the art of forgetting
a facilitation guide
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Creative and performing arts inspire us, help us be self critical, and also enable us look at problems in new ways. It is a powerful medium of communication, often subtle but very effective in assisting us to start a process of internal transformation. FLICT has promoted the use of art forms to help people understand each other, particularly those who are insular within their narrow community identity as Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay, up-country, low country, Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist. In strengthening a common inclusive Sri Lankan identity, we need to recognise our diversity. Joyful celebration of this diversity while all being Sri Lankan requires the ability to empathise, appreciate and provide space for affirmation of each others cultures. Art forms that are shared with a broad spectrum of the people help to bridge the cultural divide.

Sri Lanka has gone through several decades of violent strife in the North as well as in the South. As we struggle along a path trying to find a peaceful lasting solution, all people will have to deal with the painful past - a past that has been the cause of the pain of the present and the future. In this “past”, we may have to look for the root causes to which we as individuals directly or indirectly have contributed. Our contributions may be known or unknown, it may also be by not being actively engaged as citizens looking critically into the affairs of the state or our own communities and organizations.

The film “the art of Forgetting” is an effort at addressing some of these painful issues that we need to examine closely. The producer has sensitively crafted the film. It does not claim to be a historical, exhaustive documentation of all what happened. It captures the voices and faces from across the country, where pain has been intense for all and the losses equally unbearable.

The richness of learning by seeing films is enhanced if it is followed at some point by a discussion that is moderated and facilitated to enable dialogue, introspection and thinking. The manual that has been supported by FLICT is an attempt at this activity. This is the first manual that FLICT is helping develop in relation to an artistic product and we hope that it will be used well. Learning is a two way and a long term process. We would like to know how this manual and its use could be improved so that similar efforts could be made more useful.

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Background

The project Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation (FLICT) aims to strengthen the capacity of Sri Lankan civil society to contribute towards conflict transformation, particularly at the local level. The overall goal is to strengthen - on a countrywide approach - initiatives for conflict transformation in Sri Lanka, by supporting civil society to play a more effective and influential role in contributing towards a lasting and positive peace. FLICT expects to achieve this by supporting local initiatives in the implementation of projects and by providing services to reflect on their work and develop their organisational capacities further.

Our vision of conflict transformation in Sri Lanka is “a peaceful and pluralistic society that encompasses the needs and rights of all people in the country and is able to resolve its conflicts non-violently”.

Our objective is to support civil society organizations so that they can,

- contribute significantly towards the acceptance of democratic pluralistic values,
- take an active role in establishing mechanisms for civic non-violent conflict resolution, and
- work in cooperation with each other in conflict transformation activities.

In order to achieve the above objectives, and in keeping with our vision, we have identified three focus areas to support civil society organizations in their work.

I. Transforming cultural identities towards an inclusive society: A society based on plural values requires working towards attitudinal changes at individual level to tackle long held stereotypes of the “other” and deeply ingrained attitudes of society. The outcome of long-term work in this focus area would be the acknowledgement and celebration of the diversity of Sri Lanka and developing space for alternative forms of culture and identity.

II. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious linkages for conflict transformation: Regions where different ethnic groups interact are often sites of tension and violence. This is mainly due to rivalries among identity groups concerning resources and the constant tussle for power and influence. It is also the very multi-ethnic nature of these areas that provides opportunities for establishing bodies that cut across ethnic / religious barriers and help build positive relationships. The outcome of long-term work in this focus area would be sustainable networks of solidarity among different ethnic and religious groups that help to prevent violent conflicts in their communities.

III. Civic participation for democratic and plural forms of governance: Sri Lanka needs to develop an institutional value system that incorporates the principles of inclusion, pluralism and democracy to ensure that the needs of all people are met. This must reflect in the opportunities provided for the participation of all people in governance mechanisms while continuing to be accountable and efficient.
About the Film

The art of forgetting uses the power of memory to break through the silence and statistical anonymity that characterizes dominant discourses of war. Filmed in Sri Lanka between 2002 and 2005, the film highlights the personal stories of people whose lives have been altered by war and political violence.

The art of forgetting grew out of a three-year collaborative documentation and documentary film project that documented and explored the ways we remember the violence of war. The project and resulting film has created space for people to tell their stories: space that has been fundamentally missing in Sri Lanka. Through largely unstructured interviews, in which we invited people to tell their stories, and ongoing dialogues, the project engages in “the intentional act of remembering.”* Both the process of documentation and the film, itself, open space to remember - space within the public discourse... within peace processes, policy debates, and negotiations... within our collective conscious... within our hearts and our minds.

The film is not intended to analyze, explain or provide a comprehensive history of Sri Lanka’s recent past. Very simply, the art of forgetting is meant to serve as a vehicle to carry and convey ordinary people’s stories to a broader audience. It is an invitation to remember... to feel... to reflect... to discuss. It is not an answer; it is a question.

