

Reading Trauma in Colum McCann's "Step We Gaily, On We Go"

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Colum McCann is an Irish writer who settles in the United States. He is famous for his description of the psychological dislocation and trauma of ethnic minorities living in foreign cultures. In the collection of short stories *Fishing The Sloe-Black River*, "Step We Gaily, On We Go" tells the traumatic life of an Irishman living in the United States. It is an important early work of McCann. From the perspective of trauma theory, this article uses close reading of the text to analyze the trauma symptoms and the causes of trauma.

Keywords: Colum McCann, "Step We Gaily, On We Go", trauma

Introduction

Colum McCann was born Dublin in 1965 and began his career as a journalist in *The Irish Press*. In the early 1980's he took a bicycle tour across North America and then worked as a wilderness guide in a program for juvenile delinquents in Texas. After a year and a half in Japan, he and his wife Allison moved to New York where they currently live with their three children. Colum McCann is an Irish writer whose writing, however, is not limited to Ireland. His writing explores different nationalities and cultures. He is usually considered as an international writer. Colum McCann is also the award-winning author of five novels, *Zoli* (2006), *Dance* (2003), *The Side of Brightness* (1998), *Everything in This Country Must* (2000), as well as *Let the Great World Spin* (2009). Yet his collection of short stories *Fishing The Sloe-Black River* (1994) has also been widely acclaimed. It is his first published collection. In *Fishing The Sloe-Black River*, many characters are connected by their common experience of emigration. McCann does not, however, collapse these unique life stories of displacement into each other in the collection. Furthermore, the multiplicity of voices and narratives included in the collection is suggestive of dispersal, a polyphony facilitated by the nature of the form. *Fishing The Sloe-Black River* tells of the suffering and trauma and pain of home leaving in various ways.

As a theoretical term, the meaning of trauma has an evolutionary process. Trauma originated from the Greek word and mainly refers to wounds caused by piercing or tearing the skin. With the development of psychological research, trauma has been translated from physical injury to mental injury, and the concept has been reconstructed in the field of psychology. Physical trauma is a kind of tangible injury. Although the spirit or soul is intangible, it is just like the human body tissues, which can also be injured by accidents. The study of pathology began with the attention and treatment of hysteria. After a lot of research, experts came to a similar conclusion:

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Hysteria is a condition of psychological trauma. Due to some unbearable traumatic events in the past, trauma patients cannot treat it. After the First World War, psychological trauma research has attracted widespread attention in Britain and the United States. Trauma research at this stage mainly focused on war trauma, aiming to help soldiers suffering from combat psychosis recover their health or return to the battlefield. Since the 1980s, with the emergence of races, civil rights movements, and feminist liberation movements in the United Kingdom and the United States, attention to disadvantaged groups has made trauma research flourish. Trauma research has gradually shifted from psychiatric clinical practice and political discourse to the humanities of history, philosophy, cultural studies, and critical theory. Trauma theory is also constantly evolving. Professor Tao Jiajun believes: "During the 100 years of trauma theory development, it has roughly gone through four stages, Freud's trauma theory, post-Freud's trauma theory, racial gender trauma theory and trauma culture theory" (Tao, 2011, p. 118). In "Step We Gaily, On We Go", The author explores the character through memories, the intersection of reality and illusion. The events in this short story are all compressed in one day. "Step We Gaily, On We Go" is set in New Orleans on 9 July 1992. On the way to the laundry to steal clothes, Flaherty uses the interleaving of memories and reality to summarize the important experiences of his life. The novel truly reproduces the life situation of Irish people in the United States, and sympathizes with and exposes the torture of the protagonist, which embodies the theme of "trauma" in multiple levels. In "Step We Gaily, On We Go", the protagonist, Danny Flaherty, is an elderly Irish emigrant living alone in New Orleans, and he has been long abandoned by his wife Juanita. The novel tells that Flaherty falls into autism and madness due to the disillusionment of the American dreams and the departure of his wife.

Trauma Symptoms

"Symptom" is a change in your body or mind that shows that you are not healthy. Freud often mentioned the term "symptom" in his discussion of psychoanalysis of neurological patients. When people experience an accidental traumatic accident, they cannot understand and recognize the accident at the time. The accident has not disappeared, it will show symptoms.

