Healing Transition Trauma in the New Decade

Contributed by Carolyn Baker
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Ten years ago this moment, America was awaiting the inauguration of a new President. We knew that the new Bush administration would bring at least four years of darkness, but we had no idea how dark, nor that a second hijacked election would follow the first, nor the extent to which the influence of Bush II would extend into the future. Certainly, we had no inkling of 9/11 and that terror — both politically and psychologically would overshadow every day of the coming decade. Nor could we have anticipated the trauma of the Bush years and its lingering legacy for generations to come.

This morning I browse the Internet and find this article: "America The Traumatized: How 13 Events of The Decade Made Us The PTSD Nation." I highly recommend reading it because it is the most complete assessment of our trauma from the beginning of this century until the present moment. It's only fault is that it does not address the extent to which the European settlers who founded this nation and their descendants have traumatized this continent's indigenous population and the rest of the world from the moment they set foot on North American shores.

Shock Doctrine

If you have not yet read Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine, you do not yet fully understand the trauma of the last decade nor its permanent effects in America and in the world. Klein's incisive analysis clarifies the extent to which the world has been traumatized far beyond the events of September 11 and reveals an economic policy of the last half of the twentieth century that, like the events of that particular day, will perpetuate an indefinite climate of terror throughout the twenty-first century.

The "holy wars" engendered by 9/11 in turn produced countless men and women emotionally and spiritually eviscerated by them, returning to their homelands to become the next generation of murderers, spouse-batterers, and child abusers. And simultaneously, the close of the decade brought forth an economic bloodbath which left masses of dispossessed human beings homeless, bankrupt, unemployed, without healthcare or retirement, and in myriad instances, depressed and suicidal. Moreover, this financial carnage was not merely a vast series of incidents of economic trauma, but implemented the permanent dismantling of the middle class — a sea change of calculated, systematic impoverishment.

A December 15 MSNBC story reported that: "Joblessness has wreaked financial and emotional havoc on the lives of many of those out of work, according to a New York Times/CBS News poll of unemployed adults, causing major life changes, mental health issues and trouble maintaining even basic necessities."

As Klein documents, some of this past decade's trauma was circumstantial; some, deliberate, but all has left an indelible, protracted mark on the human species which is likely to endure even beyond this century.

Hey, I'm Not Traumatized

Some readers may argue that this article, so far, is irrelevant to their circumstances. After all, you may argue, I haven't experienced any of the above-mentioned forms of adversity. Very well — yes, I really mean that. I'm happy that you have been fortunate enough to avoid them, but do not think, dear reader, that you have been able to avoid being traumatized. In fact, if you are alive on planet earth today, you are living and will live the rest of your life in a state of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While you may not have lived through a traumatic

event, you cannot escape the effects of a plethora of traumatic events around you, and what is more, you will be reminded of those events on some level every day of your life.

Is it the foreclosure signs you see as you look out your front window? Is it the story about the Nigerian airline passenger this past weekend who allegedly intended to blow up a plane-a story that dominates airtime on cable news channels, internet sites, and newspapers? Maybe it's the homeless people you see on your city streets carrying signs begging for whatever change you can spare. Unless you're living in a hermetically sealed isolation tank, you know someone who has lost their house, job, healthcare, retirement benefits, a limb or a life in war. You're not an addict? Don't feel like self-medicating? Untold millions of people do. Why is that?

Perhaps you haven't had your "End of Suburbia" moment when you really get, down to your toenails what the end of cheap and abundant oil will mean for you and your loved ones. Maybe you can't wrap your mind around going to the grocery store only to find that there is no food there. Just can't grasp getting seriously injured and needing surgery, but no hospital, doctor, or nurse can be found-at least one with anesthesia? Oh, and did I mention that sometime this coming decade, it may become very difficult or impossible to find clean, safe drinking water? Now, do you feel traumatized?

You, yes you, are experiencing some form of PTSD, and that will become increasingly obvious to you as the collapse of the empire that engineered the pillage grows more insane, more desperate to survive, more threatened, and more willing to do whatever it takes to stay on life-support.

I haven't even mentioned here the reality of childhood trauma that many of us bring to the table in the traumatic decades of the twenty-first century. How this factors into the equation is unknown, but it does, and it will, and added to the reality that we live in a culture of competition, as opposed to cooperation, trauma-past and present, is an enormous contributor to our daunting difficulties in creating and maintaining supportive and harmonious living communities.

Wow, I'm Multi-Tasking!

For activists and those working for change, it is extremely important to understand the trauma of the people with whom and for whom you are working, as well as your own. It accounts for the inability of so many people to look at the realities of collapse and stop pretending that a
"return to normal" is imminent. And even when folks are able to look, our multitudinous forms of PTSD may keep us from realizing how little time we have to prepare and stop us from allowing ourselves to be deeply penetrated by what is truly at stake.

In an article "In Terror's Grip: Healing The Ravages of Trauma", by Harvard Medical School's Bessel van der Kolk, he emphasizes that the difference between a normally stressful event and a trauma is the degree of helplessness one experiences in the face of it. Numbness, confusion, shock, withdrawal, denial, addictions, and many other behaviors are attempts to avoid the feeling of helplessness and the reliving, consciously or unconsciously, of the trauma. The result is often an attempt to avoid feelings that might evoke memories of the trauma or use the distractions of work, family, or other responsibilities to keep emotions and memories at bay. Thus the obsession with "staying happy" or "keeping things light" or "having a positive attitude."

