HEALING IS FOR THE BRAVE



URGENT ALLER OF THE PROPERTY O

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The insights on healing and care shared in this report are only

possible because of the openness and generosity of Sudanese

womn's human rights defenders who shared their insights,

passions, fears and hopes for their healing journeys with us.

We extend our love and gratitude to you!

We would like to extend our appreciation to Lamia Samir, the

brilliant healer whose compassion and grace in accompanying

the activists were instrumental in creating a process in which

everyone felt held.

Authors: Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu.

Editor: Ndana Bofu-Tawamba

Reviewers: Jean Kemitare and Masa Amir.

Illustrations by Rana El-Mamoun

2

HEALING IS FOR THE BRAVE

Why does Urgent Action Fund-Africa support collective healing journeys?

Urgent Action Fund-Africa's core mandate is supporting Womn's Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) to respond to unanticipated and unexpected situations. For years, the Fund has been listening to activists sharing their analysis of the roots of the violence and harm they are responding to and its impact on them as individuals and collectives.

The Fund went into a reflective journey throughout 2018 and 2019, sharing her analysis of the context and the gaps that exist in supporting WHRDs and thinking with activists, advisors, academics and funding partners on what it would take to bring our dreams for transforming our contexts to reality.

We sat with many reflections and realized that while urgent responses and individual support will always remain relevant, the times demand for a revolutionary approach to reflect on structures of oppression: what these have to do with the ways in which we organize for change and the interdependence between healing and struggles for transformation. This is when we landed at healing justice as a global conversation that is engaging with what activists have been grappling with for years: intergenerational trauma, transforming structural drivers of harm and reflections on healing from traumas that activists are keenly aware has a defining impact on our struggles for transformation.

UAF-Africa embarked on <u>research</u> to explore African feminist approaches to healing justice. The research made it clear that the framework is critical as an analytical lens and a practice and reflected on exploring the root causes of the trauma and violence experienced by WHRDs and the ways in which centring ourselves in healing can have transformative effects on our feminist spaces and the world at large.

The Fund has been greatly engaged in supporting the analysis that emerged out of the research. One way is through supporting the collective healing journeys of activists who are een to reflect on the traumas they carry and unpacking the power of that exploration in transforming their relationships with themselves, each other, in the ways we build organizing spaces and our activism for transformation.

The stories presented here illustrate the support provided to the collective healing journey of North Sudanese WHRDs

1. SO THAT YOU KNOW...

'Healing is for the Brave' is a story of North Sudanese Womn's Human Rights Defenders /Activists, living in Egypt, who participated in a healing circle organised by UAF-Africa, facilitated by Lamia Samir. Lamia's healing approach is a breath of fresh air in a field often dominated by rigid conventional therapy. The approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of our personal traumas with the larger societal, ecological and even organisational crises. This approach recognizes that healing is not just a mental process but a holistic one that encompasses the body, mind, and spirit. By fostering a sense of community and belonging, we can create spaces where true healing can occur.

The story will guide you through the principles and practices that underpin the holistic approach that was embraced and embedded in the healing justice framework. We hope to offer tools and insights you can apply to your organisation, movement and personal healing journeys. The stories illustrate that healing is not a passive process but a political act of courage, resistance, and transformation in the ongoing fight for justice and liberation. The stories present a window into what is possible and as such serves as an invitation to those willing to take their first steps, or even a few more steps on the healing journey, to articulate themselves once again.

This is an invitation to you to read the stories and dance with the soul of this unique feminist perspective on healing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- · Creating a safe and supportive container where individuals and groups feel truly heard and validated transcends traditional methods.
- Healing goes beyond surface-level self-care; it encourages us to engage in practices that truly sustain and rejuvenate us.
- Healing is a communal process that integrates various feminist, decolonial, cultural and indigenous practices, including understanding the power of language.
- Understanding that trauma is deeply political and contextual, impacting more than individuals, means that healing may also need to be imagined in collective terms.