The art of forgetting challenges those who advocate amnesia: those who say the past is better left in the past. The film embodies what we know as truth - the past is the present. It is the here and now. One needs only to read the headlines to know... or to speak to the newly widowed, the daily orphaned. It is this moment and the next, reinvented again and again. It is the legacy we leave our children. If we keep the past buried it will only rot and fester further. To reveal it, to give it light and air to breath, to expose it to the elements - the wind and the rain - is to free ourselves from its stranglehold.

About the Film Maker

Lisa Kois is a human rights lawyer, writer, and film maker. Originally from the United States, she has been living and working in Sri Lanka since 1996. The art of forgetting grew out of her work on issues of human rights and accountability, and her personal experience grappling with political violence and memory. She has been affiliated with the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (Colombo), the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust, Young Asia Television, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Development Fund for Women.

*As termed by Alex Boraine, Deputy Chair of the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Founding Director of the International Centre for Transitional Justice.
Intended Audience

This guide is intended to assist facilitators who are using the art of forgetting with groups working on issues of peace, conflict transformation or reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

The film is about political violence and is intended for mature audiences. It is not recommended for viewers below the age of 12. Screenings for youth between the ages of 12 and 16 should be accompanied by pre and post screening discussions developed specifically for youth. The guide includes exercises and questions for discussion, as well as ideas about answers to those questions.

Approaches to Facilitating Dialogue

The responsibility of the facilitator is to create a safe and respectful environment conducive to the free and open exchange of feelings and ideas.

Facilitators should be familiar with the content of the film. All facilitators should watch the film prior to the screening and read this guide. Developing a facilitation plan prior to the screening is recommended. A facilitation plan might include the following:

1. What materials will be circulated prior to screening the film;
2. How the discussion will be structured;
3. How the film will be introduced and what exercises will be done before watching it;
4. What exercises or questions will be used as the focus of the discussion after the film;
5. How much time will be allotted for each exercise, as well as the entire discussion; and
6. How the discussion will be concluded.

If the group is larger than 20 people, smaller discussion groups should be formed. This should be planned in advance so that there are facilitators ready for each group. All facilitators should have the chance to watch the film prior to facilitating a discussion and should know the facilitation plan and their role in plan.

Make photocopies of page 4, about the film and filmmaker, and have the group read it prior to watching the film.

Technical Requirements

The film’s duration is 56 minutes. In order to have a screening and meaningful discussion, it is recommended that a minimum of two hours be allotted. The film could also serve as the basis of an extended dialogue.

The film should be played on a DVD player rather than a computer. The DVD is more likely to skip, get stuck or freeze when played on a computer. The full film should be tested on whatever system it will be played on prior to the screening.

The audio and music are important components of the film. Thus, the use of speakers or a sound system is strongly recommended.

The film should be played in a dark space.
Scene Descriptions

The film is divided into four sections: a pre-title sequence and three chapters: journeys, the road is just a road, and legacies of absence. Below, you will find a brief description of each section.

(1) Pre-Title Sequence:

The pre-title sequence is as an introduction to the thematic content of the film. The film opens with the filmmaker’s voice, a series of written plates, and a series of visual stills depicting the aftermath of a suicide bombing in Colombo.

“There are moments in life that shatter time and space... Moments that stop time while simultaneously propelling it wildly fast forward... Moments that leave you in the fissure between then and now... July 29th 1999 was one of those moments.”

The combination of words and images suggests a reality that is as specific as it is general. The moments that are referred to are abstract; the images are concrete. The contrast of words and images - of abstract and concrete - is used to suggest the general (political violence and suffering) contained within the particular (the assassination of Neelan Tiruchelvam).

The pre-title sequence is the only time a narrator’s voice is used in the film. The voice is that of the filmmaker and is used to suggest the filmmaker’s subjective position in relation to the subject matter; a moment for the filmmaker like those moments referred to in the narration. The images are of the scene of Neelan Tiruchelvam’s assassination July 29th 1999. The images end with the memorial to Neelan Tiruchelvam and the road on which he was killed, which has been painted by the Road Painting Movement.
(2) Journeys:

This chapter serves as the beginning of the narrative structure of the film, introduces the film’s subject matter, and establishes recurring themes that will assist viewers in following the story and understanding the content of the film. The road and travel motif is introduced through opening images of the road painting movement, roads, and a map of Sri Lanka. The road and travel motif and the map are used throughout the film to connect chapters, themes, and stories.

“Journeys” explores issues of displacement, home and return. The film is placed in context of the 2002 ceasefire agreement and ensuing peace process. Voices reminiscing about the moment of departure and the possibility of return lead the viewer toward the point of return and raise questions about to what, exactly, people have to return.

“I remember I had to just close the front door and go… And, as I closed the door, I remember just thinking whether we would ever come back.”

The Stories

Mr. Jayabalasingham’s story highlights the trauma of displacement and return, as he walks us through his partially destroyed home. He tells the story of his, and his family’s, displacement from Chavakachcheri in 2000 during a battle between government forces and the LTTE, which trapped civilians between the two warring parties.

“When this man stops, the other man starts. In every way, the civilians only get hurt. Not them.”

