

My View of Trauma and Its Affect on Personality

As in all of my articles this sharing is not the result of academic/objective research rather it is an outcome of my subjective direct experience. The value of this sharing is in self-discovery and in how it may resonate with your own experiences and any feedback that you provide or dialogue you would want to pursue.

So far everyone I've come to know has experienced various forms of trauma. Something in me makes me feel the need to generalize and so I'd like to, as is there any human out there who hasn't been struck with trauma? Then again, this is a subjective sharing and I don't pretend to "scientifically know" or have the "scientific proof" that statistically backs up my professional field experience as a Mental Health Worker of say 50 some years as well as 71 years of living life. So, in my view of human existence, trauma is one of the least acknowledged and yet one of the most profound experiences that fosters challenges to a balance in human relationships. It is only recently that trauma is getting the attention it requires as is seen by the effort by the military to acknowledge PTSD in our active soldiers and the veterans that struggle to re-enter civilian life. However, as yet, the lived experience of trauma as a cause of emotional distress isn't acknowledged openly in our society.

In my life, trauma has not been just a terribly upsetting set of past experiences that occurred and is over, like it would be for some easily healed minor physical injury like getting a paper cut. I've come to realize that in my experiences with trauma, the emotional shock may eventually subside from my consciousness, however it doesn't just go away, but rather digs deep into my subconscious where it continues to be emotionally aggravating. As I've learned to be aware of this, it feels as though it has become an integral part of me and thrives as it spreads and influences my personality. Until a few years ago I misunderstood trauma and as a result I was in a frame of mind to deeply resent its presence and viewed it as a continuous threat and challenge to my welfare.

So, in my life, trauma isn't an experience that is healed automatically by time. Instead healing requires conscious focus and often assistance with the help of someone experienced in promoting emotional healing. I want to also suggest that if it was compared to a physical injury it would be in the category of a brain or spinal injury and the potential for recovery is most often only partial if that.

I have experienced traumas that (1.) were completely isolated to me. (2.) At other times I have been influenced by experiences that have emanated from other people(s). (3.) Then I have been traumatized by being a member of a minority group and being threatened by a member(s) of the majority. (4.) I don't know how many people think about this, but I'm also aware that beyond personal/interpersonal and environmental experiences with trauma there exists the type of trauma that has affected me as a result of catastrophes that traumatizes my culture. A good example is 9/11. No doubt, I'm really focused on the manner in which these four categories of trauma influence how I view myself and in the manner in which I interact with others. Reciprocally I am also concentrating on acknowledging other people's traumatic experiences both in how their traumatic experiences affect them and how it influences their interaction with me. Although I am now aware of the awesome influence of trauma on me I have not mastered its influence. Sadly for me and the people with whom I have become most intimate, trauma stubbornly resides behind an almost invisible veil, hiding itself deep within us and we can't seem to help resisting the active acknowledgement of its presence.

For me, I have experienced all four categories of trauma. **In looking at the first type of trauma** that was strictly personal in that I alone experienced it, my first remembered episode was when I was 2 or 3 years old. I had re-occurring nightmares, what people today call a night trauma in which I was a large thumb and everything was closing in on me, crushing me before I could find an exit from the tunnel in which I was trapped. Perhaps it was a reliving of my birthing. In any case I had it repeatedly and I remember being terrorized by this dream, which could appear in my sleep on any day. The experience of this nightmare was horrible enough, but I feel what sealed it in me was that my parents only viewed my cries in the night as strictly attention getting and therefore deserving to be ignored. The crushing affect of the nightmare was both the direct experience and the affect of feeling I wasn't worth receiving help and instead deserved to be left alone and abandoned. The corrosive nature of these feelings shredded my feeling of being safe and secure and as a result I have suffered at times uncontrolled anxiety that continues to some degree today.

Another such individual traumatic experience, which also had an environmental cause was when I was a little boy, perhaps five or six when during a vacation with my family we visited Hoover Dam. I remember lagging behind as we walked on the dam's sidewalk. Having fallen behind and coming to a stop to look down I was hit with an inexplicable gut retching feeling of vertigo and simultaneously experienced a force that was seemingly pulling me over the low concrete guard. The fear of being pulled over the wall to fall to my death by an invisible force was horribly overwhelming and paralyzing. Today it might be called a panic attack. Perhaps it was connected to being told that my grandfather died from falling to his death when cleaning windows in a high rise building in New York as a result of his safety belt breaking when he slipped. The feeling was only broken when one of my family members came back for me. I never shared this fearful experience with anyone because I had already lost any feeling of trust that what I shared would be handled in a nurturing manner. This trauma stapled itself into me and I have resisted it all my life, none too successfully. Obviously I survived and yet that memory of complete loss of control seriously impacted my view of myself as a boy. I felt weaker and more vulnerable as a result. I guess the nature of its unpredictable presence completely capsized my sense of safety. I mean how does a little boy guard against such a power?

