When there is emotional pain, psychiatrists like me believe that we can help. But before we act, we need to find some handle for the problem, some name to guide action. Once in a while, we realize that these names are inadequate for the problems we are seeing. Then we search for new names, or new ways to group old names.

When I bumped into the emotional pain related to displacement, I had the option of using labels like “posttraumatic stress disorder,” “depression,” “anxiety,” and “adjustment disorders.” But I didn’t think those labels—useful as they are—were enough to tell the whole story. Like Robert Coles, Oliver Sacks, and Arthur Kleinman, I wanted to understand displacement through the words of the people who had suffered from it. I wanted to walk the streets they were talking about, examine their photographs, visit their houses, and get a deep feeling for what they were sharing with me. I wanted to know the emotional truth of the experience through which they had lived. Between 1995 and 2003, I logged thousands of air miles, walked hundreds of city streets, examined archives, collected photographs, and talked to people who had stories to tell.
I had listened to many voices when, on December 2002, the truth hit me. At the time, I was sitting in the comfortable living room of Dr. Walter Claytor, listening to the story of his remarkable family, a family that in one generation went from slavery to professional education, a family that built significant buildings and provided a high level of health care for the surrounding community. I was so proud of Dr. Claytor and his father and his grandfather that I found it unbearable that this great American family had been dispossessed by urban renewal, a program of the U.S. government that had, between 1949 and 1973, bulldozed 2,500 neighborhoods in 993 American cities. A million people were dispossessed by the program, among them the Claytors.

I don’t know if it was Dr. Claytor’s charm or his insouciance that helped pull the pieces together for me. He was not seeking my pity. In fact, he strove to maintain his dignity while telling the story of his losses. But the pain was such that he couldn’t quite keep it out of his voice. It was the breaking edge of his grief that linked it to the sound of pain that I’d so often heard, a sound that was obvious in some voices, and just beneath the cheerfulness in others. There was a remarkable emptiness in that pain. In that searing moment, I realized the loss he was describing was, in a crucial way, the collective loss. It was the loss of a massive web of connections—a way of being—that had been destroyed by urban renewal; it was as if thousands of people, who seemed to be with me in sunlight, were at some deeper level of their being wandering lost in a dense fog, unable to find one another for the rest of their lives. It was a chorus of voices that rose in my head, with the cry, “We have lost one another.”

Being in touch with such sorrow was not easy. What popped into my mind were the famous words spoken by Jack Nicholson in the movie *A Few Good Men*: “You don’t want the truth. You can’t handle the truth.”

Nope, I thought, I can’t handle the truth. The phrase, though it seemed a bit irreverent, was rather comforting. This is one of those handy mental tricks that people use to manage intense emotions. I might have used denial (“That never happened”) or repression (“What did you say, Dr. Claytor?”) or intellectualization (“How many
people feel the way you do?”) but I used Jack. I must have told a hundred people, “I can’t handle the truth,” before I started to feel differently.

This process taught me a new respect for the story of upheaval. It is hard to hear, because it is a story filled with a large, multivoiced pain. It is not a pain that should be pigeonholed in a diagnostic category, but rather understood as a communication about human endurance in the face of bitter defeat.

There is a song written by an anonymous slave that has the line “I hear the archangels are rockin’ Jerusalem, I hear the archangels are ringin’ them bells.” Imagine, for a moment, that songwriter: living in the oppression of slavery, torn from Africa, separated from family, driven by the lash, worked from sunup to sundown, yet able to imagine a rockin’ Jerusalem. In the pain of upheaval, there is the unremitting effort of the oppressed to shake off the agony of unequal treatment. It is that effort that calls us, tells us not to be afraid of the truth, but to join the movement toward a more equitable future.

One hundred years ago, the distinguished African American scholar Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that the problem the twentieth century needed to solve was the problem of the color line. It took sixty more years for the United States to engage wholeheartedly in the battle for civil rights. Yet, as we have faced the truth of the color line, we have acted, reacted, thought, and felt differently. We are a better nation for it.

I venture to propose that displacement is the problem the twenty-first century must solve. Africans and aborigines, rural peasants and city dwellers have been shunted from one place to another, as progress has demanded, “Land here!” or “People there!” In cutting the roots of so many people, we have destroyed language, culture, dietary traditions, and social bonds. We have lined the oceans with bones, and filled the garbage dumps with bricks.

What are we to do?

I have seen people in many towns and cities working to reconnect after root shock. Whether it was building a labyrinth, or holding a flea market, they were gathering together as neighbors to re-form the web
of relationships. Within such a moment, people can recover and prosper. This highly respected type of healing, which is called “milieu therapy” by psychiatrists, works through the creation of healing places. For an environment to lift the spirit, attention must be focused on opportunities for relatedness. A psychiatric team might accomplish
this by setting up a hospitable dayroom, or by having a meeting in which all the patients are encouraged to participate. The tools are many, and the intervention is powerful.

But milieu therapy is not an intervention that need be administered by licensed health care practitioners. In the psychiatric hospital, any member of the unit—staff or patient alike—can promote the common good. Similarly, each and every one of us has the power to improve the places we hold in common, whether we are concerned with the neighborhood, city, nation, or planet. A man in Berkeley, California, decided to stand by the road and wave at passersby. His death was mourned by the thousands of people who got a daily dose of friendliness from his white-gloved hand. We are each that man.

This book, then, tells a painful story, but it also offers hope. We have a century ahead of us: we have a treatment for root shock; we have the possibility of preventing further damage by nurturing the world’s neighborhoods instead of destroying them; we who care about community are many.

I present here the words of the people who lived upheaval: the uprooted, the planners, the advocates, and the historians. Read their words with care for them and for yourself. Read their words not as single individuals living through a bad time, but as a multitude all sharing their morsel of the same bad time. Read in that manner and I believe that you will get the true nature of root shock. Read in that manner, and I believe you will be able to embrace the truth, not as a fearful thing, but as a call to join the struggle for a better tomorrow.