

Wilderness Therapy with Militarised Youths in Traumatised Communities

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In South Africa, the combination of state repression and insurrectionary struggle has resulted in high levels of militarisation, particularly of the youth who were the most active participants in revolutionary struggle (Marks & McKenzie, 1995). In the 1970s and 1980s the inability or failure of the police to protect black communities led to the development of alternative policing systems. Drawing on this tradition, the beginning of the 1990s saw the formation of the Self-Defence Units (SDUs) by the African National Congress (ANC) and, in response, the formation of the Self-Protection Units (SPUs) by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (Rakgoadi, 1994). The youths involved in these informal structures perceived their key identity to be that of "*defenders of their communities*" (Marks & McKenzie, 1995).

In the Kathorus region (comprising the townships of Katlehong, Thokoza and Vosloorus) in the East Rand of Gauteng Province, the early 1990s saw thousands of people die as political parties fought to take control of territory. (1)

The East Rand battles were first reported as clashes between hostel dwellers supporting the IFP, and township dwellers predominantly supporting the ANC. As the fighting continued, ingredients of tribalism, criminal activity and conflict with the security forces were added to the political dilemma. (2)

Many residents died simply because of their origins. Divisions between Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers supporting the IFP and township dwellers predominately supporting the ANC became deeply implanted in the communities' perceptions. The ANC-aligned SDUs fought rival groups for control of sections of the townships and residents were forced to flee their homes. Empty houses became battlegrounds for the SDUs and the IFP-aligned SPUs.

The tracts of deserted homes became 'no-go zones' which people entered at their peril. Residents ran the risk of being killed if a member of a rival grouping saw them in the wrong area. The no-go zones created *displacees* – members of the community who had lost their homes during the fighting and were without a place to stay. Many initially found refuge in emergency shelters, such as church halls, and then moved in with relatives. Hostel dwellers occupied houses near the hostels.

(1) *Star*, *SDUs Blamed for Killings*, 14 December 1995, p 14.

(2) *Weekly Mail Townships Where Police No Longer Fear To Tread*, 7 August 1994, p 6.

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Some Zulu-speaking families in ANC-controlled areas were forced from their homes into the hostels for safety. The dispute over the ownership and return of occupied houses has remained one of the most divisive factors between the hostels and the township communities. (3)

While the fighting raged, peace workers in the townships picked up bodies as often as they brokered cease-fires. They were under suspicion from both the IFP and the ANC, particularly if they were seen to be with either side for too long. Eventually the peace workers began to win some respect from both parties.

Even though the death figures remained high until early 1994, political parties began meeting regularly in three Local Peace Committees. A massive security operation by the armed forces and the police forced a calm on the region in early 1994 and the peace process began to take root. By late 1994 this process began to be consolidated by peace workers and members of political parties (Seiler, 1997).

During the first half of the 1990s, the teenage soldiers, as members of either an SDU or SPU, were viewed as heroes by the community. The subsidence of the extreme conflict resulted in a change to their status. These militarised youths became marginalised, rejected and often criminalised. As a result, they were no longer seen as heroes but as enemies of the community.

The attempts made to work with these youths were often abandoned and traditional types of therapeutic intervention appeared unsuccessful. The lack of success may be attributed to, first, the youths' suspicion of authority figures; secondly, their fear of possibly needing to reveal their role in the killings; and thirdly, their perception that therapy is for "mad" people and that they are not "mad." It was thought that a more robust therapeutic intervention was required. This notion prompted the establishment, in 1996, of the Wilderness Therapy Project of Kathorus, sponsored by the National Peace Accord Trust. The project brings together young men who were formerly enemies, involved in either an SDU or SPU, and also includes the young women involved in supportive roles during the conflict.

The therapeutic intervention comprises a seven-day trail in the Drakensberg (Dragon Mountains). The trail is conducted by a psychologist experienced in wilderness therapy and an assistant, a former SDU commander. The assistant was drawn from the community to receive ongoing practical and theoretical training with the view to conducting trails independently at a later stage.

A Jungian Therapeutic Approach

The wilderness therapy intervention is conceived of and conducted in the light of the work of C G Jung. Within this framework, psychic growth has a teleological

(3) Weekly Mail, *Out of Control, Not Us Say Defence Units*, 27 December 1995, p 16.

drive towards wholeness. This drive is understood, as in the work of Jan Smuts (1926), not merely as an artificial construction but as a *vera causa*, part of the motive force behind all growth in the universe towards wholeness. Jung referred to this drive towards wholeness in psychic growth as *individuation* and to the culmination of this process as *transformation*. He believed that human beings have an instinct for wholeness and that transformation is a natural, albeit hazardous, process which involved an on-going dialogue between the ego and the Self. Transformation is brought about when the Self, or archetypal image of God, replaces the ego as the centring mechanism within the psyche (Edinger, 1973). For Jung, "...all transformation includes experiences of transcendence and mystery and involves symbolic death and rebirth" (Samuels, 1986).

Jung refined Freud's theory of the unconscious by positing the existence of a personal and a collective unconscious. Whilst the personal unconscious is a relatively superficial, accessible and variable layer in the psyche, the collective unconscious is a deeper, relatively inaccessible and more stable layer. It is universal, impersonal and collective in that it is common to all human beings.

One of the major components of the collective unconscious is the *archetypes*. One may view the archetypes as dispositions of the mind, the forms, or riverbeds, along which the current of psychic life has always flowed (Moreno, 1974). The most basic of all the archetypes is the oneness of nature – the essential self. A wilderness area, in its natural state, facilitates the experience of oneness. It provides the terrain which may foster the individuation process due to its inherent drive towards wholeness.