Strangely, every once in a while I would put myself back into a situation of risk that related to heights even though I knew that I would be setting myself up for re-experiencing the vertigo and subsequent panic. I guess I did it because unconsciously I inherently couldn't stand the shackle of fear that imprisoned and frankly emasculated me.

As a result of this drive to resurrect some sense of competency I remember re-experiencing this type of trauma again as a teenager. I was climbing up a cliff when the sand on the beach diminished to a section of rocks due to the encroachment of a rising tide. Not wanting to walk all the way back the way I came I somehow decided to climb a cliff face to gain the parking lot that was just beyond. Don't you think that I must have known the foolishness of this decision? Anyway, I started the climb and was halfway up, maybe fifty feet above the rocks below and so far doing well. I remember feeling such a sense of achievement when all of a sudden the vertigo swooped down and recaptured me. There I was clinging to the rock face totally paralyzed and with each moment the panic increasing. Not again! I really felt the pull on me seeking to force me to fall. In the face of this trap with my heart pounding and knees knocking I came to an emotional crisis in which I surprisingly just couldn't stand the feeling of fear, panic and its accompanying paralysis. An intense counterbalancing feeling of resentment

came over me and thrust me into overdrive to continue climbing to safety regardless of the enslaving feeling of desperation due to the perception that I was at a very high risk of falling.

A second form of trauma, this one being inter-personal, that I experienced was a result of a shared experience with loved ones. For me the trauma was an outcome of a divorce in which I lost custody of my son. To me, at that time, life in general was OK, but no longer had any significance. I had worked hard to overcome my childhood and the intense dysfunction that led to me living, before getting married, just for the moment and the moment's pleasures. Once married my wife taught me about pulling myself back together and in the process becoming educated to life and responsibility, which resulted in my earning a fine job in social services. After a number of years this achievement lost its juice and I was feeling lost, seeing my life just about working. For what? For some reason that just wasn't doing it any longer and that's when it came to me that having children was where life could be enriched.

I remember the exquisite feeling of holding our son just after he was born, having been in the delivery room with my wife. I remember our first year together as a family going to the park for a picnic, going together for long walks along the river. Of course getting peed on while changing him was so funny. He was very quick intellectually and when he began speaking it was amazing at what he could say. I remember watching Sesame Street with him and while carrying him through the streets of New York listening to him while he called out the letters he saw. Here I was a father, a husband, a provider and caretaker and was thrilled with the heightened energy levels I felt being so connected, relevant and appreciated. Then out of what felt like no where my wife announcing that she was leaving us, needing her own space.

The separation deteriorated into a divorce proceeding after about a year. I had a choice to fight in court for joint custody, but had been advised by a family lawyer that because my wife was African-American that there was no chance that the court would provide a White father split custody of our African-American looking child. So, I backed off rather than fight a losing cause and one, which could easily have a significantly negative effect on our son. The divorce laws required the claim of physical abuse of my spouse, which never occurred, and to finalize the divorce I had to sign the divorce decree, which also gave physical and legal custody to her. The loss of custody was devastating. It resulted in the complete stripping of any sense of empowerment I had worked so hard to develop and it struck at my sense of fairness as I could only see the destructive nature of this divorce on our young child. The feeling was that of rage and at one point it brought me dangerously close to injuring my wife and then the claim of spousal abuse would be made real.

This form of trauma was reinforced years later when a second marriage disassembled after fourteen years of marriage. The trauma erupted as I became increasingly estranged from my three children from the second marriage because I remember the division of loyalties being too much for them and to preserve their sanity they had to make a choice and so they attached to their mother. In both of these incidents the trauma was triggered by the feeling of hopelessness due to the catastrophic loss of my deeply bonded relationships with loved ones. It really felt that they were lost, like in the wilderness, or kidnapped with ransom being dangled just beyond my reach. These traumas were deepened by the restrictions placed on me in visitation privileges that could be withdrawn for periods of time at whim. These two occurrences fractured my sense of belief in the goodness and power of love to heal any situation. Concurrently my relationship with G-d was undermined.

