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Psychosocial web page – Editor's introduction

A 2010 Postscript to:

Pathways to embodied empathy and reconciliation after atrocity: Former boy soldiers in a dance/movement therapy group in Sierra Leone by David Alan Harris

For our 15th issue, we are publishing David Alan Harris' *2010 Postscript* to his previous paper *Pathways to embodied empathy and reconciliation after atrocity: Former boy soldiers in a dance/movement therapy group in Sierra Leone*. The latter paper, previously published in *Intervention (2007)*¹ and reproduced on our website in our 13th issue, is re-presented here so that the two papers can be easily read alongside each other.

In 2006, David along with three local co-facilitators ran a dance/movement therapy group (*Poimboi Veeyah Koindu, or PVK*) for former boy ex-combatants, who by virtue of their membership of the Revolutionary United Front had previously been both victims and perpetrators in the Sierra Leonean conflict. When first known to David, these boys were angry and distressed by their war time experiences, and were isolated from the local community who feared and shunned them. The rigorous, thoughtful and culturally appropriate intervention run by David and local colleagues was highly successful. By the time it finished, these excluded youth were able to display empathy for their victims, accept responsibility for their past actions and seek local forgiveness and acceptance. In a public role play of their own choosing, they acted out their own victimization, their war time experiences and their acts of violence – and were accepted back into the local community.

Subsequently, in 2009, PVK were awarded the *Freedom to Create Youth Prize*, an award that enabled David, his local co-facilitators and the group members to come together again in Koindu, Sierra Leone in 2010. David's *2010 Postscript* details the continued well-being of the youth group members, their sustained relationships with the local community, and their mature involvement in deciding how to use the prize funds to develop a sustainable and useful project for their local community - the PVK reconciliation library, a free resource that will benefit all local schoolchildren through the provision of school books and a safe and well-lit place to study.

This is a moving story of empowerment that documents the youths' journey from social exclusion to meaningful and responsible participation in community development. The local project management infrastructure that has been left in place subsequent to David's departure – run by the youth themselves alongside local community members – ensures not only that the project can survive without David's presence, but that the youth can continue contributing constructively to community wellbeing as they move into adulthood.

Dr Linda Dowdney
Editor

¹ <http://www.interventionjournal.com/downloads/53pdf/harris.pdf>

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers is an independent human rights organization. It undertakes research, analysis and advocacy to promote effective action nationally and internationally to end and prevent child soldiering. The Coalition's member organizations are Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, and the Jesuit Refugee Service.



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A 2010 Postscript to:

Pathways to embodied empathy and reconciliation after atrocity: Former boy soldiers in a dance/movement therapy group in Sierra Leone.

by David Alan Harris, MA, LPC, LCAT, BC-DMT, NCC

www.Global-WellBeing.org

Summary: After winning an international award in late 2009, the world's first dance/movement psychotherapy group for former child combatants (*Poimboi Veeyah Koindu*), which was formed in Sierra Leone in 2006, came together there again at the beginning of 2010 in order to celebrate the award and to determine how to use the prize money. Upon return, the author, who had launched the group originally, found significant evidence of its enduring impact. A standardized assessment of mental health symptom expression in 2010, forty months after the conclusion of the dance therapy intervention, revealed remarkably limited emotional distress among participants. Numerous potential confounds, such as symptom measurement in the context of re-establishing a collaborative working relationship with the PVK youth may, however, limit the validity of these test scores as a measure of therapeutic success. Nonetheless, the youths' own accounts of continued progress since 2006, their sustained relationships with the local community, and their self-presentation and mature involvement in using prize funds to develop a viable and useful community project, all attest to their enhanced self-esteem, well-being and successful long-term reconciliation with those who had previously feared and shunned them.

***Poimboi Veeyah Koindu* and the Freedom to Create 2009 Youth Prize**

In 2010, 12 former boy combatants who in 2006 had comprised a dance/movement therapy (DMT) group that they called *Poimboi Veeyah Koindu (PVK)*¹, came together again in Sierra Leone. Winning the Freedom to Create 2009 Youth Prize made this reunion possible.

