



HAP in Sri Lanka, February 2006

Barbara Wizanski

It was barely dawn. Our Royal Jordanian Airlines flight landed in Colombo where the Israeli EMDR team, led by Dr. Udi Oren was to do a 5 day Level I training and Child Day for local therapists.

The six of us, Udi, Elan, Brurit, Aiton, Barbara, and Udi's teen age son, Tomer, blinked our way into the hot morning air, found a taxi to take us to the city and began a two week adventure in this small island south of India whose coast had been devastated by the Tsunami only a year ago.

Our task was to make EMDR accessible to as many mental health workers as possible. These are the people who are dealing with those who have suffered the loss and terror of the Tsunami as well as the day to day problems that we all know as human beings.

Our plan was to tour the country for 6 days, begin to understand the culture of the people with whom we would be working, and see for ourselves the damage that the Tsunami had wrought.

The tour was wonderful. There was the fun of being together with people who we had always known that we liked, but here was the proof.

Days of riding together in a van through jungle scenery and terraced hillside tea plantations, tramping through archaeological ruins, Buddhist temples, spice gardens, hearing endless stories about long ago Sri Lankan Kings.

Days of laughing, singing, snorkeling, sharing food and experiences.

Elan's shopping for the perfect elephant. Aiton's wanderings off from the group following the beat of his own drum. We won't forget our addiction to massage, Brurit's spiritual observations and search for food that wasn't spicy, Udi and my rendition of "16 tons and whad'ya get", Tomer's amazing magic tricks, or the elephant safari-- when a huge elephant, angry that we were blocking the road to the water, charged our open jeep.

Brurit and I trembled. The men yelled for more adventure and Elan recorded the trumpeting sounds as we sped off.

We also learned. We talked to people wherever we could and began to feel the rhythm of life in a Buddhist country, and one in which most people made very little money. We knew of the strong separatist faction, the Tamil, who terrorize with kidnappings and suicide bombers to gain independence. We often saw a strong army presence.

But the people we met usually smiled and were calm, pleasant and ready to talk to us. Women showed us their children. We were invited into homes. Gradually we got to see and hear about bits of people's lives.

The beautiful 15 year old girl, showering under an outdoor faucet, radiantly pregnant with her first child. The mother of three who proudly invited us into the narrow, dark room which a donation from a couple in Australia had helped to build.

The lovely young women who served us in the showroom of a tea plantation and later hitched a ride with us. One was a Buddhist; one a Christian; one a Tamil. "In our town", they said, "we live together peacefully".

Towards the end of the week, we came to the area where the Tsunami had hit and we began to absorb two sides of this tragic story.

On the one hand we saw and heard about the devastation.

Families torn apart, bodies buried unidentified in mass graves, the loss of homes, businesses, whole lives. We spoke to many people who told their stories. How the first wave receded far into the sea and fishermen and tourists and townspeople raced to the beach to wonder at the shells and fish that were uncovered, so that they could gather them easily.

How others had seen the first wave recede but known instinctively that here was danger and they must run to high ground.

A man selling wood carvings on the beach front told of his race to the hills and his wife's joy at finding him alive when she had been certain that he was lost. We saw the remains of the destruction: piles of rubble, people still living in camps. But we also saw the drive to live. All along the beachfront tourism had returned. Kiosks and small shops were doing a good business. Hotels and guest houses were full. Children raced up and down the dirt roads. We heard of many assistance projects in cooperation with groups from all over the world, including Israel.

The director of a government social welfare office told us of work that was being done in cooperation with a Dutch International organization, and the help they were getting in many practical areas of life.

We were impressed with the ways in which they were trying to reach troubled children in the schools in a culture which traditionally believed in keeping troubles within the family.

In one project a box was placed in each school into which children were invited to "mail" their problems. A group of teachers was designated to sort through these notes every week. Here they learned about abuse, about parents who were depressed, or simply not coping, about children who were frightened or neglected. These families could be carefully approached and helped.

At the end of the first week we returned to our hotel in Colombo and prepared to begin teaching. There were several problems. We learned that there are not many psychologists, psychiatrists or social workers in Sri Lanka and in our group there were only a few. The mental health workers in general are largely para-professional, & most of those attending were medical doctors, school counselors and other community workers. In addition, the number of participants was smaller than we had anticipated because, as we learned from the local coordinator, many could not afford the 50 dollars which was being asked by the organizers, for the 5 days (including room and board). So some people who might have benefited were not there. We had 28 participants. This was important information and a problem for the local organizers to cope with.

We very quickly learned to appreciate these people and the difficult work they do. Udi carefully taught the protocol, using every bit of his dramatic talents to cope with cultural differences, like the tendency toward compliance and a reluctance to ask or answer questions in the large group. In the practicum, Aiton coped through interpreters with a group which knew no English, while Brurit, Barbara and Elan worked to be as sure as possible that our groups grasped the protocol and had experiences of the power of the EMDR processing, suited to their needs. We noticed that they tended to process through body feelings towards relaxation and comfort rather than associations to specific pictures or events. This, of course, raised questions as to the depth of the processing or whether we were seeing an example of the robustness of EMDR in a different culture.

We also learned that, in addition to the Tsunami, Sri Lanka has many problems of child abuse, rape, domestic violence and alcoholism-- the kind of complex trauma which we certainly don't recommend be tackled by beginners in EMDR. But Udi talked about resources and taught the Leeds RDI protocol, and we were able to convey the hope of working with these difficult cases through the installation of positive qualities.

The fifth day was devoted to children. I quickly realized that in Sri Lanka, as in many other places, therapists are hungry for pathways into the suffering of the child. I tried to show them that EMDR could provide such a path. We looked at the ways in which children react to trauma and how the protocol can be adapted to suit the age and developmental level of the child. But it was also important to relate to the Sri Lankans' conviction that their

children were different from those in the videos which I brought with me. They insisted that their children would continue to lower their eyes and refuse to answer a question. Their children would not tell what truly made them feel afraid, or sad, or abandoned. I showed videos of Israeli children, which illustrated how EMDR could help the child begin to share his world. We talked about emphasizing positive experiences, about ways of including the parents in the treatment and the importance of relating directly to the child's concerns. At the end of the session, the participants were interested but still doubtful. They did, however, agree to my suggestion that they try some of the methods we had talked about and let me know through e-mail what had happened.

Aiton ended the afternoon by talking about group work with EMDR and sharing his experiences of EMDR with groups of children in Thailand after the Tsunami. In the final exercise he provided a hands-on group activity. In his model the group was instructed to make six drawings on a single sheet of paper to process a traumatic event. Most of the drawings became more optimistic and people reported feeling better. Some said that this was a tool they could use.

At the end of the day there were pictures and hugs and the exchange of addresses. A tentative framework was set up for e-mail supervision. It had been an intensive, positive week which raised many challenges and questions. But we all felt the emotion of parting and the hope that we had planted a seed which would grow and flourish.

Our volunteer work in Sri Lanka was made possible by Mooli Lahad and the Community Stress Prevention Center in Kiryat Shmona, supported by the JOINT. Another EMDR facilitator, Alan Cohen, who had originally planned to join us, instead went as part of the larger project in Sri Lanka.