Talking About It
Bringing the Heart into Dialogues and Conflicts

by Angela Findlay

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart… live in the question.
Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

In 2022, my first book was finally finished and published. It was the result of fifteen years of research and seven years of writing. But the subject matter had lived with me all my life, although it took me many decades to discover and understand that.

I was born and brought up in England with an English father and a German mother. I was also the granddaughter of a Second World War German general. The book tells of my journey to understand and overcome the long shadow that his life had cast over me. Somewhat inexplicably I carried a deep sense of guilt and shame, which, as my life unfolded, I finally recognised as belonging to him. To heal myself, I needed to know what sort of man he was.

Following publication, I was invited to many places around the UK to talk about my experiences and the book, *In My Grandfather's Shadow: A story of war, trauma and the legacy of silence*. A particular event in early 2023 hosted by The Christian Community in Stroud, in the west of England, confirmed my awareness of the extraordinary space that opens up when you feel allowed to speak out the things that live inside you. As always, I was aware of potential sensibilities in the audience in relation to the subject matter: World War Two, Nazi Germany and the fact that I am the granddaughter of a decorated Wehrmacht[1] General; a professional soldier to some, a full-blown Nazi to others.

After decades of either being unable to articulate the burden of growing up as an Anglo-German in the England of the 1970s and 80s, (I was born in 1964) or being silenced when I tried, I have come to realise that the most liberating part of my personal life story has been the sharing of it with others, person to person or as a speaker at events. 'Talking about it' is also a reward for the extensive periods of solitude I, like most writers or memoirists, had to undertake. It can be a chance to communicate and reconnect to the world in a more authentic way. What was once wrapped in silence and festering in the depths of the psyche, influencing or even poisoning the Self, is now 'out there'. Like a pale, wilting plant brought up from a dark, dank cellar and placed in the light, something is enabled to green and flourish.

But talking about trauma, guilt or shame is neither easy for the afflicted nor for their listeners.

There have been a few conversations or events I have spoken at that have left me feeling drained, exposed, defensive, battered. Questions were designed to channel the dialogue down an increasingly narrow path and box me into a corner with little room for manoeuvre. The broader picture was left behind as apparent 'facts', some taken out of context, were given prominence and assumed different meanings. Such reductionist methods squeeze the colour, nuance, indeed the very life forces, from the subject until all one is left with is a black and white, clean-cut, good-bad conclusion that either confirms convenient or long-established opinions or proves the interviewer 'right' in whatever quest they are on. This is the *modus operandi* also adopted by some of the respected 'Rottweiler' interviewers on mainstream media outlets.

Such dynamics reduce life to what can be seen, measured or proven and can be observed in action in almost every area of life. It somehow begs the question: How do we move beyond divisive thinking that leads to separation and conflict?

I don't know whether it was a certain quality of listening that served as a portal for a more enriched level of communication at the event at Stroud's Christian Community, or a naturally broader, deeper world view that goes beyond binary, materialistic thinking to include the imaginal, spiritual realm. Maybe both. I just know that I came away feeling expanded, inspired, connected and softened, above all in my heart. I believe the audience did too. Though the subject matter was challenging, personal wounds and vulnerabilities were welcomed into the room. There was no agenda, just an openness to listen to and hear a voice talking about a conflict that had rocked the world; a willingness to acknowledge that each one of us, given the circumstances, is capable of both good and evil.

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly: what is essential is invisible to the eyes.
The fox in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's
The Little Prince

For seven years I had been trying to 'see rightly' what was invisible to most, including myself, and to put

my findings into the words that made up my book. As an artist and primarily a painter, *seeing* is part of the creative process. Writing a non-fiction memoir, therefore, was almost diametrically opposite to how I was accustomed to expressing myself. Feelings, observations or narratives that had formerly appeared in colour and paint within the spatial format of a canvas now had to be organised into the logical sequence of letters, words and grammatically correct sentences before being arranged onto a series of numbered pages. Artistic licence was naturally permitted, but within the inevitable restraints of editors and publishers etc. In painting, accuracy is a subjective choice. The rules of outer reality can be deliberately distorted or overridden. In non-fiction, however, accuracy is compulsory. When it comes to what we designate as 'fact', certainty is based on the idea of a single truth.

