



# Spiritual Dimensions of Trauma Recovery

First Christian Church  
Tucson, AZ

Frank Rogers Jr.  
Claremont School of Theology  
The Center for Engaged Compassion  
[frogers@cst.edu](mailto:frogers@cst.edu)

February 17, 2024



## Spiritual Dimensions of Trauma Recovery

### I. The Nature of Trauma

#### A. What is Trauma?

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):  
The three E's of Trauma:

Trauma “results from an **E**vent, series of events, or set of circumstances that is **E**xperienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting **E**ffects on the person’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

Janyne McConnaughey (*Trauma in the Pews*, p. 3):

“A traumatic event is anything that causes an individual to feel threatened emotionally or physically, feel powerless, and/or affect the capacity to cope while overwhelmed.”

Judith Herman (*Trauma and Recovery*, p. 33):

“Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary cycles of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. Traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence or death.”

James Garbarino & Claude Bedard (“Spiritual Challenges”):

“A reverse religious experience”

An encounter with an overwhelming force that debilitates one’s sense of self, undermines human flourishing, and alienates one from a life-giving Source of worth and meaning.

As opposed to a spiritual experience: an experience and encounter with a numinous reality that heals, transforms, cleanses, or empowers.

## B. Types of Trauma

	Sexual Abuse and Assault
	Physical Abuse
	Emotional and/or Verbal Abuse
Care	Neglect of Life-Sustaining Resources—Food, Water, Shelter, Medical
	Death/Loss of a Loved One
	Natural Disasters—e.g. Hurricanes, Earthquakes
	Trauma of Oppression—e.g. Racism, Sexism, Ableism, Heterosexism
Vandalism	Community Violence—e.g. School Shootings, Riots, Hate Crime
or Work	Life-Threatening Accidents—e.g. Automobile Accidents, Injuries at Home
	Dislocation—Slavery, Trafficking, Eco-Displacement
	Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
	Secondary or Vicarious Trauma

## C. Trauma is Ubiquitous

Center for Disease Control and Prevention:

- 1/5 people sexually molested or assaulted
- 1/4 people beaten to point of leaving a mark
- 1/3 couples engage in physical violence
- 1/4 people grew up with alcoholic parents
- 1/8 people witnesses their mother hit or beaten

National Sexual Resource Center:

- 1/3 women have been sexually abused or assaulted
- 1/4 men have been sexually abused or assaulted

World Health Organization:

- 70% of people have experienced a traumatic event in their life
- (30% minimize the experience of trauma in their life)

## D. The Effects of Trauma

Physical Effects (e.g. injuries, disfigurements, and mutilations)

noises) Somatic Effects (e.g. flinching at being touched, hyper-arousal at loud noises)  
 Emotional Effects (e.g. panic attacks, depression, shame, anxiety)  
 Neurophysiological Effects (the way the brain processes experience: e.g. perception scanning for danger with neural webs activating hormonal responses)  
 Behavioral Effects (Fight, Flight, Freeze, Faun instincts)  
 Relational Effects (e.g. mistrust of others, fear of intimacy)

## II. The Spiritual Effects of Trauma

A. Trauma is also a “Soul Injury” (Sexual abuse is a “cancer of the soul”—Anne Richardson)

### 1. “Soul Injury” (Opus Peace—opuspeace.org):

insidiously “A penetrating wound within our deepest self”  
 “A wound that separates us from our real self”  
 “An overlooked and unassessed wound that traumatically or separates one from their sense of self causing them to feel less than whole.”  
 guilt/shame “An aching wound perpetrated by unmourned loss, unforgiven and diminished self-compassion that is often manifested as a sense of emptiness, loss of meaning, or a sense that a part of self is missing.”  
 feel “A long-lasting response to a person or situation that causes one to personally defective, inadequate, or incomplete.”

### 2. Symptoms of Soul Injury:

damaged Shame: A haunting sense that one’s deepest self is defective or  
 beauty Self-Denigration: An inability to sense one’s inner goodness or  
 metabolized Aching Wounds: Loss and pain that has not been mourned or



“I must not be important to God.”  
 “I must be a disappointment to God—something must be fundamentally wrong with me.”  
 “I will never be able to please God enough.”  
 “God must be cold, capricious, aloof and unfair.”  
 “I hate God for allowing this to happen.”  
 “I could never trust in God again.”

2. Typical theological or pastoral explanations for God’s apparent absence

only

exacerbate the alienation from God

“God protects the free will of the perpetrator (which is more important

than protecting you from violation).”

