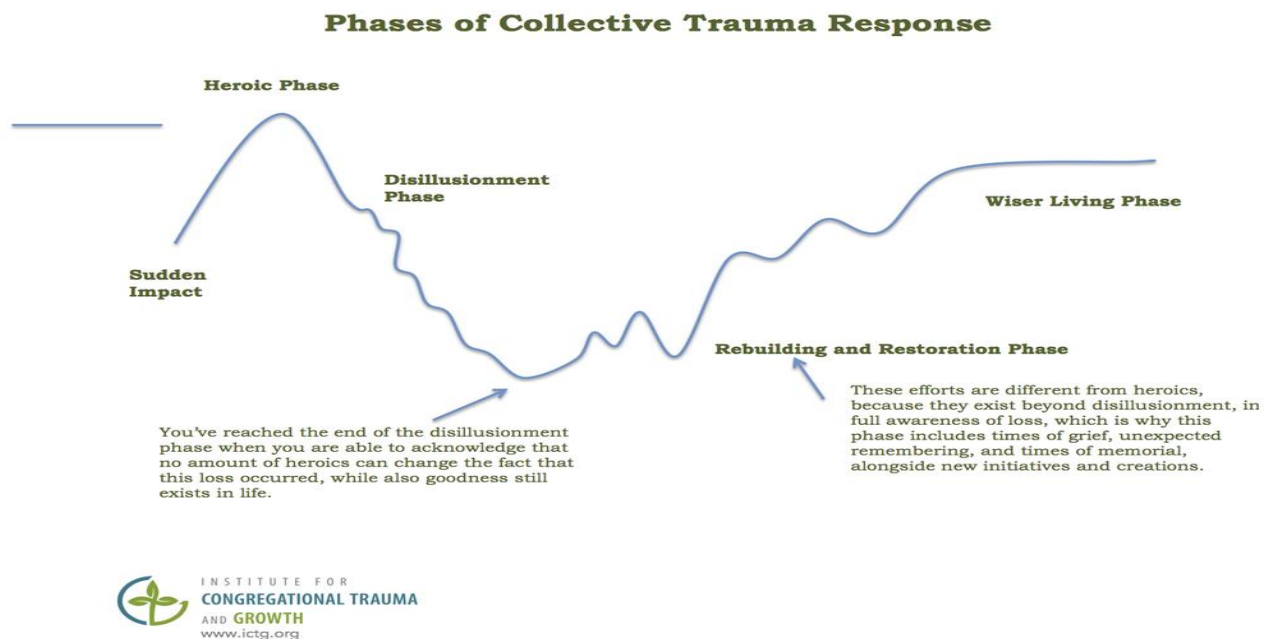


# Thinking and Praying about Trauma

## From St Luke's Virtual Clergy-Wellbeing Programme, "Here be Dragons"

(Systemic facilitator and trainer Revd Hilary Ison shares her reflections on responses to trauma to help us navigate these challenging times).

On a walk recently I was very glad of a map I had with me to help me navigate through unknown countryside. Maps are created when people have charted the terrain and noted the ways in which people have walked, to lay down the well-trodden paths. This chart from the Institute for Collective Trauma and Growth is just such a map. It was created after people and communities had been through traumas of various kinds and noted the ways in which people journeyed through the terrain, such that recognisable paths are forged.



The chart is not prescriptive in the sense that everyone will react in exactly the same way, or in a tidy, ordered and linear way: rather it is a tool to help orient communities in the recognition that this is what is likely to happen in the journey through trauma and recovery over a period of about 24-60 months. It is also a good conversation starter, a heuristic tool, for communities in reflecting on their experience – where do we think we are now? Not everyone in a community or congregation will be in the same

place at the same time. People react differently to the same event depending on their circumstances, their past experiences, and the resources available to them.

The ICTG chart was drawn up in response to one-off traumatic events such as fires, floods, terrorist attacks, earthquakes etc. The shock event happens and the process as documented in the chart begins to unfold in individuals and in communities.

In the heroic phase after the initial impact of the shock event, people discharge their stress hormones that have been activated by the shock through wanting to *do* something, either by helping victims, or by volunteering and donating things. People are energised, and it generally brings out the best in them – kindness, caring, generosity and selflessness. But operating at this level of activism is exhausting, and it is not sustainable in the longer term. So when energy levels become depleted and the reality and awfulness of the situation sinks in, disillusion sets in. No amount of heroics can change what has happened.