Freedom to Create is a Singapore-based organization that offers international human rights awards in three categories – the Freedom to Create Main Prize, the Imprisoned Artist Prize

and the Youth Prize. These awards honor the use of creative work that promotes social justice, builds foundations for an open society, and inspires the human spirit. In 2009, more than 1100 nominations for these prizes came from over 100 countries, and in November, 2009, PVK was chosen from five finalists as the winner of the award for young people.

As the counselor and dance/movement therapist who founded PVK, I accepted Freedom to Create's invitation to travel to London for the awards ceremony at the Victoria & Albert Museum. There Geoffrey Robertson, QC, who was the first president of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (an internationalized criminal court) and who had more recently served as a member

¹ *Poimboi Veeyah Koindu* translates from the tribal language Kissi into 'The Orphan Boys of Koindu'.



of the Freedom to Create judging panel, announced PVK to be the winner of the Youth Prize. Accepting a stunning trophy on PVK's behalf, I thanked the award's sponsors and promised delivery to the former boy soldiers. Separate monetary awards to accompany the honor were allocated to PVK and also to the Community Association for Psychosocial Services (CAPS), a Sierra Leonean counseling and advocacy NGO that includes among its staff two of the three former co-facilitators of the former boy soldiers' DMT group.

Following discussion of the local situation in light of PVK's history and original purpose², the Prize managers and I determined that the former boy combatants would most benefit by applying their portion of the funds toward a community development project that might continue to advance members' reconciliation with their neighbors. The CAPS team, in turn, opted to devote a part of its award to aiding PVK's members – both in terms of providing support for the former boy soldiers' psychosocial health and technical assistance with the youths' proposed community development project.

The PVK's 2006 Dance-Movement Therapy Group

In March 2006, 12 young men in their mid-to late-teens, some of whom had never met before, came together with me and three local paraprofessional counselors under the auspices of the U.S. based Center for Victims of Torture for a unique counseling group – apparently, the world's first DMT group for child soldiers. The group's dozen members all had been orphaned during the war and, by age 13, each one had a history of active involvement in atrocities with the Revolutionary United Front. At the time the group began, most of the youths had been living on the street since the war's end about five

years earlier. They were both feared and shunned by people from surrounding communities whom they had helped terrorize.

The fundamental duality in the life of these former boy combatants, as simultaneously victim and perpetrator, necessitated a psychosocial healing approach designed to foster both acceptance and accountability. The vehicles we counselors offered for furthering these aims, included various game-like creative activities fashioned in accord with specific objectives for boosting coping capacity and self-esteem, along with role-playing exercises and dancing together – activities that served to advance curative group cohesion. In a setting safely distant from daily routines, playfully experimenting with aggressive fantasies through movement also afforded a symbolic means of reflecting on involvement in armed conflict. (For a full description of the group's aims, the therapeutic process and the youths' outcomes at that time, see the accompanying Harris, 2007 article.)

Healing emerged incrementally on a foundation of growing safety and mutual support. Early on, the youths began to disclose evidence of suppressed rage. Defensively programmed to distrust through exposure to relentless wartime horrors, they aggressively tested us counselors and our capacity to treat them always with unconditional positive regard. For several sequential sessions at the beginning of the process, for example, the former fighters – during the course of our weekly improvisational Circle Dance – would repeatedly pin down one or more of my limbs, asserting control in a half-threatening way by fixing me in place and restricting my capacity to move (see Harris, 2007, p. 215). Moreover, from the outset the youths avoided expressing any emotion at all over their losses or their role in atrocities, which they would nonetheless describe in exacting detail. When acting out dramas of their own making about their wartime experiences, on the other hand, participants who had never before shown the least feeling began exhibiting what they called *sympathy* for their victims. Little by little, their creative endeavors led them to more and more expansive empathic expression. Permitting themselves to mourn their own horrific losses opened the way to concern for one another and us counselors, along with authentic remorse for those who had suffered under them.

