

‘Christmas Cleaning’: Are we able to heal the Culture?

Limpieza de Navidad: Somos capaces de curar la Cultura?

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Abstract

This article is an exploration of traumatized tradition, late December stress and brief sociodrama based interventions. It describes a crossroads: a place where therapeutic group work meets other sociocultural practices. I describe an example taken from my 16 year's experience when a special format of group work was introduced during the time of severe national financial crisis. The intention was to help people face the psychological and cultural challenges of late December. The title 'Christmas Cleaning' is a metaphor for this form of group work. Examples of brief interventions are given, processes and some results are described to discuss the main question: "Can we as group therapists help a traumatized culture to use its own symbolic remedies?"

Resumen

Este artículo es una exploración de la tradición traumatizada, del estrés del último diciembre y las intervenciones basadas en el sociodrama breve. En él se describe una encrucijada: un lugar donde el trabajo de grupo terapéutico cumple otras prácticas socioculturales. Describe un ejemplo tomado de mi experiencia de 16 años cuando introduce un formato especial de trabajo en grupo durante el tiempo de la crisis financiera nacional grave. La intención era ayudar a las personas a hacer frente a los

desafíos psicológicos y culturales de finales de diciembre. ‘Limpieza de Navidad es “El título de una metáfora de esta forma de trabajo en grupo. Se dan ejemplos de intervenciones breves, procesos y se describen algunos resultados para discutir la principal cuestión: “¿Podemos como terapeutas de grupo ayudar a una cultura traumatizada a utilizar sus propios recursos simbólicos?”’

Introduction

Many of us all over the world look for new formats that could meet some unspoken needs and expectations of groups and clients of today. Not that the old ones are insufficient – nothing gratifies more than a good old therapy group! But, there is a whole area of human need that lies in a different dimension and therefore makes us think of new kinds of group work. Sometimes there are clear indications for healing not people but their culture of everyday – and a lot of questions arise. Is this group psychotherapy or we should use other words for these ‘cultural projects’? Who gains if it works, especially if we deal with societies with a long history of unresolved cultural trauma?

Even if we, as professionals, believe in benefits of this type of group work and do not care about names, there is a serious question: how can people recognize their own needs and what can be their reasons to participate?

There could be dozens of different answers and they certainly depend upon the cultural context. The Russian context could be too specific to make a good example but the language of psychodrama and sociodrama is more universal than any other language. And, so I am tempted to share a piece of my experience and to tell a story about a very modest project of this kind. I hope that some colleagues who look for wider range of brief interventions may find something useful in it.

Beginning our Story

... A small team of psychodramatists, usually there are three of us, run a very special group once a year, a few days before New Year. We started this in December 1998, the year of a severe local financial crisis when people were so disappointed and depressed as their future seemed so unclear that the usual anxiety-diverting mental devices had failed. The next year seemed even less promising and the atmosphere of that December was rather gloomy - that could be easily traced in groups and in individual sessions with clients. Something had to be done to finish the year emotionally, to renew hope and meet the unknown future with more resilience and, perhaps, humour. The best metaphor we could think of was ‘Christmas cleaning’ – an old village tradition

and a ritual used by our grandparents. In many cultures people prepare for important holidays by putting things in order, throwing away old rags and other objects that cannot be used anymore, washing the floors, getting rid of any kind of dirt. Only after cleaning is there space for re-creation, for a new start.

The small universe of one's home represents the inner world (and vice versa). We offered a special 'Christmas cleaning' where people could say goodbye to some moments of the Old Year in a gentle or angry way, throw away useless or hostile 'objects' but also remember what was good, find a new way to 'survive Christmas' and be more aware of their wishes and hopes.

