

# The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 27

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## Finding a Future

One of my long term subscribers wrote suggesting the topic “how to get beyond the inability to see a future for oneself; in particular, a positive one.”

It is a good question. Once you have been traumatized, how do you begin to believe that life can be good. After all, “Sense of a foreshortened future, e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, or children, or a long life,” is one of those symptoms of PTSD based in reality. Life can be short and cruel (even for those of us who live with people with PTSD). Some things that have helped me:

I’ve had to redefine the type of life I want and throw out a lot of my family’s and society’s beliefs.

Trauma can reinforce family patterns of thinking and vice versa. I’ve had a lot of experience with believing the future would be as bad as the present or even worse. My family had a habit of catastrophising about everything. We were great at coming up with what could go wrong. I think there was a magical quality to this, that on some level we believed that if we thought of all the bad things, they were less likely to happen, or they wouldn’t hurt so much because we would be prepared. This fueled my perfectionism. I had the fear of making mistakes, so I became defensive and fearful. This can strongly affect a person who is afraid of repeating the trauma.

My family also acted as if anything you thought of might happen, so you had to be careful all the time. Worrying was a virtue in our minds. This negative outlook is realistic when you’ve been traumatized. You know what bad things can happen. When things were bad, I couldn’t see how they could get better. After all I had tried everything. (Not any of the things I use today.)

I used to wish I were dead every day, just so I wouldn’t have to face the pain of failing at being a good wife (i.e. perfect). The fear and despair,

often masked by anger and perfectionism, which comes from experiencing trauma can create similar feelings.

Working a 12-step program has helped me with this. One of the slogans is “One day at a time.” The time I spent worrying about the future can be spent productively living today to the best of my ability. When I lug my dying dog, Acorn, outdoors, I can smell the breeze, look at the trees waving green fingers at me, and praise her for her valiant refusal to pee inside. I could also desperately worry about how long she’ll live and how bad it will get, but I know I will find out with the passage of time. I know I will cry when she dies. It will hurt. That is okay with me. Today I can let things hurt. I focus on making her comfortable and going back to my work so I can meet my obligations to my subscribers and to my family. I feel sadness and loss, but they don’t paralyze me or cause me to spend hours trying to make them go away.

I used to be paralyzed by negative expectations. He’ll just say this... she’ll do that... The future was happening in my head so much that there was no room for the present. I couldn’t see the sunlight on the leaves or the softly falling rain, because I was living in my head.

Expectations cause difficulties and disappointments, especially if you are projecting the future. Acceptance of what is gives you more energy to change yourself which is, after all, the only thing you really can change.

If I quit trying to control everyone and everything, things turn out, usually better than my best ideas of what “should” happen.

I also bought into all of societies myths: the knight on the white horse, happy ever after, you’re nothing without a man (studies show single women are happiest, followed by married men!), if someone loves you, they will know how to please you without you having to say anything, you’ll think alike about everything (a sign of a dysfunctional family), and that normal people get over trauma without a trace. These were not helpful ideas, nor were they realistic. Maybe you have some of them, too.

If you are a trauma survivor, when things are going well, it is hard to relax and let yourself enjoy it. I find that I look for stuff to worry about because I know how to do that. Enjoying the now, one day at a time, is a new skill and I still have to practice it.

I’ve had to slowly, one day at a time, change my thinking. What do I feel? What am I telling myself? Is it something I believe today, or an old

pattern? Has current experience taught me different? By examining the patterns that kept repeating in my life, I begin, one day at a time, to change.

For traumatized people, having had really bad things happen to them, often more than once, makes it much harder to notice and change thinking. One of the most painful parts of PTSD is that the trauma is present. When you've seen a lot of people killed, it's hard to believe in a long life and happiness. If everyone in your childhood either abused you or let it happen, it is hard to believe there is another way of living. Such trauma mindsets have a lot of power. They are such a part of you, you may never have examined them to see how effective they are or how realistic today. Changing them is a lot of work.

