

Therapeutic Spiral in South Africa – Personal Reflections

Chip Chimera has been in training with TSI since 1998 and recalls visiting South Africa with her colleague Enid MacNeill

In July 2001, I made my first trip to South Africa to take part in a Therapeutic Spiral team. South Africa is a land of stark contrasts. It exudes energy and a determination to make sense of the past while simultaneously moving forward. There are unimaginably deep wounds and an inspirational commitment to healing.

The local TSI organiser, Viv Alers, is an OT who works in Jo'burg and lives in a formerly all-white suburb just outside. She juggles the contradictions in daily living in that country with an ease that it is mundane and banal to other South Africans, both black and white. It is sensational and shocking for me to encounter as an American/European.

Viv discovered TSM[™] (note 1) at an international conference in Turkey and was inspired to bring it home. Less than a year later she had organised a workshop and we were on our way.

Work commitments meant that I had to fly overnight and arrived the morning that the workshop began. I was to join the team as a trained auxiliary ego, the first level of training in TSM[™]. I was in good company, Enid MacNeill from England, and Colette Harrison from the US were also to work with Kate Hudgins as team leader. Viv made up the 5th member of the team.

Viv's 18 year old daughter, Cindy, an accomplished horsewoman and aspiring OT, collected me from Jan Smutts airport and took me to the workshop – in Ivory Park, a universe away.

The first impression of SA is of a land of opulence. The highway from the airport is lined with the trappings of affluence: large office and factory blocks for Nike, Sony, and Nikon. Road signs to very familiar places like Epsom and Kempton Park mingled with the confusion of the 10-hour flight. Was I really 10,500 miles from home and in Africa (AFRICA!!!) or had I landed in some parallel universe, a looking glass world?

The sense of familiarity progressively diminished as we neared the workshop venue. We were working in a community centre built at the convergence of 4 townships: Ivory Park, Ebony Park, Kaalfontein and Thembisa.

Nothing in my previous experience prepared me for the encounter with the townships. Mile after mile of shacks made from board, corrugated iron, old carpets, anything that could be recovered and recycled. Densely packed and poverty-saturated but with a sense of communal hopes and individual creativity and ingenuity.

Every once in while we passed a puddle with a leaky standpipe that serves a vast area of housing – the majority of homes have no running water. The buildings improved as we approached the centre. Newly built lavatory blocks appeared every 100 yards or so. Some stretches of new brick-built houses, single story and mostly one room but solid.

We drove on over roads thronged with people and bustling activity. Here is where I first encountered South African taxis – mini-busses packed to the gills with people for the half hour journey into Jo'burg for work. The taxi rank consisted of dozens of these vehicles in a kind of organised chaos of multiple queues to get onboard.

The centre of this jigsaw is where the four townships converge. Situated on a small hill is a cluster of brick buildings: the school, the welfare office and clinic and the new community centre, all embraced by an eight foot iron fence.

The community centre was newly finished. A large room about 40' x 50', with generous windows, a stage and 2 toilets and an entrance lobby with some lockable storage rooms. It was freshly painted and the electricity was partly connected. So, no lights, but the plugs worked for kettles and heaters.

As we approached the sounds of singing could be heard; the close harmonies and counter rhythms that are unmistakably African. I expected the workshop to be attended by a mixture of black and white professional South Africans, OT's and psychologists, and about 6 members of the township community, i.e. 13 – 15 members and the team of 4 (plus me). I was therefore not prepared for the sight that awaited: a room with at least 50 women and Kate standing in the middle of an enormous scarf circle having just finished directing two of the opening structures of a surviving spirits workshop³. The energy in the room was palpable.

People were encouraged to cluster in small groups to continue discussing strength cards they had selected. I jumped in, glad to be there, touched base with Kate and Colette, the assistant director, and joined the group.

I learned that the community had been asked to select 6 representatives but decided to check out the workshop for themselves. Thirty five women arrived at the centre on the first morning of the workshop. Those 35 subsequently chose the 6 who were to remain for the rest of the five days.

