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Rosetta Marantz Cohen and Doris H. Gray

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## A Conversation with Doris H. Gray on the Power and Limitations of Restorative Justice across History, Culture, and Gender

*Abstract:* This interview with Doris H. Gray, author of *Leaving the Shadow of Pain: A Cross-cultural Exploration of Truth, Trauma, Reconciliation, and Healing*, explores the impact of political trauma across time, and the strategies for healing and justice. The conversation with Gray focuses on the ways in which her own experiences, as the child of a traumatized German Jew, intersect with those of formerly persecuted and incarcerated Tunisian women before and after the Arab Spring. What are the possibilities and limitations of restorative justice for those haunted by history?

Befriending the author of any book that deals with personal trauma obviously opens you to the subject in a new way. When I first met Doris Gray at a party in Northampton, Massachusetts, she was a visiting scholar through Smith College's Global Studies Center; professor of women and gender studies at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco; and former director of the Hillary Clinton Center for Women's Empowerment. At the time, she was midway through her manuscript *Leaving the Shadow of Pain: A Cross-cultural Exploration of Truth, Trauma, Reconciliation, and Healing*. During that first social conversation, Doris spoke to me—a stranger—about her personal life and suffering in a way that enacted, I later realized, the very thesis she was in the process of exploring in her book, that is, the ways in which spoken truth can heal, the limitations of that truth telling, and the power of individual friendship to move beyond simple binaries of pain and forgiveness.

In *Leaving the Shadow of Pain*, Gray draws a powerful and persuasive comparison between two seemingly disparate examples of trauma and its aftermath. The first is the experience of Gray's own father, a German Jew, who continued to keep hidden his Jewish identity long after the Nazi defeat, and who remained haunted and privately embattled throughout his life, inflicting his fears and dysfunction on his daughters. The second documents the experiences of formerly incarcerated or persecuted Tunisian women, victims of Tunisia's cruel and oppressive regime under the dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Like Gray's father, these women carry their past trauma into the present, even after the 2011 regime change of the Arab Spring, when the state sought to recognize and redress past wrongs.

Gray's book uses these two examples to demonstrate the often-unacknowledged complexity of any strategy designed to foster forgiveness and healing in those victimized by state violence. Her particular focus here is on the 2013 creation in Tunisia of the Truth and Dignity Commission, a group formed to encourage formerly victimized Tunisian women to unburden themselves through public accusations and truth telling. Gray's argument complicates the idea that truth telling and revelation is a universal key to healing. Though we cannot know what strategies, if any, would have helped Gray's father heal from the fear that haunted his life, we do know that for many of the Tunisian women with whom Gray spoke, to make public the nature of their persecution would be to create new kinds of stigma, a fact that is too often overlooked when states seek to redress past abuse. In acknowledging this, her book looks at the nature of reconciliation through a lens that is personally intimate, psychologically nuanced, and culturally specific.

In the interview that follows, I ask Gray to explain the dangers of holding secrets, the value of confessing one's truth, and the complicated nature of healing. I also ask her to speak about the ways in which bringing one's own story into this kind of work can deepen one's empathy and understanding.

### **My Interview**

**Rosetta Marantz Cohen:** Your book begins with the story of your father, a German Jew who had to keep his identity a secret during World War II, and how that secrecy impacted his relationship with you and your sister. It's a sad but fascinating way in to this study of how personal pain—secret pain—has generational implications. Can you begin by talking about that

cross-generational trauma? What are some ways in which your father's secrets impacted your own childhood and your early adult life?

**Doris Gray:** So many ways. There always was an aura of secrecy in our home. Like many survivors of the Holocaust, we had no relatives on our father's side, no grandparents, no aunts, no uncles, no cousins and were not allowed to ask why. Our dad put us through strenuous—sometimes cruel—survival trainings, and our mother, a highly accomplished and outspoken woman, who in today's parlance would be called a feminist, silently looked on. Knowing about our father's background, she became complicit in his secret which kept her distant as well. I felt we never could touch our father, not his body and not his soul. As a result of this, and other manifestations of his secret past, I never had a clear sense of identity or belonging. As soon as I was able to, I left Germany and would not return until almost forty years later.

**RMC:** Much of your work and research as an academic has focused on issues of trauma and healing. How did your own experience with your father's "secrets" help you understand the lives of the Tunisian women you were working to help and support? Can you explain the connection you make in the book between the buried trauma of your father's life and the efforts of these women in Tunisia to heal after they were persecuted prior to the Arab uprising in 2011, the uprising that resulted in a regime change.

**DG:** I started my research before my father revealed his secret Jewish identity. In my encounters with women who were either prisoners of conscience or relatives of someone imprisoned under the previous dictatorships, I always impressed upon them the need to come forward with their stories of torture, extreme social isolation, discrimination, and often also rape. My position was that a nation could not heal if the routine wrongs committed in the name of the state did not come to light.