² See: Harris, D.A. (2007). Pathways to embodied empathy and reconciliation: Former boy soldiers in a dance/movement therapy group in Sierra Leone. *Intervention: International Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial Work and Counselling in Areas of Armed Conflict*, 5(3), 203-231. <http://www.child-soldiers.org/psycho-social/english>.



In August 2006, a month before the group was slated to end, the youths courageously decided to present their collective history through a dramatization to be performed before the local community as a whole. From the moment of its proposal, this way of symbolizing their experience had seemed a potentially life-changing outgrowth of their creative arts therapeutic process – and so it proved in reality. In devising their theatrical presentation, they chose to address their audience openly and directly: *“We are the Orphan Boys of Koindu. We want you to be our mothers and fathers, and we will be your children.”* Assimilating this message, the elders, overcoming years of antipathy, boldly accepted the evening’s ceremonial call for forgiveness and warmly welcomed the PVK youths back into Koindu’s heart. The event thus afforded not only the group’s members, but many people in the audience, something very like the authentic transformation of communal rite.

The next afternoon, at the group’s final 2006 gathering, each member expressed a mixture of relief and joy at the community’s deeply welcoming response to the PVK plea. During that day’s final review of PVK’s accomplishments in the course of its 16 sessions, the first precisely six months before, I tried to put the group’s unusual success in context. Noting then the existence around the world of some 300,000 child soldiers, and explaining that there had never before been a group like this one, I asked leave to tell the PVK story in the hope that others might inaugurate DMT groups like ours. The ex-fighters in turn thoroughly embraced this unusual opportunity for altruism. After engaging in thoughtful deliberation about whether this breaking of the group’s commitment to confidentiality was warranted, the youths – clearly relishing an enhanced self-esteem borne of their newfound community reintegration – agreed unanimously. Once the group arrived at this consensus, the tallest among them rose up, and said in all earnestness, *“Go, David, help the other children.”*

PVK Works Together Again

Bringing the group back together: In late January 2010, I returned to Sierra Leone for the first time since leaving in early October 2006. I traveled back with two primary aims in mind: to join PVK in celebrating the Freedom to Create

Prize, and to assist its members in launching an effective service project.

There were serious obstacles in the way, however. Forty months after the end of our therapeutic intervention, only one of the co-facilitators continued to reside in Koindu, and only six of the dozen youth members still lived in the area. While there had been major roadway improvements in the interim across parts of Sierra Leone, little upgrading was in evidence in the Kailahun District, which still had no paved road. Transportation difficulties thus heightened the challenges we faced in bringing to Koindu the six members who had moved away – three of them across the border in Liberia. Fortunately, there had been significant enhancements to telecommunications. A newly erected cellular tower in town, which prompted rapid proliferation of mobile phone use, enabled us to call and send text messages to and from Koindu, and eventually to reach all dozen members. Ultimately, despite the odds, all of the youths made it to at least a couple of PVK’s gatherings in Koindu in the course of my ten-day stay there – culminating in an exuberant final session that included all of the PVK youths, the two counselors, and myself.

Before it was certain that I would be able to return to West Africa, the revitalized communications network had enabled me to commence organizing. Upon notification of the award, I had been able to contact the youths still in Koindu through counselors Laurence Hallie James and Mustapha Abdulai. At my urging, the youths had selected one of their own to serve among three signatories for a PVK bank account. The group’s election to the post of Treasurer of a young man who, as a 17-year-old in 2006, had repeatedly embodied a sincere coming to terms with his wartime past, seemed illustrative of continuing discernment – and perhaps growing maturity – on the part of PVK’s members. On the morning that I would travel back to Koindu for the first time, the Treasurer joined me and the counselors in the district capital, where we established an account at a new bank, the first in the Kailahun District since the war, and as such itself something of a monument to post-conflict recovery.

