

Beyond where it started:

A look at the “Healing Images” experience

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Abstract

In March 2004, the Baltimore-based nonprofit organization Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (ASTT)** initiated a photography-based therapeutic programme for clients. Developed by a professional photographer/teacher in collaboration with a psychologist, the programme has the goal of enabling clients to engage in creative self-exploration within a supportive, group setting. Since its inception, thirty survivors of conflict-related trauma and torture from five different countries have taken part in the programme, known as “Healing Images,” using digital cameras to gather individually-chosen images that are subsequently shared and discussed within the group. These images include depictions of the natural and manmade environments in which clients find themselves; people, places and objects that offer comfort; and self-portraits that reflect the reality of the life of a refugee in the United States.

This description of the “Healing Images” programme is based on comments gathered through discussion with participants and through interviews. Additional information was gathered from observation of early workshop sessions, review of numerous client photographs and captions, and pertinent organizational materials.

A fundamental benefit of the programme

was that it offered a mutually supportive group environment that diminished clients’ feelings of psychological and physical isolation. Participants gained deep satisfaction from learning the technical skills related to use of the cameras, from the empowering experience of framing and creating specific images, and from exploring the personal significance of these images. Programme activities sparked a process of self-expression that participants valued on the level of personal discovery and growth. Some clients also welcomed opportunities to share their work publicly, as a means of raising awareness of the experience of survivors.

Key words: Torture survivors, therapeutic photography, group therapy, creative arts therapy, physical & psychological trauma

Background

Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma Founded in 1994, Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (ASTT), a non-profit organization in Baltimore, Maryland, has as its mission “to alleviate the suffering of those who have experienced the trauma of torture, to educate the local, national, and world community about the needs of torture survivors, and to advocate on their behalf.”

The need for ASTT’s services is great. The Washington, D.C. metropolitan area has become one of the top “magnet” areas for immigrants in the United States;¹ as a result, the District and the surrounding region are characterized by a broad and growing diver-

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sity of immigrant communities and related social networks. United States Government estimates place the number of torture survivors in the United States at over 400,000,² and it is estimated that approximately 40,000 survivors live in the greater Washington/Baltimore region. As one of only three specialized care centers for torture survivors in the mid-Atlantic region, ASTT has seen a significant increase in the demand for its services. At present, the organization serves approximately 200 survivors a year.

ASTT clients have experienced many types of torture. These include beatings, rape, stabbing, suspension, forced positions, burns and electric shock. Psychological forms of torture to which clients have been subjected include death threats, mock executions, sleep deprivation, forced observation of the torture of other individuals, humiliation, and sound and light over-stimulation and under-stimulation. PTSD and Major Depression are the two most common psychological diagnoses shared by ASTT clients.

ASTT provides comprehensive services for clients. Mental health services include psychological assessment, individual and family psychotherapy, and group treatment. Social support services address client needs pertaining to living situation, health and nutritional status, and educational or employment goals. All services are provided free of charge.

ASTT's work with torture survivors centers on the Strengths-Based Model, an approach rooted in the belief that every individual has deep internal resources and the inherent capacity to transform his or her life.³ A central role of ASTT psychotherapists and case managers is helping survivors identify these strengths and build upon them. Each client helps to develop his or her own plan for personal wellness, based

on individual, prioritized needs that may be psychosocial, medical, or legal in nature. Through the inherently enabling nature of the Strengths-Based approach, clients become active partners in the process of healing.

In addition, ASTT has developed a variety of special programmes and activities for the benefit of clients.

"Healing Images": an overview

In March 2004, ASTT initiated a new programme for clients: a workshop combining digital photography training and group therapy within a creative arts context. The project was developed by Steven Rubin, a photojournalist/instructor, in collaboration with Karen Hanscom a psychologist who is also ASTT's director. The goal of the workshop was to enable clients to explore paths of creative self-expression within a supportive, therapeutic setting.

