

Trauma, Transformation, and Time

Healing the Story of Us

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Abstract

This paper is born from my reflections during the Grammatica course held by Ubiquity University in 2020. The course is part of a yearly series of summer intensives held in Chartres, and dedicated to one of the seven liberal arts: Grammatica, Dialectica, Retorica, Musica, Aritmetica, Geometrica, and Astronomica. The core theme of the 2020 edition was trauma and its transformation, both individual and collective.

In the following pages, I will concern myself with psychic trauma, which I will describe as a tear in our psychological and emotional fabric. Psychic trauma can, but does not need to, be accompanied by physical trauma.

My perspective in addressing trauma and its transformation is that of a facilitator of transformational seminars, spaces where people come together to transform their lives and heal their souls. It is from this angle that I will offer some considerations on the nature of trauma, proposing that to better understand it and promote its transformation, we need to consider the way in which trauma disrupts the flow of time, and damages our sense of self.

Ancient Wisdom for Modern Problems

The theme of trauma and transformation is painfully relevant today.¹ As the year 2020 nears its end, nations are scrambling to respond to COVID-19, a pandemic of unprecedented gravity in recent history. While the complex cascade of consequences of the pandemic keeps unraveling, it is already clear that the events of 2020 will have lasting and unforeseen traumatic effects for millions of people.

Yet, although COVID-19 is forcing us to face new forms of trauma, the problem of human suffering has existed for as long as we have been sentient. For centuries, the wisdom traditions of both East and West have sought to alleviate suffering by understanding the life of the individual human being and his place in the bigger scheme of the Universe. To this end, these traditions have elaborated systems, many of which revolved around the number seven, symbolizing a totality encompassing both the microcosm and the macrocosm: the seven chakras in India, the seven rays in the Theosophical tradition, and the seven liberal arts taught at Chartres are some of the most well-known examples.

The masters of Chartres gave life to a mystery school that existed for over two hundred years from its founding under the guidance of Fulbertus in 1000 CE to its decline in the thirteenth century, when the center of Christian wisdom in France moved from Chartres to Paris (Querido, 2018, pp. 135-136). From its onset, the influence of Plato and, behind it, the more elusive yet powerful presence of Pythagoras informed the philosophical and esoteric backbone of the Chartres wisdom school. In these convulsed times, the system of the seven liberal arts taught at Chartres is a channel through which we can benefit from the reflections of those who have lived and suffered before us. By availing us of the assistance of ancient wisdom, we can hope to do what Bernard of Chartres, chancellor of the wisdom school,

¹ This paper was written between August and November 2020.

famously described as seeing farther by standing on the shoulders of giants (Querido, 2018, p. 71).

Within the system of the seven liberal arts, Grammatica reminds us of the creative, cosmogonic power of the word as the foundation of manifested reality: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. / He was with God in the beginning. / Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:1-3 New International Version). What John expresses in mystical form is, from another standpoint, a psychological observation: that our perception of reality is deeply intertwined with language. Deep in our collective memory lies an ancestral remembrance that words, in a way, create the world around us.

We usually think about sight as our most important sense, the one that allows us to identify the objects and people that we interact with. But as soon as we learn to speak, our linguistic faculties start informing our perceptions. From then onward, we continue labeling everything, for the most part subconsciously and automatically. By the time we are adults, only rarely do we allow perceptions to come in unfiltered, unaffected by language.

In fact, for most of us, the experience of unfiltered perceptions is so unnatural that it can feel baffling and confusing. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée*, Roquentin, the main character in the novel, has an epiphany when, as he looks at a chestnut tree, the usual mental scaffolding of words and concepts falls away. His experience is disconcerting: everything he sees—the roots, the benches, the grass—vanishes, and what once was the concrete reality of individual things now feels like a veneer of appearance. Once that superficial layer also melts, reality appears to him as a formless, monstrous lump of existence, frightening and obscene in its nakedness (Sartre, 2007, pp. 180-181).

C.G. Jung, inspired by the Gnostics, employed the concept of “pleroma” to refer to the mass of indistinct perceptions, undivided and unlabeled (Jung, 2009, p. 554, n. 82). In order to live our lives, Jung said, we must make our way into the troubling world of labels and struggle against the “primeval, perilous sameness” of the pleroma (Jung, 2009, p. 512).