In the disillusionment phase, people are tired, weepy, irritable, unable to concentrate and angry at what has happened and what may or may not have happened in response to the situation, especially against those ‘in charge’. There may be grief at who or what has been lost, a questioning of faith and God. There may be competition among sections of the community or congregation for attention and scarce resources. Some will be looking for a rescuer and others will just be wanting to get back to normal as soon as possible. The difficult thing is that this stage cannot be short-circuited – the only way is through. It is messy and difficult and requires a real holding of nerve and extra support for those in leadership.

As the chart indicates, the rebuilding phase emerges when enough people in a community are able to hold together the understanding that bad things have happened *and yet* goodness still exists in life. As with the psalmists, so congregations can rail against God for the losses and hurt, and yet hold onto the truth of God’s loving-kindness, grace and presence in it all. Thus experience is integrated, new wisdom is grown - and a more robust faith. None of this is easy or straightforward: there will be lots of steps forward and almost as many back.

So what of this in the Covid-19 situation? In a sense it’s the trauma that keeps giving. Or like an earthquake with aftershocks. We do not know yet what may happen further down the line. The problem is that there are no

maps available to us to help us navigate through this Covid-19 pandemic crisis as it is an unprecedented situation in the experience of this generation. But perhaps we can take the elements of the ICTG chart to see how we can use them to chart our own experience and draw our own maps. Perhaps it is like the medieval cartographers who, when they came to the edges of the known world, simply wrote 'here be dragons'.

In response to the initial phase of the pandemic, we have certainly seen heroic and inspiring responses; amazing self-giving in those who have volunteered to help neighbours and communities; healthcare and frontline workers; clergy and congregations serving those who are in need; and ministers learning to record and live stream services and finding many creative ways to engage with congregations and local communities. But instead of a peak in the heroic phase, perhaps we need to draw a plateau – a stage that has lasted not a few days but now 12 weeks, as I write.

Many are now tired, emotional, increasingly frustrated with the loss of liberties, with the denial of the usual comforts of contact with families and friends, of going out and just being normal. Losses are mounting up and realities are hitting home. Government and church leaders are not able to rescue us all, and disillusion is setting in, together with questioning as to whether those in charge have really done their best for us. Some just want to get back to normal and others are fearful of coming out of lockdown too quickly. In the Church of England there is disillusion and anger amongst some clergy towards senior leaders, and mounting fear and distress at what the future holds in terms of the financial impact on dioceses and churches - while others are keen to embrace the new opportunities this change will bring.

And it is at this point, when energy levels are depleted, that we as communities and churches are being asked to be creative, all over again, in finding ways to develop a 'new normal', which may only be temporary, to cope with requirements of social distancing - and it won't feel 'normal' at all. Perhaps this could be a new element on the chart – a transitional phase in which we try to function as best we can with the uncertainty of not knowing if we will be on a gradual trajectory out of this crisis or find ourselves back in lockdown again.

This is where we are - at the edge of our known world so far. The rebuilding and restoration phase is yet to come and could be a long way off, with many valleys and false summits to traverse. It will be important for us

to chart our journeying and to be kind and forgiving to ourselves and one another - for there is much to learn and endure as we travel, and we will need time and space to reflect on and integrate our learning. Wiser living is not a final destination, but it is the fruit of hope, trust and love shared amongst companions on the Way.

**From, Deborah van Hunsinger,  
Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel and Pastoral Care.**

**What is Trauma?**

The Christian faith was born from trauma: the passion and death of Jesus and the painful break between the Church and the rest of the Jewish people. The mysteries of Good Friday and Holy Saturday are the result of betrayal, abandonment, disappointment and loss of hope. The sacraments ritually enact that primal trauma:

- Baptism is a drowning of sin and a mystical death
- The Eucharist is the representation of the terrible death of Christ on the cross

Even the resurrection, though joyful, still generates trauma – new birth and the pain of separation from what was familiar. And rejection on account of the Gospel – martyrdom – has been an intrinsic part of Christian experience from the beginning.

The human condition is constantly marked by trauma - failure to acknowledge that can lead to further traumatization. With good intervention however, trauma can become a catalyst for growth and transformation.

The serious study of trauma came out of the Vietnam War and the behavioural damage caused to veterans and their families. A general definition emerged:

**Trauma = an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people's coping mechanisms.**

The feeling of being overwhelmed distinguishes traumatic experience from that of stress. Not everyone reacts in the same way to a

traumatizing event however and one must never minimize what another person experiences as traumatic. The latter generally has three characteristics:

- **Hyperarousal** – the persistent expectation of danger
- **Intrusion** – the indelible imprint of the original traumatic moment
- **Constriction** – the numbing response of surrender

Responses can be *fight, flight* or *freezing*. Traumatic symptoms can be turned against oneself (in self-harm) or others (projected aggressivity). Freud discovered the existence of “repetition compulsions,” i.e. ritual re-enactments of the original trauma.