Entitled "Healing Images," the programme was inspired in part by the principles and techniques developed by Judy Weiser of the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia. Approach and implementation, however, were strongly informed by Rubin's own professional experience, which has included documenting the situation of refugees held in detention in the United States as well as photo essays depicting individuals affected by conflict in Kosovo, Rwanda and elsewhere.

During initial planning, ASTT therapists and case managers helped identify potential workshop participants. The primary consideration was that participating clients would be at a stage of sufficient emotional stability that possible exposure to sensitive material within the group – the spontaneous sharing of stories of past abuse, for example – would not have detrimental consequences. ASTT staff also sought to prioritize clients who had

limited occupational or social opportunities, and who seemed to be particularly isolated.

ASTT's director perceived the photography workshop as an opportunity to explore an alternative, group-oriented approach to working with torture survivors. At the same time, the programme aptly reflects the organizational perspective that the healing process takes place on many levels and does not always require psychotherapy.

Thirty ASTT clients from five different countries have taken part in what has come to be known simply as "photo group." The number of participating female clients has been slightly greater than that of male clients, a reflection of gender statistics among ASTT's overall client base.⁴ Group size has been kept small, with four to six clients participating at a given time in successive workshop cycles. Either ASTT's director or another staff therapist is present at each class meeting, along with the photo specialist.

The original grant-funded period lasted approximately 14 months. An interval between workshop sessions in mid-2006 afforded the opportunity to assess programmatic and technical needs. During this time, reflections on the "Healing Images" experience to date, along with suggestions that could help inform future activities, were gathered from a small group of former participants/clients as well as from the founding instructor and principal ASTT staff. Inquiry was carried out through one-on-one interviews, email exchanges, and discussion with clients. This paper is based primarily on information and observations gathered through that qualitative inquiry process.

The "Healing Images" experience

Early stages

During the first workshop meetings, clients were invited to bring with them and share images that were important to them, such as

photographs of family members or friends, provided they felt safe and comfortable doing so. They were also encouraged to share images gathered from newspapers, magazines, or other sources that held meaning for them. The resulting exchanges helped initiate discussion around the power of the photographic image as well as such factors as composition and perspective. Just as importantly, these early sessions helped participants get to know one another and become increasingly comfortable as a group.

During these initial meetings, the use of already-existing images as triggers for discussion – the "passive" application of photography in counseling – served as a springboard for the project's central focus on "active" engagement of individuals in gathering and sharing their thoughts about images of their own making.⁵ From the workshop's start, ample "hands-on" practice helped demystify the technology of digital photography. Clients gathered images inside and around the ASTT office during class meetings, and subsequently began to take photographs between sessions as well.

Meetings of the photo class took place weekly, and ranged from two to three hours in length. Occasional field-trips enabled participants to explore various sites around Baltimore, including the Inner Harbor and the Visionary Arts Museum, as well as the neighborhood surrounding the ASTT office. These group expeditions – and, to an even greater extent, the work carried out by clients on an individual basis between class sessions – yielded a multitude of images for sharing and discussion. The nature of these images, and the reflections that they evoke, are the focus of the following section of this paper.

Inner and outer worlds

Clients participating in the Healing Images workshops photographed myriad aspects of

the world around them: their living spaces and personal effects, neighborhoods, friends and family members, and social events and celebrations. Nature images abound, especially photos of flowers and of trees, both fully-leaved and bare, and with roots. Many clients gathered nighttime shots: the swirl of neon signs and city lights against darkness, or the gleam of moonlight on snow.

Some photographs relate to occasional assignments suggested by the instructor, including those designed to help participants better understand certain functions or technical features of the camera. From early on, however, it was clear that the images that clients created were not bound by the parameters of proposed themes. The psychologist suggests that explicit assignments represented “too much of a construct” for individuals functioning in “survival mode.” Ultimately, clients photographed what they wished to photograph: “It was going to go where they needed it to go.”

