

## “From the Wound a Lovely Flower Grows”

by Alexa Dvorson

It's more than commendable when a group of magicians disguised as a planning team manages to organize a conference down to the last nametag and teabag. But one mystery factor -- the unknown outcome -- always figures in the equation: no one can predict how even the most finely tuned agenda will play out until the event actually begins.

The stakes were higher than usual. To give the program a wider scope, the One by One Conference Committee took a risk by inviting guests beyond the circle of “usual suspects,” so the suspense was even greater. Given the daunting schedule peppered with presentations about Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur and Armenia – to name a few -- some participants might have felt upstaged or overwhelmed by the spectrum of subject matter: “I have so much on my plate with my own story; now I have to make room for all this too?!”

A legitimate concern, perhaps: after all, each chapter of war, conflict and genocide leaves unique scars on the body of human history. Just as no two stories shared in One by One's dialogue groups are ever the same, diverse legacies of trauma, guilt and transcendence ranging from Peru to Pakistan cannot be simply cut and pasted as lessons to apply elsewhere.

Or can they?

That was part of the mystery of this conference. The divergent backgrounds of participants and guest speakers created a lush backdrop for exploring and reporting on the power and potential of dialogue from many perspectives. The underlying themes of co-existence and reconciliation lent a common ground conducive to rich exchange. But the bonding agent that offered up the greatest space for resonance and revelation was none other than the human heart.

This was the open secret of the week's success – from the Conference Committee's heartfelt intentions in the planning stages to the emotionally charged, one-word utterances in the closing circle that brought five days of profound sharing, inquiry, and listening to a conclusion:

"Inspired."  
"Brimming."  
"Blessed."

In the opening presentation, Martina Emme and Rosalie Gerut traced ten years of dialogue and transformation in One by One as they recounted the group's origins in 1993: a seed of academic inquiry that took root and grew into a flowering tree whose branches continue to spread.

It was a Harvard researcher (a child of concentration camp survivors) who staged the first meeting between children of Nazi perpetrators and those of Shoah survivors. When it was over, the participants realized they weren't finished talking to each other. They've been conversing ever since. As others found their way to what gradually became a kind of family, One by One expanded to an incorporated organization with chapters in Boston, New York and Berlin, their members spanning three generations. Besides a decade of dialogue groups and monthly meetings, the immense dedication of individual members has manifested in numerous independent projects including a One by One delegation to Bosnia, school presentations, and book projects.



## Witnesses to Transformation

Zella Brown, Suzanne Schecker, Marga Dieter and Helga Mueller set the stage for two rounds of group storytelling in which we were reminded of the literal implication of the name “One by One:” each separate narrative has meaning, impact and significance in the bigger picture. Because some of us are familiar with each other's stories, dialogue in this context challenges us to speak with greater clarity about our own processes, while allowing us to cultivate greater empathy for others and respect our differences. While one child grew up with bedtime stories of her parents' imprisonment in concentration camps, another child of survivors grew up with silence and had to fill in the blanks of her parents' ordeal by other means. Instead of processing cognitive information, she “inherited their pain. They didn't talk about it; they lived it.”

On the other side of the fence, a schoolgirl in the United States learned the meaning of prejudice when a classmate refused to partner with her because she was German. Another wanted to die when she learned of her father's guilt as a Nazi perpetrator.

"I couldn't have a positive identity with my roots and family," said a third German voice, "because the world was saying they were evil.“

"But walking the path of dialogue," concludes another, "we help each other..."

### M'chail I'Chail: from Strength to Strength

Despite our very different stories, we have one significant commonality: many of us benchmark our biographies with demarcation points to chart the paths of our lives before and after joining One by One. In some cases it has meant the difference between hope and despair, fright and security, isolation and community. The more we have grown in the spirit of dialogue through the years, the more we have to share with others; when we give voice to something that has been locked away, wounds can be treated, history changed. Conference attendees affirmed this:

"Healing."  
"Renewed."  
"Grateful."  
"Expanded."  
"Overwhelmed."  
"Elevated."

Thanks to the facilitators' gentle rituals to create space for clear intent, the atmosphere so conducive to warm, heart-based exchange was reinforced every day. When this is possible, as one speaker reminded us, pent-up energy can be channeled in other ways, and "spiritual work happens." This requires total presence, the giving of oneself through listening, and gentle but firm adherence to timing.

Punctuated by tears and laughter, the creative ambience of the conference was enhanced with workshops and presentations by the following guest speakers:

- Consultant Robin Moulds offered a template for new dialogue paradigms that centered on debunking myths and stereotypes about Muslims.

