

First Unitarian Church

October 9, 2022

When I was about a junior in college, majoring in philosophy and religion, I took a course on the Greek philosophers. It was taught by an adjunct professor whose other job was as a hospice chaplain. At the time, I had only just started thinking that maybe I'd see if I could, possibly, one day, become a minister. I didn't have any experience with chaplaincy yet. So when I learned that my professor worked with people at the ends of their lives, I said, "Wow, it must be intense to work with people who are dying."

"Dying??" he replied, "The way I see it they're still living. People are *living* all the way up to the end of their life."

Ah. That's a valuable reframe, isn't it. Life may be temporary for all of us, and some of us may already know that we have a shorter timeline than others, but we all still have the present moment. We have now. And whatever we think may happen tomorrow, today is valuable. Today is for living.

That life/death thing, it's a tension we live with from the start. Right from that mysterious moment when you could say we begin to exist in the person sense, right from that moment, life is risky. Right from the get-go, there are a million things that could go wrong.

For the most part, we are pretty much able to...well, *live* with that. We have to be able to do so, in order to enjoy life at all. So we each develop a certain level of risk tolerance. Most of it is subconscious. You probably haven't thought this morning that an asteroid could strike you at any moment. Or that you could accidentally ingest poison in your breakfast oats. Or fall into a sinkhole. (Well, you hadn't thought of it until now.) Freak accidents happen.

But if we were to worry all the time about bad things happening, we'd totally miss out on the present moment. (Now I can hear my therapist's voice. The other day I was feeling anxious about something and started listing several things that could go wrong, none of which I can actually prevent, and she said, "What if it turns out great?")

When we are living well, we are aware of risk, and we make some choices to help keep ourselves within our level of risk tolerance, but we don't spend too much of our precious lives in a state of fear.

But when things do go wrong, and we experience something traumatic, that can shift the way we perceive things.

What do I mean by traumatic? That word has a lot of miles on it. It gets tossed around a lot.

There are many definitions of trauma out there. The American Psychiatric Association defines a traumatic stressor as "any event or events that may cause or threaten death, serious injury, or sexual violence to an individual, close family member, or friend."

Other definitions include that something becomes traumatic when it overwhelms a person's ability to cope or causes feelings of helplessness.

Some definitions draw a distinction between Trauma with a big T and trauma with a little t, Big T Trauma being the physical or life-threatening kind, and little t trauma involving those things that cause us distress but which do not involve violence or disaster. That little t category is pretty big and vague, which is why the word trauma may seem overused.

There is acute trauma—trauma that occurs in response to one distinct event; chronic trauma—which comes from repeated events; and complex trauma—which develops when a person faces is a whole constellation of traumatic events.

There is also something called indirect trauma, which comes from being close to terrible events, even if they don't happen to you directly. The first definition I shared spoke to that when it mentioned close family members and friends, but witnessing a traumatic event can cause indirect trauma to the observer even if the event happens to a stranger. Healthcare workers, ministers, counselors, and others in helping professions often show their own signs of trauma from working closely with traumatized people.

Finally, there is collective trauma: a shared emotional response to a terrible event that many people experience at the same time.

So, just in the last few years, we've all been through some things. Individually and together. I know you know all of it—I don't need to go through a whole list—and things kept happening in our individual lives as well, sometimes traumatic things.

Some of you here this morning find yourselves in the midst of traumatic experiences right now, while others are feeling okay and may be ready to move on from even talking about it. The thing about trauma is that to really move on, whether now or in the future, we can't just brush it aside or stuff it down. If we do that, it will eventually pop back up. Sometimes it pops back up in disguise, masquerading as physical symptoms, other times it shows up as an outsized emotional response to something that seems unrelated. Unprocessed trauma can leave us feeling exhausted, irritable, unproductive, or depressed.

So if that describes you lately, this sermon is for you. And if you're feeling great, good for you, this stuff is also for you. It will help you understand others in your life. And, it may come in handy for your own self later on.

By understanding how trauma works in us, we can take an active role in healing.

During a traumatic experience, the brain goes into survival mode. The primal part of the brain—what is sometimes called the reptilian part (back here, in the lower back of your head)—is activated. It says, "fight or run!" It does this by flooding your brain with cortisol- stress hormones.

If we can escape, or at least move our bodies as with exercise, or fight back effectively and become safe again, our reptilian brain and nervous system will calm down. Especially if we have the support of loving people around us, we will probably recover pretty well.

Helping others also helps heal trauma—doing something to help someone else is empowering, and reminds us that we are not alone. Human connection is really important for dealing with trauma.

Another thing that helps is spiritual practice. Spiritual practices ground us in the present, and connect us to that which is beyond ourselves, like God or a sense of purpose in life, or both. Most of the time, these things are enough. Escape or fight, get some reassurance, help someone else, get re-centered. Good to go.