The first symptom is autism. Freud separately discussed two kinds of psychological trauma: sadness and sad depression. After a period of grief, the injured subject transfers love from the lost object to the new object, and realizes the empathy smoothly. The traumatized depressed subject refuses to acknowledge the loss of the object of love, refuses to restore the normal identification relationship with the external reality, and falls into self-blame, depression, indifference, and autism for a long time. When Flaherty's wife left him, he refuses to accept this reality, still living in the past, living in the memory of when they were still together before, closing himself in the memory of his wife before leaving. "When Juanita—who can be awful finicky—doesn't like a piece of clothing, she flat out refuses to wear it again. So one day last month, after a year of acquiring new clothes for her, he decided to put them to some use" (McCann, 1993, p. 67). And the truth is that his wife has left him. Instead, he doesn't buy clothes, but goes to the laundry to steal them.

The house originally provides shelter for people, it divides public space and private space into a relatively independent and enclosed space. In *A Room of One's Own*, the writer Woolf used a room that is not disturbed by the outside world to let women enjoy privacy and freedom, to show respect for women's rights. Paul Andrué believes: "In the communication between the human heart and the external world, the house is the deepest

metaphor and becomes the place where soul lives" (Andrue, 2010, p. 56). But for Flaherty, his room is a symbol of escaping from reality, blocking communication with the outside world, and becoming a cage of eternal loneliness. "Books of poetry talk to one another on the floor. A TV spits gray. A kettle boils. The cupboard at the end of the room is full of women's clothes. Blouses. Dresses. Skirts. Scarves" (McCann, 1993, p. 78). When he steals the clothes back, he "gets up slowly from the leather chair, wheezes, reached out, and touches the sleeves that dangle in the air. Runs his arms along the collar. Then pressed his face against the blouse, holding it, breathing in deeply, smiling" (McCann, 1993, p. 78). In his room, he creates an atmosphere where he still lives with his wife, and communicates with his fantasy wife. Only in this way can he feel safe psychologically, but he becomes a slave. But people who are autistic often have a kind nature. He gives the stolen clothes "to those who might wear them". "The next morning he watched the old woman come out onto the balcony. When she found the blue beauty on the doorknob, there was a smile splayed on her face that painted the whole world well" (McCann, 1993, p. 67). When he sees others happy, he also feels happy.

The trauma caused by the failure to pursue the American dream and the difficulty in adapting to the United States caused him to close himself in his past memories in Ireland. He never adapts to his Californian environment, and this is visible in the way he is clad. Before he reaches the corner of the third floor, his eyebrows are sweaty. Even though he is sweating, he still wears a very thick coat. The climate in Ireland is mild all year round, and it is not too hot even in summer. This suit is suitable to wear in Ireland, but he wears it in the hot weather in the United States, which shows that he cannot connect with the real environment. On the other hand, the thick coat also metaphors his autistic tendency. He is afraid of contacting the real world. Wearing a thick coat on a hot day is a kind of self-protection.

The title of this short story ironically comes from an Irish wedding song named *Mairi's Wedding*. This Irish wedding song connects the main character Flaherty to his Irish origins. The main character seems unable to move on and his past clings to him.

Flaherty closes himself due to trauma. He himself builds a wall for himself, closing himself in Irish memory. The less he can adapt to American life, the higher the wall and the higher the barrier, the less he can adapt to American life.

The second symptom is hallucination. In the novel, the author does not describe in detail Flaherty's specific experience of injury, but describes his chaotic mental state and fragmented consciousness after the trauma. Contemporary trauma research expert Caruth believes that trauma is a "sudden, catastrophic, and unavoidable experience. People's response to this event is often delayed, uncontrollable" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). His behavior shows hallucinations after experiencing trauma. When he takes the stolen clothes home, he "runs his arms along the collar. Then pressing his face against the blouse, holding it, breathing in deeply, smiling" (McCann, 1993, p. 78) and said softly "Juanita, my love, you look absolutely gorgeous". She is not real, but an illusion of him. On the way to steal the clothes, he always thinks about her waiting for him at home: "Juanita will be hopping mad if he isn't home in time for the tea that she has boiling on the stove. And even madder if she finds out that he has lost his hat. She bought it for him in Clery's in Dublin back in the fifties, when money was round and made to roll" (McCann, 1993, p. 79). The memory of her leaving is suppressed by him. "The cabarets, the bells, the canvas, the movies, the sheer theater of it all, the wonder—gone. He had fallen to Caffola. She had fallen, not unlike a silver goddess. Their voices had fallen too. Down somewhere deep in the belly of memory" (McCann, 1993, p. 85).