The Group of Girls tells the story of the Jaffna exodus of 1995 and Rifaz tells the story of the expulsion of the Jaffna Muslims in 1990. These two stories are placed side by side to suggest a similarity in experience, while simultaneously highlighting the distinct experiences conveyed through the personal stories. The chapter ends with a comment by Rifaz.

“These people say they are governing and those people say they are governing. So who is really ruling here?”

Like Mr. Jayabalasingam, Rifaz emphasizes how civilians are trapped between the two parties, even during the ceasefire.

(3) The Road is Just a Road:

The film moves south, out of Jaffna and into the LTTE-controlled Wanni. This chapter is framed in context of the A9 road and the devastating battles for the road. During the war, the A9 road - the only road linking the north and south of the country - became known as one of Sri Lanka’s deadliest battlegrounds. In March 2002, after the signing of the ceasefire agreement, the two parties agreed to open the road to civilian traffic.

“Suddenly, the road was just a road again.”
This chapter attempts to shatter the anonymity of mainstream war reporting while, at the same time, exposing the futility and horror of war. It begins by juxtaposing written text of the numbers of dead and kilometers gained or lost in A9 battles with blurred footage of combatants killed in battle.

The journey moves down the battle-scarred A9, navigating through abandoned mine fields, destroyed buildings, and other remnants of war, and pausing occasionally to hear the stories of those who live along the A9. The stories contained within the A9 further challenge the anonymity of war reporting. These are the faces behind the anonymous numbers.

The Stories

Rasammani & Keerthiraja tell the story of life on a former battleground, and the danger of return. Their land is littered with unexploded ordinance. Although there is laughing and joking as Keerthiraja shows off for the camera and picks up a shell, there is a simultaneous seriousness and horror to the scene, as it cuts back and forth to visuals of children, who are also watching. The tenor of the interaction changes dramatically when Rasammani tells the story of her son’s death. Caught on the front lines during the war between the Government troops and the LTTE - and forced to cater to both sides - her son was killed by the Tigers for alleged collaboration.

Saraswathi’s is a mother’s tale. After two of her children are martyred fighting for the LTTE, Saraswathi struggles with her grief and pride. Although she begins her story stoically, her sorrow and regret are revealed as her story unfolds. Saraswathi’s story speaks to the complexity of the experience of loss. While nationalist rituals celebrating fallen heroes may help a parent or loved one cope with the loss publicly, there remains a private grief that survivors carry with them.

Saratha’s story is particularly strong in helping viewers identify with others across ethnic lines. In a hushed voice filled with emotion, Saratha, a Tamil woman, tells the story of “two small army boys” who appear at her door in the midst of a battle. They are wounded and looking for shelter. She takes them in and offers them a place to sleep. During the night, both young men die.

(4) Legacies of Absence:

This chapter raises questions about the Sri Lankan state and the way in which violence has been used for the perpetuation of power. Like the structure of the film, this chapter is circular in nature, moving from North to South to North again raising questions of accountability and the cyclical pattern of violations that go unaddressed.

The chapter begins with a series of voices leading us through the transition from North to South - from the war between the Government and the LTTE in the North to the Reign of Terror in the South. These voices are as distinct as they are indistinguishable in
The Stories

Premasiri was a monk who was abducted during the Reign of Terror by unknown men linked to the government. In vivid detail - as if recounting events that had occurred weeks or months, rather than years, before - Premasiri tells the story of his abduction, detention, and torture at the hands of state actors.

Kusuma’s is a mother’s story. During the Reign of Terror, her son was arrested by the police and detained. Kusuma tells how she visited her son regularly, bringing him clothes and bandages for the injuries he sustained in custody, as he pleaded with her to secure his release. Eventually, after being transferred from his original place of detention, Kusuma’s son disappears. She searches for him at every army camp on the island, but he is not to be found, until neighbors come to tell her that his body has been found burning on the side of the road.

Nilmini was a university student at the University of Colombo during the Reign of Terror. She was active in politics and in love with another activist. Still suffering pain from the violence she experienced, Nilmini wrestles with her emotions as she tells the story of her boyfriend’s murder at the hands of the JVP.

In order to highlight the cyclic nature of political violence in Sri Lanka, the scene moves from Nilmini to images of the Monument to the Disappeared in Seeduwa, with the words - Disappearance is a Crime against Humanity, Let us not allow it to happen again - etched in stone, back to Jaffna, where, more than 10 years after the Reign of Terror, disappearances become commonplace against. The Group of Girls introduced in “Journeys” reappears to share their recollections of their friend, Krishanthy Kumaraswamy, and the story of her disappearance by members of the government forces in 1996.

terms of the geographic and political context in which they were originally uttered. The voices culminate in Colombo - the center of political and economic power and the meeting point of these two realities.

“He is still missing…” “I know it was the ones from the army camp who abducted my husband…” “I still see the one with the covered face…”

This chapter looks at the forgotten past and raises questions about the nature of the state and its use of violence to counter challenges to political power. The stories in this chapter are the most graphic, detailed and complete stories of violence. Unlike the stories from the North - which were more fragmented in the telling - the stories from the South are more complete and coherent. By looking back at the Reign of Terror and then directly linking those stories with a story of disappearances from Jaffna 10 years after that period - the chapter is intended to raise questions of accountability for past violence. The chapter also raises the gender dimension of the violence.
Challenges to Facilitation

For some, the art of forgetting may stimulate intense emotional responses and/or evoke emotionally charged memories of violence or loss. Those experiencing such a response may find it difficult to discuss the film immediately after viewing.