Our group’s Koindu reunion was immensely joyous from the start. News of the Youth Prize had reached everyone, but comprehension of its meaning and implications was limited. The new Treasurer, and perhaps other members, had



chanced to hear Paul Bakibinga interview me in late November, 2009, on the BBC World Service's "Network Africa." At the story's end, the news anchor spontaneously sent PVK a friendly "shout-out from Uncle David in London." The group's newfound notoriety was clear, but the impact of that acclaim remained intangible and unknown.

Upon rejoining PVK I asked the group to reflect back on our time together almost four years prior. I reminded everyone of the period leading up to our final day together on the 6th of September 2006, when PVK had urged me to share our collective story. I explained that indeed I had since written about PVK, and delivered talks about our practice in several cities across North America and Europe. I showed the group the 25-minute edited videotape of our 2006 meetings, which I had screened in many of those presentations, and the PVK members were clearly enraptured. They loved seeing themselves – albeit on the tiny screen of my battery-powered laptop – and would frequently break into laughter when picking out readily identifiable movement patterns in themselves, one another, or us facilitators. I noted that my spreading of the group's story had led Freedom to Create to learn of PVK, which everyone agreed was a blessing. The youths encouraged me to continue sharing the video – and a new one to be created from recordings made during our reunion – along with the unusual history of the group itself.

We had much to accomplish in a relatively short time, and the agenda for our February 2010 meetings was full. Self-expression through dancing and reminiscing was at the center of our activities, as these were essential to reconstituting group identity and cohesion, but we also had to establish the foundations of our new project. Our dancing in the eight spirited sessions we had together reverberated with satisfaction and pride. Although we counselors neither reintroduced a therapeutic contract nor offered these gatherings as therapeutic interventions, we did bring back some of the defining activities from our 2006 sessions. During our first meeting, for instance, we revived the Name Game³, asking those youths present

to take a moment to recollect our time together 40 months before, and to perform any related memories through an action or gesture, and a word or phrase. One youth, who had tended in 2006 to share somewhat cautiously *pro forma* responses to vital questions, surprised me with his straightforward self-assurance. Explaining the memory that had inspired his choice of gesture in the current Name Game he spoke frankly about the 2006 culminating event at the community center as an occasion for "forgiveness."

It was soon apparent that this young man's peers had similarly unguarded, hopeful attitudes. As the days went by, counselor Laurence H. James and I held private meetings of at least an hour with each of the 12 youths, during which the former rebels would routinely speak of PVK in 2006 and its concluding performance in particular, as a turning point in their lives. One after another, the youths disclosed how enormously pleased they felt for what they had achieved together. Comfortable enough with themselves to avoid embellishment, they would speak of their experiences quite matter-of-factly: "*We apologized to the community for the bad things we did and they forgave us.*" Uniformly, the youths claimed that acting the role-play had changed their relationships in the community permanently, and to a degree that people who had shunned them before, or pointed fingers at them, had begun from the night of PVK's dramatic performance to treat the youths well. Several group members mentioned the warmth of the elders' greetings to this day, helping the once alienated and severely marginalized youths to feel integral to their community.

Relationships with the community after the 2006 PVK group: In the course of our private meetings, I asked each of the 12 youths to characterize their interaction with the people of Koindu, and specifically, whether finger-pointing or "grumbling" (a term commonly used to reflect more indirect provocations) had ever been a problem. Eleven of the youths denied having experienced a single such incident since the performance at the community center. A few of the former fighters expressed delight that when they would walk through town elders would stop them and invite them into their homes, often sharing meals. One youth, who has moved to a small city several hours away in order to pursue secondary education, answered my question by saying that an elder who had ignored him before

³ The Name Game is a circular, accumulating self-naming group process, accompanied by freely chosen gestures/movements, that facilitate interaction and bonding among participants (see Harris, 2007).



the public dramatization took an interest in him afterwards. *“He now calls me from time to time, just to see how I’m doing,”* the one-time soldier concluded, his voice quietly trailing away in a mixture of humility and wonder.

