

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 5

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Telling Your Story: creating community and healing

In the September/October, 1995, issue of the Utne Reader there is an article by Wendell Berry called “Health is Membership,” the subtitle is “The Community Is The Smallest Unit of Heath.” For me, after struggling for fourteen years with PTSD without knowing what it was or that other people had been affected, this is a powerful statement. Healing is hard in isolation. I remember the relief I felt when I read the DAV pamphlet “Readjustment Problems among Vietnam Veterans,” by Jim Goodwin, Psy.D., and saw there was a name for what Bob had been going through, other people had it, that it wasn’t my fault, and there was help.

I told bits of my own story in *Recovering from the War*. Bob wrote a memoir of Vietnam called *Chickenhawk*. *Chickenhawk: Back In The World* told more of our story. Having our stories read and accepted and appreciated was very healing.

I got a letter the other day that started out,

We have never met and probably never will but I love you and Bob with all my heart. Your paper has just saved me and I believe has made a significant turning point to recovery for my beloved husband... bless you for your love, hindsight and ability to share the pain and the peace with those of us who know only the pain.

I remember when all I knew was the pain. That is what makes it all worthwhile.

The creation of a new story is needed.

I know how important it is to be *a part of* instead of *apart*. Bylye Avery speaking at the Gainesville Commission on the Status of Women Workshop last year said we all need to challenge the silence within ourselves, to tell our story so we can experience the difficulty of doing it and respect others for doing it. What’s been hard? What’s been good? “Every time I tell it I hear something different,” she said. “Our lives and our stories give us the power.” Especially the power to heal.

Telling our story may not be the only thing we need, however, if our story is “devoid of effective ideas for dealing with the problem, or because available stories are intrinsically destructive ones that blame or disempower the patient or others in a manner that engenders suffering (p. 113).” That’s a quote from *The Body Speaks* by James and Melissa Griffith, a book about the kind of illness (somatic) that often results when someone has an unspeakable dilemma. Since PTSD is often accompanied by somatic complaints, I found their book very helpful. *The Body Speaks*’ greatest virtue is its attitude towards clients and their suffering. I quote: “A person or

family with a problem wishes to be free of the problem. The converse, a belief that patient and family members 'want to be sick' or 'need to be sick,' precludes respect (p. 92)." The book goes on to note that if the creation of a new story is needed, people usually already have experiences and elements which can be combined or looked at in some new way to provide a story of healing for them. When they can see a way to heal, they can heal. The job of a therapist or group is to help them find a way that works for them, not to impose some theoretical model of healing.

Telling our stories is important not only for self-healing but to light the way for others. Trauma will always be with us. Since survivors often suffer in isolation, feeling different, marked, discounted, and/or crazy, and usually unaware that others share their symptoms, finding the writings of people who have also been through hell and seeing the similarities can be very healing. "Identify, don't compare," is a good slogan. Sometimes it hurts to know others are finding ways through the pain when you haven't yet, but yet is the key word. Recovery is a process. The process helps us develop patience and compassion for ourselves and for others because it takes time. Finding help from all sorts of sources helps us get over that "one- right-way" black and white thinking. We develop a willingness to try new ways because we know it's okay to make mistakes. We can learn from our mistakes.

One of the funnier speeches at the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies this year was a famous psychologist talking about how important it is, for scientific research, to know why psychodynamic psychotherapy and cognitive behavioral therapy both work with trauma survivors. I almost laughed out loud, and I wanted to yell at him, "because they are telling their stories!" but of course I'm way too mature and dignified to do that.

I didn't want to hurt his feelings either, because I'm sure it is good to study the outcome of different therapies. I am not sure how that can be done, because listening to other people is an art. That's why the same treatment works for one therapist and not for another. Arthur Egendorf's "Hearing People Through Their Pain," in Vol. 8, No. 1, January, 1995 of *The Journal of Traumatic Stress*, is one of the best things I've read on the art of listening. Another book about this which I am in the process of reading is *Healing the Hurt Child: A Developmental- Contextual Approach* by Denis Donovan and Deborah McIntyre. They talk about *listening to behavior as well as words*, a concept I had already found useful in dealing with a Vietnam veteran named Bob who didn't want to talk.