For others, the film’s emotional content may lead to a detached and, in some cases, distancing response. This may mean that the viewer seeks to undermine the dialogue or discredit the film or responses to the film.

Such responses present challenges for the facilitator, who must ensure that a safe and respectful environment is maintained and that there is room for both emotional responses and more detached analytic responses. An introduction and discussion prior to the film (see section, Before Screening the Film, page 12) will help create this atmosphere. One aspect of the preview discussion may be to clearly establish, or with the group agree to, a set of rules or guidelines for the discussion.

Addressing questions of bias

One way in which the later, more detached, reaction to the film may manifest is through raising questions of bias in the film.

Although the art of forgetting is intended to move beyond divisions by focusing on our common humanity and shared suffering, the film’s subject matter - political violence - is inherently sensitive for many people and linked to their core identity. The way one sees or understands the film will be influenced by the way one sees the world and, more precisely, the way one understands Sri Lanka, its history and its current context. For example, at different times, with different audiences, the film has been labeled pro Government, anti Government, pro LTTE and anti LTTE.

Common questions and critiques

1. Why isn’t the story of... included?
Exclusions that have been highlighted include massacres in border villages, the IPKF, suicide bombings in Colombo, the Muslims of Puttalam, the East, 1983, etc.

Background: The film does not seek to provide a historical overview of Sri Lanka’s recent past. Rather, personal stories about particular moments of violence have been pieced together through a journey that runs through the heart of Sri Lanka, on roads that link people and places, in order to convey a reality that is as general as it is specific.

How to Respond: The facilitator should be careful not to let such questions sidetrack the discussion. Pre-screening exercises that encourage viewers to look for connections and commonalities (see page 12) will help focus the viewers prior to watching the film. The first post-screening exercise (see page 13) also helps focus the group on commonalities rather than differences.
Should questions about omissions persist, the facilitator might ask the following:

What is it about your example that might be unique or that you feel is not reflected in the stories that are told in the film?

Listen carefully to the example. It may be important to validate the importance of the incident of violence raised as an example while simultaneously trying to guide the viewer and the group to the broader reality that violence is suffered by all communities and to the stories contained within the film.

For example, “Your right, the violence suffered by border villages is horrendous, as was the violence perpetrated against the Tamils in 1983, neither of which has been addressed in the film. Can you (or anyone in the group) draw any parallels between a story from the border villages and the stories in the film?”

2. The film is pro/anti Government and/or LTTE. The film has been labeled pro Government, anti Government, pro LTTE and anti LTTE.

Background: The film is anti violence and anti war. It has attempted to be as neutral as possible. Perceptions of bias arise in part from the different ways in which stories are told. For example, the stories about LTTE violence tend not to be explicit due to the prevailing climate of control and fear maintained by the LTTE, whereas stories about government violence tend to be more explicit, particularly in the South where there is more freedom of expression than in conflict areas.

How to Respond: The facilitator should be careful not to let claims of bias, or questions about which side was more or less favored, sidetrack the discussion. The facilitator may wish to probe why the viewer believes one party is more or less favored. The facilitator might also wish to respond with one or more of the following questions.

How does this label (or these labels) pro-LTTE, anti-LTTE,-pro-Government, or anti-Government- help you to understand the film?

Such labels tend to limit the openness of the viewer to truly see the film. Instead, the experience of viewers who seek to label and/or ascribe a political agenda to the film tends to be clouded by their need to find “proof” of such an agenda. Thus, they see what they are looking for and miss the rest. These labels are also part of the process of marginalization and dehumanization of people and groups that fuels division, conflict and violence.

How have labels been used by different groups-the government, the LTTE, the JVP- to promote and justify violence against particular individuals or groups?

For example, the LTTE uses the term “traitor” to marginalize individuals and the Government uses the term “terrorist” for the same purpose. These are subjective categories that are used to demonize and dehumanize individuals or groups. Once a person or a group is demonized it becomes easier to justify violence against them.
Before Screening the Film

*The art of forgetting* uses an unconventional documentary form. It does not tell viewers what to think and provides few “facts” or details of the events remembered by those in the film. As a tool to promote dialogue, *the art of forgetting* raises more questions than it answers. As such, a brief introduction to the film and a short discussion prior to the screening may help focus the discussion that will follow.

**Pre-screening Exercises**

When watching the film, some people focus on what is not there. Others look for biases in the film. These exercises are intended to help viewers watch for connections and commonalities.

**Exercise 1: Everybody Please Stand Up**

Instruct the participants as follows.

1. If you have been directly affected by war or political violence, please stand up.
2. If someone close to you has been directly affected by war or political violence, please stand up.
3. If you or someone you know have been indirectly affected by war or political violence, please stand up.