I asked the one youth who admitted having been subject to stigmatizing provocation to describe it for me. On the sole occasion when a man had mocked him for his role in the war, this PVK youth had reminded the provocateur of the community center performance. *“I told him we did bad things, and apologized,”* he acknowledged, head high, before informing the antagonist that the elders had then offered forgiveness. Asked how the man had responded to this candor, the youth indicated that the other had quickly abandoned his taunting and accepted PVK’s revised status without question.

This former fighter had thus avoided defensive, angry postures in the face of overt disrespect. Instead of responding reflexively with the sort of violence and rage he had been indoctrinated into at such an early age, he had opted to express his concerns calmly, through reason. Ultimately, in choosing level-headed discourse over instinctual acts of retaliation, the PVK youth had readily resolved the situation. Hearing this story and others similar confirmed for me that the transformation I had witnessed in the community center 40 months before had been every bit as momentous as it had seemed to me then. I voiced my enormous pride in this young man for the dignified, peaceful way he had diffused a potentially volatile conflict.

Youth outcomes: In both group gatherings and individual meetings, the youths thus reflected profound personal strength. To a man, they attributed their emotional resilience to having joined PVK four years before. In order to get a better idea of their collective mental health status, Laurence H. James and I invited each of the 12 youths to respond to an inventory of 59 questions about their health over the previous month. For this survey, we utilized an assessment instrument from the Community Association for Psychosocial Services: the CAPS Adult Client Follow-up. The first section dealt with physical ailments common to the setting, and the remainder elicited information about ongoing emotions, and experiences that Western psychiatry deems as defining symptoms of anxiety, depression, and the three symptom clusters of Posttraumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD): Intrusive Recollection, Avoidance/Numbing, and Hyper-arousal.

The youths, accustomed to answering similar questions in 2006 as part of ongoing program assessment, readily consented to the questioning, and had little apparent difficulty reporting the frequency of their “symptoms” on the measure’s 4-point Likert-type scale (“Not at all” = 0.0; “Rarely” = 1.0; “Sometimes” = 2.0; or “Often” = 3.0). The responses yielded profiles closely congruent with my observations of the affects and behaviors displayed in the group. Only one of the youths even came close to fulfilling diagnostic criteria for PTSD, and none met the conditions for other anxiety or depressive disorders. Indeed, the February 2010 data reveal symptom levels that are remarkably low, considering the youths’ childhood exposures to frequent and severe traumatic incidents. Calculating the measure through numeric equivalents ranging from 0.0 to 3.0, the group’s average overall symptoms scores were: Anxiety, 0.45; Depression, 0.52; Intrusive Recollection, 0.62; Avoidance/numbing, 0.52 and Hyper-arousal, 0.32. In other words, the PVK youths reported remarkably few symptoms of emotional distress within each of these dimensions, such that the group’s average scores are markedly below what would be required to characterize them as ‘rarely’ occurring.

Balancing youth and community needs: The PVK youths’ optimism and resilience – which likely underpin their positive outcomes and were often on display in our conversations as well – were all the more noteworthy given the former rebels’ extremely poor socioeconomic status and their difficulty securing a livelihood in an impoverished area with negligible work opportunities. Facing such daunting circumstances, it was unsurprising that within a few days after we had launched our February 2010 meetings, the youths began to try to negotiate an agreement, whereby they would cut the duration of the proposed community development project, and divide among themselves the financial savings afforded by a reduced time-frame. In the negotiations that followed, the youths’ means of communicating their concerns were both sophisticated and effective, and led, in fact, to their securing an agreement to each receive a small sum to meet personal needs.

