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Around the World in Eighty Conversations

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This year marks eighty years of peace in Western Europe. Never before, however, has this much conflict ravaged the rest of the world. Since I began working as a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist at ARQ Centrum'45, where I see many traumatised refugees, the figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on global displacement have risen year after year. Some refugees find their way to our centre to be treated for complex trauma. They tell me about injustice and violence, and I listen to their experiences, rooted in places thousands of kilometres away, while their grief feels anything but distant. In our conversations I try to bridge that gap, to help carry the burden of their sorrow. But can such distance ever be truly bridged?

Every week, I have a session with Fatima, who fought for women's rights in her home country of Afghanistan, where she was subjected to countless threats, and managed to escape just in time. Since the Taliban has taken power in Afghanistan, human rights have come under increasing pressure, while women are actively silenced. Here, Fatima can speak freely. She tells me about what has happened in her country, her words gushing out as a torrent. While it is a source of relief for her, I also sense her anger at the "the West", as it looks on passively while her homeland falls prey to tribalism. She speaks Dari, her mother tongue, pausing only for the telephone interpreter to relay her words to me. When she speaks of her fear and sorrow for her family, who remains in Kabul, she struggles to find words. Articulating your feelings in another language, even after years in the Netherlands, is difficult, but even in her own tongue it does not always come easily. The interpreter translates what Fatima tries to say, yet something feels out of step. At times, it feels as if the interpreter is leaving things out, while at other times Fatima's answer does not follow from the

question. In psychotherapy sessions, I usually listen to what is said, but more often to what is said between the lines, and especially to what remains unsaid. My sessions with Fatima leave me wondering: is it Fatima, or the unknown voice on the phone who leaves words out or weaves in phrases that were never spoken? Is it a matter of lexical gaps, of untranslatable words, that causes Fatima's words to be lost in translation? Or is it the vast distance in time and place of her experiences that opens a gulf between us, leading her to see me not as perpetrator or victim but as a Western bystander? Someone who merely stands by and lets it happen? I suspect that the pain of loss is so immense that not everything can be said. I wish I could truly understand her, so that I could stand more fully by her side. After countless sessions with clients from Afghanistan, I still do not speak a word of Dari. Even after all these years, its lilting cadence continues to mystify me. I follow the melody of Fatima's words, her intonation and the rhythm of her sentences. While she speaks, I lean forward slightly and nod from time to time, even though I have no idea what she is saying. Fatima seems to take this as encouragement and opens up further, sharing more personal experiences than in our first sessions. Have the seeds of trust been sown? Perhaps not so much because of what I say, but because she feels invited to reflect on her experiences? Trust, in an epistemic sense, is the basis on which adults distinguish those we can rely on, those who we feel recognise us, and those with whom we can form a bond.[1] Trust, where it exists, is palpable,

1 P. Fonagy and E. Allison. 'The role of mentalizing and epistemic trust in the therapeutic relationship'. *Psychotherapy, 51*(3), (2014): 372–380; P. Fonagy, et al. 'Culture and psychopathology: An attempt at reconsidering the role of social learning.' *Development and Psychopathology, 34*(4), (2021): 1205–1220.

no matter which language you speak. I also realise that I often think I know how Fatima feels, even when she says nothing at all. When she sinks sadly into the chair in my office, her pain fills the room. Her posture, her gestures, and her glances are full of meaning. Most communication is, in fact, non-verbal, and most people are sensitive to some degree to those non-verbal signals that allow us to connect with one another. Might Fatima also sense my own non-verbal responses in this way? Could it be possible for people to feel seen and heard without having to put their pain into words? In the end, it seems to matter less what is exactly said. Empathy creates understanding, and makes me feel a greater closeness — the "we mode", a shared experience of togetherness.[2] But how can you ever know that any experience is truly shared?

A shared experience goes beyond recounting events or grasping their emotional meaning. As a therapist, unburdened by a history of war and violence, in the safety of a consulting room, I meet people who have lost everything, or who are only a shadow of who they once were. What can be shared is not the invisible bond that ties them to overwhelming experiences of the past, but the lived experience within the relationship, in our meeting here and now. How does Fatima experience this? When speaking with people from all over the world, what conventions are considered important can vary greatly: what you expect of the other person, how you define the relationship, how you express and discuss emotions. These cultural differences arise from growing up in a particular social group. After all, socialisation sees people

2 Fonagy, et al. 'Culture and psychopathology', 1205–1220.

adopt cultural habits, directing their shared attention to what matters to that group and thus strengthening the sense of "us".[3] The variety of such conventions is vast. Yet in therapy, where the client and I focus on working through their trauma, I find that these conventions quickly lose their meaning, as if the client consciously lets down their defences. Time and again, cultural conventions prove to be no more than masks that lose their function once a foundation of trust is established. Humanity knows no totem, no taboo. In our conversations I notice that Fatima feels comfortable sharing more, and the lived experience of our contact helps her find words for pain that at first seemed unbearable. The deepest sorrow, of trauma or the loss of a loved one, does not depend on the coordinates of what happened to be your home town growing up. Nor does the support one can experience in learning to live with that sorrow.

