

Preface

In this small volume, I offer reflections on the themes of truth, fear, reconciliation, and subjects related to forgiveness in the process of coming to terms with a violent past. I focus on violence that is indelibly shaped by circumstances of history, and also by individual acts of torture. I ask questions that have stirred me and that undergird my evolving philosophical and spiritual thinking. How do individuals begin to tell the truth about traumatic events? What happens when someone chooses not to come forward with the truth? Whose truth matters? And of course, what is truth? I also explore ways in which victims approach healing. Writing this book has been a journey into scary places, as is often the case when one lays bare an unpolished human existence.

I use the heuristic method, from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find. It refers to a way of thinking and exploring used in various academic disciplines. Heuristic methods often are rooted in autobiographical accounts that serve as a base from which to explore larger themes. The corresponding suggestion is that research questions emerge from the lived experience of the researcher. Ruth Behar (1996) proposed a new “humanistic anthropology” that weaves together ethnography and memoir, wherein the subject matter derives from lived experiences and is narrated in a personal voice. Likewise, Clark Moustakas (1990) argued that the heuristic methodology is rooted in the autobiographical. The personal identification, or the internal frame of reference, brings a sense of urgency and focus to the inquiry. As Gerard Kenny (2012) noted, a heuristic research methodology investigates *knowing* as a process rather than a product. It most closely resembles auto-ethnography, which uses stories as a basis for reflecting and making sense of historic events (Hayano, 1979).

The questions with which I began, then, were borne out of an internal process and examined within a given historical and social context. Via “exemplary portraits”, I expand on larger ideas. In this book, I reveal how my research with trauma victims in North Africa eventually led me to confront my own trauma and integrate these experiences into my life. By integrating hard realities rather than compartmentalizing them, I was able to come to a more complete sense of self. In turn, the process of confrontation and integration also came to inform my research and teaching. The reflections

I present here are based in part on my personal experiences and, accordingly, I tell some stories from my own life. These narrated experiences span several decades – from my childhood until the time of this writing – as well as several countries and continents where I spent long periods of my life, including in Germany, the United States, Kenya and Morocco.

For much of my academic career I have worked on women's rights issues in North Africa, that is, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Even before this time, when I worked as a journalist, I explored problems of justice, always in far-off lands. My work reporting from 22 African countries included a time in South Africa during the apartheid regime and 10 years in Kenya. While based in Nairobi, I reported on famines in Ethiopia, the civil war in Uganda, the genocide in Rwanda and more. Looking at my professional career, two things become clear. First, I was drawn to delve into situations that were geographically, culturally and linguistically removed from my own. Second, I have been most interested in reporting and analyzing – either as a journalist or later as scholar – how larger political or natural crises affect individuals. My best stories as a journalist were those that described the lives of people in a refugee camp, for example, or of warriors in a civil war. As a scholar, my most intense interest has been in victims of the dictatorial regimes in Tunisia, more specifically women and truth telling in the aftermath of the uprising in 2011.

During my years as a foreign correspondent I frequently had to cover authoritarian, corrupt regimes and interview corrupt, authoritarian leaders. My attention was less on the ways their oppressive leadership hindered, for example, the growth of a healthy economy (which it certainly did) but what it meant for citizens when they could not trust their governments and public institutions. What does it do to individuals when they know their leaders willfully deceive them, deprive them of a decent livelihood and ignore the rule of law for personal gain?

When leadership is unapologetically deceitful, it creates a model for society. Even if individuals know the difference between truth and lies, such leaders create an atmosphere rife with the reality that deception and depravity are acceptable and often necessary for personal advancement. The pervasive sense of mistrust in such societies corrodes the relative harmonious social relationships that exist, eventually turning neighbors against each other.

After I left journalism for academia, my scholarly research turned to exploring contemporary women's rights in North Africa. In particular, I

sought to understand better the process by which Tunisian women came to terms with their torturous pasts in the wake of the revolution that led to the overthrow of a dictatorial regime. Over a period of seven years, I interviewed hundreds of women and dozens of men who were either prisoners of conscience or were related to someone who had been a political prisoner, either as wife, daughter, sister or mother.

Despite the differences in culture, time and place between the women in Tunisia and myself, I found significant similarities when it came to secrets, truth, forgiving and healing. The commonalities between the experiences of these survivors and my own experiences led me to meditate on the universalities of responses to trauma. If I were a great writer, I would be able to begin this volume with the opposite of the opening line of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I have found that it is in tragedy, suffering and trauma where we most deeply connect with each another across cultural, linguistic and religious divides. Once acknowledged, tragedies can bind us together in ways much more profound than can happiness.

