

Fragments of War

Natasha Kuhn

“ I wonder how many generations will carry attachment to the pain and hurt we caused each other in that war.

It was a beautiful summer evening. The familiar smell of the Pacific Ocean was in the air, and a golden sunset was unfolding while I walked the streets of Vancouver, BC. A large crowd walking towards the English Bay reminded me that the Symphony of Fire was about to start. I decided I would not join this beautiful event since I needed some rest, and to feel grounded at home. Learning how to deal with my needs was a difficult but much-needed skill I was learning.

Walking through a corridor of downtown buildings, I heard the first small fireworks. I casually kept walking towards my apartment building while noticing an unusual feeling of something like anxiety tingling in my belly. I picked up my pace, thinking I wanted to be home before the full-blown fireworks started. I noticed my heartbeat picking up, and I felt hot when more fireworks echoed between the buildings, and then again, and again, much louder this time.

Suddenly, I felt frozen. The slight tingling in my belly had become an explosion of panic throughout my body; my heart started pounding, my hands were sweaty, and I felt completely lost. Outside was a beautiful day, but within me, there was still war.

I wanted to scream and run, or curl up into the smallest speck, but I couldn't; I felt disoriented and helpless. For a split second, I lost sight of my building, and in my mind, I was back in Bosnia. Grenades are exploding all around me. I see the living room where I grew up. I am a child and have nowhere to hide; I am helpless. The detonations are so close and powerful that I can feel them in my body. I cover my eyes and burst into tears. What do I do? Where do I go?

This was not the first time I experienced panic since becoming a refugee after the Bosnian war, but this was the first time that panic completely took over my current reality. The only other time I have experienced my body take over my mind was while giving birth to my child many years later. The two experiences are not comparable, but the similarity was that I could not talk myself out of them. The body knew what to do, and it was unfolding beyond my control.

When the war started in 1991, I was fifteen years old. Living in a war zone for three years, without electricity or enough food, was terrifying and confusing as a teenager. When my brother and I walked through minefields to flee Bosnia on our own, and became refugees in Canada at age 18, I experienced intense panic attacks, a deep sense of helplessness, and loneliness. I was separated from my family, home, and everything I knew. The pain was unbearable.

Wars destroy country infrastructures, cultures, families, and individuals. Just like on the outer, so it is on the inner. My inner infrastructure was destroyed, and I found myself in this unfamiliar culture, lost and scared. My new strategy was to block all painful memories, and forget everything that happened. I had a new chance, and I needed to pull up my bootstraps and do this life, even if I was alone. I pushed away the fear and panic, and put on a mask of confidence and resilience. If I could survive the war and leave everything behind, I could push through anything.

But my experience that evening in Vancouver showed me that no matter how much I pushed them away, the pain and panic were still in me. They were wired in my nervous system, body, and mind. The more I pushed, the more I felt separated from myself. My longing to understand who I am and where I belong prompted me to embark on my healing journey.

One of the paths I took was Core Energetics classes. I started understanding that my body holds all the painful fragmented memories I have lived with for many years. These fragmented parts are not gone; they can't be forgotten. They were buried in me with alternative intentions directing my life. They show up as blocks on different levels of being. The Core Energetics framework looks at the blocks on five levels – our body, emotions, thinking patterns, inner will, and spirit. For example, Wilhelm Reich's teachings taught me that blocks made up of muscle groupings stop the difficult emotions from moving through me, but also hold back my life force. They have to be met with compassion and love in the present moment. They want to be witnessed, expressed through my whole body, and accepted; then they can move on. Suddenly I understood why talk therapy was not helping me. I realized I couldn't just talk the trauma out of me. But I still can change and create a different life for myself.

Like the new dawn, hope has come in, and I can sit differently with the pain of war. I still feel anger and hate that so many people had to die for someone else's ideals, but I don't need to project that hate passive-aggressively onto people around me today as I sometimes used to do. I feel anger that I had to flee from the land that I long for every day, but now I know that I don't have to flee from my body. I can safely express the hate and anger in my sessions, giving it a voice and letting it go. Today, my deep longing for my people and land is my teacher asking me to stay in the present moment because this is where healing takes place.

As I take my work into the world and find my voice, I look at the long history of human attachment to pain. As part of the Balkans – neither Western nor Eastern Europe – Bosnia has a deep tumultuous history. We have had wars on our land almost every 50 years. After the most recent war, 30 years later, Bosnia is recovering from massive disruption. The political and economic arena is deeply corrupt, and exploited by individuals fueling fanatic nationalism. In people's eyes, I see the pain that is looking to target revenge. It shows up through addiction, and abuse of the land and each other through dishonest relationships.

Don't get me wrong; there is also love and our well-known hospitality, but the pain has to manifest in some way. I wonder how many generations will carry attachment to the pain and hurt we caused each other in that war. Would forgiveness mean that we are letting the other side truly win after all? Holding a grudge is keeping us in the same familiar tension. Perhaps this tension is what gives us limits, and feelings of belonging. But what kind of belonging is it when it means excluding or being better than others? How many years and generations are we willing to stay with this negative wish for our people, for all

people? I believe the work starts on a micro level; we each need to recognize our own love and hate projections in the world. The grief and pain are real and need to be acknowledged, yet the mass beliefs must be individually brought to consciousness, challenged, and discarded to make room for new and true inner and outer freedom.



Natasha Kuhn spent her formative years in the former Yugoslavia until becoming a refugee in 1994. Arriving in Canada allowed her to embark on a healing journey and explore the best ways she could help others. Her passion is working with individuals and groups. She now has a private practice in Seattle, WA, where she lives with her husband, two kids, and a mischievous cat.

Website: <https://www.somaecology.com/>