

Trauma Story Assessment
And
Therapy
ISAI
Notebook

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The trauma story is the heartbeat of the personal and clinical narrative of those who have experienced extreme trauma. The trauma story is everywhere. On a given day try to notice what is being shared by our spouses, relatives, friends, work mates, the media and from the pulpits of our religious institutions. Some of us when we hear the term “trauma story” shrink away from listening because we expect to hear sad and frightening accounts of terrible events. In few situations this may be the case. But no one is immune from experiencing life tragedies. Emotionally disturbing events happen not only during times of war, terrorism and ethnic conflict. In any social gathering you can find people who have encountered a life threatening illness, a devastating divorce, sexual abuse, or the loss of a loved one to accident or crime.

Out of our need for healing and survival, human beings have developed a complex array of physical and psychological responses that include language and communication. On a personal level the trauma story teaches us how to *heal* from trauma and how to *survive*. The trauma story warns us that dangerous things are happening and there are ways to cope and react to this threat.

Out of decades of clinical and field work listening and collecting trauma stories from many ages and many diverse cultures I discovered that the trauma story has a basic structure. It is fascinating but not surprising to speculate why human beings have evolved to tell their traumatic life events in a universal way. The four elements of the trauma story present the story in a coherent way that has a powerful appeal to those who choose to listen. The four elements of the trauma story include:

- 1) the factual accounting of the events
- 2) the cultural meaning of trauma
- 3) revelations: looking behind the curtain
- 4) The storyteller-listener relationship

In every trauma story, the primary element of the story is the factual accounting of what actually happened to the storyteller. Sometimes these are referred to as the brutal facts. When trauma stories with the brutal facts alone are narrated we sometimes become horrified, shocked and frightened and are repulsed by the story. When you listen to a good storyteller you’ll see them gradually move us along from the very disturbing facts to the other three elements of the trauma story.

In addition to recounting the facts, each trauma story reveals the storyteller’s socio-cultural history in miniature, depicting the traditions, customs, and values in which the story is embedded. Every trauma story has a cultural meaning because our personal identities, biographies and experiences are made up and given meaning by the societies in which we live our lives. Early on, for example, I learned that a traumatic event in one culture may have no meaning in another; and that perpetrators knew what events would cause the maximum amount of shame and suffering in victims within their society.

Almost every trauma story is filled with personal revelations gained by the storyteller through his or her traumatic life experiences. The traumatic story reveals the deep insights one learns from being forced by trauma (i.e. one rarely chooses to be involved in a tragic event) to “look behind the curtain.” Having looked behind the curtain the storyteller reaches deep insights when reflecting upon his/her situation. The story teller may have previously supported commonly held beliefs and attitudes that say “he” or “she” is bad for having been involved in a tragic event. However, through their

experience of violence, these conventional beliefs are seen as false. Out of this pain the storyteller shares with us these new truths and revelations.

In listening to another's trauma story you can become an integral part of that story. Clearly therapists and field workers cannot avoid even if they try to become a character in the storyteller's narrative. The storyteller-listener relationship, however, may be fragile. No normal, ordinary person wants to experience, witness or learn about trauma and suffering. We usually want to avoid this. Storytellers are also vulnerable to emotional and physical pain when they retell their stories. Sensitive and empathetic listening allows us to hear the storyteller's full text. Significantly, encounters with others opens up the possibility of the unknown; all dialogue has the potential for future friendship and affection but also for disappointment and conflict. Entering into the trauma story, therefore the listener must have the courage to accept a promising but unpredictable outcome.

This journal has been set up to allow you to systematically collect the four elements of the trauma story. You can use it either prospectively to conduct an interview and write in the journal as you go along. Or you can write retrospectively to review a trauma story narrative you have already listened to but not in this way. The key to this journal exercise is reflection. As you listen "deeply" to the storyteller in a sensitive and empathetic way, occasionally stop-meditate-and reflect on what you are hearing and then write it down in your journal. While recording the four elements of the trauma story primarily focuses on content, you can also jot down the manner in which the story is told. Try to be aware of the narrative process that includes style (how the story is told), metaphor (the fable and myths used) and the emotion expressed during the storytelling process.