*By the end, everybody should be standing.*

Invite the group to take a moment to think about what this means for the group, for the country, for the work that they do - that everybody (or at least most people) has been affected in some way by war or political violence.

**Exercise 2: Watching for Connections**

Make copies of the appendix and instruct viewers to use the diagram to make notes and keep track of the stories so that they can discuss them.

Instruct the participants as follows.

While watching the film, look for the ways in which you connect to people and their stories. Pay attention to the moments in the film that impact you most and the stories that you identify with or that move you. Observe your emotional responses. These observations will be used as the beginning of the post screening discussion. Make copies of the appendix and instruct viewers to use the diagram to make notes and keep track of the stories so that they can discuss them.
After Screening the Film

It is important to avoid rushing the transition from the film to the dialogue. Time should be provided at the close of the film so that those who have an emotional reaction to the film do not feel the need to switch off their emotions. The emotional response (viewers may feel sad, shocked, touched, angry, disturbed, etc.) is an important one and should be acknowledged and received with compassion.

For many people, emotions are difficult to discuss. The facilitator may start by expressing how he or she feels. **What the facilitator says immediately after the film is essential for creating the right environment for dialogue.**

Post-Screening Exercises

**Exercise 1: Identifying Connections**

After the credits finish, invite the group to revisit the film in their minds, paying attention to the ways in which they connected to people and their stories; the moments in the film that impacted them most; and their emotional responses. In so doing, encourage participants to think about where those emotions come from and how these emotions may contribute to understanding and healing. Open the floor up to comments or reactions from the group.

This may lead viewers to tell their own stories. Sometimes, anecdotes and personal stories are difficult to tell and thus may lack apparent focus or coherence to listeners. The facilitator may wish to help a speaker keep the discussion focused on the film. It is ok to gently and respectfully encourage a speaker to summarize their story and focus their comments. A response may go something like this.

“May I interrupt you for a moment? It sounds like you had a pretty intense / horrible frightening experience and we do want to hear about it. Right now what I’m going to ask you to do is to think for a moment about how your experience specifically relates to the film. Can you continue your story helping us all understand those links? Because of our time constraints, I’m going to give you about two minutes to do this. Do you think you can focus on the essential elements and links in that time?”

**Exercise 2: Working with Emotions**

In a group setting, expressions of emotion may make some people uncomfortable and may silence others. However, emotions are essential to peace building. Healing, peace and reconciliation all have emotional components and, thus, the challenge is to create an environment in which emotions can be a part of the dialogue. It is important for the facilitator to structure the dialogue in a way that helps participants move from a purely emotional response to a response that acknowledges those emotions in context of a dialogue designed to encourage deeper engagement and understanding.
Examine specific interviews and discuss the ways in which emotions are reflected in the interviews. Also, think about the emotions involved in the work that you do - yours and others - and how you create space for emotions to be talked about or addressed.

Saratha (00:27:20)

In this story, Saratha tells how two government soldiers, both of whom had been shot in an ongoing battle, came to her home in search of water and shelter. She takes them in. In the morning, she finds that they have died. Saratha relates the story with empathy for these “two small army boys”.

Questions:

How does this story challenge conventional ways of understanding the conflict between the government and the LTTE?

The assumption often is that Tamils identify with the LTTE and Sinhalese identify with the government. As Saratha reveals, the reality is not that simple, particularly when we allow ourselves to see each other, first and foremost, as humans.

Nilmini (00:41:24)

Nilmini tells the story of her boyfriend’s killing during the Bheshenaya. The close up camera angle captures the subtle shifts in emotions reflected in her face. At times, Nilmini seems to be smiling as she depicts painful memories. At other times, she seems to be upset. Explore how emotion is conveyed in the story.

Questions:

Why does Nilmini smile sometimes as she recalls the tragedy?

For most people, expressing or showing emotion is not easy, particularly when the emotion is sorrow of a very personal nature. Smiles or laughter may be a result of discomfort or nervousness. They may be used intentionally or unintentionally to mask the emotions that are being felt.

In the work that you do, when and how do people express their emotions?

There are a variety of ways of expressing emotions, in both direct and indirect ways. Many people find it difficult to talk about their feelings, and so the emotions come out in different ways. Fear may be expressed as suspicion or scapegoating. Sadness may be expressed as guilt or through psychosomatic illnesses. Anger may be expressed through name-calling, stereotyping, or silence. Because emotions make some people uncomfortable, they may joke, laugh or smile to hide whatever it is they are feeling.

How have you addressed such emotions when they arise in your work?

It is not always easy to address other peoples’ emotions. Many people feel uncomfortable when another person shows feelings of sadness, grief or anger. Often a person will change the subject, make a joke, or use other avoiding techniques. This may make the person who is experiencing the painful emotions feel like they cannot talk about what they are feeling. It helps to let those who are suffering know that it is ok to talk about what they are feeling. For example, “I don’t want to pry, but I want you to know that it’s ok for you to talk about what you’re going through.” Or “Would you mind if I ask you how you feel about what happened?”

