

## **Awakening from Darkness into Light: Beyond Lifespan & Intergenerational Impacts of Collective Trauma**

**Elizabeth Krahn – January 28, 2024**

Tragedies experienced by Russian Mennonites since WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution have been well researched by Mennonite, and a few non-Mennonite, historians. Historians strive to focus on historical and archival data, and oral history accounts, with objectivity. But it is critical to also look at the traumatic impact of these historical events on survivors, their descendants, and entire cultural communities through an emotional, mental health, and spiritual lens.

Collective and intergenerational trauma has been researched and better understood since the 1970s, primarily as a result of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, but the Russian Mennonite experience has not gained much visibility as a traumatic experience with mental health repercussions. Survival required resilience, and emotional weakness was a handicap that could put survival in jeopardy. Some Mennonites adopted the perception that those who struggled emotionally suffered from either a weakness of character or a lack of faith. It is now known that strength and resilience can actually mask underlying trauma symptoms that are impacting our lives. As a child growing up in the shadow of my parents' trauma—parents who were both incredibly resilient despite many traumatic losses on both sides of the family, including the repatriation of my mother's sisters and their children to labour camps where four died of starvation—I internalized much of their grief unconsciously and read my mother's genealogical records when I was 9 years old! I was highly socially anxious, and feared there was something wrong with *me*.

My presentation underlines the importance of recognizing and acknowledging possible effects of collective trauma within ourselves, our loved ones, and/or members of our community—and not regarding it as an individual pathology, rather a normal reaction to external social and historical forces often beyond our control. If repressed, these effects linger in our bodies across the lifespan and impact generations to come. Psychological understanding and support shine a light on both the condition itself and how we can move beyond the constraints it has the power to impose on us. Christ's Love and Light magnify and deepen this growth and can prepare us for a more fulfilled life of relationship, community, compassion, and service much less restrained by fears or other issues that accompany legacies of trauma.

***Key points I will address in my presentation for group discussion:***

- ***Possible symptoms of collective trauma.*** *These symptoms may emerge at the time of trauma and intensify over time, or after a life of resilience when triggered by challenges of old age. Symptoms vary in intensity and do not necessarily meet the criteria for PTSD.*
- ***How trauma is passed on from one generation to the next and how it can manifest.*** *Four primary modes of intergenerational transmission offer a deeper understanding of ourselves, our families, and our community—and illuminate a path of growth.*
- ***How those who have experienced collective and intergenerational legacies of trauma can achieve posttraumatic growth.*** *What is posttraumatic growth? How can we move towards such growth individually and collectively? The German term for mental illness is “Seelenkrank,” a suffering of the soul. How can trauma-informed psychological perspectives be integrated with spiritual healing of the soul, just as the skills of a surgeon, classroom teacher, or a compassionate listener, can be enhanced through Love, Gratitude, Prayer and Grace?*

Please note that ample time will be set aside for discussion. I welcome your thoughts, reflections, and questions, and look forward to meeting you all!