

# Healing Collective Trauma

## A Process for Integrating our Intergenerational and Cultural Wounds

A book excerpt by Mobius Friend and core Next Practice Institute faculty Thomas Huebl  
writing with Julie Jordan Avritt

At the 2022 Next Practice Institute Annual Gathering, Thomas will lead a day-long intensive on the mystical principles of transformation.

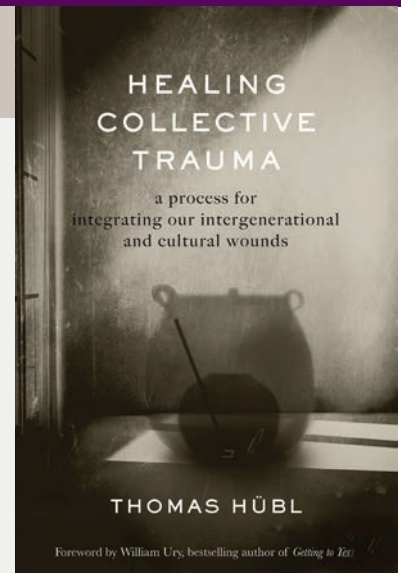
Whether or not we have experienced personal trauma, we are all—in very real ways—impacted by the legacy of familial and cultural suffering. Recent research has shown that trauma affects groups just as acutely as it does individuals; it bridges families, generations, communities, and borders.

In *Healing Collective Trauma*, Thomas Huebl has summarized two decades of experience working on personal and collective healing in Germany, the Middle East and in the United States. In this breakthrough offering, he unpacks the many societal symptoms of collective trauma and traces them back to their roots in family trauma and collective events such as war, genocide, inequity, and societal destabilization. He also shares his own proprietary method for large group processes that restore and repair the deep aftermath that such violence leaves in its wake.

Thomas is a profound teacher, trauma expert and process facilitation expert working with professionals on their inner lives, guiding restorative group processes for teams and organizational leaders, and attending to geopolitical hotspots experiencing multi-generational national traumas.

His work integrates the essence of the great wisdom traditions, with scientific knowledge, findings in child and adult development, neuroscience, cognitive science and cultural theory. Thomas' leading-edge work has spread worldwide through workshops, multi-year training programs and online courses—including supervisory training with Mobius' transformational faculty and coaches.

In 2008, Thomas founded the Academy of Inner Science to bring his lifelong interest in the dialogue between science and spirituality to wider audiences. In 2016 Thomas founded the 'Pocket Project', a nonprofit organization devoted to interdisciplinary trauma research and human outreach in conflict zones across the world. In October 2020 and 2021, he hosted an annual Summit on Collective Trauma where some 150,000 participants came together to learn from seminal trauma experts including Dan Siegel, Gabor Maté, and Mobius Senior Experts such as Dick Schwartz and Terry Real.



Forty years ago, Helen Epstein, a young journalism professor at New York University, published a groundbreaking book that altered the course of Western psychological research in trauma and validated many things that aboriginal peoples and Eastern thinkers had known for centuries. The book, titled *Children of the Holocaust*, was part ethnography, part oral history, and part memoir and was the first published work outside academia to explore the subject of the second generation (2G) — the sons and daughters — of Holocaust survivors. Her work inspired startling new questions: Had the unspoken horrors of Nazi Germany been in some way passed down to the descendants of those who had lived through them? If so, what might this traumatic inheritance mean for other traumatized groups and their progeny?

Epstein's book was a noble exploration of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, kicking off decades of often difficult, and sometimes illuminating, research in Israel, the United States, Switzerland, and beyond. While more research must be done on the subject, there is much to learn from what has emerged.