However, after hearing why my father kept quiet about his Jewish heritage, namely, because he was afraid even in postwar Germany, I began to reflect on the theme of who has a right to the truth. My father was afraid that anti-Semitism had not disappeared despite Germany's defeat in World War II and the subsequent change in political system. He wanted to build a new life for himself and his family and did not want to pass on the burden of his Jewish identity to his children. He felt he had a right to conceal the

truth about his background. However, once I found out, I felt that I had a right to the truth too because his secrecy had clouded our childhood and cast a shadow long into adulthood. The conflict between national reckoning and an individual's right to speak out or to be silent is not easily reconcilable.

**RMC:** The book creates an arch between autobiography and scholarship. Why did you choose this format?

**DG:** As a scholar, I felt that I could not ask my interview partners in North Africa to do something—come forward with the truth about their torturous past—if I was not willing to do the same with my own story. Plus, I realized that there is a connection between my personal experiences and my professional life that I needed to acknowledge and come to terms with. Commonly referred to as “positionality,” my goal here was not to point out the relative differences between me and my interlocutors but rather to search for commonalities. In doing this, I hoped to make a contribution to transnational feminist scholarship.

**RMC:** You speak about healing as a “collective endeavor,” but you acknowledge that not everyone wants or needs to tell their stories in the same way. Can you speak about some of the inherent problems in a survivor “telling her story,” and why speaking about torture or injustice is always complicated—politically, culturally, and in other ways.

**DG:** First of all, there is the potential of being revictimized when feeling forced to bear one's soul about trauma. This is particularly the case when the victim does not have assurance of structures that address the wrong such as counseling as well as legal procedures that aim at offering justice.

On a national level, wrongs of the past and their enduring effects must be acknowledged so that a need for justice can be understood and supported by a majority of the population. Crimes committed in the name of a political system are not abstract but were carried out by fellow citizens. Though not on the same scale, in Germany after World War II and in Tunisia, victims and perpetrators continue to live in the same country, towns, or even neighborhoods. Certainly, in Germany few victims of the Shoah survived, so my father was an exception and his sense of being vulnerable was acute. In Tunisia, because there were many more survivors, this added a different level of complexity to reintegrating victims and perpetrators.

Just because someone chooses not to tell their story of trauma, does not mean they are not in need of healing. A person has many reasons to speak or to remain silent. It is a precarious balance between the one who carries a burden and the one who feels they have a right to know. For my father, the risk of revealing himself was greater than the pain he inflicted on himself and his children with his secrecy. And while I wish he would have found a way to let us know about what happened to him, it was his right to speak out or to remain silent.

**RMC:** Why might this be particularly hard for women?

**DG:** There are several issues here: violence against women often involves sexual violence. In some cultures, the reputation of a family lies in the perceived sexual virtue of the women. A sexually violated woman brings shame not only on herself but also on her entire family—hence women may not want to come forward with horrific crimes they endured when they are of a sexual nature.

What I learned from women in Tunisia applies more broadly, namely, that victims of violence often experience a sense of feeling abandoned by the state and betrayed by their families and a culture that holds that violated women dishonor their family. The law did not protect them, nor did authorities attempt to ensure their safety. In spite of a regime change, they did not feel they could trust the new state because some of the same people remained or regained positions of power.

Women are often taught to be mild, kind, and forgiving. Therefore, openly to demand accountability can be viewed as not becoming of a woman. This demand for justice can be denounced as shrill, “bitchy,” and disturbing the peace—an aggressive, assertive attitude is more acceptable in men.

**RMC:** You speak about the difference between “truth” and “facts” and how those two concepts, as they were inadequately distinguished from each other, impacted the possibility of healing for the Tunisian women you interviewed. What is the difference between truth and facts, and can you explain how this distinction might have broader implications for other victims of state violence?

**DG:** I found the distinction between fact and truth useful, but it is not a scientific or scholarly differentiation. For example, my dad hid the fact that

he was Jewish and had survived the Holocaust as a Jew inside Nazi Germany. But the truth that something was awry with our father was clear to my sister and me from early childhood. He could not hide his immense sadness and abiding mistrust of people, especially people in positions of authority. Likewise, the women who suffered torture and persecution in Tunisia often did not speak about the facts of their cruel mistreatment, but they could not hide their bitterness and resentment. And this truth gets passed on and consequently, trauma is multigenerational, even when detailed facts are not revealed.