We planned it to be just a psychodrama support group – the last Sunday of a difficult year seemed the right time for action. However, this unambitious and simple project elucidated much more than a need for personal support: that day helped us to understand a deep collective need to re-create personal meaning of the symbolic aspects of the New Year. The participants, there were former clients, colleagues, strangers who had never heard of psychodrama, gave us an astonishing feedback. The main idea was, "I had no idea that I needed this so much, but I did". And, somehow it was obvious that the difficult year of 1998 was not the main point, it was rather a good pretext to work on something else. Since then we run 'Christmas Cleaning' every year and usually have about 30-40 people. Some of them come and go, some join the 'cleaners' regularly. The last Sunday before the New Year is always scheduled for this specific event. It is psychodrama-based but also uses elements of sociodrama and creative arts. Psychodrama can serve as a one-session or a brief intervention (Naar, 1990). To say more about this particular brief intervention we have to think more about specific stress of winter holidays.

'To Survive Christmas...'

To re-create – or, perhaps, just to remember - the prevailing context of the season we have to admit that December is stressful all over the world. Social pressure increases together with social anxiety, achievement-oriented cultures encourage all sorts of competition, commercially provoked excitement seems excessive, travelling becomes difficult and behind the lights and music there is a lot of tension that is acted out in addictive shopping, family conflicts, eating and drinking too much etc.

The symbolic meaning of the winter holidays goes far beyond Christian tradition: cold and darkness are still powerful but the sun will soon rise a few minutes earlier and then the inevitable life cycle will bring spring. Solar symbols were widely used in winter rituals in many cultures. In the twentieth

century we still feel connected with the deepest collective symbols of inevitable change, circular processes and revival.

Winter holidays make us face other liminal experiences as well: eternity and futility, ends and beginnings, hope and fear take different shapes but their dynamics is represented in many traditional procedures and public or family rituals. Magical thinking goes hand in hand with age regression that is not only permitted but encouraged culturally: people tend to behave 'like children' when they celebrate. As group psychotherapists we may think that holidays give an opportunity to be more in contact with one's 'inner child'. There are psychological disadvantages as well: children, as we know, are not only playful, creative, curious but also greedy, envious, jealous... Conflicts in families and couples 'near a fir-tree' sometimes are about nothing and a reminder of the quarrels between children when they unwrapped their presents and did not find what they hoped for.

Other 'December complaints' are about negative feelings of having no control, not being good enough, having no resources, being a failure – and very often about not being able to enjoy winter holidays. Why? People talk about tiredness, lack of sincerity in their social interactions, repressed irritation, loss of personal and collective meaning. In the days of winter holidays we may see interwoven levels of collective and individual existence in transition, if we are curious enough to do so. But, groups usually go on vacations, psychotherapists and their clients as a rule 'survive Christmas' separately, visiting families, travelling or doing something else that helps to make a symbolic fresh start in January. We all try to enjoy holidays and not only for reasons of our own. Culturally conditioned feelings and behaviour help people to go through this 'rite of passage' safely.

Rituals are much older than psychotherapy. The same can be said about poetry. Long ago Walter Scott wrote, "Heap on the wood! The wind is chill/ But let it whistle as it will/ We'll keep our Christmas merry still". It is amazing how in these simple lines the spirit of collective protective action, physical and symbolic at the same time, is grasped. However, there are cultures where the stability of old traditions do not protect anymore.

There are certain facts and dates concerning Russian history that are mixed with our culture of the everyday. These are universally shared anxieties, pressures and temptations: the shadows of the past century. Our story would be incomplete without them. Let us have a look at some historical facts.

1918: Christmas celebrations are prohibited. The calendar is changed and the order of the holidays since then becomes confused. In Russia New Year's Eve comes first, a week before Christmas, which since then is celebrated by the Russian Orthodox Church on 7 January.

1928: Decorated fir-trees and any other traditional Christmas symbols are not allowed anymore because 'they support old superstitions' and are 'remnants of the dark past'.

1935: Most Christmas symbols are distorted and re-used by the officially sanctioned Soviet New Year. The fir-tree returns with a red star, instead of the Star of Bethlehem, on top. New and ideologically controlled meanings are prescribed for the New Year rituals (as if no one remembered the traditional ones). Symbols of the Soviet New Year since then are 'stolen' from Christmas and put in opposition to 'the old superstitions'.