The Wilderness Process

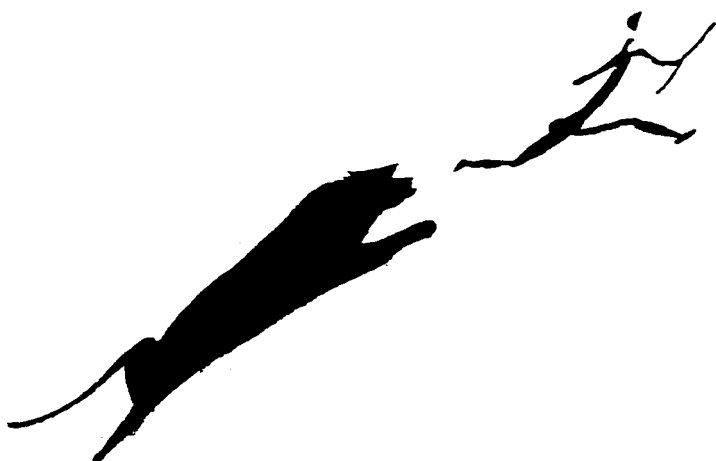
In symbolic terms, wilderness is associated with the unconscious:

"...everything which surrounds the conscious, its edges, its limits, and which threatens death and extinction. [It] can be a place of misery and exile, but may also be the occasion of new insights for the community or individual" (Chetwynd, 1982).

The use of archetypal imagery and symbolism is central to the therapeutic construction of the experience which is designed to facilitate the individuation process. The physical obstacles, challenges, achievements and their parallel psychological equivalents are dealt with in terms of being the same process. The archetypal significance of the physical terrain is primary to the psychological processes involved during the trail. Although the particular structure of a trail is

dependent on the assessed therapeutic needs of the group, trails may be broadly grouped as either a "rebirthing" or a "transcendent" experience. A rebirthing trail follows a watercourse through tunnels, rock arches, and forests within a widening valley system. The transcendent trail involves ascending the mountain and spending at least one night on the summit. Mythology holds that mountains are the centre of the world, the seat of the immortals, the place where the gods assemble. Mountains symbolise the highest longings and aspirations of human beings (Chetwynd, 1982).

Most trails include overnight stays in or near sacred Bushman caves. The caves were the site of the healing trance dance. The Bushmen addressed issues of social harmony, well-being and the healing of individuals by means of the communal trance or healing dance (Yates, et al, 1990). The rock art associated with this healing ritual (Lewis-Williams, 1994) still remains on the cave walls. The symbolic value of the caves and the rock art is incorporated into the healing process of the trail. The project uses a copy of a Bushman rock painting as a logo. This painting depicts a human figure pursued by a beast. The logo is used as a graphic representation of an analogy used in the therapeutic process which holds that the participants on the trail (the human figure) are pursued by their traumatic past and other negative or shadow issues (the beast).



Logo used by the Wilderness Therapy Project of Kathorus

During the time spent in the mountains, participants sometimes experience trauma flashbacks. These are processed within the particular therapeutic milieu facilitated by the wilderness experience. The whole group tends to assume a supportive function in response to this type of situation as the group internalises the underlying notion that the group's well-being depends on each individual's well-being. An example of this process was related to a journalist during an interview with a former SDU after returning from wilderness therapy:

During the first night on the trail, a participant dreamed a faceless enemy was attacking him. On the second night, he fought back, shredding his sleeping bag. *"I tried to work out what it was I had not yet dealt with,"* he says. The other SDU members slept at his sides the rest of the night to protect and comfort him. (4)

The therapeutic process also involves reconciliation in that members of opposing groupings participate together and begin to change previously held negative perceptions and build more constructive relationships. The assistant therapist guides the participants towards changing the words of "war songs" that emerged during the conflict in the community. Towards the end of the experience in the mountains, participants are usually singing songs with words appropriate to a different phase in the community's development. The reconciliation between participants during the wilderness experience may be seen to have a ripple effect in terms of shifting the perceptions of the communities regarding formerly opposed groupings.

Many of the participants on the trail regard the experience as a type of rite of passage or initiation process. Due to the extreme conflict and disruption of community processes, most of these youths had failed to be involved in any community-sanctioned ritual indicating their role within the community. They return from the wilderness experience to the community with the status of heroes. However, the whole discourse around their heroic status within the community has changed and is no longer in terms of violence and war. In order to enhance the community's changed response to the returning youths, each participant in the wilderness experience receives a copy of a video recording of the trail. These video recordings, that are eagerly shown to family and friends, serve to boost the heroic status of the youths in the perceptions of their communities. The transformation process is then reinforced by the community, allowing the youths to become more integrated and to serve as role models to other youths.

After returning from the wilderness experience, some youths begin to make use of the counselling service available. All participants in the experience become members of an informal 'club.' The youths elected to call it, "The Mountain Club." This informal structure serves an ongoing therapeutic function, allowing youths to

(4) Star and SA Times International, *Youths Scarred By The Township War Learn To Fight The Beast Within*, 19 February 1997.

discuss their experiences, continue building relationships, and become involved in cultural and sporting activities. The club, as it accommodates the needs of members, is developing in various directions, including assisting members to become involved again in community affairs. Members have functioned as peace monitors at a commemoration ceremony and assisted as mentors to children participating in an adventure therapy programme. The club's current plans include the initiation and continued involvement of members in reparative projects within the community.

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