“God allows evil to test our faith and purify it.”

“God brings suffering to help us grow spiritually and strengthen our character.”

consequence

“Suffering in the world is a result of human wickedness—the

of sin in which we are all complicit.”

“God’s ways are a mystery and not to be questioned.”

mystery of

“Suffering is redemptive; in submitting to it we participate in the  
 the cross.”

3. To a survivor, this sounds like:

“Be quiet and accept your abuse.”

“Tolerate your violation with patience.”

some

“Do not question what happened to you—it will all work out for

good of which you may never be aware.”

edification.”

“Submit to your violation with longsuffering and use it for your

perseverance.”

“Count it all joy when you suffer because it produces

This is a theology that serves the perpetrator.

burning

“Let no word ever be uttered that is not credible in the sight of

children.” Rabbi Irving Greenberg while acknowledging that

1 ½

million children died in the holocaust.

Elie Wiesel puts such a God on trial.

### C. Religious Teachings often Re-traumatize and Exacerbate Soul Injury

and  
 “The body is of the flesh and is at best not to be trusted and at worst filthy  
 defiled.”  
 “Anger, despair, and shame are sinful, and need to be repented.”  
 “If you had more faith, you would not be so troubled.”  
 being, defiled The doctrine of original sin or total depravity: “You are flawed in your  
 since birth.”  
 surrender to “Submit to those in authority (parents, husbands, priests, etc.) and  
 your circumstances.”  
 reconcile “Jesus calls you to love all people—to forgive those who wound you and  
 with those who have wronged you.”  
 Purity culture’s belief that if your body has been defiled than you are now  
 irrevocably impure.  
 Easter Triumphalist theology and toxic positivity—rushing to the all victorious  
 Sunday without passing through Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

## III. Spiritual Resources for Trauma Recovery

### A. The Divine as a Source of Restorative Compassion

1. The Sacred Source in all spiritual traditions is a presence of absolute compassion—moved by our suffering and aching for our restoration.

Christianity:

The Prodigal Son parable (Lk. 15)

‘Be perfectly compassionate as God in Heaven is perfectly  
 compassionate.’ (Mt. 5:48)

Judaism:

Rabbi Hillel reciting the whole Torah on one leg  
 Yahweh weeps even for the Egyptians

Islam:

*Bismillah ir rachman ir rachim* (“Aligned with Allah, the most compassionate, the most merciful.”)

2. This Sacred Source of compassion permeates and sustains all of creation.

Jewish psalmist: “Where can I go to flee from your Presence?”  
(Psalm 139: 7-10)

Christian witness of Paul: “Nothing in all of creation can separate us from God’s Love.” (Romans 8: 31-39)

Sufi poet Hafiz: “We are as sunk within God as fish within the sea.”

3. This is the God that Jesus knew.

Jesus was a trauma survivor.

Roman occupation and ubiquitous micro-aggressions  
Born out of wedlock and considered illegitimate  
Infanticide of Herod and exile to Egypt  
Imprisoned, tortured, and horrifically executed

Jesus’ resilient faith was rooted in an experience of God’s compassion: ‘You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased.’ (Mk 1:11)

On the cross, this God knows suffering and takes it into God’s being.

4. Knowing a Sacred compassion is a healing resource in trauma recovery

Sacred compassion can be known  
Knowing a Sacred presence of compassion with us in our trauma is healing

and restorative

Melissa Raphael: “The Feminine Face of God in Auschwitz”

This is God’s true power: Not the power of might but the power of radical

compassion

## B. A True Self-Essence resides within us all.

I. Every person possesses a core Self essence—a pilot light of the soul that everyone has access to. It endures in each person no matter how damaged and traumatized one might be.

Psycho-spiritual traditions have called it:

Imago Dei  
 Beloved Lover  
 Buddha Nature  
 Atman  
 True Self (Thomas Merton, Carl Jung)  
 Immortal Diamond (Richard Rohr)  
 Contemplative Presence  
 Observing Ego  
 Witness

2. This Self-essence is a source of our dignity, resilience, healing and flourishing.

3. The Sacred's deepest desire for us is that we flourish in our unique beauty

St. Irenaeus: "The glory of God is humanity fully alive."