Another mindset can be a feeling of invincibility. I survived that, so nothing can hurt me now. Working 80 hour weeks, riding on motorcycles, jumping out of airplanes and other types of adrenaline producing activities are common among survivors. Somewhere between living forever and no future is a place where life can be good. Finding it is an individual thing.

When I began the recovery process, I was positive that Bob was the real problem. I might have a few minor ones, but he had big ones. I hope you are laughing with me, because I had a lot of problems, many of which I've discussed in other issues of the news-letter. One of them was this global (always and forever) catastrophizing. I knew Bob would never change so my life was always going to be awful. I knew I was right. Well, guess what? Bob changed. I found out I was often wrong, and it didn't matter, especially if I could see my mistakes and change.

### **Find the tools that work for you.**

I have a much different outlook today, because my life has gotten better and better over the years of recovery, despite some terrible family problems, health problems, and financial strains over which I would once have been very depressed. Today I'm not. Part of the reason I'm not is that now I have effective tools to deal with the pains of life. Before I didn't. When life gets bad again, I pick up one of my new tools, something that has helped before. You can too. You may think you should be beyond this but, guess what, you aren't, and what's more, you don't have to be. "Start where you're at," is a phrase that has helped me more than I can say as has, "It takes as long as it takes."

I also keep myself open to finding new tools.

It takes a bit of mental practice to turn a symptom into a virtue, but doing so can give you the impetus to live one day at a time. If “a sense of a foreshortened future” manifests in ineffective behaviors like staying drunk or not paying your rent, such behaviors can be unlearned and replaced with more effective ones, like doing today what will make your life sane and safe today. Change can be slow and daunting, so living one day at a time takes the focus off how far you have to go and focuses you on where you are today. It is easier to take healthy actions just for today.

**Finding support will help.** You can gain a sense that a future is possible through becoming part of a community of survivors, either through a therapy group, self-help, AA, Al-Anon, SIA (Survivors of Incest Anonymous), a service group (Vietnam Veterans of America) or by becoming a volunteer. A spiritually focused group—church, temple, meditation group—that doesn’t tell you to “get over it” or imply that your karma or lack of faith caused the trauma might be helpful.

For me the advantage of being in a group was that it helped me see that people who had been as unhappy as I was when I started had found ways to be happy and at peace. In 12-step groups, you can ask someone who “has what you want” to sponsor you. They share their experience, strength and hope with you. When you have a problem they don’t tell you what to do, but help you apply the steps (and the principles inherent in the steps) to the problem.

Practicing principles instead of awfulizing and catastrophizing or being paralyzed with depression, gave me the feeling that I had the power to make my life different. It is today. As a matter of fact, I know I will be able to deal with anything that comes along, because I have the steps and tools of the program to help me. I no longer fear the future.

**Taking action and turning over the results** has also been part of my recovery. I went to meetings even though I’m not a group person. Turned out I got a lot out of groups. I remember asking someone in one of my first 12-step groups, “How do I know this will work?” The reply was, “Well, if it doesn’t, your misery will be freely refunded.” It made me laugh. I kept going back. It did work.

I used to think I had to choose the right thing at every moment. I think this was based in those Reader’s Digest disaster stories I read when I was a kid (little did he think when he decided to fly to Seattle... followed by a

plane crash). Today, I don't think there is only one perfect choice at any point in my life. So I'm willing to make choices based on my principles, my gut feelings and research I've done, and then I turn over the results. Often things turn out better than I could have imagined. Sometimes they don't work out. Today I don't have to keep doing what doesn't work as I once would have— out of fear or the desire to make it happen the way I wanted it to. I can let go (even though letting go is hard and takes practice).

**“Do what's in front of you,”** is another slogan that has helped me a lot. While I'm trying to decide what would be the best thing to do, I can wash the dishes, water the plants, sort through a pile of mail. I used to hate doing that stuff, but now I find enjoyment in the doing.