This insight was brought home to me after one tearful, gut wrenching interview, when a Tunisian woman asked me, "Are you one of us?" I am not Tunisian. I have not experienced persecution. Because I was in my professional mode and had not talked about myself, these women could not have known what had happened in my own life that would allow me to understand some of their pain and their struggles. Yet, this woman, and several others like her, sensed some kinship. I should have remembered then what my late African American mother-in-law exclaimed decades ago when I first told her about having discovered my father's previously hidden past as a Holocaust survivor. Unlike me, she was not surprised, and stated as a matter of fact, "One victim can smell another."

After years of completing scholarly articles and reports on the subject of tortured women in the small North African country of Tunisia, I decided it was time to confront my own past. What follows are reflections on my struggle to make sense of multiple tragedies and their wider implications.

I have experienced death and loss on several continents. My oldest daughter Lancy died in 2000 in Morocco, and my husband Ken died seven years later in the United States. I have seen how communities come together in the wake of profound loss. I have had the sad opportunity to experience the different ways people in the Global North and Global South deal with

personal tragedies. Before writing about these losses, however, I delve into my father's tortured past, a past he kept secret from us until he reached his seventies and thought he would not have much longer to live.

Few lives extend smoothly in a linear fashion. Most of us experience life in jumps and stops and hapless restarts. For most, life is a journey with many dead ends, across roads with potholes so deep they can swallow us. (I lived in Africa for close to 20 years where I have travelled on roads with treacherous potholes). This book is not a smooth retelling of my life's story, followed by inspiring lessons. Rather, it offers snippets of certain events in my own life that have prompted me to reflect on larger matters that I also have encountered in my scholarly research.

To protect their privacy, I have changed the names of the people in Tunisia whom I mention in this book. In my own story, I have chosen not to mention anyone by name who is still alive. In this effort, I rely on my own memory and my own responses. Others who were present at the same events may recall them differently and may have reached different conclusions.

My listening for hours, weeks and months over a period of several years to the stories of Tunisian women and men had a cathartic effect on some who shared their stories for the first time. Likewise, writing this book has had a liberating effect on me, because for the first time I dare to share publicly some of my story.

If nothing else, I hope that readers will draw courage from this book, courage to own their life story and wrest it away from those who have the power to shape or interpret it on their behalf. We can heal best if the way we make sense of our life is our own.

Chapter 1

Clipped Wings

There are two things children should get from their parents: roots and wings.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“Let’s lift our glass to life,” my father said with a big smile. I dropped my glass. We were in a village in the French Alps, sitting around a table at dinner. Without a word, I got up and left the restaurant. My husband Ken followed me, while my young daughters sat and looked bewildered, not knowing how to react. They remained at the table with their grandparents.

Ken and I walked back to our room in a local guest house. “I don’t get your father. I don’t even want to talk with him anymore,” he said. Our eldest daughter Lancy had died two weeks earlier, in a car accident. She was 15 years old. Now I lay on the bed in our hotel room, stiff, stunned and silent. Shortly thereafter, my mother knocked at the door. As usual, she tried to smooth over my dad’s life-long odd behavior. “He is sitting in his room shaking,” she said. “He does not know how to deal with this situation.” Consumed with my own grief, I had no will to understand what ailed him.

At the time, we were living in Morocco, having come a year earlier for a university teaching fellowship there. My parents had not been able to make the strenuous trip to North Africa to attend our daughter’s funeral and suggested we meet them in France, halfway between Morocco and Germany. In order to see them we had taken the ferry from Tangier to Sète, a port town near Montpellier in southern France. This trip, originally planned as a summer vacation, had been organized long before our world fell apart. After Lancy’s death, incapable of thinking about arrangements beyond compliance with Moroccan funeral customs and intent on keeping our diminished family afloat, we found it simpler to maintain the original travel plans.

Friends offered to accompany us to France. We were so unmoored by our daughter’s sudden death that we felt unable to appear coherent in front of customs agents at border crossings between Africa and Europe. Trusted friends throw us a lifeline in times of darkness. M and H drove with us to the port city of Tangier, shepherded us onto the ferry and stayed with us on the two-day cruise across the Mediterranean. We were given an inside cabin

without a porthole. The darkness in the cabin and the rocking of the boat on the waves created a physical sensation that mirrored how I felt: bleak and without solid ground under my feet. While our friends took care of our daughters, I stayed in the cabin and did not turn on a single light. For three days and two nights I remained enveloped in darkness, swaying about. How was I ever to regain my bearings? The up and down of the boat matched my sense of instability, and my seasickness blended with my grief.

After several days on the Mediterranean, we arrived in the breathtaking shadow of Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc. Yet we had sunk to our personal lowest point. We met with my parents for the first time since they had lost their granddaughter. I felt that a quiet dinner would have been appropriate. Yet my dad used the occasion for a grand, life affirming gesture that to me felt like complete disregard for our sorrow. The following morning, he pretended nothing of great consequence had happened and we passed the next few days not talking much to each other.