God delights whenever we:

Heal from old, aching wounds  
 Access our personal power and resilience  
 Find our voice  
 Radiate in our beauty  
 Find and embody our vocation  
 Soar in our personal gifts

## C. Self-Compassion as a Spiritual Source of Healing and Restoration

1. Trauma survivors are often consumed with possessive interior movements:

*emotions* that overwhelm like rage, shame, despair  
*internal voices* and self-talk that is self-lacerating  
*drives* to numb ourselves or self-destructive impulses  
*images* and daydreams that replay traumatic scenes  
*bodily sensations* that plague like flinching or muscle tightness

2. When possessed by an interior movement, we usually do one of two things:

Act out: Submitting to the power of the interior movement's grasp over us.

Resistance: The attempt, usually rooted in shame and self-judgment, to manage the interior movement; distract it; or will it away (which is simply an enmeshment in another more judgmental interior movement).

Both acting out and resistance are unsatisfying and counter-productive. Acting out only intensifies our distress and escalates the situation; resistance is like pushing a buoy underwater (what we resist, persists).

3. Self-compassion invites us to take a 'U' turn, or 'tend to the log in our own eye first.' This invitation is grounded in three observations:

1. As contemplative spiritual traditions teach us, a grounded posture of awareness can be cultivated that is free from the possessive clutch of the interior movement. This has been called mindfulness, detachment, emotional intelligence and contemplative nonjudgmental awareness

2. Our reactivity is more about us than it is about the external situation.

3. The radical recognition that every activated interior movement is rooted in some form of internal suffering; they are, in fact, distorted cries frantically waving to get our attention. They are rooted in at least one of the following:

F--Fears unsoothed

L--Longings unsatisfied

A--Aching wounds still tender and unhealed

G--Gifts that are stifled and undeveloped

As such, there are no 'bad' interior movements or Parts; they may be pleasant or unpleasant, enjoyable or difficult, pleasingly restorative or tragically destructive—but they all merely communications of either distress or joy.

At their core, interior movements or Parts are intending to secure our survival, our healing, or our flourishing.

Difficult interior movements are rooted in trauma wounds that still ache for healing.

4. Tending the log in our own eyes entails recalibrating the erratic interior movement to the PULSE of Self-compassion:

P-Paying attention to the movement without acting out its power nor judging its presence within you;

U-Understanding the suffering at the root of that movement's cry;

L-Loving with empathic connection the suffering one senses;

S-Sensing the Sacred's compassion for whatever that suffering is;

E-Embodying the new life aching to be birthed.

5. Such self-compassion restores us to our true Self and realigns us with the sacred Source that sustains us. This grounds a survivor's empowerment:

A deep sense of one's sacred worth and belovedness

An inner strength that one can endure anything with resilience

A resurrected and restored spirit of vitality

A capacity for trusting intimacy

A survivor's mission that gives meaning to one's suffering

## IV. Spiritual Allies with Trauma Survivors

### A. Responding to a Survivor's Trauma Disclosure

When a survivor shares with us their experience of trauma, it is an exceedingly vulnerable, trusting and sacred disclosure.

Helpful Responses include:

Accept their experience: "I believe you."

Empathy: "That must have been horrific. I am so saddened for you."

Presence: "You are not alone. I am here for you."

Affirm their courage: "That must have been so hard to share with

me, let

alone to live with all this time."

Dispel any shame. "It was not your fault in any way."

Validate their feelings: "You feel what you feel for a reason. You

were not

born that way. The body does not lie."

Offer hope: "There are resources for healing out there. It may be

hard, but

there are paths to help navigate this."

When a minor discloses: It is ethically incumbent on us to report it.

For

caregiver professionals, it is legally required as well.

Unhelpful Responses include:

"It's over now... that belongs in the past."

"How could you let that happen to you? Why didn't you report it?"

"Are you sure all of that happened like you said—it sounds

incredulous."

"I know how you feel."

"Just turn it over to God. God will take care of you."

"You'll be fine. It'll all be okay."

"Forgive and move on... that's what you should do."

"Let's pray to have God take this all away."

"Here let me give you a hug."

"God would not give you more than you can handle."

"Jesus says we should reconcile with our wrongdoers."

Silence.

### B. Ways that Faith Communities Can Support Survivors

The church is called to be a sanctuary. And yet, 93% of sex offenders considered themselves religious. And it is a widespread belief amongst pedophiles that the church is the easiest place to abuse a child.