- Pat Clark shared lessons learned about the formation of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to investigate racist murders in North Carolina in 1979. In her workshop, she appealed for the establishment of TRCs in U.S. communities.
- David Blair of the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding addressed the importance of breaking the cycle of revenge after a conflict and healing the wounds of identity.
- Human Rights Activist Mirsad Miki Jacevic told a compelling story of trauma and transformation as a witness to the siege of Sarajevo in the Bosnian war.
- Elisa Medina, who started a One by One branch in Peru, spoke about the healing process underway since she initiated an exchange between families of victims and perpetrators in the terrorist killings of the 1980s. Other Latin American perspectives were presented by Christina Braidotti, former Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum curator Irene Jaievsky, and Argentinian artist Patricia Krasbuch.
- Performing artist Naava Piatka transported her audience to the past with songs written by her murdered uncle Leyb Rozenthal and sung by her mother Cheyela Rozenthal in the Vilna Ghetto. She also gave a self-empowerment workshop titled “Moving On, Moving Up!”
- Dan Booth Cohen and Sophia Kramer led a family constellation workshop that opened doors of non-verbal, interactive intuition to help find clues to unresolved questions in the lives of two participants.
- Robert Hilliard gave a synopsis of the media's role during the Holocaust, raising powerful issues about the responsibility and impact of today's 24-hour media in times of war and genocide.
- Claudia von Alemann showed her film, “Shadows of Memory,” which addresses an unreconciled past involving three generations: the filmmaker, her 84 year-old mother, and her teenaged daughter.



- Karen Baldner presented a collaboration titled “Art as Dialogue” that seeks to channel artistic creativity to explore discomfort, fear and mistrust between a descendant of Holocaust survivors and a non-Jewish German.
- Blanche Foster and Abdelbagy Abushanab of the Darfur Rehabilitation Project spoke about the time

lost while nations bickered over the accuracy of the term genocide to describe the killing of thousands of Sudanese in Darfur over the last two years. The organization’s appeals for support, justice and democratization in Darfur underscored the urgency of their campaign to help solve the current crisis (more information at [www.darfurrehab.org](http://www.darfurrehab.org))

***Note: For a complete listing of conference speakers and events, please refer to [www.one-by-one.org](http://www.one-by-one.org).***

## **A Keynote of Courage**

(Please see our website [www.one-by-one.org](http://www.one-by-one.org) to read Joseph Sebarenzi's keynote speech.)

Joseph Sebarenzi, former head of the Rwandan Parliament and survivor of the Rwandan genocide, presented a stirring portrait of life in Rwanda before and after the murder of almost a million Tutsis and allied Hutus. He was joined by H.E. Professor Joseph Nsengimana, the Rwandan Ambassador to the UN, who gave the keynote speech at Fordham University. Both speakers discussed the benefits and shortfalls of gacacas, or people's courts, whereby perpetrators are given lighter sentences if they agree to tell the truth of their acts in April 1994, sometimes referred to as "the month that would not end."



Sebarenzi challenges those bent on vengeance with the words, "Revenge is like adding guilt to victimhood. It solves nothing. At some point, we have to ignore the past and envision the future." Pointing to One by One's healing effects of dialogue, he drew applause for his closing words: "If you can do it, we can do it."

## **Notes on Healing through Forgiveness**

As a long-term resident of Germany, a country whose value system places punctuality not far behind democracy and freedom of speech, I used to delight in the two-word greeting of a colleague who would let me off the hook when I regretted arriving at my workplace a few minutes late. "Instant forgiveness," he said.

What a concept! Nothing could be further from the philosophy presented during one of the most challenging and thought-provoking events in the One by One Conference. The forgiveness workshop, led by New York psychotherapist Marian Weisberg and trauma expert Anie Kalayjian, could have been mistaken for a crash course in human evolution and transformation. Due to time constraints, many participants felt an upwelling of unfinished business when the session ended, but they left with a toolkit of lifelong usefulness.

Myths were dispelled in a flurry of bullet points: forgiveness does not mean forgetting or denying whatever evil was committed; the enemy is not exonerated, nor are the dead or wounded betrayed. Furthermore, forgiveness does not forego justice. And in this paradigm, it is not necessary to wait for perpetrators to acknowledge their acts and ask for forgiveness first.



I could almost swear I heard little wheels whirring in people's heads--mine included--as we tried to wrap our brains around these daring notions in record time. The tight places in our belief systems were instantly noticeable, as if we were trying out new yoga positions in the heart-mind.

To stretch those tight places, another dose of bullet points: the state of being unforgiving can manifest in anxiety, compulsion, fear, resentment, inflexibility, horizontal violence and depression. There were instant nods of recognition; most of us have been visited by any combination of those conditions. As session participant Helen Rinde put it, "When I hold onto anger and hatred, I give away my power. By opening my heart, I get it back."

Thus one of the more salient points proposed: forgiveness is for healing oneself, not for someone else. According to Dr. Kalayjian, making a conscious choice to forgive can cleanse the soul of resentment, yield its grip on misery, and free the self from the chains of hate and anger. Whoever is not addicted to carrying sadness and grief [raise your hand!], she went on, has the chance to release trapped energy - which can then be channeled into positive action for the world.

