

TRAUMA - The hidden story of the Treaty Delegation - UCC Cork October 2, 2021

First, I am not an historian. I wish to share a medical reflection on The Treaty Delegations, from the human side, as a doctor - with an interest in people- not politics. From the lens of trauma - from the Greek word - to wound.

We descendants grew up in homes where the Treaty and Civil War were not discussed. People of differing political groups were demonised. Rage was currency. There was plenty of judgement but a blistering silence about the past.

This was not the result of badness or madness, or personalities or bad politics - but **trauma**.

What is trauma? It is a wounding. When you cut your skin, it hurts, it bleeds, it tries to heal by inflammation – it is painful - it gets hard, scars and loses sensation - it becomes numbed – it is injured - it is changed.

TRAUMA DEFINITION: a wider definition: “**Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope** – causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel a full range of emotions and experiences”

Psychological or emotional trauma is more complex than physical trauma: victims of rape, sexual abuse and crime, describe being violated, unworthy, unclean, not good enough; they self-blame, become isolated, have nightmares, and display periods of uncontrollable and inexplicable anger/rage

Why? Trauma causes damage to the emotional self – the brain – the person – the soul. Trauma triggers fear, loss of control, flashbacks, panic attacks, dysregulation, anxiety/distress, the extreme stress responses of fight/flight/freeze appearing at the wrong time, becoming shut down emotionally, insensitivity to others, feeling difference, dissociation, inability to talk, feel or share.

And it is even more complex than this.

It is now recognised that most illnesses, physical and mental, are caused by trauma, and mostly by childhood trauma, which creates a pattern of behaviour and adaptations that are repeated into adulthood.

The Kaiser ACE Study (1995 -1997) shows the link from childhood trauma to illness. ACE (Adverse Childhood Events) is a predictive score (0-10) recording abuse, neglect, violence, separation, divorce, death, abandonment, imprisonment. A higher SCORE = GREATER CONSEQUENCES. How? Trauma suppresses the emotional brain, over-stresses the vital pituitary-adrenal stress response and misdirects the immune system – causing disease (disease) e.g. asthma, cancer, heart disease, auto immune disease and mental health dysregulation including anxiety/depression.

ADHD and addictions are common adaptations to childhood pressures - each triggered by early childhood stress/trauma. We now know that children develop patterns of attachments in the first 3-4 years of life that defines their future relationships, mental and physical health. All that happens before adulthood.

Now let's look at the collective traumas of 1921

This Irish Delegation was a diverse group, but many came together through a shared journey – the Gaelic League, CLS, CIDA, the Volunteers, the 1916 Rising, Sinn Fein, the imprisonment in Frongoch, the birth of an electoral mandate, the War of Independence, the partition of Ulster, the fragile Truce – a growing conviction that independence was the defining issue (and solution) of the time for Home Rulers, Republicans and even a growing number of erstwhile southern unionists who changed allegiance at great personal cost.

They all shared a high-water mark of expectation, effort and commitment – the Treaty negotiations in London. It was a brotherhood and sisterhood of national awakening, delivered as a team with pride, hope and dedication. A period of supreme public and civil service.

All the delegates went in high hopes. They had achieved a lot after 20 years of shared struggle. A Treaty, right or wrong, gave the hope of peace. Yet the reaction at home prevented joy or celebration. Their return was traumatic.

This was no return of the travelling heroes. This was no Italia 90, Jack Charlton triumph. There was no public welcoming on O'Connell Street. Instead there was a sense of withering disappointment, anger and rage.

They met a cabinet divided, a Dail divided, a country divided, and families divided. Finally they faced an armed conflict. There was a sense of failure. Of not being good enough, of inadequacy. Of letting people down. The loss of control, anxiety and guilt was overwhelming. Panic, pain, insensitivity, scarring, hardness - does that sound familiar????

This is the hidden cost of high public service where failure is perceived. Note the stress that followed, Griffith dead at 51 – the traumatic deaths of Childers, Collins and Brugha killed by their own people - the cost paid by families whose parents were constantly stressed, traumatized, in prison or away for months or years - in the USA or on the run - while their kids were young. Imagine what those kids felt. What the spouses felt. What the delegates felt. The stress in the homes – at the kitchen table.

During the CIVIL WAR: Remember the daily personal risks. The risk of violence/murder. The loss of friendships. The sundering of the shared purpose. The death of friends. **The unspeakable shame** of brother fighting brother, family against family, friend against friend.

The solution of silence. Not talking about it. All descendent families speak of it “never being spoken about at home”. The shame. The blame. The grief. The silence.

Passed on through the kids. At the kitchen table. Generation after generation of shame, guilt and silence.

The Civil War was continued in silence, stigma and shame.

Modern behavioural science and epigenetics now explain the effects of trauma on individuals, families and succeeding generations. Trauma causes shame, isolation and silence. It cannot speak. Hence the panic attacks, dysregulation, flashbacks, and constant triggering of fear, judgement and rage.

Today, compassionate psychotherapy and evolving use of medicinal psychedelics offer hope, while Trauma-Informed Care shows how we heal by talking, connecting, bringing understanding, reconnecting to ourselves and removing the isolation of shamed silence.

We learned this from war veterans, rape victims, those who suffer sexual abuse, physical or emotional abuse – and from those children whose needs are unintentionally neglected because the parents are too stressed by the effects of war, conflict or calamity.

Our country was traumatized twice. First by what happened to us. Next by what this did inside us by subtle individual and collective changes to the brain and psyche, that kept us shamed, guilt-ridden, stigmatised and silent – overwhelmed by loss, fear, nightmares and flashbacks.

This is called post-traumatic stress disorder, and we as families and as a country, are still going through it, generationally, by not talking about it. It is much easier to blame or demonise “evil people” on the other side, politicians and governments than to reflect compassionately on a traumatised generation.

Our families grew up in this grey unforgiving world, where talking was not allowed. Demons and villains were everywhere, but no understanding that each had been traumatised.

Our nation was born out of trauma. The revolutionary period was bloody – it endured the trauma of sundering, partition, division and civil war. Brother against brother. Shame. Guilt. Anger. Rage. But mostly silence about the real hurt and pain and scarring.

Our journey as descendants, who chose to explore and reveal **the men and women behind the Treaty**, rather than the politics, can perhaps bring some inter-generational healing through talking about these incredibly brave people, who suffered so much - by conferences like today which explore the role of people and relationships in politics – and through our Book - by telling the human stories - and breaking the silence.

The Treaty generation was damaged by trauma. So were their families. So too was the country. It may take 100 years for the pain to go but the scar remains. It is up to us today to look more compassionately on that generation, to learn what they had **no understanding of, or language for**, to treat them with the compassion we now have for “deserting” soldiers “shot at dawn” in WW1 - mistaken as cowards because they were simply shell-shocked. Our country has suffered shell-shock for a hundred years. Today, through conferences like this and deeper understanding of our shared humanity, we can open ourselves up to learn more keenly from the past.

I'd like to thank UCC for hosting this. It's also been a real privilege to work with Eda, Bernard, Julitta and all on our Steering Group over the last year. I'd particularly like to thank Aine Broy for joining us today - as a primary descendant - and Teresa Napoli watching in Rome and Dermot Lynch in London. It is an honour to be here today with you all. You have been inspirational for us. You, and your parents, suffered a lot of **wounding for Ireland**. You have also shown us how to endure and to survive trauma, and to build a better future for those that follow. Today you have helped us break the silence. Thank you.

Dr Ronan Fawsitt - Grandson of Diarmaid Fawsitt, an Advisor to the Delegation in London.

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