The after affect was the devastatingly eroding feelings of betrayal, abandonment, powerlessness, and unrelenting distress due to the loss of the full and unfettered relationship with

my children. It was a terribly confusing time. It was a horrible and devastating feeling to feel the lessening of my children's acceptance, appreciation and respect that I had previously experienced with them. My perception of all this led to a disintegration of my mental health, which spiraled into a combination of depression, self-medication and rage. It all just reinforced my subconscious feelings that I learned from the abuse by my mother that women could be a threat to my very existence.

I need to share that my mother physically abused me repeatedly until I was eight when I finally was too big to physically control and then from that age to the time I left home at nineteen the abuse was crushingly emotional. I was also saddled with a father who was completely emotionally detached. As a result I never experienced the warmth and care of a nurturing mother and an involved father. When as an adult I realized my degree of deprivation I started to go to lectures and read accounts of love in order to discover the manner in which that feeling can be shared in a good way. I also was blessed to meet young adults who already were married and had children and so they became peer role models to the challenge of child rearing. So, when I married my first wife I was just in the process of learning and practicing the skills of a loving relationship.

I wasn't very good at it initially yet I gradually gained a sense of maturity and began to get the "hang" of it toward the end of the first marriage. It was shocking to me when she decided to separate not long after our son was born. It seemed that the more I came together the more vulnerable and less secure she felt and her commitment to our marriage eroded as I acquired maturity. That of course I came to understand or believed I understood as I began to see how trauma can affect how one lives by influencing our perception and thus the choices we make. This maturity then eventually led to me being empathetic and able to feel compassion in regards to how trauma affected her during her childhood due to the emotional abuse of her impoverished environment and by her manipulative father. This life view also eventually encompassed my second wife and as a result I have been able to develop a cordial and supportive relationship with her. Oh, life is so damn complicated. No one is around who really knows how it all works. Pieces maybe, but the whole thing? No. And if there were, who would listen and if we did listen, would we be able to comprehend their knowledge?

The third form of trauma I have experienced is the one acted on an individual, a family or a community by the incursion of another and stronger culture. The cultural trauma I experienced at times during my childhood was due to my family being Jewish. As a family we had never dealt with the emotional threats that penetrated every Jewish family as a result of The Genocide and for American Jews, handling the guilt for not having done anything about it during the years that it was on-going. Of course throughout life I have been subjected to varying levels of anti-Jewish sentiments from peers who weren't aware of my cultural background.

The Genocide wasn't a topic that was ever discussed in my family but it couldn't be escaped because as a child I watched on TV the films/documentaries of American soldiers "liberate" various concentration camps and for the first time witnessed the graphic exhibition of the atrocities. Seeing my Jewish people and very likely some of my European relatives stripped of their humanity, skeleton thin, staring vacantly at their liberators was excruciatingly painful and frightening. Even more painful and terrifying than viewing the piles of scarecrow-starved bodies tossed helter-skelter into the pits waiting for cremation was the look of vacancy in the survivor's eyes. These images struck deep into my soul.

This trauma was reinforced when I then later read accounts of other atrocities directed at Jews in East Europe with the Pogroms, and earlier accounts in Spain and Portugal during the

hundreds of years of the Inquisition. Of course I had repeatedly heard hateful comments by some Christian peers about Jews as the Christ Killers. I remember as a little boy having to hide the fact that we were Jewish. Where my father worked, Jews weren't employed and my father was passing as a Christian in order to get the job. In those years Christians wouldn't hire a Jew nor sell a house to one. Because Christian co-workers of my father were coming by the house at Christmas we had to have a Christmas tree. This was devastatingly disturbing to my young mind and my parents weren't willing or able to provide the context to this occurrence and so I just felt that there must be something very wrong and threatening in the fact of being Jewish. Again these situations kept reinforcing the trauma of it all not being safe and that there was no one to protect me from the threats.

This trauma directed at cultures of people isn't short lived or ever really over as I have directly experienced its continuation in me. As an adult I have become close to many immigrant people who fled/escaped to the United States for a better life. We all seem to continue to live our trauma with little awareness of its affect on our interrelationships.

Another example of this type of trauma in which a culture traumatizes its own people I experienced when I was horrified as I watched the movie, "The Killing Fields" which depicted the mass murder of millions of Cambodians by their own people. Strangely I directly experienced a sense of this type of Cultural Trauma when I witnessed the lack of response by our government to the plight of our African American citizens devastated by Hurricane Katrina. There, right on TV, for everyone to see were our people trapped in the flood, bodies floating unrecovered, people huddled in the stadium without water, food, clothing or shelter and The National Guard totally absent. Could it have been because most of the people were Black? I couldn't help but believe if those people were White that the government would have moved heaven and earth to bring help to them. It was terrifying to me to see that level of racism manifest so clearly and underlying that, my being Jewish, I couldn't help but believe that in the right circumstances, as has happened so often in the past, it could have been us.

