

Trauma and Sanctuary

by Bob Wentworth

Do you ever find that events trigger emotions (or seeming lack of emotions) that lead you to do things you wish you wouldn't, or to fail to do things you wish you would? Seemingly everyone experiences this. Likely, often when this happens we may be experiencing the aftereffects of trauma.

Trauma occurs whenever our experience overwhelms our coping mechanisms, provoking intense emotions that make a profound lasting impression, burning that experience into the wiring of our brain. When things happen that in some way remind us of the original experience, our conscious mind tends to get overridden with powerful urges towards emotions and behaviors arising from the time of trauma. These responses have the beautiful intention of ensuring our survival -- but often persist long past the time in our lives when they were really the best strategy we could devise.

It is important to realize that what we experience as traumatic can vary widely from person to person. Events that seem innocuous to others can be experienced as traumatic. Witnessing something unpleasant happening to someone else can be traumatic. When we are young and vulnerable, anything can be traumatic. Seemingly, we all experience some degree of trauma. The things we do when our traumas are re-stimulated often produce pain in ourselves and others, sometimes to the point of creating new trauma. Thus, there is a tragic cycle that happens, in which trauma leads to behavior that creates more trauma.

Arguably, this is the cause of much of the suffering in the world. It's also one reason why NVC can be challenging to use at times, even when we are well on our way to having mastered its understandings and skills. When trauma-related survival mechanisms activate, we are under the influence of parts of us that may not have access to those understandings and skills. I am aware of two broad approaches to addressing the effects of trauma: approaches that involve healing trauma, and approaches that involve managing the effects of trauma and preventing additional trauma. I would say that the work of Robert Gonzales leans towards the first of these, focusing on creating conditions to support the healing of trauma.

Today, I would also like to draw your attention to the latter sort of approach, as pioneered by NVC practitioner, psychiatric forensic nurse, and traumatologist Donna Riemer. Riemer's work builds on Dr. Sandra Bloom's work on "creating sanctuary" as well as on Nonviolent Communication (NVC). Riemer's model for creating sanctuaries from violence has been astonishingly powerful, reducing violence in criminal/psychiatric settings by over 90 percent. Riemer believes that her model is equally applicable to schools, families, workplaces and other settings. The recipe for creating sanctuary looks something like this:

Recognize that we all long for sanctuary, i.e., safety from violence, be it physical or verbal, overt or merely a subtle precursor to violence that promotes separation and distress.

Learn to recognize early warning signs that we or others are getting "triggered", or moving into trauma-inspired protective patterns.

Develop and use a plan for what to do when we or others are beginning to get triggered. Such a plan may include things like:

1. If necessary, separate ourselves from whatever is triggering us.
2. Learn emotional-care techniques (breathing, meditation, grounding techniques, etc.) to help us

reconnect to ourselves.

3. Give ourselves self-empathy, or receive empathy from others.
4. Although being triggered can often result in behavior that some may regard as undesirable, it is important to understand that the behavior is related to pain, and that nurturance is a more appropriate response than is punishment.
5. Use Nonviolent Communication to communicate, especially when anyone is triggered.
6. Develop group agreements about how we will respond when we or others are triggered, so as to support everyone in having an experience of sanctuary.

I think that sanctuary is a basic human need, one that we would do well to learn how to meet for ourselves and others.