Because of a self-compulsive impulse, he is forced to repeat the suppressed traumatic experience, and treat these repetitions as current experiences, without remembering that these belongs to the past, so he has the illusion that she is still there.

"For a moment he lets himself think of the Caffola fight and mustard oil. September 9, 1938. A bitter thought. Then he lets a little jab fly at the sky and almost loses his footing on the stairs" (McCann, 1993, p. 67). The moment he was overthrown by Caffola appears three times in the novel, and this experience is always compulsively repeated in his life. It is a sudden blow that causes trauma. It is like a threat to the integrity of the body, destroying the experience of time in the brain. And this failure was a sudden blow to him. Since then, he has been living in the shadows, this event "has no beginning, nor can it reach the end, there is no before, between and after" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 69). This event always occurs "now". Ruth Leys believes that "trauma is a situation of separation or loss of self. Under certain conditions, the traumatic scene can be compared to the trance state after hypnosis. This means that returning to the traumatic experience is not controlled by subjective will, but needs an index" (Leys, 2000, p. 124). Therefore, any similarities in life with Caffola's fierce battle will become the fuse of his traumatic memory. For example, "hotter than a jalapeno in the hell" (McCann, 1993, p. 69) and "a belt that he himself never won in the heavy weight division" (McCann, 1993, p. 66) remind him of the fierce battle with Caffola, which had a bad influence on him.

After experiencing trauma, there is usually confusion and feeling like hallucinations. When LeBlanc said he was the clothes-thief, he hit LeBlanc's chin with a punch, but he had such an illusion: "Falling sideways with a thud. Referee calling the count. Junaita up on the ropes. Shouting in Spanish. Danny get up. Get up. Looking like she had four eyes. Everything swirling. Stumbling on the ropes. Finished. Gone. And it is all over now, Danny boy" (McCann, 1993, p. 85). The scene where he was defeated appeared repeatedly. Freud once referred to the memory disturbance phenomenon of this traumatic experience as "repetitive compulsive impulse" in clinical research. The repetition of this behavior seems to have the characteristics of a "heart demon" (朱迪思·赫尔曼, 2018, p. 37). It is difficult to control with consciousness. And this kind of behavior has caused a split in life, making him live in two worlds. One is in the field of trauma, and the other is in the current field. The two worlds are usually difficult to communicate with.

The third symptom is aphasia. Shoshana Felman believes that the most destructive of traumatic experiences is the "loss of voice, knowledge, perception, understanding, perception, and speaking ability" (Felman, 1992, p. 72). When he meets Leblanc on the way to the laundry, LeBlanc told him "Somebody been stealing clothes down there and hanging them on doorknobs" (McCann, 1993, p. 74). He replies, "Thyron is fighting in the Garden." He returns home after stealing the clothes and finds that the hat has fallen in the laundry, so he goes back to the laundry to get the hat. The girl who lost her clothes tells him "I misplaced a blouse", but he replies "Sorry to hear that. Well, I must be on my way. Juanita expects me home. She has the tea on" (McCann, 1993, p. 81). What he says has nothing to do with what the girl says. The girl asks about her clothes, but he answers that his wife has already made tea. He couldn't communicate with others, he is talking about something from another world. Then, he says to himself, "Had to run all the way here. Still have it in my lungs, all the same. Used to run six miles a day. Way back when" (McCann, 1993, p. 81). This sentence has nothing to do with the girl's problem. The girl is asking about his clothes, but he is discussing lung capacity. And when he says that there have been thieves lately, he says, "It's a terrible thing. Can't trust a soul these days. All the young ones are into drugs. No wonder they call

it the junior high" (McCann, 1993, p. 82). From what he says, it can be seen that when he talks to others, he doesn't care about what they say, but focuses on his own world. What he cares about is his wife, his once strong body, and his unsuitability to society. His wife and his strong body are things he used to love and be proud of. He said these are actually a kind of self-protection. He is afraid that the girl would find out that he stole the clothes, so he creates a safe atmosphere for himself. But these things that he is proud of were eventually lost, and they all caused him harm. Contrary to the normal narrative, the consciousness of people who have experienced trauma is always focused on the traumatic event, so when talking with others, he is always unable to communicate normally and always pays attention to the things that have hurt him. Having experienced trauma, it is difficult for him to join the world he is now in and unable to communicate with others. His world is dualistic. Each time his narration is not diachronic, but synchronic, from one world to another. When he speaks, his words are split into two parts, one part is daily conversation, and the other part is about his trauma.

