

## Healing Individual and Collective Trauma

### *Earthquake Trauma Relief Work in Chile with Core Evolution - an integrative, Body-Oriented and Mindfulness-Centered Approach*

© Siegmar Gerken, Ph.D. ECP, HP (Psychotherapy), founder of  
CORE EVOLUTION [www.coreevolution.de](http://www.coreevolution.de)

Chile was hit hard by an earthquake in March 2010. The nation was in shock. I arrived a week later in Santiago to conduct our trainings. To meet the needs of the time, I changed the teaching topic to Trauma – the Core Evolution approach to working with trauma.

I landed in Santiago at 8 am on the morning of March 11 and two hours later two earthquakes of the magnitude of 7.2 were shaking the ground. People were running outside the buildings or throwing themselves on the floor, searching for shelter – most of them still in shock from the previous week. As I mostly live in California earthquakes are not foreign to me, but I have never felt them with such an existential fear. After quite awhile I still felt the ground shaking. At first I could not tell if the ground was still shaking or whether I was still trembling in my body, i.e. brain, as a sensor of any stronger/threatening vibration or tremor in the surroundings (the sensoric system becomes highly alert, even when larger cars are driving by and shake the streets). People around me could not differentiate it either, and I became aware that a great number of the people around me were still holding the traumatic experience of the earthquake in their system as an individual as well as collective trauma.

I had already arranged with my organizer that I would offer a free earthquake Trauma Relief workshop, which became sponsored by a pharmaceutical company. In this moment of personal and national emergency they acted from an altruistic, supportive place, since they did not want to be mentioned or have any advertising.

Meanwhile, the information reached me that the Center where we usually held our trainings had collapsed and that the auditorium of the Pharma Company had to be closed, because of cracks in the walls and ceiling. However, they kept their commitment by renting a large room in a downtown hotel. In spite of these events, date and address changes, about 70 people came!

After welcoming everyone and centering, I began with a left/right brain hemisphere balancing exercise. This establishes a more coherent communication between the left and right brain, which in return allows the system to relax, deepen the breathing and be more present. This enabled the participants to move into grounding exercises and gradually begin to express and release some of their held fears, as well as realize how they still held the shock of the recent days. With a deepened presence in their body and the strengthening of their inner ground, they felt safe in accessing their body as a resource in relation to the traumatic event of the earthquake.

From here I invited them to begin to build community, by sharing in groups of four how they perceived the events. Participants were advised not to describe so much the details of what had happened, but rather, what they had perceived and if they could still feel it in their Body-Mind system.

Up until now some of the participants had just been holding their lives together and had brushed aside their real feelings. The existential intensity of these days left no time to share honestly about oneself. Opening their feelings in a safe space allowed them to share with others and establish a community of understanding – another important resource after such traumatic events.

Some people stated: “I will never trust the earth again.” or “I will never trust Nature again!” These statements indicate that the person will be in a state of chronic conscious or unconscious state of alertness, fear, caution, which means they will stay in chronic post-traumatic stress, which may become after a while, PTSD.

At this stage I then introduced the body-therapeutic technique of ‘giving over’, which they practiced with partners. This work allows one to move chronic stress patterns of holding fear and brace against losing control into trusting the body again and being able to allow the involuntary movements necessary for self-regulation. It felt very rewarding to see the bodies opening up, moving back to a healthy muscle tone; the enhanced circulation bringing more color into the skin. One could perceive open, communicating eyes and radiant faces.

To re-establish their connection to beauty and also to pride of the nature of their country and the world at large, we had prepared a slide show with places in Chile such as the snow-covered Andes, tranquil rivers, Chilean folklore dancers, and others. These images in general create an atmosphere of inner ground in Chilean people, a sense of being united. With the trust that had been regained through the work of the last hours, they were once again able to expand their perspective of nature, their country and the earth at large. We ended in a large circle spontaneously intoning ‘Gracias a la Vida’ – giving thanks to life.

In four to five hours we had been able to move from a condition of fear and traumatic stress to establish again a ground of trust in the body as one’s own resource (with concrete exercises they could repeat when needed), as well as building community by sharing and empathic listening, leading into further support and developing networks (*Individual Trauma integration*).

During the gathering people felt like being in a family, in the group exercises they felt held in a safe container and they pledged to share this with their own families (*Family Trauma integration*).

People also shared stories of their grand- and grandparents how they had structured their lives after Earthquakes and other disasters and what could be learned and released from these times - after all, Chile had suffered over 120 earthquakes since their documented time since 1500 (*Generational Trauma integration*).

And last but not least, in such amount of experience, people felt naturally connected by positive collective images, that unite them, gathering in a circle and invoking a song, that expresses

gratitude to life and compassion for all people in the nation and beyond - all people who have suffered a similar fate. This is where we touch the *healing and integration of the Collective Trauma*.

This concept has now been refined and expanded, so that we can work with much larger groups, depending on the topic and circumstances, in areas of natural or manmade disasters or other traumatic events.

This Trauma Relief workshop demonstrated that with our expertise in body-oriented therapy in general, and specifically with the Trauma work we have developed in CORE EVOLUTION (addressing developmental and shock traumata in a specific way), we have the knowledge, competence and tools to address both the physical traumatic condition and the associated psychological circumstances.

These days we are all becoming aware that traumatic events are accelerating worldwide, so I would like to encourage us all to utilize and prepare to offer our capacities in these times.

*Gracias a la Vida.*

*Siegmar Gerken PhD*