5.1 A psychotherapist’s kama muta

For me, the turning point in working with an ten-year-old Syrian refugee was when I opened my heart to him. When I first started working with the boy, he was completely disengaged. He would often walk out of therapy ten minutes into the session. He was aggressive, hyperactive and seemingly shut down to the prospect of having a relationship with me. I would privately dread sessions with him because it was such hard work.

However this little boy had good reason to be wary of attachments. When he was five years old, militia had stormed his family’s farm. Thinking they wanted to kill him, the boy’s father fled for his life. The boy watched his mother being beaten, while he was held at knifepoint. He was told that he would be be-headed. He was then thrown against a wall and finally tied to his mother and left for dead. Given that neither of his parents was available to him in a moment where his life had been threatened, I understood that attachment was going to be difficult.

The boy’s functioning at school was severely impaired and the school ultimately diagnosed him with an intellectual disability. My organization disagreed. The diagnosis of intellectual disability is often made with refugee children when trauma is a more likely explanation for their symptoms. However, the decision was made. He was to be sent to a special school. I would no longer be working with him.

Weeks later I received a call from the school saying something had changed in the boy’s behavior. He had begun telling stories in class about horrors that he had witnessed in Syria. No one knew what to do. They asked me to come back in and speak with him. I agreed but suspected that the conversation would not go very far. He had shown no interest in engaging with me until this point, and I saw no reason why this situation would be different. I was wrong.

To my amazement, the boy, who I had never seen sit in a chair for longer than five minutes, came in and sat down, looked me in the eye, and proceeded to tell me a twenty-minute story about an incident in Iraq where he witnessed a young boy being killed. He then said he did not want to talk. He wanted to play games instead, so that is what we did. After a full session - the first in which he had not attempted to run away - it was time to go back to class. I asked him if I could come again the following week and he said yes. This was the beginning of a whole new relationship. He did not go to a special school and remained in therapy with me.

After this turning point, it soon became clear that the boy had become attached to me. This coincided with a new level of openness on my part. It was as if the moment my heart opened to him, his heart opened to me. At the beginning I had dreaded our sessions together but the more I had learnt about him and his history the more my
Compassion had grown. Whereas the school saw him as a “naughty boy” who needed stricter discipline, my knowledge of his trauma history meant that his “bad” behavior could be viewed through a more understanding and compassionate lens.

This shift in our relationship culminated in a very special moment. In the two years we worked together, the boy had not spoken of the man who had tried to kill him. However one day he drew a picture and told me it was “the man”. I asked him who the man was and he began to describe what had happened in Syria. He said he wanted to kill the man. With this, he picked up scissors and began stabbing the picture shouting “DIE, DIE, DIE!!” He then tore the paper into pieces and told me he would like to perform “magic”. With this he placed the paper in a container and requested water, earth and fire. I gave him water and we collected dirt. He poured the water and dirt into the container, arranged a circle of stones around it and began beating a drum while chanting, “Earth, Fire, Wind, Water MAN... GOOOOO!!” He invited me to join his ritual and we repeated the chant together several times. After the ceremony he created a grave for the container and made me promise that it would stay buried.

This is a story that will always stay with me, and in many ways I consider it to be the making of me as a therapist. It showed me what I now consider to be the essential ingredients of therapy: that people intuitively how to exorcise their own “demons” but that it may take the safety and containment of a secure relationship for them to explore freely their own creative potential, and bring about their own healing.

Lauren Ban
5.2 Kama muta at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance

I ran into a man I know who lives down the street. He’s in his 40’s, gay, married . . . . I mentioned that I had just spent the day at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance (MOT), and he said that he went to the MOT a couple years ago to hear a guest speaker . . . . there were actually two people, speaking together. One was a (formerly) homophobic white supremacist, the other a (gay) man who was once very badly beaten up by the homophobic white supremacist. Apparently, [some months before] both men began public speaking about their experiences of “hate” without any knowledge that the other was doing the same thing. And they both began speaking [occasionally] at MOT, separately, without anyone (themselves included) putting together that they were part of each other's stories. Once they made the connection, they reconciled and began giving talks together. My neighbor said it was “amazing” and “very, very moving”.

I asked if there was anything in particular in their talk which was the most moving for him. At first he said, “not really”, that the “whole thing” was just really “powerful” – then thought a minute and said that it was probably most “moving” when the men spoke about reconciling and forgiveness (the man who was attacked forgiving his attacker). My neighbor said that he felt both “being able to forgive” like that, and (for the attacker) being able to confront his horrible actions and face his victim, required incredible courage, which my neighbor really admired. He said remembers crying during their talk, and that he walked away feeling much more “light” and “hopeful” than he had anticipated. He said he expected the talk to be really “heavy” and “intense” – and that it was – but that it left him feeling “much better” than when he went into the talk.

Michelle Piazza  field notes 18 May 2015
5.3 He today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother

We would not die in that man’s company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.
This day is call’d the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam’d,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say “To-morrow is Saint Crispian.”
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say “These wounds I had on Crispian’s day.” . . .
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered —
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother.