Lately I came to understand a variable of imposed cultural trauma, not by being directly involved but rather through being exposed to it through the media. In this form of imposed trauma on an individual, family and community by its own culture the trauma was the outcome of how in certain societies a family, community and society responds to the circumstances of when a woman is raped as if she was the criminal. I believe that culturally it is a confused and extreme form of religious orthodoxy that teaches its people to behave in this manner. In these cultures the raped female is seen as a seductress who entices the perpetrator to the act of rape. He is the victim and she is the perpetrator. As a result, her family and the community view her as "tainted" and no longer fit to be wife/mother. In this experience the female must experience a much greater pain than just the rape; she experiences the loss of status, loss of potential, and the accumulation of guilt and self-disgust. The trauma then is not just the rape, for the trauma of the rape in these situations is magnified by the reaction of the family and community within which she lives. The trauma then spreads like a disease and her rape isn't viewed as an assault against a family member, but rather she has caused an assault directed at the family and the community as a result of her behavior.

I have worked hard to understand this reaction, but I am limited by my own cultural upbringing. This causes me to initially think that maybe it's all about denial of the family and community's responsibility and ability to protect their women. So is it that the family and the community failure to protect her results in their feeling guilty and inadequate? Rather than accepting that responsibility for their failure to protect her and to make certain changes so that

any future outcome is different, the family and community chooses to shift the blame solely to the raped female. By doing this, the female is sacrificed to protect the self-esteem of the family and the community. By removing her from the category of the good daughter to one who is shameful, which in effect prevents her from marriage, the rape, which is viewed as an injury to her family and community is excised and she then alone carries the taint. In this way they preserve their sense of propriety by cutting off the offending member.

To me it seems to go a bit deeper and that is in the transfer of responsibility from the family and community to the female who was raped. In these cultures one way she can regain a bit of self worth and demonstrate her loyalty to her family is go along as the sacrificial lamb by living out the denial of her innocence, the family's judgment. In order to be a good daughter and because she honors her parents she has to prove the judgment of the family and the community as correct and so she does this by subconsciously sabotaging her life, which proves the correctness of their judgment. Her whole life can become a justification of the judgment.

Yet there is also another alternative. If there are no witnesses to the rape then the female has a choice, and that is to tell no one of the assault. She can choose to keep the experience as a secret. She can choose to do this to protect her family, her community, if not herself, from shame. In this way, on the surface she can continue to live the life of the good daughter. However, the experience is traumatic and likely has deep psychological effects on her mental health, and the influence of the trauma deepens in the psyche in that the rape is kept secret. The hiding of the trauma, disguising it and withholding the shame from her family and the community, causes her to live in denial of the experience, but all the while it subconsciously eats away at her ability to be open in her relationships with others. She has to guard the secret and she likely fears intimacy for she fears that in the experience of intimacy she may weaken and her secret would be revealed and her lack of worth would be exposed.

In secret, she hides her truth. This leads to her having to respond to the encouragement by her family to follow their cultural imperative to marry and bear children. She can't help but to subscribe to this edict and so she accepts her parent's decision as to whom to marry. To protect her secret she will subconsciously and subtly have to keep her husband at an emotional distance. This distancing will confuse and hurt her husband, and in the end it may undermine the integrity of the marriage. The husband can't help but to feel rejected and intuit the confusing lack of trust. This feeling can lead to suspicion and a feeling that she isn't honest or loyal. Should the situation continue it can lead to threats of divorce, which also is viewed as shameful. Should he actually divorce her, it will also prove how unworthy she really is, and her self-denial of worth will be proved justified.

The consequence of this type of trap can lead to depression and if it continues unabated, to a psychotic break, or even suicide.

The trauma and the critical response of the family and community force the individual's personality to shift in order to live out the judgment. This is the individual's tragedy. Still, it is instructive as to other elements of trauma. One can have insight into the dynamics that shifted the personality of the family and the personality of the community to come to this position of condemning the daughter for the rape.

This leads to the fourth category of trauma. One might wonder what kind of experiences the family and community had been living in order to come to such a stern position. An intuitive leap would suggest that a family can also be traumatized and should the trauma be widespread enough it can effectively traumatize a given community or even a society/culture. History shows us many examples of widespread trauma, such as the Bubonic Plague in Europe

during the Middle Ages, or maybe even the plagues placed on the Egyptians at the time of Moses. A whole culture may believe that they are being punished and even deserve to be punished by G-d. In societies where trauma is associated with shame, one might easily come to see that some widespread trauma must have been experienced to bring a society and culture to treat its women with such judgmental and horrific consequences. What secret(s) is the culture guarding that leads it to condemn its women for their being raped?

