

STORIES OF THE FLOOD

THE VENEZUELAN FLOOD OF DECEMBER 1999

STORIES OF THE FLOOD: THE PROJECT -----	DANIEL S. BENVENISTE	3
COORDINATION OF THE PROJECT-----	MARTÍN VILLALOBOS	8
RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION -----	MÓNICA FRACA, MARJORIE GUTIÉRREZ, AND SABRINA RAMÍREZ	12
THE STORIES OF ERNESTO -----	ADRIANA S. PRENGLER	17
STORIES OF THE FLOOD-----	THE CHILDREN OF VARGAS	38
CRISIS INTERVENTION AFTER MAJOR DISASTERS -----	DANIEL S. BENVENISTE	70

**Compiled by Daniel S. Benveniste in collaboration with Prof. Martín Villalobos,
Adriana S. Prengler, Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutiérrez, Sabrina Ramírez and**

THE CHILDREN OF VARGAS

PDF Version December 2019

DEDICATION

This little booklet is dedicated to the victims of the Venezuelan flood of December 1999, the survivors, and all the friends within Venezuela and outside of Venezuela who came to help us in our time of need.

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STORIES OF THE FLOOD:

THE PROJECT

DANIEL S. BENVENISTE, PHD

In December of 1999, after months of intense rain, Venezuela suffered an enormous flood that killed between 15,000 and 50,000 people and left hundreds of thousands of people traumatized and homeless. The people of Venezuela came out to help in any way they could collecting money for the survivors, carrying food and water to be shipped out to the distribution centers and working in the shelters. Psychologists around the country organized themselves and entered the disaster sites and shelters to provide crisis counseling to the thousands of people who had been traumatized by the disaster. Immediately after the flood I wrote an article on *Crisis Intervention after Major Disasters* and my colleague, Adriana Prengler, translated it into Spanish. We sent it out on the Internet and it informed crisis treatment in shelters all across the country. It was subsequently used in other disaster situations in North and South America and beyond. It is included here at the end of this document.

THE PROJECT

A year and a half after the flood, the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), the Red Cross and a school in the State of Vargas joined forces on an innovative project. Three psychology students from UCV evaluated 28 children, provided a brief psychotherapy intervention (ten sessions each) for 14 of the children and then re-evaluated all the children again after the treatment sessions. Every child was evaluated with several psychological tools for determining the presence of symptoms of psychological trauma. As a part of the evaluation, each child was asked to draw a picture and tell a story of his/her experiences of the flood. In the brief treatment, many of the children continued to draw pictures of the flood and recount their traumatic experiences in one session after the next.

I formulated the project and provided training and supervision for the psychology students. The project was organized and directed by Professor Martin Villalobos of UCV. Adriana Prengler, psychoanalyst, provided additional clinical supervision. The three students, who are now licensed psychologists, were Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutiérrez and Sabrina Ramírez. The Red Cross provided critical assistance in locating the school for our work. And Prof. Juan Bautista Salas Valentín, the director of the school, Escuela "Miguel Segundo Sánchez" in the Parroquia Maiquetía, was instrumental in making the school available to us and enlisting the co-operation of the teachers, the students and their parents. The following is a collection of some of the pictures that were drawn and some of the stories that were told and subsequently translated into English. (The names have been changed to protect confidentiality.)

PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS

A psychological crisis comes about when a traumatic event overloads a person's capacity to cope in his or her usual fashion. An event that precipitates a psychological crisis for one person is not necessarily going to precipitate a crisis for another person. Nonetheless, some events commonly precipitate psychological crisis reactions. These include physical assaults, torture, rape, automobile accidents, intense personal losses, and natural catastrophes such as earthquake, fire and flood. Events like these will often result in a psychiatric disorder that we call an ACUTE STRESS DISORDER. The Acute Stress Disorder is characterized by feelings of intense fear, helplessness and horror. There may also be an emotional numbing, a lack of emotional responsiveness, a feeling of detachment, reduced awareness of surroundings, a sense of unreality or amnesia. People suffering an Acute Stress Disorder may feel anxious, excitable, agitated, distressed, despairing, irritable, or hopeless.

When dealt with quickly, the symptoms of Acute Stress Disorder will typically diminish or disappear entirely within 30 days. In some cases, particularly when untreated, Acute Stress Disorder may persist. If its duration is from one to three months we call it an ACUTE POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER. When the symptoms last more than three months, we call it a CHRONIC POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER. (The above diagnostic information is derived from the DSM-V) It is not uncommon for untreated Posttraumatic Stress Disorder symptoms to persist for many years and become serious constraints on a person's life. The acute and posttraumatic stress

disorders are described in more detail in the chapter at the end on Crisis Intervention after Major Disasters.

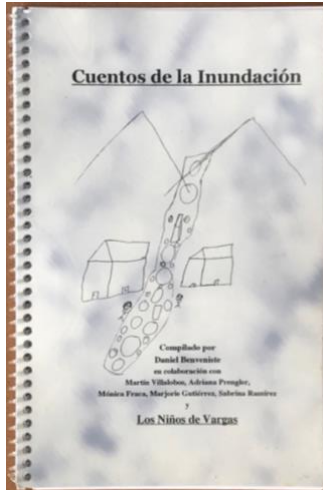
TREATMENT OF STRESS DISORDERS

Counselors working with Acute and Posttraumatic Stress Disordered patients may assist them in the management of the post-traumatic event tasks and by providing a safe place to talk about the experience, the person's symptoms, or whatever else is foremost on the patient's mind. Though it is sometimes painful to talk about the traumatic experience, people often report a sense of relief and a reduction of symptoms after they have been able to talk about it. While adults may talk with a therapist, a child suffering an acute stress reaction is likely to talk about it in the child's non-verbal language of play and drawing, in the metaphors of the stories they tell from their imagination as well as in accounts of their actual experiences.

When working with children, it is often useful to invite them to draw a picture and tell their story while the counselor takes dictation and invites the child to elaborate the story. The child can draw pictures of his or her home before and after the disaster, pictures of the people he or she lost, pictures of how he or she used to feel and pictures of what the feelings are now. The stories they dictate can be read back to them and they can add additional stories and pictures over time. These pictures and stories can all be stapled together into a "book," which may, for the rest of their lives, be the only thing remaining of all that they lost.

THE BOOKLET

This English translation of the little booklet, which was privately printed and originally in Spanish, includes all the children's stories, the article by Martin Villalobos on the coordination of the project, and the article by Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutiérrez, and Sabrina Ramírez on the results of their research. In the next chapter, by psychoanalyst Adriana Prengler, FIPA, we have the stories and drawings of a ten-year-old boy, Ernesto, who came to Ms. Prengler only two weeks after having been traumatized by the flood. The case demonstrates how in only three sessions the boy was able to reestablish his psychological equilibrium through the psychotherapeutic process.



The next chapter contains the *Stories of the Flood* as told by the children of Vargas. The final chapter, not included here was titled My Own Stories and was a section in the Spanish edition where there were provided several blank pages for the reader to draw pictures and write his/her own stories of what he/she did and experienced during the flood. Over a thousand copies of the Spanish version of the book were printed privately and distributed to students, conference attendees, colleagues, people on the street and other interested people. The project was described in three national newspapers in Venezuela – El Universal, Tal Cual, and The Daily Journal (the Venezuelan English language newspaper). All of these write-ups included rich descriptions of the project including reproduction of some of the children’s drawings and stories.

The final chapter here, not included in the original Spanish booklet, is my article on *Crisis Intervention after Major Disasters*.

COVER STORY

TRAUMATIC STRESS REACTIONS
and the story of Ernesto in the Venezuelan Flood of 1999

By Dawn Bennett, Ph.D. and
Alicia Ferrer-Casas
Depto. U. Wisconsin

STRESS DISORDERS

A traumatic experience is one that overwhelms a person's capacity to cope (1) or to feel safe. Such experiences cause widely predicted responses in the victim that persist. There are three that have been a major focus of research in the area of trauma: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder (ASD), and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD). These three disorders are characterized by a variety of symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors. PTSD is characterized by a variety of symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors. ASD is characterized by a variety of symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors. CPTSD is characterized by a variety of symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors.

of emotional responsiveness, a feeling of detachment, reduced awareness of surroundings, and a sense of unreality or estrangement. People suffering from Acute Stress Disorder may feel anxious, irritable, confused, disoriented, depressed, hostile, or apathetic. They may experience difficulty in concentrating, sleeping, or appetite. They may experience difficulty in remembering important events, or they may experience difficulty in remembering important events. They may experience difficulty in remembering important events, or they may experience difficulty in remembering important events.

When disaster strikes, the symptoms of Acute Stress Disorder will typically diminish or disappear entirely within 48 hours. In some cases, however, they may persist for several weeks or even longer. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can develop after a person has experienced a traumatic event. PTSD is characterized by a variety of symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors. PTSD is characterized by a variety of symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors. PTSD is characterized by a variety of symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors.

TREATMENT OF STRESS DISORDERS

Though it is sometimes initially painful to talk about the traumatic event, people often benefit from a sense of relief and a reduction of symptoms after they have been able to talk about their experience of the trauma. They can see the traumatic event clearly when talking to a professional. While talking with a therapist, a child's feelings may become more organized and they may be able to look at the event with a perspective. While talking with a therapist, a child's feelings may become more organized and they may be able to look at the event with a perspective. While talking with a therapist, a child's feelings may become more organized and they may be able to look at the event with a perspective.

Niños que pintan la tragedia

"Cuentos de la inundación" es una compilación de dibujos e historias resultado del trabajo de un grupo de psicólogos con niños afectados por las inundaciones de Vargas

Aliana González

"Vi a mis perros ahogarse... nadaban, pero ya estaban demasiado cansados... yo tenía mucho miedo de que el agua me llevara. Yo no sabía si mi papá estaba vivo porque no podía verlo. Me dijeron que yo me fuera corriendo para que me salve. Mi mamá me gritaba ¡¡Corre!! Yo corría y a cada rato me daba la vuelta para despedirme de ella. La veía a lo lejos, me volteaba y le decía te quiero, y la saludaba con la mano. Pensé que no los iba a ver nunca más. A mi mamá la veía, pero pensé que mi papá había muerto. Corrí hasta llegar a un techo más seguro. Tenía frío, estaba todo mojado y lleno de todo, no había comido por dos días, tenía mucha sed".

Este es parte del relato de Ernesto, un niño de 10 años que logró sobrevivir con sus padres a la tragedia de Vargas, en diciembre de 1999. Su casa quedó enterrada bajo el fango. Mientras pasaba la inundación vio cómo el río se llevó a la señora que lo cuidaba y sus dos hijos. Desde ese día tenía problemas para respirar y se mostraba indiferente, sin poder expresar dolor por las pérdidas sufridas. Adriana Prengler, psicóloga clínica y psicoanalista, lo atendió en consulta dos semanas después de la inundación. Después de tres sesiones con terapia del arte, comenzó a mejorar.

"Cuentos de la inundación" es el título del libro que recoge el trabajo que realizó un grupo de psicólogos con niños víctimas del desastre de Vargas. La recopilación, además de las dramáticas historias y dibujos, es una mirada distinta a los sucesos, que ocurrieron hace hoy tres años. Demuestra también cómo el dibujo puede ser un instrumento terapéutico para ayudar a niños con traumas psicológicos.

Terapia con arte

Un año después del desastre, la escuela de Psicología de la UCV, la Cruz Roja y la unidad escolar nacional "Manuel Segundo Sánchez" iniciaron un proyecto para ayudar a algunos niños que continuaban traumatizados por sus experiencias de la inundación. Tres estudiantes de la escuela de Psicología recibieron entrenamiento básico en psicoterapia infantil y evaluaron a 28 niños para administrar un breve tratamiento a 14 de ellos. Cada niño fue invitado a dibujar la inundación y a contar un cuento sobre su dibujo.

Martín Villalobos coordinó el proyecto y fue el tutor de Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutiérrez y Sabrina Ramírez, las estudiantes que realizaron el trabajo clínico. Adriana Prengler supervisó a las estudiantes y aportó los dibujos y cuentos de uno de sus pacientes. El profesor Daniel Benveniste fue el promotor de la idea y junto entró a las estudiantes en terapia del arte.

Como resultado la mayoría de los niños mejoró los síntomas de estrés que tenían antes de comenzar la terapia. Las niñas fueron más receptivas que los niños, y mostraron mejoría en mayor grado. "Mi perro que estaba en la casa, cuidaba de la casa, se lo llevó el río. Era un perro guardián y no aguantó el agua que venía muy fuerte. Cuando lo vi estaba vivo. Vino un tractor y con la pala, lo agarró y se lo clavó y lo terminó de matar, pero de todas maneras se iba a morir porque no tenía respiración. Cada vez que veo un perro en la calle recuerdo al mío. El se llamaba Beethoven. Nos pusimos a llorar porque el perro tenía muchos años con nosotros y lo enterramos como si fuera una persona. Lo enterramos en la playa con su cruz y todo, pero no lo velamos. Cuando veo la TV había uno igualito pero no era el mío y se quemó la TV y no pude saber dónde estaba mi perro", escribió Bernard, de 10 años.



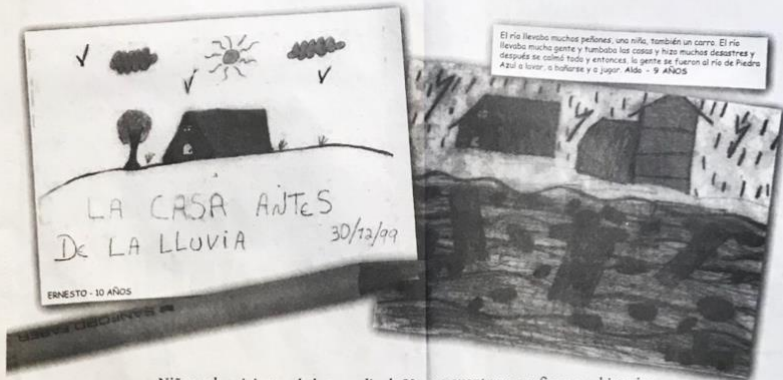
Dos de los dibujos con los que Ernesto pudo contar su historia

Cortesía/Daniel Benveniste

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CALIDAD DE VIDA

DOMINGO 17 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2002 4-5



Niños sobrevivientes de la tragedia de Vargas cuentan y grafican sus historias

Cuentos de la inundación

Una tesis de grado de la escuela de Psicología de la UCV revela el trauma que dejaron los derrumbes de 1999

NELIDA FERNÁNDEZ ALONSO

Hablar de tragedia es trasladar los recuerdos a Vargas, a la lluvia, al derrumbe y a la inundación de diciembre de 1999. También es traer a la memoria las pérdidas de familiares y amigos, sin contar las otras cosas que son parte de la vida y que fueron arrasadas por ríos desbordados. Días y semanas quedaron sin tratar y tres años de la vida se han perdido a las que les cuesta hablar.

Catorce niños de la Unidad Escolar Nacional Manuel Segundo Sánchez, entre 6 y 12 años, tuvieron la oportunidad

de contar y pintar la tragedia de acuerdo con sus experiencias particulares. Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutiérrez y Sabrina Ramírez, quienes para el momento del derrumbe eran estudiantes de la escuela de Psicología de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, asistieron a estos chicos con "terapia del arte" y los resultados de ese análisis formaron parte de las conclusiones de la tesis de grado tutorada por el psicólogo Martín Villalobos en la que obtuvieron una excelente calificación con mención Publicación.

"Llegó a Venezuela en el año 1989 y observó todo lo que sucedió en Vargas. Tuvo la oportunidad de conocer el caso de Ernesto, un niño que vivió la tragedia y estaba evidentemente afectado. Entonces tuvo una idea de proyecto para atender a los pequeños que estaban allí y también debían estar traumatizados", cuenta Daniel Benveniste, PhD en Psicología Clínica de Estados Unidos que desde entonces vive en Caracas.

La idea de Benveniste se basó en lograr que los niños pintaran y contaran su vivencia en la tragedia, material que además de servir como evidencia en el tratamiento psicológico de ellos, podría ayudar a otras personas que sobrevivieron al desastre a sobrellevar una carga emocional una vez que los cuentos y los dibujos se hicieron públicos.

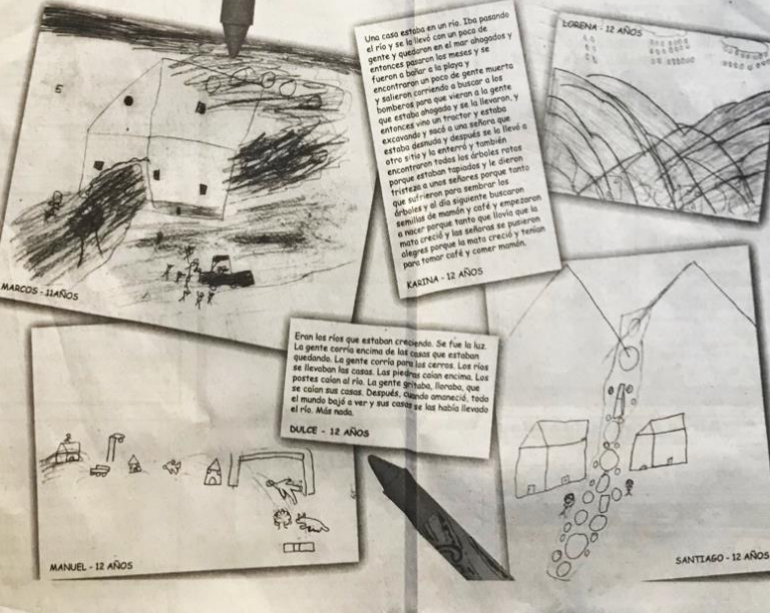
Un primer caso

No quedamos viendo como todo se caía, la montaña se vino abajo, los carros volaban, los troncos de los árboles caían por el agua, pedras del tamaño de las casas se caían. Yo creí que me voy a ahogar y a ahogar, que vamos nos vamos a morir. Yo estaba en un techo más seguro, mi papá más cerca de la montaña y mi mamá en el mundo. Me iba venía hacia nosotros y pensé que nos iba a llevar, pero de repente, no sé cómo, un árbol muy grande que había caído frente a nosotros, con raíces atenuadas, desvió todo para los costados y dividí el río en dos. Noviembre 2002

El río llevaba muchos pedrones, una niña, también un carro. El río llevaba mucho gente y hundió las casas y hizo muchos desastres y después se calmó todo y entonces la gente se fue con el río de Pezera Así a lavar, a bañarse y a jugar. Año - 9 AÑOS

El trabajo de Prengler, Benveniste, Villalobos y de las aborregadas Fraca, Gutiérrez y Ramírez, está plasmado en un libro llamado "Cuentos de la inundación". Es una preciosa obra que destaca sencillos y efectivos. Fue editada por el propio Benveniste y contiene la recopilación de historias con sus respectivos dibujos.

Según Benveniste, este resultado "que ofrece un tema para otra investigación" puede darse a que los varones también a reparar sus sentimientos por casos de una crisis machista. Esto significa que la asistencia psicológica solo los ayudó a afrontar esos sentimientos ocultos y sin la asistencia al trauma.



STORIES OF THE FLOOD:

COORDINATION OF THE PROJECT

PROF. MARTIN VILLALOBOS

The rains that fell on the State of Vargas in December 1999, generated the greatest disaster our country has suffered in recent decades. The magnitude of the damage was measured in the loss of life, the number of victims, the destruction of homes, the collapse of infrastructure and services, economic losses, and the environmental transformation that occurred. This dramatic situation, however, also served to demonstrate the praiseworthy capacity of civil society to almost spontaneously, organize and provide the help required to the victims during these difficult times. In addition to highlighting the cooperation and solidarity of our society, we were able to verify it through the observations of international relief agencies and providers of humanitarian aid. It should be noted that government entities, the business sector, non-governmental organizations and international organizations also played extremely important roles in the quality of response given to people affected by the disaster.