Once you open space for emotional conversations, you must be ready for other expressions of emotion such as crying. Remain empathetic. You do not need to say anything to make things “better”. Just sitting with a person who is in pain, listening and letting him or her know that you are there may be enough. If you don’t know how to respond, it’s perfectly appropriate to say so. For example, “I’m glad you feel you can cry. I’m sorry you are feeling so sad. Is there anything I can do that might help you feel better?”
Krishanthy Kumaraswamy’s Friends (00:47:37)

The final story in the film is told by a group of young girls. They are recalling a school friend, Krishanthy Kumaraswamy, who was abducted and killed by the Sri Lankan military. The atmosphere seems to be jovial throughout.

How does the way in which the girls tell their story and talk about Krishanthy differ from typical stories of suffering and loss portrayed in mainstream media?

Often survivors of violence, including families and friends of victims, are depicted in ways that emphasize their victimhood. They are shown solely as one-dimensional characters defined exclusively by their suffering. Krishanthy’s friends are recounting their memories of Krishanthy. Although there are moments when sadness and regret cloud their faces, they also share the happy memories.

Would you classify these girls as victims or survivors? Why?

The terms victim and survivor are two distinct categories. The individual or community as victim is defined exclusively in terms of the violation or violence committed against them. The victim is solely the consequence of what has happened. The term, survivor, however, acknowledges the harm while simultaneously acknowledging the person’s agency to move beyond it. These girls would definitely fall into the category of survivors.

Exercise 3: Ways of Knowing

Ways of seeing, understanding and knowing are informed by our individual and collective experiences, perspectives and beliefs. Identity categories, such as ethnicity, religion, gender, etc., further influence the ways in which we see and interpret the world around us. In fact, it is sometimes difficult to truly see or gain insight into an issue or problem because our vision is clouded by preconceived notions arising out of prior experience and stagnant notions of identity.

The film does not rely on traditional categories of understanding, such as Sinhala and Tamil and, thus, is intended to challenge dominant ways of seeing and understanding. Those that it does rely on, like North and South, are challenged in the narration text.

Some people say there are two stories in Sri Lanka… The story of the North and the story of the South.”

Questions:

What parts of your identity do you rely on for help in understanding what is happening in Sri Lanka?

For example, language, ethnicity, religion, gender, political affiliation, etc.
How do these parts of your identity inform your understanding and your ability to connect or empathize with others?

Some identities help us connect with others and others may impede our ability to connect with others.

Sometimes, certain shared identities help us connect with others. For example, as a mother, I may identify with another mother or I may be more empathetic to stories told by mothers about the loss of their children. Or, as a torture survivor, I may identify with another person who has suffered torture.

Due to the biases we each have, which are a consequence of living in a divided society, certain identities (like one’s ethnicity or one’s politics) may predetermine what we see and how we interpret events. They may make it more difficult for some to see linkages or may undermine one’s ability to empathize with others outside of one’s social group. For example, if I see myself primarily as a member of a group of victims, I may seek out information that conforms to this perception of myself. It may be difficult for me to identify with the suffering of another if I do not see it linked to my own suffering. I may only be interested in stories that validate my own suffering.

What would happen if you didn’t rely on these parts of your identity?

Working to acknowledge and overcome biases may be both a disruptive and a liberating experience. It can be disturbing because, suddenly, the world is a more complex place. There is no longer black and white, good and bad, Tamils and Sinhalese, Buddhists and Hindus, North and South, etc. We are forced to rethink everything and this can be a very difficult process. But to rethink and to seek to understand a situation from a position of empathy may also be a liberating experience. It opens an individual up to the possibility of peace.

Exercise 4: Remembering

In countries emerging from situations of internal armed conflict, war or repression, choices must be made about whether and/or how to confront past violence and injustice. In many cases the choice is made when the state fails to take any proactive measures to address the past. However, there is an increasing consensus emerging that there must be space within conflict transformation processes to expose and acknowledge the past in some way. For many of those who have been harmed by war and political violence, acknowledgement is an important part of healing and may be a necessary precondition for reconciliation.
There are many ways to address issues of past violence and repression. Alex Boraine, former Deputy Chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and founder of the International Centre for Transitional Justice, uses the term “intentional act of remembering” to describe the way in which memory and acknowledgement can be used to promote healing. Those affected by violence do not forget. The challenge is to find ways to promote a non-vindicative, healing memory; to remember the past in order to move beyond it. There are many ways in which this can be done; through official and unofficial mechanisms, at the national, regional or local levels; through rituals, the arts, memorialization, truth commissions, ceremonies, days of remembrance, oral history projects, and trials, to name a few.

Invite the participants to take a few moments to think about the memories of past political violence that their communities or individuals within those communities carry with them.

Questions:

How has your community dealt with violence and loss associated with the war or the reign of terror?

Viewers may need some help or prompting through follow-up questions, such as: Do people talk about what happened? Have there been any public acknowledgements? Have support groups of survivors been formed formally or informally?

Are there particular events or rituals that are used within your community to deal with memories or the past? How might these be used to promote peace or reconciliation?