Perhaps most clearly indicative of this maturity during the negotiation process was the



wit that PVK exhibited in one Name Game session. Laurence introduced this particular exercise, asking each youth to share a word and gesture about how he was feeling that day. The resultant list of the words uttered might on its face suggest strong dissatisfaction with the process. However, I observed both overdramatization and laughter associated with most of the offerings, which instead underscored the group's ongoing playfulness and its sense of ironic detachment from such literal interpretation.

Introducing the group's communal complaint, the first three ex-soldiers evoked their misery through the words, "Sad," "Empty stomach," and "Nothing." Mustapha, a counselor, then cheerfully voiced, "Fine," only to be followed by an exaggerated, comic lamentation in a local dialect: "No better thing." The Treasurer followed, droopily, with "Tired," and I took up his challenge, calling out, "Energetic," while dashing around the room. Not to be outdone, the inventively demonstrative youth to my right raised his pleading hands to heaven with his histrionic declaration, "Unhappy!" The participant after him drolly reprised the poverty theme: "Empty pockets." Laurence, next, laughing raucously at the dry humor on display, spontaneously flouted the youths' invocation of nothingness and despair with an emphatic, if joking, retort of his own: "Something!" But the youth to follow the counselor managed to undo that wry inversion by twisting his body away from the circle and pointing into the distance, wailing, "Something is over there." In its context, this complex gesture represented a form of reality testing, as if asserting that in the here-and-now of the youths' daily lives, basic needs still trumped visionary thinking and material benefits remained far away. That this young man could, with magnificent economy, put forward such a nuanced message – and make it funny – testifies to his and his peers' growing mastery of communicating within the form's limited means.

At the exercise's close, just moments later, one of the youths crumpled to the floor in laughter. The rest of the crew, though, seemed freshly energized and exultant over the witty way they had borne one another's burdens. In thus affording the youths the means to mock fate, the game made PVK's maturation perfectly manifest. In 2006, I had observed the group undergo an extended internalized battle between mockery and sincerity: the rites of

adolescent passage taken to the n^{th} degree. Participation in this 2010 activity, by contrast, seemed to transcend that archetypal struggle. The ex-combatants, now young adults with united interests, bravely embodied a defiant, worldly-wise hilarity – something akin to "gallows humor." While in reality suffering ongoing deprivation, they collectively invoked laughter – not physical aggression – as the key to communal survival.

Moreover, there was no longer any question, as in 2006, of aggressively testing the limits of the counselors' commitment to the now 18-to-22-year-old former combatants. Rather than symbolically killing me off by physically immobilizing me, as they had done four years before, the PVK youths found less invasive ways of interacting with me and each other – by our dancing together powerfully and in unison. The movement was often bigger, bolder, more virtuosic than before, perhaps befitting a prolonged celebration of "coming number one in the world," as the youths came to describe their winning first prize in the Freedom to Create competition.

PVK's Community Development Project

During almost every February 2010 gathering we both danced together and sat for long periods, seeking consensus on plans for using the PVK portion of the prize funds. Establishing a viable blueprint for PVK's community development project proved a serious challenge, particularly given the mere ten-day period that we had for meeting together in Koindu. Before traveling to Sierra Leone on this occasion, I had consulted with Michael Wessells, Ph.D., a leading U.S. expert on child soldier reintegration, regarding an exceptionally successful microcredit program in Sierra Leone's Northern Province, which the Christian Children's Fund (now Child Fund International) spearheaded in 2002-03.⁴ I arrived in the Kailahun District hoping to investigate the possibility of replicating such an effort in Koindu. Exploring this idea on behalf of the group, Laurence consulted with a Ward Councilor in

⁴ Wessells, M. (2006). A living wage: The importance of livelihood in reintegrating former child soldiers. In N. Boothby & A. Strang & M. Wessells (Eds.), *A World Turned Upside Down: Social Ecological Approaches to Children in War Zones*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.



