



Headington Headlines

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SO FAR IN 2006...

Headington Institute staff have:

Facilitated a retreat in Australia for humanitarian workers responding to the Pakistan earthquake.

Facilitated a retreat in New York for relief workers involved in hurricane relief efforts.

Provided over 200 hours of assessment, counseling, and debriefing to humanitarian staff working in crisis situations.

Provided over 50 hours of consultation to humanitarian organizations on staff care issues.

Presented at an international conference on staff care.

Conducted 8 training workshops on traumatic stress and humanitarian work.

ALSO IN THE NEWS...



You'll soon see more resources on the Headington Institute website as we work to meet the needs of our global online community. Watch for:

Our second online training module on trauma

The text of our CE module in pdf, and much more...

Quote from the frontlines...

"I've been thinking a lot lately about what I'm actually doing here. The idealism that initially inspired me is being tempered with the knowledge that on some deep level I'm in this for me too – a trauma-tourist – searching for a purer truth I seem to think can only be found in the world's saddest places and in the valleys of life."
(Humanitarian worker, Croatia, 2001)

INSTITUTE FOCUSES ON SPIRITUALITY

"The mission of the Headington Institute is to provide psychological and spiritual support to humanitarian aid and disaster relief personnel worldwide."

One question we often get asked here at the Institute is why we chose to include the word "spirituality" in our mission statement. Wrapped up in that query are two related questions: What do we mean by spirituality, and why is it relevant?

Spirituality is a core component of human nature. It includes a sense of meaning, purpose, hope and faith, and a connection to a deeply held set of values. Whether due to an explicit belief in God, a more diffuse sense of connectedness with nature or a life force, or a belief in human nature and solidarity, most people believe that to be fully human involves more than just the physical dimensions of existence.

We see that spirituality is relevant to our mission for at least two reasons. Spirituality — beliefs about meaning and purpose, altruism, and compassion — is often an integral part of a person's decision to make a career out of humanitarian work. In turn, an individual's spirituality will almost always be shaped, challenged, and changed by the experiences they encounter as a humanitarian worker.

Most of us have an internal "map" of beliefs and assumptions we use to help guide us through life. When that map doesn't match the terrain that we're crossing, it is challenging and troubling. It forces us to go back to our map, compare it to our experience, and try to reconcile the two.

More than most careers, humanitarian work puts people in "challenging terrain" as they encounter disasters, suffering, and human cruelty. These experiences often rouse spiritual questions and issues related to: their personal identity and purpose in life; the existence and/or identity of a transcendent power; and the existence and nature of broader meaning and purpose in relation to disasters and suffering. A growing body of research suggests that personal spirituality is a key resource in understanding and coping with traumatic stress.

So that is why we include spirituality in our mission statement — because helping humanitarian workers explore their personal spiritual motivations and challenges is a piece of "support" that is too important to neglect.



CONNECT WITH US

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FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

On occasion I am asked, “Do you miss academia? Will you ever go back to university teaching or administration?” The answer is “Yes” and “No.” Yes, I do miss working with students. Perhaps that’s why I dream of a day when the Headington Institute will include interns and post-docs among our staff. Their energy, curiosity, and intelligence always revitalize me. And no, I don’t think I’ll return to academia. Here’s why.



Working with relief and development professionals has brought a deep sense of satisfaction. In some small way, I feel like part of a growing worldwide effort to alleviate human suffering and injustice. Supporting those who help victims in tangible, practical ways has brought opportunities to work with some of the finest people I’ll ever meet.

Although being a dad to my four children remains my most challenging and rewarding responsibility, working at the Headington Institute is a great job. I do love it.

Best wishes, Jim

WRITING TO HELP HEAL

On the front page of this newsletter is a quote that comes from a letter I wrote while on assignment in Croatia in 2001. It was my first solo international assignment, and it was exhilarating, petrifying, and lonely—often all at the same time.



One of my most important anchors during that time was writing, something that has proved to be an enduring passion for me. Similar to developing chemicals on photographic negatives, the keyboard helps me “fix” an experience and understand better what it has meant to me. Considering how I’ll word my next letter home while an experience is unfolding can transform something potentially frustrating into something bearable, or even amusing. For me, writing has become an essential therapeutic outlet.

I’m not alone in this. A growing body of research suggests that writing detailed accounts of stressful or traumatic experiences in a way that links feelings with events leads to significant physical and psychological improvements. This remains true even if the experience of writing is upsetting in the short term.

At the Headington Institute we see this as so important that we’ve created a section on our website devoted to sharing stories from humanitarian workers around the world. There’s also a series of journaling questions to help you get started if this is new to you. Visit us to read some of these stories, and share yours.

Lisa McKay

THE POWER OF UNDERSTANDING: HELPING THE TRAUMATIZED

“You mean I’m not crazy?” These words come back to me often, as I think about conversations with helpers and leaders in Rwanda. When I talk with people there about psychological trauma, they often show great relief. Normalizing the often frightening emotional experiences of traumatic stress—the nightmares, flashbacks, physical sensations, social withdrawal, jumpiness, numbness—is a powerful tool we can use to help those affected by group violence, grinding poverty, persistent injustice, and other horrible life experiences.

As psychologists specializing in group violence and reconciliation, trauma and recovery, Ervin Staub and I have visited Rwanda numerous times since 1999, offering to share our knowledge in any way that it might be useful. We have conducted workshops with more and less educated Rwandans,

both Hutu and Tutsi, from many backgrounds. These groups consistently respond with interest, relief, and often amazement, to the information that their responses are normal responses to abnormal events, that there are commonalities across genocides and among traumatized people. Perhaps most important, people were profoundly grateful that there is a path to healing and to reconciliation.

How can humanitarian staff help? Taking time to learn about these issues and then to share that information with those we serve and work with can be an invaluable service. These topics are on the minds of most people who have experienced group violence. Such conversations can take place while building bridges, studying religious texts, shelling beans. For more on these topics see the free online training modules on the Headington Institute’s website.

Laurie Anne Pearlman, Ph.D.