But is truth ever as clean cut as that? It can be, but only if you leave out the possibility of forces at work that are far greater than us. And therein, as I see it, lies a problem.

I am minded of the Buddhist parable of the blind men, who have never come across an elephant before. When they are brought before one, they are asked to say what it is like. For the blind man who felt a foot, an elephant was like a pillar; for the one who felt the tail, an elephant was like a broom; for the one who felt the trunk, an elephant was like a plough, and the one who felt an ear, the elephant was like a winnowing basket. Each was convinced their description was right; they naturally fought. Of course, they were all right… from their personal experience and point of view. But each was also wrong. Their conflicting perceptions would never be resolved if they remained stuck in the narrow, subjective perspectives of what was a far greater whole.

This little story perfectly describes the limitations of the kind of divisive thinking so prevalent in the world, not least in some of the dynamics behind all wars. Britain's Houses of Parliament could not be better designed for an oppositional slagging match. Twitter and other social media feeds while expanding our access to ideas frequently evoke misunderstandings, arguments, often nastiness and public humiliations all within the space of a few words. Algorithms filter out views that media platforms unilaterally consider inappropriate. Increasingly tight and unforgiving forms of cancel culture, political correctness and censorship – invoked by a one-sided consideration by those in 'authority' – create echo chambers and threaten to shut down legitimate, healthy debate and freedom of expression.

Binary ways of thinking frequently derive from a clash of polarities: conscious thought and unconscious instinct. Both can be deeply flawed and lead to incomplete viewpoints. The former can result in cold, top-down judgement, the latter in heated, bottom-up reaction. It is only when we bring *feeling* (as distinct from inflamed emotions) into the picture that something different, more expansive, inclusive and harmonious can happen. I have witnessed this countless times in my work with prisoners and later in responses to my book. And I have learnt that this shift starts within each and every one of us.

We used to wonder where war lived, what it was that made it so vile. And now we realise that we know where it lives… inside ourselves.

Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*

Prison Work

Back in the late eighties, equipped with an Artistic Therapy diploma from Tobias School of Art in East Grinstead, Sussex, England, I built up my early career as a muralist teaching art in prisons first in Australia, then in Germany for six years and finally in England. Basing my approach on the teachings from the works of Goethe and Rudolf Steiner, I translated the, at times, complex concepts and practices of Anthroposophy into what I called my 'baked beans on toast' approach, a simplified essence in everyday language that the prisoners could better understand. Colour, light and darkness, line and form became the fluid means through which men, numbed by trauma, drugs and violence, found ways to express the devastation they had experienced, witnessed or caused. Within the boundaries of the blank paper they found ways to voice the unspeakable and work through their silenced thoughts, emotions and crimes. And within the safe space of the art room, in the presence of respect, trust and support, many were awakened to the possibilities of a different version of themselves and a better life. This approach of offering such a chance to criminals is ultimately in the interest of us all, whereby offenders released from prison are better equipped to lead a productive, crime-free life than when they went in.

If you treat an individual as he is, he will remain as he is. But if you treat people as if they were what they ought to be, you help them become what they are capable of being.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship

My work in prisons taught me that there are always at least two sides in any conflict. And each side believes they are justified in their actions. Each believes they are right. Yet both are suppressing the fundamental oneness all human beings share. I discovered that it is by listening and trying to understand the other side – which is not the same as defending, excusing, justifying or condoning wrongdoing – that we can begin to feel our way into another's situation. Standing in the other's 'shoes' offers a chance for empathy or compassion to

Angela's art and mural painting classes in Cologne Prison, Germany, 1991-97, except the top and middle right that are from her mural painting project at Feltham Young Offenders Institution, England, 2001

arise. Separating the deed from the doer means one can unreservedly condemn the deed without condemning the human being. After all, one could ask: what would I have done? What would any of us have done?