2. CONTEXT MATTERS

Womn's¹ Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) can be disembodied by the contexts within which they live and work. In addition to personal experiences, their wellbeing is impacted consistently by different forms of structural violence. On a day-to-day basis, they face a wide range of wellbeing, safety and security challenges, attacks and violations including attacks on life, bodily and mental integrity, physical and psychological deprivation of liberty, attacks against personhood and reputations, and invasion of privacy. Constant abuse and torture mean that they live with limited connection with the intelligence of the living earth, including ancestors, and that can leave their lives so tragically diminished, their bodies incoherent. Defenders also live with an inheritance of the violence and harm that our ancestors suffered, the pain transmitted through memories of injustice, and their impact on the relationships they had with their communities. If there is no healing, they are likely to get depressed, fatigued, resentful, self-loathing, wounded and sometimes sick. They are also likely to resent one another- even within their activist spaces because of the brokenness carried in their bodies. And when this happens, they miss beautiful layers of their own human inheritance: their dances, connection to nature and one another, emergent dreams, vivid imaginations, sensory aliveness, and connection with the vast, shimmering moment.

Healing should be part and parcel of the work of WHRDs and there is no saviour who is going to support our healing journeys; we have to do it ourselves. This is why individuals, organisations and movements are alert, alive and mobilised, with determination, focus, and with both resistance and imagination underpinning action.

Defenders also live with an inheritance of the violence and harm that our ancestors suffered, the pain transmitted through memories of injustice, and their impact on the relationships they had with their communities. If there is no healing, they are likely to get depressed, fatiqued, resentful, self-loathing. wounded and sometimes sick

¹ Our use of **womn** is an act of challenging and replacing traditional ideas of what and who a womn is and can be the links of womn to a system of patriarchy where womn are, in effect, subject to men or a sub-category of men. Other formulations used by feminists and others include womxn, womyn and wom_n. Womn for us includes lesbian, bisexual womn and transwomn. Further, womn includes those who are non-binaried, identifying with neither gender.

They were, however, caught off quard by the realisation that much of the violence experienced by activists at the hands of government or any other antirights actors is often secondary to violence they face within their homes or families as a result of their activism. It is mostly this violence that makes them feel untethered and lost.

They know that they need to tend to their 'inner gardens' as to get the energy to deliver on the outer.

It is against this background that HC and RC, recently interviewed North Sudanese Women WHRDs who are refugees in Egypt, as a result of the war in Sudan. The stories explore the transformative power of healing through the lived experiences of four womn, who participated in six healing sessions over the span of three months. These stories are an ode to both the womn who were courageous enough to walk the healing journey and to the healers and facilitators who supported these journeys. The stories provide a sanctuary of sanity, depth, kindness, and soul. They invite the reader to think about healing in expansive ways, to recognise that opportunities for physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing exist and that there is no singular or 'legitimate' way to heal. There is healing in conversation, in music, dance, meditation, food, breath, movement and many other exercises and practices.

The interviews revealed that WHRDs appreciated the strong "container" offered by the healers for courageous, generative conversations. They highlighted that the methodology employed engaged them wholly and allowed all parts of themselves to resonate and speak. The WHRDs emphasised the importance of collective healing which enabled them to tell their stories in an honouring, contained space with a community to listen, where the deep hurts were named and recognised without judgement. Further, the conversations were conducted in a familiar language without interpreters and without jargon. Activists observed that healing created a new language of imagination and transformation.

HC and RC were not surprised by how much pain and anguish are experienced by activists and how this is further magnified during crises. They were, however, caught off guard by the realisation that much of the violence experienced by activists at the hands of government or any other anti-rights actors is often secondary to violence they face within their homes or families as a result of their activism. It is mostly this violence that makes them feel untethered and lost. Healing approaches and practices therefore need

to attend to this reality and its complexities. It must acknowledge historic pain and trauma, hold space for the reality that activists can and often are also hurt in spaces that should feel safe, including by loved ones or within their movements.

The stories highlight the importance of slowing down, listening to our bodies, and nurturing our souls. This method goes beyond surface-level self-care, encouraging us to engage in practices that truly sustain and rejuvenate us. The stories also show that community healing approaches are not just about individual healing but about healing the collective.

The experiences of the four womn provide a glimpse of some of the practices that underpin this holistic approach, offering tools and insights that you can apply in your own therapeutic practice or personal healing journey.

Finally, the stories remind those with resources in whatever form to share in the collective responsibility of accompanying activists' healing journeys once they recognise their power and importance as both resistance and restoration exercises.