In particular, the Central University of Venezuela, with its professors and students of the different departments, performed in outstanding ways. Their efforts included participating in rescue actions, providing medical care, organizing shelters, and supplying medicines and food. The Network of Psychological Support (RAP – Red de Apoyo Psicologico), was the avenue by which professors and students of the School of Psychology at UCV and the Catholic University "Andrés Bello" (UCAB), as well as unaffiliated private psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, organized immediately and spontaneously to provide assistance to the masses during the first weeks of the tragedy. Undoubtedly, this organization of mental health professionals, their cooperation with government offices and international organizations, made it one of the most successful initiatives launched in the wake of the disaster.

After the first four weeks, however, the activities of the RAP formally came to an end. The beginning of the academic and professional activities of the members, plus the transfer of the victims to the interior of the country, made it impossible to continue with the activity of the RAP, as it had been spontaneously structured. Nonetheless, various members of the network continued to develop projects for the survivors of the flood and particularly with the population that had remained living in Vargas.

When at the beginning of August 2000, Dr. Benveniste presented me with his proposal to collect stories and drawings of surviving children of Vargas, and publish them in the national press as a way to contribute to the collective working through of the disaster, I was immediately enthusiastic.

I assumed then that the material needs of the survivors, despite the efforts made by the national government, non-governmental organizations and international aid agencies, were so broad and profound that any attempt at intervention or psychological assistance was going to have to face serious limitations arising from the distance between their needs and expectations, and the psychological nature and limited resources of our interventions. That said, the motivation and affection embodied in the initiative was so great that it was impossible to refuse, and it was natural to support this adventure proposed by Dr. Benveniste.

Having had the opportunity to learn about the experience of Adriana Prengler, FIPA, who worked closely with Dr. Benveniste in crisis intervention following the tragedy of Vargas, I was deeply impressed by the account of her treatment of Ernesto, a child survivor of the flood. Seeing Ernesto's drawings and reading his stories generated a kind of mosaic of feelings. On the one hand, the verification of his personal tragedy; but at the same time, his ability to adapt and elaborate or work through his traumatic experience. But what about the thousands of other children in Vargas? Would they have the same capacity and strengths as Ernesto? From these thoughts there emerged a demand to answer those questions that was not only academic but ethical.

My open attitude to this project was also influenced by my contact with two North American professionals who had recently visited UCV. Dr. Gilbert Reyes, a professor at the Disaster Mental Health Institute, of South Dakota University (USA) and Jennifer Peavy of the Venezuelan Delegation of the American Red Cross. These colleagues joined with us in a wide and enriching

exchange of ideas, the provision of useful information, educational kits for the children and for emphasizing the importance of working with schools.

The development of the Stories of the Flood Project meant being able to contact the children of Vargas, for which it was also necessary to access the schools. I have to say, it was not easy. The contacts we made with other units of the UCV that performed some type of work in Vargas did not give the expected results, nor did the contacts with public organizations. At the beginning of October 2000, after several weeks had elapsed, and we had all but given up on the development of the project, three undergraduate students, Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutiérrez and Sabrina Ramírez, in the ninth semester of their work in the School of Psychology at the Central University of Venezuela, expressed their interest in carrying out their thesis work with surviving children of Vargas State. Enthusiastically they each told me about their varied experiences related to the flood. Together with Dr. Benveniste we began to work on the preparation of the draft proposal. We felt that the stories and drawings of the flood produced by these children could be part of the research material to be used for the detection of symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress. And at the same time, we planned to perform a psychotherapeutic intervention focused on the treatment of the symptoms detected, using the art psychotherapy modality. Dr. Benveniste took on the art therapy training of students and provided the clinical supervision of cases. In this way, a rather ambitious, but equally necessary, research project was put together.

Once again it was difficult to directly access the Vargas schools and it was then that psychologists Claudia Carrillo and Delys Marcano of the Venezuelan Delegation of the American Red Cross proposed that we work with the "Miguel Segundo Sánchez" School of the Parish Maiquetía, with which they maintained institutional contact. In this way, an important difficulty was overcome and the project began. It is necessary to emphasize that from the first contact both Prof. Juan Bautista Salas Valentín, Director of the Educational Unit and the teachers of the afternoon shift showed us a wide acceptance of the project. We proposed to work together and asked them to help us determine which children were presenting behaviors that could be associated with the traumatic experience of the flood of December 1999. To facilitate this, we organized a workshop on posttraumatic stress in children in February 2001, which was developed with a massive and enthusiastic participation of the teachers. Participants completing the workshop were granted certificates of

participation by the Specialization in Clinical Psychology of the Central University of Venezuela.

It is necessary to highlight the commendable work developed by the thesis students: Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutierrez and Sabrina Ramírez. The scientific quality of the work done, the overflowing enthusiasm that allowed them to overcome the difficulties of research, the loving relationship established with children and the professional relationship formed with teachers, deserve without a doubt a public recognition. All this is further evidence of the enormous potential of our university youth to successfully face great challenges. It has been a long road, but the receptivity and affection received from the children of the "Miguel Segundo Sánchez" School has compensated for all the difficulties encountered and the effort made. This great work is of them, and for them. We hope with the development of this project, to have provided a little help so that the dramatic experience of the children of Vargas can be more widely known and understood and that all of us can continue to elaborate the painful experiences of the Venezuelan flood of December 1999.



STORIES OF THE FLOOD:

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

MÓNICA FRACA, MARJORIE GUTIÉRREZ Y SABRINA RAMÍREZ

In September 2000 we were invited to carry out a research project, which would both fulfill the requirement for our degree Bachelor's degrees in psychology and also afford us the opportunity of working with the children of Vargas. All three of us had previously worked in shelters with the victims of the Vargas floods in December 1999. This experience left each of us with many concerns about the survivors and also with desires to continue our work in this field. We realized that fifteen months after the tragedy occurred in Vargas, the work of the government agencies was focused on the recovery of the infrastructure and we did not know of other entities that had or were providing emotional support. Because of this we were interested to find out what happened to the children. How did the tragedy affect them? And more than that, how could we help them? This is where our idea of providing psychological care through Art Psychotherapy to children victims of the Vargas tragedy was born. For this, we always have the help of professors Martín Villalobos and Daniel Benveniste, who at all times provided us with guidance and encouragement to carry out this project.

We established contact with a school in Vargas called the Manuel Segundo Sánchez National Educational Unit. Psychological evaluations were carried out on all children in the 4th, 5th and 6th grade of the afternoon shift. Twenty-seven children out of 130 had manifestations of post-traumatic stress. Authorizations from the parents or representatives of these selected children were requested and an interview with the teachers was also carried out to know a bit more about the children's academic functioning and behavior in the classroom. A questionnaire was sent home requesting that parents provide information regarding their child's behavior before and after the flood, details of family composition, and consequences of the tragedy for the family.

After obtaining the permits and having received an art psychotherapy training we set out to perform the intervention. For this, the children were divided into two groups, some received the art psychotherapy intervention and some did not. Because

there was not enough staff to treat all the children the others became a naturally occurring control group.

At the end of February 2001 the intervention began. Each child met with one of the research-therapists (always the same) twice a week in a private environment (school library), for thirty minutes, during which the child was invited to draw freely and tell a story about the drawing. The idea was that the child would express thoughts, feelings and conflicts, and at the same time have the opportunity to have a therapeutic experience that might reduce the consequences that the exposure to the tragedy of Vargas brought to his or her life.



MÓNICA FRACA

The results revealed sex differences. The girls who received the intervention improved significantly in that symptoms of anxiety, depression, aggressiveness and post-traumatic stress all decreased. In terms of their school performance, there was observed greater interaction in class, as well as fluency in their interpersonal relationships and greater openness in their relationships to their teachers.

An example of this is the case of Sylvia, a 12-year-old girl who was very shy and withdrawn in the classroom. She had suffered material losses to her home. Despite having a good academic performance, her mother reported that after the disaster she had many fears and difficulty sleeping. Throughout the intervention it could be seen how little by little she managed to express with increasing confidence her main fears and concerns. By the end of the intervention, Sylvia was leaving behind her fears. Her interaction in the classroom became more participatory and her teacher reported that she became much more communicative and had made many new friends. Her personal hygiene improved, and her mood changed from being indifferent to cheerful

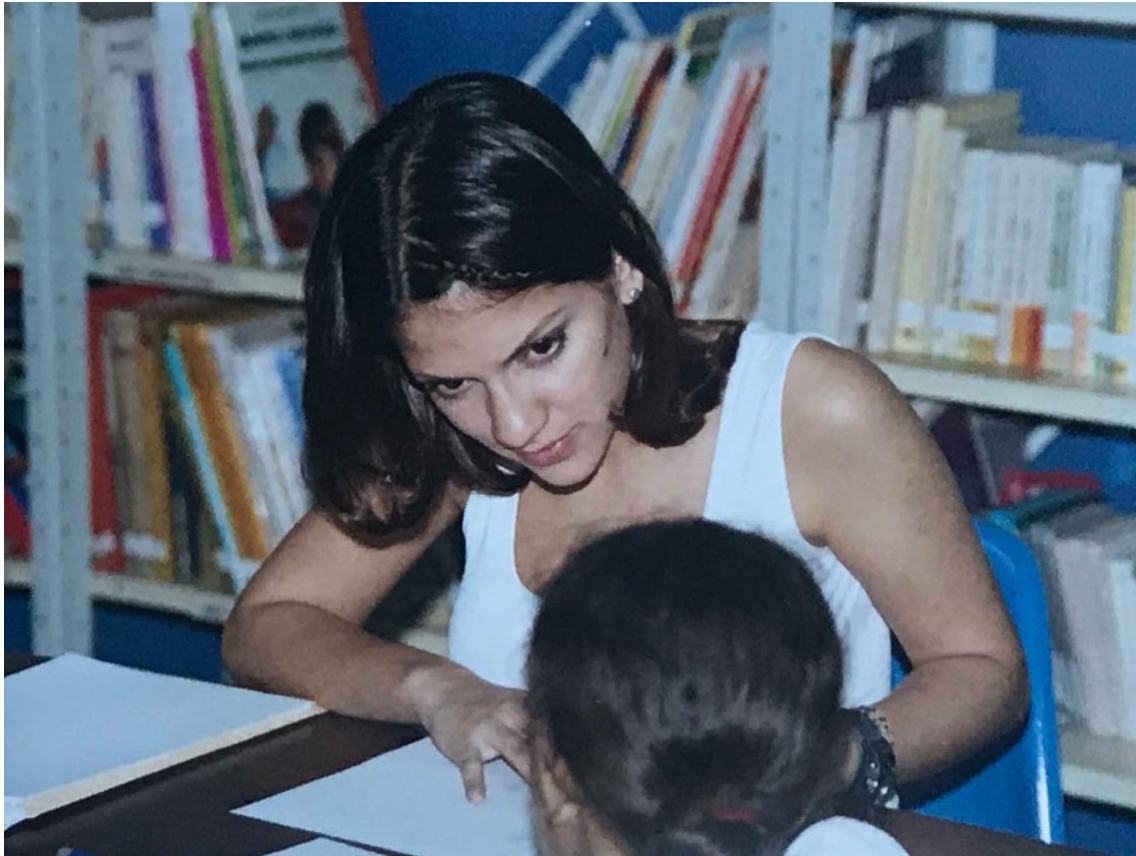


MARJORIE GUTIÉRREZ

Sylvia is just one example of the great changes and benefits that the girls in the treatment group presented after the intervention, unlike those in the control group who did not receive treatment, who maintained their behavior over time. There were no favorable reports from parents or teachers. On the contrary, they requested that their children receive the same treatment by the psychologists since they saw that the other girls were improving so much. As one of the 5th grade teachers put it: “I

wish Sofia could be in treatment since I can see that Daniela is doing so much better after working with you."

The boys who received treatment improved to a lesser extent in terms of anxiety, aggression, and post-traumatic stress. They improved considerably in their relationships within the classroom, in academic performance, participation and relationship with their classmates, and most of their fears also disappeared.



SABRINA RAMÍREZ

An example of this would be the case of Marcos, a ten-year-old boy, who lost his home as a result of the tragedy. Before treatment he was afraid of the rain, his academic performance was down, he was shy and restless in his body. During his treatment he was very collaborative and enthusiastic about doing the art psychotherapy activity. At the end, noticeable changes in his behavior were observed and the teacher said: "I see him much better, he participates more in class, and his performance has improved." His mother said: "Thank you very much for everything you have done for my son; I see him more open and communicative and he no longer fights so much with his brother."

As in the case of Marcos, the parents and teachers of other children reported improvements. Those children who did not receive the treatment also had a decrease in the expression of anger and sexual conflicts, but there was no observed improvement either in the classroom or at home.

These results allowed us to conclude that symptomatic behavior improved to a greater extent in girls than in boys. This is probably due to the fact that girls can more easily express their psychic conflicts through language. It seems that boys, on the other hand, express their concerns through physical activity. In this sense, the treatment used was more effective with girls than with boys.

However, the improvement in social relations and school performance was favorable for both sexes, which indicates that short-term benefits were seen after using this technique with all children.

At the end of the evaluation, a workshop was held in two sessions for the group that did not receive treatment, in order to allow them to express some of their concerns in the art therapy modality. We did not evaluate the results of this brief intervention.

The experience of working with these children was very rewarding for us, since we were able to help them rebuild important aspects of their lives. We know that much remains to be done and that this is only a start to promote the mental health and well-being of these children. We are willing to continue with this task and hope that this little report on our work will be a useful contribution to others providing them the opportunity to learn from the therapeutic work we conducted with these children.

THE STORIES OF ERNESTO:

THE BRIEF TREATMENT OF A BOY WHO SURVIVED THE VENEZUELAN FLOOD OF 1999: AN APPLICATION OF PSYCHOANALYSIS IN THE FACE OF CATASTROPHE

ADRIANA S. PRENGLER, FIPA

“I don’t know how to begin.” he said. “I don’t know how to begin.” Ten-year old Ernesto sat in front of me with paper and crayons in hand. Ernesto and his parents had together narrowly escaped the Venezuelan flood of December 1999. This flood came after an unusually long rainy season and a period of intense showers that brought rivers of mud, boulders and giant trees barreling down the mountains and into the coastal towns.

After it was all over, thirty thousand people had died and 500,000 people were left traumatized and homeless. Ernesto’s was one of the homes completely destroyed and buried under the mud. Everything was lost – books, toys, photos, everything. There was nothing left as a reminder of Ernesto’s past. The objects of a lifetime had been crushed, washed away, buried.

Two weeks after the ordeal Ernesto’s parents brought him to me, saying that he was having some difficulty breathing and seemed emotionally numb and indifferent to the terrifying experiences they had all just endured.

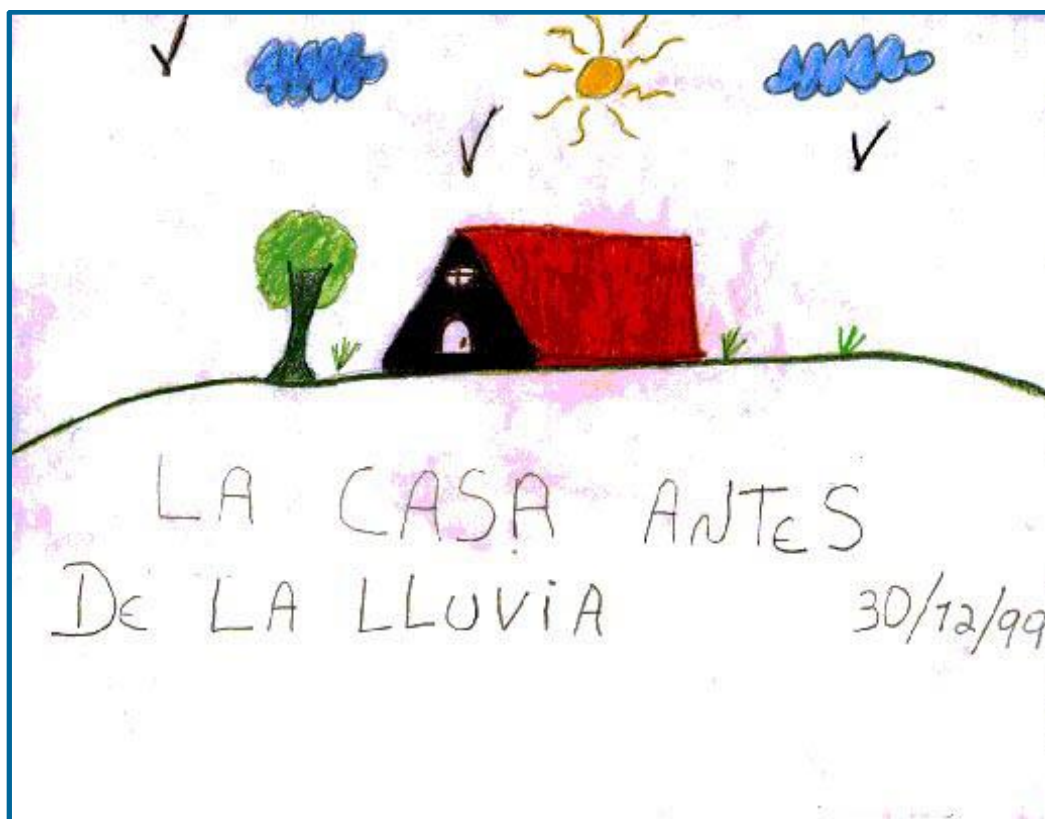
“What should I draw?” he asked. “Whatever you want to draw.” I answered. Anxious and immobilized he responded, “I don’t know. I can’t imagine what to draw.” Under these circumstances, I broke from my usual non-directive stance and proposed he draw a picture of his house. “NO!” he said with fear in his voice. He then politely refused to even try to draw.

His earlier comment “I don’t know how to begin.” echoed in my ears. Confronted by his resistance, I suggested that he might like to draw a picture of his house before the flood.

In response to my suggestion, his lips formed a soft and gentle smile and he prepared to draw. And then, once again, this time with his pencil ready in

hand, he replied: "I can't ...I don't know how to begin, I want to draw it, but I can't begin."

Then, without really thinking about it much, I said, "It's difficult to know how to begin your picture just as it is difficult to know how to begin your life again, after the flood took so much away from you". He looked at me and listened carefully. I continued, "Maybe starting over again will be like drawing your picture, difficult to begin at first but once you begin, you'll be able to continue little by little, and I'd like to help you to begin your drawing and begin your life again too." An odd smile spread across his face. It was something between a grimace and a grin, between happiness and sadness. And then in a low murmur I heard him say, "How did I used to do it? Where did I used to begin?" He picked up the crayon and with great care began "building" the roof, the walls, the doors, the windows, the sky, a big sun, the clouds, the birds, everything colorful, just as it was before the flood.