For some clients, the camera directly opened the way to exploration of their new surroundings and physical environment:

“I was given the camera and I went and took the photos that I wanted to, everywhere I wanted ... that also really helped me to see the city – I hadn’t even paid attention to many things. Now that I have the camera I look around a lot, I look around to photograph this building, which is taller than this one or that one. I searched for statues, I went around downtown to take photos of lots and lots of little statues ... In between I stopped and read and said, ‘Ah, I never paid attention to all that!’ So, with the camera I have now, I’ve started to pay attention to many things.”

Another client describes the satisfaction he gained from pursuing a self-chosen subject

– in this case, a series of nighttime winter images:

“... I saw how the landscape was different that day, and I set myself to try to capture certain things when I went out. And there was a lot of wind and snow and it was cold, but I went out and took some photos that pleased me in the end ... I felt that I devoted myself ... it allowed me to create certain challenges or do certain things that maybe I could not have done”.

For this client, photography became a way of exploring the dynamic relationship between subject matter and state of mind:

“Day after day, without personally having anticipated it, [using the camera] helped me to learn how to discover another side of shooting certain things. Because when you see things in a different manner, from one day to another ... your mental state is different on each day. This let me notice certain changes, to discover that, oh, maybe in this state I discovered this or that, there was a change in me internally, and for me this was positive.”

He adds, “Seeing something under another aspect than that in which I was used to seeing it every day – I tried to capture that and it made me happy.”

Self-portrait as statement

ASTT staff and instructors were struck by the number of self-portraits created by participants, and by the candid nature of many of these images. Clients photographed themselves or were photographed, at their request, by others – class members, family members, friends – in situations reflective of their day-to-day experiences. One picture shows a client standing at a public telephone, listening intently. The closely-framed

image bears the simple caption “A refugee’s life in America.”

Other self-portraits include objects or elements that give clients comfort or strength. One image shows a client miming the feisty gesture of the emblematic World War II figure “Rosie the Riveter,” featured in a poster on the wall behind her. The caption reads, in part:

“After my housemate told me the real story of that lady, Rosie the Riveter, I decided to have a copy of the poster in my own bedroom, just in front of my bed, and every day before I go out in the morning I will look at her and just say to myself ... you too can do it. I was so weak at that time and wanted to give up. The poster was just a good expression for my life ... when I feel weak, or under a lot of stress, I will just take a look at it and feel strong.”

In another self-portrait, a client wears traditional clothes from her homeland. “When I wear my African clothes,” the accompanying caption reads, “I feel like I’m in my house.”

Some self-portraits were made expressly

for mailing to distant family members or friends. It was noted that many of these tend to show the client well-dressed and standing near a car or in a nicely-furnished room – portrayals that feature reassuring signs of well-being and stability.

Commenting on the number and diversity of the self-portraits, the psychologist observes: “In psychology, one of the ways we know ourselves is by what others tell us about ourselves ... how others reflect back to us.” She suggests that:

“When people move here, they’ve changed all the culture and scenery and everything around them, and they don’t have a picture in their mind of themselves in space and time and environment.”

These photographic self-portraits, she feels, actually help clients in constructing “the sense of self in place, and seeing themselves here in the United States – making it real.” She further observed that, over time, clients tended gradually to create fewer and fewer self-portraits.



You never know what you can do unless you try. I stood in the cold for the first time without a coat to shelter me, to provide warmth. I just wanted to try it, to see how it felt. In my country I wanted to try politics, as one of the few women who do. I then too stood alone in the cold, unprotected and unsheltered.



This reminds me of one of the tallest buildings in downtown Dakar, which is the administrative building. People think we have no roads, no cars, no houses, no buildings and this shows we have buildings like this in Dakar. Everywhere in the world there are poor and rich. People here in America only show the bad parts of Africa.



Look at these girls! Their lives are beautiful and without worry. They reflect the joy of life. Will my life one day resemble that of these little ones?