Again, the wheels whirred in a screech of instant resistance. Won't this send the wrong signal; doesn't it ultimately let perpetrators off the hook? How on earth can this be applied to the Shoah, or any other genocide?

Dr. Kalayjian had an answer for everything. A descendant of survivors of the Turkish genocide of Armenians, she has heard such questions before. You forgive the soul of someone, she replied, not the evil deed. And: forgiveness is not something to be forced; it is a shift in perception to see beyond the reactive judgments of the ego—a shift not possible without adequate grieving time.

Let's face it: old habits die hard, and old identification systems die perhaps even harder. What becomes of someone who lets go of the anger around remembrance and remorse that have fueled a life's work and identity for years? How can forgiveness fit that sense of obligation?

Answer: it is wise to distinguish between the kind of anger that is constructive, manifesting in activism and other creative engagement, and the self-destructive kind that clings to the "demonization" of the Other, resulting in a perpetual polarization that blinds us to our own shadow sides.

We were asked to use a "workable grievance" to experiment with a step-by-step exercise in forgiveness. By acknowledging first what happened, then achieving empathy, followed by validation and reparation, closure was possible. No push-button paradigms were promoted here: just as dialogue can lead to reconciliation, this too is a process. When it works, one may arrive at forgiving the soul of another – it is not necessary to forgive the evil act.

The session concluded with these parting shots:

- 1) an invitation to observe the difference these steps can make in daily life;
- 2) an invitation to think about the impact of forgiveness—or lack of it—on the next seven generations.

As an afterthought, this quote from *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, sheds another light further along the forgiveness path:

"Then I realized something: that last thought had brought no sting with it. (...) I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded, not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night."

## **Notes on Compassionate Listening**

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the Czech novelist Milan Kundera writes that compassion holds supremacy in the hierarchy of emotions; in Tibetan Buddhism, it's a number one dharma charm. Thus the title of this workshop had instant appeal even before communication consultant Andrea Cohen introduced the Compassionate Listening Project (TCLP), a non-profit organization "dedicated to empowering individuals and communities to heal polarization and build bridges between people, communities, and nations in conflict."

The group was seeded in 1990 as Mideast Citizen Diplomacy and later developed under the stewardship of Leah Green, an American Jewish woman who had lived in Israel and worked in the West Bank. As Ms. Cohen spelled out, one of the main premises of the Compassionate Listening Project is that solutions to conflict can arise when people have the mere chance to be heard; barring violent intent, every human being holds a piece of the answer.

While we all wish to be heard with compassion, the simple act of listening to another person without passing judgment or chiming in with our own opinion at the first opportunity is a tall order. Those who attended this session had a chance to test their compassionate listening skills in an exercise led by Ms. Cohen, a licensed facilitator of TCLP and co-director of the Jewish-German Reconciliation Project.

In pairs, participants took turns speaking for four to five minutes about each one perceived as the most troubling aspects of the Middle East crisis. Both roles—speaker and listener—offered liberating revelations. Knowing they were not going to be challenged or interrupted, people reported a strong sense of trust, calm and respect when they held the speaker’s position. As listeners, some found they could give more of themselves than in typical exchanges. By opening more inner space to take in what the other person had to say, they could release the habit of formulating a response in their minds, which so often happens during discussions.

Although the exercise was brief, it revealed a broad plateau of more conscious communicating that seemed to offer unusual potential for greater understanding.

[On a personal note, despite my workaday familiarity with the intricacies of give and take in communication, I found this exercise particularly rewarding. As a correspondent who has recorded hundreds of interviews with people around the world, I experienced a refreshing break from my habitual listening position framed by the goal-oriented task of ‘getting’ something from the speaker. This time I could relax into giving an unusual quality of undivided attention.]

Ms. Cohen also showed the documentary film she directed, “Children of Abraham” about a Jewish Compassionate Listening mission to Israel and the Palestinian territories. The film triggered impassioned debate afterward, providing a splendid opportunity to practice more compassionate listening on the spot.

## Closing

Four days’ cultivation of dialogue’s fertile ground concluded with a party of song, readings, dance, and more storytelling. The next day, part of the closing circle was dedicated to the memory of Gottfried Leich, a One by One member who passed away in February 2005.

The sharing of common space to discuss a rich range of issues yielded an atmosphere so inspired that the heart quotient seemed to multiply with every session and conversation. By thinking outside the box to lend the conference a more global terrain, the planning committee made a glowing contribution to support the community of mediators, healers, peace artists, activists and facilitators; may their momentum be blessed and enhanced in the new year.



"Hopeful."  
"Fulfilled."  
"Family."

The family grows. As one member said, "This is a process that will last until the end of our lives."

...And then some.