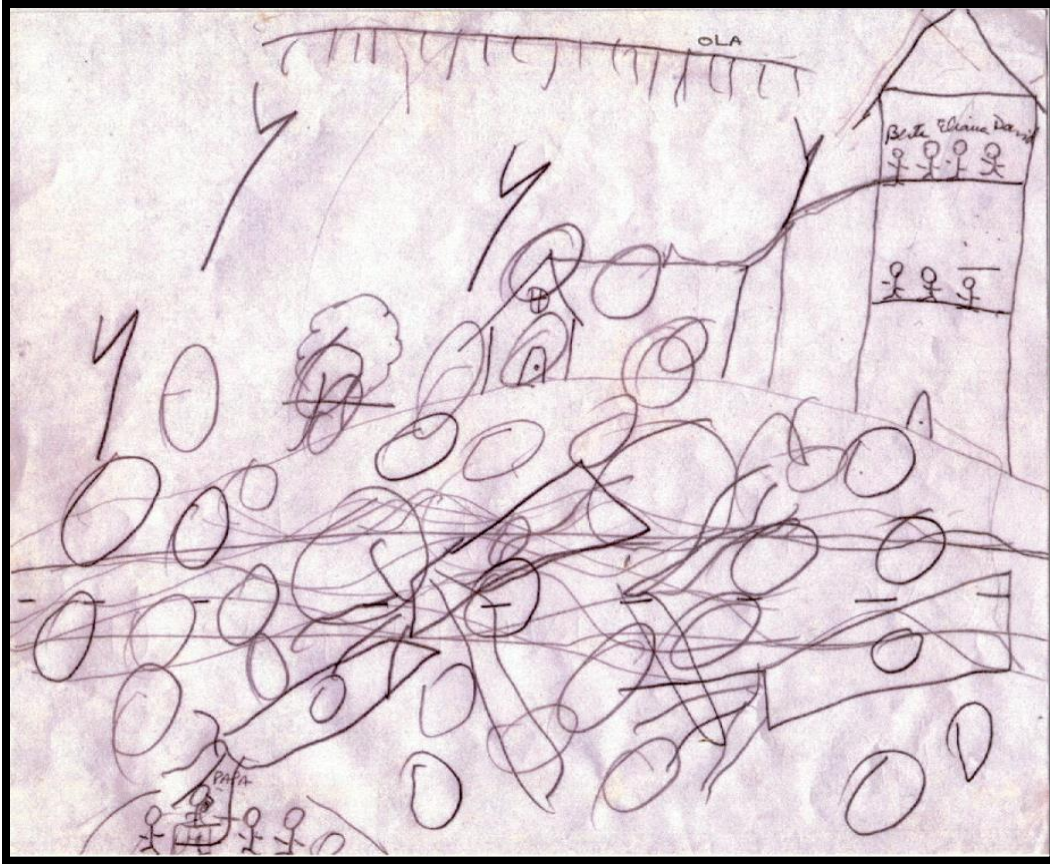
My invitation for him to draw his house before the flood was an invitation for him to reconnect with what he had, what he was, and with all his internal resources that presumably would have survived almost, any external disaster, as parts of his ego.

While taking me on a tour of his memories and current internal riches, we inevitably stumbled upon his sense of emptiness, disconnection and a past that seemed not to exist, for lack of objects to confirm it. In reconnecting with what he once had, he found the strength to begin again.

As he drew his colorful and well-formed picture of his house, a tree, plants, some clouds and the sun, he broke his silence and began to tell me about his house, his dogs, his birds, his books and his toys. Once his drawing was complete, he wrote underneath it **“The house before the rain”**. This separated his life into a first part, before the flood and a second part, after the flood.

With this drawing drawn and his story told, he now seemed prepared to draw what had been, up until this point, unspeakable. Previously all he had been able to say was: “I was afraid that the river would carry me away. It rained so much”.

Now sitting before me, he smiled an empty smile with which he tried to hide his pain. And then, as he began to draw his house in the middle of the flood he was now ready to tell me the following story: "We were at home watching TV. My aunt called and said that the river near her house was rising very high. Mom looked out the window of the kitchen and saw that the river in our street was also very high... She realized that the street had become a river and we were trapped... it looked like the house was floating in the river...Mom began to cry. We went up to the roof of the house and stayed there, under the pouring rain. The neighbors did the same thing.”

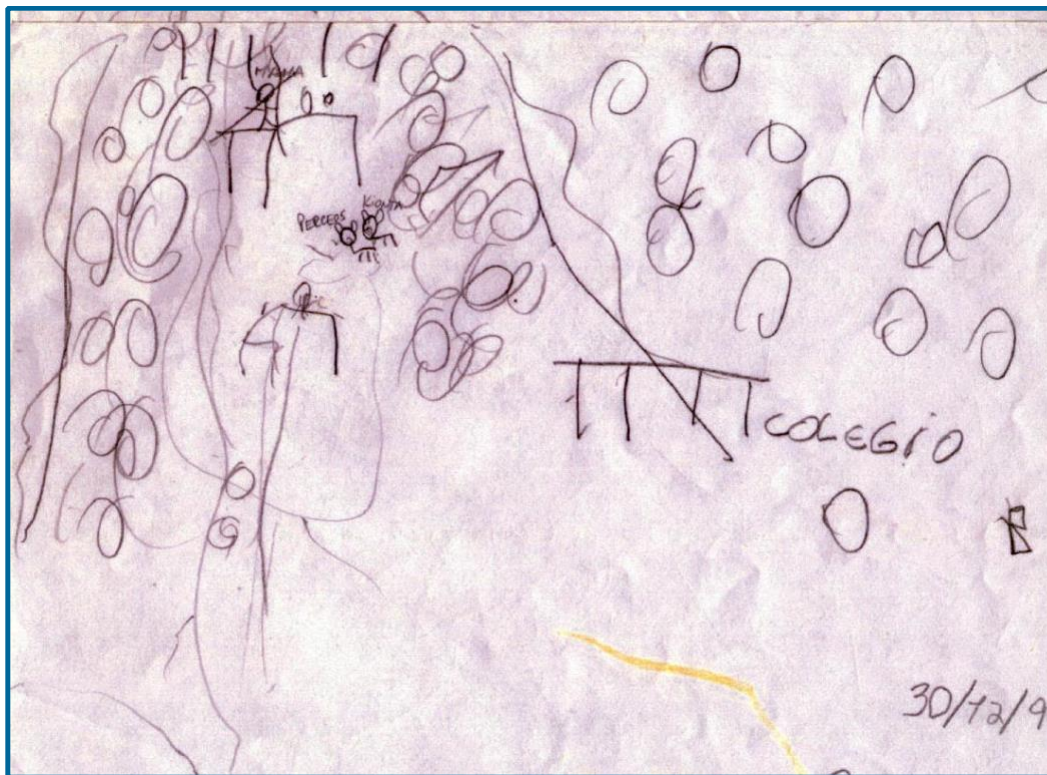


While telling his story Ernesto was drawing very fast and with tremendous excitement showing me where they ran, where each one was, and how things were happening. "We were on the roof...Mrs. Juana, the maid, who worked in my house and lived with us with her two children since I was born, climbed to the roof with her daughters. Our neighbor told us to come to the roof of his house, which was higher. We stayed there all the night under the rain. It was cold. In the morning the river was a little calmer and we were able to go to the roof of another neighbor's house. My Mom, my Dad, and some other neighbors went there. Suddenly the landslides began to come one after another. Mrs. Juana and her two children stayed on another roof, that later fell. We stayed on the neighbor's roof all day long. From there we saw a wave coming down from the mountain, the same mountain that we used to see every day through our window. The mountain had turned into a gigantic wave and it came down, dragging big rocks the size of the house, cars and whole trees with their roots. I couldn't believe it...We began to run and run. The children reached one roof and the adults stayed on another one. From there we began to watch how

everything was falling, the mountain came down, the cars flew, the trunks of the trees rushed down through the water, and stones the size of the houses fell.

I thought the world was going to end. I was on a roof but I was far away. My Dad was near the mountain and my Mom was in the middle. The wave was coming toward us and I thought it was going to carry us away, but suddenly, a very large tree with big roots going in all directions came down and divided the river in two. And there we were, on an island in the middle of all the stones, cars, and trees floating by fast.

At this point in his story, he reached the bottom of the page and urgently asked for another piece of paper to continue illustrating all he was telling me. I gave him another piece of paper, which he placed under the first, and then continued to draw and said: “We saw everything falling... the house fell... One part of the river went toward my school and destroyed it. The other part went toward a high building and cut it in two pieces. I was very frightened. I thought the river was going to take me away. I was cold, wet, hungry and thirsty.”



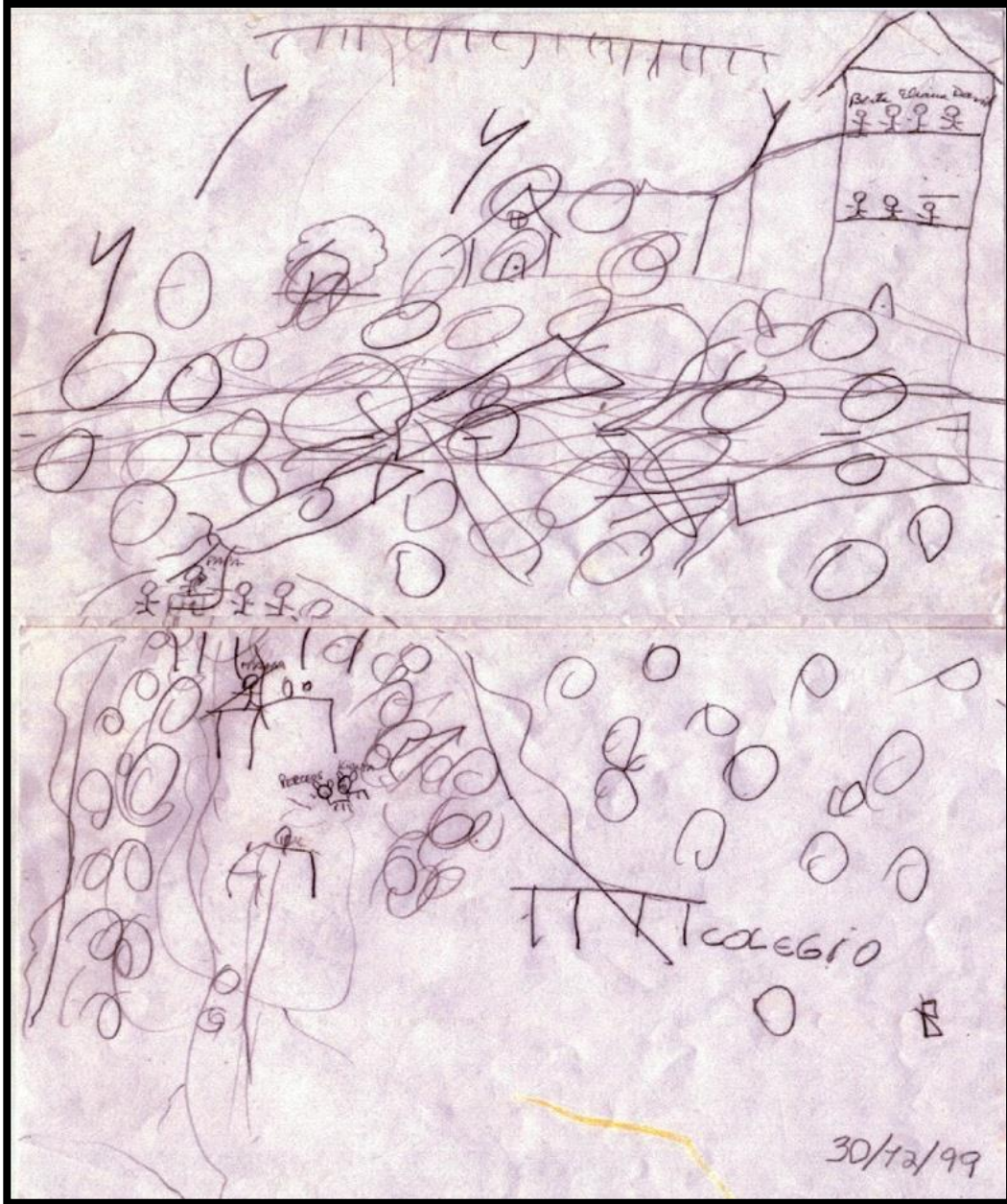
Ernesto continued drawing and telling his story with great excitement. He resumed his story without even looking at me as if he needed to tell it to himself. "I was so scared that the water would take me. I didn't know if my Dad was living because I couldn't see him. My Mom shouted to me "Run! Run!" And I ran and each little while I turned my head to look back to say good-bye to her. I saw her far away and I turned and said: "I love you, Mom", and waved to her with my hand.

I thought I was never going to see them never again. I was able to see my Mom, but I thought that my Dad had died. I ran until I got to a safer roof. I was cold, all wet and full of mud. I didn't drink or eat anything for two days. I was very thirsty."

When he completed his story, Ernesto looked at his drawing and said: "Ugh! What a horrible picture! It's a disaster! What an ugly drawing! And I don't understand it either!" I told him that what happened was horrible and very difficult to understand. I asked him if he wanted to color his drawing. "How am I going to color such an ugly drawing?" he replied.

This drawing, unlike the first (The house before the rain), was basically a map full of ill-formed, rapidly drawn, pencil sketches of his house, his school, his loved ones, his dogs, the rocks, flooding water and floating logs.

As we neared the end of the session, we joined the two pages of his map together with tape to give both, the drawing and his story some continuity.



SECOND SESSION

Ernesto entered my office for our second session and looked nostalgically at a notebook on my desk. On the cover was a picture of a young surfer. He told me that he loves to surf, and that one of the things that makes him particularly sad is that he lost his surfboard. They lived near the beach and surfing was his favorite sport. He told me that he used to have the walls of his room covered with pictures, similar to the one on the notebook. He said he'd like to put those

kinds of pictures back up on the walls of his new home. Breaking from my usual therapeutic stance, again, I offered to cut the cover from the notebook and let him take the picture with him to begin to reconstruct "his wall". He thanked me and said he'd like to have it, in order "to begin".

Instead of maintaining abstinence, I offered him something concrete to take with him rather than an interpretation. This could be considered acting-out on the part of the analyst that is perhaps not only unnecessary but also easily avoidable (Valedon, 2000). Nonetheless, I decided in favor of giving it to him, thinking that it would be more useful than an interpretation, especially within the time limitations of our work together. Furthermore, even as an act, it was simultaneously a metaphor of "beginning" his life again.

Ernesto took his picture of the surfer, set it aside, asked for a piece of paper and said that he wanted to draw the flood again, but to do it prettier this time. He needed to put the whole experience into order on the page and in his mind.



Again, he drew the houses, the rain and the floodwaters with the cars and trees and stones mixed in. This picture, however, was drawn carefully and colorfully in crayon. It is more organized and much calmer than his picture from the previous session, as if he needed to put his ideas and his perceptions in order.

As he drew, he quietly told me the story again, often establishing eye contact and gesticulating with his hands in a way that made me feel his empathy and alliance with me.

Curiously enough, in the middle of his picture, is a car and a tree trunk in the water that are juxtaposed in such a manner as to give the impression of a cross in a cemetery. He felt very satisfied with this drawing and said that it's better than the other one. He said he misses his room, his things, and his dogs.

I told him that I can imagine how difficult it must be for him to have lost so many things and that he must miss them terribly.

He told me about the way he chose names for his dogs from Greek mythology and about some of the objects that he lost. He also told me about Mrs. Juana, the lady that lived in his house, whom he had not seen since the flood. "She went to Colombia. That's what my parents told me".

I knew, from his parents, that they hadn't told Ernesto the facts about the death of Mrs. Juana and her children, and that two weeks after their disappearance there was no doubt about what happened. In a prior meeting with them, I recommended that they not keep this secret from him as it would negate what Ernesto seemed to already know, either consciously or unconsciously and would also deprive him of the opportunity to talk about it. They disagreed, feeling that they needed to protect Ernesto. They were afraid that the boy, who loved his grandfather so much might want "to join him in heaven" and, now, also join with Mrs. Juana as well.

They had the idea that he might attempt suicide even though there had been no previous attempt or indication that could suggest this danger.

I told them that I didn't think Ernesto was a suicide risk as he has extensive psychic resources, but they were very frightened and we didn't have enough time to go deeply into this matter because they were going to move soon to the suburbs. So, I offered to meet with them together, as a family, to help them talk with Ernesto about Mrs. Juana. It occurred to me that they might be just as frightened as Ernesto and that they might have the illusion that if they don't

talk about it, maybe it didn't happen. One cannot forget that these parents were also traumatized by the same horrible event. They brought their son to treatment to talk about what was difficult to talk about, but out of fear and pain, they kept their secret and silenced Ernesto at the same time.

"She left to Colombia... this is what my parents told me"...

I asked him if he thinks he will see her again. He told me that he didn't know, but began to speak about his beloved Grandfather, his "Nono," who died years ago, and whom he still misses.

In this way, I thought he was revealing his suspicion that Mrs. Juana and her children may have died and been taken away by the water. He continued telling me about her, her children, the affection he felt for them and his doubts about their survival. He wondered, "If they are safe and they left to Colombia, why didn't they say good-bye? Why didn't they call? Maybe they were carried away by the river?"

Continuing with the theme of death he told me about his two beloved dogs, Perceos and Kionta: "I saw them swimming, but they were too tired so I know that they drowned". I saw, from the roof, how they were swimming. They seemed to be very tired, because of the way they were wildly breathing. That's why I know they drowned. I didn't see the moment that they were carried away by the flood, but I know it happened".

As Ernesto told me the story of the deaths of his two dogs I wondered if he might also be referring to Mrs. Juana as well.

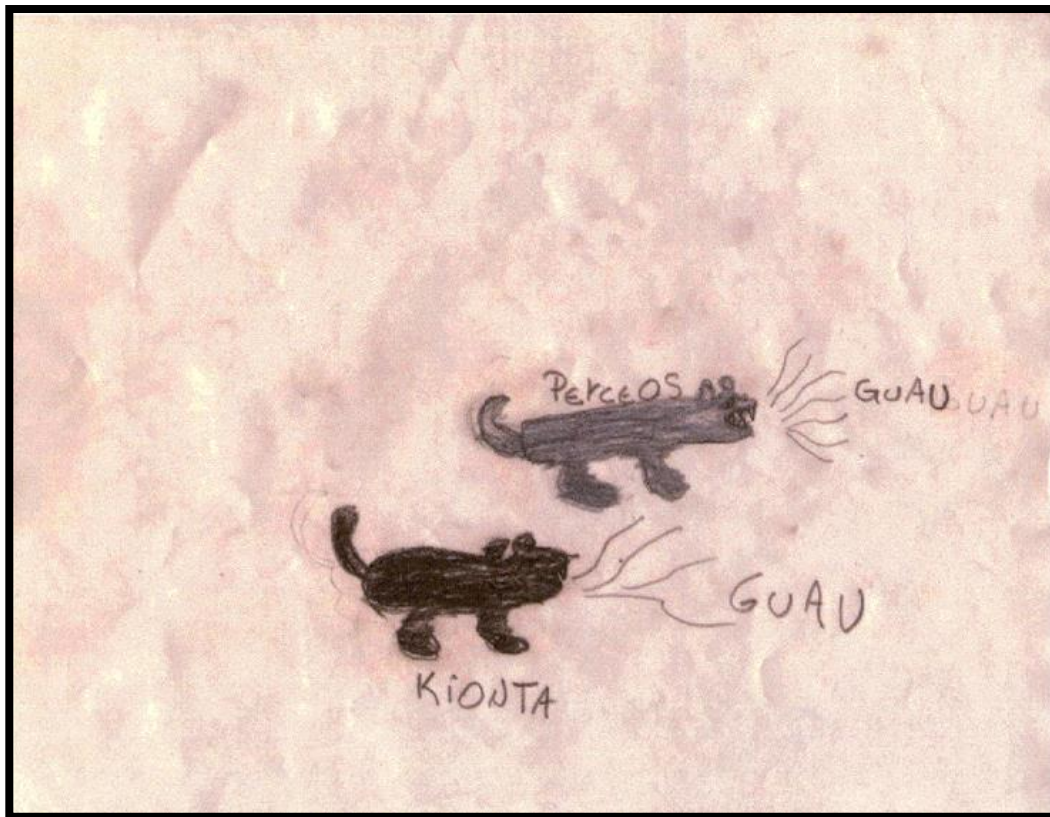
At the end of the second session Ernesto said: "I feel better because now I have someone to tell what happened". With this comment he expressed his relief at being able to speak not only about the flood, his fears, his losses and pain, but also about the death of his Grandfather "el Nono", and the forbidden topic of the disappearance of Mrs. Juana and her children.

THIRD SESSION

We had agreed that this would be Ernesto's last session, as he and his family had found a new home and would soon be moving to the suburbs.