One of the symbolic meanings of the story of Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge is that gaining knowledge of good and evil means moving out of the pleroma. Eating from the tree sanctions the loss of the innocence of the primitive man, who lived in unity with Nature, with no language and no judgment. We, who live away from the garden of Eden and in the world of opposites, are condemned to use labels to describe both our inner world and the reality that surrounds us. Although we may long to re-experience the primordial state of no-differentiation, from a psychological standpoint we cannot permanently go back to the pleroma. Our departure from the pleroma, which symbolically constitutes an original sin, is also a milestone in the evolution of our consciousness.

The act of labeling, then, is not a mere utilitarian matter; it is a foundational operation in creating our reality. In this sense, indeed, the act of giving names to objects amounts to creating them, for it brings individual things forth from the undifferentiated mass of sensory perceptions; it also gives them the potential to become part of our story, the narrative we have about ourselves. Eventually, the words we use to describe what happens to us end up becoming the building blocks of the narrative of our lives. Significant events, people, and even objects become an integral part of our sense of identity.

But our capacity to create the world through naming can be abused. When we rely too much on it, we risk getting trapped in a realm of rigid labels, where change and flow are impaired, and where finding creative solutions to our problems becomes extremely

challenging. If we want to transform and heal, we need to melt those rigid labels and reclaim the right to write our own story creatively.

Based on her long-standing experience as a medical intuitive, Caroline Myss argues that the greatest blockage for healing is the shortage of vocabulary to transition to a different stage of our lives: we lack the words to describe how it would be like to feel better (Myss, 2019a). Once we are willing to change the words we use to refer to our lives, tremendous transformational and healing experiences can happen (Myss, 2019b). Along the same lines, acclaimed author Joe Dispenza guides people into focusing on “space” rather than on the inner objects that populate their awareness (2017, pp. 253-254). This is so that they can change the web of meaning in their inner world, thus influencing their brain state. The past, argues Dispenza, literally exists only inside our brains and bodies (2017, p. 28); if we want to change and transform, we need to let go of this powerful ballast.

Again and again, we find that our greatest powers become the sources of our deepest limitations and vulnerabilities. Our advanced capacity to store and retrieve long-term memories of events and feelings exposes us to the risk of becoming trapped in the past. But also, as we shall see, our sophisticated meaning-making faculty makes us vulnerable to stress and trauma in ways that other animals are not. In order to move towards transformation, we must understand more about how trauma affects our memory system and how it threatens to disrupt the narrative of who we are.

Trauma: a Tear in the Soul

At the time of writing this paper (November 2020), the world is still immersed in the COVID-19 pandemic. While on a surface level, a pandemic of these characteristics might seem to be a less traumatic occurrence than more overtly violent events such as a war, we are

beginning to realize that its emotional, psychological, and spiritual—in other words, psychic—impact may have been just as potent. Even beyond the dire reality of the number of deaths and hospitalizations, the pandemic has instilled a deep fear of the future and of each other in hundreds of millions of people, who have experienced sudden and dramatic changes in their life circumstances.

In a sense, this is nothing new: human beings have always been periodically subjected to harrowing and unpredictable experiences, being at the mercy of sickness, predators, and the forces of nature. Physical and psychic suffering is ingrained in the very texture of human life. But the more our collective consciousness gains in complexity, the more exposed we are to different kinds of suffering and trauma. Only an advanced nervous system endowed with meaning-making capacities, only an intelligence able to self-reflect and recognize its own individuality is complex enough to experience trauma in its full disruptive capacity: as something unbearable and intolerable, overwhelming and unbelievable (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 195), something that essentially threatens our sense of identity.

The current circumstances serve as a reminder that we are much more than our physical bodies. Although, at the time of writing, there have been over thirty-eight million confirmed infections and over one million COVID-19 related deaths worldwide, for most of humanity the pandemic has not yet entailed direct physical suffering. Yet almost everybody on Earth has endured long months of lockdown, with severe reductions in their mobility and possibility of interaction with others. Many of our relations have transitioned online, with an inevitable loss of intimacy and engagement. With the widespread imposition of face masks, something previously unimaginable has become a common view in most cities worldwide: streets filled with anonymized humans, their facial expressions all but hidden from view. It may be argued that observing the norms and regulations imposed by the national, regional,

and local authorities was an essential part of the collective effort in containing the pandemic. Yet, the sense of impotence experienced by vast amounts of people who saw their lives transformed, their business shut down, their families being torn apart by distance and isolation, is an incredibly fertile ground for psychic trauma.