Insight is not always pleasant. One may see many secrets that once revealed would affect the culture's perception of itself. Many of these secrets would unbalance society and its perception of worth and rightness. In my lifetime when the Supreme Court awarded the first election to George W. Bush while there were so many improprieties in the voting was to me deeply traumatic. Then with the terrorist attack of 9/11 and subsequently when President Bush and his team lied about the Weapons of Mass Destruction, which led to the war in Iraq, this too was traumatic and as a result deeply overwhelming. It was so culturally overwhelming that there was no outcry to these atrocious distortions of the values that most Americans hold dear. It was just too much and so the mass of our culture fell into denial and disenfranchisement.

It seems to me that secrets have a life force of their own and is often guarded with an illusion that protects itself. The illusion is extremely powerful and can protect itself in many subtle and also overt ways. It can easily cast any revealer of the illusion, the revealer of the secret, as a dangerous enemy. I guess that's why Democrats who are progressive in America are cast by Religious Republican Conservatives as Bleeding Heart Liberals, people who are to be viewed weak and weepy. In earlier times these same kinds of caring people were cast as Communists for their concern about the poor and the working class. Of course at the commencement of our country, people who didn't fit in and support tyrannical imperatives delivered by powerful people were cast as witches and sorcerers and burnt or drowned.

Perhaps the situation of the raped woman is revelatory, focusing light to the culture's secret, and thus one can understand the drive to eliminate her at least in reputation from the family and community. Definitely by casting her in shame, she is diminished. The community fears in a state of trauma induced paranoia that whoever can reveal the secret will by this act ultimately gain control. The function of the secret is to prevent access to the "truth" and by doing so, power is maintained. By attaining power through the maintenance of the secret provides a distorted sense of empowerment, the antidote to the cultural trauma and the consequences from that trauma which is a feeling of helplessness; failure to protect her.

One can only wonder about the affects of trauma when it affects a whole culture. To me when trauma becomes a secret it will ultimately undermine the strength of the culture unless it is brought out into the light and its healing promoted. This is true of course for all social structures below it. For healing, the trauma must be acknowledged and the responsibility for it shared by all levels of society.

I feel that in how people respond to a traumatized individual determines the hold of trauma on the person's psyche. An open, accepting, nurturing and supportive response can moderate its long-term hold. A judgmental and punitive response deepens its hold. One can't help but to wonder what intervention can possibly be effective thereafter if the initial response is negative, for it seems as though the longer one lives within that response, increasingly will the individual assume the negative identity. Yet, inherent within most individuals is the will to fight, to free oneself from the affect of trauma and its accompanying prison of deceit.

So, how can the hold of the trauma be broken, and the healing promoted? Maybe the hold of trauma can't be broken or fully healed. Maybe one has to even view it as a permanent

disability. Then it would make sense not to attempt to get overly intimate with a traumatized person who has assumed the negative personality that was placed upon them by their family and community. Perhaps a relationship that is more distant is what is required, one that is distant enough not to excite the defense mechanism of the secret. It is a difficult position to assume, yet safer than not for both the traumatized individual and the one who is in a social relationship with that person.

In regards to the time that I was experiencing the panic attack on the cliff, hanging on to my grip on the cliff for all I was worth, the crisis produced a life changing experience not only in reinforcing the damage of its re-occurring attack on my psyche, but surprisingly also in the manner in which I moved on with the climb to assure my survival. I can't really say I overcame the fear, but I did make some kind of decision to go for it whatever may come. I can say that an awareness of the depths of my drive to live has been a positive outcome of this experience and in a way has contributed to my confidence that I can get through it or at least get on with living life.

In all that I've written I don't really have any answers for anyone else. I definitely don't adhere to the theorem that "If I could do it so can anyone else if only they want it enough." I do know that when I have what I call an insight I experiment with it in my own life and if it withstands the test of my life and supports some improvement in the manner in which I live life, then that's what motivates me to share. It might be helpful. I sincerely hope so.

Should you wish to share your experiences with trauma or have something to add or even challenge I welcome your input. Jonathan@Outfar10.com.

Until then, as always, Peace, Love and Harmony is the Vision. To me, it's all about learning how to live it and in this, so we need each other. I mean, what's the point of getting there and finding one all alone, with everyone I care for somewhere else.