Trying new things to see if I liked them, and if I liked them, doing them was another way I began to look forward to each day. I started with a list of stuff I thought I might like. Another advantage of this is that if you suffer from a compulsion like buying books or clothes, using drugs, overeating, etc, this list gives you some alternatives to do when you feel out of control. Read a poem instead of buying that book. Know that in the evening a long peaceful bath awaits you. It may help you let go of needing a drink or a twinkie right now.

Another tool I use a lot is having a plan. I don't really plan the future too much, but I have a plan for the day, (up at 6, write in my journal, stretch, pray and meditate, and an idea of what I'd like to accomplish). Today I want to bring two plants back up on the deck (still not strong enough to bring them all back up at once), finish the rough draft of this article (work from 9 to 12:30 and 2 to 5) and get Acorn to the vet. I also have a plan of eating (3 meals, 1 snack, nothing in between, one day at a time). I have a pretty stable weekly plan, get to the same three 12-step meetings each week, go to town early on Tuesday to visit Karen and little Jack , go out with Bob on Friday night.

I find I do much better with stability. I used to be a reactor. What happened around me controlled my day. I was always playing catch-up or putting out fires. The first stabilizing element in my otherwise completely crisis-oriented life was adopting Bob's writing plan. Sit at the typewriter from 9 to 12. (Adopting it actually made me so anxious, it led me to ACOA.). Going to the ACOA meeting each week became another stabilizing influence.

I also have had to **develop realism about the effects of trauma.** People with PTSD can go through bad times for no apparent reason. When they're currently spending tremendous effort suppressing what may be going on with them, it is hard to see a future. If they feel they should be over it by now, it makes it worse. This can be particularly true if you've been doing well and something sets you back, whether it is something obvious that triggers old behaviors, or something you don't think will affect you, like moving or like changing the amount of recovery work you are doing. I moved 30 miles away to my old house in 1994 and dropped two meetings because it was just too far to go. It really set me back! I had to increase my use of the telephone and my journaling and I still had a very hard time for about a year. So if you have been making changes, and old behaviors and patterns reappear, be kind to yourself and do your best to be supportive of yourself instead of impatient. Instead of thinking "This shouldn't affect me," think, "Wow, if this little change affects me, no wonder the trauma had such a strong effect!"

Patience has been a hard thing for me to learn. I grew up with impatience. Patience, kindness, tolerance and self-care were not modeled for most of us, so it is hard for us to know how to do it. Sometimes observation helps. Look at that woman who is kindly but firmly removing her child from harm's way and the other who is screaming but not getting up and helping the small child obey. Getting up and helping is the kinder thing to do. Get up and help yourself, whether it is getting yourself to a meeting, finding a therapist, or taking yourself out of the room where someone is saying "You should be over it."

**Let go of people pleasing.** People pleasing is a survival skill. Whether you learned it keeping your abuser happy, or trying to stay alive on the battlefield, it may now be doing you harm. The slogan, "What other people think of me is none of my business," helps me move away from people pleasing (especially "I should be over this!"), towards self-care.

When you've had a lot of trauma in your life and have had to live day by day or even hour by hour, some- times it is hard to believe that there is a future, that you deserve to be happy, that good times will come.

Sometimes you can be so wrapped up in the past, you can't even see the present. In each individual case with time and self-care, good therapy or

other recovery support, you may find what you need and come to the place where you realize that life is good.

Even if it gets bad again, you have more tools to deal with the badness and work your way back to having a good life. If you are open, life can become a continuous process of growth. Even the ups and downs can be dealt with.

With an open mind, I am more able to take away something of value from most interactions, even if it is the realization that although someone's suggestion may work for them, it doesn't feel right for me.

**What do you want?** Ask yourself some questions: What do you want? Friends? New interests? Relationships? No pain? Is what you want realistic? Having no pain and knowing the future are not. Having friends is.

**Make a plan:** small steps. For friendships, share a little, see if someone is trustworthy. Listen a little. See if you are trustworthy. For new interests, try something out on a short term basis (rent equipment, go to one meeting, visit a museum once) instead of jumping in and overcommitting.

**You can also change your goals:** for example, from having no pain to learning to soothe intense emotional states (talk, cry, write) and sit with feelings until they pass.