Van der Kolk (2014) explains that one of the most common and damaging aspects of trauma is a sense of immobilization, the helplessness experienced in the face of circumstances that leave no way of escape (p. 55). In the early months of 2020, millions of people have experienced such impotence by having their freedom of movement drastically and suddenly curtailed. The word “lockdown” has irrupted into the collective consciousness with very little warning, becoming the new normal for an enormous amount of people. These sudden and dramatic changes have affected us all in profound ways, touching us to our core, and particularly in our basic need for relationship and physical contact; as a result, we have witnessed the emergence of a collective psychic field ridden with frustration, anxiety, fear, and pain. While it is too early to judge from a historical perspective, it may not be an exaggeration to say that nearly everybody alive and conscious in 2020 has experienced some form of trauma.

Yet if there is a hidden gift in the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that it has taught us again, particularly those of us living in affluent and complacent societies, the reality of suffering. Our collective experience during the months of the pandemic has reminded us that trauma is not necessarily related to a brutal or life-threatening incident. According to Gabor Maté, one of the leading experts in traumatic disorders and physiological stress, the three factors that universally lead to stress are uncertainty, lack of information, and loss of control (Maté, 2011, loc. 665). But all of these three factors are connected to our capacity to make sense of the world around us and give it meaning, to perceive our lives as coherent stories, and not as a

random sequence of events. Unfortunately, as we will see, trauma has the power to disrupt those stories, and it does so by interfering with our perception of time.

One of the most distressing characteristics of trauma is that its damaging effects can extend way beyond the traumatic event itself. Terrible as it is, every traumatic event has a beginning and an end. Physical assault, rape, even war have a finite, if not necessarily definite, duration. How is it possible, then, that we can be traumatized for decades, sometimes for an entire lifetime, because of a situation that lasted minutes? How does trauma get to project its effects so far into the future? And why is it that it may take us years to unwind and transform the psychic knots caused by a traumatic event, even after the physical effects of it have long healed? To find answers to these questions, we need to look deeper into trauma and recognize it as a very peculiar kind of suffering, one that wounds not only our bodies but our souls.

Time: The Power of Memory

We are, arguably, the only living beings to measure time and organize our lives around it. We make appointments, create business plans, remember occurrences, keep track of the years since we were born, and study history. Most importantly, we give meaning to the passing of time, which elicits in us a whole range of deep-seated emotions.

As far as we know, we are also the only animals that construct a story about their existence. Our brain has among its functions the capacity to construct a more or less coherent narrative of who we are, have been, and expect to be. This narrative depends on our ability to organize our experiences and memories in a time-based sequence, something that provides us with a unique sense of identity and is the foundation of our autobiographical sense of self (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 236). Without our ability to project our existence backward and

forward in time, there would be no literature, no business, and no science. But our capacity to experience time, and construct our life narrative around it, also has some less desirable consequences. Not only do we live in almost constant fear of death, old age, and uncertainty of the future; the past also weighs heavily on us and, at times, dictates our behavior.

Dispenza (2017, p. 30) illustrates the mechanisms that make us live in the past, not just metaphorically, but from a biological and neurological point of view. When we wake up in the morning, we start looking for our identity, for the familiar feeling of being ourselves, which we partly let go of in the hours of sleep. But our identity is connected to feelings and emotions we have experienced in the past. For example, as we wake up, we think about that argument we had last night. We reconnect to the emotions we felt during the altercation, and because similar feelings trigger the brain into producing the same hormones, our body believes it is experiencing the same environmental conditions as it was back then: before we can realize it, we are literally living in the past (Dispenza, 2017, p. 41). As a result, argues Dispenza (2017), we unconsciously divert our psychic energy out of the present moment and into the past, and our whole organism becomes invested in responding to conditions that are no longer actual (p. 35).

While the condition of living in the past is common and ordinary, traumatic experiences accentuate it to extreme levels. To understand why, we must remember that our nervous system has an uncanny capacity to respond to stimuli coming from memory; if a memory is powerful enough, the brain and the body will essentially not know the difference between it and an experience lived in real-time (Dispenza, 2017, p. 36). But powerful memories are one inevitable byproduct of traumatic experiences, so traumatic experiences become like psychic magnets that anchor us to the past with extraordinary strength.