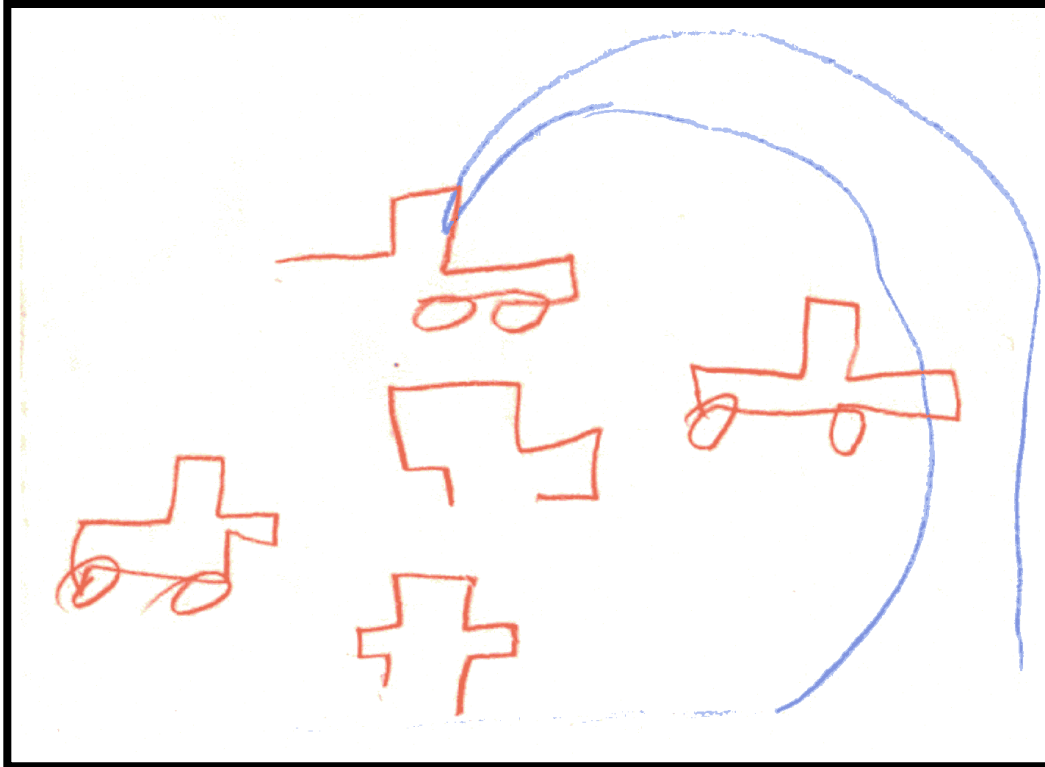
In this session Ernesto said he wanted to draw and proceeded to make three drawings.

The first was a picture of his two dogs whom he described as “screaming” or “barking desperately.” He emphasized their sharp teeth, which seem to convey, not only his own rage, impotence, and calls for help but also a continuation in the process of accepting his losses. While drawing this picture Ernesto spoke of his sadness over this great loss.



He told me how much he misses his dogs, the way he took care of them, the way he fed them, how he used to play with them, and also of his overwhelming sense of powerlessness at seeing his dogs swimming alone and being unable to help them.

In his second drawing he drew a huge wave about to cover some cars. The waves and cars are all drawn in color but only in outline. Again some of the cars are drawn in a way that gives the impression of crosses in a cemetery about to be covered by a gigantic wave.



Could it be that Ernesto was beginning to bury his dead and lost objects?

In his third and last drawing, he drew another wave, very similar to the one in the preceding drawing, but this time he colored it in carefully with a rich blue.

And in place of the inundated cars he drew a surfer on a surfboard, riding the wave, instead of being terrified by it. At this point the threatening wave had been transformed into a wave he could ride and attempt to control while at the same time being immersed in it.



Ernesto was trying to come to terms with his traumatic experience and regain control of his emotions by expressing it all through his stories and drawings.

In August of 2001 I had the privilege of discussing this case with Dr. W. Ernest Freud, Freud's oldest grandson, who became a psychoanalyst, and is better known as the Fort-Da baby, because of his famous game of playing with a spool on the end of a string, which Freud described in "Beyond the pleasure principle".

After hearing the case and seeing my young patient's drawings, Dr. W. Ernest Freud commented that, this little boy, by drawing what he had suffered passively, had turned passive into active, just as he, W. Ernest Freud, had turned passive into active when he invented his Fort Da game as a way of managing the anguish he suffered each time his mother left him for a while.

Incidentally, I would like to mention that I gave my patient the pseudonym "Ernesto", in honor of Dr. W. Ernest Freud, who suffered numerous losses throughout his life.

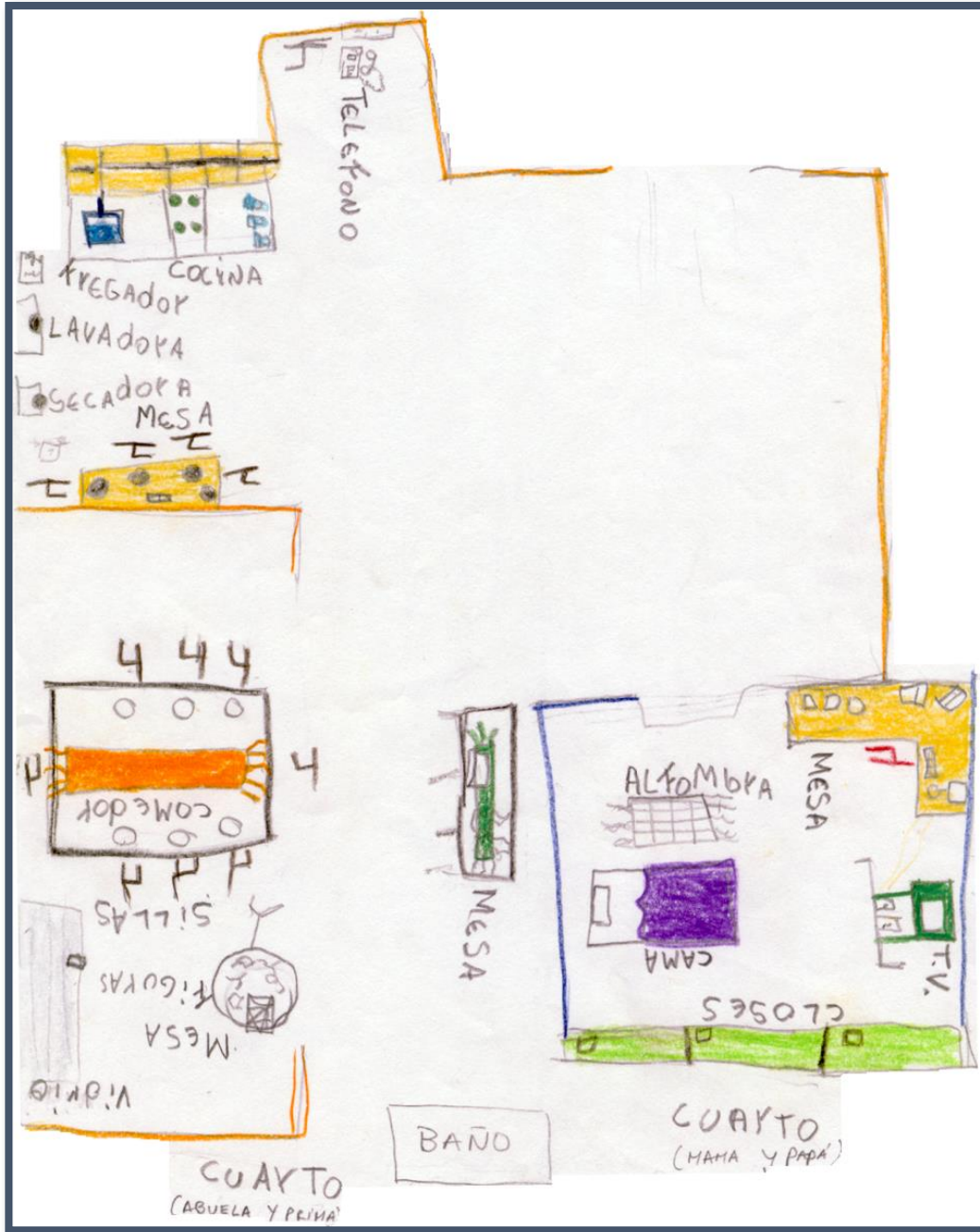
Thus, we can see in the drawings of Ernesto, the "beginning" of a longer process of the elaboration of his rage and pain associated with all that he lost.

We get the impression that by drawing and telling stories about his experiences, he was modifying the traumatic nature of his feelings and perceptions of the flood, and transforming them into a more manageable experience.

Ernesto's treatment ended after three sessions when his symptoms subsided, his family moved out of the area and he started up at a new school.

After two months he returned for one more session to say good-bye. During this session I gave to him a little book (that I made for him) containing all his pictures and the stories he told me about them. This little book would represent a concrete link between all that Ernesto was and all that he is – a link between his life before the flood and his life after the flood. It is an object that establishes and declares continuity in his life despite the trauma.

Ernesto was so pleased with his little book that he read all the stories right away and then wanted to draw one last picture - one he wanted me to keep.



It was a picture of his new house but unlike the other drawings it was like an architect's floor plan, a top view depicting the interior of his house with all the rooms and his things in their proper places. In the entryway there is a telephone, perhaps like the one that they answered the day of the disaster when Ernesto's aunt called to tell them of the rising river, perhaps as a symbol of communication and salvation.

He then carefully drew a well-ordered set of rooms, the furniture, the appliances, the decorations, etc. While drawing, he spoke in detail about each of the objects recently acquired and of others that came from the house of his grandmother and that he was now remembering as parts of his own history.

He told me that it is a comfortable house, and that he is getting used to it, but that he still misses the house they lost in the flood and he felt sad about it.

I looked upon this drawing as his way of showing me his house, that is his Ego, "from inside" with a new "organization" and a new "arrangement" of the objects of his internal world.

Looking at the sequence of the drawings and the associated stories during this brief intervention, I had no doubt that something had changed in Ernesto. But I asked myself: Looking at this case, can we speak of a psychoanalytic process? Can we speak of an elaboration? Of a modification of defenses and a subsequent re-organization of the ego?

Can we speak of a process in three sessions when timing was thrown to the wind along with the usual regard for the frame and for abstinence? Are those factors indispensable for creating a psychoanalytic process?

Can we expect to find a process, similar to one taking place in an exhaustive analysis of the transference neurosis and a working through of the material over time? Are all the rules of psychoanalysis necessary to produce a psychoanalytic process?

Many authors have been interested in this theme, but no consensus exists among them as to the definition of a psychoanalytic process (Vaughan et. al 1997; Wallerstein, 1995).

Different authors emphasize different aspects in their definitions of a psychoanalytic process.

Weinshel, cited by Wallerstein (1995), defines the psychoanalytic process as a special interaction between two people, the analysand and the analyst, in which are displayed object relations, identifications and transferences and in which the central factor is the analysis of the resistances through interpretation as Freud had previously described (Freud, 1913).

Boesky also asserts that the process of a successful analysis implies a fight with one resistance after another. (Wallerstein, 1995, p. 449)

According to Klimovsky (cited by Etchegoyen, 1991. P. 531) “the therapeutic process, to be such, has to provoke changes ... and these changes are those we try to encourage through interpretation.”

Etchegoyen (1986) says: "Certain writers maintain that the analytic process is natural in that it seeks to set in motion, the mental growth arrested by the illness" and adds: “In general all analysts admit that analysis is a process of *growth* and also *creative experience*...

The essence of the process consists in removing the obstacles, so the analysand can go his own way... The analyst’s creation consists, (for Etchegoyen), in the capacity to give the analysand the necessary instruments for him to orient himself alone and become himself again” (p. 533).

Using these ideas as a foundation, I consider a “psychoanalytic process” to be a process that as a consequence of the interaction between the intervention of the analyst and the response of the analysand, promotes a decrease in the resistances that give rise to a movement in the defense mechanisms, leading to an elaboration and a change.

Rudolf Ekstein reminds us of Freud when he says "The detective, like the archeologist, works from the present to the past and tries to reconstruct the events.” (Cited by Etchegoyen, 1991, p. 536).

This was my task with Ernesto - to reconstruct the events or experiences that had been "covered over" in his psyche - just as his home had been covered over by the flood two weeks earlier, and to help him begin a process of mourning for his lost objects.

The transference, while present, remained a silent factor, functioning unacknowledged by Ernesto and uninterpreted by me. But the nature of his transference allowed him to revive the traumatic event, knowing that he was in a safe place with someone who could give him the freedom to express his fears and pain.

"I don't know how to begin", said Ernesto. He had forgotten how he used to begin and how to carry on with his life.

What is a boy to do in the face of a catastrophic situation such as this? What is an adult to do in a situation such as this? And what is a psychoanalyst to do when he or she feels called upon to respond to such a catastrophe and yet is used to working with patients in a very different kind of frame?

It is clearly not possible to conduct a formal psychoanalysis in a crisis situation like this. How can we use proper timing when the treatment itself takes place within such a limited frame of time?

How should we handle the transference when there is neither the space nor the time to develop a transference neurosis, to allow repeating with the analyst in order to remember? (Freud, 1912)

How should we handle these cases in which traumatic loss and massive assault reduce the ability to symbolize and drive both, the patient and the therapist into action?

Let me be explicit, it was not a psychoanalysis that I conducted with Ernesto. We did not have the time or the resources that a full psychoanalysis would require. It was a brief intervention using psychoanalytic psychotherapy. But according to the definition proposed above, I dare to say that a kind of psychoanalytic process was operating.

Through my interaction with Ernesto we were able to reduce his resistances, eliminate his symptoms and begin to elaborate his traumatic experience through his drawings and stories.

Although dreams are the royal road to the unconscious, art and symptoms, are yet other roads to understanding the unconscious. With the help of his drawings, Ernesto was able to make sense of chaos and in this way his art seems to have had a healing function.

Creativity is an attempt of solving a conflict. Unlike the symptom, that represents an unsuccessful attempt at self-healing, creativity is typically a more successful attempt at dealing with the conflict.

Freud, in 1909, during one of his conferences at Clark University, stated: "If a person who is at loggerheads with reality, possesses an artistic gift...he can transform his phantasies into artistic creations instead of into symptoms. In this manner he can escape the dooms of neurosis and by this round-about path regain his contact with reality" (Freud 1909, Vol XI, The standard edition of the complete psychological works of SF, Fifth lecture, page 50).

The artist controls the world through his creation, just as Ernesto tried to control the wave of mud and stones that came down fast from the mountain, by transforming it in his drawing into a wave on which he could surf.

In the drawing of his dogs drowning while showing their sharp teeth, Ernesto creates the possibility of communicating his rage and impotence, feelings that at that moment had to be repressed and silenced.

Ernesto arrived at my office with his internal world and external world confused and invaded by impotence, destruction and the threat of being closed off. While he was allowing himself to make contact again with his internal world, he could feel that the external one, destroyed, was, once again, outside himself, which allowed him, as Etchegoyen would say, “to become himself again”.

Six months later I received a telephone call from Ernesto’s mother, telling me that her son, who had always been an average student, had won a full scholarship in his new school, for being the student with the best grades there.

I was reminded, then, that Ernesto had told me that he did not want to be identified by his friends in his new school as “the victim of the flood” but rather as “the brain”.

His mother also told me that a few days before, Ernesto had been kidnapped. Ernesto, his father, and some of Ernesto’s friends were returning from a weekend at the beach. When they were near the father’s office, his father parked the car for a moment in the street, to get something he needed from his office, while the children waited inside the car. Just then kidnappers entered the car and drove off with the children.

Facing a new traumatic situation, Ernesto, in the middle of shouts and cries from the children, maintained an extraordinary calm in front of the kidnappers, enabling him to make a deal with them, and secure their safe release.

To conclude, in this paper I have described how an analyst using psychoanalytic theory and modifications in psychoanalytic technique, can establish a kind of psychoanalytic process that can achieve a therapeutic outcome.

My work with Ernesto was governed by the basic theoretical principle of psychoanalysis - to make the unconscious conscious – even though there were certain variations from the standard technique. This means that when psychoanalysts are working in a different framework outside that of the

traditional psychoanalytic practice, they must operate under different rules – the rules of the unexpected.

In circumstances of unexpected trauma, such as natural disasters, psychic reality becomes "flooded" by external reality and obliges us to abandon some aspects of traditional technique. But if we can maintain our psychoanalytic identity, adhere to the psychoanalytic principle of making the unconscious conscious and make appropriate modifications in our technique, we can often be of great service to our communities in times of crisis.

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STORIES OF THE FLOOD

BY THE CHILDREN OF VARGAS

KARINA – 12 YEARS OLD

There was a house with a river passing by and it took it away with some people who were thrown to the sea and drowned and some months passed and they went to swim at the beach and they found some dead people and they ran to look for some firemen so that they could see the drowned people and they carried them away and a tractor came and was digging and it pulled out a lady who was naked and after that they carried her away to another place and buried her and then they also found all the trees broken because they were covered with mud and they were sad because they had worked so hard to plant those trees and the day after they looked for mamon (a kind of fruit in Venezuela) and coffee seeds and they began to be born because of the heavy rains and the plants grew up and the women were happy because they had coffee to drink and mamon to eat.

KARINA - 12 YEARS OLD

I saw when the river was taking the people, the houses, the cars, the fans, the pictures, the glasses. The hill came down toward us. The plants fell on the roof. The living room was flooded. A wall swelled up and the noise was ugly. The bathroom was covered with mud and the stairs were also covered with plants and earth and fortunately we left. The firemen took us to a club and when we went out, the plants and the hill came down.

KARINA – 12 YEARS OLD

When the river was getting bigger it took away people, cars, the houses, the chairs and the people. Some men were going to rescue some babies and afterward a creek got bigger and a lot of people and men began to come out through the roof out of desperation. It was raining and the next day came and we went to our house and when we saw that the hill had come down and that the house was full of sand and water and there were a lot of boulders and one had to go on top of some rocks and after that some people went to loot to the bridge and they brought boxes of food and a lot of things.

HUGO – 10 YEARS OLD

Those are the rocks, that is the mud and here is a house full of mud – a flooded house. Here is a tree trunk on top of the house and it was completely destroyed. Here was a man, some people, a man with half his body covered in mud and the man shouted, “Help!” Some police came and they took him away and here is our house all covered with mud and here is my Father with a shovel taking out sand and here is the river coming down and there were some ladies saying “I lost my house and all my family. The only thing left is me. And that’s it.

HUGO – 10 YEARS OLD

This is a lady that is being taken away by the river. The lady says, “Help! Help! Take me out of here! I lost my family. I lost my house. I lost everything. This is nothing but mud. The tree is falling on top of me! Please help! Take me out of here!” Then there is a man and he says to the lady, “Give me your hand and I will take you out. And the lady stretched her arm out and the man holds her and pulls her out and the lady says, “Thank you, sir, for having saved me.”

DIANA – 10 YEARS OLD

These are three children. When they were passing by, the river took them away and they couldn't be saved or anything. The second one was the nephew of my uncle that could not be saved. Nothing more.

Mónica: And this one? The third one?

My father.

Mónica: Did the river take him away?

He was saved. Nothing more.

ANDREA – 10 YEARS OLD

The river took our house. Once people were crying because they thought the river was going to take them too. And one of my cousins said, "Ay, the river is taking me!" There was a pregnant woman with another baby. She was scared by the water. I saw children crying because they were left alone. The time was black and the people were saying that the water is starting to come up.

ANDREA – 10 YEARS OLD

Once when the rivers came up, the people were frightened. Men, women, children and a house were taken and some rocks on the hill. Everybody was desperate to go higher up the hill to a nursery school that was on the hill and we took refuge there. My aunt, my cousin and my brothers and sisters and I. Mom told us to go with my aunt quickly because she (Mom) couldn't go with us because she had to take care of my grandma. She lived in Quebrada Seca because the hill covered her house, it knocked off a piece. She took my grandma from Quebrada Seca because my mother had a premonition and she didn't know that the rivers were going to come up. That's it.

ANDREA – 10 YEARS OLD

When the river ... I have an uncle that was with the firemen helping to take the people out. A boy was going to die and my uncle caught him in the river so he would not die. In the second catastrophe the river took the crazy man who was the drunk of the community and he died. This is the house where I live. There comes my grandma, my uncle, my uncle's wife. Now I live with my aunt. I was upset because I thought the river was too high and it took my mother and my aunt. In the first tragedy I lived in Commando 58 and I went to live in Maracaibo.