Trauma Causes

In addition to natural disasters, the causes of trauma are more man-made factors, such as domestic violence, sexual violence, and war. Only by exploring the causes of the trauma of characters can we understand them more clearly.

Everyone yearns for a happy family and hopes that the family can become a haven of happiness, but there is always one reason or another that is destroyed. Although there are not many descriptions of the family he lived in as a child, it can be seen that the family he lived in lacks care and warmth. His father "was an American and came to Ireland in the ordeal of the First World War" (McCann, 1993, p. 71). His father experienced the war and was traumatized by the war. The hidden family trauma is repeated in the psychological space of the offspring. It is an unconscious product that has never been realized. The way of transforming from the unconsciousness of the parents to the unconsciousness of the children has not yet been confirmed (陶家俊, 2011, p. 120). Trauma is parasitic in the psychological space of the next generation, leading to disorder of self-identity and loss. This is also one of the reasons for Flaherty's trauma. His father always "hanging a sandbag from a chestnut tree, shouting at him to get ready for practice" (McCann, 1993, p. 75), while his mother "bent over the sink, scrubbing some blood from the collar of a white shirt". It can be seen that his father didn't know how to educate his child and always used violence against Flaherty. His lack of paternal love in his life directly deprived him of his identity as a son. His mother "is a hard woman, a disarray of beauty, maps of the west wrinkled on her skin" (McCann, 1993, p. 71). Although there is no specific description of the mother, it can be seen that the mother has also experienced a lot of hardships. And his parents died when he was 15 years old. As a young child, who should have been cared and loved, he was violently treated by his father. As the next generation who grew up, he should have been sheltered and cared by the previous generation, but he was hit by the death of both parents. The violence he suffered in childhood and the lack of family love left trauma in his heart.

The disillusionment of the American dream is also an important cause of trauma. He has a pair of thick hands, "hands that won fights all over Ireland" (McCann, 1993, p. 72). Later, he left his hometown from Ireland and came to the United States. At that time, he "swearing to Ireland that he would come home Heavyweight Champion of the World". In the first eight months, "he was invincible on the court". But after he was defeated in the 1938 war with Caffola, he began to fall apart, and since then, his American dream has broken down. Because

he couldn't face the trauma caused by his defeat by Caffola, he could only forcefully explain that Caffola "wiped mustard oil on his gloves" (McCann, 1993, p. 72), and he couldn't open his eyes. This was because the fists hit the eyes and brought fiery pain and reminded him of mustard oil.

The breakdown of his marriage exacerbates his trauma. He and she once had a happy love. When they first got together, "One victory flew into another. In the dressing room Juanita took to massaging his shoulders like some women take kneading bread. Reporter in wide hats began to notice. A photo appeared in the papers of him and Juanita swapping wedding bands. Him decked out in a white tuxedo Jacket, her in the finest taffeta, a bouquet of white flowers in her dark hair" (McCann, 1993, p. 78). Afterwards, both of them had trouble in working and their careers fell into a trough. He was defeated after the battle with Caffola. Although he came back for a while, he was later "fallen easily to a no-hoper from the bowels of Brooklyn" (McCann, 1993, p. 72). Although she was making movies in Hollywood, she looked very beautiful, "a voice so gorgeous she sounded like she had a wren in her throat" (McCann, 1993, p. 73), but because she is a Mexican girl, "they terminated her contract". Because both of them lost their jobs, they looked for other opportunities. "The couple stood on the deck of another boat, combing the waves in an easterly way. They sang together in the smoky cabarets of Ireland and Britain where men in zoot suits wet the tip ends of cigars with lascivious tongues and stared" (McCann, 1993, p. 73). But then the cabarets went down, and they returned to the United States. Since then, he has been devastated. He could not give her anything, he would only sing to her continuously, but in fact, singing could not solve anything. He just sang to comfort himself, and escaped reality, and hide himself in another world. On the afternoon she left, "his hair was ashy and ferocious that afternoon" and "her skin wallpapered with grief" (McCann, 1993, p. 84). It can be inferred from this that they were not happy, he was always very irritable because of the unsatisfactory life. When she left him, he "thought of home, far away, far away. The garden of rock. The limestone that lets the water seep through. The turloughs with their disappearing water. The strangely colored flowers. She would be back. He would wait. Granite was impermeable. That he had learned. Granite doesn't let water through" (McCann, 1993, p. 85). Hometown and her departure are two things that have nothing to do with each other. This is because her departure brought him trauma, and he remembered that hometown was actually a kind of self-protection. The traumatic event destroys the ability to perceive the sense of time and destroys the combination of feeling and meaning, so it is difficult for him to explain the meaning of the trauma, and he can only explain the trauma by explaining the past.