The Trauma Story as Assessment

After you have collected the four elements of the trauma story and you are in a clinical setting you can use this analysis to guide your screening and bio-psycho-social-spiritual diagnoses (see Engel GL. *The need for a new medical model: A challenge for Bio-Medicine. Science.* April 1977;196(4286)) The trauma story is physically embedded in the body and the clinician can rule out, based upon the narrative, the different parts of the body and mind that have been damaged. I have discussed this psycho-social and medical assessment at length in an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (N Engl J Med July 1, 2004; (351:5-7)).

A Dialogue with the Storyteller Using the Trauma Story as Therapy

Considerable evidence exists that just the process of telling the trauma story to an interested person is therapeutic. All research on the therapeutic outcomes of narrative and testimony therapy including the model presented here indicates, however, that some kind of engagement with the storyteller through feedback, commenting or supervision maximizes the therapeutic value of storytelling.

Share the four elements of the trauma story with the storyteller. Rarely has the storyteller gained this type of systematic analysis of their life experience. Say things such as, " I really appreciate your insights. What a profound revelation," or , "Thank you for

explaining to me how your culture deals with someone who has experienced _____. I can now understand why you feel _____.”

You will need to come up with your own way of sharing your appreciation of the trauma story with the storyteller. It has been my experience listening to thousands of stories from around the world over the past three decades that storytellers experience joy in having been deeply listened to and appreciated. Direct feedback is even better. Beware of psychologizing another’s reality. Few people like being told their motivations and intentions as if people are able to read their minds.

Building upon the Self-Healing Power of the Trauma Story

Four simple questions asked of the storyteller can help you maximize the therapeutic power of the trauma story. The trauma story, because it is primarily a narrative of survival and healing, also plays a key role in the self-healing of the traumatized person. This self-healing process can be built upon by the clinician and the field worker. Four simple questions will help you do this. The questions are:

1. What traumatic events have happened?
2. How are your body and mind repairing the injuries sustained from those events?
3. What have you done in your daily life to help yourself recover?
4. What justice do you require from society to support your personal healing?

Traumatized persons can profit in their own recovery efforts by systematically responding to these queries. The therapist can write down their answers, review their responses with the survivor and help them formulate their recovery plan. The therapist can help the traumatized person develop this into a daily reflection and meditation that can lead to improved help, reduced hopelessness, and a restored sense of control our traumatic memories and emotions. A dialogue between therapist and traumatic person is the ideal situation that in order to be most productive continues over time—i.e. a form of self-healing supervision. One can jump into these questions without having obtained the full trauma story or one can use this approach with only a minimal re-visit or brief recapitulation of the trauma events (Question 1).

For all trauma story work it is a good idea to check out with the storyteller if they find your approach useful or is it hurting them and making them feel more distressed. In my experience, a negative response to trauma storytelling and listening rarely occurs since people appreciate being heard, often for the first time. Please remember however, it is important to use the TSAT under the supervision of a skilled clinician.

Healing Invisible Wounds

An in-depth discussion of the approach, theory, history, and scientific basis of this work is fully presented in my book *Healing Invisible Wounds: Recovery in a Violent World*, Nashville, TN Vanderbilt University Press: 2006

All the quotes that follow and annotated page numbers are from *Healing Invisible Wounds*.

*“See reality clearly,
but never give up
your dream.”* ²⁴⁸

-Frank Mollica

Journal for Field and Clinic

Creating a trauma story journal is an act of creation between the journalist and the storyteller. Each member of the conversation is activated by the shared experience of deep and sensitive listening to the realities of a tragic and traumatic life experience. Reflection by the listener and storyteller leads to revelation and builds upon the universal power of self-healing. You will be amazed by the world of discovery you will experience as you develop your thoughts and observations in a systematic way. You will feel humbled and honored as you witness the therapeutic power of narrative and the trauma story.