In 1981, the Jewish scholar and theologian Arthur A. Cohen described 2G this way: "It is the generation that bears the scar without the wound, sustaining memory without direct experience." In his 2006 text, *Healing the Soul Wound*, clinical psychologist and researcher Eduardo Duran assessed that in the overall body of research on the subject of historical trauma and its transmission, there is evidence to suggest that "not only is the trauma passed on intergenerationally, but it is cumulative." Duran further contends that "when trauma is not dealt with in previous generations, it has to be dealt with in subsequent generations." Moreover, when unresolved trauma is passed on, it may become "more severe" in successive generations.

Early in his career, Duran's work with Native American populations in California uncovered a critical cultural difference in how the indigenous community perceived and spoke about the effects,

consequences, or *symptoms* of historical trauma that they directly experienced, such as poverty, illness, alcoholism, family separation, mental and emotional health conditions, and more. The Western world had become dominated by clinical, pathological descriptions and labels for all manner of emotional and interpersonal distress, but these communities didn't use such terms. Instead, they referred to the suffering that had blighted their people during European colonization and had been passed down through the generations since as "spiritual injury, soul sickness, soul wounding, and ancestral hurt."

My work has shown me that trauma is never purely an individual problem. And no matter how private or personal, trauma cannot belong solely to a family, or even to that family's intricate ancestral tree. The consequences of trauma — indeed, the cumulative effects of personal, familial, and historical traumas — seep across communities, regions, lands, and nations. The burden borne by a single person, family, or community invariably and inevitably reaches its larger society, touching even those who share little in the way of common identity or custom. The impact of human-created suffering extends beyond the original subject or subjugated group; trauma's legacy weaves and wires our very world, informing how we live in it, how we see it, and how we see and understand one another.

Many of us are aware of the manifest ways that unhealed trauma can create long-term personal pain and developmental problems for individuals. What is perhaps less well understood is how unhealed *collective* trauma may place similar burdens on the health of human cultures and societies, even placing our planetary home at risk. The symptoms of collective trauma appear to reveal themselves in the condition of collective bodies of all kinds — our communities, schools, organizations, institutions, governments, and environments — revealing where we are injured, fractured, or imbalanced. Indeed, it is my belief that unresolved systemic, multigenerational traumas delay the development of the human family, harm the natural world, and inhibit the higher evolution of our species.

**Shadow, like  
conflict, is  
a driver of  
evolution.**

I vividly remember sitting with my grandfather, *Opa* in German, as a young boy, listening attentively as he shared stories from his experiences of the Second World War. He had been a private in the Austrian *Bundesheer*, or “Federal Army,” and was serving when Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany. Sadly, this meant that he and his fellow soldiers were conscripted into service for the German Third Reich.

Opa’s stories of the war included being met in the open by enemy soldiers, where both sides chose simply to turn around and walk back, rather than engage in lethal combat. He often spoke of the good-heartedness and heroism of ordinary men, many of whom had been forced to fight, even though their hearts weren’t in the cause. A young man at that time, my grandfather was badly injured by an exploding bomb. Sustaining severe injuries to his leg, he was sent home, no longer able to serve.

Before the war, my grandfather had been a passionate soccer player, full of vigor and athleticism. Afterward, both his passion and agility were reduced. Though he kept much of the evidence buried throughout his life, he had been changed by unrelenting heartbreak, wrought by the trauma of his experiences in the war. For the rest of his life, Opa was weighed down by the stygian gloom of the past, which was ever present in the room. At times, a distant, disconnected quality colored his benevolent eyes.

Though I could very much *feel* these things as a boy, I couldn’t yet understand them. I was very close to my grandfather, and as I grew, I began to feel even more things. Some of these I couldn’t name; they stemmed from hidden emotional layers, the consequences of the scars of war. Others were more tangible. The relationship between Opa and my grandmother, *Oma*, for instance, was often eruptive. (Oma had lost her mother when she was only fourteen, forcing her to fight her way through life.) Deep trauma haunted my grandparents’ lives, as it had everyone who’d been touched by the war. Quietly, this quality of hidden personal and cultural suffering — present everywhere in Austria as I was growing up — began shaping my life and my future. I became compelled to learn all that I could about it.

