

Article

# Spiritual Dimensions of Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth: An Ethnographic Exploration

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**Abstract:** *Cradled in the Arms of Compassion* is an autoethnography chronicling the spiritual dimensions of recovering from childhood sexual abuse. This article summarizes the results of that autobiographical research with particular attention to the spiritual dimensions and soul injuries of childhood sexual abuse experienced by the author and the spiritual resources that were discovered in the recovery from such abuse. It concludes with ten distilled coordinates that guide and support sexual abuse recovery as a resource for therapeutic and spiritual caregivers working with sexual abuse survivors.

**Keywords:** trauma; recovery; spiritual practice; compassion; contemplative practice; autoethnography; soul injury; self-compassion

## 1. Introduction

Since Judith Herman's landmark work, *Trauma and Recovery*, in 1991 (Herman 1991), and the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the International Classification of Diseases in 1992, the last decades have seen an explosion of attention given to the effects and healing of trauma. This has perhaps culminated in Bessel van der Kolk's book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, (van der Kolk 2014), spending over two years atop the New York Times bestsellers list. Trauma is being discussed, researched, and treated in ways both unprecedented and truly liberative. It is fair to say that trauma and its recovery have become woven into our cultural and professional awareness.

And yet, until recently, the spiritual dimensions of trauma's impact and the potential role of spirituality in trauma's recovery have been neglected. An enormous amount of research has illuminated the impact of trauma physically, somatically, emotionally, neurologically, behaviorally, relationally, and even ethically as the moral injury dimensions of trauma are now being recognized. Trauma, however, is also a spiritual injury. As Garbarino and Bedard **have observed** (Garbarino and Bedard 1996), undergoing traumatic events can be a "reverse religious experience". (Though most scholars would offer distinctions between spirituality and religion, Garbarino and Bedard used the phrases "spiritual experience" and "religious experience" interchangeably.) To the extent that a religious or spiritual experience is an experience of or an encounter with a numinous reality that heals, restores, and empowers, a reverse religious experience is an encounter with an overwhelming force that debilitates one's sense of self and strips one of one's core sense of value, stability, and meaning. Trauma has spiritual dimensions, and trauma's recovery can be enhanced when accessing spiritual dimensions of healing.

*Cradled in the Arms of Compassion: A Spiritual Journey from Trauma to Recovery* is the author's autobiographical account as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse that chronicles both the spiritual devastation such trauma can cause and the role of spiritual resources in recovering from such trauma. *Cradled in the Arms of Compassion* is essentially a work of autoethnography. As C. N. Poulos (2021) observes, an autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the

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lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues." Adams, Jones, and Ellis elaborate as follows:

"autoethnography is a qualitative research method that: (1) uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences; (2) acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others; (3) uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as "reflexivity"—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political; (4) shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; (5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and (6) strives for social justice and to make life better." (Adams et al. 2015, pp. 1–2)

*Cradled in the Arms of Compassion* (Rogers 2023) was written in my capacity as the Muriel Bernice Roberts Professor of Spiritual Formation and Narrative Pedagogy at the inter-religious Claremont School of Theology. My autobiographical study not only offers a 'thick description' of the maternal sexual abuse of a boy, but it also details the psycho-spiritual journey that led to genuine healing and recovering. Along the way, I critique the spiritual practices and theological teachings that exacerbated the impact of sexual trauma and I describe the spiritual practices, psychic resources, and theological meaning-making that contributed to posttraumatic growth. This article summarizes the spiritual dimensions of childhood sexual trauma as chronicled in this work of ethnography, the spiritual resources that contributed to healing and recovery, and coordinates in the recovery journey as a resource for therapeutic caregivers, chaplains, and spiritual directors who work with survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

## 2. Autoethnographic Context

At the age of 30, I was seemingly launched into an adulthood both stable and promising. I was married and the father of a young boy; a tenured-track professor at a prestigious school of theology; a popular teacher; an active parishioner; and involved in my community as a volunteer for the local interfaith council. I was also tortured. With the birth of my boy, flashbacks of childhood trauma ravaged my waking hours while nightmares pierced my sleep. Passions erupted within me that whipped in their ferocity—rage, despair, a self-loathing that was lethal. I began to cut myself. I stormed through the foothills screaming obscenities and pounding tree-trunks with a baseball bat. I became suicidal, until one attempt was aborted and I ended up committed within a mental facility.

