

Maurine Kelly (from our Washington DC branch) and I were two of several mental health professionals who volunteered to help the survivors of Charlottesville. Although Maurine and I had never met before, we bonded quickly while going through what turned out to be a uniquely intense, emotional experience.

The event was called "AFTER ACTION HEALING SPACE." It took place in a beautiful Unitarian church in Fairfax Virginia. Many of the people who had volunteered in Charlottesville were not from Charlottesville but from surrounding towns in Virginia.

First---two facts we learned (you may know these). For several months before the volunteers held their rally in Charlottesville, they explored ALT RIGHT websites (there are many and they know all of them) . These websites announced their planned protest rallies, one of which was in Charlottesville. They knew that the Ku Klux Klan and anti-semitic, xenophobic and other hate groups would be protesting the removal of confederate statues and more. Although they had knowledge about these protests, they initially underestimated the degree of actual physical violence that would take place. The week I was in Virginia, the volunteers told us about the forthcoming protest rally in Boston, allowing the Boston police to be prepared for more violence.

The event I participated in was organized by a group of interdenominational clergy and mental health professionals. The experience reminded me a lot of 9/11, as what they called an " After - Action Healing Space" event, also included massage therapists and even acupuncturists. You probably know that at that time in NY several restaurants closed and brought their chefs to Ground Zero to cook for the first responders. Actually, our first intervention also began with offering food to the victims (I think I should call them "survivors".) Feeding them appeared to be the perfect beginning, as not only THEY, but WE also needed to be nourished. (We all had enormous anxiety about what we would hear and whether we could be helpful). Our fears were later amplified when a few people arrived bandaged and with arms and legs in casts.

Before all the survivors arrived (we) the therapists initially met for an hour to conceptualize a strategy for involving the survivors of the debacle. We decided to allow the survivors to lead us to what they needed emotionally. Flexibility was the keyword, thank goodness. After the joint late lunch, the plan was to hold small groups that would include one psychotherapist whose specialty was individual treatment. That person would be available

to anyone who wanted to speak with someone alone.

After lunch, the survivors gravitated toward each other, obviously needing to re-connect as we learned that most hadn't had contact since they were attacked. Just a few people sought out the groups. Some wanted massage therapy and acupuncture.

I was beginning to get discouraged, and started to feel useless. Then--lo and behold--I jokingly said to one of the clergy that "I need to be needed" and in response, the priest said, "spoken like a true therapist!" I had no idea that one of the survivors was standing behind me. She said in a booming voice "I need you---I really DO need you!" Surprisingly, she DID need me and that began a truly moving experience that lasted about 3 hours or a little more.

The woman (probably around 40 years old) who said "she needed me," asked if we could walk and talk. I said, "of COURSE," and that began the saga that ultimately engaged other survivors as well.

During the first part of our walk, she (I'll call her Julie)) talked about what seemed inconsequential ---like the weather, the delicious food we all shared, the beautiful church grounds, and her house outside of Charlottesville. After a brief silence, she talked about her two "precious" children and supportive husband. After I listened attentively without uttering a word, Julie asked me to tell her about my personal and professional background. Although I was tempted to let her know about my Civil Rights and Anti Vietnam activist experiences(some of them fraught with violence), I'm so glad I didn't, as it left room for her to finally share her overwhelming anguish related to what seems clearly to be "survivor guilt." Julie told me about her role as one of the major organizers of the Charlottesville rally. Throughout her life, she had been involved in several protests and marches ,and was considered to be an expert in organizing these events. She told me that this was in her blood, a part of her identity.

Finally, Julie revealed the roots of her guilt: she had decided that she couldn't go to Charlottesville with the people she had trained in civil disobedience and other protest strategies. She felt that she had failed her "activist children." She began to cry and told me that she had been absolutely terrified to go to the rally, as a few years before at what was expected to be a peaceful rally, she was thrown to the ground by the police and badly injured her back. Julie was arrested and imprisoned for 18 hours during which time neither a bed, toilet, food nor telephone were made available to her. Her continuing persistent back pain was also an issue. Julie's terror of violence prevented her from accompanying her" trainee

"children" (her words). Her guilt was all encompassing, as she also told me that when she's involved in activism, she tends to spend less time taking care of her children.

So--I'll attempt to describe my interventions as briefly as possible. I found myself drawing on my psychoanalytic training, of course, but even more on my social work education that stresses the ego. In other words, no id interpretations!

We talked about how hard Julie is on herself and how she expects so much from herself. We did quite a bit of reality testing related to her pervasive guilt. She was able to see that her children did NOT feel abandoned, as her nurturing husband took over a lot of their children's mothering. In fact, her children were proud of Julie's activism. We spoke about the healthy and realistic decision she made to NOT attend the rally and how her participating in it might have put her in emotional and physical danger. I told her that I thought that she actually DID attend the rally, as I was sure that she was present in the hearts of her "trainee children." There was more, but as we talked, Julie's expression changed, she looked more relaxed, her intermittent tears stopped flowing, and she actually told me that she felt better.

As if by magic, the mostly young survivors approached us. It was as if they intuitively knew that that this was a perfect time to show homage to their activist "mother." Julie and I had been sitting on a bench surrounded by trees and wild flowers. I later found out that her activist "children" had been watching us talk and had witnessed her tears-- so it wasn't magic at all! The survivors enveloped Julie in hugs and praise for her wisdom and knowledge. It turned out that she HAD prepared them for violence and, most likely, would have been targets of more violence if they hadn't been trained by her.

One of the survivors (a young social worker who'd attended my graduate school, Columbia), told the harrowing story of being just a few inches away from the car that crashed into the crowd and had killed her close friend. Everyone, including me, surrounded her with a huge hug that lasted for a couple of minutes. We all became teary-- certainly one of the most moving events of my life. Soon after, more people approached Julie and told her how much she meant to them. The group coalesced around its appreciation of Julie as well as having shared what was certainly a tragic and traumatic event.

It was difficult, but I knew it was time to leave. I walked away feeling deep sadness but also relief that perhaps I had helped even a little bit.