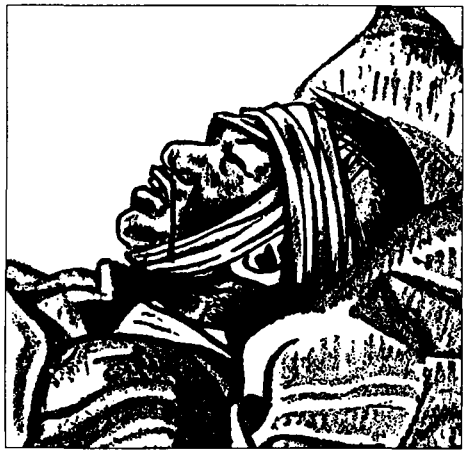
THE BALKANS: READERS' RESPONSES

Confession of an Omission

Susie Barrett



What better place to confess than in the pages of a magazine read by counsellors and psycotherapists. My confession is not about what I have done but what I didn't do. It's a sin of omission that has weighed heavily on my mind since 1991 and even more heavily since NATO started trying to bomb Milosevic into submission.

In the autumn of 1991 John Demos, an international photographer with an agency in Athens, learnt that Kosovan Albanians were being killed by the Serbian Army. He wanted a writer to go with him to cover the story. As soon as we arrived in Pristina and began asking questions of the right people we were sent to Pollate, a village where troops had shot and killed two young men a few days before. The army and the police had set up roadblocks around the village to stop people going to the funeral. We managed to reach the village and spent some time there in the family enclave. The stunned and grief-stricken people clung to us, led us from one farmyard building to the next, showed us the bullet holes in the cob walls of barns. The mother of one of the murdered men gave me a pair of socks she had knitted. 'Tell President Bush what's happening,' they urged. This was the message we were given all week as we went from place to place, to other villages were men had been summarily shot. We were arrested twice; the first time for only a few hours, the second time more frighteningly for twelve. This was the first time in my life I had lost my freedom, the first time I had felt utterly powerless. My brief experience of a single day was as nothing to what the people of Kosovo were, and horrifyingly still are, experiencing.

'We are no longer thinking of the dead,' said one man during a large meal we were given in Pollate. 'We are worried about those left in prison.' The brother of one of the dead men gave a speech. 'In my name, and in the name of my family, in the name of Albania, in the name of the people of Albania and in the name of the mothers of Albania, I appeal to the world's democracies, to the United Nations Organisation, to

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the Council for Human Rights, and finally to Mr George Bush, to intercede on our behalf, to save our lives because our lives are not safe under the present Yugoslavian government.'

I returned to England, intent on passing on this message to the world. It had seemed, while I was in Kosovo, a vital and possible thing to do. In London, meeting journalist friends, it rapidly seemed impossible. Who could I tell? What could I do? People here had not heard of Kosovo. People here had other things to talk about. I wrote up my notes, and put them in a bottom drawer. I wore my socks in my first year as a humanistic counselling student. The woman who had knitted them was the mother of Skender Munoh who was trying to escape when he was shot. My notes tell me: *We were shown the place near a pile of timber stacked ready for winter where Skender fell, wounded by a bullet in the back of his thigh. He was taken away alive, and returned next day for burial, his head most horribly twisted out of shape.* I sat on a floor cushion, looked at my socks, and learnt about Carl Rogers' core conditions, and gestalt, and Freud, and Jung.

Now clients come to me with their painful problems and tell me that they know these are as nothing compared to the suffering of the Kosovan Albanians. But we can only deal with our own personal suffering. What can we do for the suffering Kosovans and Serbs? What are we to feel?

In 1991 I was unable to do anything. Today I cannot bear to feel anything. I can only take the merest glimpse at the news. I am at the point where I have to protect myself against feeling anguish about things over which I have no control. Yet at the same time . . . I can beat myself up for this attitude of self-preservation. I also spend fruitless time going round and round the question facing society today. It cannot be right to counteract violence with violence. Yet how else can we deal with evil dictators? Should we not take any action at all? In the case of Iraq and Yugoslavia, if the West had acted more quickly and decisively as soon as the evil being perpetrated had become known — and the US must have had agents on the ground in both places all the time — then many lives and much suffering could have been saved.

Maxine Linnell, in her editorial piece in *Self & Society* (May 1999), tries out three simple ideas. As I understand her, the first suggests that our present cultural propensity for splitting off good from evil drives us and our leaders to take action. We need to change this perception. By acknowledging that good and evil are integral to each and all, we will act with compassion — or maybe not act at all, just feel angry, helpless and despairing and let things be. Her second point draws a parallel between a powerful military machine prepared for action and the build-up of charge in an individual — both can go off with a bang. The third calls us to remember the inherent goodness of people and the distortions and defensive strategies caused by hurt to feel compassion for everyone involved in the war and to value mediation and discussion.

I think these are all valid views to express in our society. But how will these ideas help the present situation? In England we are fortunate in being able to discuss our views. We haven't lived under an evil dictator. Yes, we can feel compassion for all the people who suffer under

such regimes and who find themselves acting cruelly and violently out of fear for their own lives. But I don't want my leaders to be humanistic if that implies pacifism in the face of evil. The Hitlers, Saddams and Slobodans don't want to mediate. Why should they? They have to be beaten on their own terms. We have to use force to counter force. We also have to be clear about our determination to do so, as soon as we see a dictator removing the human rights of his citizens. That is where the West makes mistakes: by holding back and vacillating.

As Maxine said in her piece, 'the collective and personal mirror one another.' As a young mother, and latterly as an old grandmother, I kept on learning the importance of being firm, clear and consistent about what was allowed and what was not allowed, right from the very beginning. That way, we all felt safe. That way, one severe reprimand or punishment did for a long time. The other way, we were all over the place — often upset, never quite knowing what could be got away with, sometimes being frighteningly angry, which made us all feel bad. I think that this family pattern can be usefully transposed to international relations. I believe the lack of will to punish evil dictators properly at the beginning leads to the position where we have to use evil ourselves in a long drawn out and messy way.

It is also useful to transpose some ideas about individual therapy to therapy for the human race in general. Do you remember Alice Miller's books? She pointed out that one of the mitigating circumstances in cases of child abuse was when an adult had witnessed the event and had expressed the view that this was *not* all right. I believe that this is something that we, as humanistic practitioners, can do. We can speak our minds. We can bear witness. And not when it is too late, but at the first sign of evil in the world. To do this we need a forum.

My omission was not to be the observing witness in 1991. Now in 1999 I have found a forum for my confession. Perhaps there could be a space set aside in the pages of *Self & Society* for bringing to wider attention anything we see in the world around us that is antithetical to life.

Feeling like a Refugee

Dani Dale

In some ways I feel like a refugee, for I am not sure where I belong or where I should call home. England, or the former Yugoslavia. I have only ever lived in England; in fact, you may call me a 'good old Yorkshire lass'. You may wonder what I am talking about; I wonder myself sometimes.

This is about identity and about who I am or believe to be. There is nothing

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