
Trauma

How are we in this pandemic time? Where are we as we begin to contemplate a post-pandemic country (though certainly not a post-pandemic world)? A few writers I respect have provided a useful word to describe our situation. The word is “trauma.” For sure, most of us have never borne the violence that instills severe trauma in our time: war, bombs, shootings, physical and sexual abuse. But this past year has certainly affected us in traumatic ways.

A few weeks ago, I joined some clergy colleagues (via Zoom!) in a small gathering to hear the wisdom of Serene Jones, who is the President of Union Theological Seminary, in New York. She finds herself, she says, being named as the mother of “trauma in theology,” following her powerful book of nine years ago, *Trauma and Grace*.

Serene Jones identifies trauma as “an event of overwhelming violence, in which a person experiences themselves (or someone close to them) as threatened with annihilation.” She described several features of traumatic experience; my scribbled notes got them as:

1. A loss of control,
2. A loss of a sense of organizing space (an inability to categorize events),
3. A loss of a sense of order in one’s life,
4. An erratic memory or lack of memory,
5. A loss of a capacity to even find the language to talk about one’s experience,
6. A lost sense of association (loss of relationship),
7. A loss of agency.
8. A final feature of the traumatic experience is the sense that *any* outside force can be perceived as a threat.

Before the pandemic, many of us knew that diagnosis as it pertained to victims of violence. But those of us listening to Serene Jones quickly recognized those sorts of symptoms around all of us these days. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have affected all of us, throughout the world, with a sense of trauma. Some of us admit that we are forgetting things; we have lost a sense of what day it is, so much that we cannot organize things. Some of us say we are simply too tired, too fatigued, to even talk about what is going on these days. Some of us have lost a sense of space, and a sense of safe and trustworthy space. Some of us have lost a sense of relationship with others. Some of us seem to fear almost anything these days; we are attacked and critiqued from every direction.

Finally, of course, there is the condition that I find distressing almost everyone: the loss of agency. Most of us, whoever we are, and no matter what position of power or influence we have, have had our agency, our will, our capacity to decide, taken away from us. All these conditions fit what Serene Jones has identified as the conventional features of trauma.

Another writer, Resmaa Menakem, has written a book titled, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*, in which he focuses particularly upon bodies, bodies as the places where trauma is inflicted. More particularly, he writes about the trauma that happens to Black bodies, white bodies, and bodies in law enforcement, due to what he calls “white-body supremacy.” He notes that, for the past hundred years, white bodies have become the standard for supremacy, and that, “for white Americans, the most important task in dissolving white-body supremacy involves separating whiteness from supremacy.” Again, whether we are white or Black, he identifies a kind of trauma as our condition.

In our meeting the other day, Serene Jones reminded us of a list, a list of the traumas that we have experienced, almost all at once, in the past year. It’s not been just the pandemic itself. It’s been the acute

awareness of racialized violence, the realization of deep racial divide, fires in so many places, freezing weather in Texas, political leadership arguments, violence in the United States capital, and the deaths of over 600,000 people.

The journal *Oneing* has devoted an entire recent issue (volume 9, number 1) to trauma and healing, featuring excellent contributions from Richard Rohr, Sallie Howard, and Matthew Fox. With that word, “trauma,” they name our predicament very well. Noting that the word, “trauma” comes from the word, “wound,” or “cut,” Rohr names trauma as a “sacred wound.” He asks:

“Could this be what mythology means by “the sacred wound” and the church describes as “original sin,” which was not something we did, but the effects of something that was done to us? I believe it is.”

“If religion cannot find a meaning for human suffering, humanity is in major trouble. All healthy religion shows us what to do with our pain. Great religion shows us what to do with the absurd, the tragic, the traumatic, the nonsensical, the unjust. *If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.*” (Rohr repeats these words in his recent newsletter at the *Center For Action and Contemplation.*)

Is there healing? Is there a medicine for trauma? Like Richard Rohr, I admit that I am no specialist in dealing with trauma. I suppose that only a few of us are. But, as a priest, I do lift up a particular source of healing. It is the local parish, the local community of faith, the place that is supposed to provide us a sense of holy space and holy time.

The world, all of us who are scarred with the sacred wound, needs a place for that original wound to experience safe and healthy redemption. I realize that no parish is perfect, and no community of faith is perfected. We all struggle, with sin and with our imperfections. But, note how a healthy community of faith addresses each of those features of trauma that I noted above!

For instance, at our best, abiding communities of faith help us to re-order our time, to remember stories of redemption, to re-order our association with sacred story, to re-find our healthy traditions, and to experience what is truly safe space. We need those safe spaces. Finally, a healthy community of faith enables us to find our agency again, to find our voice, to find our confidence, to be able to act willfully and joyfully again. In healthy community, we re-engage.

Everybody I speak with, who knows anything about trauma, admits that healing takes a lot of time. There is no magic medicine, no automatic healing of the wounds, no quick return to the way we were before. It takes time. It takes time to renew our lives, while incorporating and redeeming the pains we have known in the past year. I believe we will need local communities of faith, parishes, re-gathered and renewed; we will need them more than ever. Join one! Join us!



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