After a few weeks of therapy Fatima gives me a cutting from a fig tree. The interpreter explains that her uncle and aunt once lived in a fertile region of Afghanistan, where they had an orchard that Fatima loved to visit in the summers. In the Netherlands, her husband also grows trees in the allotment garden they have rented. Through the interpreter I receive precise instructions: the cutting must be planted in a spot with plenty of sunlight. I promise her I will take good care of it. She looks at me expectantly, and I nod. I think I understand what she is asking of me.

Through Fatima's stories I come to know not only her, but also her sister, her wider family, and Afghanistan itself. She recounts

3 Fonagy, et al. 'Culture and psychopathology', 1205–1220.

how her grandparents survived the Soviet era and the endless war that followed, how her parents never knew if they would live to see another day. She tells me that her parents were progressive and believed in equal rights for men and women. They trusted that things would one day improve. Fatima shares hopeful stories about the rebuilding of the country, but also how each new bombardment crushed that hope. She knows the fragments of the life stories of her grandparents and parents, yet she tells them as if they had happened yesterday and she had lived them herself. Fatima feels deeply connected to her family so far away. The threads of experiences of those dear to you weave a fabric that binds you together. There is, however, a darker side. Intergenerational trauma is the passing on of trauma without words, sometimes even before words. It is not always only the bond with loved ones that the next generation takes up, like a torch to keep the flame alive. The pain of earlier generations, their inability to mourn or process loss, can also lead later generations to identify with these traumas, in what is known as chosen trauma.[4] Successive generations form not only a shared inner image of the pain or humiliation of a lost struggle, a historical trauma, but they can see it so vividly that it feels like a genuine shared experience from the recent past. When trauma is passed down, told and retold, it becomes part of who you are or who you believe yourself to be, potentially even shaping how you relate to others.

4 V.D. Volkan, *Transgenerational Transmissions and "Chosen Trauma": An Element of Large-Group Identity.* Opening Address XIII International Congress International Association of Group Psychotherapy August, 1998.

As Fatima's stories introduced me to her and her relatives, I have also met many others in the accounts of people who fled from countries such as Bosnia, Ukraine, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Iran and Syria. With so many conflicts across the globe, between and within states, and so many failed states without the foundations of the rule of law, where authoritarian elites fight for power, rifts appear in the world community. After the most recent geopolitical upheavals, it is hardly surprising that millions are forced to leave their homes. I see how history has shattered the lives of my clients within the walls of the consulting room, making me a witness to their experiences. Yet some of these stories are not confined to the therapy room and are widely shared on social and broadcast media. Sharing these stories is like the beat of a drum calling people to reflect, stirring support or compassion. The fate of the people still in Afghanistan, however, rarely makes the headlines. The total dismantling of a country where the female half of the population has been reduced to slavery receives little attention, as if oppression and murder by one tyrannical regime is somehow more worthy of condemnation than the systematic torture and oppression by another subversive power. Surely the right to human dignity cannot be measured by how often the violation thereof makes the front page? If how much support we give to victims is directly linked to media coverage, we have lost our way. Especially when the retelling of intergenerational traumas involves conflicts whose historical and political context we scarcely know. This ignorance only deepens the fault lines in the global landscape. All these stories shared in the media are absorbed as if they were part of a collective experience from an unfinished past, with which people identify. Such narratives begin to shape how we relate to others, as if it were the natural order of things.

All these personal stories of refugees have taught me just how little is actually shared about what is happening in the world, and how much of everyday life for vast groups of people remains terra incognita. What do we really know about other peoples, their cultures, their customs, their daily lives? What do we know of their dreams and desires? A map with so many blank spaces can only be filled in by personal stories, shared and then voiced in conversations with people from places we do not know. Thousands of words, like pieces in a collage, have shaped in my mind images of countries around the world. Images of nations scarred by violence in the world of the homo economicus, the person who sees the earth as a free market where might is deemed right. Images of the people who live there. And whatever planned misery, or beauty, that cannot be captured in translation, I have filled in for myself.[5] I can picture the verdant trees in the valleys at the foot of the mountains in the north of Afghanistan, whose peaks are capped with ice. I can see the desert dust of the south blowing across the arid plains, where the soil is so dry it has cracked open. In my mind I walk the streets of Kabul, where the sounds of the city drown out conversations and only the blare of passing car horns cuts through the noise. It feels as if I know the place, as if it is familiar, even though I have never been there.