Koindu about an already functioning community-based microcredit program in the town. Even though none of the PVK youths was benefiting from the existing lending program, we counselors opted not to introduce this idea, since we did not want to duplicate services and preferred to address a community problem that would be ignored without PVK's help.

We sought recommendations for potential projects through consultations with people in the community, as well as through our daily discussions with the former boy fighters themselves. The youths put forward a few income-generation schemes, any one of which would require purchasing some collective asset as an initial investment: a motorbike for various members to ride as a taxi service; a photocopy machine; or a petrol generator and transformer to be used in charging mobile phones. The group eliminated each of these ideas in turn through thoughtful deliberation over costs and benefits. Having another motorbike taxi or charging-station, it was argued, would benefit the community little since such services were not lacking, although even the modest income to be generated would surely prove helpful to a group of young men living on next to nothing. It was impossible to determine whether bringing Koindu its first photocopy machine would be worthwhile, for we had insufficient time to conduct a proper needs assessment.

A staff member from an international NGO, who had once lived and worked in Koindu, suggested using a generator to light the town's court barrie, the open-air structure that constitutes the center – both geographically and symbolically – of every Sierra Leonean town of any size. Lighting the barrie, he noted, would provide a place for children to study after dark. This opportunity for service was one PVK's members understood well and embraced with enthusiasm. Like many places in under-developed, rural Sierra Leone, Koindu still lacked electrification. As a result, even most children there fortunate enough to afford to attend school were unable to complete schoolwork in the evening, since few families could afford candles or lanterns. Even fewer could buy textbooks, moreover, which may only be purchased many hours away by vehicle. Yet fostering educational opportunity, as the ex-fighters knew from its absence, is at the very core of effective community empowerment.

It was my idea, rather than illuminating the open-air barrie, to light the community center building where PVK had performed, and had also, as its members came to refer to it, "*asked forgiveness.*" I further recommended utilizing solar power, in place of a petrol generator, as the energy source. The value of solar, as a sustainable energy source, seemed self-evident in a community without petrol pumps. In fact, I had happened to bring with me to Koindu a lightweight, portable solar panel and battery pack, which several of the ex-soldiers used on occasion throughout my stay to charge their mobile phones. The youths raised reasonable questions about how well a solar-powered system would operate in the course of the rainy season – which, fortunately, generally coincides with the three-month break between academic years when no one is much occupied with studies anyway. Upon securing a satisfactory answer, though, the youths voted overwhelmingly to support the lighting of the community center through solar power. It was further agreed unanimously to stock the center with the books needed by children at every grade level in the town, and certain youths accepted assignments to survey teachers at each local school to determine what texts were used. Beyond managing these rather momentous decisions democratically, the youths and the counseling team joined as well in the painstaking, collaborative writing, and subsequent ratification, of by-laws and a constitution – documents required for registering PVK as an organization through the government of Sierra Leone's Ministry of Social Welfare.

The PVK youths, in turn, proved eager to go before the local authorities and seek the elders' support for the community development project that we proposed to sponsor with the monetary award from the prize. No longer defensive about their histories, five of the young men volunteered to speak on our behalf at a meeting we had with a half dozen local officials. There each of the youths looked confident when rising to make his speech before the elders, then explaining the group's good fortune in winning, and its intention to bring the advantages of the prize to the community, and not solely to its own dozen members. The authorities, themselves looking a bit awestruck over the PVK international victory and the trophy to represent it, responded with great pride over the group's accomplishment. Indeed, the elders formally thanked the PVK members for enhancing Koindu's status by bringing this award.



Eventually, the Paramount Chief himself generously acceded to the youths' request to hand over the community center where 40 months earlier the group had enacted its transformative drama, and to let the youths renovate it as the PVK Reconciliation Library.

Spurred by the elders' emphatic support and the Chief's demand that the center be in use again within three months, we moved our project forward quickly. Ultimately, a Koindu-wide celebration on 25 May 2010 officially launched the PVK Reconciliation Library, further boosting the local reputation of the former child soldiers whom the community had once shunned for so long. On four evenings weekly since late April, school children have been able to study in a safe, comfortable environment, seated at tables and on benches that PVK contracted from local carpenters. Ten copies of each textbook used at every grade level have been made available to children free of charge in the library.

