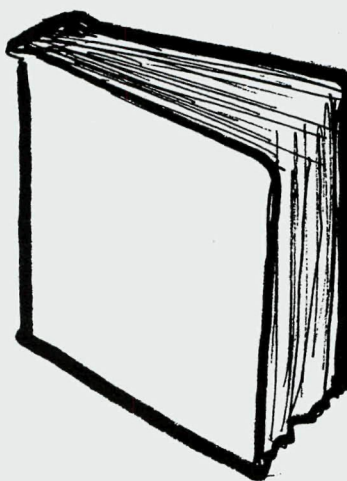
As she told her story in the context of the therapy, she came to a startling realization. The violence she experienced in the gang was the very thing her parents sought to protect her from when they left their homeland. In the United States, she learned not to talk about her past in the gang. She did not want people to think badly of her. She felt that what she had done was wrong. She shared her past with two people, her best friend, Angel, and, to varying degrees, with me during the therapy. Instead, she pretended to be "the smart, good little girl."

Throughout treatment, she would say, "No one knows the real me. If they knew me, I know that they would not have anything to do with me." It was hard for me to know what to say. Sometimes, I would nod to this, sometimes I would feel woefully inadequate, and sometimes I would wonder how much more she had edited.

She and her parents came to the United States looking for a new life. Katya decided that this was her chance "to start all over." She made important decisions.

She decided to say no to gangs, sex, and drugs/drug-selling. Although she avoided these things, her new life still included discrimination and pain. She summarized her inner experience eloquently: "It is as if I am living with a war inside of me. Every thing, every encounter, and every person is dangerous. People? They can hurt you—you know? They can break you. They can kill you. I know this. I have done this."

Given this, she decided the best way to deal with life was to do her schoolwork and her store clerk job as perfectly as possible. In that way, she avoided the dangers of the relationships in the outside world. She would not allow herself to need anybody to help her. She said she knew from experience that she would get hurt. She believed if she made mistakes, others would make fun of her, or worse yet, reject her. In all that she did, she tried to be the perfect person. When she was perfect, no one knew the real



Katya. She had to hide her true self. If people liked her, they did not really like her—they liked

the person she pretended to be.

Although she learned to pretend all the time that she was "normal," she said that deep down inside she felt she was not normal. Katya once said "I will never be normal. Worst of all, I cannot sleep at night. I am tired, scared, and lonely." In her nightmares, we discovered that her experiences with war and the gang conflict have scarred her for life. At some point, her false presentation was so hard to maintain that even books (her "friends") did not comfort her anymore because she could not concentrate. Her perfect grades were impossible to achieve because she could not focus on what the teachers were saying.

Sometimes people said simplistic things that upset her and that "would get her mind stirred up." When this happened, she just 'mentally checked-out.' To her dismay, she learned that this 'mental check-out' could happen at any moment. In response to this dissociative experience, Katya commented: "I feel like I am like a prisoner in this 'free' world. This life is not a new life—this life is haunted." Indeed, her world was experienced and peopled just like her past life. The only difference was that in some cases, the names and places had changed.

Alone, exhausted, and imprisoned in the real 'free' world, she broke down. Katya's emotional and mental guard weakened. Several months prior to beginning treatment, she met a gazelle-like girl whose name in English means "Angel." They became friends. They shared some

dreams and they realized that their real life experiences had amazing parallels. Her friend had even been in a gang, prostituted, stole, and sold and used drugs! Katya fell in love with her.

Katya's relationship with Angel both confused and excited her at the same time. At times, she wanted to be with Angel as much as possible. When she was with her, she felt special. She had a best friend and she felt she was no longer alone. The war that was going on inside of her was still there, but she felt less scared and lonely. With respect to her relationship with Angel, Katya told me after she entered treatment with me that "until I met her, I wanted to die, but then, she needed me, and I needed her. She saved my life."

Katya discovered that talking with her 'Angel' friend helped her. Like Katya, her 'Angel' friend had serious problems. At some point, Angel told Katya that she thought Katya needed "professional help." Angel told Katya that she went to visit the "talking lady" for counseling in the school-based clinic once or twice a week. She tried to persuade Katya to get counseling. Katya's reaction was "Professional help? No. No, thank you."