Van Der Kolk (2014) speaks of two different memory systems: ordinary memory and traumatic memory. While ordinary memory is constantly integrating the elements of remembered experiences into the continuous experience of self, traumatic memories are neurologically different because of the effects of traumatic events on the brain. During traumatic experiences, the high arousal of our nervous system causes a disconnection of the thalamus and the hippocampus, areas of the brain whose role is essential for the integration of incoming sensory perceptions. As a result, the sensations that enter the brain are not assembled together into a coherent narrative, but rather remain as fragmentary sensory and emotional traces (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 176). The brain scans of people who are reliving a traumatic memory often show deactivation of another fundamental brain area, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC)—the brain’s “timekeeper,” responsible for putting our present experiences into context and evaluating how they relate to our past and may affect our future (p. 69). When the DLPFC is incapacitated, the result is that the sense of chronological context is lost, and the remembered past feels like an eternal present. Even long after the traumatic event has occurred, the memories related to it remain scattered, disorganized, and yet uncannily vivid, as if frozen in an eternal now.

On the other hand, in the presence of traumatic memory, the amygdala, the part of the brain assigned to produce the physiological changes required for immediate threat evasion and response, goes into hyper-activation (Van Der Kolk, 2014, pp. 68-70). The amygdala cannot differentiate between present and past; it starts to send signals that put in motion reactions characteristic of a trauma response. The heart rate accelerates, the body starts to sweat, the digestive functions are brought to a halt, the blood pressure rises; in short, the brain and the body respond as if they were experiencing the traumatic event in the present moment. These complex neurological processes are responsible for the fact that people who

are experiencing a traumatic memory become “engulfed” by the sensory and emotional elements of the past. (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 219).

Traumatic memories, therefore, are in a class of their own. They have the power to transport us instantly into the experience that generated them, but they are also incredibly difficult to integrate into a coherent narrative of who we are. The recollection of traumatic memories can happen over and over again, without the trauma ever becoming a coherent, integrated part of one’s story (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 70). It is perhaps not surprising that a mechanism in our brain refuses to incorporate traumatic memories into our autobiography. We generally harbor the belief that our lives are meaningful, that they matter, and that they are part of a collective journey of growth and evolution. But this belief makes traumatic events very challenging to blend into the storyline of our lives; how can we integrate harrowing traumatic experiences such as rape or abuse and still feel that our lives make sense?²

This paradoxical situation, where traumatic memories both loom over our sense of self and refuse to be integrated into it, is one reason why transforming trauma is so difficult. Psychologically, emotionally, and even biologically, trauma warps time around itself; our capacity to stay in the flow of time is severely affected, creating a vortex of pain that is both ever-present and frozen in an unreal eternity. Trauma is the ultimate experience of “this will last forever” (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 70). By becoming eternally present, a fragmentary experience disconnected from the biographical flow of our biographical time, and therefore forever recurrent, trauma hurts not just when it happens, but for years to come.

² For centuries, providing ways to integrate traumatic events has been one of the roles of organized religions—trauma becomes more acceptable if we consider it part a divine plan.

In order to transform trauma, then, we need to unfreeze and restore the natural flow of time. We need to recover the parts of our psyche that have gotten stuck in the past into the aliveness of the present moment and allow the traumatic memories to become part of our past; a past that, albeit surmounting the greatest difficulties, we must integrate into the history of ourselves.

Transformation: From Presence to Currency

Trauma threatens the core of our identity, disrupting our perception of ourselves as sentient entities with a coherent story. In order to survive, we are forced to lock the traumatic memories in a vault, keeping them in artificial isolation from the rest of our memories, usually at the cost of a huge expenditure of psychic energy. As long as we are doing that, a part of us is literally stuck in the past, and therefore cannot live, enjoy, and contend with the present moment. Transforming trauma opens a possibility to recover some of that frozen energy and come back to more fullness of life. But how do we approach a memory so scary, so overwhelming, that it refuses to be integrated into our life story? We have seen in the previous section that trauma distorts and warps the threads of time around us. To transform trauma, then, we need to unravel those threads and come back to where we are right now: in the present moment. This means regaining our capacity to be both present and current³. The distinction is important, so let's explore it more in-depth.