1937: Public celebrations of the New Year are established all over the country, which by that time is multinational. For many people in the 'Soviet republics' the new meanings are the only meanings they know (mostly from newspapers and radio). 1937 is known also as 'The Year of Terror': thousands are killed or sent to concentration camps. Prescribed optimism and grandiosity of celebrations have to conceal the unspoken. 'New Year celebrations' mostly are staged and performed for children who get presents and take part in well-organized interactive show headed by Father Frost, an atheistic version of Santa Claus. Scripts are carefully edited and usually praise 'our achievements', leaders and heroic deeds.

1947: for the first time 1 January becomes an official holiday: from now on not only children but adults too can celebrate the New Year and drink champagne at midnight.

After Stalin songs and plays for children and adults became less and less politicized but 'the main holiday of the country' remained a state holiday. It acquired a lot of people's habits, feelings and spontaneous rituals. It even acknowledged its connection with Christmas but it remains an official holiday.

Even now at ten minutes to midnight the President congratulates the people and after his 'Happy New Year' greeting all the country hears the sound of the Kremlin clock tower as if family gatherings and corporate parties were still under the 'paternal' care of the State.

The procedures of celebration – place, entertainment, clothes, food – are supposed to be more important than in any other case, and not only because of magical thinking.

Svetlana Adonyeva, a philologist and folklorist, draws from anthropology to explain how the mass symbolic practices of modern Russia can be both openly sanctioned as well as concealed, dissolved into routine acts. In her lecture 'Spontaneous Rituals in Contemporary Russia' given in the 'Strelka' Institute on 5 September 2014 she said, "Spontaneous symbolic activities are symptoms of stress of the social body. By deciphering the language of metaphors and mass gestures we can start to understand the conflict within the

society. The social body (that is a community within given time and space) lives: it ages, it gets sick, it adapts to change, it heals etc. A particular stress can be removed but the social body can never return to its original condition” (Adonyeva, 2014).

Moreno wrote in his article ‘Spontaneity and Catharsis’, “Conserving cultural rituals serves two purposes: they were of assistance in threatening situations and they made secure the continuity of a cultural heritage” (Moreno, 1940). We know that Moreno considered spontaneity to be opposed to cultural conservatism, even rescued. But in Russia of the twentieth century cultural memories sometimes suffered as much as spontaneity.

No wonder that our ‘Christmas Cleaning’ groups are motivated to change something in their uneasy attitude towards the ‘routine acts’ of meeting the New Year Eve. But what do we do to heal the culture of everyday?

Cleaning Technique: Ecology of Intervention

Let us introduce our ‘stage’ that adds a lot to the process. Our Institute occupies a former living apartment in an old house (D.O.B. -1911), located in the ‘old city’*. An ingenious designer used a certain amount of authentic lamps and door handles – and not only for aesthetic reasons: they were less expensive in the beginning of 1998. Our ‘Large Hall’ is just a large room with high ceiling, shabby floor and some pieces of old furniture mixed with more functional new chairs. The room is a usual place for training groups and group psychotherapy, lectures and presentations and even staff meetings: the place itself has long memories of its ‘former lives’ and different functions of today. One can easily imagine a tall fir-tree with hand-made Christmas decorations and candles in the middle – there is a place straight under an old lamp with coloured glass mosaics, where you can almost see a ‘fir-tree’s ghost’. And this empty space speaks for itself: the lifestyle of pre-war Moscow of the 1910’s has ‘gone with the wind’ a century ago. But two old armchairs and the lamp survived all the storms of the Russian XX century: they are so fragile, they could be destroyed many times, but here they are to help us.

So we have a powerful support from the room itself: the place seems strange but fascinating to many of our visitors, some even call it ‘magical’. Of course in a strange place like this there is a lot of ‘friendly spirits’: memories, associations and fantasies of the participants are easily evoked.

A team of directors usually starts by designing the event in November and the first meeting gives space for observations and vague (or clear) images of a year. What was new or special in our on-going and short-term groups, what

new facts, processes or words came to life, what collective feelings stayed unexpressed in the social world – these are the questions to be discussed? And then, little by little a script comes to life.