A thumbnail view

The photographs included here, a minute sample of the work produced through the “Healing Images” project, offer some examples of the kind of pictures under discussion. (For purposes of confidentiality, no identifiable images of clients are included, and no attributions are attached to the photographs or accompanying captions.)

Talking about the photographs

As suggested by the images included here, clients’ photographs sparked reflection and



Since humans are not snails that move with their homes (shells) on their back, I was not going to be that exceptional human to do it ... Words will never be sufficient enough to thank who offered that little space. That’s my world. I lived in a small space but with a free mind and with other conditions like the photography class my mind grew lighter. I liken myself to a corn grain: if it drops someplace no matter how shallow it was buried, if conditions are favorable it will grow.

This photograph reminds me of my transition from my life in Africa to my new life here in America. In Africa I was a light to my family, my friends, my children. I provided for my family, we were a happy family. Then I got involved in politics and this light went out. Then I came to America ... a second light went on for me, ASTT. ASTT is the light for me, a guide for me now.

discussion around such themes as “identity, dislocation, loss, renewal, and American culture.”⁶

Within the class, clients shared their photographs with one another by displaying their work as a slide-show, during which any participant could hit the “pause” key to request the photographer’s thoughts regarding a particular image. Clients always had the “first word” about their own photographs, with ASTT staff and other participants offering their comments only afterwards. The resulting insights were often unexpected as well as deeply revealing.

A photograph taken by one client, for example, shows the exterior of a Chinese restaurant, its façade topped by a canopy decorated with artificial rocks. A discussion revealed that:

“the rocks made the client think of the coast where she used to live and how they’d go down the coast if you were pregnant and get some of the calcium rocks and chew on them... so you’d get enough calcium for you and your baby.”

As noted by ASTT’s director:

“It’s really the same thing as art therapy with interpretative painting...the picture means something to the person that took it. We can have a reaction to it, we can have our own reaction, but it really has this meaning only to the person that took it.”

As Weiser has stated, “The surface visual contents of people’s photos, along with the unconscious decisions they make while planning or taking them, are all indications of people, places, and things that have mattered most inside them.”⁷

Benefits of the “Healing Images” experience

Beyond photography

For some clients, the opportunity of gathering with one another on a regular basis, for both social and learning purposes, was the first benefit they mentioned when asked about the workshop:

“For me, it was very good: it really helped me meet people who I didn’t know before, to make their acquaintance ... Coming each week to the meetings – that really helped me a lot. To come and talk together, it was very good for me.”

The fact that all of the participants shared the bond of having survived trauma or torture made the rapport a unique one. “The photo course in itself became a way to meet with people with whom you shared a few of the same experiences,” said one client.

“On my part it’s had an effect, because I suffered inside ... I was in the first place troubled by my problems. To come to the photo group, meet with brothers, share the same ideas, discuss things ... it helped me a lot.”

Another client comments:

“To be with people who are a little in the same situation as you...one feels that one is not isolated, one is not alone ...”

Participants shared not only a past history of trauma, but a present situation marked by uncertainty, owing to their status as asylum-seekers or as individuals who had recently gained asylum and were in the process of creating new lives for themselves. The class gave clients the opportunity “to share their asylum experiences and to be supportive of each other.”

Seeking to involve clients who had been socially and emotionally isolated proved a critically important aspect of the course. One participant describes how the photography class encouraged her to escape the “four walls and stress” of her everyday situation:

“The fun of handling the camera, it took away the stress that I had. Like going out – the camera even motivated me to go out of the house ... just taking some pictures of beautiful flowers, appreciating nature ... you know, just living with the world.”