As a professor of spiritual formation, I read widely and gave myself to contemplative practices and therapeutic processes that promised emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and spiritual vitality. As a person of faith, a life-long Roman Catholic, I sought theological frameworks that made sense of my experience, rebelled against those that did not, and pined for connection with a sacred source that promised succor, freedom, and abundant life. My quest spanned three decades, deconstructing harmful church teachings, wrestling with spiritual practices that only intensified my emotional distress, and searching for the resilience to confront the traumas that plagued me in ways that metabolized the pain and gave rise to psychic and spiritual well-being. Through a generative web of resources, including trauma-informed therapy, contemplative practices inspired by Carl Jung and Ignatius of Loyola, narrative arts modalities, and recovery protocols from researchers of childhood sexual abuse, I followed a path that not only restored my psychological well-being and spiritual generativity, but it also transformed my battle for survival into a survivor's mission of companionship others on the journey toward posttraumatic growth.

### 3. Spiritual Dimensions of Abuse

#### A. Trauma is a Soul Injury

While trauma in general, and child sexual abuse in particular, wounds the body, the brain, and one's capacity for emotional regulation, it also injures the soul. The nonprofit veterans' organization, We Honor Veterans, coined the term 'soul injury' which they describe as "an overlooked, unassessed emotional, spiritual, or psycho-social wound that traumatically or insidiously separates one from their sense of self" (We Honor Veterans 2024). The trauma recovery center, Opus Peace, elaborates that a soul injury causes one to feel less than whole; it is an aching wound characterized by unmourned loss, unforgiven guilt and shame, and a diminished self-compassion that is often manifested as a sense of emptiness, loss of meaning, or a sense that a part of oneself is missing (Opus Peace 2024). Such a violation to one's core sense of self is corroborated by the Jungian depth psychologist David Kalsched in his work, *Trauma and the Soul* (Kalsched 2013).

In traumatic abuse, the vital essence of who one is and the foundations of one's source of meaning and vitality are violated. Whatever is assumed as ultimate—that which grounds a confidence in the goodness and stability of the world, be it God, Life, the Universe, or even one's authority figures—are experienced as untrustworthy, leaving one vulnerable to the caprices of the world. Such violation cuts to the core of one's sense of self, leaving one bereft in a chaotic and uncaring universe. For Opus Peace, the symptoms of such a soul injury include the following:

1. Shame: A haunting sense that one's deepest self is defective or damaged.
2. Self-Denigration: An inability to sense one's inner goodness and beauty.
3. Unmetabolized Wounds: Loss and suffering that have not been mourned and therefore haunt from their buried shadows.
4. A Fundamental Sense of Betrayal: An acute sense of the lack of support and protection from trusted figures in one's life—God, an organization, or oneself—at the time of the original injury.
5. Meaninglessness: A disconnection from one's life purpose or source of connection that erodes hope and resilience.
6. Spiritual Wounds: Anger at God; rage at life; existential despair that one is alone in a capricious universe; metaphysical anxiety that renders one's place insecure in the cosmos where, at worst, one fears that life is out to get one and, at best, one simply does not belong in the world; and guilt that one has offended that which brings order to life.
7. Terror of Death: A primal dread that that which lies on the other side of life is dangerous and condemning.

Such soul injuries require soul healing. This includes accessing one's deepest sense of self and experiencing it as beloved and worthy; connecting to a life-giving source of worth, empowerment, and hope; grieving the unmourned loss and violation that haunts one's deepest being; re-parenting the wounded ones within us that still carry the pain of abuse; a self-compassion that holds the protective parts of ourselves with understanding, care, and, when necessary, forgiveness.