The very idea of 'Christmas Cleaning' needs special balance of the new and the old. Warm-ups, creative experiences, structured vignettes and sociodramatic suggestions are always new – some are really invented, some are borrowed from other practices and just restyled. There were dozens of them: as examples of special use of creative arts we can mention transformation of surgical masks into art objects (the year of bird-flu panic) or making a Dark Snowman – it will be introduced later – of old newspapers, or using pieces of fishing-line and old buttons to make a symbolic sequence of significant personal events of the year.

But some structural features and processes never change.

There are always three sessions with two coffee breaks. We start at 11am and finish at 5pm because people are really very busy and very exhausted – but also to avoid traditional 10-18 frame.

The event is non-commercial: the Institute charges much less than usual.

We never introduce participants so that they can stay anonymous if they like and there is no protagonist-centered psychodrama.

There are no Christmas or New Year decorations unless they are used ironically. In 2008 we made a flat Christmas tree of garbage sacks that are pale green in Russia, it looked wonderful but people recognized mockery immediately.

Directors are always in the roles of *cleaning women* that are in Russia usually loud, tough and intrusive (old aprons, rubber gloves, mops and ridiculous clothes help a lot). These roles help us to add some 'salt and pepper' to instructions, but the more important meaning of our masquerade is grotesque devaluation of power and authority: our participants understand it very well. They know also that any cleaning woman with a mop resembles Baba-Yaga, an old witch from Russian fairy tales.

Postcards - season's greetings - are used in the same way every year.

We collect them carefully to offer all sorts of them: old and new, cheap and hand-made, strange and usual – so that each participant can choose the special one in the end of the first session. And then there are two minutes of absolute silence: one can begin to write a short letter to oneself, which is personal and confidential, and then there are two more occasions to continue and to finish the letter. Here contrast is used: triviality of a postcard is opposed to personal message to oneself, collective playful action ends with solitude and silence.

The first session is focused on the personal and collective events of the year. The questions it activates are about inner world (memories, unfinished

business, changes) of the year as well as simple practical things and shared experiences.

Culture of everyday has its own symbolic means to deal with important matters. Should something be kept or thrown away? Remembered or ignored? Repaired or replaced?

An Example of a Brief Intervention (Session 1, 2006)

A group was offered to think of objects – be it a piece of furniture or a book – that were many times ‘sentenced’ to be thrown away but still take their place in the houses. Next step was an invitation to say a few words from the roles of these objects to their owners. Here are some of the messages:

- I am a Hand-Made Dress. You will never put me on again: maybe I am out of fashion or maybe you are not as slim as you were. Do you remember how impressive we were together? Now you buy clothes and I look strange. Your daughter refused even to make a summer bag out of me...well, I understand... And still I tell you: don't get rid of me. I remind of your clever hands and of your younger days. Do you remember how much you worked and still had time for laughter, dance – and me? Your energy and creativity are still with you. Find a way to make new beautiful hand-made things, you miss it. And who knows? Maybe a small piece of my embroidery will fit...
- I am a Pile of Bricks on your balcony. You folks were going to renovate the kitchen and you needed bricks. Five years passed and you, Yuri, still stumble over me. Alone. Divorces happen, eh? You don't need that damned kitchen anymore, that's what I tell you.
- Speaking of balconies... I am an oak bookshelf used for all unnecessary items you don't dare to get rid of. I live in exile on your balcony. You keep them as if you don't believe in stability or safety: what if I lose my job? What if prices go up and I need that old grinder again? Look, that's crazy. Whatever happens you find solutions. You will never use that old stuff. Please, think of a new job for me. I don't want to hide your fears.

This piece of action took 17 minutes only, 12 participants spoke. People did not know each other's names or social status and there were deep feelings, laughter, tears and a lot of spontaneity. A collective ‘poetic reflection’ upon changes and good-byes could do without names.