Further, the workshop fostered a process of exchange that helped clients regain a sense of trust in others. An early sign of the rekindling of trust emerged very early in the project. A number of ASTT's clients at the time were from Cameroon, a country where political conditions have ignited conflict along sociocultural, ethnic, and linguistic lines. Concerns arose on the part of ASTT staff when both Francophone and Anglophone clients from Cameroon – putatively, individuals from opposing sides of the conflict in their home country – expressed interest in the photo class. The decision was made to raise the matter within the group itself. According to the psychologist, Karen Hanscom, the clients' response was striking in its unanimity: "Each time the groups shifted and we had that [situation], people said basically the same thing: 'We were both hurt' ... Never at any time did they get into a discussion of 'my side and your side'." The recurrence of this response suggests that, from the outset, a sense of shared identity as survivors outweighed other, potentially divisive distinctions among these clients; a common interest in the photo project helped to consolidate this sense of shared experience, and, arguably, to deepen and strengthen it in unexpected ways.

Another factor that strengthened group identity was that of shared language skills. During the first few class meetings, a volunteer interpreter was present to assist those clients from Central and West Africa who spoke French; subsequently, though, it became clear that some clients were sufficiently multilingual (in English as well as French and/or local languages) to translate for their fellow students. This process nurtured a sense of solidarity among participants and created an atmosphere of sharing and mutual support.

Beyond skills acquisition

Compounding the satisfaction that came from gaining photographic skills was the special excitement associated with use of up-to-date digital equipment. In the words of one client:

"I will talk now about how it feels to have and handle a digital camera, to have a camera in your possession. Not only a camera, but a *digital* camera – something not yet common in my part of the world, which is Africa. My experience with a camera is this: you feel like you are moving with the world ... You feel like you are going along with technology, you are not left behind, you are going with the time ..."

The prevalence of this attitude among participants prompted the instructor's observation that "the use of current digital technology with clients who typically have access to antiquated or run-down materials in their homeland [if they have access to anything at all]" carried benefits in itself.

An important corollary benefit was the acquisition of basic computer skills. Clients who had not been computer literate at the workshop's outset became adept at using a mouse, creating files, and transferring pictures from one file to another; some clients also learned to upload and email photo files through the Internet. At the end of each workshop cycle, participating clients received CDs of their photographic work.

The nature of the digital medium, apart from its novelty, offered another particular advantage in working with this group of clients. As noted by the instructor:

"I think the digital camera's immediacy of result was very useful and even therapeutic

for those survivors waiting in lengthy limbo for the U.S. government's long-awaited decision on their asylum status."

In contrast to the lack of personal control that characterized many critical aspects of their lives, the photography programme enabled these individuals to set their own goals, to autonomously select, frame, capture, and describe various aspects of their world. The deep sense of satisfaction conveyed by clients' comments on the workshop experience suggests the inherently empowering effect of this opportunity.

Perhaps most importantly, participants' reflections on the Healing Images experience suggest that, far from being a unidirectional device, the camera can become a channel for multiple connections between the individual and his or her world. Taking place at many different levels and in ways that cannot necessarily be defined, these interactions appear to help foster a process of re-engagement. The client who described the camera's role in motivating her to leave the confinement of her house and re-discover the small beauties of nature describes as well the re-awakening she feels taking place inside her. "Some life is creeping back into me," she says. She adds:

"I think things are kind of improving, my spirits are coming out until where I am today – because I can tell you that I am looking like a human being now, I have a smile on my face and everything."

Her words suggest the powerful connection between new ways of seeing the world and new ways of being in it.

*Sharing "Healing Images" with the public**
ASTT's mission statement includes the goal of helping "educate the local, national, and

world community about the needs of torture survivors." In consonance with this aim, the possibility of exhibiting photographs created by the photo group was considered from the project's outset. Once the group had generated a body of work, each client made an individual decision about taking part in public exhibitions, and selected what image(s) would be included if s/he indeed wished to participate.

One client described the decision to "opt out" as follows:

"Not taking part in certain events was sometimes, for me, a personal choice ... I take the photos for personal expression. That's to say, for me, photography is a personal experience. I can mount and show the photos, but I don't; it's not with that view in mind that I take photos. It was a personal experience, and helped me internally ..."