Whatever your individual desires are, moving towards them will be a one-day-at-a-time-thing. And along the way you may find many other satisfactions which at one time you would not have noticed. At least that has been my experience. Acorn died last Monday. I cried and I still cry for her, but I survived the loss. Living one day at a time, I had many happy moments during her last days, some of which were just patting her and telling her she was a good dog and it was okay to go.

“Yesterday's history, tomorrow's a mystery, all we have is today.”

Not only is it the present, it is a present.

# Staggering Meditation

Alan Cutter

Alan Cutter was a Naval Intelligence advisor in Vietnam and is now a Presbyterian minister.

In November 1992, Arnie Kotler, Terese Fitzgerald, and Claude Thomas came to share a Day of Mindfulness with a group of Vietnam veteran ministers. We all could sit, but walking meditation was difficult for a few of us. One man lost his legs in Vietnam; I injured a hip and knee during an incident and cannot walk slowly and deliberately without a cane. I mentioned to Terese that during the walking meditation, as I sat on the porch and watched, I had felt left out and separated from the group; half in jest, I said that what I needed was some form of “staggering meditation.” She replied, “It’s up to you to invent it.”

That day I had left my wooden cane in a corner of my room at the retreat center. For years I have kept it hidden, having learned how to compensate for and disguise my painful problem with walking. That “stick” was a reminder of things I wanted to forget. I did not want to remember “Cripple Corner” in Danang, an intersection near a Vietnamese hospital where maimed Vietnamese soldiers, surrounded by canes, crutches, and makeshift wheelchairs, would gather to wait for an American convoy of large trucks to pass, hoping to be able to throw themselves, or be thrown by friends, under the huge trees so that their families could collect some monetary compensation from the US government.

Yet I could not forget, a few years ago, watching a parade in Wheeling, West Virginia. I knelt down beside my young son, and my hip went out and I could not get up, and I was one with the soldiers of years before, a “cripple” by the roadside. Shame, disgust, and despair welled up within me, my helplessness found a focus on that hated cane, and in my anger I would not use it.

When I returned to my room later that afternoon, I sat and thought about inventing “staggering meditation.” I decided that I would go for a walk, and rather than take my “stick” along as a necessary evil and out of anxiety over falling, I would “invite” my cane to be my helper. “Please

come and be my companion,” I said. So we set out to walk into the nearby city center. As we made our way along the sidewalks, I tried being aware not only of my breath but of my feet and of the wooden cane in my hand. Many emotions and thoughts came and I greeted both the pleasant ones and the not-so-pleasant ones and invited them to join us in our walk. After a while, I became less aware of these emotions and thoughts and more aware of the ground on which I was walking, the beauty and gentle warmth of the evening, and the people around me.

I even became thankful for the companion which supported me.

As I have continued my “staggering meditation” with my companion, I have tried to think deeply about this practice. For so many years, because of my anger, I deprived myself of support that I needed to be fully mobile. When I did seek that support, I was motivated more by fear of falling than anything else. I have come to an awareness that my companion is a gift that helps connect me not only with the ground, but also with the many others who for a variety of reasons cannot walk easily, but who also stagger. When I am connected with these brothers and sisters, I no longer feel separated or left out. Rather than a reminder of a terrible past, I have uncovered a deep root of present meaning in this “tree” that I hug in my hand.

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## Short takes on the brain

### 1. Early abuse and brain development.

*The New England Journal of Medicine's "Journal Watch: Psychiatry"* newsletter reported in August that “Physical, sexual or emotional abuse early in life may affect the size and structure of brain areas.”

Previously some adults with PTSD have been shown to have smaller hippocampi (an area that processes memory) but these children didn't. Instead the kids with PTSD had 7% lower intracranial volume than matched kids without PTSD, smaller corpus callosum areas (which connect the two halves of the brain), and larger ventricles. The longer the abuse and the earlier it started, the greater the structural changes. Lower brain volume and large ventricles were also associated with lower IQ.