As Katya saw her friend get a little better, she felt envious of Angel's renewed joy for life. She too wanted that peace, that inner happiness. However, she did not want to talk with a stranger. She later shared in the therapy that she would have preferred to talk with her 'Angel' friend. In fact, she shared that she felt jealous of the

"talking lady" (me) because her 'Angel' friend talked with me about her secrets.

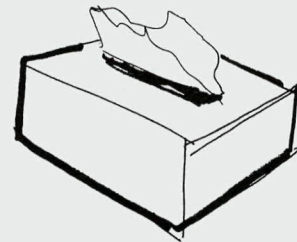
I knew that Angel had a war going on inside of her. Her war was about her experiences in the gang and her abusive and drug-using parents. Angel's father was a pimp and her mother was a mentally ill prostitute who tried to kill Angel in infancy. (They abandoned her.) As Angel grew, Katya spent less time with her. She began to feel alone again. The metaphor for Angel's treatment was "getting back on track." Indeed, Katya's 'Angel' friend was 'back on track.' Angel's gazelle-like legs carried her to some considerable achievements in track and field.

Katya noticed that Angel was feeling and doing better; she decided she too wanted to feel better. Angel's growth motivated Katya to consider therapy.

When Katya asked the secretary in the school-based clinic for an appointment to see her, the secretary said that the 'talking lady' was very busy. She asked Katya if this was for an 'emergency,' and Katya said, "No." Three weeks went by and Katya did not get an appointment. Katya later told me that she feared that I did not want to see her. Feeling rejected (even before the therapy was to begin) Katya acted out. When her appointment arrived, she did not attend. She reminded me of this in the course of therapy. "Back then, when I had to wait, I decided that I did not want to talk. Talking is painful. Talking reminds me of the things I know I need to forget. Talking hurts me. I can take care of myself just fine."

Therapist's Narrative

I am Katya's therapist. As the granddaughter of Irish immigrants, I heard stories of discrimination that accompa-



nied immigration. The "Irish need not apply" signs—they referred to my grandmother and my grandfather when they searched for work.

My experiences with discrimination were peer-related bias (appearance discrimination) and classism. I understood what it was like to feel as though one doesn't quite "fit in." This understanding pervaded my internal and external experiences. As I prepared to see Katya, I thought I might know this small part of her world. We all want to be accepted. We all want to "fit in." We have our humanity; we have our basic emotional needs in common. I think most people experience these needs. Quite simply, when I met Katya, I expected to see myself and the existential struggle of most others in her story, although I recognized that experiencing discrimination as an immigrant is very different from the experience of being a war refugee.

After the missed appointments, I therefore decided to go looking for Katya. Any adolescent who could muster the courage to schedule an appointment with a therapist must be in pain. The very same day that Katya missed her appointment with me, one of Katya's classmates told me she would like me to meet her best friend—Katya. Knowing of the missed appointment, I invited the teen (Angel) to bring her friend to visit me during their lunchtime. Angel eagerly agreed to "share" her session because she believed Katya needed to talk more than she did.

The First Session

Katya's affect was initially constricted during our first meeting. She looked distant and her eyes appeared tired. She was able to 'half-smile' when her friend touched her or said something that was intended to be funny. I did not believe her when she said she was not depressed. After the introductions and connecting began, Angel went to lunch, leaving Katya with me.

Katya was a compelling young woman whose eyes held me in their gaze. She searched my eyes. Her eyes darted from my left to my right eye—as if she read me. Her gaze told me of the pain she has experienced. Throughout the therapy, I wanted to look away, but I knew I could not—to look away would be to abandon her. She challenged me to be fully me when I am with her.

"Katya, can you do me a

favor?" She nodded. "I am worried about how you are feeling inside. You seem so sad and tired. Will you promise me that you will not hurt yourself?"

Katya drew in her breath. Her narrowed eyes were wide with surprise. She sat up straight and whispered, "How did you know?" Not wanting to scare her, I replied softly, "Sometimes, when other teens feel sad and tired, they think about things like that. I like you and I want you to be safe and feel better. Katya nodded and whispered, "Yes, me too."

