

“Abadian offers a new lens by insisting that we go beyond the individuals to the collective, particularly in dealing with intractable conflicts.” As the former executive director of the KSG’s Institute for Social and Economic Policy in the Middle East and founder of PeaceBeat, whose motto is “Some good news, some of the time,” she is working to reshape the polarized public conversations among Muslims, Jews, and Christians, primarily in the Middle East. Miller is on the board of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, a growing coalition of 50 citizen-diplomacy organizations in Israel and the

Palestinian territories. “People-to-people peace building offers the opportunity for relationships that engender hope in a despairing region,” she says. “Hope is a fundamental requirement of healing collective trauma.

“At the end of each political, sociological, or economic analysis [of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict], inevitably there’s a sentence that reads, ‘And both peoples are traumatized,’” Miller continues. “There is never a second sentence after that. No one knows what collective trauma really means, what it does to groups and nations, or how to intervene

to heal it. Sousan offers a crucial part of that road map.”

In 2003, Miller and the Institute for Middle East Peace and Development, a New York-based nonprofit, organized an interfaith summit that convened a group of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders and theologians from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to reflect on the challenges of religious leadership. The KSG’s Center for Public Leadership hosted the gathering, which included some of the highest-level clerics in Egypt and Jordan. Abadian told the group about the Native American experience of colonization and trauma, distinguishing between individual and collective traumas. “Everyone seemed to identify with [that] experience of oppression and trauma,” says Miller. “Sousan was so compassionate and clear; people understood—but more important, *felt*—that the pain and violence in the Middle East are not a deficiency in themselves, their nations, or their religions, but in part a universal human response to collective trauma.” Abadian recalls, “In the middle of the talk, one Muslim theologian banged on the table and said, ‘We must heal our children! We must heal our children!’”

But collective healing involves much more than healing individuals and relationships, Abadian says. She also advocates a selective revival of traditions and cultural elements, and the generation of new ones. “Cultural renewal isn’t about bringing back wholesale everything from the past,” she cautions. “Some practices may have to be adjusted, or jettisoned altogether. In the context of native peoples, some Pacific Coast tribes practiced slavery and polygamy, for example. And communities may adopt cultural elements from outside that they find meaningful. Communities that didn’t traditionally practice sweat lodges and sun dances have adopted them.” Furthermore, new or revived life-affirming ceremonies can take the place of dysfunctional coping mechanisms like drinking binges. Traditional dances, drumming and singing circles, quilting groups, and even weaving porcupine-quill baskets may occupy the social space formerly held by drug use or violence.

Cultural revival can spur controversy. When the Eastern Pacific gray whale went off the endangered-species list in 1994, young people of the Makah tribe in

## Trauma and Social Injustice

“THERE’S ACTUALLY BEEN no institutional relationship between personal healing and social justice,” says professor of psychiatry Richard Mollica, M.D., director of the Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma (HPRT) at Massachusetts General Hospital. “For example, look at the experiences of witnesses in the Bosnian tribunal at The Hague: it’s very clear that many did not experience social justice as therapeutic.” South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission set several goals, including apology, punishment, compensation, and reconciliation, but its chair, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, LL.D. ’79, clearly stated that the commission would not be able to heal most victims of the atrocities of apartheid.

Mollica has spent more than 30 years helping victims of many kinds of trauma around the world. His recent book, *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World*, argues that people have an inherent ability to heal themselves and focuses on the relationship between personal healing and the healing of collective wounds—which may or may not include the legal and institutional remedies that are aspects of social justice. Mollica and his colleagues at HPRT have developed a global training for post-conflict recovery, and set up an on-line global dialogue on the prevention of all forms of human violence (see their blog: [healinginvisiblewounds.typepad.com](http://healinginvisiblewounds.typepad.com)).

No society has a good definition of social healing, Mollica says, and ironically, social justice—prosecuting perpetrators of crimes against humanity, for example—“can actually make the individual and/or the situation worse for the survivors of violent crimes. Look at the aftermath of acquittals in The Hague—people felt betrayed, and felt that their ongoing social and economic crises were not addressed. Many survivors felt the courts were primarily politically motivated.” Furthermore, “A lot of people were destroyed or psychologically damaged by giving or hearing testimony at the international tribunal,” he says. “It is traumatic in itself for a South African mother to learn via testimony that her son was barbecued by police agents.” Yet vivid testimony of this kind strengthens the prosecutors’ case, Mollica says. “The more vivid it is, the more injured the victim is, the more it helps the prosecutors.”

Though he believes that social justice can contribute to the healing process, Mollica points out that “there is such a thing as a toxic trauma story. Telling the brutal facts that generate high emotions can be very negative and anti-therapeutic. A trauma story needs to be associated with survival and healing—then it becomes a teaching story, as in the lives of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and ordinary survivors as well. Societies need to collect and share these stories. We’re not doing a good job of this internationally, or with the people of New Orleans or Iraq, or soldiers returning from the Iraq War. We don’t have good personal data from Native Americans on their personal reactions to the ethnic cleansings they experienced. Stories like this can help both social healing and personal healing.”