

Change is Afoot:

A New Paradigm for First Responses after Difficult Events

With Sarah Peyton

The solitary hero's journey, the lone gunfighter's ride, the orphaned child who makes it against all odds, Jesus crucified for our sins – we live in a world of myths and legends that teach and reinforce an essential aloneness through an embedded narrative of separateness, reflecting and helping us make sense of the physical disconnection of bony skull from skull.

These narratives layer on the biological reality that as human animals, the way we make meaning of difficult events in the absence of warm, responsive support, is to withdraw into our own skin. We can even see this social withdrawal into self-sufficiency in the tendency of most originally disorganized infants to easily move into the disavowal of pain associated with the “dismissing” style on the Adult Attachment Interview (as shown in both the Berkeley and the Minnesota longitudinal attachment studies, Sroufe, et al., 2005; Main et al., 2005). This sense of having to do it alone is not just alive in Western culture. We also see it in the founding of Buddhism, with Gautama making his lonely journey to enlightenment, and in Buddhist teaching stories, including in the story of the traveling monks. The teaching tale appears in several configurations, and goes roughly like this:

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her. (Sometimes the woman is haughty and demanding, rather than young and beautiful.)

The senior monk carried this woman on his shoulder, forded the river and let her down on the other bank. The junior monk was very upset, but said nothing.

They both were walking and senior monk noticed that his junior was suddenly silent and enquired, “Is something the matter? You seem very upset.”

The junior monk replied, “As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman, how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?” (Sometimes the junior monk is also angry and resentful that the woman was arrogant and that the senior monk helped her anyway.)

(But no matter what the junior monk's objection, the senior monk always replies:), “I left the woman a long time ago at the bank, however, you seem to be carrying her still.”

Rereading these words, my heart sinks again, as I return to the familiar territory of feeling shame about how hard it is for me to get over certain simple human interactions. I first came across this story many years ago, and like the young monk carrying the woman in his mind, I've been walking with it ever since. Somehow my reaction to this story was noticed and grabbed by my amygdala and entered my implicit, timeless memory, remaining alive within me to the present day. Since my emotional response here is shame after a flare of irritation (hypo-arousal after hyper-arousal), my reaction can serve us as a tiny model of trauma in action in the brain. And like all unprocessed trauma, since my reaction never changes, we know that we are in the realm of the ever-present past, of memories held by the amygdala. But because I can process around what cannot be processed, I am stuck and I am neuroplastic – happily, my neural circuits are always available for a different first response that will help me lay down my burden. I have been carrying my load with anger, shame, bewilderment, resting on a feeling of protectiveness for the younger monk, perhaps because the story takes me into my original experience of disorganized attachment. The moral tone of the tale, in my hearing, perfectly

recreates my life-long dismissive response to my own upsets including my reaction to this story: “Get over it,” I would say to myself, after running into this story again. “Why can’t you let it go?” “Why are you still thinking about that?” “Didn’t you first read that story years ago?”

Unfortunately (and fortunately) for me, dismissiveness is a notoriously ineffective regulation strategy (Matas, Arend & Sroufe, 1978). Rather than “checking out”, becoming more present – through attunement and resonance (hallmarks of secure attachment) – works much more effectively to calm the nervous system in the face of upsets (Siegel, 2012). And according to Allan Schore’s regulation theory (2012), the experience of being able to soothe ourselves always begins with someone else soothing us. Given my attachment history, it’s no wonder I try dismissing myself (emotion #shame) as my first strategy. Our brains do not come hardwired for self-regulation; we have to be held with understanding in order to learn how to respond to ourselves in a way that lets us notice, attend, and be done with difficult moments