We usually offer a lot of exercises in pairs, groups of three or five but it is important to introduce some activities so that one could withdraw or just look

and listen – so that people could choose level of involvement. This particular intervention had a special subtext too: one could decide whether to speak or not, “togetherness” was not forced. Those who did not act were involved emotionally and really amazed by their own feelings: important things, touching and even philosophical, could be easily expressed through such a simple role play! There was a good mixture of magic and sobriety and a lot of energy to move the session further, to other contents and activities.

More than once we offered ‘A dialogue with one’s Daily Planner’ – when a few days are left it is time to say goodbye...in a short vignette. Daily Planners usually represented criticizing and controlling parts of the protagonists’ personalities. In a series of 4-6 vignettes one could observe transformation of the group attitude towards these figures: from obedience and guilt to riot and resistance and then to change of balance between the whole and a part. As one of protagonists said, - “I am not your instrument, you are mine. I gave you too much power, you control my life. Thank you for your help but now I change the rules”.

Sometimes we offer a piece of sharing in the end of the first session, more often there are short sharing experiences in small groups of three or in pairs: it is important to maintain balance between the collective and the personal. Usually in the end of the first session people just select a postcard and start their letter. It is the best way to contain and signify a lot of feelings and ideas that are too personal to be discussed.

The second session is usually focused on the boundaries between the collective and the personal. “Should I join the rituals, is it really important for me to share atmosphere, ambitions or hopes of other people? Or, I can create something for my family and friends and begin a new tradition? Is it really necessary to eat and drink so much or we just try to avoid fear or sadness or something else?”

An example of brief intervention (session 2, 2002)

It’s time to introduce our Dark Snowman. The scene described below started with a short sociodrama ‘New Year Trivialities’ Fair’: a group spontaneously staged a metaphoric Marketplace with ‘special offers’: illusions, fake feelings, socially desirable achievements and other ‘New Year Musts’. It was artistic, rather wicked, full of grotesque and exaggerations and a group roared with laughter.

The Dark Snowman was created at the beginning of the session – a big puppet made of old newspapers. It stood in the corner. The ‘Fair’ was over,

people de-roled themselves and a simple question was asked, “What is beyond all this noise and inflated excitement? What else can be felt in the air?” People answered the question from the role of Dark Snowman (they could stand behind the puppet). Here are some of their answers.

- I am here, just behind your fake enthusiasm. I am your fear of emptiness and isolation. Do you really hope to forget it with loud music and vodka?
- When you are so agitated, you can ignore a simple truth: all your magic wands are made in China. Real magic can be created only, you cannot just buy it.
- Who taught you that holidays produce pleasure only? Everything in this world has a shadow. I am this shadow.
- Joy and hope need sadness and fear. If you do not see me, you lie to yourself. The more you do so the more disappointed and lost you are. “Where is joy?” you ask yourself if you dare to. Mourn your losses and face your fears, only then you will find pure joy and new hope. And then you can feel what is there to celebrate.
- I am here to remind that time passes and life is short. Maybe it could be wiser not to spend so much time in a marketplace.

And then people could come back to the circle and say something to Dark Snowman to end this scene. Mostly they wanted to thank. This character brought back the existential dimension of transition and reminded of culturally conditioned limitations, disowned feelings and deeper aspects of holidays.

Messages that seemed ‘dark’ added meaning and awareness. To make a symbolic integration we suggested a spontaneous group nonverbal action with our puppet. Some participants gave it a hug, a young lady added colour with green and red markers and finally after a collective slow dance they found a place where Dark Snowman could be together with a group ‘to tell us the truth if necessary’.

Some activities of the second session give an opportunity to express negative feelings in a non-destructive way (like ‘Ugly Artificial Fur-Trees’ Contest’, ‘Classical Family Fights: Much Ado About Nothing’ or ‘How to Add Stress to Celebration’). When anxiety and aggression can be expressed in an artistic, creative way they lose some of their ‘poison’ and seem much more tolerable. For instance, when a group enacts in a short spontaneous sociodrama ‘The New Year Rules’ with, ‘You have to look happy’, ‘You have to overeat’, ‘You have to wear high heels at any cost, even if tomorrow you cannot walk’ there is a lot of anger and resistance. The Rules usually look awfully stupid and people do a lot to make these characters as repulsive as possible. But in the end the roles are taken off and there is a chair in the middle and a

question, "What do I do with the Rules this year?" The answers go far beyond resistance as the social meaning of the rules is grasped with curiosity and surprise. The main insight on a personal level is about freedom to choose the rules and to transform them. In the end people have to be a little tired as emotional tension is discharged; there is space for new feelings. It is time to continue with a letter and after some writing to have a last coffee break.