Survivors and families can tell our stories in many ways. Sometimes the memories of trauma are passed down in family stories without people realizing the effect such traumas usually have on people. (More about intergenerational effects next issue.) Revisiting old family stories can reveal much. New stories of healing are the results of breaking the silence that used to surround trauma. People just didn't talk about it, a technique which was not effective in either preventing further trauma or in healing it.

Think how much easier it would have been for Vietnam vets if WWII PTSD had been treated, not ignored.

When a person tells his or her story and it is accepted by a willing listener or witness, the pain begins to lose its power. 'I can feel this pain and live,' is what the person realizes. We've been brought up in a culture that dodges pain. Watch the ads for painkillers on TV if you don't believe me. Psychiatry has turned from the art of listening which is difficult and time consuming to the "chemical imbalance" theories because many psychiatrists cannot tolerate normal feelings. No one is supposed to be sad in America.

In *Men And Grief*, another great New Harbinger book, Carol Staudacher says, "If you try to walk around the perimeter of loss, that loss will remain unresolved, and you will be more likely to endure painful emotional, psychological, or physical consequences." This applies to more than the loss of a loved one. It can include physical and material losses and the loss of innocence and trust.

People talk and/or write their stories, but words are not the only means of communication. Some people draw, paint, sculpt, dance, sing, act it out. Others create healing rituals and memorials for themselves. The Wall tells the story of Vietnam through architecture.

Even in the least interactive of brief therapies, Traumatic Incident Reduction (TIR), the survivor is supported and led through the viewing of the trauma by a facilitator who is a caring witness to the process. CISD, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, also uses caring and understanding witnesses, peer facilitators, to help emergency personnel process particularly horrifying incidents right afterwards.

Part of the reason telling your story is so important is reframing. When a story is inside, untold, it looms, grows, develops offshoots of shame, self-blame, belief that we caused the whole thing, that it was our fault, that we deserved what we got or are totally worthless because it happened to us or because of some of the things we did or didn't do to survive. The same story told out loud to a safe person begins the process of reframing, of seeing it in a different more healing light. We let go of perfectionistic thinking. People change their perceptions of themselves from worthless mistake to *human-who-makes-mistakes*. This, in turn, allows them to grow and to change. And that is recovery.

From Trauma to Enlightenment: The Survivor's Journey

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The healing from the trauma of war is a journey which encompasses the mind, body and spirit. To attend one and ignore another is to embrace a detour...

I believe war is about loss and that those who have not successfully embraced a healing from war are experiencing profound loss. That loss may be tangible—the loss of body parts or their functioning, the loss of friends to death, wives or husbands to divorce—or intangible losses such as a belief in one's immortality, or youth, or self-esteem.

For many veterans one of the greatest losses they feel they have incurred is the loss of God...which is often camouflaged with anger... The Reverend Bill Mahedy, who served as a chaplain in Vietnam stated that “teen-aged soldiers... had been led to believe that God would never let them down, that he would always lead them to victory over evil and preserve them in battle against the foe.” (Mahedy, *Out of the Night*, p. 5)

Yet eventually, with support, the veteran may work through a grief of tremendous proportions. For once the veil of anger is removed, a tremendous sadness wells forth. It is here that the heart opens and the healing begins.

When I speak to veterans of spirituality, they often confuse it with religion and thus institution and the reaction is anger. I've asked veterans I work with to reframe this perception, to try on a new interpretation. I ask them to sit still and visualize where they last felt small and the world large: where they knew that there was a larger force at work and that they were not in control; and, importantly, that this condition was all right. Many veterans have told me that this occurs when they are in the woods or on the beach... For others it is on a clear mountain lake or hiking in the desert, and for some, it is prayer or meditation. I ask the veteran to try on the concept of spirituality in this context—that these methods are vehicles to...a higher power of whatever name they wish to utilize, that religion is such a vehicle as well which may or may not work for them. I encourage them to embrace a vehicle which will allow them to be still and to lead them into their hearts as that is where the healing lies.

...Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, said that “the problem in middle life...is to identify yourself not with the body, which is falling away, but with the consciousness of which it is a vehicle... What am I? Am I the bulb that carries the light or am I the light of which the bulb is the vehicle?” (*Power of Myth*, p.70).