But the junior monk and I are on our own if we are traveling with folks like this particular senior monk. As a brain-building companion, he is fairly useless. While he does notice that the younger man is silent, he does not move into attunement and support. Nor does he take a meta-view of the situation, considering power or meaning. He does not acknowledge the power difference that allows him to make decisions contrary to the requests of their order without loss; he does not discuss how choice and agency (he was able to choose and take action, while the younger monk was simply an observer) can relieve people of carrying the burdens of the past (Terr, 1992). Of course, the senior monk most likely does not know that more than any other brain areas, our attachment and self-regulation circuits can continue to grow more complex and dense, and increase in effectiveness as we age (Cozolino, 2008). He may not realize that he could contribute to the junior monk’s learning of self-regulation. And he is certainly not listening to the heart of this younger monk longing for integrity and clarity, or helping him to hear his own torn-ness and move toward laying down his burden of resentment. In this story, the junior monk is simply supposed to understand that he is wrong to still be thinking about the woman, and he should follow his senior’s example and put her down. And as far as how to do it, that is his responsibility, his private, unexplained path. No guidance is offered in the ways of the heart and mind. He is the lone gunman within himself, and he is supposed to ride on and shoot down his emotional burdens on his own.

As human beings, whenever our response to one of our members in difficulty is to tell them what we are doing, or how they should do it differently, or to blame others for their actions (as the senior monk would have done if he had agreed with the junior that the woman was arrogant), we are missing an opportunity to connect deeply and offer a new beginning of self-regulation and self-understanding to our companion. This is true when discussing these small difficult moments, and it is even more essential when we are dealing with larger moments and experiences of trauma.

One way to understand trauma is it means we have been dealt a blow greater than our nervous system can tolerate – and that in response to the event, we move first into hyperarousal, and then into hypoarousal or dissociation (Levine & Kline, 2007). The research of Lanius and Hopper (2008) helps us to understand how this cycle can live on in our bodies long after the original incident is past. Using fMRIs, these researchers showed that sufferers of PTSD, when dissociated, were unable to pick up any body information from their right anterior insular cortex (AIC), as it is strongly inhibited during hypoarousal. The right insula maps the visceral and somatic states that are associated with emotions, a key to understanding ourselves and others (Damasio, 2000). With inhibition of the AIC, these individuals were not able to fully process emotional cues and information, the nervous system level of their felt “disconnect” from emotion, body, and others.

Hyperarousal, on the other hand, involves high activation of the right AIC, resulting in hyper-sensation (Lanius & Hopper, 2008). In hyperarousal, the body is in sympathetic arousal, the fight or flight mode of being. In this state the brain is more neuroplastic, more capable of change, as it is swimming with

emotion, the brain's fuel for transformation (Damasio, 2000). Yet sometimes hyper-arousal is unsupportable without containment, as we open into our unregulated right hemispheres and need to be held by the responsive right hemisphere of another, in order to right ourselves and recalibrate our nervous systems (Schoore, 2005).

So here we find a new invitation, grounded in what we are learning in Interpersonal Neurobiology, allowing us to begin to respond differently when we share our worries and concerns with one another. What if we listen differently? What would happen if we felt supported enough to allow our right orbitofrontal cortex to take steps toward connection and resonance? And how about if the teaching tales we told were about the ways we can support one another in the aftermath of difficult moments? Our narratives might begin to reflect interdependence and support, and our myths and legends of alone-ness might change to a sense of "we." Returning to our monks' journey, what if the older man could respond in a new way? Let's imagine a different unfolding:

They both were walking and senior monk noticed that his junior was suddenly silent and enquired "Is something the matter, you seem very upset?"

The junior monk replied, "As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman, how could you then carry that woman on your shoulder?"

The senior monk paused for a moment, focusing his attention on the younger man, feeling into his experience, and asked, "Are you worried about how to be true to your vows and at the same time fully participate in the world? Are you confused by your own love of beauty and your sensuality while feeling so committed to the requirements of our path of spirituality? Come, let us continue walking while we talk about this together."

Let's rewrite the story for me, too: Sarah, do you long for a world of support and responsiveness, where people are not wrong when they speak about their discomfort and upset? Do you wish that we would approach one another with openhearted curiosity and attunement? Can you embrace this in your self? Do you hope for a world where the narrative is we can help relieve each other of our burdens? Yes, imagine the radical shift in our world, if our legends and myths spoke to the naming of torn-ness, to the power of relationship to heal, and embraced the multiplicity of the experience of being human. And imagine if we listened with "right-hemisphere ears" to the voices of our fellows, shifting our world, little by little, into a place of on-going attachment repair and the resilience of earned security.