The fig cutting grows into a sapling, and later into a tree, which I prune and water. Climate change means that there is no shortage of sunlight. The first figs taste sweet, almost as if I am tasting the

5 S. Marks, Human Rights and Root Causes, *The Modern Law Review 74*(1), 57–78, 2011.

country itself. I occasionally show Fatima a photo of the tree. She responds with tips. Her Dutch is now good enough to tell me there is still room for improvement in my pruning and insists that I cover the tree's roots in wintertime to protect it from the frost. In a country as cold as ours, trees can be fragile. When I ask her if she trusts me to take good care of it, Fatima nods hesitantly. I tell her I will do my best, and I think her nod tells me that she understands that I appear to grasp what she is asking.

One day, Fatima arrives for our session in a blind panic. Her worst nightmare seems to have come true: her little sister has disappeared and is entirely unreachable. The Internet barely works, phone calls go unanswered. Her despair is contagious. What words can I offer? She does not want to talk, she wants to act, to go and search for her sister, but she knows she can't. Why is no one stepping in? Where is the West? Envisioning her sister's fate leaves her sleepless. I sense her restlessness, her inability to sit still for even a second, as if fear has lodged deep within her body and is tossing her about the room. I see Fatima in despair, her phone welded to her.

While phone, Skype and FaceTime calls were a matter of course for Fatima before, access to communication with the outside world from Afghanistan has become ever more difficult since 2021, as the regime has grown more repressive. In just a few years the fragile society has been completely destroyed, and the gravest human rights crisis in the country's history has unfolded. People are allowed to hear only what the regime permits; every dissenting voice is silenced. The world has been forcefully split into "us" and "them". How different things are

in the West, where we hear mostly what we want to hear. Facebook groups full of like-minded people spring up everywhere, with all the likes and clickbait leading us into the arms of influencers who give us more of the same, echoing and reinforcing our own world view. But does this clickbait engagement not make us deaf to diverse voices and open up a gaping chasm between "us" and "them"? The stronger our need for affirmation, the deeper the chasm. The gap between life here and life in a country like Afghanistan will only grow wider if we can no longer, or will no longer, listen to one another. Empathy means being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes.[6] But when people start living parallel lives, alienation seeps into our world and our empathic brain begins to wither. If we no longer listen to others, and no longer need to imagine their lives, then there is little left to mirror: we are left only with our own reflection, doomed to drown in narcissism. The alternative is the emergence of radical distrust. Being on your guard is useful in times of war and danger: you are alert, ready to fight or flee. But it is only useful for a while, because if you never learn to trust again, your world will only shrink. Can we still uphold human dignity when all others are a stranger? Othering only deepens an already divided world view. How dislocated must you feel in a country where you yourself are regarded as the "other", even if you speak the language fluently. Only when there are "others" we can trust, to whom we can attach ourselves, we can feel at home.

6 F. de Waal, *The age of empathy.* (London: Souvenir Press, 2019); C. de Keijzer. *Het empathische brein* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2012).

The fig tree has survived several winters and has not succumbed to the freezing temperatures. Every season, its roots reach deeper into our garden. I learn that when the branch ripens and the leaves begin to unfurl, summer is near. The tree reaches full growth, and the deep black figs, best picked when just overripe, could not be more delicious. Fatima never again heard a word from her sister, as if she vanished from the face of the earth, leaving a hole in Fatima's heart. Arrest warrants from the International Criminal Court for the Taliban leaders responsible for atrocities against women come too late for her. Yet Fatima notices that it no longer controls her. She finds some footing, managing to go on with her life together with her husband, in a third-floor flat in a run-down neighbourhood of a medium-sized Dutch city. She helps him in the allotment garden, welcoming the opportunity to escape the stuffy, noisy apartment. Their first child is a daughter, named after Fatima's sister to preserve her memory.

It was eighty years ago that WWII came to an end, and the names of those millions of victims are kept alive generation after generation. In that way, they are not forgotten. At the same time, many millions more names have been added since then. Whole populations are on the move, driven by battles over land, power, money and natural resources, fleeing countries where the only language still spoken is that of the barrel of a gun. War has now reached the eastern borders of Europe. A rupture with what has been built in post-war Europe is not inevitable. But once fear takes hold, it becomes hard to keep thinking clearly and to put experience into words. Fear paralyses and narrows your view. When you are constantly on guard, you often cannot, or simply refuse to empathise. In all my conversations

with refugees, I have seen that we can understand one another, even without a shared language. Inside and outside the therapy room we can try to bridge gaps. Sharing personal experiences – both with and without language – is a bonding exercise that culminates in shared experiences. These are cautious steps on the journey from homo economicus to homo empathicus. How else can we live together peacefully?

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