ALDO - 9 YEARS OLD

The river was taking many boulders, also a child in a car. The river was taking lots of people and knocked down houses and made many disasters and then calm returned and then the people went to the river of Piedra Azul to wash, to swim and to play.

ALDO – 9 YEARS OLD

The river took away the car. The people swam. The branches were coming down. The tree trunks, the plants and many houses fell. The market was looted. Many cars were lost. There were people that disappeared. A lot of water came down and it took away a tower. The bridge fell and the water of the river went to the sea. The road was destroyed. The lights went out and there was a lot of shooting. Many people died. There were rocks that the river brought down.

DULCE – 12 YEARS OLD

The rivers were rising. The lights went out. The people were running on the roofs of the houses that were still there. The people ran toward the hills. The rivers were taking the houses away. The rocks fell on them. The telephone poles were falling into the river. The people were shouting, crying because their houses were falling. Afterwards when dawn came everybody came down to see if their houses had been taken away. No more.

DULCE – 12 YEARS OLD

There were some people from up there. They were shouting to the ones down there so they would come up. The river had taken houses and all that. They were walking with their children over the roofs. We crossed the river with ropes and an inflatable boat. I was scared. The stones hit me and I thought the river was going to take me. A man with his little dogs died when the cable got loose and killed them.

BERNARD – 10 YEARS OLD

This is the bridge and under it there was a river. When it was flooding, the river rose and covered the bridge and the water took away some houses and covered others. I saw some houses that fell down. Some people moved away. One was my best friend. One bridge that we are crossing rose up and the people fell down.

Mónica: And what did the people do?

Ran to safety.

Mónica: Did the people shout?

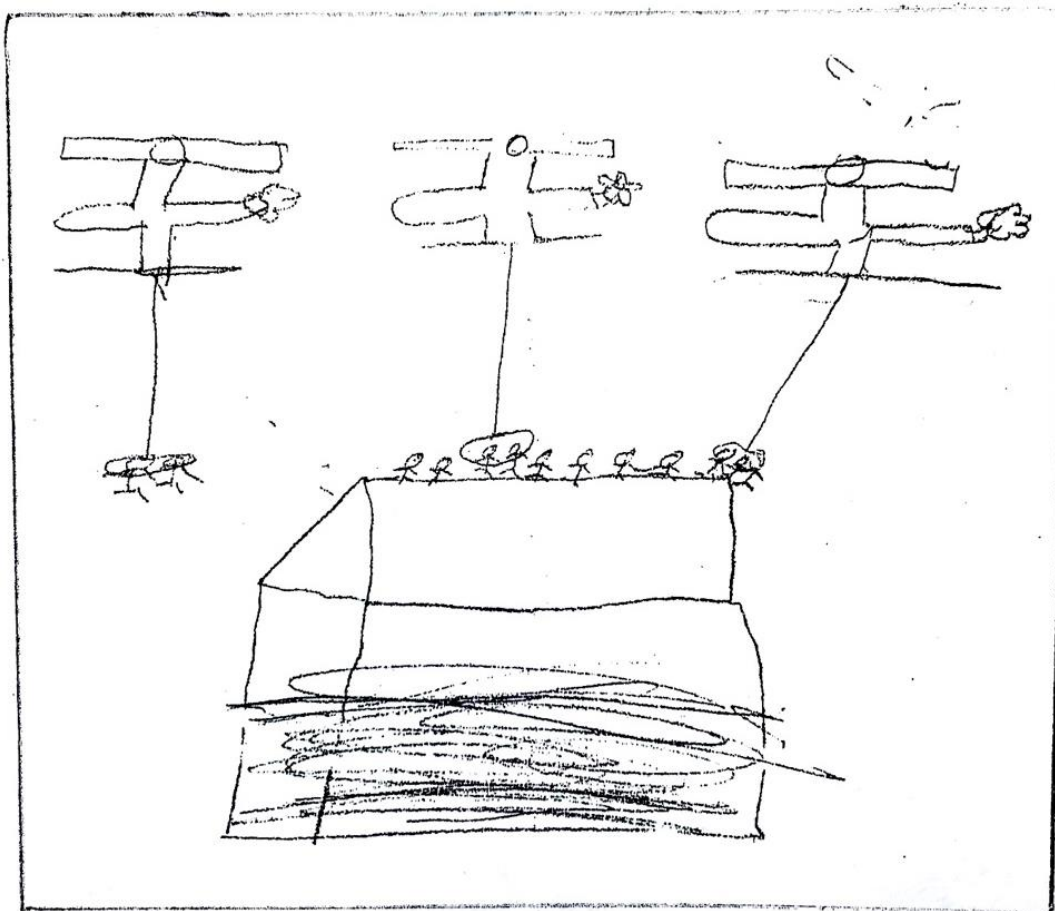
Yes, because it was dark. You could see nothing and if the river came I was trembling because I couldn't see if the river was coming and what I heard was

the noise. I was taken away a little bit by the river and I had a cut. I was taken out with a rope.

Mónica: Were you scared?

Yes, because the river was taking me toward the sea.

BERNARD – 10 YEARS OLD



BERNARD – 10 YEARS OLD

I don't know how to draw very well. The house of my aunt. She lives in Maiquetia. We were there and the house was split in two parts the day of the tragedy. I felt sad that the people were taken by the river and I saw bodies without arms and without heads and I saw a head all by itself. Many people drowned in their cars and I felt sad. People were left helpless. My aunt was left with only one part of her house. And it could happen to me too. I felt like crying. I couldn't sleep.

Marjorie: Are you still afraid?

Yes, when it rains, when there is no light. We lost the furniture of our room and the TV Afterwards we went to Valencia for about four months and then we returned to La Guaira. When I fall asleep I think bad thoughts.

Marjorie: What do you think about?

That I am going to be kidnapped because in all the schools there are photos of lost children. I wanted to save the Play Station.

Marjorie: How do you feel?

Sometimes I get angry because of things that are happening to me.

Marjorie: What is happening to you?

They are taking away my candies. I see at night that the river is taking me. I don't want to die. This is the house, when the avalanche of mud and rocks was coming from two sides with people, but they were dead people. The river was finished and we all lived. In Valencia we were treated well. They gave me food. The house of a friend. They could not save themselves and a helicopter came and saved him.

BERNARD – 10 YEARS OLD

When the tragedy happened we were going to the Government Insurance Agency and a big tree trunk fell on us and the tree was covering the bridge and the water stayed there. And the water came out. The bridge was broken. And all the water came out. There were dead people, injured people, the houses fell down. I got a cut. I was holding a rope that broke and I grabbed the leg of a man. We were jumping from one roof to another until we reached the end of an alley. I stopped and that's it. In the Insurance Agency there were a lot of people, it was hot, the mattresses were peed in. Then we laid down on the mattresses for babies and with those we built a big mattress. In the morning we walked to the church in La Guaira. We got on a boat and arrived at the airport and I'm finished.

BERNARD – 10 YEARS OLD

My dog, that was in the house, taking care of the house, was taken away by the river. He was a guard dog and he couldn't resist the water that came so strong. When I saw him he was alive. The tractor came with a lever and it cut him and pierced him and he finally died but anyway he was going to die because he couldn't breathe. Every time I see a dog in the street I remember mine. His name was Beethoven. We cried because the dog had been with us for many years and we buried him as if he were a person. We buried him in a beach with his cross and everything but we didn't have a funeral. When I watch TV there was one exactly like him but he was not mine and the TV burned out and I couldn't know where my dog was. {He then erased the dog that he drew and began to make it bigger.}

Marjorie: How do you feel?

Pained when he died because he lived the same as us. Every time I see a dead dog I shut my eyes.

CHRISTINA – 10 YEARS OLD

I was very sad to see all the children shouting and the houses falling, the rocks, all the houses that fell, the children that died in the tragedy. I feel pity for those children. They have no food. I begged to God that this would never happen again because it is too horrible. The little house has a part that fell and it is not painted.

CHRISTINA – 10 YEARS OLD

Everybody was shouting. They shouted, “Help, help, help us!” These boulders are going to smash us like fried fish. And then another day the people woke up destroyed without having anywhere to go, nowhere to sleep or eat and thank God there was nothing missing of what I lost.

JENNIFER – 11 YEARS OLD

On December 15 there was a tragedy here in Vargas. The bridge of Vista del Mar fell down. The people were shouting, “Help!” They said that the bridge had fallen down. There was a child that lived near the bridge. The river took him away with a stick buried in his head. The houses were falling. The rocks made noise and the people cried.

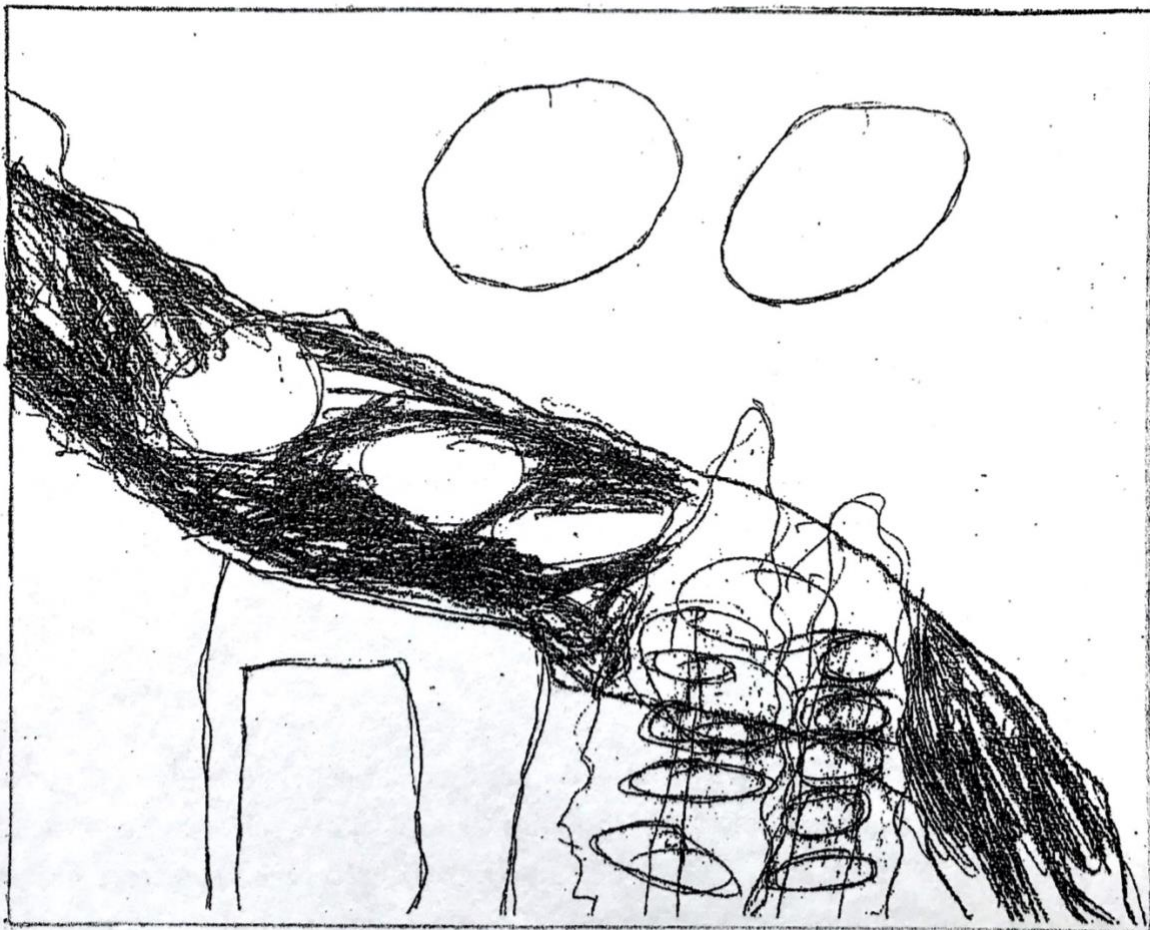
HECTOR – 10 YEARS OLD

Here I was with my Grandma. I saw the river when it was rising up. The wave passed twice – a high one and a low one. I didn’t see the first one. The second house was full of water but not so hard. Here we are in a lot looking at the way these people drowned and it took away a house. That’s what I saw.

HECTOR – 10 YEARS OLD

A picture of when the water started to go into the pools. When the water was falling it was grey. Here I was very scared, worried for my family. The river went into my aunt's house and they got out fast. If not the river would take them. When the house fell, I was with my family. There went the looters and they stole the TV. The window was all a mess.

ANTONIO – 11 YEARS OLD



ANTONIO - 11 YEARS OLD

This is a power plant that exploded. My house thundered. My father told me that when the power plant exploded the house shook and he fell under the house. The water knocked down the Madre Emilia School. In an old house the wall of a bathroom fell.

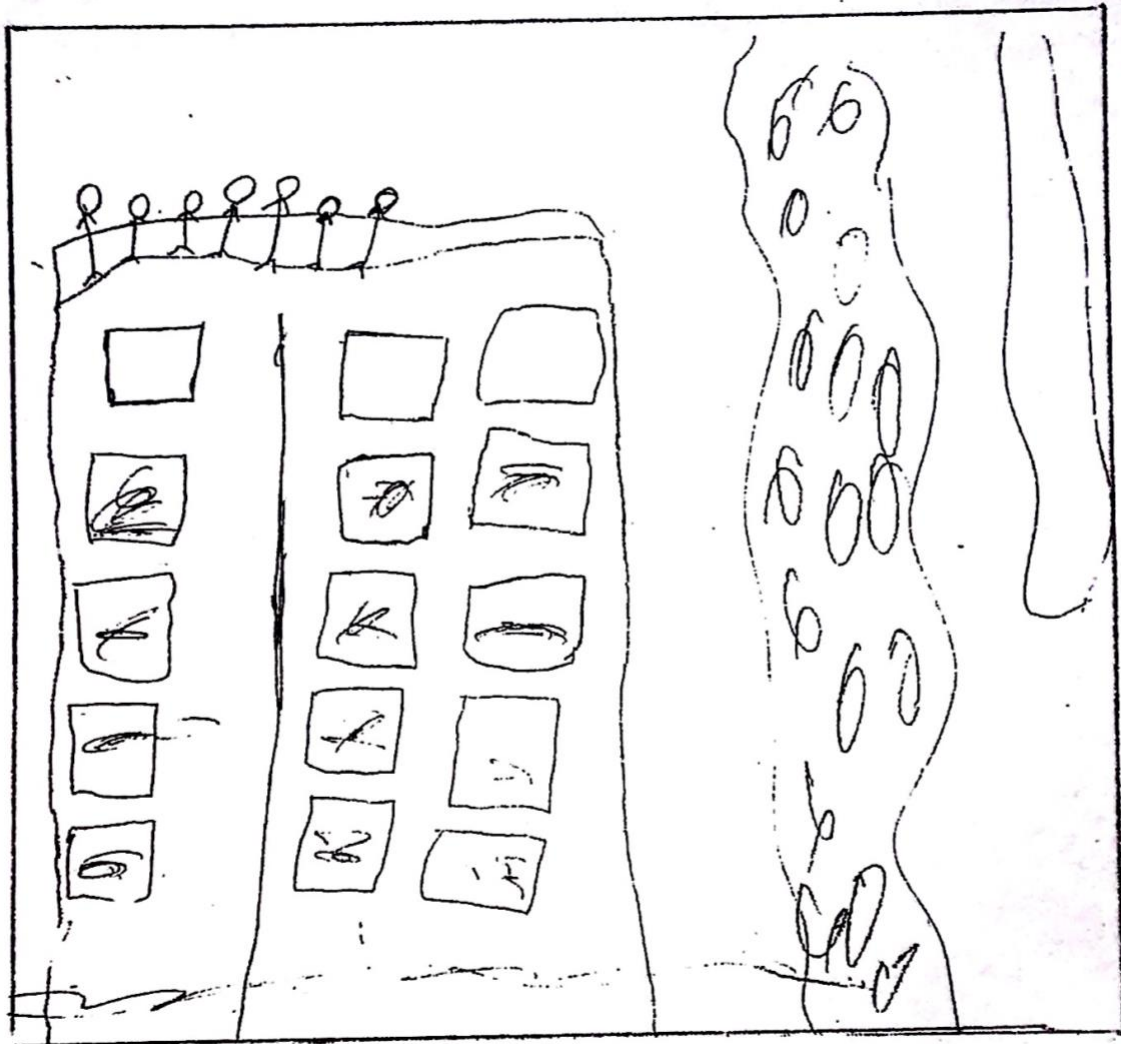
Mónica: And were you scared?

Yes, because people said the Avila was going to take away the liquor store but it was a lie and we stayed home and the only thing we didn't have was something to eat.

Mónica: What did you do to eat?

With what I looted and was given. Afterwards we went to the port. We found broken containers and I took off what I had on. I grabbed some things and I took them to my little cousin. I got dressed and I found another container with apples. We grabbed them and put them in a sack we got out of the river and we crossed the river calmly running and the shoes I was wearing when I was crossing the river became stinky and they broke. And if I keep telling this story you are going to use a whole ream of paper.

ANTONIO – 11 YEARS OLD



ANTONIO – 11 YEARS OLD

Can I draw a building?

Mónica: You can draw whatever you want.

In December the tragedy began and the next day there was this building and the building was cut in two, this way, from top to bottom and here and here and here and there was mud up to the 12th floor and the water came and it was inside and here there was a road, here the house of the Garcia and the building

down there. Chavez came in a helicopter and they grabbed the seven people and they took them with Chavez far from here.

Mónica: Where to?

And then Chavez came to the electric plant and he stayed there with the helicopter and it seems that he took out TV sets, food, and gave it to all of them down there.

I went down and I met him and he shook my hand and everything.

Mónica: And how did you feel?

I said at last I saw Chavez. Afterward I saw him from far away. He was passing by with a van on a bridge and he said, "We have a long way to go." And then he gave a long speech down there on television and he said, "Look at the way the state of Vargas is. There is a long way to go to fix it." Then he ordered to fix a bridge down there.

Mónica: And did they fix it?

Yes, with some stuff made of iron.

JUANITA – 11 YEARS OLD

I almost don't remember because we left in a hurry. The mountain – a billboard – when the river was going down strong the people were crossing over the bridge. This is a girl who was running because she was frightened. The houses that were in the mountain all fell. When it rains, the water comes out from the mountain. We had to run to another street. We had to go fast and we had to run up very long stairs (outdoor stairs through the town). We had to turn at Block One and from there we went to Guarenas to a house of my family. This house was the only one left in the middle that the river did not take away. My house was half full of mud. Yesterday I went to the river and I saw this sign and I was impressed. It's the first time I saw a billboard on a mountain. The bridge was slippery but the little girl did not slip but she went up. There were a lot of people.

Marjorie: What did the little girl think?

She thinks that somebody could take away her house, that this was not going to exist anymore, that it was going to turn into nothing but river.

