

Healing the Wounds
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We all experience trauma in our lives. The American Psychiatric Association didn't recognize PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as a reality to be reckoned with until 1980, and the decision to include it in the DSM-III which labels and describes the symptoms of psychological disorders was controversial. But the ancient Greeks recognized trauma. The Bible recognized trauma. Shakespeare recognized trauma as a human phenomenon that touches us all. Modern medicine is just catching up to archaic wisdom.

The Buddha recognized it. "Life is suffering," he enunciated as the First Noble Truth. Some of this suffering is just due to the normal, everyday wear and tear of living. Like when you're kept on hold for twenty minutes trying to phone the doctor's office or your insurance company. Like home improvement projects that take two minutes on Youtube taking two days in real life. Stress. Frustration. Annoyance. Irritation. It's a fact of life.

But the Buddha also taught that there are more extreme forms of distress. If "dukkha" in Sanskrit means suffering, "dukkha dukkha" means suffering raised to the *n*th degree. And this too, at some point in our lives, occurs to almost all of us.

I don't know how many cartoons I've seen where two men, half-starved, are hanging shackled by the wrists from a dungeon wall. Their beards droop halfway down their chests. Their clothes are in tatters. "The worst thing is not having access to your email," says one to another. "Some days, I just can't seem to get going," is another gagline. But sad to say, there are much worse things than that.

For instance, as a child, my father died when I was five. I was sexually abused as a kid. I was bullied in school. When I was eighteen, I learned I'd inherited the same disease that killed my dad. And many years later, after receiving a successful organ transplant, my description during a sermon of the experience of being on hemodialysis--having my blood run through an artificial kidney three times a week--caused one member of my congregation to faint dead away. The EMTs came right into the church to revive him. I could go on, but this sermon isn't about me. It's about our common human situation.

Because if emotion is inner weather, many of us, by the time we reach mid-life have survived some severe storm advisories. Divorce. Disease. Dislocation. Job loss, or jobs like my sister-in-law's, a neonatologist at Johns Hopkins Intensive Care who every day saw babies born prematurely, too small to breath, or with deformities and disabilities no infant could survive. She herself is on disability now, as are so many of our veterans, our police officers, our firefighters and other first responders, ourselves, our sisters and brothers, like so many victims of rape or incest or sexual assault or domestic violence or childhood neglect or

abandonment. You've probably heard the cliché: "God never gives you more than you can handle." Baloney. In my experience, that's exactly what God does, stretches us to the breaking point and then way beyond.

Hersh Wilson, our Deputy Chief at Hondo Fire where I work as a volunteer, recounted one incident when he experienced the effects of PTSD. Hersh is a great guy. He walks dogs for the humane society. He's a soccer coach. He teaches the sport to young girls, besides fighting fires and working as an EMT, and he'd been called to a scene as he was coming back from a tournament. A family van had been hit head on by a drunk driver. Four people were killed. One survived. It was hard, it was horrendous, but he sucked it up. He was a man about it, a professional. He thought he'd handled it. But then a month later, he was driving down that same stretch of road when he was stopped at a DUI checkpoint. Hersh said when the cop came to his window, he nearly jumped out of the car and strangled the guy. It was a primal reaction. Unthinking, Irrational. Uncontrollable. That incident was a trigger event that unleashed all the unexpressed anger, grief, shock, that had lain inside like a time bomb, unexploded but just waiting to go off.

That's how it works. The word trauma means wound. And so many of us carry unhealed wounds. Psychic scars. They haunt us. They live in the basement world of our conscious minds. But they affect our waking hours and our sleep, hiding like some snag or boulder just submerged under the surface of a running river, tranquil on the surface but lurking, merely waiting to toss us out of the raft and into the deep water, gasping for breath and panicky for our lives.

Helping us to survive, overcome and heal from trauma has been the historic role of myth and religion, including the public rituals of what's called civic religion. Do you remember how, in 2015, not so long ago, a 21-year-old white supremacist named Dylan Roof entered the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina? How he was welcomed, sat to pray and worship in this church, and then shot and killed nine congregants, including the pastor and a state senator from this congregation that had been founded by Denmark Vessey? That made it one of the oldest black churches in the country. Vessey was a slave who was accused of plotting a negro uprising in 1822 and was hanged for the offense of seeking freedom. Emmanuel Baptist had to go underground after that. The historic church wasn't reconstituted until the end of the Civil War. But subsequently it grew. It became a center for civil rights organizing and black pride. And then Dylan Roof's murderous reprisal took place on the anniversary of Denmark Vessey's death. Sick. It was a heinous hate crime that shocked our nation, at least the decent people of our nation. And a few days later, President Barack Obama offered a eulogy to the victims of this massacre, a eulogy that ended as he began *a capello* to sing the hymn "Amazing Grace."

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
We have already come,
'Twas grace that lead us safe thus far

And grace will lead us home.