How does one who has experienced such profound trauma; whose life has been enmeshed in the tragic legacy of war, in shame, guilt, rage, and physical and emotional

pain [or the avoidance thereof—ed]; how does that individual become the light? And what of the roadblocks set by a rejecting society? How does one get by those?

The first task in healing from trauma is to recognize what is going on...the trauma of Vietnam is so profound that many veterans become their trauma. It is such a part of them that it permeates every aspect of their existence and offers no relief... Therapy may provide the answer and the counselor may serve as the guide. However it is critical that the therapist have a road map and equally critical that the trauma survivor believe it to be a valid road map...I will describe such a roadmap borne of my own experience in Vietnam. 12 years as a therapist with traumatized individuals, it finds its source in traditional mythology that is in the voices of countless individuals in innumerable societies the world over who sought an explanation for the difficulties they faced, an avenue to express the pain of their journeys and meaning in those experiences, the hero's adventure.

For Campbell, "the basic motif of the universal hero's journey [is] leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or more mature condition." (*Power of Myth*, p. 124). This is essentially a transformation of consciousness by trial...it is Christ in the desert and Buddha beneath the Bo tree... [Note: this is not the John Wayne hero-who-does-not-fail or grow. Ed.]

Here a redefining of the concept of hero is in order, and the definition I am embracing is a hero is one who takes on the task of growth, and though he or she may fall, stands again, integrating the fall into the wisdom needed to negotiate the future.

I believe this growth can only happen when we let go of ego...when we choose to release our preoccupation with ourselves and our own preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness... "The moral objective is that of serving a people or saving a person, or supporting an idea. The hero sacrifices himself for something..." (*Power of Myth*, p. 127).

The mythological hero journey itself entails, 1-separation, 2-initiation, 3-return... One may not intend to embark on an adventure and yet be chosen or drafted into it ...or be initiated by happenstance. Regardless the hero is soon engaged in an adventure where dragons are faced, where one is tempted by the dark side and where one also may learn of an ability to embrace goodness. The hero may succumb to the dark side and then later move through a redemptive healing process. Transformation may come through the trials themselves or may come later through revelation...

...the adventure is followed by the return... This return is the critical piece of the journey. For the carnage of war is meaningless without its interpretation by the warrior to both society and self. Society needs the enlightenment about our collective dark side that only the survivor can bring. The act of informing society in itself serves as a healing mission for the survivor...

Vietnam veterans and their advocates in the mental health field were critical to the legitimization of post-traumatic stress disorder. ...it has proven to be a gift from the veterans to society as many trauma survivors have benefitted from the growing awareness of the effects of trauma.

In the hero's journey motif, the hero and the larger populace must join in a reciprocal relationship in which the returning adventurer serves as a guide. It is society's task to listen, to embrace the lessons brought to them by those who took on the risk of adventure, of growth.

For the adventurer there must be a willingness to share the inner recesses of the heart, to take on reasonable questions as well as overcome those who renounce. The message is critical to our survival [as a society, in my opinion—ed.] and is indeed born of individual struggle. Robert Bly wrote that "where a man's wound is, that is where his genius will be..." (*Iron John*, p. 42).

In May 1969, while serving with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam, I took part in the Battle of Hamburger Hill. I witnessed the deaths of close friends as well as participated in the killing of numerous enemy soldiers. Near the end of the battle I was seriously wounded and evacuated from the war. I often thought about the war and spent many tumultuous years searching for meaning [in what] appeared to me to be senseless destruction. Twenty-two years later it continues to look like senseless destruction. Yet there is a critical difference. Today I use my knowledge of the pain of war to teach peace to society, while I access my experience of healing from trauma to assist others in their journey home. My work is exactly where my wound is.

To complete the journey, to heal both self and community, the soldier must return to society as witness. It is a redemptive process and a critical element in the spiritual path. The challenge to our humanity is there-yet so has the opportunity to understand our dark side, to overcome, and to be true to our inner selves. Too often veterans have, [instructed by society to think of themselves negatively], complied and by embracing the negative, by not rising from the fall, have not integrated the knowledge gained in war and have not brought that gift to the community.

I ask the veterans in therapy to try on the following concept. If the veteran could...be 18...again...what is one thing they gained from the Vietnam and postwar experience they would be unwilling to give up? When they have identified one gain, I ask them to continue to build on the list.