Being present is connected to the capacity to direct our attention in a way that is congruous to our intentions and environment. For example, if we are meditating, we want to direct our attention to our thoughts and feelings, observing them as they move and change; having too much attention focused on the external environment would disturb the meditation,

³ I will use the word "current" as a synonymous of "up to date."

and we would lose presence. Our degree of presence will increase as we redirect our attention from the external environment to our inner world. But having our attention focused on the inner world is not always what we need. If we are driving a car, we need to be focused on the external environment; too much attention on our thoughts and feelings could cause a car accident. Our degree of presence with the drive, then, will depend on how much attention we can redirect towards the external environment and away from the inner world. Presence is fundamentally a factor of our attention and our intention.

Being current, on the other hand, has to do with the extent to which memories of the past or anticipations of the future can influence how we respond to life. If we are having dinner with friends, but our nervous system is still activated by an argument we had with our partner a few hours before, then we are not current. We might be talking with someone and be reasonably present with their words and body language, but if we are mainly responding to anticipations of what they will do in the future or memories of what they did in the past, we are not current. Not being current is connected with our capacity to store memory and anticipate the future, and it is an unwanted gift bestowed on us by our advanced nervous system. Children and animals, who both have simpler nervous systems than human adults, tend to be current because they mostly respond to what is happening right now as opposed to memory or anticipation. Not being current condemns us to repeat patterns of survival that are not adapted to our current situation. The consequences for our ability to interact with the world and with others are devastating.

Trauma pushes the lack of both presence and currency to its extreme consequences. As we have seen, when gripped by a traumatic memory, one is fully absorbed in reliving the trauma. Under those conditions, where attention is sucked away by the traumatic memory, it is hard for anybody to stay present with whatever sensations, stimuli, or messages are coming

at them from the outer or the inner world. At the same time, someone absorbed by a traumatic memory cannot be current; their physical and psychological responses are less adapted to their present situation than to the remembrance of a traumatic experience from the past. In other words, the traumatized person is not just stuck in the past; they are also not fully alive in the present (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 221).

In order to put an end to trauma's dominion over our lives, we need to bring ourselves back to both presence and currency. The transformational work usually starts from restoring presence, our capacity to feel what is happening right now, in both the inner and the outer worlds. Since trauma is linked to a lack of capacity to assimilate whatever was going on at the moment, in the transformational process we usually need a surplus of presence, which can be provided by a guiding facilitator or an attentive group. There are multiple ways to regain presence; one of the simplest and most effective is to start to notice, perhaps with some gentle guidance, the sensations in our body. Bringing presence to the body helps us direct more of our attention to our current physical state, reclaiming it back from distant times and spaces. Eventually, by focusing on bodily sensations, we can notice how they ebb and flow, and even change dramatically in a matter of minutes. Then we discover a fundamental difference between the present sensations and the frozen memories from the past, impervious to the passage of time (Van Der Kolk, 2014, 208).

Through these or other methods, we can start to restore presence, which represents the first step towards unraveling time from the tangles in which trauma has enwrapped it. But returning to presence is not enough to transform trauma. We could, for instance, be fully present with the remembrance of a traumatic event, and still be engulfed in sensations and feelings coming from the past, completely unable to relate with others and with the

environment. In order to fully liberate ourselves from the grips of trauma, we need to become current again.

As more and more presence is restored, we gradually build a solid base from where we can start the journey towards the traumatic memory itself, to recover some of the psychic energy invested in it, and begin to unfreeze it from its eternal present. Van Der Kolk (2014) stresses that it is important to visit the past only when we are reasonably grounded in the present (p. 69); in other words, it is useless to attempt to unravel a traumatic memory when the memory is still capitalizing most of our attention. As we continue reclaiming our nervous system from the grips in which trauma has held it for the longest time, we start to own our brain back, which is when real transformation begins (Van Der Kolk, 2014, 129). Unfreezing a traumatic memory does not necessarily mean accepting what has happened, let alone justifying it. But it does mean that we become able to tolerate our recollections of the traumatic events and the feelings associated with them, to speak about those events and feelings, and eventually, to integrate them into our story of ourselves.

Communication: the Key to Transformation

One of the most astonishing and puzzling characteristics of trauma is that the traumatic memories and experiences revealed in group processes are not always traceable to any individual's life. People can experience a variety of emotions, from joy to sadness and grief, that are not directly connected to their present or past conditions; it is as if they were feeling the emotions of the collective. Trauma, in other words, is not only individual but also collective and archetypal. A woman, for example, can experience individual trauma connected to having been sexually assaulted. She can experience intergenerational trauma connected to violence and rape endured by the women in her lineage: mothers, grandmothers,

sisters, aunts, and ancestors that she may not even remember. That same woman can also experience memories connected to the women's archetypal trauma, which is embedded in our collective consciousness and can be found even in our myths and fables⁴. Yet this capacity to feel the emotions of the collective should not surprise us overmuch. Though we may harbor the illusion that we are independent and isolated beings, the reality is that barely a few meters, sometimes a few centimeters from us, other people live, feel, suffer, rejoice, and affect us with their emotional states.