Boundaries – and the lack of them – play a significant role in health and relationships. There are the enforced boundaries of prisons. There are national borders, designed to keep people in or out. Cycling the Berlin Wall Way in the summer of 2022, I could feel the pointlessness of this concrete divide that led to the misery and deaths of so many people considered to be the 'enemy' on the other side. The profound distress such an artificial division can cause is repeated the world over. War is only possible when we suppress or can't access our basic humanity and see the enemy as 'other.' When difference becomes a threat, leaders can justify their decisions despite the catastrophic consequences. That's also one of the ways criminals can commit their crimes without compunction. With empathy gone, we all become capable of unimaginable cruelty.

But boundaries can also create safe spaces in which to explore the heartlands of our varied human experience. Circles of compassion where the shadows and shames some of us carry can be examined without judgement.

All these important lessons continue to instruct me when I am faced with disagreements or hurts within family or friendships. And unbeknownst to me at the time, they were the training I needed to work with the legacy of my dead German grandfather and his role and deeds as a military cog in Hitler's war of annihilation, above all on the eastern front with Russia. Why did I need to wrestle with the life of a family member I had never met and a conflict that had finished twenty years before I was born?

The answer to this only unfolded over many years of my life when I came to understand that unresolved deeds and trauma that aren't faced can infiltrate and influence the lives of those who come after, shaping the way they think and act in ways that may well lead them to repeat history, rather than learn from it.

It is through science we prove, but through intuition that we discover.

Henri Poincaré, *Science and Method*

I never knew my German Grandfather.

> *A week after I took my first breath, he took his last. But I always had an abiding sense that we'd connected in those few days when our lives overlapped. That as he ascended from the world and I descended into it, our paths briefly crossed. And like a relay racer passing on a baton, he handed me something. It would take me four decades to discover what. And that just as we might inherit physical or character traits, we can inherit the unresolved emotions, traumas or crimes of our forebears, too; that these do not simply disappear, but may remain festering among our roots ready to erupt into our present, seeking resolution*[2]

Other than the photograph of my grandfather that sat in a faded green frame on my mother's writing desk, the face of a uniformed and decorated German General staring from beneath his hat, lips sealed in silence, this 'baton' vision was my earliest encounter with the man I never met. At least in my life on earth.

I can still experience this 'baton' clearly to this day, though now, in the wake of my research, it has assumed a deeper reality and significance than I could have ever imagined.

A blissfully happy childhood in an English village led to the gradual dawning that Germans were not liked. They were the baddies, the losers, the evil enemy. "The only good German" apparently "was a dead German." Nights began to be invaded by a recurring nightmare about a wily fox that held me captive in its pit in a dank, leafy dell. Every time I tried to scramble up the banks and escape it would appear and round me back into its lair. This visual and visceral vocabulary of being hopelessly trapped and isolated in darkness communicated to me what my psyche increasingly felt its situation to be. But as I would discover decades later when I eventually engaged with the fox in a therapy session and asked what it wanted of me, it became evident that far from being a jailor, it had been a guardian, holding me in the darkness until I finally developed the capacity to see in the dark. With these organs of perception, I could edge my way forward, a miner in a pitch-black tunnel, until I emerged into the light. It was through that process that I uncovered gems of insight and healing I would never have found otherwise.

My school days saw me develop into a troubled and troublesome truant. Only art made any sense to me. Expelled from school with a handful of low-grade exam results, my rebellion against the constraints of English convention continued. I travelled the world and was introduced to ideas and philosophies that I recognised I had always innately felt to be true, but hitherto I had lacked the concepts to bring these to an understanding expressible in words: Reincarnation, karma, the presence of the dead among the living, the past within the present. Part of me began to flourish.