### **Breaking Free from the Vicious Cycle**

How does one reach a condition of more freedom, i.e. not conditioned through *oblivion* (denial) or *revenge taking* (projection), by the original trauma? The deadening emptiness may also be avoided through distraction in work or play.

Analysts suggest three helpful factors:

- The trauma needs **attention paid to it**
- It needs to be “**re-experienced**” in the company of another person or a group
- These steps are taken **with uncertainty** about how they will come out

Healing comes as sufferers piece together **a coherent narrative creating a web of meaning**. That may be accompanied by feelings of horror, shame, guilt, etc. The aim is gradually to engage the trauma - yet without being overwhelmed by it.

N.B., those who grow through and emerge from trauma usually do so by forging a spiritual framework for post-traumatic growth.

### **Carers: Keeping an Open Heart in Troubled Times**

“When you listen to stories of pain day after day, how do you keep your own spirit alive? The root meaning of compassion is ‘to suffer with.’

What do you do when you reach the limit of your capacity for compassion?”

Every life is contextualised, one significant context being trauma itself: the media repeatedly shows a traumatized world of wars, famine, terrorism, natural disasters, poverty, disease etc. That's particularly true in the current crisis, with media overkill. People in ministry and caring agencies internalise others' pain so much so that compassion fatigue may result. **Yet we stop caring not because we don't want to care but because we reach our limits!**

Psychiatrists and analysts warn that trauma is 'infectious' if we are exposed too much to it. So as a carer how do you keep an open heart in such a context?

### **Nonviolent (i.e. Non-Reactive) Communication: Self-Empathy**

"Non-violent communication" has been called:

- A mode of **consciousness**
- A **set of skills** to help us practice empathic reception of others and respond empathically to ourselves

Empathy for others cannot flourish apart from empathy for oneself. In order to focus on another one must paradoxically be able to focus on oneself. That means recognising and responding to one's own needs - e.g. for love, acceptance, mutuality, community etc. one's spontaneous, unplanned reactions to things (as Freud learnt) help to identify one's needs and how they are not being met.

### **Practice**

However, simply finding words to describe our feelings **is not necessarily the same as really connecting with them**. The body and its responses is crucial here – what produces bodily relaxation, bodily tension etc.? We have to follow the feelings down to their source in the needs. **This is not intellectual knowledge but emotional awareness**. When we feel "we cannot bear" something what is the particular thing that triggers such a response? Identifying that, particularly with another person but also in prayer, is a first step toward the awareness that "*I can bear it.*"

## **A Christian Understanding**

All human needs are understood in the light of the Gospel of Christ and the Lord's Prayer. In the gospels, "compassion" is uniquely ascribed to Jesus/God – compassion for the blind, the lame, the deaf, the afflicted and the hungry. Jesus has compassion on the crowds and on individuals.

**Prayer must entail paying attention to our real needs and articulating them before God.** Meditation on the Christ of the NT shows him as God's response to our needs – indeed, to human need as such. Christian petitionary prayer is about asking God to come with us and meet our needs.

Only connection to God (prayer) as the transcendent source of compassion enables us to keep our hearts open in troubled times. Christ's cross and resurrection is a transcendent fixed point, an anchor outside oneself, on which to fasten (see, "St Teresa's Bookmark" below). Only God can repeatedly renew our willingness to share the painful traumas of others.

### **From Holy Scripture: Paul on the Groaning of Creation and Groaning in Prayer**

#### **Romans 8. 14-30**

<sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" <sup>16</sup> it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>18</sup> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

<sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; <sup>23</sup> and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits

of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. <sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

### **St Teresa's Bookmark**

*Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing;  
God only is changeless.  
Patience gains all things.  
Who has God wants nothing.  
God alone suffices.*

This was found in Teresa of Avila's prayer book after her death in 1582. Although a contemplative nun, Teresa – like most of the great mystics – was also intensively involved in active life in the complex and conflicted society she inhabited. Her famous "bookmark" invites us to keep a focus on God in all things, no matter how demanding they become. **That isn't escapism but staying connected to the only source inexhaustible of renewal...**

**Written by Dr Earl Collins CMD Officer Diocese of Chichester**