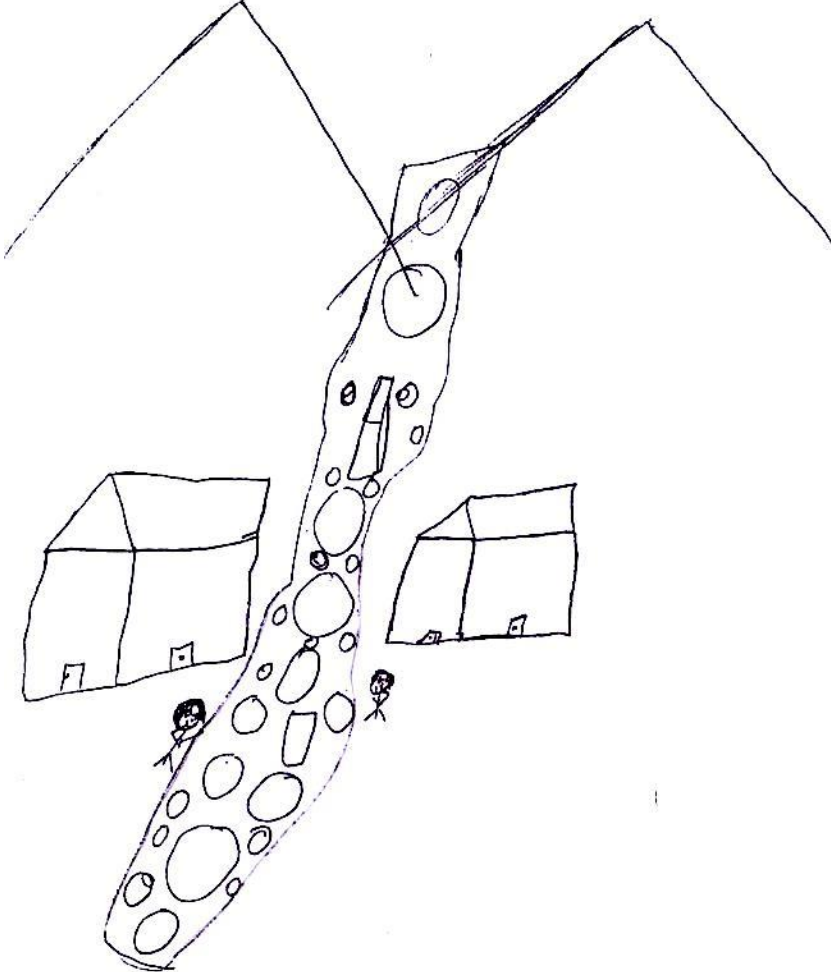
Marjorie: How does she feel?

She's afraid and sad because the river comes up. Everyone went away twice, first on December 15 (1999) and the second time on Sunday in 2000. I missed a lot of days of class. The river took away a person named Gela. He went to swim and he was told that the weather was very ugly and he said "No." and he died. He was a friend of my Grandma and a girl too was taken away by the river. They told her to run and she didn't and through a very little hole in the sewer, there was a hole, and through there, the river flooded and took the girl away.

JUANITA – 11 YEARS OLD

The river began flooding at 6:00 in the morning. The people couldn't imagine that it was going to go up so high. Then, as people used to throw garbage in the river, the bridge was very slippery. The people were passing over it, grabbing on to the pipe and then at night my aunt was fixing the Christmas tree and after that she took it down and then she left running and she couldn't run because the firemen were there and if she ran the river would take her away and they had to throw a rope to her and then she grabbed it at the door where her son was and they both just barely came out and the river almost took away my cousin and my aunt grabbed my cousin and they were able to cross little by little and afterwards they went running up and we stayed down waiting and they told us that we had to run, that the river was coming up and then I, with my anguish, went to look for my grandma and I had to go up some stairs and little by little we got there. We were taken out of that house because it was falling and then very shortly after we left, our house fell. We were in Block One that was down there and two days passed and they came to look for us. We were going to Carayaca but then we couldn't go through because there was a lot of dirt. The car could not go through very well and we went to Guarenas and after that we went to the house of my aunt where we stayed for a month. We came back in January and we arrived there at night and I hugged her a lot and I gave her a little gift and from there we went to bed.

SANTIAGO – 10 YEARS OLD



SANTIAGO – 10 YEARS OLD

There are the rocks and this is the tree trunk. The house, the man came out to see and the lady and this is another house and the doors and the other doors of the other houses and this is the mountain and this is the river. That's it.

Mónica: What happened with the river?

It knocked down a lot of houses, some big storage containers, and even buildings.

Mónica: What happened to them?

They came out to see and they almost fell into the river.

Mónica: The two of them?

Yes.

Mónica: Were they were scared?

Yes.

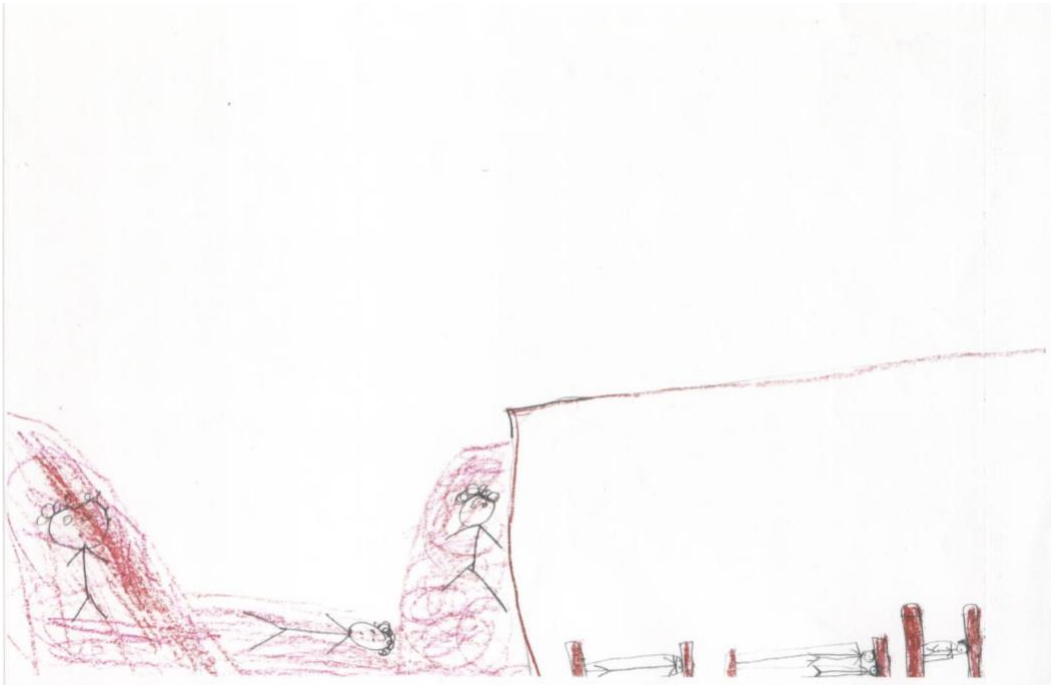
Mónica: Did anything happen to them?

No.

Mónica: Were people scared?

Yes.

SYLVIA – 11 YEARS OLD



SYLVIA – 11 YEARS OLD

Here is the river with dead people and there (describing her drawing) is my family sleeping. My Daddy was going to the bathroom and when he saw the river he called my Mommy. She got up and she didn't want to call me because I suffer from the nerves. [I was baptized when I was two years old and I woke up with bruises and my Mommy said it was from the elves.] The next day I went up to my Grandma's and I saw the way the river was carrying rocks and trees and the family. My Grandma was nervous and had a deep pain in her heart. My Daddy went out to look for food, diapers, water to bathe with and to make food. My Aunt suffers from the nerves because of the tragedy. A lady carried a newborn baby in her arms and the river took them away and the mother and the baby died.

SYLVIA – 11 YEARS OLD

Once upon a time a tragedy was happening as in the state of Vargas. The river passed by and it had taken away houses, children, animals, and the lives of other people. It was so ugly that all the people could not leave their houses and a lady, that did not want to leave her house, was taken by the river but when they saw the lady already dead and those people, like her husband, became very sad that she had died. She was so chévere (nice) with all her neighbors, friends and buddies, etc. That day was so ugly that people thought it was a dream until the river dried out as it is now. So that now they are dying of thirst until at last it rained and from the mountain we grabbed a lot of water and the people became very happy now because they had had what to drink and they became very happy but some of them didn't because they were thinking of the tragedy.

Marjorie: What were they thinking of?

That the river was going to come up again and friends told them not to be sad because the river is not going to come up again. So they were very happy too with the rest of their neighbors and lived happy forever.

DANIEL – 9 YEARS OLD

I was on this balcony with my aunt and my cousin and we were very frightened and this was a cliff and everything came together. My Grandma had to be carried. An aunt took a box of food and gave us soft drinks and water. In the mountains there was a rock and it destroyed all the houses and it took away half of my aunt's roof and we didn't have a place to go and we were taken to Maracay and we were treated well.

DANIEL – 9 YEARS OLD

A house and suddenly the creek rose and it took away a lot of houses and rocks and it destroyed all the streets and the people were frightened and didn't have anywhere to go. The National Guard gave them food, gave them water, everything! And they grabbed it because they had nothing, absolutely nothing to eat and everything was piling up and going to the beach and the fish were dying because of so many infections that they caught.

LORENA – 12 YEARS OLD

A lady who used to live near my aunt's house was taken away by the river. She was covered by mud.

Mónica: Did you know her?

Yes, she was my Mother's Godmother.

Mónica: Did you see when the river took her away.

No.

Mónica: And how did you know about this?

My aunt told me.

Mónica: And how did you feel?

My mother felt bad and me too and she was giving math classes to us.

Mónica: And what happened to her family?

Her son wanted to escape in the van but when the wave came it couldn't run and the river covered it and her son tried to save it but he couldn't.

Mónica: Something else?

No, nothing else.

MANUEL – 12 YEARS OLD

The flood? Noo! I already forgot that. Once upon a time the river took away the bridge, a car. It rained every day. There was no sun. The people were scared because they lived beside the river and the children were scared too. It took a house and the people ran from one side to the other to be safe from the river and so the river would not take them. It took away a lot of cars, a lot of houses. I don't remember anything else.

VICTORIA – 9 YEARS OLD

May I put a rock here?

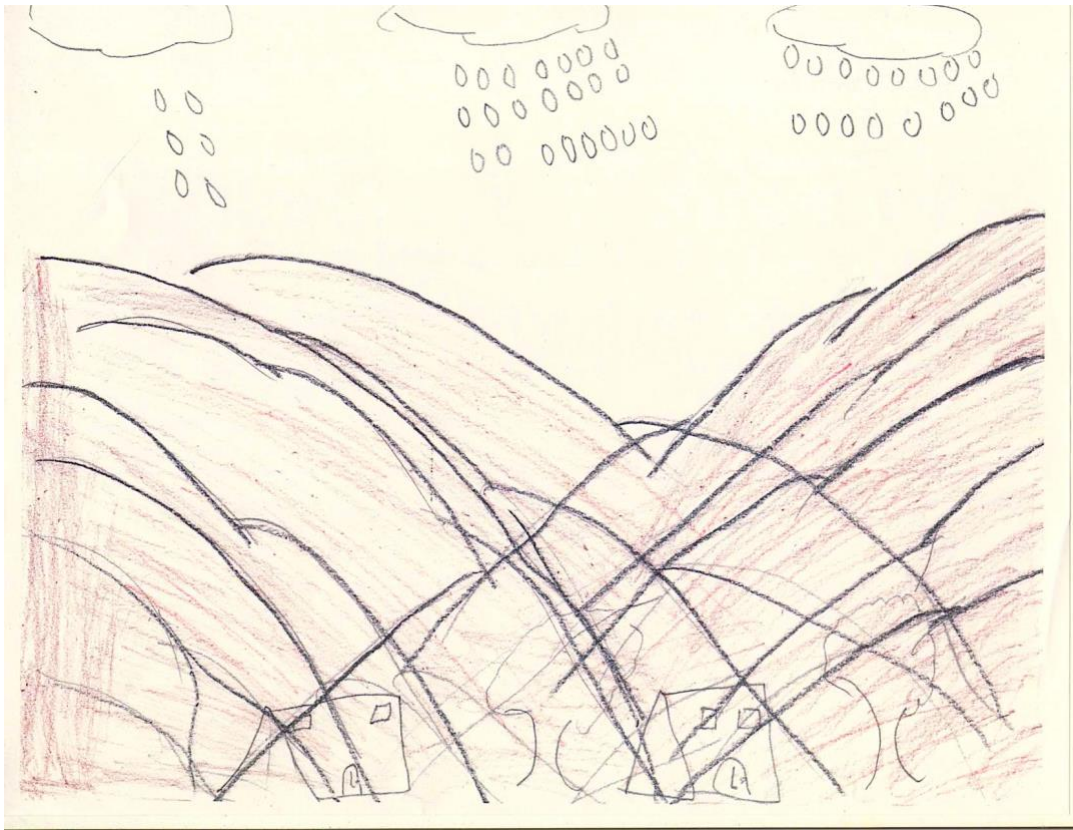
Mónica: Whatever you want.

When we got on the helicopter the little rope was about to break. I fell into the water. The river took me away and I was on a rock and that's it. Afterwards my mother came for me and also my aunt and my uncle.

Mónica: And who is here?

My aunt, my grandma, my uncle, my brother.

LORENA – 12 YEARS OLD



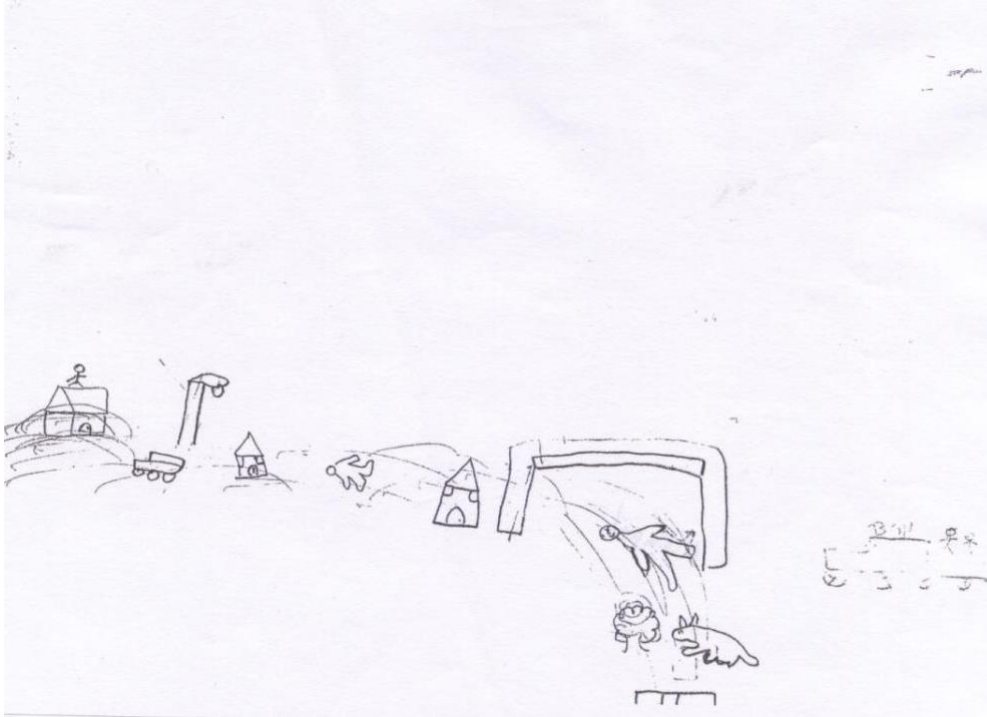
LORENA – 12 YEARS OLD

Around 9:00 at night the rivers began to rise. First it was the one in Piedra Azul, at 6:00 in the morning the one in Quebrada Seca. The rivers began to knock down the houses and the river was coming with more strength and the trees were falling down. When a wave came, it knocked down a house and it seemed as if it were going to explode. The flood lasted for hours and that's it.

Mónica: What did you feel?

I felt bad, full of anguish, crying. I thought that my aunt was going to die. The river did not take me.

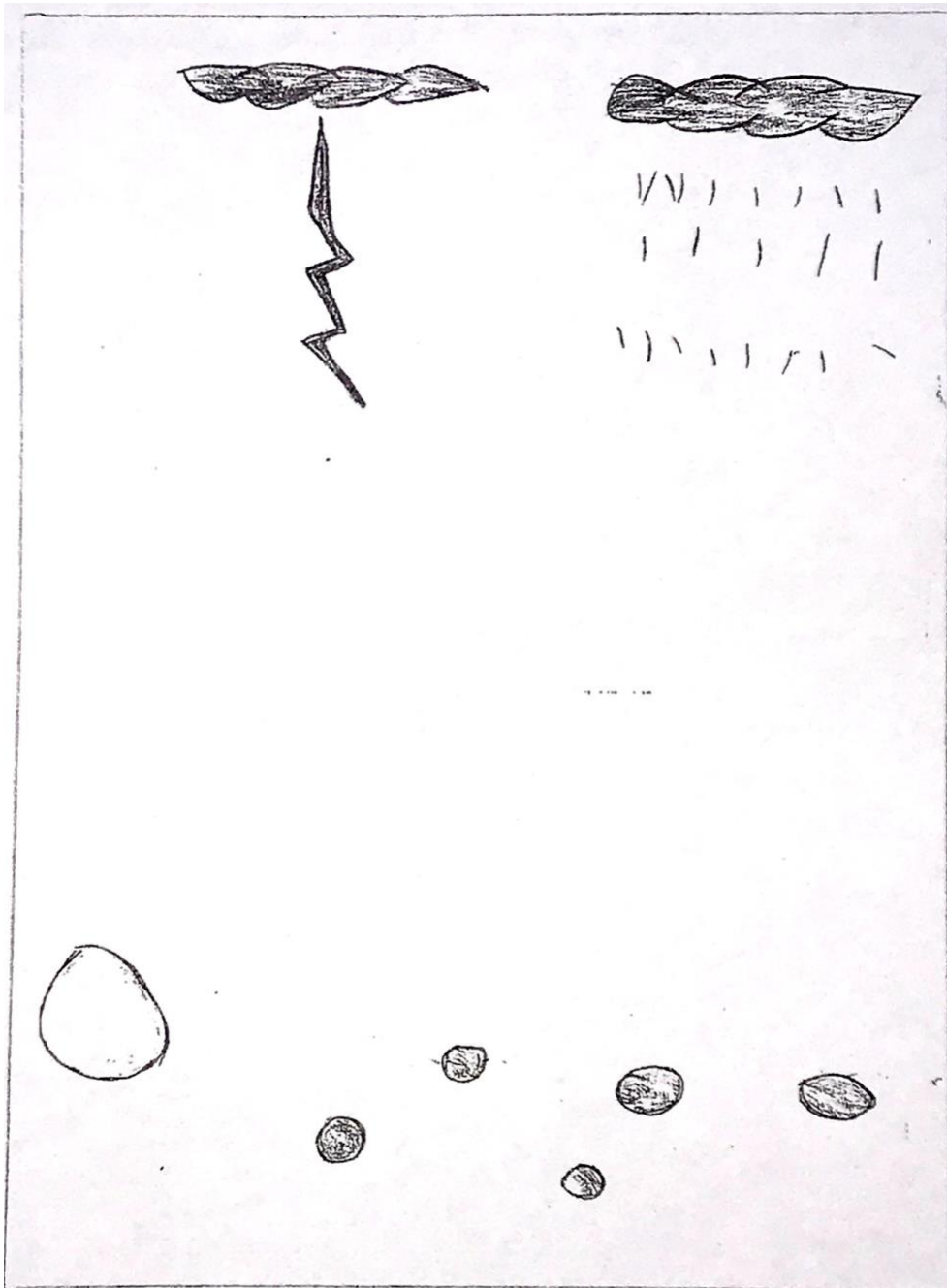
MANUEL – 12 YEARS OLD



MANUEL – 12 YEARS OLD

The river passed over the house. I was on the house there with another person. It took cars, street lamps, houses, people, bridges, dogs, trees and some other things and nothing more. Oh, and it took the market and the people that were watching. There was looting. Everybody was scared and looting. I saw people buried. It took apartments and brought stones and sand.

VICTORIA - 9 YEARS OLD



VICTORIA – 9 YEARS OLD

This was when the rocks were coming down the river and the people were coming down in the river. The children crying, even pregnant ladies.

Mónica: And did you see that?

Yes, with a flashlight of the man that is living with my Mom now for eight years.