There are many themes that emerge from the stories with the WHRDs, but we have chosen to focus on three:

The power of language;

The role of healing in guiding activists to deal with conflict; and

Challenging beliefs about what constitutes a scientific and "logical" response to trauma.

The stories of the womn are told by **Healing Herself** as the narrator and interspersed with the voices of the activists.

Let **Healing** and the activists tell you the stories themselves...

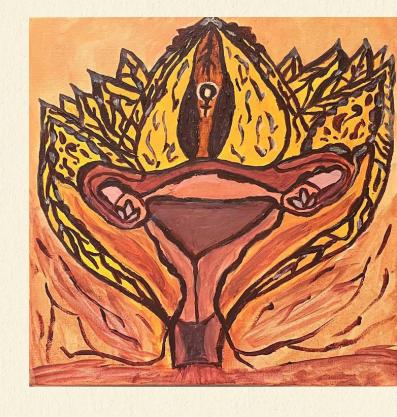
The experiences of the four womn provide a glimpse of some of the practices that underpin this holistic approach, offering tools and insights that you can apply in your own therapeutic practice or personal healing journey.

3. THE JOURNEY OF HEALING THAT TRANSCENDS TRADITIONAL METHODS

3.1 HEALING THE STORYTELLER

Healing's voice: It is a strange existence, knowing how many people need me yet they believe I am elusive. To be fair, there are also a multitude who are struggling, but they do not know that it is me they are seeking. I am healing. Not the concept nor

the destination, but a quiet presence that restores what has been stolen or broken. I have a beginning but no end, and I come in many different forms. I am curated uniquely for each individual because of the unique experiences individuals go through that necessitate my presence. Some wonder what healing even means; others ask whether healing can truly exist and whether people really heal. Sometimes, I'm a whispered prayer in the silence of night. Other times, I'm a deep breath in the chaos of a crowded mind. Whether my presence is felt strongly or quietly, I assure you I am still there. This is not to say the healing journey is simple. It can take many years, even a lifetime as wounds from activism combined with historical trauma cannot be expediently and easily bandaged and fixed. The most important thing is to start the journey and focus on small steps.



This is the story of how Rana, Duha, Zay-

tuna and Tayah began healing, piece by piece, breath by breath and how they have been brave enough to stay and keep journeying with me. I met each of them separately when they tried to reach for me, but only for brief moments. There was something different, however, when we encountered each other in the space held by Lamia, supported by UAF-Africa. The methods experienced were many and diverse, the approaches used were embodied, oral/verbal, psychological and spiritual. The stories of the activists will be shared from the perspective of Healing as the narrator and in their voices, in recognition of their individual and intersecting journeys.

3.2 MEETING THE ACTIVISTS

Duha

Duha was drowning when I first felt her reach for me. She had spent years fighting, trying to amplify the voices of womn, and demanding change in the spaces that were suffocating her. But she was like a shock absorber taking in everyone's pain, the negativity, the harassment, until she was swallowed by her own silence. When she buried her trauma deep inside, it threatened to choke her. She tried to carry the weight alone, thinking that naming her pain was a weakness. As I witnessed her, I was willing her to find her voice because truth is where I live.

Tayah

As for Tayah, she was strong, brave, and always at the front-lines. She had carried me with her in small ways over the years, though she did not always know it. In the streets of Sudan, as she resisted oppression, I was there. But Tayah had to leave her home behind, escaping the violence that haunted her and many others. From Khartoum to Gezira, then to Egypt, her body moved, but her heart was still at war. The trauma of displacement and the burden of her family's struggles weighed heavily on her.

Zaytuna

The war found Zaytuna while she was living alone and for two and a half months, she found herself completely isolated. The brutality of war was undeniable and like many other women she was sexually violated. Her journey taught her something she did not realise. While she thought her traumas were all about the war, an exercise on healing your inner child showed her that there were older and deeper traumas she needed to heal. The experiences of war were easier to recognise and were, in a sense, a magnification of already existing traumas that needed to be addressed.

Rana

Rana had fled from one war only to fight another within herself. She carried shame like a heavy coat—grief from displacement, trauma from violation, guilt from strained family ties. When she came to Egypt, she brought it all with her. Her body, that has become a source of shame, felt foreign to her. She was lost in it, disconnected. But she was searching for me. And in the healing sessions, guided by Lamia and the other healers, she began to recognize me.