**RMC:** What is the role of “remorse” in the process of forgiving, reconciling, and healing?

**DG:** Again, these are lessons [that] I learned but may not be applicable to others. In the case of routine acts of violence, that is, politically sanctioned violence, subsequent governments must acknowledge the wrongs of the past in a clear, unequivocal manner. That is, victims must hear from someone in a trusted position of authority: “This should not have happened to you. You have been wronged.” Plus, there has to be an official assurance that all efforts will be undertaken to rectify past wrongs and with a view of nonrecurrence. However, though countries may engage in acts of public contrition, on an individual level, there often is a “don’t ask, don’t tell” attitude so that individual perpetrators are not held accountable. For the sake of a harmonious living together as a nation, some victims choose to reconcile, others feel forced to reconcile via truth and reconciliation commissions. I have found that expressions of remorse are eminently important in the process of healing. All too often the emphasis is on the victims and what they should do for collective healing to occur: they have to forgive, they have to reconcile for the greater good. In addition to their own trauma, the burden for future success of their family and the state is placed on their shoulders as well.

**RMC:** Toward the end of the book, you tell powerful stories of two victims of torture and imprisonment, Moncef and Amina, who are permanently changed in surprising ways as a result of their experiences—changes that involve new understanding about the brutalities of class and power. Can you speak about their transformations, the implications of it, and the role of “courage” in this process.

**DG:** Moncef and Amina are the only two people I cite in the book, but there were several more like them. They feel the revolution had vindicated them. The dictatorship had been overthrown, and a democratic system installed. They felt that their suffering had paid off. The country they loved but had mistreated them had changed in profound ways. People who still clung to the old regime were now the ones left behind. The national narrative had changed; people who previously were despised as enemies of the state were now admired as martyrs of the revolution.

While there were separate facilities for male political prisoners, women political prisoners shared cells with common criminals. They could only survive by helping each other. Islamist women (who constituted the majority of those persecuted) who had considered themselves morally superior depended on thieves and sex workers to get them a bar of soap or food. This sense of solidarity endured after their release.

Neither Moncef nor Amina mentioned forgiveness toward their former torturers; rather, their time in prison had freed them from conventions and allowed them to embrace life on their own terms. Their suffering and steps toward self-care, their rejection of deeply entrenched cultural mores, led them to embrace a common humanity with others who also suffered.

I consider these changes in outlook acts of courage. Forgiveness keeps perpetrator and victim entangled, while the acts of courage I observed in some Tunisians—and also my dad—allowed them to emerge from their ordeals with a hopeful focus on the future. Hope, borne of trauma, is not the same as cheery optimism or faith in an imminent good outcome. In hoping, one puts faith in some transcendental goodness—and that takes courage.

**RMC:** The pain and trauma of your own life—the difficulties of your childhood, the death of your daughter, the terrible physical attack you survived—these experiences seem to have made you more acutely sensitive to the complexities of healing as an individual, but also as a culture. You offer no easy solutions at the end of the book, but appeal to readers to use their own pain as a way to find common humanity in others. Can you give some examples of how that might work in other parts of the world and other conflicts?

**DG:** A saying in German goes: the shortest way is the one from victim to perpetrator. This is to say that victims can turn into perpetrators when



circumstances allow it. It is often merely an accident of history, not a matter of a deliberate choice, on which side we end up. This rather trite insight should help us to understand that as humans we are more similar than we are different.

The events in my own life that you mention in your question must have left a noticeable mark. When I was conducting my interviews in Tunisia, women would ask me if I was one of them. I am not Arab, not Muslim, not born into a dictatorial system where the simple act of voicing a word of criticism can land you in prison, so why did they think we had something in common? Still, they sensed that I could relate to their pain, to their outrage, to their difficulty in articulating what had happened to them. I felt sure that I presented myself in an “objective, professional” way to my interlocutors. Yet to these victims of trauma, it was obvious that I too carried a burden. This understanding created an atmosphere of trust in which women told me of atrocities they had endured that they had not shared with anyone else. I had nothing to offer them in return, no redress of grievance, no assurance of nonrecurrence, and so forth. But we would sometimes just sit, hold hands, and cry. The experience of being heard, of having their trauma acknowledged and taken seriously, was profoundly affirming—and an experience that transcended culture, religion, language. Every time I return to Tunisia, I receive phone calls where people ask if I am still listening to testimonies. What started out as a scholarly research project turned into an experience of shared humanity that was comforting.

**RMC:** How have you, as a teacher, tried to communicate these lessons to your students?

**DG:** I don't talk much about myself in class. Students feel obliged to listen and pretend to be interested. Instead, I ask them to describe a moment in their life where they personally experienced an act of discrimination, cruelty, or violence and how they felt about it. Then I ask them to reflect on an incident where they committed an act of discrimination, cruelty, or violence and reflect on this experience. They do this in writing but do not have to put their name on the paper if they wish to tell their story in confidence. Which act changed them and how? After this exercise we start from the presumption that all—to various degrees—have been on the receiving and giving end of injustice. I have found that this creates a safe environment

in which students are open not only to absorbing new knowledge, but learning that is transformative. What is true on the individual level also applies to the national level; we are all—to different degrees—victims and perpetrators. Inasmuch as we learn to become numb to injustice, we can unlearn our indifference. In the process, we rediscover our humanity, and this feels eminently empowering and creates a sense of connection to others. I believe without feeling connected, we cannot heal.

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