For example, memorials, days of remembrance, naming of lanes or streets, or culturally specific rituals. The road painting movement, which was started as a response to a specific event of violence - the assassination of Neelan Tiruchelvam - has been used to promote healing and send a message of peace. Twice a year on Neelan’s birthday and death anniversary - the road is repainted. Road painting has been used throughout Colombo to mark and transform sites of violence. The message - “secure the sanctity of life” - is always the same, as are symbols of peace.

It is important to remember that rituals or symbols of memory or the past are not always compatible with peaceful objectives. In some cases, memory is used to fuel conflict. Be aware and listen carefully to the responses and encourage the group to think about the many ways expressions of memory might be experienced and used. Such expressions may mean different things to different people and may have both positive and negative associations. Some of the bus stands in the south that have been erected to remember military and police personnel killed in the war may be examples of expressions of memory, about which some may have mixed or negative feelings. In particular, bus stands that use symbols of militarism and the state may evoke both reactions.
How has memory been used to fuel conflict between political parties or groups?

Memorials and rituals that honor “heroes” are used by all parties to promote their nationalist agendas. The LTTE, with its cult of martyrdom, uses memory and ritual to promote its struggle and appeal to the emotions of Tamils in general, and young Tamils in particular. The annual hero’s day ceremonies are examples of this, as are the martyr cemeteries maintained by the LTTE. The government has erected large memorials for government forces killed in the war at the Saliyapura Camp outside Anuradhapura and in Kandy. Like the LTTE, the military has ceremonies recognizing “heroes” and the mothers or family members of fallen “heroes”. Celebrations of martyrdom fuel nationalist agendas and help maintain a steady supply of new recruits.

What challenges are posed to peace building by the use or manipulation of the past for partisan political purposes and how can those challenges be overcome?

Because certain episodes of violence become linked to one particular group as perpetrator, it becomes difficult to raise issues of past political violence in a neutral way. Memory is co-opted for partisan political gains and, thus, becomes mired in the politics of name-calling and finger-pointing. Serious independent discussions become difficult for fear of being identified with one particular group or of fueling another group’s political project.

In the south, memories of the Reign of Terror have been evoked during political campaigns. Hence, that period has been associated overwhelmingly with partisan politics. For example, the People’s Alliance produced a series of posters “Don’t ever forget 17 years of rule by the UNP.” These posters graphically depicted images of terror. This is an example of vindictive memory; memory used for petty partisan gains.

Those working for peace can counter such campaigns and work against the cooptation of memory by providing alternatives; by consistently working with survivors to find ways of remembering through rituals.

To whom is the “you” referring in the film’s title sequence “but you did everything you could to be ill informed?”

You, the viewer, as part of a broader Sri Lankan population…. political leaders… the world.

What does the art of forgetting mean?

The term, the art of forgetting, is used ironically. This is a film about memory. Some people believe the past is better left in the past and that it should not be discussed. The question of remembering versus forgetting and the implications of both is an interesting topic for discussion.
Exercise 5: Representing Violence

Representations of violence in the local media have been characterized overwhelmingly by insensitivity, exploitation, and sensationalism. Photographs explicitly depicting the aftermath of violence are commonly found on the front page. Images or graphic descriptions of violence are typical. Violent images are used on extremist websites that seek to incite division and hatred. Further, media representations of people affected by violence often focus on their victimization and victimhood.

Questions:

Can you think of examples of both sensitive and insensitive portrayals of violence in the media?

Graphic images of the dead or of body parts are the most common and persistent examples of insensitive portrayals of violence. Sensitive portrayals focus more on survivors than on victims. They may show survivors in positive roles - such as working to rebuild their lives - and do not exploit their suffering. Some images, themselves, may be relatively neutral. However, they may be used in such a way as to render them sensitive or insensitive.

How do you think such portrayals help or hinder empathy, healing and/or reconciliation?

When we are exposed to insensitive images of violence that dehumanize people or groups, we are less likely to be able to identify with those people. Also, when we are exposed to numerous images of graphic violence, we become desensitized to violence generally. Such images slowly numb us to the reality and horror of the violence and its consequences.

How might you be able to influence media in your community or as a part of your work? How can media be more effectively used to promote healing and peace?

There are numerous ways to work with media. Invite media to your organizations’ events. Send educational press releases. Respond to offensive portrayals of violence with letters or phone calls. Get to know your local stringer, so that you have direct access to him or her when news happens. Suggest stories to him or her. These are just a few examples. Brainstorm with the group and see what kind of interesting ideas are suggested.

Are the people in the film victims or survivors?

Survivors. The stories have been chosen, in part, because they convey the complexity of the survivor story. Breaking the silence surrounding political violence and sharing one’s story is a political act. The willingness of people to share their stories and speak on camera indicates that they have agency.
What role can or should survivors play in conflict transformation and how might you or your group help facilitate such a process?