Establishing safety was my first priority. My next priority was to engage her in the process of feeling better. "So Katya, if you were feeling better, how would you know?" "I would be able to sleep like a baby!" Katya smiled as if remembering what it was like to sleep. "I think the lack of sleep is the worst thing. That is what makes me tired. If I could sleep, I think I could concentrate and get better grades..." She was staring at the basket of lifesavers on my desk. Silence.

I took the basket and held it out to her saying, "Which flavor do you like?" She looked at me quizzically. Then, she tentatively reached for the white lifesaver. "Ah...my favorite! By the way, I also like the red and green ones!" I opened my white lifesaver and popped it into my mouth. I was smiling as encouragingly and as warmly as I could. I was conscious of the metaphor my lifesaver proffered. She took one, but would she eat it? I waited. More

silence.

Katya cupped the lifesaver in her palm and began tossing it from hand to hand. It was as if she was weighing it...making a decision. Then, she looked into my eyes and opened it. She put it into her mouth and winced at the tart flavor. Then, she began to smile shyly.

After she agreed to a "no suicide safety contract," we spent the rest of our session going over the "list of things other teens do" to get their sleep back. She was right with me, repeating the get-your-sleep-back list verbatim.

"No caffeine, no sugar, and no fast food after 3 p.m."

I saluted her with my hand and said, "Check!"

"No watching the news, no scary or tear-jerker movies—only comedies, adventure, and romances?"

"Check, check, and check!" I replied. I wagged my finger at her and said jokingly, "And, no napping after school!"

"Why?"

"I want you to feel good and tired when bedtime comes."

"That one might be hard..."

I laughed and put my hands on my hips in mock horror. "Katya, say 'Yes, no napping after school.'"

"Okay, I will try."

"Exercise, and lots of it. You can do anything. Walk. Climb the stairs. Whatever you do, try to spend time outside, the fresh air will also help you sleep." She looked at me incredulously.

"No." She was being affectively dramatic. "It will not."

She was looking at a picture of my son on my desk. I

replied that whenever I want my little boy to sleep well, I bring him outside and that it really does work. She asked if the picture on my desk is my son. "Is that him? He sleeps well at night?"

"Yes, like a baby...all night long!" I was conscious of the parent metaphor and I laughed nervously. "Back to business now. No snacks after 8 p.m. No bedtime television. Oh yes, and no reading books in bed."

She whined, "But I like to read." She was getting into this back-and-forth bantering.

"Me too, but if you give me a really good book, I'll stay up until I finish it. Does that happen to you?"

"Yes, I get lost in books. I love them." "Me too, but if you want to sleep, you're going to have to read before bedtime!" Silence.

"Okay." She looked at me expectantly, as if it were my turn to speak again.

"And, most importantly, you need a journal. Do you have one?" She shook her head no and her eyes looked distant again. "Have you ever...?"

"A long time ago, I had a journal...it is gone now."

She then explained how she had lost her journal and how much she missed it. She talked about feeling like she had lost a part of herself when the journal disappeared and how she felt uncomfortable with the thought that someone else might read it and know her thought and feelings.

"You have lost so many things...So many things have happened to you..." I imagined

how scary it must be for her to come to my office...how she might fear feeling exposed or fear getting lost herself in the therapy. Silence. I opened my file cabinet and handed her a marble composition book. "At night time, until your eyes get sleepy, you can write in this journal. You can write anything and everything that comes to your mind. It is like free therapy. Sometimes, I like to pretend I am talking with someone when I write. You can write to anyone, God, your friend, me..."

She smiled shyly. "I like to write." "That's great!" Silence.

Then, Katya said "Yes, I want to sleep. I will try all these things. Some will be harder than others you know."

She clutched the notebook to her chest. I imagined the notebook as the prototypical transitional object—the teddy bear. I wanted her to have something to hold onto. I also held out the lifesavers again. She picked the red, green, and white lifesavers.

"You like...ooh, my favorites."

"Mine too." She said shyly. She put them in her shirt pocket for later.

"Since your safety and getting a good night's sleep are our priorities, I would like to see you every school day until we have you sleeping." I smiled. "You need to tell me whether the get-your-sleep-back plan is working! I have other ideas about getting a good night's sleep, but let's see how these ideas work first."

"Okay." She nodded in agreement.

"Anytime during the

school day, you need a safe place to come and relax, you're welcome to stop by and see me. Here is my beeper number for emergencies..."

