

The Way of the Wound: A Spirituality of Trauma and Transformation

by Robert Grant Ph.D.
copyright @1998

Traumatic events expose victims to aspects of life that most would prefer to ignore. Trauma creates confrontations with the lack of security and certitude that underlie all human endeavors. Trauma has the power to throw into question or obliterate any organization of self, God and humanity that victims have been able to create.

The implications of traumatic events assault things once considered sacred and beyond reproach. Trauma brutally demonstrates that rational and logical consciousness cannot manage certain painful dimensions of life.

Many trauma victims feel lost, disoriented and powerless when former ways of making sense are damaged or destroyed. Many lose their bearings, become unsure of whom they are and have great difficulty moving forward.

Many wander indefinitely until new and more comprehensive ways of taking up life are created. Without support, guidance and reflection it is almost impossible to develop frames of reference capable of incorporating the truths generated by traumatic experiences.

Eating from the Fruit Of Knowledge

Many do not understand that they have eaten from the “fruit of knowledge.” They have made contact with things outside of personal and collective frames. The innocence of the “taken for granted” is often lost forever. Old forms are exposed as inadequate. Ignoring the powerful shifts occurring within consciousness is not without cost. Wounds, along with the implications they have for future living, must be integrated into new and more comprehensive approaches to life. Failure to do so condemn victims to a host of problems related to post traumatic stress.

Support and Accompaniment

Victims of trauma are by definition “overwhelmed and rendered helpless.” They are unable to weather the shock and impact of their injuries. They need support and guidance. Trauma exposes aspects of reality that have been previously unacknowledged. Trauma initiates deep spiritual questions and demands that victims take in more of reality than was previously possible. The Spirit demands expansion and is intolerant of partial solutions.

The meaning of life is frequently questioned. Old answers no longer suffice. Priorities are reordered. Concerns about identity, the value of suffering, the importance of justice and the appropriateness of forgiveness proliferate. Recognizing the impermanence and cruelty in the world, along with the impact these realities have for images of God and the value of human relationships demands some form of resolution.

Conclusion

Trauma, in spite of its brutality and destructiveness, has the power to open victims to issues of profound existential and spiritual significance. The displacement of rational and egocentric consciousness forces confrontations with deeper levels of self and reality.

Trauma throws victims onto a path that spiritual seekers have been walking for thousands of years. The difference is that victims of trauma must work this territory or be overcome by it. Non-traumatized seekers have the luxury of

getting off the path voluntarily: for theirs is not a life or death struggle.

Trauma forces victims to confront realms of Being that exist outside of ego and collective consciousness. The soul, along with various existential/spiritual vulnerabilities, demands recognition. In displacing the ego trauma demonstrates that no individual is entirely sufficient or a god unto himself. If health is to be restored then the help of the Spirit and others are required. Acknowledging this fundamental dependency is a critical achievement on the healing path.

Unfortunately many victims of trauma are misdiagnosed and socially abandoned. Many are unable to find healers who recognize that trauma is a modern form of spiritual initiation. The profound struggles of victims are typically spiritualized or psychologised by mental-health professionals. Victims need safe and supportive spaces which allow them to walk amidst the ashes of their former organizations of self, reality and God, while dialoguing with transformations that are taking place on every level of their being. Eventually, personal identity must be seen to have been grounded in collective values and features (which are not the most foundational dimensions of being human). Relationship to the "Deeper Self" must be fostered and developed. In essence, traumatic experiences are one of the few things powerful enough to get the ego to release its tyrannical control over consciousness. In displacing the ego trauma creates access to the spiritual core of victims.

In receiving appropriate care, compassion and direction victims are often able to overcome the destructive impact of trauma, break through restrictive approaches to life, and become more soulful and compassionate beings in the process. Traumatic injuries, when accompanied by love and understanding, do not become places of deadness, denial, and disease. Rather they become bridges of compassion that connect victims to all sentient beings. Survivors accept that they can be broken, overwhelmed and rendered powerless. These realizations are not considered shameful (as they were at the beginning of the journey) but are now recognized as the common ground that connects victims to all forms of life. Becoming comfortable with one's inherent capacity to be rendered powerlessness enables survivors to encounter the brokenness and wounds of others without fear.

Survivors typically want to do everything possible to decrease the gulf of disconnection that separates victims from others. Simultaneously they want to help victims realize that the loss of their former ways of being in the world, despite the tremendous pain involved, is an opportunity to discover the Spirit living at the core of their being.