There is no easy answer to this question. There is likely to be differing opinions. Like any other group of people, those affected by conflict have divergent opinions about what should be done. For example, those affected by political violence are not necessarily pro-peace. Nonetheless, there are particular needs that arise for the affected and, thus, processes of conflict transformation must seek to address these needs. In order to understand the complexity of these needs, those affected by political violence and war should play a role in planning and implementation processes. Discuss what some of these needs may be and how to integrate affected populations into planning and/or implementation processes.

**Exercise 6: Women and Armed Conflict**

One of the issues raised in the final chapter, legacies of absence, is the issue of gender. Although it is not explicitly addressed, the stories suggest that there are different ways in which women and men are impacted by war and political violence.

“Later I got a message saying my son was killed and burnt. Because I was a woman the villagers wouldn’t let me go to see his body…” - Kusuma

“I was attacked even though I was a woman.” - Nilmuni

War and political violence are gendered, which means that the experiences of men and women during war and episodes of political violence are different and, in part, determined by their gender. Although individual experiences vary, there are certain experiences of war and political violence that are shared by women, not only in Sri Lanka, but also the world over. In some cases, this may mean that women are subjected to less physical violence. For example, women in the military may not be assigned to combat positions. In other cases it may mean that the kinds of physical violence they experience are distinct, such as sexual violence.
Women experience political violence and war in their many different roles; as political actors, combatants, mothers, wives and daughters. They may be targeted because of their political work or because of their relationships with male political actors, such as their husbands. There are particular forms of violence that are gendered i.e. gender based violence such as rape and sexual harassment. Sexual violence is used disproportionately against women, further impacting the distinct nature of women’s experience in war and armed conflict.

**Questions**

**Why do you think there are so many women in the film?**

*There may be many reasons for this.*

*In many families and communities, it is the women who are the storytellers. They carry the history of the family with them and pass on that history to others.*

*Generally, women are more present in the home. It may be that more women were met by virtue of the approach of the filmmakers, who approached and met people randomly on their travels.*

*Sri Lanka’s armed conflicts have claimed the lives of more men than women. Thus, in some areas (particularly the North and East), the ratio of men to women is skewed. There are less men than women because so many have been lost to the war.*

**What does this suggest about how men and women have been differently affected by political violence and war?**

*As discussed above, women and men experience war differently. More men serve as decision-makers and combatants. More women are left behind to tend to the family and the home. These different roles impact the way men and women experience war and political violence.*

**How might women’s unique experiences impact on conflict transformation or peace processes?**

*Women’s distinct experiences in war and periods of political violence impact their needs during conflict transformation and peace. The harms and injustices suffered by women must be addressed specifically and appropriately. Thus, conflict transformation processes or peace processes must specifically consider women’s needs and must plan ways to address these needs. Women should play an integral role in developing such processes.*
October 31 1990  Jaffna’s Muslim community was given two hours to leave Jaffna by the LTTE, who was in control of Jaffna at the time.

October 31 1995  With a government take-over imminent, Jaffna’s entire population was forced to leave by the LTTE, who was in control of Jaffna at the time.

September 7 1996  18-year-old Krishanthy Kumaraswamy disappeared at Chemmani Checkpoint in Jaffna. Her mother, brother and a neighbor, who went in search of Krishanthy, also disappeared. The disappearances of the family sparked national and international outrage and led to the formation of the Krishanthy Coalition (later the Vigil Coalition), a Colombo-based civil society initiative that held weekly protests calling for accountability for the perpetrators of the crimes against Krishanthy and her family, as well as other violations of women’s human rights. The Kumaratunga Government initiated an investigation that led to prosecutions of military and police personnel for abduction, rape and murder and those found guilty by the court were sentenced to death. The case was heralded as a victory for human rights protection in Sri Lanka despite serious flaws in the administration of justice.

May 13 1997  The Government launched Operation Jayasikuru (Victory Assured) to capture the A9 road and open a land route to the government-controlled Jaffna peninsula. The longest and most costly military offensive in Sri Lanka’s history, Operation Jayasikuru ended in failure for the Government after the LTTE retook the three most significant camps in the Wanni: Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Elephant Pass.
July 29 1999  Neelan Tiruchelvam - constitutional scholar, lawyer, member of parliament, moderate Tamil politician - was assassinated by a suicide bomber on his way to office.

August 29 1999  The Road Painting Movement was started when four young women who worked with Neelan Tiruchelvam painted the road where Neelan was killed with images of peace and the message, “secure the sanctity of life.” The group grew to include activists, artists, students and other peace-loving people and went on to paint about 20 sites of violence in and around Colombo.

February 20 2002  A Ceasefire Agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE was signed, paving the way for peace talks between the two parties. Talks continued through six rounds until, on April 20 2003, the LTTE suspended participation in the talks.

April 8 2002  The two parties opened the A9 road to civilian traffic for the first time in 12 years, allowing civilians to travel between the north and the south with relative ease.

June 2006  The Ceasefire Agreement continues to hold in name only, with systematic political killings, aerial bombing, and increasing violence leading to a return to war.
Additional Reading

Non-Fiction


Fiction


## Appendix

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<th>Name</th>
<th>What was the story about? (List a few key words to help you remember.)</th>
<th>Which political group/s was implicated?</th>
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