This is the beginning of the survivor's mission. It can eventually look like the film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, it can be social or political action such as aiding the homeless, it can be manifested in the adoption of an Amerasian child, or addressing a student assembly regarding the cost of war. It could well be in the raising of a loving family in which the rights of all are respected. The...survivor's mission illustrates the transformation of the despair of war into the hope of peace.

The survivor's journey is fraught with peril yet is illumined by experiences of goodness. There is much information to be garnered from the journey which can assist us all in living in harmony with ourselves and our world community. The survivor must take on the task of healing and society must open to the message of that healing.

The message is simple: the answers to the problems of our planet are not in conflict but in service to each other.

Books to Tell Your Story

• *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art*, by Barry M Cohen, Mary- Michola Barnes and Anita B. Rankin, The Sidran Press, \$19.95.

Once again the Sidran Foundation has provided a book for trauma survivors which I can recommend highly. If I could insert a video in the pages of this newsletter, you'd see me dancing on my desktop waving the book and saying "Get this." Ditto for *The Way of the Journal*, reviewed in Issue #1.

Some people are very verbal and have no trouble telling their story with words, spoken or written. Others who have more trouble verbalizing feelings can both express them through artwork using the simple directions in this book and also begin to work at verbalizing more through the writing exercises that accompany each art making project. "These experiences are for the sole purpose of communicating with yourself (and possibly your therapist)."

"Again and again we have seen trauma's debilitating effects eased by the benefits of creativity... we recognized the difficulty in designing safe, effective art experiences... we identified a highly structured approach that would promote effective self-management of post- traumatic symptoms."

The book is divided into Part I, Developing Basic Tools for Managing Stress, Part II, Acknowledging and Regulating Your Emotions, and Part III, Being and Functioning in the World. Each contains lots of projects.

My favorite exercise was the one on Protective Containers in which you can store intrusive thoughts feelings and emotions. I didn't actually draw the containers. I imagined them as I went quickly through the book so I could review it, but after visualizing one container for an impulse I get to be compulsive sometimes, and another for the impulse I got while reading the books reviewed in Issue #2 to stab myself in the eyes, I sort of fell asleep for a few minutes and woke up visualizing a tiny shiny white biplane flying and zooming around me with little pink elephants wing-walking on the top wing doing trunk stands and other tricks. It cracked me up. I realized it was a very funny and cheering container for my fears.

When I got to page 40, *Landscapes of Emotion*, I spaced out, reading without comprehension. I put the book down, made some tea, and went back to look at the content of the exercise. I find that what I space out about is often stuff I need to look at. I saw myself as a lonely figure in a rocky desert walking alone and lonely down a dry canyon. It helped me identify how I was feeling. Then I did the Changing Scenery part of the exercise and at the bottom of the dry canyon was a lively stream running through a little canyon full of pine trees and aspens and a pleasant meadow full of peace and life. I knew I'm not alone. It was an incredibly neat experience.

This book uses readily available art materials and gives clear simple directions that are easy to follow. No "artistic" skill required.

- *The Artists Way*, Julia Cameron, Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam, 1992, \$13.95. Designed to help people who are blocked creatively, I think it would help anyone who is stuck in pain. Recommended by other trauma survivors. Popular for a reason. This book is fun and healing.

- *Men And Grief*, Carol Staudacher, New Harbinger Publications, 1991, \$12.95.

- *Beyond Grief*, Carol Staudacher, New Harbinger Publications, 1987, 13.95. Two of the best. Since recovery involves grieving our losses, these are good resources for trauma survivors. • *Being a Man*, Patrick Fanning and Matthew McKay, Ph.D., New Harbinger, 1993. \$12.95. A book for men about seeing who you are and who you can become. Lots of good exercises.

- *Mightier Than the Sword*, Kathleen Adams, MA, Warner Books, 1994. Book about journaling for men, full of wonderful exercises for anyone. Made me cry!

- *I Can't Get Over It*, by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D., New Harbinger, 1992, \$12.95. Best book for trauma survivors. Lots of suggestions for written exercises. Full of information.

- *Rituals For Our Times*, Evan Imber-Black, Ph.D., and Janine Roberts, Ed.D., Harper/Perennial, \$12.00. Healing book on creating our own rituals to help us heal. We can acknowledge our own pain.