#### B. Trauma Often Evokes a Faith Crisis

Children, like myself, often grow up with a sense of the divine as an all-powerful and protective guardian. I was taught that God had the power to intervene in history and protect God's loved ones; indeed, if one was good and faithful, God would watch out for us and keep us safe from the bad things happening to us. Catholic schoolboy that I was, I had a picture of Jesus on the wall of my bedroom kneeling in prayer before this all-powerful, all-loving God. My mother taught me to pray to that God every night, and that God would be faithful. That was the same bedroom in which I was raped by my mother's predator stepfather and was molested by my mother. I prayed for God to stop it, but it happened anyway.

For me, such abuse spawned a faith crisis that lasted for decades. Where was God when it happened? Why did God allow it to happen when God could have prevented it? What was wrong with me that God did not care enough to intervene when I was most in need? Survivors like me often internalize damaging beliefs about our relationship to the divine. We feel that God must not love us; that we must not be important to God; that we must be a disappointment to God with something fundamentally wrong with us; that God must be cold, capricious, aloof, and unfair; that one could never trust in a supreme being again. Damage to one's faith in or relationship with God for sexual abuse survivors has also been recognized in researchers who interview such survivors. Susan Shooter's ethnographic study of nine Christian women revealed a fundamental sense of betrayal by what she considers a patriarchal understanding of God (Shooter 2016); Pereda and Segura discovered an acute loss of faith in God and the church amongst 38 adult survivors of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in Spain (Pereda and Segura 2021); while Stephen Rossetti discovered, in a study of 1800 adult Catholics in the U.S and Canada, a measurable lack of trust in both God and the church among sexual abuse survivors as opposed to those who report no history of sexual abuse (Rossetti 1995).

The theological communities in which I was navigating my faith crisis offered explanations that only exacerbated my alienation from my sense of God. They taught such explanations as God protects the free will of the perpetrator (which apparently was more important than protecting me from violation); that God allows evil in the world to test our faith and purify it; that God brings suffering into our lives to help us grow spiritually and strengthen our character; that suffering in the world is a result of human wickedness—the consequence of sinfulness in which we are all complicit; that God's ways are a mystery and not to be questioned; that suffering is redemptive—in submitting to it, we participate in the mystery of Christ's Passion.

To an abuse survivor, this feels like being admonished to be quiet and accept one's abuse; to tolerate our violation with patience; to not question what happened to us as it will work out for some good of which we may never be aware; to submit to our violation with longsuffering and use it for our edification; even to count it all joy when we suffer because it produces perseverance and aligns us with the suffering that Christ endured for us.

This is a theology that serves the interests of the perpetrator, not those of a survivor. It promotes the survivor's silence; places blame on the victim; deepens the alienation between the survivor and the sacred source that the survivor beseeches; and piles on the self-recrimination for the seeming impossibility of being thankful for one's violation and submitting to it willingly. Such meaning-making systems that ground a survivor's fundamental faith need to be deconstructed and replaced with more liberative ones on the path to a holistic recovery.

### **C. Spiritual Practices often Exacerbate Soul Injury**

As a person of faith and a professional researcher of spiritual practice, I have encountered spiritual teachings that have only intensified my psycho-spiritual distress. It is beyond the scope of this summative article to catalog the various ways that religious and spiritual traditions impede recovery from such trauma as childhood sexual abuse. For excellent resources on this issue, see Janyne McConnaughey's *Trauma in the Pews: The Impact on Faith and Spiritual Practices* (McConnaughey 2022), and Charles Kiser and Elaine Heath's *Trauma-Informed Evangelism* (Kiser and Heath 2023). Teachings of the need for survivors to forgive our perpetrators and reconcile with those who have harmed us minimize the long process of healing necessary before forgiveness is a live option and often encourage a cheap reconciliation where there is neither accountability nor a commitment to curtail further abuse. As I was to discover, confirmed by the Linns' work *Don't Forgive Too Soon* (Linn et al. 1997), genuine forgiveness is the endpoint of a long season of recovery, and authentic reconciliation with a perpetrator demands the perpetrator's remorse, rehabilitation, restitution, and repair before such a reconciliation