Like many others, in the spring of 2020, I was under strict lockdown measures. Every day at eight o'clock in the evening, people in my neighborhood would go on their balconies for a few minutes to clap their hands in homage to the health workers who were engaged in facing the pandemic. It was a moment of emotional connection with total strangers, supporting each other in that simple yet powerful way. At times, during or immediately after the applause, I felt strong waves of grief and sadness moving through me and demanding to be expressed. Although I had suffered no personal loss during the pandemic, I was sensing and being moved by some of the collective pain that was alive all around me.

In a sense, we all live in a sort of psychic soup where we are influenced by each other's emotional states. This interconnectedness allows trauma to spread faster, and yet when we manage to create environments that support group transformation, that same interconnectedness becomes an invaluable resource. In my experience as a facilitator, I have witnessed, time and again, the enormous power of group transformation. Even in a comparatively short amount of time, groups re-create many of the social dynamics that can precipitate both traumatic and transformational experiences through an individual's life from

⁴ For instance, when a girl listens to the fable of Little Red Riding Hood, for instance, part of her experience will be connected to the archetypal vulnerability of a female character faced with a menacing masculine energy (the wolf).

childhood to adulthood. Group dynamics of dominance and exclusion, but also solidarity and support emerge, and skilled facilitators can guide them with empathy and intelligence.

Through the inevitable ups and downs of a group experience, most participants gradually experience increased safety, support, and belonging. This, in turn, allows people to soften up and access vulnerable, sometimes traumatized layers that come up to be witnessed. The group creates a field of attention that is the ideal milieu for emotions and memories to surface, be seen, and potentially be transformed. When someone steps into a circle of attentive people while they direct their presence and attention toward the center, miracles can happen.

There is a neurological basis for the relational aspect of both trauma and transformation. Our nervous system's capacity to synchronize with that of another human being isn't just a fancy accessory: it is an essential survival skill. Children have virtually no capacity to self-regulate inner biological processes such as heart rate, level of hormones in the bloodstream, and nervous system activation; their internal biological states depend entirely on the relationship of their nervous system with that of empathic and caregiving adults (Maté, 2011, loc. 3333). A child left without the support of a caring adult could literally die of fear or emotional distress. Empathy, communication, and relationship are essential ingredients of Nature's recipe for human survival.

Even as adults, we are not completely independent for our self-regulation: other people's actions and words can produce dramatic physiological shifts in our bodies (Maté, 2011, loc. 3344). Anybody who has had an intimate relationship knows how a harsh comment from a loved one may be enough to put our whole nervous system in a state of hyper-activation and inundate our bloodstream with stress hormones. The opposite is also true: when someone shows empathy to us, breathes with us, and shows that they care, our nervous system immediately starts to relax. In a fundamental sense, the best antidote to trauma is being seen

and acknowledged by others; Van Der Kolk (2014) expresses this by saying that communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized, and that sharing our deepest feelings is the most essential form of therapy (p. 235).

Unfortunately, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication and relationship is precisely the area of our lives that has been the most severely affected. This may be one of the factors that, in the years to come, will contribute to the arising of collective trauma of a pernicious and long-lasting kind. When the health-related threats of COVID-19 are finally under control, we will need an enormous amount of togetherness, loving presence, empathy, and touch to bring back our collective nervous system to a state of balance.

Conclusion: Safety and Freedom

On one of my trips to Thailand, I hiked to a local waterfall. Upon arriving, I found a group of about fifteen children, aged between six and twelve, playing freely in nature. They were swimming, jumping, using the slippery rocks as a makeshift slide, and doing all sorts of things that would have been considered high-risk in most European countries. Meanwhile, their parents were enjoying a picnic a few meters away, wholly unconcerned of whether one of their children would fall off the slippery rocks. Were those parents negligent? Perhaps that is not the most interesting question to ask. But rather: how would that degree of freedom and risk affect those children's upbringing? Vaguely aware of that question in the back of my mind, I jumped into the pool at the bottom of the waterfall. I was instantly welcomed by a barrage of splashes, laughter, teasing, and fun.