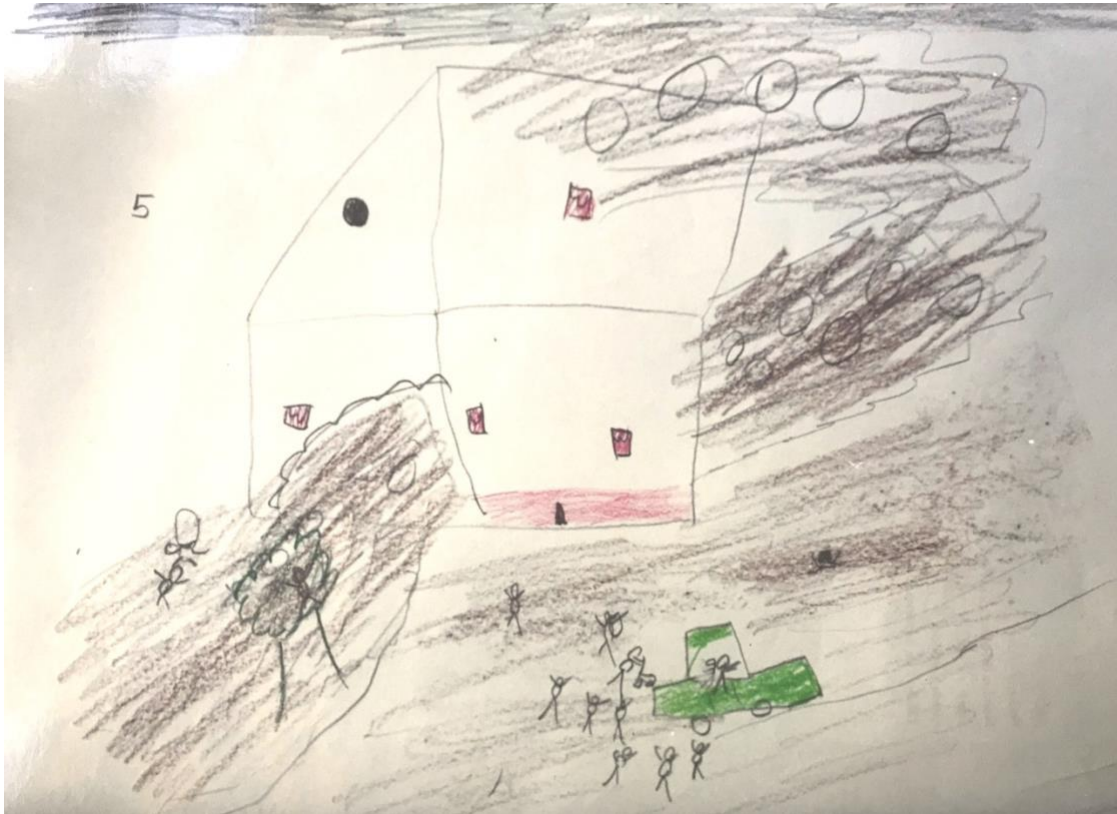
Mónica: And what did you see?

People in the river asking for help. This lightening is because in my Grandma's house (I sleep with my Grandma and my cousin) the lightening struck right beside the bed where I was and my cousin went to look for me and she began crying with me and then we all went to bed and covered ourselves from top to bottom because we were afraid. Then my cousin's mother went to pick her up.

Mónica: And then what did you do?

I wanted to leave because the river went through Montesano and that is where my Father's Mother lives. When it stopped raining I went with my Grandmother who is 79 years old and I took food to her. There was nothing left of the house of Señora Miriam and nothing was left of my Father's Mother's house either. When I went there my Father had a cast and I asked him what happened and he said that he had to fight for his family.

MARCOS – 11 YEARS OLD



MARCOS – 11 YEARS OLD

This is the house and the river comes and breaks it in two and a huge wave takes it away and also the people that were getting into a car to leave and the river came up and we were running and it took away the people and destroyed the houses. It opened holes, smashed the people and the people hung on to the trees to save themselves but the trees were also taken away and the people shout as if they were crazy saying, "The river, the river, the river is coming." And the people who could get away in their car went to Barquisimeto and there they were worried about their family, crying until the family arrived. They cried, they embraced and they wished good things to each other. Some days later it passed and they came back to La Guaira from Barquisimeto and they bathed in the rivers and they were all happy

Mónica: How does that family feel now?

Very bad because many people friends and neighbors died. Their things, their houses and they cried for the people that were raped during the tragedy.

{He takes a pencil and writes a number on the page.}

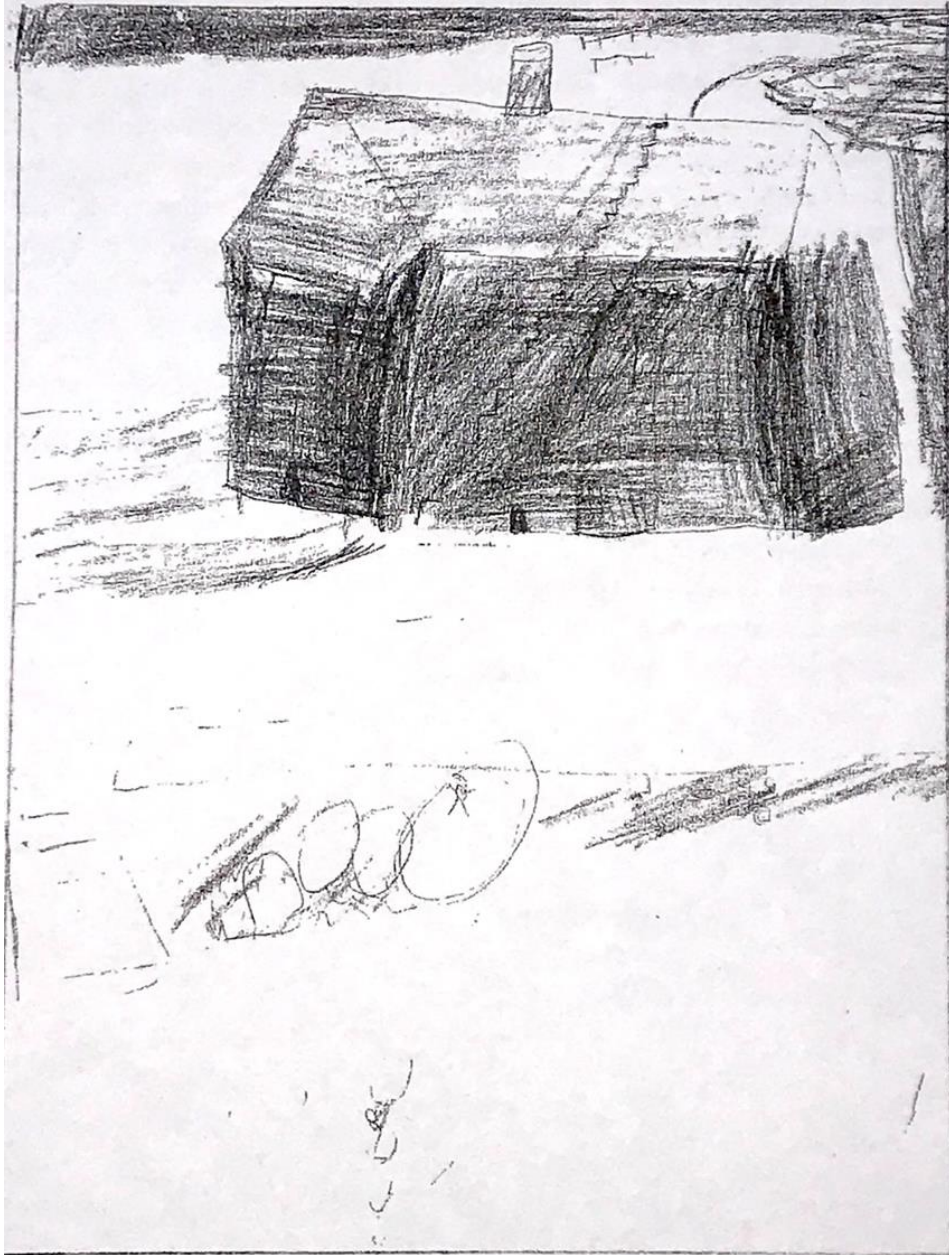
Mónica: What is it?

The night. {then he makes a "5"}

Mónica: And this five?

It happened at 5:00 in the morning.

MARCOS – 11 YEARS OLD



MARCOS – 11 YEARS OLD

This was a beautiful house that was being painted because it was going to be December 31st and they were putting up some light bulbs. One day it was night and it was raining and the river was up high but it was not taking anything away and a few moments later the river took away the stairs and it came up higher and the people in this house left and a lady was telling them not to go and the husband of her daughter was saying that she was crazy for staying. They went in a car. They parked in the house of a friend of her husband and the river went through the streets and there were little children crossing and they got into a house. They were sleeping and there were 4 no 3 that were cold and one that was hot, the one that was hot was wet and he was wet because of the fear. They were hungry. They only ate cookies and during the night a sound was heard as if it were a river but it was a plane. The people said, "The river is coming." During the night they looked for food and they got it. The firemen said that in the mouth of the river it was raining and the people in this house, out of fear, went to the place where the man worked. There he got money and took a bus to Barquisimeto where he lived with his relatives. The wife thought of her sister and the mother of her daughter. She was calm but then came a tragedy in which some bad men came and stole a TV set, a radio, and tried to rape a lady. Then the bad man asked the other one to help him and the bad man with a knife stole the TV set.

Mónica: What is this?

These are rocks with people. This is a river, a pipe, this house was saved (points to the right) and this one wasn't (points to the left) the two plants were taken away by the river.

Mónica: And what do the people think about what happened to them?

They are recovering from it and buying another house. The other part of the family gets frightened with the weather.

Mónica: And how do they feel?

Their house was really pretty, beautiful and they will never have another one like it and besides the animals that lived there they will never get them back.

Mónica: What animals?

A dog and a cat.

Mónica: What happened to them? They couldn't rescue them because the river was up high.

Mónica: Was it anybody's fault.

Yes. The river's. That is my family. That family is mine and I would like those animals to live. But we couldn't save them. And what hurts more is that they were tied and couldn't escape.

Mónica: Are you mad at the fact that they didn't let you get them loose?

Yes, my grandpa has a dog and he says that it is in heaven. I think that my cat could save himself because he was not tied but I looked for it and I don't find it.

Mónica: What was it like?

He was yellow and he was called Snow and every time I see a cat I call him to see if he turns his head and if someday this happens I will know that it is my cat.

Mónica: Do you want to have animals now?

No, I don't want to have any. I liked mine – the cat, the dog, the chickens, some birds, and a turtle.

MARCOS – 11 YEARS OLD

A house that was very beautiful but with the tragedy disappeared but it stood with so much strength that it disappeared. The people who lived there cried remembering the house and the animals.

Mónica: What animals?

A cat, a dog, a turtle, a chicken, little birds and little parakeets.

The people who lived there after crying a lot said "We can make another life and we are going to remember and get back all that we had." And with a

drawing like this, like the one my mother did, they remember and it is possible with the drawing and the engineers to make another house similar to the other one asking how much it will cost.

Mónica: What is this?

A little house where flowers are sold. In the yard there is a way out and there is another at the back door that goes to another street and to an alley. This is an almond tree with its swing and two gentlemen playing cards. A little bird on the roof.

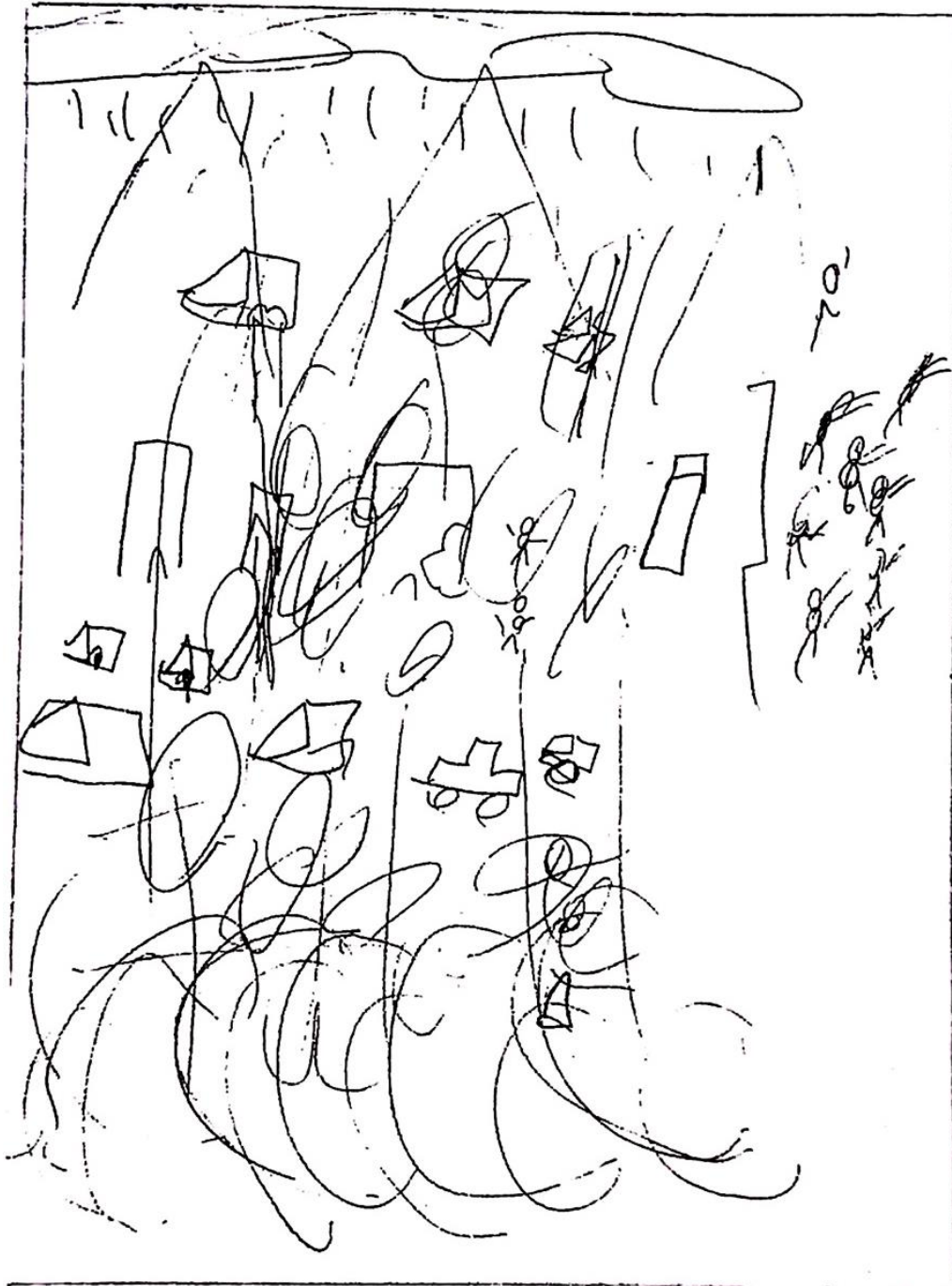
Mónica: What is this?

Little birds with the sun and this is the tree where the river went through and this is the chicken coup and this is the river.

Mónica: Who lives in this house?

My grandparents, my aunt, my uncle, my cousins and I do.

MARCOS – 11 YEARS OLD



MARCOS – 11 YEARS OLD

First it was raining then it stopped raining and then everything became black and there was a moon but it was covered. Afterward it rained cats and dogs. The river came but it was not so high. Then it grows more and more until it becomes very big. The people running. A pipe falls and people died electrocuted. It takes away a house, a car, people running. The river came down until it arrived at the city. The buildings were knocked over and finally it got to the sea and there was a horrible noise. The houses were shaking and the people were shouting frightened. Six days passed and it was calm and people came out to loot and the firemen came. Some days later the river went up high again and it took away a man who had not died before. The river became calm and some tractors came to move but the river came up again but this time it didn't take anything away. The people were crying and praying because the water was coming. And afterward the river did not come up anymore. And when there are clouds people use their whistles to warn that the river is coming.



CRISIS INTERVENTION AFTER MAJOR DISASTERS

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Major disasters are large-scale devastating events that destroy homes and infrastructure, kill people, and leave many others physically injured and psychologically traumatized. Such disasters are infrequent but devastating enough for us to make advance preparation a high priority. This paper begins with a brief description of acute and posttraumatic stress disorders and then describes some early intervention strategies for counseling traumatized adults and children immediately following a major disaster of natural or man-made origin.

This paper was written in response to the December 1999 floods that devastated much of Venezuela, killed 10,000 to 30,000 people, and left 500,000 people homeless and psychologically traumatized. It was written for professionals who volunteered to work in the shelters set up around the country for survivors of the flood. Theoretical concerns were minimized so that it would be technically useful to professionals with different theoretical orientations and to nonprofessionals working in the shelters as well. While the principles described here were first used to aid survivors of the flood, they have subsequently been found useful in the wake of other disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and massive fires. The techniques described can also be applied to survivors of man-made disasters, such as war, terrorist attacks, and violent social unrest.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and technique developed around the ever present traumas of early childhood experience and the neurotic symptoms that resulted from these and became established in the adult personality structure. This was a powerful insight but in the early days available only to practicing psychoanalysts and their patients. However, in 1914 the First World War began, and students of Freud who entered the military found themselves faced with psychologically traumatized soldiers on both sides of the war. They independently modified Freud's technique to attend to the needs of these

soldiers, whom they described as suffering from “war neuroses.” The symptoms the soldiers demonstrated included trembling, screaming, apathy, agitation, terror, irritability, angry outbursts, and helplessness, among others. When the world learned of the benefits these soldiers obtained through modified forms of psychoanalytic therapy, psychoanalysis received a new wave of international attention.

By the Second World War psychoanalytic influence had already entered psychiatry in the United States military. The successes of psychoanalytically informed therapy for soldiers with war neuroses during and after that war helped launch the postwar “golden age of psychoanalysis” in the United States. During the US war involvement in Vietnam, traumatized soldiers appeared once again, and in their efforts to self-heal the veterans formed groups to discuss their symptoms and struggles in order to readjust to their postwar situation. During the course of these meetings they developed a deeper understanding of what then came to be described as “posttraumatic stress disorder.” Soon thereafter people began recognizing that the same symptoms of soldiers traumatized by war were present in people who suffered other sorts of psychological crises associated with horrific car accidents and assaults.

What Is a Psychological Crisis?

In a psychological crisis a traumatic event overloads a person’s capacity to cope in their usual fashion, and what cannot be coped with, or well processed psychologically, is converted into symptomatic behavior. Psychological crises cannot be reliably predicted by the events that precede them. An event that precipitates a psychological crisis for one person does not necessarily precipitate a crisis for another person. Nonetheless, some events of disastrous character commonly precipitate psychological crisis reactions. These include physical assaults; torture; rape; automobile accidents; intense personal losses; natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, fires, and floods; and man-made disasters such as war, terrorist attacks, and violent social unrest. Events like these often induce a psychiatric disorder that we now call an “acute stress disorder.”

Acute stress disorder is characterized by intense fear, helplessness, and horror. There may be an emotional numbing, a lack of emotional responsiveness, a feeling of detachment, reduced awareness of surroundings, a sense of unreality, or amnesia. People suffering an acute stress disorder may feel

anxious, excitable, agitated, distressed, irritable, or hopeless. They may reexperience the event in recurring dreams, flashbacks, or persistent intrusive memories of the trauma. They may avoid people, places, and objects that reawaken memories of the traumatic event. They may have difficulty concentrating and functioning in their usual way at home and at work. They may also suffer survivor guilt, guilt for not providing enough help to others, or self-criticism in terms of what they did or did not do in the crisis situation. They may isolate themselves or behave erratically. Some people may become aggressive or self-destructive, disregard self-care, become confused, or behave in a bizarre fashion.

When therapeutic intervention comes quickly, the symptoms of acute stress disorder typically diminish or disappear entirely within 30 days. Sometimes the symptoms disappear even when left untreated. But in many cases, particularly when untreated, the disorder may persist. If its duration is from one to three months, we call it an acute posttraumatic stress disorder. When the symptoms last more than three months, we call it a chronic posttraumatic stress disorder.” (This diagnostic information is derived from the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual-5*, 2013)

It is common for chronic posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms to persist for many years, to become serious constraints on a person’s life, and to pose serious challenges for family members in dealing with the patient’s irritability, belligerence, unwarranted fears, nightmares, and other negative behaviors and experiences.