While still in high school, I became passionate about emergency medicine and determined to become a paramedic, volunteering for the Red Cross.

**Willingness to go into the dark with a light is evolutionary work; it brings healing, clarity, and integration. If we’re committed to the work, it opens us—not to more pain and darkness but to a more brilliant luminosity through which we can access higher capacities, deeper potentials, and a clearer, more creative state of being.**



Miniscape II by Jim McManus, Mobius featured artist

## Complexity is simplicity in the right container.

After a long period of training, I reached my goal and threw myself into work I cared deeply about. When I wasn't working or studying medicine, I served as a teacher for new paramedics. I loved the fast-paced, deeply present work. It required quick thinking, sound judgment, and fast action, as well as a grounded stance toward human suffering. Being called to assist at one crisis after another taught me how to see more deeply into human lives, all walks of them. I attended to both the rich and the poor in their most intimate moments of fear and pain and observed those of all ages and creeds as they struggled to survive the most traumatizing situations of their lives.

Many times, I was present in the final moments of a person's life.

Over time, I observed how the experiences of our patients weren't held in isolation, solely impacting the injured or dying and their loved ones. As emergency responders, we were exposed to that cascade of human suffering, and it affected us. Paramedics at that time received no guidance about how to deal with the psychological repercussions of trauma, neither for our patients nor ourselves. Even so, my desire to understand suffering so that I might better serve in a healing capacity only continued to grow. I decided to become an emergency physician.

At nineteen years old, I had begun my own regular meditation practice. And, in parallel to my coursework and medical studies, I began investigating many of the world's wisdom traditions. I took these habits with me when I entered medical school in Vienna, where I spent my days working shifts and my nights deep in study. It was an amazing time, and I loved it — I felt I was in service to life itself. It was there that I first sensed something going on *beneath the surface*

in my country. Whenever I traveled outside Austria, which I loved, I felt a strange sense of liberation, as though I could breathe more easily somehow. But each time I returned, a sense of resistance and constriction came back. This quality mystified me and began to feel like a call toward some deeper or higher understanding. I continued working and studying, until at twenty-six, I felt a powerful pull to leave it all behind and embarked on a period of silence and meditation.

People close to me were concerned. Why was I choosing to give up everything to just “sit around”? But I knew I had to do it; I had to enter deeply into the roots of the *I am* in order to learn the answers to the questions I sought.

I started my quest in India, then with my former wife, Lenka, I traveled to the Czech countryside where I spent many hours per day in meditation, driven to explore deeper levels of consciousness. I'd been inspired by inveterate sages and philosophers like Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, and the writings of American philosopher Ken Wilber since I was twenty years old. I longed to experience what they were pointing to, to deepen my awareness and investigate the vast terrain of the interior world. That experience lasted four intense years and not only altered the course of my life, but profoundly grew and changed me.

I never went back to medical school.

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There are many current crisis zones in our world today, places where the reality of war is imminent and ongoing. Yet, even where peace appears to exist





Miniscape II by Jim McManus, Mobius featured artist

on the surface, the ravages of the not-so-distant past can be felt. Every region has its own distinct trauma signature. It's as if a massive elephant sits in the human living room; few may see or acknowledge it, but we are all impacted by its presence. Everything about our societies — from geopolitics to business, climate, technology, health care, entertainment and celebrity, and much more — is dominated by the existence of this elephant, by the residue of our collective trauma. And as long as we fail to acknowledge or adequately care for it, the elephant will grow larger.

This book is offered as a step toward recognizing and attending to the growing crisis of collective trauma. It provides an exploration of the symptoms, habits, and unconscious social agreements that collective trauma creates. Growing like mold spores in the dark and fragmented underground of the human psyche, trauma's seeds are evidenced all around us: widespread isolation, endemic depression, violent divisions, systemic injustice, and countless other destructive forms, including our burgeoning climate crisis. But, though it is urgent, this book is not apocalyptic. Its pages offer possibilities for how we might shed light on the dark and come together in revolutionary ways to directly address our generational and cultural traumas in order to heal ourselves and our world.