My parents returned to Germany and we travelled from France to Switzerland, where we met with my sister and her family. It was her birthday. My dad called, and after wishing her a happy birthday, he asked to talk to me. "You need to move on," he insisted. "Look forward to life and celebrate with your sister." Here he was, again pressing past the grief. I whimpered, "Papa, my child just died, I can neither celebrate nor think of looking forward right now." Short silence. "Don't hold on, you must pick yourself up," he said, undeterred by what I had just told him. I hung up.

If our relationship had not been strained before, it was at a breaking point now. Most of our communication after that call was tense. In the months that followed, my dad insisted that we move Lancy's body from Morocco to Germany and have her interred there. He was adamant that her remains needed to be in the collective family grave in a wooded, historical Christian cemetery in Frankfurt. Ken and I resisted. Lancy was born in Africa, albeit on the other side of the continent, in Kenya. She had died in Africa, so that was where her last resting place would be. We thought: leave the dead still. Moving a dead body does not lead to life. I tried to tell my dad that having the members of a family interred in one place does not make a family whole again, but he would not hear of it. To him, being united even in death seemed of utmost importance, so he continued to pressure us to have her coffin unearthed from the Moroccan cemetery and moved to Germany. He said this was so important that the cost did not matter to him. Even so,

Ken and I did not give in. We left Lancy in her tomb, in the old cemetery reserved for Christians and soldiers, in the Muslim-majority country where she had died.

The French established these cemeteries during the colonial period, and they contain large sections for World War I and World War II soldiers who fought on their side. Christian soldiers received an unmarked white cross; Muslims, a carved tombstone resembling a candle. To this day, the cemeteries are maintained by the French embassy, though most of the graves date back to the period when Morocco was a French protectorate (1912–1956). The vastness of these cemeteries, with large swatches of land still untouched, attests to the confidence of the French colonial powers that they would never have to leave Morocco. Today, most of the old graves are dilapidated and the crumbling marble columns and tombstones speak of faded colonial glory. Our daughter's grave was by far the newest addition. We chose a hilly spot overlooking the foothills of the nearby Atlas Mountains.

My dad never came to visit his granddaughter's grave in North Africa.

Throughout my life, I came to accept my dad's inclination for disregarding bad experiences. But here he went too far. He could not bring himself to support us in our grief, instead busying himself with research about moving his granddaughter's corpse from North Africa to Europe. He could not restrain himself but had to repeatedly tell me that I needed to get on with life, that I should not give in to my mourning. He found no words to acknowledge my inconsolable grief over the death of my child.

Eventually, my mum, as always, found a compromise. She had a commemorative stone with our daughter's name placed on the family grave in Germany. And Lancy remained in Morocco.

Lancy and our other two daughters had all been born in Nairobi, Kenya, where Ken and I worked for nearly ten years prior to coming to Morocco. After each birth, my parents would travel to East Africa to celebrate the new life with us. While my mum would attend to chores around the house so I could rest, my dad – made plans. Less than a week after the birth of our second daughter he suggested we drive up to nearby Mount Kenya. Country roads in Kenya are filled with potholes, and even in the best of circumstances, roads are difficult to navigate. Bumping around crater-size holes, skirting around donkeys and chickens on the road, or veering away from oncoming cars all require a good stomach. A few days after giving birth, I did not embrace his proposition. But for my dad, neither my comfort nor

his was worth considering. We constantly had to *do* something; recovering from birth and nurturing a newborn was simply not enough activity. Always restless, he felt at ease only when he was in motion, both physically and mentally. Even when he was seriously ill, which he often was, he would drag himself out of bed and insist on moving about. What is more, he was not satisfied with just moving himself. He needed to direct the activities of those closest to him and rarely accepted dissent.

For my dad, there was no worse state of being than staying still. In church, the opera, in a concert hall, he had to arrive either before or after everyone else and secure a seat in the front row, only to get up and make his way to the exit shortly before the service or performance ended. Because of his limping leg, the result of an untreated injury in his younger years, there was no such thing as a discreet departure. He would hobble up the aisle, willfully oblivious to the punishing gaze of other observers or audience. As children, my sister and I always trotted obediently behind him, red-faced, heads hanging low to escape the scolding expressions of those who resented the disturbance. He so viscerally detested being part of a crowd, he could not stand to be surrounded or move within a large group of people. I, to the contrary, resented not being allowed to hear or see the end of a performance and was endlessly embarrassed by marching out while everyone sat in rapt attention awaiting the grand finale. My mum rarely accompanied us on such excursions, however. Because she wanted to avoid conflict over my dad's insistence about leaving early, she had long acquired the habit of attending performances by herself or with her friends.