In horrific fires, floods, and earthquakes people often lose prized possessions, homes, and loved ones. In response to these losses people commonly experience depressive reactions, grief, anxiety, confusion, derealization, sleep and eating difficulties, psychosomatic complaints, agitation, emotional deregulation, screaming, crying, physical attacks on one’s own body, arguing, fighting, and so on. In these cases the first step is to find safety and help the person to calm down enough to begin a proper crisis counseling intervention.

Working with Patients with Acute Stress Disorders

Crisis counselors working with patients with acute stress disorders may initially assist them in the management of various practical tasks and then find a safe place to talk about the disaster, the survivor’s symptoms, or

whatever else is foremost on the patient's mind. Though it is sometimes initially painful to talk about the traumatic event, people often report a sense of relief and a reduction of symptoms after they have been able to discuss it.

While adults may talk with a therapist, a child suffering an acute stress reaction is likely to talk about it in the child's nonverbal language of play or in the verbally spoken metaphors of the stories they tell from their imagination. So with children therapists are more likely to conduct a play therapy session. (We will go into this further in the section on children.) When the behavior change of the traumatized person affects the whole family, it is often helpful to conduct a family therapy session to address difficult issues and improve communication between family members.

A traumatic event is one in which a person's coping mechanisms are overwhelmed by the intensity and magnitude of the traumatic situation. Being overwhelmed in this way, the person's primitive defenses are mobilized, resulting in symptomatic behaviors. Beneath these symptoms are unprocessed aspects of the traumatic experience and the remnants of traumatic experiences from early childhood. In treating acute stress disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder we want to help the patient to recover the traumatic experience, break it down into smaller pieces, understand it, make it more intelligible, and liberate the emotions previously frozen in the trauma-based symptoms.

There are some circumstances in which the person is uninterested or unable to speak of the traumatic event. In these circumstances the person is encouraged to speak about whatever is uppermost in their mind, and the symptoms sometimes diminish nonetheless. While we encourage the patient to speak about those things that are difficult to speak about, we always respect the patient's defenses. And if the patient is not ready to speak, we don't push them.

The crisis counselor working directly in the disaster site must always be mindful of any ongoing threats to health and safety. They must get themselves and the patient out of danger first.

Although they are often linked, fear and panic are not the same. Fear is a rational and healthy response to a dangerous situation; it helps us to manage or flee a dangerous situation. Panic is an irrational anxiety response to a situation that could be dangerous but isn't right now. The panic reaction is often more dangerous than any remote possibility of danger, as it can lead to carelessness, impulsiveness, and sometimes to tragic accidents.

The crisis counselor needs to evaluate the situation for present danger, take note of what resources are available, and then establish priorities as to whom to counsel first and how to coordinate care with the available resources. The crisis counselor should be kind, calm, empathic, understanding, warm, organized, efficient, and emotionally present. The crisis counselor must communicate clearly, facilitate connections between people, foster collaboration with other professionals and nonprofessionals, and take control of the situation to limit any additional trauma.

In natural and man-made disasters everyone in the area is affected by the crisis, including the counselors themselves. As such, there are several useful ideas to keep in mind:

1. Counselors Need to Take Care of Themselves and Each Other

It is easy for counselors to become overwhelmed and emotionally drained by this kind of work. Food, water, rest, and consultation are essential to the proper functioning of the crisis counselor. A traumatized and overwhelmed therapist is not able to be as helpful as one who is rested and calm. Experienced psychotherapists who have never worked in a crisis before are often surprised to discover how thoroughly exhausting this work can be. Crisis counselors need to look after each other.

2. Counselors Need to Remember to Think Clearly

It is easy to lose perspective and become confused in a crisis. Counselors should slow down, make a checklist of priorities to address with each case, and discuss their clinical decisions with their colleagues.

3. Counselors Need to Set Priorities

In a crisis, people often lose their ability to differentiate between what is important and what is not. It is helpful for the counselor to have a checklist in order to offer guidance through the work. The list might include information such as the name, age, and address of the patient; family members; physical illness or injury; medications; time of last meal; and date of last counseling

session. Safety, medical concerns, sleep, food, and shelter must be attended to or otherwise considered before any psychological treatment can begin.

Many people are delirious, anxious, or depressed because of medical problems, which may include concussions, brain damage, metabolic conditions, or lack of medication for previously diagnosed problems. Others may be agitated due to lack of sleep. If a person hasn't eaten for most of the day, they may appear depressed or agitated, or they may have difficulties thinking. It is dangerous to treat these kinds of problems as psychological problems when they are partially or fully the result of medical or metabolic issues. Sometimes a patient needs a meal, a cup of water, a rest, a medical referral, first aid, or medication more urgently than anything else.

4. Counselors Need to Work Collaboratively

Crisis intervention after major disasters is best performed under the conditions of intense interdisciplinary interaction. Such an environment gives counselors the opportunity for mutual supervision and consultation with medical doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, emergency personnel, and others involved. It is easy for crisis counselors to become overwhelmed by the intensity of the problems encountered and, as a result, find their thinking clouded. Frequent clinical consultation is essential for conscientious crisis intervention.

5. Counselors Need to Recognize That Working with Patients in Crisis Is Different from Working with Patients in a Private Practice Setting

Counselors need to leave the private practice model behind. Your crisis intervention "office" may be a large room or shelter with many other people in it doing all sorts of different things, or it may not be in a building at all. Confidentiality may be a lowered priority or seriously compromised by the nature of the emergency and the need for support from others. We try to maintain some level of privacy, but beyond that we need to be flexible with the crisis intervention frame. The counselor meets with people whenever they are in need, and sessions are limited only by the resources available.

6. Counselors Need to Be Flexible When Working in a Crisis

Crisis counselors need to look at the crisis situation clearly and be as flexible, creative, and innovative as possible. They need to improvise with space, time, materials, and resources. They need to collaborate closely with others. They need to assess their task and choose goals appropriate to the circumstances and the situation. They need to be forgiving of others and themselves when they lose their composure. And, if at all possible, they need to maintain both their sense of calm and their sense of humor.

Crisis Intervention

Just as the crisis intervention setting is different from a private practice setting, so too are the problems the crisis counselor needs to treat. The problems include the kinds of symptoms described above in the section on acute stress disorder. During the crisis, the goal of treatment is not characterological change, interpretation of transference, or insight into the childhood origin of the patient's problems.

The three goals of crisis intervention are:

1. To help the patient to cope with the trauma.
2. To help the patient adjust to the new situation.
3. To return the patient to their previous level of functioning.

These goals are met by inviting the patient to talk about their experiences, gain some perspective on the event, sort out the associated thoughts and feelings, and problem-solve about how to deal with their new situation.

First Contact

In the first contact it is useful to get basic information such as the person's name, age, medical condition, and social support system, but the crisis patient should not be subjected to a lengthy intake evaluation. The counselor should try to set the patient at ease, clarify the task, and invite the patient to talk. A good crisis counselor is a good listener but is also more active than a psychotherapist seeing patients in a private practice. The crisis counselor

clarifies, reassures, educates, offers advice about practical matters that the patient needs to deal with, and refers patients to appropriate agencies and programs. The counselor needs to be mindful of the patient's medical condition and seek medical consultations if the patient's disorientation, confusion, anxiety, depression, agitation, or sleeplessness are at levels that severely impair functioning, indicate a physical injury, or make the crisis intervention impossible.

Long-Term and Short-Term Goals

In the midst of a crisis, people lose perspective. They are flooded with thoughts and feelings. They have difficulty setting priorities and, as a result, they tend to become very concerned about unimportant matters or other concerns they can't deal with. At the same time, they avoid or ignore the more immediate concerns of the moment that they *can* manage. For this reason, it is often useful to help the patient to organize their thoughts into two sets of goals: a set of short-term goals and a set of long-term goals.

Short-Term Goals include:

Calm down

Try to come to terms with intense fear

Talk about what has just happened

Get shelter for the night

Have something to eat, drink, etc.

Long-Term Goals include:

Find permanent housing

Enroll in school

Get into a longer-term therapy

Look for a job

Make plans to move to another town, etc.

The crisis counselor needs to be active and directive in helping the patient sort out these two types of goals and then working with them to achieve the short-term goals. One survivor of the Venezuelan flood was primarily distressed about how she was going to return a lost book she had borrowed from the library. It was probably dynamically important, but in the midst of the crisis it was the least of her concerns after her entire house had been destroyed.

Making a Plan

People in crisis have trouble concentrating, thinking straight, using good judgment, and setting priorities. It is often helpful for the therapist to take notes while talking to the patient, keep track of all the information that emerges, and have a list of topics to address during the interview—topics like short-term and long-term goals. During the interview it is useful to collaborate with the patient to make a plan, write the plan in legible penmanship, and number each of the points and format it so that it is easy to read. Here's an example:

1. If I get upset, I will talk to a counselor.
2. I will make sure to have dinner tonight.
3. I will find a place to stay for tonight.
4. I will call my uncle to see if he can help me out during the next two weeks.
5. I will talk to my doctor about replacing my medication for my asthma.

You can refer to this plan in your subsequent session or pass it on in a file for the next therapist who may pick up the case, as this is often the arrangement in a shelter setting, where multiple counselors may be helping the same patient over the course of several days. If there is no documentation of what you have done and what needs to be done with the patient, there will be no continuity of care, and the patient may be subjected to a chaotic, uncoordinated treatment regimen. Furthermore, if the plan is illegible, it functionally does not exist.

Telling the Story

People develop the symptoms of an acute stress disorder because they have been exposed to a traumatic situation that overwhelmed their ability to cope with the situation in their usual way. Consequently, their symptoms, like other psychological symptoms, serve to cover or hide the overwhelming and unprocessed experiences. Psychoanalysis is called the “talking cure,” and while crisis intervention is different from psychoanalysis, it is based on the same principle of helping the patient to talk about what is difficult to talk about. In this way the patient can transform their psychological symptoms into stories that help them make sense of what has happened.

It is important to remember that there is no generic response to a crisis. If ten people are traumatized by a combat situation, they will each be traumatized in a unique way that pertains to their own personal history. If ten people are traumatized by an earthquake, they will each have a different experience of it: One will feel guilty for what he didn't do. One will feel abandoned. One will feel weak. One will feel betrayed. One will feel ashamed of something he did. One will go silent. One will become focused on a seemingly obscure and insignificant event. One will become sad realizing the emptiness of a marital relation in the face of the tragedy. One will have a crisis of faith. One will feel forgotten. And so on. The disaster is an assault on their psychic integrity and, as such, reveals not only the recent trauma but the conflicts and traumas of the past, which gave rise to their long-standing personality structures.

Houses with different kinds of construction are, of course, affected in different ways in an earthquake, and psyches with different kinds of personality structures are affected in different ways in a major disaster.

Crisis intervention is intended to help the patient tell their story, hang words on the traumatic experience, get some distance from the event to help understand what has happened, and return the patient to their previous level of functioning. As the patient tells the story of the traumatic experience, they may laugh, cry, yell, whisper, fall silent for a while, recall another seemingly unrelated loss, or become preoccupied with some feature of the story that may seem to us to be insignificant. The therapist should listen patiently and keep the patient returning to their story. The process of telling one's story and being heard produces a favorable change in the way the crisis is dealt with psychologically. The chaotic flood of emotions and images becomes more

manageable when communicated in a verbal, narrative form. Some call this “mentalizing.”

Common Themes in the Stories of Trauma

In the process of hanging words on the experiences of trauma we find several recurring clinical presentations. This list by no means describes all the different stories but offers a glimpse of some familiar scenarios:

1. Some people are overwhelmed by emotion and because of this have difficulty speaking. Counselors should help them calm down by taking them to a quiet place, offering a cup of water, allowing them to express their emotion, and then helping them speak about what they are experiencing. Sitting with the patient in silence or letting them cry for a while is very helpful, but eventually it is important to help the person to speak, little by little, about the disaster.

2. Some patients are emotionally numb while telling their story of horror. In these situations the counselor can point out the usual feelings that most people have in such circumstances and wonder, with the patient, what feelings might be hidden from view. But it is also important to remember that if a person is emotionally numb, the reason is to ward off overwhelming affect. It is important for the counselor to respect the patient’s defenses and give the patient time to let their feelings about the experience come to the surface. Some survivors of trauma may appear to be doing well in the first days following the disaster and then completely fall apart a week or two later, when they are in the safety of another context and the danger of the traumatic situation is far behind them.

3. Though it is irrational, it is also very common to encounter people feeling guilty for surviving a tragedy when others have died. The crisis counselor can help these patients to mourn their losses by inviting them to talk about the people and things they have lost. It is sometimes useful to ask the person if their deceased loved one would have wanted the patient to go on suffering or, alternatively, carry on in remembrance of the deceased, living life to the fullest. This tends to shift the focus from endless survival guilt to mourning one’s losses and finding a place in one’s heart for those who have died.

4. Some patients feel that they have in some way caused the disaster or that they could have done something to save their family or friends. In these

circumstances it is important to help them recognize the power of the opponent they were up against, acknowledge the fear and confusion of the moment, and help them to mourn their losses. Another, related problem is trying to identify someone else who must be guilty. Blaming oneself or finding blame in others, however, only postpones the inevitable task of mourning the terrible losses.

After the person has told their story, it is often useful for them to tell the story again and again and again. Patients won't need to be told to do this; it will come naturally. But we can show understanding and let them know they are not boring us. Each time the story is told it is likely to be further elaborated and the withheld emotions further liberated. It is useful for a patient of any age to make drawings of the traumatic experience and dictate or write a narrative, which is kept by the patient with a copy in the case notes.

Termination

Crisis counseling is, by its nature, very brief. Many interventions take place entirely in one session. It is important to conduct the session as a single-session treatment. If the counselor sees the patient again, that is fine. Some crisis counseling may take place over several sessions, but it is helpful to regard each session as an intervention unto itself. The crisis intervention should end with a concrete plan for the patient to follow. The plan should be written and given to the patient. If the patient is a child, the plan should be given to the adult in charge or placed in a chart for the child's ongoing care. The counselor should make any and all referrals that might be necessary, and then the patient and therapist need to say their good-byes. The therapist needn't worry about being too neutral. It is helpful in crisis counseling for the counselor to express feelings about the tragedy and empathy toward the patient, offer advice, and wish the patient good luck. Though physical contact is avoided in psychotherapy, hugs are not uncommon in the midst of catastrophic events. A reassuring touch or a hug can sometimes make all the difference in the treatment. While counselors need not be excessively nervous about touching a patient, it is important to remember that the crisis patient is often feeling like an exposed nerve and any unwanted or excessive physical affection can feel intrusive or confusing. Any physical affection should always be in the interest of the patient, not the crisis counselor.

Children

Most of what has been described above applies to children as well. The big difference is that when children tell their story, they speak in the language of play and the metaphors of their imagination. As such, it is helpful to meet children who have suffered the traumatic experience of a major disaster with a pocketful of crayons and a pad of paper or a bag of toys and puppets. With paper and crayons children can draw a picture and tell a story that reflects their concerns in metaphor. The invitation is for them to draw whatever they want and tell a story about it. To help the counselor understand the metaphor, it is useful to invite the child to talk about the picture. The counselor should not ask “What is it?” but rather “What can you tell me about this?” “What happened before this scene that we see here in this picture?” “What is going to happen next?” “How do the people or animals in the picture feel?” It’s often useful to write the story down as the child dictates it to the counselor. Afterward the counselor can read the story back to the child, who can then elaborate on it. In this way the counselor and the child have the opportunity to enter into a dialogue about the monster, or the war, or the big animal, or whatever other metaphor might be used to speak of their concerns about the child’s traumatic experience.

Drawing a picture and then telling a story is also a useful technique when children experience flashbacks of the trauma or are awakened by nightmares of the trauma. When they can draw their dream and tell a story about it, they can often get some distance from it and manage it a little better. When children wake up at night frightened by a nightmare, it does no good to deny the existence of the monster they just saw. Instead, ask them to show you what they saw by describing it, drawing a picture of it, or telling a story about it. Often no interpretation of the material is necessary. The counselor should just let the children express themselves and elaborate their stories while the counselor remains curious about what is happening and empathizes with the affect. If a child has difficulty getting started, the counselor can invite them to draw before and after pictures of the traumatic event—for example, draw the house before and after the flood, the trees before and after the fire, the building during the earthquake, etc.

Toys and puppets provide the same opportunity to express the child’s deepest concerns in the metaphors of play. Children should be spoken to honestly but in small doses that acknowledge the reality of the disaster and its consequences and thereby help them to come to terms with what has

happened. Perhaps the child claims to not be afraid but might tell us that the puppet or baby doll is afraid. To reduce helplessness, children benefit from being given active roles in caring for themselves and others in developmentally appropriate ways. The inclusion of family members or caregiving persons in child interviews helps the child's social network understand the child and support the therapeutic benefits after the counseling ends. One crisis counselor who was working in the shelter for the Venezuelan flood survivors saw some adolescents looking restless in the way her own teenagers do just before getting into mischief. She called them over and put them to work helping in the shelter, and they happily took on their new jobs with a sense of real purpose.

Connections, Disconnections, and Reconnections

We all know ourselves and find pleasure in our world through the connections we have to the people, places, and things in our lives. When those connections are cut due to fire, flood, or earthquake, children and adults become frightened not only by the event they just suffered but also by the disconnection from everything that once was their world. In such circumstances it is important to try to reconstruct the world by hanging on to whatever has survived, including objects and memories. When working with children, it is often useful to gather together their drawings and stories so that they can be stapled together into a "book," which, for the rest of their lives, be the only thing remaining of all that they lost. In addition, names and contact data can be included in this personal story book, which may accompany the child in unknown ways for years to come.

Children need to feel at home in their temporary shelter. If possible, define their sleeping space, put their possessions in a bag, and offer some sort of consistency. Reassure them of your efforts to do your best to help them, but don't offer promises you can't keep. Be honest. They often enjoy having something like a toy that they can hang on to and use to maintain some sense of security during an otherwise chaotic time. It can be useful to invite the children to sit together and have stories read to them in the shelter. Children might also find some comfort in taking turns talking about their experiences of the trauma in a group context, but this should be carefully monitored, as some children might be overwhelmed further in such an activity.

When working with children, crisis counselors should expect regressions, including dependent clinging, loss of urinary and bowel continence, and emotional upsets emerging seemingly for no reason at all. When children begin

to feel safe, many allow their memories and feelings to come to the surface and suddenly just start crying. Other times a word, a song, an activity, or a person's name serves as a trigger, and suddenly the memories and feelings come rushing in. Children may have symptoms of insomnia, eating problems, aggressive behavior, withdrawal, and so on. It is best to initially look at these symptoms as expressions of the traumatic experience, but in fact some of it might be preexisting behavior simply reappearing within the context of the emergency shelter.

In this regard, it is also important to remember that adults and children affected by crises include people with a full range of diagnoses—depressives, obsessive compulsives, psychotics, addicts, mentally retarded people, borderline patients, delinquents, and others. And in a crisis, counselors may see all of them. People often fall apart in a crisis and look much worse than they usually do, but after a suitable crisis intervention they will be able to cope with the situation, adjust to the new reality, and return to their previous level of functioning.

Finally—and this is worth repeating—crisis counselors need to pace themselves in their work to avoid becoming overwhelmed. If they do become secondarily traumatized in their role as first responders, they may require a crisis intervention themselves. Though there is no shame in a crisis counselor needing a crisis intervention, whenever possible we should try to avoid the possibility of the counselor becoming overwhelmed. The crisis counselor needs to maintain a manageable pace, eat properly, rest properly, consult with colleagues on cases, and speak with a colleague or supervisor about particularly stressful or upsetting cases.

As psychologists we have an important role to play in crisis intervention after major disasters. We always hope there won't be another major disaster, but we also know that they are inevitable, in one form or another. For this reason, it is best for us to always be prepared.