### SAMHSA's Four R's of Trauma Sensitive Organizations

Realize how widespread trauma is  
 Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma  
 Respond with trauma-sensitive policies and practices  
 Resist re-traumatizing survivors

### Concrete Actions a Church Can Take:

Talk about trauma and abuse in sermons and educational settings  
 Host support groups for survivors  
 Display posters and brochures about trauma and abuse  
 Draft a congregational policy about child abuse  
 Have clear protocols about appropriate and inappropriate touch,  
 meeting  
 privately with a child, and contact with a child outside of  
 scheduled  
 programs  
 Screen all new staff and volunteers  
 Train all staff and volunteers in recognizing trauma, knowing  
 trauma  
 protocols, and responding to abuse disclosures.  
 Create a safe environment, for example in regard to lighting and  
 visibility  
 Set up a resource center on trauma, abuse and recovery  
 Refrain from re-traumatizing teachings on forgiveness,  
 reconciliation with a  
 perpetrator, original sin, Christ's sacrificial death, etc.  
 Create a directory of trauma-informed therapists and spiritual  
 directors.  
 Offer ministries of healing and self-care like healing services,  
 recovery  
 retreats, yoga classes, spiritual practice groups, art  
 workshops etc.

### C. Aids to a Survivor's Recovery

- 1) Circles of Support: Finding people to share one's story with and companion you on the anguishing road to recovery
- 2) Setting Boundaries: Limiting contact with a perpetrator

- 3) A Season of Recovery: Giving oneself to the hard journey of healing—Mike Lew's advice: 'Shop Closed for Repairs.'
- 4) Learning about Abuse: Reading accounts of survivor's journeys and resources on the nature of trauma and recovery
- 5) Trauma Therapy: Finding skilled counseling with people trained in trauma therapies like Internal Family Systems (IFS), EMDR, Bio-Spiritual Focusing, Somatic Experiencing, and Jungian Active Imagination
- 6) Trusting One's Body: Instead of minimizing or judging one's reactivities and bodily responses, listen to the truth of what the body is telling you.
- 7) Giving Expression to One's Emotions: Honoring and validating the passions and impulses that war within one by giving them a safe space to express themselves—perhaps through journaling, drawing them with colored pencils, working them out with clay, emoting them on a stage, howling in the woods, and venting them to therapists.
- 8) Befriending and Restoring One's Psychic States: Cultivating a grounded, mindful awareness of the interior states within one; listening to the deep cry or need hidden within them; extending a loving care to the wounded parts buried underneath one's reactivities; and accessing a sacred source of compassion that restores one to one's best self.
- 9) Physical Activity: Discharging energy especially when physiologically flooded and emotionally overwhelmed through vigorous physical activity.
- 10) Transforming Trauma into Art: Taking the raw material of one's traumatic experience, reflecting upon it, and fashioning it with meaning and purpose through composing music, painting, poetry, pottery, story, etc.

## Suggested Resources

### On Trauma:

Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*

Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Violence to Political Terror*

Ellen Bass & Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse*

Mike Lew, *Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Child Sexual Abuse*

Substance Abuse & mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

### On Spiritual Dimensions of Trauma:

Janyne McConnaughey, *Trauma in the Pews: The Impact on Faith and Spiritual Practice*

Anne Richardson, *Spiritual Direction with Survivors of Sexual Trauma*

Victor Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus*

Frank Rogers Jr., *Cradled in the Arms of Compassion: A Spiritual Journey from Trauma to Recovery*

James Garbarino and Claude Bedard, "Spiritual Challenges to Children facing Violent

Trauma" *Sage Journals* 3, 4 (1996)

Opus Peace

[https://opuspeace.org/?gad\\_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQiAw6yuBhDrARIsACf94RWzdliUI3xsRFO99d8zQ0lsgoZpJiuYk-y10JCCxf8UTE9hk--JoFYaArbnEALw\\_wcB](https://opuspeace.org/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQiAw6yuBhDrARIsACf94RWzdliUI3xsRFO99d8zQ0lsgoZpJiuYk-y10JCCxf8UTE9hk--JoFYaArbnEALw_wcB)

### On Cultivating Trauma-Informed Faith Communities:

Basyle Tchividjian & Shira Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches and*

*Ministries* (An amazingly helpful and comprehensive guide in assisting faith

communities become trauma-informed and trauma-responsive)

Pete Singer, "Toward a More Trauma-Informed Church: Equipping Faith Communities to

Prevent and Respond to Abuse” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 51:1  
(January  
2024) Another incredibly thoughtful and comprehensive resource for faith  
communities

These materials were created by Frank Rogers Jr., Professor of Spiritual Formation and Co-Director of the Center for Engaged Compassion at the Claremont School of Theology. Dr. Rogers is also a spiritual director and certified IFS practitioner. He can be contacted at [frogers@cst.edu](mailto:frogers@cst.edu).