

November 6, 2022
“Navigating Collective Trauma”
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Hi.

I just want to be down here today. I don't want what I say today to seem like it's coming from some elevated, if slightly off center, place. It's coming from the level where you are. Right here.

I think by now, over a decade later, I have forgotten much of what I learned in seminary. That's because a lot of what I learned was Hebrew and Biblical Greek. And I have lost almost all of it. One thing I do remember though was translating the scene in the gospel of Mark where Jesus is healing people by forgiving them.

Healing by forgiveness is a powerful lesson. But there was more to it than that. The Greek that has been interpreted as, “I forgive you,” is more literally translated as, “You are released.” That changes the action. Jesus isn't forgiving, he is observing an essential innocence and freedom and reconnecting the afflicted to that natural state.

As I was thinking on our topic this week that translation loomed in my mind. What if we conceived of the afflicted in that story as people paralyzed by trauma? Along comes a healer who says, “you are not the sum of your wounds. You are not beholden to them. You are released.” And then people who could not function, regain their agency.

This has become a personal topic for me. I am speaking to you as a traumatized person. I do not say that to identify as a victim. Though there is a time when that is important to do. No, I say that to you as a sympathizer, as a means of getting in touch with you through the collective field generated by our congregation. And that collective field... is traumatized. I am a traumatized person speaking to a room full of traumatized people.

I hope saying so does not cause you more pain. It's just that we've been through a lot together. What we've been through has been traumatic. And I would say that it is very likely that what we have

been through, or at least how we've been through it, has not only caused trauma, it has been caused by trauma.

And this is not surprising in the least. We are surrounded by trauma. We may even be addicted to it in a certain way. We have multiple television networks devoted to its consumption. Chief among these are news networks. I mean, we sell stuff on the back of trauma. Think about that relationship for a second.

There is intentionally terrifying sensational journalism. But they don't have to twist things to traumatize. Ecological devastation, violence in nearby neighborhoods, pandemics, atrocities abroad, and all the rest. You feel that. How could you not?

The ubiquity of trauma is devastating. In North America alone, 30% of individuals who witness a traumatic event develop post-traumatic stress disorder¹. To be honest, I think that is in person witnessing. But I'd wager the sheer amount of violence and despair in our info-media impacts as trauma.

So I've jumped from the congregational level to the societal level. And that's okay. They are related. As is a third level: the personal. We have trauma in our field at 3 levels. Societal, local, and personal, each distinct but interrelated. And if we have any hope of freeing ourselves from any of them, we need to become aware of each and all of them.

It is important to note here that, as Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score* notes, trauma is not what happened, it's how you respond to what happened. Trauma is not only an event of physical, psychological, or spiritual pain, it is the way that painful experience continues to live in our bodies, minds, and spirit. In so doing, trauma reveals that the body, mind, and spirit are inseparable.

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<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4318493/>

I opened by identifying that we, as individuals and as a congregation, are traumatized. And I ultimately want to focus there. But just by way of underscoring my claim, I want to zoom out again and talk more generally about the ubiquity and consequences of trauma.

We know that 1 out of 8 kids have witnessed physical violence between parents. More kids than that get beaten by their caregivers².

That means that somewhere between 15-25% of us here have had a traumatic experience with those entrusted to care for us... and it's the same for our kids. Add to that survivors of war, poverty, sexual abuse, domestic violence, racism, sexism, natural disasters, or accidents. There is also evidence in both family systems theory and genetics that suggests that we can pass our traumas through generations.

There is so much hurt. And it is self-perpetuating. Untreated trauma causes trauma. It's a tragic cycle that extends out into the future and up from the past stretching back millenia. Added all together, I think it is fair to say that trauma is ubiquitous. It is the air we breathe. It increases over time and is now central to the society we have crafted under its influence.

Thomas Hubl, author of "Healing Collective Trauma," observes that, "Trauma is not an individual issue. Trauma is a collective net. And this collective net becomes a societal structure, a societal structure we have been born into. And we call it normal."

Of course, this has consequences. Simply put, trauma disables us. Right off the bat, trauma affects brain development. Gabor Matte has noted that brain development depends primarily on our relationship with our environment - fundamentally with the parent. A healthy brain develops with parents who are present, emotionally available, non-stressed, non-depressed and mutually responsive to the child. I mean...

Trauma also affects health in general, our hearts, the endocrine system... all of it.

Psychologically, trauma activates what van der Kolk calls the "cockroach brain," that primal part of us interested only in survival. It is the most reactive, violent and debilitating aspect of our brain.

According to van der Kolk, when you are experiencing the effects of trauma, you're "not able to engage, or learn, or to see other people's point of view." Trauma gives fight, flight, or flop the keys to the car.

It also leads to dissociation, the experience of not being where you are, of tuning reality out. Dissociation leads to indifference. Indifference is the bedfellow of both depression and cruelty.

I'm talking about us. I mean, I'm talking about everyone. But we're part of everyone. And we have our own container; a congregation and the values upon which that institution has been built. And that container can channel amazing things; activism, caring relationships, and connection to the holy wavelength. But it also can become an arena that focuses and invigorates the trauma we are all beset by.

Hubl points out that, "The collective trauma material is kind of a dormant force in the society. But if the environmental pressure gets stronger, the crisis gets stronger, it's going to come up as destructive tendencies, separation tendencies in society."

You think a global pandemic might qualify as an increase in environmental pressure? With all its fear, disruption, isolation, and straight loss of life? Or the increasing emotional awareness of climate emergency? Or the shifting of a paradigm that has existed for anywhere between 400 and 10,000 years?

Have we seen - everywhere - but also right here, our trauma expressed as destructive tendencies and separation tendencies? And then trauma causes trauma. Hurt people hurt people. And so we're all hurting, all of us, locked into cycles of reactivity, unable to engage, learn, or see other people's point of view.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Daiw720De6I>

each other a little space. And in that spaciousness we may find a kind of release. We may find a truth that will set us free. Aphiente. Aphiente. Aphiente.

While, tragic, it's not surprising at all. But... it is also an opportunity. The pandemic really cracked the egg. A massively traumatic experience, the consequences of which we are only beginning to understand, it also forced us to look at trauma, and collective trauma. By looking at it, we can see what a driving force it is in personal, societal, and ecological tragedy.

It may well be that the planet as we love it will only survive if we figure out how to release ourselves from collective trauma.

It may well be the same for this congregation.

So how do we do that? We have to find a way to release ourselves from the past, not to become naive in its forgetting, but to be free of its clutches. The thing is, while we can work to mitigate future traumas, there is nothing we can do about the harm we have already endured or afflicted. That's happened and there's no un-happening it.

But we can become less reactive to it. This is the learning from Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, aka EMDR, and MDMA therapy. Both methods result in patients being able to revisit the cause of their trauma without pain, judgment, or reactivity. In doing so, they find they are released from their trauma.

So we know there is a way out. And we know it involves decreasing our reactivity. And we know there are practices we can engage in to cultivate non-reactivity. In fact, next Sunday, we'll spend some time playing with them.

If we can manage to cultivate a non-reactive state of being, we will not only no longer feel triggered, we will not, as we otherwise would have done, perpetuate damage in our reaction to the damage we've endured.

The first step though is to see the problem. And that is what we are doing right now. To see our trauma. And by seeing it, perhaps to allow it to generate within each and all of us some mercy. Mercy may also slow the cycle. Mercy may buy