July and August are winter months in South Africa. I have a northern hemisphere concept of 'winter'. Winter in SA means dressing in layers. In Jo'burg winter is 18 – 20 degrees in the daytime. We ate lunch outside in t-shirts. At sundown, which happens suddenly at about 5:15 p.m., it gets cold – the temperature drops immediately to 6-7 degrees. Township coal fires are lit at about 4:30. By 5:30 p.m. the smog is thick and unbreathable. I am told this is what the 'pea soupers' were like before the Clean Air Act in Britain. The township women developed noticeable coughs as the workshop progressed.

The team stayed in Viv's comfortable home, 15 minutes and 2 worlds away. In the morning a magical frost greeted us with the haw-dee-daw dawn chorus (note 2) before melting away under clear blue skies and South African sun.

In spite of its contradictions, or maybe because of them, there is an energy in SA that is impossible to describe. It is recovering from unimaginable trauma. Every person in the workshop had been deeply personally affected by the inhumanities of the Apartheid system. Every walk of life was represented, both black and white. There were a number of religions (the three major ones and a number of native African religions), at least 6 languages, every skin shade and body type (South Africa is the only place on earth that I feel positively svelte!) There were six white participants. A seventh had been pressurised by her family to withdraw when she and they discovered the location of the workshop.

All of the white participants had some anxieties about working in the township. Car jackings, rapes, murders and other crimes of violence are rife in SA. During the workshop one participant had her car stolen from outside her own home, in a 'safe' area, overnight. Another left her keys in the ignition all day outside the centre and it was not touched!

The 5 days were structured to encompass both an introductory training and an experiential personal growth element. The core memory for me was on day 3, deep into the experiencing part of the workshop. The group was split in choosing a protagonist. Two people wanted to work, one black, one white. After hearing both the issues, Kate decided to work with the two of them together. These two women were worlds apart in life experience, age, education and living conditions and they shared an aspiration to heal.

As the stories unfolded, we learned that both had experienced similar traumas at the very same age in childhood. One wanted to forgive her attacker, the other to access her righteous anger, which had been suppressed.

Using the team, the wonderful energy of the group, the structure provided by the model and Kate's inspiring clinical skill, this double protagonist drama provided a safe space for healing wounds that had long festered.

Space does not permit the many stories of healing and spontaneity from this workshop. Working in a vibrant community, one was never surprised by the unexpected such as the day when one of the community leaders arrived with his theatre group of young people who performed a play for us about the evils of domestic violence.

As the workshop continued there were many dramas that encompassed the personal and the political. Inner and outer space were distinguishable but the distinction was not significant.

The local children became very curious about the activity at the community centre. At our last lunchtime in the bright sunshine a group of about 6 children who had been growing increasingly bold day by day, came closer for a chat.

It was the 12th birthday of one of the boys. His heart's desire was to get a Sony Playstation for his birthday. He was cautiously optimistic that he would get it. Not so different a universe after all, perhaps.

Notes:

1. The Therapeutic Spiral Model (TSM)tm was developed by Kate Hudgins as a way of applying psychodrama methods to work with trauma survivors to prevent uncontrolled regression into trauma material. The emphasis is on choice and safety. The model is applied through the use of a team consisting of several trained auxiliary egos to facilitate the group, an assistant leader who manages group processes, and a team leader who acts as director and overall co-ordinator.
2. Haw-de-daws: the ubiquitous ibis, a bit bigger than a crow, so called because of its distinctive call.
3. For more information about the theory and practice of TSM see Hudgins, M.K, (2002), *Experiential Treatment for PTSD: the Therapeutic Spiral Model*, Springer: New York.
4. For an inspirational and brutally honest account of the healing and distressing processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission see Edelstein, J. (2001) *Truth and Lies, Stories From The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*, Granta:UK.
5. Since the success of this workshop, Viv obtained funding for the training to continue through Themba Lesiswe, a joint initiative of the European Union and four leading South African NGOs involved in victim empowerment and in survivor support.
6. The three women are Kirsten, Pearl, and Enid

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