In this first session, I tried, as best as I could, to create a connection and a safe holding environment in my office space. I used my metaphoric, non-verbal, and verbal communication to inform Katya that I would be there to help when she needed me.

Treatment

During the therapy, Katya and I learned that we had much in common, despite our differences. For both of us, school was one way of coping and feeling successful in life. The classroom is a level playing field. An education also offers us opportunity to grow and move forward developmentally. Reading is another way we cope. We learn about ourselves from the characters of the books we read. Words not only soothe us—they take us away. We can retreat inside our minds and they lead us to other spaces. These places and spaces are sometimes preferable to the harsh reality of the outside world. The outside world can be a world in which relationships are conditional and dangerous. We both feel deep in our hearts, that we do not "fit in"—regardless of how hard we try. We both like to write. Writing organizes and legitimates our experiences. When we reread our writing, or others read it, then we are seen and heard. For us, writing is a therapeutic experience; writing

is cathartic.

The next year of therapy focused on more covert issues and interaction patterns. During this second year, Katya rejoiced in her newfound zest for life. I observed her in our sessions and watched her from afar. I felt considerable satisfaction in the therapeutic work. She had grown. I had grown. In one poignant session, she proclaimed herself "cured." She spoke of a blissful feeling of inner peace.

We began the process of termination. Our appointments were less frequent and more like "check-ins." We moved to an "as-needed basis" for emergencies (keeping the door open), with regular appointments every two weeks. One month into this termination process, her nightmares had returned and she was unable to focus in school again. She missed an appointment with me. When we met, she said she went from feeling "cured" to "feeling worse than I felt when I began."

This puzzled me. I wondered aloud if this was related to a fear of ending therapy. She emphatically said no. Then, I began to wonder if she had been traumatized either directly or vicariously. She was sure this was not the case. Instead, she said, "I feel you have lied to me. I got my hopes up that I could live my life and be happy and have peace. This therapy did not work! I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can't think or even talk right! Again, I am scared all the time. When I came here, I thought this would make my past go away. But it hasn't and I feel worse." I wondered if I had mis-

led her somehow.

I focused right away, giving her the permission to feel angry and hurt and trying to learn about the sequence of events leading to this "relapse." Katya was highly resistant to talking about the two weeks prior. It took two weeks to discover that Katya had indeed experienced additional vicarious traumatization. The first vicarious trauma occurred when she was functioning as a volunteer translator for other Bosnian refugees. She would listen to their war stories as she helped them learn to negotiate the United States. These helping experiences were fulfilling, but they were stressful and they reminded her of experiences she would rather not remember, she said.

Then, another war broke out. She shared that this was when her inner peace was "shattered...gone." She talked about how she glued herself to the news and the television. She was looking to see if she recognized any of the places or the people; she wanted to know everything she could about what was going on. Instead, she was remembering her past. Everywhere she went, the war was being discussed. They called the war "the conflict." She was interviewed for the news. We came to the conclusion that volunteering and watching the news should be added to her list of things to "stop doing" in order to get her sleep back. She took the initiative to make elaborate plans for substituting other activities and experiences that would be less traumatic.

In addition, Katya's inner conflict also coincided with an outbreak of local gang conflict and violence. She knew and had met people who had been injured or shot in the neighborhood. Some of the places she used to visit or hang out at were the locations of drive-by shootings. "I could have been shot or hurt." Places that were previously considered safe were now dangerous.

It appeared that Katya was struggling with the internal conflicts that were either triggered or superimposed by the war, the gang violence, and her volunteer translator experiences.

With the shadow of war and gang conflicts hanging over us, we learned how fragile one's inner world can be. We continued on our journey to free her from the past that haunts her present. We learned that as long as there are wars and gang conflicts, she will have relapses. For Katya, the world will remain forever a dangerous place.

This knowledge about how war and conflict in the world could trigger a relapse was an important discovery in the therapy. Eventually, she began to feel safe and her nightmares ended. When the next "conflict" occurs, either internally, local, or abroad, she will be ready, armed with the knowledge that for her, relapse is to be expected. Together, in our journey, we have learned that she will be able to return to a state of relative health and relative inner peace. The operative word is—relative—for her, for me, for you, for all of us. □

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