I notice, for example, that it is much easier for activists to "lose themselves" in causes and projects than actually feel the feelings associated with these endeavors. This accounts for the ubiquitous question "What should we do?" that arises as people begin to awaken to the dire issues of Peak Oil (and every other resource), climate change, global economic catastrophe, species extinction, and population overshoot-to name only a few. If I'm busy "doing" and "solving", then I don't have to feel my feelings about something that may or may not have a solution. If I don't feel my feelings, however, I am likely to misdirect my energy and while being quite task-oriented, fail to be the person I need to be, for myself and for others, as the external situation further deteriorates.

The moment we feel our feelings, we are no longer in the land of logistical preparation where we can operate from the neck up and pretend that there is no force greater than the personal human ego operating within in us or outside of us. Once we feel, we are in the territory of soul — a domain that is irrational, non-linear, unpredictable, and beyond our control.

As Van Der Kolk and others emphasize, a sense of helplessness is what keeps us from exploring our feelings in relation to collapse more fully. Yet what is unavoidably true is that on many levels, we are helpless or at least feel helpless in the face of monumental challenges like Peak Oil and climate change.

The Mother Of All Fears

If I feel, I enter the domain of the heart and soul, and if I do that, I will invariably, sooner or later, confront my fear of death. But isn't that just another trauma? Well, it can be, but it doesn't have to be. A number of wise men and women have researched death extensively including Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Stephen and Ondrea Levine, and the Dali Lama who claims to spend at least one hour a day contemplating his own death.

Isn't this just a lot of self-absorbed navel gazing? I think not. In fact, I believe it is very important in a culture that is based on invincible heroism, to contemplate our defeat and our demise regularly. Until we do so, death has unspeakable power over us-so much so that it prevents us from feeling our feelings and thus tapping into that "something greater" within us that can guide us to where we will be most useful to our loved ones and the rest of the community of life.

In fact, Van Der Kolk, the Harvard Medical School researcher, highly recommends feeling our feelings: "...effective treatment of PTSD", he writes, "must involve promoting awareness, rather than avoidance, of internal somatic states." He uses the term "mindfulness", a word often used by practitioners of meditation, stating that, "Mindfulness, awareness of one's inner experience, is necessary for a person to respond according to what is happening and is needed in the present, rather than reacting to certain somatic sensations as a return of the traumatic past. Such awareness will free people to introduce new options to solve problems and not merely to react reflexively."

What Does Your GPS Say?

Finally, says Van der Kolk, "Imagining new possibilities, not merely repetitively retelling the tragic past, is the essence of post-traumatic therapy." In this I hear the both-and that we must embrace as we navigate another decade of trauma and traumatic residue from the previous one. That is, we must be willing to feel our feelings and listen to their reverberations in the body, and at the same time, envision and imagine life lived in a new paradigm of cooperation, enoughness, service, respect, and deep listening and truth-speaking. In the coming decade of transition trauma, we must listen deeply not only to others but to the "something greater" within us-the internal GPS (not Global Positioning System but Greater Positioning System) that can center and ground us when all manner of terror confronts us and tempts us to resort to numbness, avoidance, panic, cynicism, or frenetic busy-ness.

I don't know how the next decade will end, but it is beginning with an insipid mediocrity that I find more ominous than blatant upheaval. Thus I cannot help but wonder to what extent a dramatic "event(s)" will be necessary to awaken more of our species or the level of catastrophe required for the awakening to occur. In other words, a significant portion of the human race may be incapable of mindfulness without the experience of more trauma of a more calamitous nature. I would very much like to be wrong about that, but we're out of time, and most of humanity is obsessed with a "return to normal."

This week's issue of Newsweek features an article on "Survivalism Lite" which highlights families around the nation who are preparing for the worst. Of course, it's all about amassing vast quantities of food, medical supplies, and ammunition. Nowhere in the piece is there one mention of how these people intend to cope emotionally and spiritually when all the cans of Chef Boyardee run out. What this movement portends is quite simply, a bunch of traumatized people preparing to inflict more trauma on themselves and others.

There is absolutely no place in the decade ahead for arrogance based on how much we know about collapse and how prepared we think we may be for it. Like veterans returning from combat, we are all the walking wounded, and our work is to hold onto each other and feel our own and
the other's feelings, then join hands and transform our communities. The work to be done is daunting in quantity and scope; it is the work not only of preparation but also of healing-the work of looking inside ourselves and asking, "Who is preparing? Who is healing? Who do I want
to be-who must I be in the 20-tens?"

This morning I also received this stunning poem by David Whyte which I invite us to take with us into the new decade:

MAMEEN (Conamara, Ireland)

Be infinitesimal under that sky, a creature even the sailing hawk misses, a wraith
among the rocks where the mist parts slowly. Recall the way mere mortals are overwhelmed by circumstance, how great reputations dissolve with infirmity and how you, in particular, live a hairsbreadth from losing everyone you hold dear.

Then, look back down the path as if seeing your past and then south over the hazy blue coast as if present to a wide future, recall the way you are all possibilities you can see and how you live best as an appreciator of horizons whether you reach them or not, admit that once you have got up from your chair and opened the door, once you have walked out into the clean air toward that edge and taken the path up high beyond the ordinary you have become the privileged and the pilgrim the one who will tell the story and the one, coming back from the mountain, who helped to make it.

- David Whyte

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