Some scholars pointed out that "the significant differences in values and beliefs in different cultures, and the differences in the ways in which the same feelings or attitudes are communicated socially, are enough to cause inter-ethnic conflict. "There are major differences between Irish and native Americans in terms of cultural values and beliefs, and Irish people are not popular with Americans, but face rejection" (李其荣, 1998, p. 80). The United States is a multi-racial country of immigrants. Fear, confusion, and helplessness are the true inner portrayal of early immigrants of all ethnic groups. The early life of Irish Americans was difficult. They not only suffered persecution caused by invisible cultural shackles and racial discrimination, but also suffered from the poverty, disasters, famines, and wars brought from their homeland. The Irish all feel depressed and dislocated in the United States. The value standard that most Americans believe in is wealth, which will naturally exclude poor Irish people. And Flaherty is also a poor Irishman. He lives in a room that is "small and cluttered and full of silence" (McCann, 1993, p. 78). It can be seen that his room is not very good and the living environment is poor,

indicating that his life is very poor. Irish housing in the United States is generally very simple. The houses originally used by the family are often divided into a number of very small apartments, each of which is packed with a large family. Due to such living conditions, the incidence of various diseases such as cholera and mental illness is very high in Irish residential areas. As he said, "Give life long enough and it will solve all your problems, even the problem of being alive" (McCann, 1993, p. 63). The living environment of the Irish in the United States is too bad and it is very difficult to survive. Like blacks, as an Irish, Flaherty also suffers from racial discrimination in the United States. When he was going downstairs, he saw graffiti on the wall, which read: "*When did the black man learn to walk? Beneath it: When the white man invented the wheelbarrow. Beneath that: Eat shit, honey motherfucker*" (McCann, 1993, p. 64). He is often said to be a honey motherfucker by people. Especially the white ones, they use it most vindictively. "In the deep-shadowed corners late at night he can hear them make bets that the old Irish motherfucker could probably still throw a punch or two" (McCann, 1993, p. 64). Continuing to the second floor he encounters his favorite piece of graffiti: "*Women of the world rise up out of the bed of your oppressors...and go make breakfast*" (McCann, 1993, p. 65). Still further, he descends to the ground floor: "*though all the words. Eat the homeless. Johnny X is hung like a horse. Leroy is sprunger than mofo*" (McCann, 1993, p. 66). The presence of the graffiti suggests that Flaherty is living in a relatively disadvantaged complex. Flaherty is neither an economic success story of Irish emigration nor indeed a personal triumph either—his departure from Dublin and onto the United States is littered with perceived and actual betrayals, hardships and abandonment. In that era, a large number of Irish people arrived in the United States. This proliferation of population poses a threat to Americans, and public welfare costs are rising sharply. In addition, the drinking and fighting habits brought from Ireland have been difficult to eradicate in the United States. Many Americans believe that alcoholism and fighting are the natural characteristics of Irish people, so Irish people are deeply racially discriminated in the United States. But in fact, many poor Irish people became alcoholics when they were in the old world. Under unbearable social conditions, he also developed the habit of using violence to deal with opponents who symbolized the entire hostile environment at that time. Some Irish people still have to fight in the U.S. It is only natural for them to continue drinking and fighting in the U.S. What makes Flaherty more painful is that he is not living among an expatriate Irish community in America. He is not a part of a stable, and perhaps stabilizing, network of Irish or Irish-Americans. Instead, his lot is that of an isolated and impoverished Irish emigrant living in a racially heated tenement and city.