Other clients embraced the opportunity to show their work. "When I saw all my photos, it gave me a lot of pleasure," said one client who took part in an exhibition. Some photo group members have attended opening events and spoken of their workshop experiences before the public.

Challenges

Balancing flexibility and focus

It quickly became clear to those involved with coordinating the photo group that flexibility would be essential in working with these participants, chiefly because of the flux and uncertainty that characterized their personal situations. Despite strong interest in the course on the part of clients, attendance was often sporadic. Any number of issues might arise on a given day that prevented an individual from taking part in class: difficulties regarding living situation, follow-up on legal or health matters, or a need to retreat into solitude.

ASTT sought to alleviate obstacles posed by questions of transportation. As with clients benefiting from the organization's other services, funds were made available to help class participants cover public transport costs. In addition, the course instructor was able to pick up some participants and bring them to class. He observes that "sometimes it seemed that it would have been better to hold the class not at ASTT but in their communities – but that poses its own problematics, given that not all clients live in the same area."

During the photojournalist/instructor's involvement with the programme during the original grant period, three different groups of clients took part in photo activities; however, the parameters of class "sessions" were often flexible, with some clients continuing while new students joined. As a result, working on a consistent basis with the same group of individuals was rarely possible. Despite the challenges posed by this situation, it was recognized that this flux and flow reflected the reality of clients' lives:

"Some clients would curtail their involvement due to immigration matters. Some would drop out when they got asylum and then found jobs or started English classes. But these were all essential steps toward their resettlement and healing, a goal ultimately consistent with the program even if they meant disengagement with the program itself."

Integrating classwork into individual therapy

The photography class significantly complemented the therapeutic services and other support that clients were receiving at ASTT. Powerful and revealing discussions of images took place within the group; in addition, clients often talked about the photo workshop experience during their individual

therapy sessions. However, the integration of the photo work itself into these individual sessions did not take place as originally intended. This was chiefly owing to technical obstacles; namely, the lack of a photographic printer and necessary accessories. Within the photo group itself, the sharing of clients' photos through computer-based slideshows worked very effectively; the use of computers or laptops in therapy sessions for this purpose, however, was less practicable. This issue has since been addressed through the acquisition of two printers as well as a new computer and photo programme, a projector, screen, and additional digital cameras.

Conclusion

Based on the feedback they offered, we can conclude that participating ASTT clients perceived several benefits deriving from the "Healing Images" programme. The photo class provided an occasion for them to come together in an empathetic and caring group; for many, doing so represented an escape from psychological and physical isolation. This was a very positive and powerful experience.

As clients gained skills in using the cameras and began to depict different aspects of their lives, the class became an empowering experience at practical and personal levels. Clients describe a process of self-discovery sparked by the act of taking, viewing, and/or discussing the photographs. Talking about their images and the feelings associated with them appears to have deepened group sharing and mutual understanding.

Some differences in response emerged around the sharing of photographs with people outside the workshop or organization. For at least one client, creating and reviewing images sparks a valuable process of personal reflection; making them available for viewing by individuals outside the class

group is extraneous to his sense of satisfaction. Other clients welcome the opportunity to share their images with a broader audience through exhibitions or similar events, both in order to celebrate the collective achievements of the photo group and to help raise awareness of survivors' issues. These contrasting views indicate that respecting the individual preference of each participant on this decision, as ASTT has done to date, will continue to be essential.

All of the former participants who provided their feedback on the "Healing Images" experience strongly recommended that the programme continue into the future – "because," as one of them explained, "it will help many people. We ourselves, we have seen it; why not others?"

"It will help, so I hope it will continue. These are activities that help even without one's perceiving that they help us ... the photo course, like the English course, goes beyond being a simple photo class in which you learn how to use the camera. It becomes a family gathering ... it goes beyond where it started. It's tremendous."

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