My dad had an uncanny ability to look forward; he did not dwell on defeat. When we got bad grades in school, failed to excel in athletic activities, suffered from teenage angst, fell ill, he acknowledged the situation only for the briefest of moments and quickly turned his attention – and ours – to the next step that would deliver us from feeling down. Not only in defeat, his credo was not to be overcome by the exigencies of the moment and instead keep the mind trained on the next step. His intense focus on the future also applied to joyful events, like the birth of each of my children. We would receive a quick “congratulations,” followed by a series of admonitions about what had to be done to ensure a good future for the child.

For me, it was impossible to figure out my dad. Kind and gentle towards everyone else, he was relentlessly demanding and stern with his children. Curious and open-minded much of the time, he also was secretive and in-

scrutable. I had witnessed him show great empathy towards his employees when they were in distress. But when his own granddaughter died, he did not shed a tear.

It was his remoteness that was hard to bear. As a child I would have loved to tumble around with him and play silly games. Likewise, my children wanted to play with him, to have some fun with their granddad. Not only did his remoteness keep us at arm's length, his aura of secrecy made him untouchable.

Adding to this sense of distance was his keeping us in the dark about his life story. My dad seemed to come from nowhere. He seemed to be attached to no one but the family he had created with my mother. We knew of no relatives, no parents, no siblings, no aunts, no uncles, no cousins. We understood from earliest childhood that asking about his family was taboo. My dad could give us *the* look that made clear that we would burn in living hell if we uttered another word. He would give us that steely, penetrating, forbidding look that made us shiver. Though it only lasted for seconds, *the* look would stop any emerging thought we might have, any attempt to trespass on the taboo topic of his family. Together, my sister and I would spin stories about how our dad came from a wandering circus, his mother a trapeze artist who had given him up at birth. Or how he was the son of a sex worker who could not care for him, and how he could not, as a good Catholic, acknowledge such a background. We needed to explain to ourselves where our father could have come from if we were to understand our own origins.

The one thing we did know is that as a child he lived in a certain neighborhood in Frankfurt that we visited with ritual regularity once a year. Every Christmas eve, while my mother decorated the Christmas tree, dad drove with my sister and me to the apartment building where he grew up in Frankfurt's Bockenheim neighborhood. Apart from being the historic location of the renowned Goethe University, it was once a working-class neighborhood with simple apartment complexes on cobblestone streets. My dad told us nothing about his childhood other than that he once lived in this old and creaky building, one of the few that were not destroyed during World War II. We would climb up and down the stairs, go from apartment to apartment, and visit the old people in that house who had known my dad from early childhood. They were always happy to welcome "their" Karlheinz back to the neighborhood and complimented him on what he had made of himself. There was never any talk or reminiscing about old times. Instead, they were

happy to see him and his daughters, pleased to remark on how well we behaved and how much we had grown, and always emphasized how proud they were that he had managed to become a successful businessman. Alas, I never learned anything new about our dad from these annual reunions. They represented a ritual: same people, same place, same words and always at the same exact time, Christmas Eve. As the years went by, some of his former neighbors became bent by age, some became senile, some died in the year between our visits. Yet each year, my dad, with us children in tow, enacted the same routine. We were to just sit and smile, *the* look made clear that we were not to ask any questions about what bonded him to these people. As the years passed, one after another died, but still we visited every Christmas season until the very last person in that building who knew my father was no more. I saw these annual calls as highly curious because my dad was not overtly sentimental. There were no heartfelt exchanges or any contact with these people apart from the yearly Christmas Eve visits. For me, it was a peculiar, if required, performance.

What these visits to his childhood home did show us was that he came from humble beginnings. The same was true of my mother who freely shared stories of her childhood. Her father had been a gardener who died before we were born; her mother had been a homemaker. My mother had left school early and gone to work as a teenager to provide for the family while her father was a prisoner of WW I in France for several years. As a result, my parents wanted nothing more than to make sure their children would never know poverty and would get an education. My father had not finished high school and my mother had never made it beyond eighth grade. They aspired to create a middle-class life for themselves and their children. In the turbulent post-WWII years with its *Wirtschaftswunder* (the rapid rebuilding and economic development after World War II in Germany), hardworking, innovative entrepreneurs were given unparalleled opportunities. No one asked about pasts or proven qualifications. The war had disrupted the life of every man, woman and child, and a collective pact of silence about what one did during the Nazi era allowed perpetrator, survivor, Jew and Gentile to dare embark on a new beginning.

From my friends in high school I knew that other parents had signed on to this pact of silence, too. We occasionally talked about what we thought our parents had done during the war. Most had managed to extract some fragments of information. Their fathers had fought on some front line or