Robert Grant Ph.D. is a consultant who trains and educates professionals (therapists, doctors, nurses, teachers, spiritual directors, chaplains and church ministers) and agencies (relief agencies, church groups, religious orders) to provide psychological and spiritual care for victims of trauma. He is author of "The Way of the Wound: A Spirituality of Trauma and Transformation", "Living and Working in Environments of Violence and Trauma: A Resource Manual for Humanitarian Workers", "A Comprehensive Approach to the Diagnosis and Treatment of Trauma," and "A Healing Response to Terrorism," "Trauma and Missionary Life" (Missiology, January 1995) and "Healing the Soul of the Church: Ministers Facing their own Histories of Abuse and Trauma."

[TRAUMATOLOGYe](#), 5:1, E2, 1999

Spirituality and Trauma: An Essay
by Robert Grant Ph.D.
rw_grant@hotmail.com

Abstract

Traumatic experiences forces victims to face issues lying outside the boundaries of personal and collective frames of reference. As a result they are forced to confront psychological and spiritual challenges that are unfamiliar to the average person. Therapists need to recognize that organizations of self and God are often thrown into questions or destroyed by experiences of

trauma. The deconstructive power of trauma exposes the lack of substance and cohesiveness that comprises identity and images of God.

Introduction

Child abuse, domestic violence, rape, violent crime, war, vehicular accidents, terminal illness, unexpected loss of loved ones and natural disasters are becoming increasingly common. Many consider these events as back luck or indicators of personal inadequacy. Trauma is life at its worst. Traumatic events are often unexpected and horrible. Typically they lead to variety of physical, emotional, interpersonal and spiritual problems. Lives become structured around addictions, avoidance behaviors and even violence. Professional and interpersonal relationships also suffer. Many professionals believe that several psychological disorders are rooted in unresolved trauma. Trauma has been implicated in personality disorders, eating disorders, addictions, attention deficit disorders, sexual dysfunctions and a host of bodily complaints. Few would state that anything positive can come out of experiences that "overwhelm abilities to cope" and that "render victims helpless and living in fear for their lives (DSM-IV, 1995)."

Initially, trauma is grounded in pain, loss and fear. Often it leads to breakdowns. Ultimately, with proper support and guidance, it has the potential to transform individuals into compassionate and deeply spiritual beings.

The Dark Power of Trauma

Traumatic events expose victims to aspects of life that most would prefer to ignore. Trauma creates confrontations with the lack of security and certitude that underlie all human endeavors. It has the power to throw into question or obliterate any organization of self, God and humanity. The implications of traumatic events assault anything considered sacred or foundational. Trauma brutally demonstrates that the ego (the rational aspect of consciousness) cannot contain or make sense of certain aspects of life.

Most victims feel lost, disoriented and powerless when former ways of making sense have been damaged or destroyed. Many lose their bearings, become unsure of whom they are and have great difficulty moving forward. Many wander indefinitely until new and more comprehensive ways of taking up life are created. Without support, guidance and reflection it is almost impossible to develop new frames of meaning capable of incorporating the life truths exposed by their experiences of trauma.

Eating from the Fruit of Knowledge

Many do not understand that they have eaten from the "fruit of knowledge." They have made contact with aspects of reality that are outside the parameters of social consciousness. The innocence of the "taken for granted" has been lost forever. Old ways of understanding are exposed as inadequate. Trying to ignore the profound shifts occurring in consciousness is not without cost. Wounds, along with the implications they have for future living, must be integrated into new and more comprehensive approaches to life or victims run the risk of being saddled a host of post trauma related problems.

Deconstruction of Ego

Many experiences of trauma, especially those involving abuse, have the power to expose the lack of substance and cohesiveness that make up the ego. The average person knows him/herself in terms

of a collage of internalizations grounded in feedback from significant others, such as parents, family, teachers, coaches and church ministers. Hopefully, the victim of trauma carries a lived sense of self that is grounded accurate feedback and his/her unique temperament and gifts. This fortunate individual is the holder of a "true self" that is painstakingly constructed over time. The ego or social persona is the sense of self that most can identify with. Certain experiences, such as peak, near death and mystical experiences often project individuals into another realm of consciousness that is often referred to as transpersonal or spiritual. At these times the ego is displaced or cracked open. This enables transpersonal dimensions of consciousness to emerge. Many of these experiences despite their beauty and sublime character are unnerving and terrifying.