Here is another important reason to protect your kids from abuse, even emotional abuse and to be kind to yourself, if you survived such abuse.

Remember, other recent studies have shown that an enriched environment can lead to growth even in older brains. Rather than seeing this report as a reason to give up, trauma survivors and their family members can use it as an impetus to look for new ways of healing and relating to each other, new skills in parenting, communicating, etc.

“Developmental traumatology, Part II: Brain Development” DeBellis, MD, et. al. *Biological Psychiatry*, 1999, 45:1271-84.

## 2. The Mental Butler

Behaviors which are learned under the lash of trauma are very hard to bring under conscious control. People “go off” or “give in” without knowing why.

A recent article in *Science News* (Oct 30, 1999) sheds light on how much influence the unconscious can have. Scientists say there is a different system in the brain for unconscious “procedural” knowledge (how to drive a car) as opposed to conscious, “declarative knowledge of factual material.”

My first thought: people who have been traumatized know different “procedures.” Most people’s unconscious procedures are not about life or death.

Your unconscious may also involve stereotypes/prejudices. In one study, people who had been exposed to stereotypical old age words like “wrinkle” and “Florida” walked more slowly afterwards than people who had not. If your stereotypes have to do with death, danger, or abuse, you may react more strongly than you really need to given the situation.

Unconscious stuff is usually a big advantage to people and makes life a lot easier. Thinking through every movement in steering a car or walking is time consuming and difficult to do. John Bargh of New York University calls them “mental butlers’ who know our tendencies and preferences so well that they anticipate and take care of them for us, without having to be asked.”

Finding a way to identify and choose your “mental butlers” is one of the tasks of post-traumatic recovery.

## Report on my trip

The National Conference of Viet Nam Veteran Ministers gave one of its Spiritual Retreats for War Veterans and Spouses in Federal Way, WA (near Seattle) this year. Once again I was invited to talk about spirituality and relationships and help facilitate the women's group.

I arrived a few days early because Joan Fiset, MA, had invited me to come talk to the wives group at the Seattle Vet Center, (see letter in issue 24)

Joan has taught veterans her method of writing emotionally expressive vignettes. Her book, *Now the Day is Over*, (Blue Begonia Press, 1997), is a series of vignettes or prose poems about growing up in an alcoholic WWII PTSD home. It is a moving book. You can get a copy from Amazon.com.

Each of the women in the Vet Center group had a copy of *Recovering from the War*. They use the book and articles from the Gazette as a basis for discussion. One woman had even heard me talk in Seattle in 1990 on my book tour!

We spent a pleasant two hours, talking about coping skills and the importance of taking the focus off the veteran so he has room to grow and change and of working on our-selves. I shared a lot of my story and got some good laughs. They knew what I was talking about. One woman gave me a beautiful framed photograph of the flowers in another one's garden which I will treasure always.

The next morning Louis Fiset, Joan's husband, drove me to the train station . He's the author of *Imprisoned Apart: The World War II Correspondence of an Issei Couple*, University of Washington Press, 1997. I was fascinated by the book since a "sudden loss of home or community" is one of the traumatic stressors. Small world!

A red tailed hawk flew next to the train about ten feet from me for a minute or so as an incredibly clean train carried me south past beautiful scenery. I was met at the Portland, OR, train station by Shirley Sennhauser, RN, who coordinates in-service training for the PTSD staff, and we rushed over to the VA auditorium. When I walked in there were 8 people. I committed myself to doing my very best even for such a small crowd, but

by the time I started talking there were 40 people in the room. It was very gratifying. I talked about being the wife of someone who has PTSD back before it had a name. I talked about family issues and about some of the things I have written which might be helpful in their work. The Portland VA has a number of people who work with couples. I even ran into some old friends from ISTSS meetings. The level of support for my work was extremely generous. Their enthusiasm really rejuvenated me. Thanks Portland VA staff!