The project's design intentionally affords benefits to PVK's dozen members that parallel those to the broader community. Keeping the library open throughout the academic year and ensuring that the PVK youths begin assuming progressively more responsible leadership roles in the project have remained essential to our plans. Accordingly, the Krio-speaking Canadian solar engineer whom we contracted to deliver and install the state-of-the-art electrification system trained a crew of PVK's youths to assist with the installation, and afterwards to clean and maintain the system on a continuing basis. The six members of PVK still residing in or near Koindu gladly accepted responsibility for running the facility – with strong support from a Community Monitoring Committee that we recruited, which includes the Paramount Chief along with other local leaders, as well as PVK representatives. By the opening of the next school year in September, 2010, a few teenage women will be able to share library duties with the PVK youths – with all to receive equal compensation for their work in the form of stipends to be allocated toward their own educational expenses. The six PVK youths from afar, who had traveled long distances to meet with us, are unlikely to be available to participate in the library's ongoing operation, and hence will be ineligible to earn their school fees. It was largely this discrepancy that persuaded me to consent to the entire group's request for a small payment to each member. I deemed this cash outlay appropriate since the Freedom to Create Prize

had been awarded to PVK as an entirety, not solely to those remaining in the Koindu area, and this benefit would be enjoyed equally by all dozen youth members.

Conclusions

As planned, the PVK Reconciliation Library has opened the way for the former boy combatants to share their good fortune with the community, while commemorating their own ascendance into useful roles in local development. The rewards have been at once tangible and symbolic. As one of the former fighters gratefully proclaimed in February, every time people visit the library they will remember the night when PVK members apologized at that site for their roles in the war and the audience witnessing their performance forgave them.

Clearly, what the PVK youths have managed to achieve is exceptional. After a lengthy specialized process of therapeutic development, they created a vehicle for replacing disabling shame with pride, and subterfuge with truth. Risking openness within the community by staging their collective past yielded genuine reconciliation between the youths and the community. Later, winning the Freedom to Create Youth Prize, with its accompanying monetary award, enabled the launching of a much-needed study facility that further advanced their reintegration by securing them meaningful adult positions within the community.

It would be terribly difficult to parse out to what extent newfound local celebrity and hope of additional financial reward from the affluent West have motivated the PVK youths. These unknowns, and the socioeconomic power discrepancies that inform them, may well have confounded the validity of the 2010 symptoms survey findings, even when viewed in the aggregate. On the other hand, it can scarcely be doubted that the ex-fighters' pride in their accomplishments has been a major contributing factor in their having reported relatively few mental health problems, and instead, a pervasive sense of overall well-being. Given their histories, these findings are remarkable.

There can be little doubt, moreover, that the dance therapy program that my colleagues and I designed to assist these teenage former



combatants served them well. Today these dozen young men's positive attitudes and increasingly healthy relationships with a community that had long shunned them, bear out the program's enduring success. Indeed, the unusual and lasting achievements among PVK's members in locating balance and well-being in their lives support broader dissemination of this DMT approach to fostering recovery and reintegration.

The model of psychosocial intervention that we co-facilitators devised specifically for PVK may thus be readily adaptable to situations with former child soldiers elsewhere, and perhaps other war-affected children and youths, as well, at least in those parts of the world where dance has a pivotal place within cultural traditions.

When in 2006 the PVK youths themselves bid me farewell and sent me off to describe their progress to the world, they joined in this far-reaching aspiration. We all trusted then and continue to hope that the DMT pathway to embodied empathy, reconciliation, and a renewal of meaning that we first blazed together in Koindu, might be usefully extended as our collective gift to struggling post-crisis communities, even beyond Sierra Leone's borders.