Pain penetrates

Me drop

By drop ³¹

-Sappho

The Trauma Story I: The Facts

“I came to settle in east Boston near the ocean. Now when I dream, I always see an American who dresses in black walking along the sea. One day when I was in my sponsor’s house, I had this vision. This year, the year of the cow, I would like the American people to help me build a temple near the seashore. Since the Pol Pot soldiers killed my children, I am so depressed that all I can think about is just to build a temple—that is all. God appeared to me again other day, and he told me to build a temple. Please help me make my dream come true. If not, I do not think I can live in more.” ¹¹

-An elderly Cambodian woman

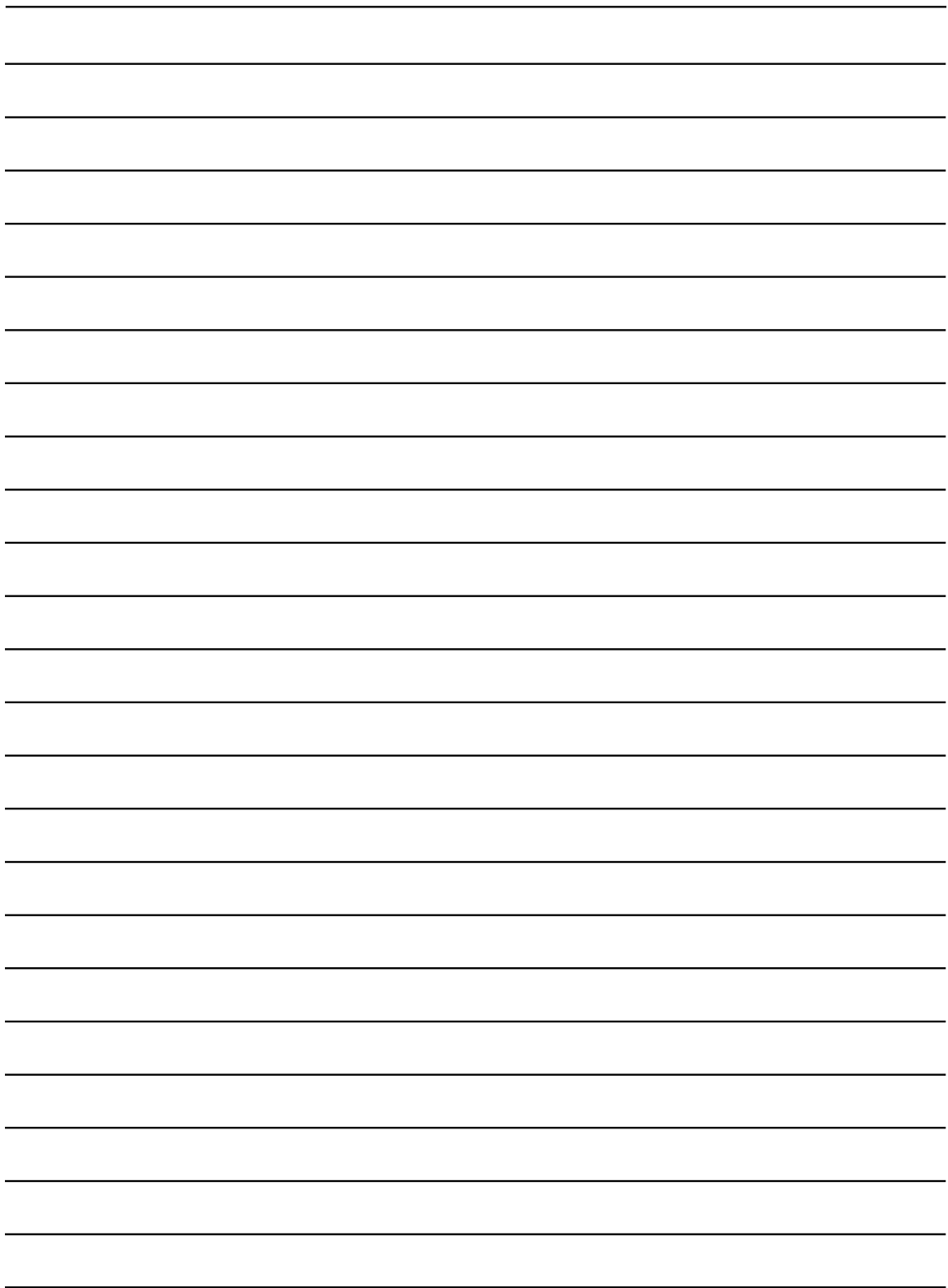
“It is horrible. I buried my parents with my own hands. Like I said, you used to put the body in beautiful clothes, the favorite clothes that the person used to like before they died. Okay. You would give them a bath, right? And you would put them in beautiful clothes. You put on them a little bit of makeup. And if the body is a mother, and the mother died and the baby is still alive, sometimes you would put a...watermelon with the body to pretend it was a baby.” ⁴¹