could be possible. Susan Shooter, in her interviews with the abused women, recognized the dangers of church-imposed demands for forgiveness on a survivor's healing, as well as the debilitating effects of substitutionary understandings of the atonement, what Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker consider divine child abuse (Brown and Parker 1989).

In my journey of recovery from childhood sexual abuse, I found particularly problematic teachings that disparage the body and our emotions. Many spiritual traditions suggest that the body is 'of the flesh' and is, at best, not to be trusted and, at worst, filthy and defiled. As somatic practitioners confirm, many of my symptoms of sexual abuse were embedded in my body—intuitive sensations of my privates being violated, burning sensations in the region where I was raped, a stiffness when I would be embraced, a flinch when I was touched from behind. While trauma experts record how the 'body keeps the score', spiritual teachings that disparage the body feed self-doubt in the survivor. This was intensified for me with the ubiquitous teachings of original sin and total depravity—that we are flawed in our being from birth. Like most sexual abuse survivors, I carried an innate sense that I was damaged goods in my being, that my very cells were soiled by the violation that I endured. I was convinced that the extreme emotions that ravaged me were the consequence of my inherent fallenness, that psychotherapeutic healing could only go so far—only a spiritual cleansing of my depravity would lead to a sustaining sense of self.

This was exacerbated by spiritual practices that consider difficult emotions like anger, despair, and shame as sinful and either in need of repenting or to be resisted and released by contemplatively or mindfully letting them go. For me, these extreme emotions came with the force of a demonic possession. Like a buoy being pushed underwater, they defied suppression, and my few moments of contemplative reprieve when I practiced Centering Prayer or mindful breathing were short-lived as the passions erupted all over again when I found myself in triggering contexts. Being told that these passions were sinful only deepened my sense of self-denigration, while my inability to master them in contemplative practice only intensified my certainty that I was spiritually deficient. For me, the path to recovery involved making peace with the passions and bodily sensations that waged war within me, as well as discovering spiritual practices that not only cultivated emotional regulation but engaged these interior energies as spiritual allies.

#### **4. Spiritual Resources in Recovery from Abuse**

##### **A. A Source of Sacred Compassion**

As the all-powerful and all-knowing God of my childhood died for me during my years of theological deconstruction, a reconstructed sense of sacred presence proved to be profoundly restorative on my journey toward recovery. In her book, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, the Jewish feminist scholar Melissa Raphael (2003) suggests that God was with God's people during the Shoah in God's feminine form, as Shekinah. Like the portable tabernacle that followed the Jews through all manner of exile and suffering, Shekinah was present in loving solidarity, sustaining the spirit of God's people in pain. Her presence grieved with those in mourning, sat with those in despair, and walked with those holding onto their humanity in the midst of evil's dehumanization. Even in the belly of the abyss of Auschwitz, women resisted the spirit-killing horrors and extended care to each other. They shared scraps of food with one another, wrapped blankets around the dying, wiped tears from crying children, massaged each other's hands, lanced each other's boils, and in ritual acts of daily hygiene, they simply washed their own faces, claiming the purity of their divinely imaged radiance in a camp that sought to defile and disfigure them. This is divine power in its truest form—to extend kindness in a world of coldness, to coax beauty out of the decay of the ugly, to claim dignity in the face of degradation. It is the power of sacred compassion.