It is almost impossible to plan the third session beforehand, there are some rough 'sketches' only and usually we change a lot according to real process. Still the main themes are hopes, unexpected findings of the year that have future, continuity of life, emotional resource. Once we enacted a collective First Dream of a Year, sometimes the 'dreamers' were not people but streets, lampstands and other city objects. It seems important that here some ancient or even eternal voices appear naturally. Stars and moon, a city or a night snowfall look at people – at least in our third session - with non-judgmental understanding, patience and compassion. The deep roots of 'rites of passage' are represented by voices and images that are old enough to give evidence.

Sometimes there are short meditations, once we even used an element of aromatherapy (fir-tree and tangerine oils, of course). It would be unwise to direct the whole session in a 'hypnodramatic' style: there are more vivid episodes and experiences (like 'Lost and Found of the Year' or a short enactment of the first day of next spring). But as a rule the third session is more quiet and contemplative than the previous ones. In the end our 'cleaning team' finishes the letters and takes postcards home. But before saying good-bye there is sharing. Usually there are a lot of subtle and well-differentiated feelings, some are more related to content and some are reflections of a process. People usually are amazed by the universality of the unspoken and, of course, by the creative power of a group.

Conclusions: Healing the Holiday

- 'Christmas Cleaning' attracts people of different backgrounds; usually they are united by their need to 'repair' or regain personal meaning of winter holidays' collective experience.
- A dialogue of cultural conserve and spontaneity/creativity gives birth to a complex unity that meets this need. Group work design represents this unity: well-known images and symbols are explored and redefined in a personal way, culture of everyday may be viewed as mysterious and deep, personal attitudes and feelings are rediscovered as internalization of the collective etc. Surplus reality helps

to add unexpected dimensions to familiar actions, roles and objects. The same is with metaphors, subtexts, humour, and use of prompts: they help to discover other meanings.

- This type of group work should maintain balance between the personal and the collective; sociodrama and psychodrama together with expressive arts are adequate tools. Flexible structure is essential: the balance mentioned above should be found in the group itself. The energy of a group can be channeled by relevant content, timing, sub-grouping, sharing and many other well-known tools. However there should be clear messages that this is not group psychotherapy but rather an experiential exploration of thoughts and feelings so that people can be prepared for the New Year. For example, individual insights are contained in written form and usually not shared with a group of strangers.
- People do understand and can discuss the objective of group work of this kind. The idea of ‘healing the holiday’ was discovered by participants in several groups: they tried to describe their experience and give a definition. However it could not be offered before the experience itself and in many ways was its result. Direct motivation for those who joined the project were still ‘December distresses’, so we tried to know more about typical complaints and their dynamics after ‘Christmas Cleaning’.
- An informal survey of 200 participants showed that there were significant improvements in their functioning (‘less anxiety’ 60%, ‘taking more care of one’s emotional needs’ 50%, ‘less conflicts’ 40%, ‘finding a spiritual dimension of a holiday’ 30%, ‘doing something new and creative’ 20%). Still these figures should not be overestimated: people gave their answers in January and could feel better about winter holidays only. So perhaps the idea of ‘healing the holiday’ is the most relevant to the potential group members.

As one of our participants said: “I like the idea: meaning is not destroyed, it can be born again, re-created. If we can do it with our winter holidays, there is hope. Maybe other burnt or frozen segments of our life can be re-created as well...”

We agree wholeheartedly. And this is why ‘Christmas Cleaning’ is presented in this article: there are other places in the world where culture needs healing and here only one path was described. But sometimes one path is better than nothing.

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