Tayah

But Tayah had to leave her home behind, escaping the violence that haunted her and many others. From Khartoum to Gezira, then to Egypt, her body moved, but her heart was still at war. The trauma of displacement and the burden of her family's struggles weighed heavily on her.

3.3 HOW HEALING AND LANGUAGE INTERSECT

In the tapestry of the world of healing, the importance of language justice through cultural and linguistic resonance stood out as a strong thread, weaving together the energies of WHRDs. Language is sacred, it is a pathway to healing. Language enables self-expression and its power makes us who we are. Self-expression itself is a powerful tool for emotional well-being, healing, and creativity. During the self-led healing sessions, one of the activists who deeply resonated with the tapping healing technique offered it to other activists in the space in the Sudanese dialect. The session was one of the most powerful, several activists sharing that it was deeply grounding to be in a healing space where the offerings are conducted in their mother tongue by someone who understands their experiences and context. This was unlike any other healing space activists had experienced, where the healer was often an English speaker, or at best, speaking Arabic but not in the Sudanese dialect. No words were lost through translation. Feeling that healing is not something that is known by "others" was a powerful reminder that healing practices that resonate are those that do not feel imported and that healing is not something known by "experts" but a deep need that activists can learn to fulfil for each other. Experiencing tapping in the Sudanese dialect deepened the embodied experience and brought to life the magic of being held in the familiar.

While equal recognition and valuing of languages is a dominant feature of the language justice conversation, it became apparent to HC and RC during the interviews with WHRDs that language of communication is also an important part of that conversation. It is not just about a language or dialect but also about being heard and understood. Supporting healing processes is, therefore, as much about what is said as it is about what isn't. Silence itself is a language; it could be communicating repression, trauma, and pain, but also resistance or self-preservation. Paying attention to the different ways WHRDs were holding and experiencing their traumas was pivotal to opening space for healing.

Healing: I Found Duha in Her Silence



"Tthe most traumatic experience I had was in 2022 when I was arrested and detained. It is a trauma I still struggle to put into words. It was my breaking point, and for two whole years, I couldn't talk about it. I buried the pain so deep inside that it broke me. I became numb, detached, and indifferent."

It should come as no surprise then, that it wasn't easy for Duha to find me. She had spent so long detaching from herself, burying the horrors of the arrest, the endless violence and the traumas of the revolution and war. But during the healing offerings, I showed her that one way to heal is to reclaim your **voice**. If the voice is blocked or over-active, you cannot get to your higher self. Your wellbeing and inner power are

compromised. I also showed the power of a collective healing circle, with people who share a common cause, language and understanding of each other's context.

Some of the healing rituals included meditation, breathing, and dancing; oh, how Duha danced! She found me in the movement of her body. Slowly, she realised that she didn't need to search for light at the end of the tunnel. She was the light, and I was within her all along, waiting. As she says,



"Healing has revealed parts of me that exist beyond the trauma I've carried for so long; freed versions of myself I didn't know existed. I am proud of the person I am becoming."

I Walked with Tayah as she resisted

Tayah was searching for something when she joined her sisters in the Lotus programme. She didn't know it yet, but she was searching for me. As I watched her move through the sessions, I saw the exhaustion in her eyes. She thought the resistance was external, but I knew her real battle was within. In the collective, she found me in a new way through the stories of others who had walked her path, through the shared practices of breathwork, meditation, and ancient rituals.

I reminded Tayah that there is no single path to healing. Her journey would be different from Duha's, different from Rana's and Zaytuna's. But that's the beauty of it. Healing is not one-size-fits-all. It's a tapestry, woven together by each person who walks toward me.

Zaytuna did not need words to find me

In the absence of words and language suicide felt like the easiest escape from all the pain.



"I was disgusted with myself and I did not want to live. But when I joined the healing circles something began to change. When we started, I did not know what to expect and I did not understand the practices but I knew that I felt safe in that space and so I opened myself up to the experience and what it would offer. We had all been through so much and so the girls were keen to share their stories, that is when I realised how similar our experiences were."