William Shakespeare, Henry V, Act IV Scene iii 18–67

As Shakespeare’s language suggests, shedding blood together can be compellingly consubstantial. Mixing one’s blood on the battlefield, bodily suffering and pain, and the bodily aspects of horrific fear can make soldiers into one body, and hence into one social person in CS. Shakespeare says, through King Henry, that this creates lifelong CS bonds. We posit that such lifelong bonds are often mediated by the kama muta experiences on the battlefield. Moreover, in combat, kama muta experiences may motivate devotion to comrades, both those who suffer for the unit, and those whose lives have been saved by their buddies self-sacrifice. Seeing that the unit has your back, suffers wounds, and dies for you may evokes kama muta that motivates you to do the same. We think most soldiers, sailors, and airmen would confirm this, and suggest that it would be worthwhile to do research to see whether there is greater until solidarity in units who have had potent kama muta experiences. If so, this is likely to be a virtuous circle of positive feedback, in which greater solidarity in turn motivates further kama muta-evoking heroism, so long as the unit remains intact as a true unit in the CS sense.
5.4 Kama muta in victory

In the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, when Seema Poonia of India won the women’s discus, she told an interviewer that she felt that all her time away from her child had not been for nothing because she had done something for her country: (http://d2010.thecgf.com/interview/poonia_gets_emotional_recounting_her_sacrifices_win_gold)

At the 2014 Olympics, Finland won the bronze medal in hockey. It was the last game of winger Teemu Selänne’s international career. He said that before the game the players had met and decided to “play for each other, from our hearts.” Saying how proud he was to be “part of this” team that worked together, supporting each other, he wept – and so did the Finnish interviewer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgW412vWamk; http://yle.fi/uutiset/selanne_signs_off_with_bronze/7103642

Scoring a goal, making a touchdown, or hitting a homerun for the team in a crucial match can evoke kama muta in the player, team, coach, family, and friends. In the opening match of the 2016 Euro football (soccer) tournament, after scoring the winning goal for France in the 89th minute, Dimitri Payet wept about what this meant for France (Wilson 2016; Le Buzz 2016)

The winner is not the only one who experiences the kama muta of victory. Fans love great players, and when this ignites into adoration, fans may feel kama muta. When the great basketball player Bob Cousy played his farewell game on 17 March 1963, the Boston Celtics fans showed how they felt:

    For minute after minute, the chant was unendurably affectionate, loud, nostalgic, throbbing: “We love Cooz! We love Cooz! We love Cooz!” I shouted myself hoarse.
    . . . In the end, Cousy broke into tears. I doubt there was a dry eye in the house.
    Novak 1993:125

Competitive victories and other extraordinary achievements are felt to be notable contributions to the team, the town or university, and the nation they represent. Fans and admirers feel that they have won, they have achieved great things. After a football victory, US collegians more frequently wear clothing with their college’s insignia and more frequently refer to the event by saying that “we won,” as opposed to saying of the team that “they lost” (Cialdini et al 1976). After a victory in the Olympics or World Cup, people display their national flags and team colors.

Sometimes victory evokes kama muta in people who identify with the winning national team, even if they are not sports fans, as such.

I never watch sports, and I could not care less about football. But when I was ten, I was watching a football match at home with my father and older brothers. It was the FIFA 1998 World Cup, and tonight Norway met Brazil. Norway had to win this match to proceed to the knockout stage, but the prospect of defeating the
mightiest of football nations was considered microscopic. As the match was approaching the end, the score was 1–1.

Then, when only three minutes remains, Norway is awarded a penalty kick. We are holding our breaths and barely dare to watch the TV as player number 10, Kjetil Rekdal, places the ball in front of him and steps backwards.

The Norwegian commentator is clearly emotional, half-screaming that “The pulse is in 410. This is so huge for everyone. The most important kick on a football in the history of Norwegian football.” Rekdal then starts running towards the ball. The ball passes the Brazilian goalkeeper on the left side and enters the net. In the same instance, the stadium explodes with joy. The commentator screams so loud that he becomes short of breath: “And he scores! Norway is leading 2–1! Norway is leading! Viva la Norvège! Allez Norway! Kjetil Rekdal and everyone at home. I have never experienced anything like this. And I say this from the bottom of my heart. 2–1 to Norway. This is incredible! We’re back! Brazil was leading. Brazil hasn't lost since ’66. Hasn't lost since ’66! And Norway. . . In everybody’s hearts! Excuse the patriotism! Excuse everything!”

Around me are my brothers and my father, screaming and cheering and jumping in their chairs, as the clip is shown over and over again. One minute later, the match is over. Norway has won.

It was a warm and bright summer night. Energized by the victory, I ran outdoor. I ran to the meadow where my horse Manolita was grazing, hugged her and told her about the match. “Can you believe it, Manolita! We defeated Brazil!”. I still get the shivers when I watch clips of that penalty kick.

Sigrid Møyner Hohle