-Cambodian Royal dancer

The Trauma Story II: the Cultural Meaning
of Trauma

“Is there anyone who can say these women are guilty and sinful because of what they have been through? Thus they can be guilty for some other reason but for this event—no way. Therefore, no one should talk about them in this manner. We Muslims, and especially their closest, should accept them as heroines, as martyrs, and support them both morally and materially.” ¹⁸⁰

-Dervis Ahmed Nuruddin
Bosnian cleric



*To whine, cry, or entreat, is equally cowardly.
Accomplish energetically your long and hard work
in the road that Fate has called you to walk.
Then, afterwards, like me, suffer and die without speaking.*

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La Mort du Loup
-Alfred de Vigny

A beloved poem of a Vietnamese POW

Trauma Story III: Revelations—Looking
Behind the Curtain

“I think being a human being you have to love in your heart. If you do not have love you are not a human being. Life is created by happiness, sadness, exciting, unexciting, boring; all those things create life. Sometimes when life is becoming upsetting, I figure out that this is my life and I must accept it although I never chose this life, to be reborn and to be in this present situation. I never wanted to be alone. Never. It is a very scary situation to be without someone. But I also do not want to marry and have an unstable marriage, after all I have been through....But I am looking to love someone again. One person for one person.”⁴⁶

-Cambodian Royal dancer

“No normal, ordinary people really want to experience, witness, or hear about extreme violence; they want to avoid the subject. The chorus in Sophocle’s play ‘Philoctetes’ recognizes this fact when, upon visiting Philoctetes, they immediately sing, ‘I am a stranger in a strange land.’” ⁴⁷

Trauma Story IV: Listener Storyteller Relationship

“Whenever you tell a story you feel better. I will give you an example of the Bosnian people from the Muslim religion. They do not cry too much. The females go to the funerals and they speak a lot. They repeat and repeat the story. I have had a chance to listen to this several times in several tragic stories on many occasions. The stories are like a tape with the same words and sentences. And each time before they finish, the storyteller is much happier than before, and the listener becomes wealthier from receiving new knowledge.”

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-Dr. Bakir Nakas
Head of the State Hospital during
The Siege of Sarajevo

*Our true faces Are
said to reveal Their
true faces
When we lose clothes, food, and houses At
the limits of existence* 121

Tanka poem by

-Sumako Harada
(Kobe earthquake)

Self Healing

Question 1: What Traumatic events have happened to you?

“This force, called self-healing, is one of the human organism’s natural responses to psychological illness and injury. The elaborate process of self-repair is clearly seen in the way physical wounds heal...The healing of the emotional wounds inflicted on mind and spirit by severe violence is also a natural process. Mind and body are powerfully linked, from the molecular level up to the thoughts and social behaviors of a person. Mind and body are similarly interrelated in their potent curative influence. After violence occurs, a self-healing process is immediately activated, transforming, through physical and mental responses, the damage that has occurred to the psychological and social self.” ⁹⁴

Self Healing

Question 2: How are your body and mind repairing the injuries sustained from these events?

“Healing begins with a choice. Survivors of extreme violence must decide which reality to live in – their old, broken world or a new one. Day by day and hour by hour, violence challenges people to use their traumatic experiences to build new lives and to focus on the present instead of the past.” 157

Self Healing

Question 3: what have you done in your daily life to help yourself recover?

“When mass violence occurs, there is damage not only to individuals but to entire societies, indeed to the world...As a consequence, healing must occur not only within individuals but also within societies, with society as the healing agent”

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Self Healing

Question 4: What justice do you require from society to support your personal healing?

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