Bringing Care During the Most Difficult Days

By Medhanye Alem, Psychotherapist/Trainer

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Medhanye Alem, psychotherapist/trainer with CVT Ethiopia, was the featured speaker at CVT’s 2023 Restoring Hope Breakfast. He travelled from Tigray to Minnesota, U.S., to share his story of how the team extended care to refugees and displaced people during violent conflict in Tigray.
In this video, Medhanye describes what he, along with colleagues, family members and friends, went through during that time.

See Medhanye’s video

Medhanye delivered this speech at the event on October 26, 2023:

Good morning everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today to share my story and to honor the incredible courage and resilience of my team in Tigray.

I want to start by expressing how immensely proud I am of my colleagues. Their strength and determination to show up for survivors of the conflict every day since the war began in 2020, is incredible.

I am proud to be able to share their story and represent them before you today.

It's hard to explain what it feels like to have your entire life change in the blink of an eye.
Before the war, my life was normal. It was peaceful. I was doing work I enjoyed. I was raising my son. We were happy.

And then it all changed. I was separated from my family. I didn’t know if they were alive. They thought I had died. There was no communication. I could not reach them. I felt powerless and vulnerable. Witnessing the horror of the conflict will forever haunt me.

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My colleagues and I had to do what we could to help.

I couldn’t leave. I felt that leaving this community was ethically and morally unacceptable. They trusted us, and we knew we couldn’t abandon them.

At first, many of us felt like we weren’t doing much, even if we’ve been present, but the lack of coordinated service delivery made us feel like we were doing nothing. But for our clients, it was everything. After being treated inhumanly, we treated them with dignity. We sat with them, listened to them, cared for them.
One of my colleagues told me: “I’m struggling to eat knowing that someone next door is starving to death, a diabetic patient is counting down nights for lack of insulin or a child is living in horror, and the fact that I can listen and connect them with an agency to provide some assistance keeps me going.”

Despite our own trauma, grief and anxieties, we supported each other through it all.

Just two weeks ago, 22 of our colleagues had been informed of the loss of close loved ones. For more than two years, these 22 people did not know the whereabouts of their loved ones and lived under ambiguities. The active violence in Tigray has shifted to another part of the region. However, we still deal with the aftermath of the conflict every day.
But it’s been the survivors we work with who inspired us to keep going.

There is one survivor in particular whose story will stick with me forever. I’ll call him Tesfay. Tesfay is an old man who lost his family in the conflict and was detained and tortured before escaping to Shire. He would come to our Trauma Resilience Workshops with a rope tied around his stomach.

When I asked him about it, he said “You see that I have tied my stomach with a rope so that I don’t feel the hunger. I would have gone to beg for food, but chose to come here, to CVT, to feed my soul. Your support is my strength to keep going.” I will never forget him.

In all locations where we operate, there is a huge flow of survivors in need of CVT services. Their names are kept on a waiting list, and they ask me “When am I supposed to receive treatment? I’m not able to sleep and need someone to talk to.” It is so heartbreaking to keep telling them to wait for their turn.
My team and I know how to help people feel better. We want to help people feel better. We struggle to say, “Please wait.”

The work my team and I do is extremely important. Our work helps give a suicidal client a second chance at life, helping a mother form an emotional bond with her child born out of sexual assault, or empowering a severely tortured man to overcome his shame. These individuals may lack enough to eat or a safe place to shelter, but they consistently tell us that what CVT provides is irreplaceable to them.

It is not lost on me that it is because of the support of the people here today that myself and my colleagues have been able to work and provide for our families, when so many others have faced unemployment and insecurity.

But most importantly, because of the support of the people here today, the community we serve has been able to continue to receive care. And for that I am so grateful.
I'm incredibly honored to be here with you today and on behalf of my colleagues and my community, to extend our heartfelt gratitude for your generous support.

I'd like to finish by sharing a poem I wrote to describe a conversation between myself and the perpetrators of torture.

Me: On a broad daylight,

On her search for safety

Carrying three kids, tired, thirsty,

Overwhelmed with mother’s responsibility.

Why did you all gang rape her?

Why?

Perpetrators: Silence
Me: Why did you let the innocent kids watch the mom staggering?

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Screaming in agony, desperately

ስስጎይ፣ተስፋ ብምቑራፅ እናእወየት

Fighting till the end, bloodshed.

ሃኩ ብመእፋ እናይለትን እንወቅ እናወን

The kids in horrors, helpless.

Can’t rescue mommy. Little, weak, powerless. Why?

Perpetrators: Silence

Me: Why then needle and nail,

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To make her infertile?

Did you stab her with a knife,

Does it not give life?

Why?
Me: It froze my nerves as I listen that you left her fainted, unconscious, defeated,

The hyenas kind enough,

The vultures smarter,

Sympathized for the kids,

Refused to finish her.

How does this make you feel?

Perpetrators: Silence

Me: Now you see

In a small torn tent,

With nothing to eat left,
She is lying on stone and mud.

The kids are abandoned.

Ashamed of incontinence,

Draining her patience,

Bleeding nonstop, unable to sit, walk.

Pain, immense grief, sadness

Leaving her hopeless.

Is that all you wanted?

Perpetrators: Silence

Me: In one bright morning, a beautiful day,

She held her chin up, tightened her body,
Decided to fight, not to obey.

Isn't she brave?

Perpetrators: Silence

Me: You know what?!

Her soul is deep, her heart is deeper.

Born resilient, tested on fire,

Will evolve in time, even stronger.

I'm here for her, here for her,

Perpetrators: Silence

Thank you.