Back in England, however, my newly acquired Buddhist practices coupled with the weight I gave to dreams, serendipitous coincidences or the symbolic metaphors our souls and bodies whisper to us as they communicate messages of distress or pleasure, were fervently dismissed or ridiculed. I learned to compromise the language of my soul in the presence of others, to disguise it, pretend to laugh about it, or avoid using it all together. I developed depressions, addictions and other physical symptoms as I wrestled with inexplicable feelings of guilt, shame and a conviction I needed to atone for something.

Everything led me to prison – within and without! Working in prisons as an artist, I would haul prisoners out of the pits of guilt and shame into which they had fallen. Whilst in the prison in Cologne, Germany (employed by the Anthroposophical Trust, Maßstab e.V) I was encouraged to use the language of art and soul to help the prisoners find ways forward. My heart sang as I saw them lose themselves in deep concentration and wrestle with creative challenges. They moved colour around the paper as though it were a stretch class for their taut nerves and compressed emotions. Most were suffering widespread emotional illiteracy, resulting in each negative feeling morphing into a single faceless tormentor. Creativity gave them access to and a voice to tell their stories of childhoods, so often full of adversity and deprivation. It made me question whether violence, addiction, criminality and mental illness are inevitable reactions of once-sensitive, open-hearted kids to a cold, cruel world and a childhood that didn't make sense. In many cases, unrequited longing for respect, purpose, justice or love was raw and barely disguised and as the blank sheets of paper soon revealed, what the prisoners really wanted to express was their longing for open skies, nature, beauty, home, the people they loved. The outcomes for some of the prisoners from this process of painting, talking and feeling respected in their current state, were astonishing.

It would take me until my forties, however, to realise that in helping those deemed 'guilty' by society, I was also equipping myself with the tools I would need to make sense of, and liberate myself from, the baggage and task I was struggling under that, on some level and in some way, was given to me at birth by my grandfather when he handed me that 'baton'.

The dead are invisible, they are not absent.
St Augustine of Hippo

Intergenerational Inheritance

Whether you regard it as a case of God visiting the 'sins of the fathers upon the sons to the third and fourth generation,' or a form of intergenerational transmission of one generation's psychological wounds or baggage to the next, or an epigenetic change[3] to the functioning of certain genes, the implications are largely the same: trauma, guilt, shame and other unresolved emotions in one generation can form an emotional inheritance in another. As psychotherapist Dr M. Gerard Fromm describes it: "What human beings cannot contain of their experience – what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable – falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an affective sensitivity or a chaotic urgency."[4]

The offspring are then left to wrestle with it and find ways of bringing its full, tragic story to light without either re-triggering the trauma in theirparents or breaking away from the family. This baggage may include a sense of duty to carry out a task such as avenging a humiliation or apologizing for a crime. It is possible that the burden of both bearing and communicating the grief of a forebear will fall on one child within a family.

This describes precisely what I *experienced* long before I learnt from books and scientific articles that it is a widespread phenomenon affecting descendants of those such as Holocaust victims or survivors, Vietnam veterans and a whole generation of Germans whose parents and/or grandparents had been perpetrators or victims of Nazi Germany's crimes against humanity.

In Ireland in the 1990's I met a travelling Maori 'magic man' on a mission to heal Western people. He guided me through a strange process that involved me kneading a ball of clay, impressing an ancient labyrinthine spiral into its surface and baking it in a self-made kiln in the earth while he called on the help of exiled ancient beings. Even by my standards, this felt slightly whacko, but through it he found his way deep into my psyche and to what he called "a memory cell set deep in the waters of my etheric."[5] He told me it had been passed from generation to generation "like a gene waiting to be talked about and let go."

I believe this was when the seed was sown that would later bear the fruit of one of the main components running through all my work as an artist, speaker and author. The vital, 'Let's talk about it.'