As Zaytuna found sisterhood and community in the healing circle, she continued to surface different layers of herself. She was clear that words would never be adequate to express what she had experienced or what she was experiencing during the healing circles. Her smile is what tells the tale. It used to flicker across her face from time to time but by the end of the programme and after finding her own way as a healer supporting other women on their healing journeys, it is what you remember most about her. When she smiles her eyes sparkle and a warmth washes over you. I had to be careful with Zaytuna though, monotony is not her friend and the repetition of one thing put her off.



"I could never pick a favourite exercise, what I know is that different exercises healed different parts of me. If anyone would have told me about the process before I went through it, I would not have believed that it could be possible. It has been magical, and now I know that healing is possible, not just for me but for other women."

Zaytuna's experience also shows that I can be reached in many different ways with no wrong or right way.

I Am Healing, And I Am Here

I have always been here, waiting for those brave enough to seek me. I am not just about mending what's broken. I am about transformation, turning pain into strength, isolation into community, and despair into hope. I am in the laughter that rings out after tears have fallen. I am in the embrace of a sisterhood born not of blood, but of shared struggle and shared healing.

Rana, Duha, Zaytuna and Tayah have each found me in their own way. Their stories, intertwined with mine, remind you that healing is not passive. It is an act of courage. It is resistance. And it is available to all who are brave enough to walk the path.

So, if you are searching for me, know this: I am not far. I live in your breath, in your body, in the quiet moments when you allow yourself to feel. I am waiting for you to invite me in.

How do I find you, some of you ask?



You find me by listening politically to your wounds, by sharing wounds by sharing painful feelings.

By sharing our anger.

And our grief.

You find me in different places of being in power with your sisters

You find me by acknowledging your pain,

By naming it,

By facing its source

By allowing your rebirth

after too much has been taken

You find me in the lyrics of a song
In the caress of a gentle breeze
In the smile of a stranger
Or the giggles of a child
You find me in a journal and that is
where deep awareness dwells
You find me in the magical sights
and sounds and smells of nature
It clears your head space
You find me in the darkness
Because you are the light at its end
You find me in the home within you
Because to belong is to know you
are your first home

1.4 DIALOGUE BETWEEN DIFFERENCES: HEALING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

This theme focuses on conflict within the feminist movements and in human rights struggles.

In Sudan, just like in many of our countries, wars, conflict, fundamentalism and backlash have shredded the social fabric, destroyed the economic and weakened the political systems, making the lives of activists miserable. As a result, WHRDs are fragmented and weakened by bitter and violent partisan politics, by distrust and fear that repression and dictatorship breed, and by continued insecurity.

The likelihood of engaging in trusting conversations and healthy relationships is significantly reduced. It also becomes difficult to arrive at difficult conversations with a sense of dignity, freedom, belonging, safety, and legitimacy. When this happens, they miss the richness of intimacy with one another and with precious life.

At the space where the healing offerings were held, some activists recognised one another as belonging to different political parties; others had experienced unresolved conflicts. The programme engaged in building their capacity to relate to each other in ways that allowed the differences between them to live and breathe without necessarily killing the conversation or faith in themselves. The offerings supported them to relate to their differences, reframe conflict, and practice bridging and belonging in ways that grounded in and built toward a vision of justice, liberation and healing where activists flourish. Activists shared that being in a space where they were able to gradually open up and trust each other with their traumas, experiences of harm and what they are

struggling with helped them see another side of each other and challenge the ideas they created around who the other person is. One activist reflected: what if we handle all conflicts by creating spaces where we experience each other differently?



Healing: Rana Discovered Me in Her Wounds.

"The beginning wasn't easy. I met a fellow Sudanese activist in the healing circle, who came from a different political party, we had a tense history and couldn't stand each other. It was so intense that she refused to return after seeing me at the first session. But Lamia created a space where our feelings were not ignored or trivialized [...] helping us focus on our healing, and over time, a sisterhood grew between us. The same activist and I became close friends, something I never would have imagined."

The beautiful healing space created was not devoid of its complexities. The conflicts that arise in movements when deeply held beliefs are in conflict followed some of the activists to the space. But it was the opening space for healing that enabled coexistence and, over time, conflict resolution. The recognition of the parts of themselves that were hurt and threatened by the other allowed activists to begin to heal and, in the process, stopped seeing each other as enemies. Deep hurt can overflow from an individual and onto others. As such, healing is not just about the self but is also an enabler of more peaceful human interactions. Too often conflict is about people at war with their pain and unable to contain or release it, and external representations of that pain turn into targets for release.