- *Understanding Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Addiction*, Katie Evans and J Michael Sullivan, Hazelden, 1994. \$2.50. Although it's listing of PTSD symptoms is kind of misleading, it contains helpful writ- ten exercises.

- *Grief's Courageous Journey: A Workbook*, Sandi Caplan and Gordon Lang, New Harbinger 1995, \$12.95. Designed for working through current grief, I believe it would be useful for working through the losses of the past.

- *Soldier's Heart: Survivors' Views of Combat Trauma*, Edited by Sarah B. Hansel, Ph.D., Ann Steidle, R.N., Grace Zazec, M.P.H., and Ron Zazec, Veteran, U.S.M.C., The Sidran Press, 1995, \$19.95. A very moving book by veterans of many wars and both sexes who share both pain and recovery.

Readers Write

Julie writes:

Things I've done that have helped me are: identifying triggers, identifying deep-rooted fears, maintaining a positive attitude, and being selective about who I talk to about this disorder.

As you know, some people have very good intentions, but seem to insist that "it's all behind you now, so get over it." And they can't understand why the symptoms persist. Recognizing PTSD and learning about it has also helped a great deal. Now when I do a perimeter search of the house every night or jump up from my desk to peer out the window 50 times a day at work, I understand why. When I get that want-to-crawl-out-of-my-skin, claustrophobic, anxious feeling, I know where it's coming from. The ways I've done these things are:

1. Identifying fears: The process that worked for me entailed literally weeks the first time I did it. It took writing down my fears succinctly, in no more than two sentences per fear. I started all my sentences, "I'm afraid..." and went from there. Example: "I'm afraid I'll never have a 'normal' relationship." It doesn't matter if some of the fears seem to contradict each other—they will. Or at least they did with me. Having them on paper and seeing the contradictions was part of the healing process. The hardest part was step two: telling someone [your spouse, therapist, best friend, whoever] about them. I chose to give my list to my therapist, and to my best friend—folded up into a little wad with the dire warning, "DON'T READ THIS TILL AFTER I'M GONE!" I still couldn't face them right away. After a year, I recently reviewed my fears and was able to cross SIX of them off my list! PROGRESS.

2. Identifying triggers: When you've identified the specific occurrences, places, etc., that always bother you, you've identified a trigger. For me, I become anxious any time I hear loud banging or thumping. That's a trigger. Any time a child cries, it's another trigger. Knowing what some of my triggers are has given me the ability to avoid them, or at least the opportunity to psych myself into being able to cope with them a little better if they're unavoidable.

3. Maintaining a positive attitude: This can't be done all the time, but doing certain things can help. Have positive people in your life. A bonus is to have these positive people understand your symptoms and be willing to sit with you—be a presence in the room—when you're having a hard time coping. Have goals—a difficult thing for people who have problems seeing ANY future, but if you can't think of any five year goals because you can't see that far ahead [I can't], have goals for tomorrow or next week. Or make your goal to learn to make goals, and list things you'd like to do before you die. Keep a journal.

4. Learn about PTSD. This has helped big-time. I read and research everything on it. My therapist does too. I gave him a copy of the Gazette. Knowledge is power. I hope this helps someone.

Creativity

Susan Sirak, an actress and trauma survivor says, “General creativity, writing or drama or painting—to me, creativity is my truth. It’s an honest part of me. What comes out is very honest, so I access a part of myself that I can trust. In drama in particular, when I let myself get into the character, she tells me very honest things about herself. I can understand her and I feel healed. When I played a survivor I felt great understanding and compassion for her.

“Creativity makes me feel connected to something bigger than just my isolated self. One time, I couldn’t sleep. It was a very difficult time. I started to write, ‘I’m upset about this...’ and then something else spoke through me as I was journaling. Wisdom comes through as I’m writing if I just do it.

“For me, creativity has helped me to trust myself. I have to quit judging, to let whatever comes through come through. It’s not perfect, but because it leads me to an honest part of myself, my self esteem goes up and I feel empowered.

“I always thought I was an artist, but I was blocked and judgmental. I use the book, *The Artists Way*, along with therapy, art therapy, and dreamwork.”