Science, psychology and medicine all failed when it came to diagnosing what was 'wrong' with me. Instead, it was a film and an online photograph that served as the portal through which my grandfather burst fully onto the stage of my life in 2005, popping up in front of me like a roadblock demanding my full attention… and action. The film was 'Der Untergang' ('Downfall'), an account of Hitler's last days in the Berlin bunker. It left me crying for many hours, a strange response considering it marked the end of Hitler, the Nazis and the Second World War. But something about it had precipitated a visceral reaction, uncovering a deep wound in me. The shadowy, absent presence of my grandfather – who at the same time as Hitler's 'downfall' had been toppled from the heights of his General status to be banished into decades of shamed silence – was shaking me awake. On my return home, I researched his name on the internet. The first thing to appear was a photograph showing him surrendering to the Americans in north Italy in May 1945, the moment when his war ended and his time as a Prisoner of War began.

All this would also mark the end of my time as a prisoner to the sub-conscious dynamics of his unresolved issues (in me) and the beginning of a healing process that would disentangle me from his destiny and simultaneously, I hope, unburden him from some of his karma. When I am asked which qualities most helped me extricate myself from the tightly bound knot of my

grandfather's destiny and change the course of my life, I can easily point to the same qualities that worked so effectively with the prisoners and that I believe will help any of us to change the ways we collectively think, communicate and act in the world. It is the empirical and ephemeral that I call the 'feminine,' 'soul' or 'heart,' that guided me not only to the source of my symptoms, but through and out of them.

The Feminine

Everybody will have different words to describe the phenomena that I call the 'feminine'. This has nothing to do with the biological female, nor with gender. Nor is it exclusively an attribute of females. I use it to describe the feminine principle that lives within each one of us to a greater or lesser degree. I also call it the 'soul'.

For me, the feminine/soul has the reflective qualities of the moon more than the outward shining sun. It is inner, a creator of safe spaces, like the womb in which new life can be nourished and nurtured into being. It is the holding earth, both the literal soil in which seeds can grow, or the metaphorical fertile ground for ideas and inspirations. It exists powerfully but quietly, like the tiny flame of a candle taking command in the darkness. It cannot be easily and neatly packaged and presented as a single, nameable entity in a box, for it is interconnected and woven through everything in life… and death. On a physical level it lies in the upper chest region that houses the lungs and the heart. It is present in the gentle rhythm of the in-breath and out-breath, the heartbeats that keep us 'alive'. On an emotional level, maybe its true home is the realm where dreams, feelings, intuitions fluctuate almost invisibly or dramatically, like daily or seasonal transformations and weather. Existing between the extremes of the conscious and unconscious realms, it is the intersection of light and dark that gives rise to colours; where the full spectrum of feelings can co-exist in defiance of over-rational logic and judgments that may try to negate its existence when it doesn't 'make sense'. It tries to respond rather than react to the compulsive outbursts of a sub-conscious carrying trauma or other unknowns. It does not look to orthodox science with its insistence on proof through man-made instruments or formulas but is confident in the deep knowing of an intuitive awareness that enables seeing and feeling something that isn't visible to the naked eye.

What Helped Me Work Through The Issues

I started the process by facing the facts of my grandfather's life, knowing that I had no power to change them. Knowing they were his not mine. 'It wasn't me.' I soon realised that no truth I might uncover about my grandfather could hurt me more than the not knowing had.

It was painful to experience the feelings associated with the facts that had long been avoided, first by him, then by his family. Yet feeling the feelings is essential to healing them. Throughout Germany, with few on the victorious side of WW2 interested in the suffering of their enemy, German men, women and children had learned to wrap their experiences into bundles, seal them tightly and hide them away. Years later, children and grandchildren would find those bundles of unresolved guilt, shame, humiliation, trauma and despair buried in the backs of family closets and begin to unpack them.

Art, journaling, dance and various alternative therapies gave me a non-verbal language with which to unpack the heavy baggage attached to that baton my grandfather had handed to me and that had buckled me as a young person. I established a deep relationship with the dead man. He had been travelling with me all my life, somehow steering me from the 'other side' to find understanding and perhaps an atoning for him and his actions. Without this expanded, spiritual awareness that allowed my dreams and intuition to guide me, I believe I would still be ensnared in that dark fox's pit.