In summary, his personal suffering, childhood misfortune, marriage frustration, and social oppression made his heart full of trauma.

Conclusion

As an early work of Colum McCann, "Step We Gaily, On We Go" incorporates various elements like ethnicity, emigration, homeless in it but focuses on traumatic existence of the homelessness. Different from his later trauma novel *Let the Great World Spin* which holds a grand topic and takes a panoramic perspective to examine the trauma of various group, McCann pays his attention to one certain individual. Colum McCann portrayed an Irish boxer struggling in the United States, and through his presentation of his trauma, he fully demonstrated the plight of the Irish in a foreign culture. Flaherty's traumatic experience reflects the collective trauma of the Irish in the United States, and reflects the Irish people's displacement and pain of home leaving in

the United States. This article analyzes the novel, interprets the specific presentation of trauma, and further analyzes the causes of trauma to explore the theme of trauma in the novel.

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Step we gaily, on we go. A word in edgewise. From many, one. Fishing the sloe-black river. Around the bend and back again. Along the riverwall. Cathalâ€™s lake.Â Colum McCann Fishing the Sloe-Black River. For my father and mother. And for Roger and Rose Marie. SISTERS. I have come to think of our lives as the colors of that place â€” hers a piece of bog cotton, mine as black as the water found when men slash too deep in the soil with a shovel. I remember when I was fifteen, cycling across those bogs in the early evenings, on my way to the dancehall in my clean, yellow socks. My sister stayed at home. I tried to avoid puddles, but there would always be a splash or two on the hem of my dress. Author Colum McCann was attacked outside the Study Hotel in New Haven, Connecticut. Michael Mott, 34, confessed and was charged with assault, police said. Police said Mott had a dispute with his wife after hotel staff told the couple the credit card Mott used didn't have sufficient funds to pay for the room.Â A Connecticut man who assaulted acclaimed Irish author Colum McCann last month outside a hotel after the author tried to help the man's wife following a domestic dispute has been charged. Michael Mott, 34, of Oxford was charged with assault in the June 28 incident outside the Study Hotel in New Haven. Step We Gaily, On We Go. A Word in Edgewise. From Many, One. Fishing the Sloe-Black River. Around the Bend and Back Again. Along the Riverwall. Cathalâ€™s Lake. Also by Colum McCann. Copyright.Â A man with a walrus mustache gone gray at the tips took me down to the public lavatories in Castlebar. He was a sailor. He smelled of ropes and disuse and seaport harridans. There were bays and coverts, hillsides and heather. My promiscuity was my autograph. I was hourglassy, had turf-colored hair and eyes as green as wine bottles. Someone once bought me an ice-cream in Achill Island, then we chipped some amethyst out of the rock banks and climbed the radio tower. We woke up late at the edge of a cliff, with the waves lashing in from the Atlantic. â€œMcCann is a passionate writer whose impulse is always toward a generous understanding of his diverse characters.â€The Wall Street Journal. â€œEach chapter of the title novella in Colum McCannâ€™s hauntingly beautiful new collection of short stories begins with a stanza from Wallace Stevensâ€™ poem â€”Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.â€ But instead of blackbirds, the sky above retired judge Peter Mendelssohn is filled with cameras, tracking his movements on the fateful day when he is assaulted outside a Manhattan restaurant. Another story features a single mother raising her deaf son in a cottage along the Irish coast.Â In one story, a mother and her adopted teenage son step into â€”a shaft of light so clear and bright it seemed made of bone.â€ National Book Award winner Colum McCann offers thoughtful insights on writing in the wake of the 'American Dirt' controversy.Â His newest novel, Apeirogon, uses the same basic fiction-nonfiction concept with a fresh motive thatâ€™s apparent from the get-go. McCann was inspired by the friendship between Rami Elhanan, an Israeli, and Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian, living on opposite sides of the wall in Jerusalem. The two became friends through the group Combatants for Peace â€” Aramin founded the organization after a seven-year stint in an Israeli jail and Elhanan joined after his 13-year-old daughter, Smadar, was killed in a suicide bombing in Jerusalem.