3.5 A JOURNEY OF HEALING THAT TRANSCENDS TRADITIONAL METHODS

Trauma is not just a personal issue but a political one, deeply intertwined with issues of social justice, colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, homophobia and systemic oppression. Hence a "scientific" approach alone is not adequate. The approaches implemented brought a wealth of knowledge that challenges conventional psychotherapy methods, delving into how community and cultural healing practices can redefine our approach to mental well-being. The approach makes it clear that understanding the politics of trauma is essential for anyone supporting feminist activists and movements. This perspective is crucial for understanding how conventional therapy in a broken system cannot be transformative. By embracing the politics of trauma and recognizing the historical and cultural contexts of our suffering, we can begin to heal in ways that are profound and lasting.

Lamia's voice: Before the Ancestral Healing Session, I was worried some wouldn't accept the modality, which contradicts with some religious beliefs, that we couldn't connect with souls of those who left our realm. Contrary to my concerns, all participants readily embraced the concept of ancestral healing and actively engaged in the rituals to connect with departed loved ones and release what no longer served them. This session evoked a sense of both release and pride in their lineage of strong women. Over the course of the program, I noticed remarkable language and mindset shifts; participants began using more empowered language, expressing beliefs that nature, objects, and experiences had chosen them, and that they deserved positive outcomes, for instance: (this stone wants to go home with me, I will go outside to ground and send my pain



to earth, this tree asked me to hug her, and she gave me good vibes, if it happened to me then it must be part of a bigger picture, ..etc.). This shift in vocabulary reflected a growing sense of self-worth and trust in the process.

Healing: I introduced myself slowly to Rana. I was in the deep breath of her yoga practice, in the vibration of the sound bath that resonated in her bones. At first, she couldn't see me. She saw only her pain, the anger, the trauma, the shame. But as she continued to breathe, as she practiced tapping and let the energy healing flow through her, something shifted. She found me not in some distant place, but in her own body.



"The healing sessions combined traditional therapy with energy healing. I know that some people are sceptical about energy healing, but for me, it complemented the conventional therapy in a way that made me feel whole. It helped me recognize that the war I was fighting wasn't just external, it was within me. I had carried so much shame and disgust for my body after experiencing sexual violence but through these sessions, I began to find peace with my body. The breathing techniques, sound bathing, yoga, tapping exercises, each practice brought grounding where there had been chaos."

Healing: I was there as she forgave herself, as she turned the compassion, she had given to others inward. Through her wounds, I whispered to her: "You belong within yourself." And in time, Rana began to feel at home, in her body and in her soul. She even brought her family into my presence, guiding them toward their own healing. Together, they learned to breathe, to meditate, to connect. And I became not just hers, but theirs. Indeed, healing is collective

4.0 HOMECOMING

The journey of healing is a complex and a deeply personal one, but it is also a communal and political process.

The true power of this journey is found both in solitude and in the collective, in the resonance of shared voices and the grounding presence of others who have walked similar paths. It was present in the bravery to return to the past to understand who you are and how you became that person. The practices and rituals activists embraced became tools, but it was the quiet and informal moments in between, over shared meals, gentle smiles, or words of encouragement that allowed them to see and recognize themselves in each other. In this sacred space, where their stories intertwined, they found strength, compassion, and a new way of being. Healing is never linear, and the journey will ebb and flow, but they now walk a lit path, supported by a circle that sees and honours each step, however unsteady. Voice is a huge part of healing. That moment of liberating the throat through voice in a place that feels safe and supportive - that is an invitation for healing to enter.

Trauma has a way of uprooting us, severing our connection to our bodies and leaving us wandering in spaces that feel unfamiliar and hostile, far from the wisdom we carry within. Through the healing offerings, activists began to reconnect with themselves and with each other, bit by bit, breath by breath. While the healing space created was a gentle and regenerative one, being in the space entailed grappling with difficult questions about intergenerational histories of trauma, experiences of grave violations in fleeing a war, the ways in which activists have been relating to their bodies, to each other, to their families following the violent trauma of the war. It is out of this realization of what healing entails that activists repeatedly mentioned that healing is not a straightforward or easy process.. it is for the brave!