Angela performing her 'soil ritual' in La Stanga, North Italy, 2007

Ritual also played a role. Travelling to specific locations relevant to my grandfather's biography or the wider World War Two story, I would perform a self-made 'soil ritual'. A burying of earth (gathered and brought from my home) and tobacco – because that was a constant substance in my nicotine-addicted grandfather's life – that gave focus to each place, lifting the veils between past and present to touch the moment when injury or wrongdoing had occurred. Like an acupuncturist, I felt I was penetrating the surface layer to release blocked energy and allow it to ripple out to be reintegrated into the whole.

As important as all the above, was the act of talking about it. I started in what I considered were safe spaces. I shared the facts, feelings and my deep vulnerabilities first with family and close friends. I tested the waters with groups, seeking out where their own traumas and sensibilities might lie, listening to their stories with the same compassion I hoped I too would be shown. I then moved to speaking publicly, to audiences from school children to elderly folk. Extraordinary encounters developed with people from all sides of the horrors. Healing hugs and handshakes, tears of pain or laughter mixed together as we gave each other permission to explore what wasn't really ours to apologise for or to forgive.

A question that I was asked at the end of the talk in Stroud, and have been frequently asked in other contexts too, is: What can we as individuals do to prevent the division that can occur when we are faced with difference? When we are with people whose opinions or beliefs we vehemently disagree with, or think are completely wrong? When we encounter 'the other side'. The physician and author Gabor Maté came up with a term that captures best the approach I try to take: Compassionate Enquiry. It is neither top-down judgement, nor bottom-up reaction. It is a form of curiosity about the individual person in front of you that comes from the heart. "I'm interested… how have you come to feel or believe that?" It allows the packaging and outer labels we all come with to fall away and opens up a space, a pause, a moment to listen with genuine kindness; to find similarities rather than get locked in a narrow, combative dialogue that neither will ever truly win.

If a true love for the other is to be found on the mountaintop, for which I see all religious, spiritual or self-development practices strive, then the path to that summit surely begins in its foothills with a heartfelt *interest* in the life and being of the other.

Angela Findlay is an Anglo-German artist, author and public speaker who spent much of her career teaching and campaigning for art in prisons. Her time 'behind bars' in Germany and later as Arts Co-ordinator for the London-based Koestler Arts charity informed her research into the intergenerational consequences of unresolved trauma, guilt and shame. For over a decade, she has been lecturing and writing on the topic as well as on Germany's post-war remembrance, resolution and reconciliation. In My Grandfather's Shadow *is her first book*. www.angelafindlaytalks.com

You can read more articles by Angela Findlay on her monthly blog: https://angelafindlay.blog

Endnotes

1. The Wehrmacht was the unified armed forces of the Third Reich as opposed to the SS, The Schutzstaffel, Hitler's personal paramilitary organisation.
2. Extract from the prologue of *In My Grandfather's Shadow* by Angela Findlay
3. Epigenetics is an emerging area of scientific research into how experiences and environmental influences can affect the way genes work. During development, our DNA accumulates chemical marks – or 'tags' – that make up the epigenome ('Epi' is Greek for 'above', 'on top of', 'in addition to'). These then activate or deactivate certain parts of our DNA, like switches, modifying how our genes behave. Epigenetics posits that these changes can be 'passed on' through the generations. It begs the question as to whether genes ('switched' on and off by epigenes) are informed by forces other than hereditary ones and if genes are the *primary source* of influence in us that science considers them to be. [See 'Form and the Human Embryo' by Pearl Goodwin, *New View* issue 106, Winter 2022-23. – Ed.]
4. *Lost in Transmission,* edited by M. Gerard Fromm, Routledge, 2019.
5. Etheric or life force, which, according to Rudolf Steiner, is also the part of us, our life 'body' (supporting and informing with life our physical body) wherein also resides our capacity for memory.

(In My Grandfather's Shadow is reviewed on page 88)

Angela standing in the footprints of her grandfather where he surrendered, La Stanga, North Italy, September 2007.