But if we can't take care of ourselves: either the situation is overwhelming, or we are trapped, or we are too young and vulnerable to fend for ourselves, or we simply don't know how, and the trauma continues, then the brain will continue to send stress chemicals out. Even long after the event has ended, the brain's electrical circuits will keep going.

Right above the reptile brain is the mammalian brain. That's the limbic system, where our emotions live. The limbic brain reads the social environment. It notices what is pleasurable or scary, perceives danger, and filters out information that is not important for survival. This part of the brain is developed through experience. If we do not grow up in a safe family, or if we do but we experience violence later on, it can be wired or rewired for danger.

The reptilian and mammalian parts of our brain together make what can be thought of as "the emotional brain." When the emotional brain is wired for danger, that becomes the brain's main focus. This is smart, in an evolutionary sense: when we are in danger, we need to focus on that.

But that focus prevents other parts from functioning very well—like the parts that are devoted to language, meaning making, narrative memories, and reason. It can suppress the frontal lobe, which is the part that tells us we are in the present—with the result that traumatized people can become essentially stuck in the past. Stuck in the brain processes of trauma and danger.

Since the brain controls the body, those physiological brain processes create whole body symptoms, especially when the person encounters a trigger- meaning something that reminds them of some aspect of the traumatic event. And that's when trauma turns into post traumatic stress disorder, PTSD.

PTSD leads to physical feelings of anxiety, like tightness in the chest, or feelings of panic. It leads to depression. And often because it's so distressing, it leads to attempts to self-medicate, like with drugs or alcohol, which may ultimately do more harm. Sometimes people living with PTSD describe the feeling of being triggered as a row of dominoes falling one by one in an unstoppable motion; or as an innermost door closing, followed by another, and another, until the self is very disconnected and shut off from the world.

With the body stuck in the brain activity of the past, vivid flashbacks and nightmares are common. Some survivors with PTSD develop poor physical coordination, or a disconnect of their minds from their own bodies.

Another sign of PTSD is feeling frozen in the face of new danger. The brain learned the first time that there was no escape.

It can make you feel like you don't have control of your brain and body.

So then what? How do we heal? And when it feels like nothing will help, where do we find our courage?

The first source of courage is wisdom. When you know you're experiencing the after effect of trauma, or if you know you have PTSD, then you know you aren't broken or lazy or anything like that. And you know that the anxious voice inside is really just that: an anxious voice. It only knows one script. That script is, "Doom! Doom! Nothing will help!"

You can choose to listen to another voice. The voice of wisdom says, "Healing is possible." The voice of wisdom says to the anxious voice, "You say nothing will help, but let's just try it. Why not?" And then for good measure, it kind of kicks the anxious voice over a ledge for a little while.

Now you're ready to try out the things that help. One is that we have the ability to regulate our own physiology through basic activities like breathing, moving, and touching. Activities like yoga, meditation, and tai chi are healing. Movement helps prevent trauma from turning into PTSD, and mindful movement also helps heal PTSD.

Another thing is community. In his book on PTSD called *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van der Kolk lifts up how belonging to a caring congregation can help with healing. Church is a place where we can find the words to express what we are experiencing, so that we don't have to face it alone.

The healing power of a caring congregation goes beyond companionship, too. It turns out that singing in a church choir can help heal the body's relationship with the brain. Van der Kolk calls it a "wonderful" experience of group synchronicity and rhythm, which help heal PTSD. We have at least three kinds of choirs here at First U. One of them, the "Come As You Are" choir, doesn't even require a long term commitment. They just sing every once in a while. You are invited to give it a try, just talk to Susan Peck. Susan, by the way, has been doing some learning about trauma and music—she attended a retreat on it this summer—making this a very intentional part of our music program going forward.

Finally, professional therapists have some tools for healing PTSD. There has been a lot of research on this lately, and new research is leading to new approaches, so if it's feeling too hard on your own, and even if you've tried therapy before, and even though it's hard to find a therapist who is taking new clients *and* who is a good match, it's absolutely worth trying therapy again. There's a shortage of therapists right now because the need is so high, so it takes some perseverance. Sometimes you've gotta get on a wait list. But just get started.

Life entails risk, and sometimes we get hurt. But also, life entails love, healing, connection, and things that fill us with awe and gratitude, even when we have known great pain—maybe *especially* when we have known great pain. That ever-present reality of love, connection, healing, and awe is our source of courage, and it is why I chose the reading I did for today, Psalm 139 in the Hebrew scriptures. It was written and passed down by people who knew a lot about trauma and healing. “Where can I go from your Spirit,” the psalmist writes to their source of hope, “Where can I flee from your presence?”

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there you will guide me,  
You will hold me fast.

Even when anxiety or worry overcome us and we lose our sense of it, we are still held by that larger love. However you find yourself this morning, may that be a source of peace for you, and may you find exactly the courage you need.