He wasn't reading off a teleprompter. Because he knew those words by heart, as many of us know them. Though written in 1772, we know them because the lyrics to "Amazing Grace" speak to some timeless truth about hardship and extremity and the human capacity to endure. And President Obama that day did something remarkable. As Consoler-in-Chief, he helped lift us above the shattering senselessness of the crime and offer a glimpse of hope and humanity that briefly brought us together as a people.

This is why we sing hymns here. Not because we're fuddy-duddies. Certainly not because we're vocal virtuosos. Not because we are some crazy psalm-singing old biddies like Katherine Hepburne in the *African Queen*, whom Humphrey Bogart accuses of excessive religiosity when she pours his gin down the river. But because the old lyrics and the old stories hang on for a reason. They restore. They renew. They guide us through the traumas and wounds that have afflicted generations. And because even if we don't need them right now, we might need them some day.

So we may have forgotten the place in the forest. We don't know how to light the fire. All we can do here is sing the songs and tell the stories of resilience. And somehow that's enough.

Here's a story for you. When I was minister in Worcester, Massachusetts, back in 2013, I had to quickly rewrite my Sunday sermon, throw the prepared one in the trash and write a completely new one, in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing that killed three, dismembered over a dozen, and wounded hundreds of innocent bystanders. It was a tragic, numbing, bewildering day, so random and so deadly. We all grieved the victims. But we collectively, as Americans, also desecrated and reviled the perpetrators. For weeks afterward, the corpse of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of the two Chechnyan brothers who committed the atrocity, lay in the basement of a Worcester mortuary because no cemetery would accept the body. In a blog for the *Worcester Telegram*, I wrote that

The body of Tamerlan Tsarnaev deserves burial. The corpse of the Boston Marathon bomber has been under refrigeration at a funeral home in Worcester on south Main Street for days, with protesters gathered outside and no local cemetery willing to accept the remains. This situation is indefensible. Since ancient times, proper interment of the dead has been the mark of a civilized society and a universally recognized moral injunction. In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, the king of Thebes, Creon, brings down the wrath of the gods upon his own family when he refuses to allow the heroine for whom the drama is named to bury her brother Polynices, who had rebelled against the state, ruling the body must be left to rot on the plain. Transgressing the king's decree, heaping earth upon her slain sibling, Antigone proclaims to Creon that no mortal could override the unwritten and unyielding statutes of heaven.

In his book *Theater of War*, author Brian Doerries describes how the ancient Greeks used dramas like *Antigone* as a means of social purgation and catharsis. Sophocles, he explains, was not only a playwright, but also a general in the Greek army, a general in a militia where Athenian men were all citizen soldiers, where Athenian women saw their warriors return home physically and psychologically scarified from hand-to-hand combat, from delivering death at sword point and holding dying comrades in arms. The theater, twenty-four centuries ago, was not a place of entertainment, in those days, but a haven of communal solidarity and safety, where the harshest, most disturbing truths could be spoken within a framework that could hold and contain the raw, bleeding edges of life. The plays, *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, *Ajax*, along with the scripts of his contemporary Aeschylus, were bloody, jarring, not in the comfort zone. Incest. Matricide. Child sacrifice. But Doerries, who has restaged these old Greek plays in places like Ferguson, Missouri, where the dead body of 18 year old Michael Brown was permitted to lie uncovered and visible in the street--an object of horror and pity and astonishment to his family, his friends, his neighbors, for casual passers-by--lying there for hours after being shot, reportedly with his hands up, his hands up, shot by a white police officer in the back, finds that stories like *Antigone* still have power not only to outrage, but to heal and unify communities who need a common narrative of how individuals persevere despite the inhumanity of brutal systems of power.

We don't always succeed here. But that's part of what we are trying to do, in my opinion, as a community of faith, as a congregation. To offer a safe place where painful truths can be told and vented and purged and dispelled. To sing songs of shipwreck, survival and rescue. To hold our common suffering in a vessel large enough and strong enough to contain it, to confine it within bounds that acknowledge pain without allowing it to overwhelm.

Truly, we never fully heal from the wounds we have suffered. At some level, the scars remain, sore and tender to the touch. And for those whose minds have been ravaged, who waken every night screaming or who can't sleep at all for dread, there are modalities which have been proven to help with PTSD. Yet for the rest of us, the walking wounded who carry the usual human burden of tears and travail, there is also help. We gather to retell these old Greek and Christian and Buddhist myths that have at the core some saving message, because these are not old just legends but lasting truths about our human condition. Our mortal fate is trauma. Pain. We are all hurt and haunted and broken. We have been damaged and disgraced and disempowered, crucified. But grace will lead us home: with the help of friends, with the power of love, with the medicine of truth. We shall not only persevere or persist, but consecrate and hallow, able to truly sing "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Glory Hallelujah."