In the evening I went to the VA's Auditorium in Vancouver OR and spoke to about 100 veterans and family members about PTSD as a normal response to trauma and how it affected me and may have affected the other women in the audience. I got a lot of good laughs and was given applause, hugs and positive feedback afterwards. It was just what I needed. I felt that I am making a difference and helping people to get through what Bob and I once had to go through alone.

Thursday and Friday were the last days of the National Conference Of Viet Nam Veteran Ministers at the Dumas Bay Center in Federal Way, WA. As usual, Father Phil Salois had invited a wonderful speaker.

Robert Grant, Ph.D., talked to us about "The Spirituality of Trauma." Among the ideas he shared with us was that while mystics seek to lose a sense of self—to shed their old ideas and parameters of the world—trauma forces the same experience on people. He used the metaphor of a box, which he drew:

untraumatized people (may also contain people in denial, people who are numb, using substances or behaviors to avoid pain, etc. and people who are ashamed of having been traumatized and/or are keeping secrets) live inside the box of conventional thought, feeling and experience.



\*The trauma survivor is out here some- where.

Part of the trauma survivors struggle may be simply trying to “get over it” rapidly and without pain, and get back in that box, where money counts, status is important, and everything is “nice.” This is usually ineffective.

Dr. Grant does not believe you can skip the emotional and psychological pain of healing, as some “spiritual” people try to do, seeking peak experiences to obliterate pain. He does believe trauma can over time be turned into a spiritual gift, a place where you let go of materialistic and status values and connect with your spiritual core. It forces us to acknowledge our dependence on a Higher power and other people. It also creates a bridge of compassion from survivors to all living things.

This journey to spiritual growth will be facilitated if you can find effective help, as it is very difficult to achieve alone. It is not something most therapists are trained in (that is the spiritual as well as psychological impact of trauma). His book, *The Way of the Wound*, describes the spiritual issues and journey that trauma victims are asked to take up. Dr. Grant also suggested that part of the survivor’s journey can be going back and trying to enlarge the box in which most people live. That is certainly part of the mission of the Gazette!

Friday evening, our retreat started with supper. Afterwards, fourteen participants shared a little of our sacred story, as Father Phil calls it. He begins the sharing with his own story and then we passed a little box of earth from Vietnam around and each person could speak or pass as they wished. No one else can speak while you are holding the box. Some spoke, some passed. Everyone knew there were further opportunities for sharing-planned into the weekend. This is a place that it is safe to say things you might not discuss elsewhere.

After breakfast the next day, “Sister Sarge” (Linda McClenahan, O.P.) led us through some Biblical perspectives on PTSD which were developed by Jack Day for earlier retreats. These include the story of Saul (who had killed his thousands) trying to pin David to the wall with his spear because the poor kid was trying to soothe him with harp music. I have to laugh at the looks on peoples’ faces when they learn that Saul was irritable and prone to outbursts of anger, too!

After a break, Alan Cutter talked in a very un-churchy way about the realities of war and of grace and redemption. No cheap easy answers, no being “Godded” to death, no attempt to raise the body count for a

particular religion, Alan's talks have a profound effect on everyone who hears them. I'm not telling more because I want all my subscribers to come to these retreats and hear for themselves.

After lunch we had separate groups for the men and the women and then some free time for people to think about something they wanted to leave at the retreat. Some people write, some don't, some read, some don't, but everyone was asked to come to the evening Liturgy of Reconciliation with a piece of paper to crumple up and put in the bowl. After the service we take the bowl of papers outside, pass it around the circle of participants in order to share each other's burden, and then burn the papers and try to let go of at least one bit of our burden. As I mentioned in issue #25, this ritual relieved me of the feeling that I am somehow intrinsically defective which I tried to leave behind at the first retreat two years ago. Sometime between then and now it has become a non-issue!

In the morning, Alan talked about "The resurrection story: is there life after PTSD?" and then we had a closing circle during which everyone got to share a bit more.

One of the things I enjoy most about these retreats is getting to meet subscribers. One couple flew up from San Diego and a veteran from eastern Washington drove over for the retreat.

RETREATS ARE FUN!

and

YOU DON'T ACTUALLY HAVE TO RETREAT!