### **Mystical Principles of Healing** From Chapter One

#### **DESTINY OF THE UNHEALED HERO**

From a mystic's (or Jungian's) perspective, every experience or emotion from the past that remains unacknowledged, unprocessed, or denied is stored

in the realm of the unconscious, or shadow. These experiences have not been integrated by the psyche or spirit, and so they will — indeed, they must — surface again and again in new but familiar forms. *What we think of as destiny is in fact the unintegrated past.* And the fragmented, unintegrated past appears always as a false future of repetition, a preprogrammed path along which every individual and every culture sets out until the contents of that past have been brought into the light of consciousness, reconciled and healed. This mystical wisdom reveals itself in the study of history and psychology, and undergirds philosopher George Santayana's words, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

We may choose to understand these repetitions of shadow content as *karma*, a Sanskrit word originally meaning "effect" or "fate" (i.e., destiny). Or we may recognize them in light of our contemporary understanding as trauma — specifically as *retraumatization*, the unconscious act of repeating the conditions of earlier traumas upon self and others.

Everything that resides in my unconscious inevitably flows into and blends with yours and everyone else's. All together, this forms the collective shadow, which may be visualized as a series of dark subterranean lakes, flowing deep beneath our everyday awareness. The dark water of the collective shadow becomes a way station for the energetic residue of unresolved conflicts, multigenerational suffering, and all manner of unhealed trauma. It harbors the unacknowledged hatred of one nation for another, the suppressed terror echoing within a racial group or gender, and the unexpressed outrage felt by a tribe or religious faction.

Psychic energy that is held in the shadow remains out of sight until it becomes activated by external

**Our ancestors are not gone; they live on with us and in us. This truth comes as a clarion call from future generations, who require that their ancestors be healed so that they may live in a better world—or that they may live at all.**

conditions and an accumulation of energetic momentum within the social field. Once activated, the dark contents of the shadow surface like a Loch Ness monster, cresting in the form of patterns of human behavior and consequence, from recurring toxic relationship patterns to poisonous social histories. These repetitions are the silent summoning of our unhealed injuries and unexamined failures. Freud termed the tendency to repeat the painful past *Wiederholungszwang*, or “repetition compulsion,” theorizing that unconscious retraumatization is an attempt to find conscious resolution to the original trauma. Whether surfacing as histories of poverty, family violence, or addiction, or on the social scale as ethnic hatreds, war, or social collapse, repetition compulsion is an ancient undercurrent in human affairs — one that can be healed.

While our will is our own, our choices are inevitably bound and restricted by karma, by trauma, by what we conceive of as “the past” — all that we have denied, disowned, dissociated, and suppressed. The unconscious denial of any experience freezes some portion of our available energy in shadow, thereby restricting our freedom and movement. With every denial or suppression of the past, we create our destiny, which is the repetition of suffering.

Still, as the great spiritual myths reveal, the hero discovers that by acknowledging and repairing the folly of his past, by integrating all he has been, he may become truly free — and more of what he truly is. ■



**Thomas Huebl** is a mystic, healer and teacher who is blazing a path of 21st century spiritual practice, helping thousands of students around the world to live their awakening amid today's busy world. His annual summit on Collective Trauma and his non-profit, Pocket Project, are leading beacons in the field.

Mobius is privileged that for the past several years Thomas has been guiding many of our practitioners in the professional development of state-of-the-art healing practices and trauma-informed approaches to executive development. Through the Next Practice Institute, Thomas offers workshops, supervision groups/hyper-learning circles, and study groups exploring mystical principles.

In 2020, he published his ground-breaking book *Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating our Intergenerational and Cultural Wounds*. This opus explores how significant collective trauma symptoms are in shaping our modern society and contains cutting-edge remedies that serve as a beacon of hope for generations to come.