Trauma, in addition to its ability to deconstruct reality horizontally, in terms of belief systems and frames of reference, also initiates a vertical deconstruction. It either displaces or obliterates the ego. Victims are thrust into the realm of the Deeper Self without warning and preparation. This brutal exposure illuminates the fact that the ego is a mosaic held together by personal narration, continual feedback from others and internalized object relations. Exposure to its lack of unity and substance is terrifying. Some do not recover from this forced encounter with a space in consciousness referred to as the "great Naught" or nothingness. Some decompose and others fragment. This is the realm from which both mystics and madmen emerge.

Support and Accompaniment

Victims of trauma are by definition "overwhelmed and rendered helpless." They are unable to weather the shock and impact of their injuries. They need support and guidance. Trauma exposes aspects of external and internal reality that have been previously unacknowledged. Trauma initiates a process of deep spiritual questioning and demands that victims take in more of reality than was previously possible. The Spirit demands expansion and is intolerant of partiality.

The meaning of life is questioned. Old answers no longer suffice. Priorities are reordered. Concerns about identity, the value of suffering, the importance of justice and the appropriateness of forgiveness are figural. Recognizing the amount of evil and cruelty in the world, along with the impact these realities have for images of God and the value of human relationship, demand careful consideration and continual reflection. Questions of identity proliferate. Responses to these demands require more comprehensive ways of taking up life.

Conclusion

Trauma, in spite of its brutality and destructiveness, has the power to open victims to issues of profound existential and spiritual significance. The displacement of the ego forces confrontations with deeper levels of self and reality. Trauma throws victims onto a path that mystics, shamans, mythic heroes and spiritual seekers have been walking for thousands of years. The difference is that victims of trauma must work this territory or be overcome by it. Non-traumatized seekers have the luxury of getting off the path at will: for theirs is not a life or death struggle. Theirs is usually a gradual and volitional emersion. They are able to progressively assimilate the demands of this realm. Victims are thrust into this realm against their will and with no preparation. Trauma forces victims to confront realms of Being existing outside of ego and collective consciousness. Various existential and spiritual vulnerabilities, such as the inevitability of one's death, the lack of certitude and security surrounding human existence and the lack of substance and unity making up the ego or social self, demand acknowledgment.

Trauma displaces the ego and demonstrates that no one is a self-contained being around which the universe rotates. If health is to be restored then the help of the Spirit and others is required. Acknowledging this fundamental dependency is a critical milestone on the healing path.

Unfortunately many victims of trauma are misdiagnosed and socially isolated. Most are unable to find healers who recognize that trauma has thrust them on a path that spiritual seekers have been walking for thousands of years. In addition, most do not understand that an ego has to be reformed or established before one can develop a permanent relationship with the Deeper or Transpersonal Self.

The profound struggles of many trauma victims are often spiritualized or psychologised by various caring professionals. Victims need safe and supportive spaces in which to walk amidst the ashes of their former organizations of self, reality and God, while dialoguing with the transformations taking place on every level of their being. Eventually, the ego must be seen to be based on collective values. It is not the essence of being human. Relationships with the "Deeper Self" must be fostered and developed. In essence, traumatic experiences are one of the few things powerful enough to get the ego to release its tyrannical hold over the transpersonal dimensions of consciousness. In displacing the ego trauma creates access to the spiritual core of victims.

In receiving appropriate care, compassion and direction victims can overcome the destructive impact of trauma, break through restrictive approaches to life, and become more soulful and compassionate beings in the process. Traumatic injuries, when accompanied by love and understanding, do not become places of deadness, denial, and disease. Rather they become bridges of compassion that connect victims to all sentient beings. Survivors accept that they can be broken, overwhelmed and rendered powerless. These realizations are not considered shameful (as they were at the beginning of the journey) but are now recognized as the common ground that connects victims to all forms of life. Becoming comfortable with one's inherent capacity to be rendered powerlessness enables survivors to encounter the brokenness and wounds of others without fear. Survivors want to do everything possible to decrease the gulf of disconnection separating victims from others while simultaneously helping them realize that the loss of their former ways of being in the world, despite the tremendous pain involved, is an opportunity to discover the Spirit living at the core of their being.