Today, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I can't help but think back at those Thai children with a sense of nostalgia. How lucky they were to still live in a world that, while suffering and broken in many ways, was largely unconcerned about infectious viruses spreading

massively through the air! Even before the SARS-CoV-2 virus came to change our lives, those children were growing up in a riskier, less sanitized, but also more freeing and empowering environment than most of us Westerners. Yes, perhaps while at the waterfall or on another such adventure, one of those children might have broken an arm. Perhaps, although I certainly hope not, one of them might even have sustained a serious injury or worse. And yet, I can't forget how those children seemed full of life, attentive, smart, playful, and, above all, trusting in themselves and the world.

As I am writing these words, the school year has just begun in Europe. Children of all ages are finally going back to school after long months of different degrees of confinement, when they were deprived not only of instruction but also of the company of their peers. But they are going back to an unfamiliar and uncanny environment, subjected to a multitude of different and often conflicting norms and regulations. They may be required to wear a mask all day, sit in individual school desks, or be protected by individual plexiglass cubicles. Any given day, they may be told not to go back to school because one of their schoolmates or teachers has tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It remains to be seen what the psychic impact of these measures will be.

Maté (2011, loc. 3608) points out that traumatized people can develop stress-related symptoms not only because of pain and loss, but also because of the absence of something beautiful and necessary. This is one of the reasons why children are so exposed to trauma: there are so many beautiful and necessary things in a child's life. The freedom to explore, the sense of adventure and wonder, may be just as essential for a child as physical safety and proper school instruction. Is this also true for the child in each one of us? Today, safety seems to have taken a solid hold as the most important factor to consider in every choice we make, individually and collectively. Yet perhaps we are not adequately evaluating the psychic health

consequences of the chronic lack of freedom and trust to which we are getting accustomed. I write these lines with full awareness that populist parties and governments all around the world have appropriated and distorted the collective demand for freedom. By no means am I suggesting that there is a simplistic solution to the delicate balance between safety and freedom that each community is trying to achieve. Instead, my intention is to invite consideration of our health as a holistic concept that includes both our physical and our psychic well-being.

Van Der Kolk (2014) writes that we are on the verge of becoming a trauma-conscious society (p. 347). Since, according to him, trauma is our most urgent public health issue (p. 356), that we become collectively trauma-conscious is urgent and necessary. Yet, as we become more aware of trauma and the damage it wreaks, we must be careful not to respond by sacrificing all of our needs for freedom and connection, for adventure and intimacy, in the name of safety and the avoidance of suffering. Suffering, and its severe version we call trauma, is not something we can set out to eliminate from our lives; in fact, the more evolved and sophisticated and sensitive we are, the more we are exposed to different kinds of suffering and trauma. Rather than focusing on the impossible task of creating a trauma-free world, we can accomplish more by refining our capacity to come back to presence and currency.

Suffering and trauma are powerful catalysts for our attention; they invite us, force us even, to look their way, signaling that there is something that needs love, presence, attention. The existence of trauma offers us both the opportunity and the obligation to stay centered and compassionate—only in this way can we be alert enough to move from trauma to transformation. Trauma calls us to exercise balance, to avoid the short and easy answers, and to find ways to be present with what is. The critical factor in recovering from trauma, writes

Van Der Kolk (2014), is that the patient learns how to tolerate knowing what they know and feeling what they feel (p. 125). Denial and dissociation are just temporary patches that can help us survive in a moment of overwhelm; eventually, we can only recover from trauma when we accept it and integrate it into our story. And although living a traumatic experience is something that we would not wish to anybody, once transformation happens, the wound of trauma may present the carrier with unexpected gifts, such as sensitivity, empathy, and wisdom. Sometimes we may need total solitude to heal and transform. But by and at large, our traumas can be best transformed in a relational context; the existence of trauma, rather than separate us, can be a strong motivator for community building.

Once we have walked the tortuous path that goes from reestablishing presence to revisiting the past and integrating it, our life story will be altered forever. Traumatic experiences may turn into painful, lasting memories, memories that we may not want to revisit often; but once transformation is underway, they don't need to dominate our lives anymore. With time, we may accept those memories, stripped of their unnatural eternity, as something that contributed to making us what we are today, and give them a place in the unique story of who we are.

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