Melissa Raphael offered me a credible theological understanding of sacred presence and power that made meaning of my experience and inspired a reconstructed faith system through which to navigate life. She also informed a restorative spiritual practice. In prayerful meditation, and sometimes when in the throes of my traumatized anguish, I sought the compassionate comfort of Shekinah. In the manner of the ancient practice of the healing of memories, where a comforting divine figure is invited to be with one in the scene of a disturbing episode from the past, I invited, imaginatively, this feminine presence to cradle and care for the wounded ones within me. This proved to be profoundly consoling. Similarly, Susan Shooter observed that a spiritual experience with a tender and compassionate sacred reality, present with them in the midst of their trauma, was restorative for the women survivors of sexual abuse. Shooter described this sacred presence as God's timeless presence and God's holding company even within the horrors of abuse (Shooter 2016). Jill Louise Wylie also found that spiritual experiences with a loving sacred presence was instrumental in the healing journey of twenty women survivors of sexual abuse—offering them a deepened sense of connection with their higher self, a heightened sense of self-determination, a restorative sense of connection with others, and a greater capacity to make meaning of their abuse (Wylie 2010).

I did something similar with a different divine figure when I participated in the nineteenth annotation of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* during a particularly transformative season of my recovery. In meditating on the various scenes of the New Testament gospels, I came to see that Jesus was an abuse survivor. Living within a pitiless occupation, born illegitimate in a doggedly patriarchal society, surviving the infanticide of Herod, and being brutally tortured and horrifically executed, Jesus knew the suffering of trauma. Others have recognized Jesus as a trauma survivor (see, for example, Kiser and Heath 2023). However, Jayme Reaves, David Tombs, and Rocio Figuero additionally recognize that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse as well. Their edited volume *When Did You See Me Naked: Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse* details how Jesus' torture and crucifixion—with its forced stripping, naked exposure, and sexual humiliation—was an intentional form of sexual abuse and violation, and they describe the destigmatization, solidarity, and sense of divine accompaniment this realization offers survivors in their healing journey (Reaves et al. 2021). I experienced this divine solidarity myself. As a symbolic embodiment of divine being, I invited Jesus into the scenes of my abuse and experienced the keen sense that sacred presence knows my suffering and takes it into God's very being where it is not only held with care, but the pain is metabolized and spiritual vitality is restored. The enduring essence of this sacred reality is infinite compassion. As I discovered throughout my recovery's journey, often mediated through acts of kindness extended to me by others, compassion resuscitates. It does not take the pain away, but it keeps the spirit alive while going through it.

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

While true to some extent in all of us, abuse survivors in particular are often consumed by possessive interior movements. This was certainly true of me. Emotions such as rage, shame, and despair would overwhelm me; internal voices of self-laceration would hound and criticize me; the drive to cut myself or numb myself in distracting behaviors would compel me; images, daydreams, and nightmares would flash me back into traumatic scenes; and bodily sensations would plague me like stinging in places where I was violated, shivering in the coldness of my desolation, and an uncontrollable flicking of my fingers in an attempt to dispel from my being the sordidness that inhabited me.

Formed in a religious tradition that considered such interior movements as symptoms of sin or signs of an immature faith, and as a student of the spiritual practices that sought to rid such psychic energies out of our systems, I cast judgment on these passions and impulses, and I fought them with all my strength. The fight proved to be futile. These interior movements defied any attempt to be suppressed, subdued, managed,

or merely willed away. In fact, such attempts only escalated my distress and intensified their possessiveness.

A decisive turning point in my recovery occurred when I stumbled upon the discovery that every one of the interior movements that rifle within us are there for a reason. They are cries of the soul, each one rooted in unmet needs, unfulfilled longings, and unhealed pain aching to be heard, healed, and restored. It is a counter-intuitive truth. The emotions and impulses that so often plague us, they all mean well. They are all rooted in some form of suffering, and they all can be tended to with grounded compassion. Paradoxically, when we turn toward them with curiosity and extend to them care, they release their grip on us and contribute to our well-being.

This discovery, that I experimented with time and again throughout my recovery, distilled into a contemplative practice that became a fundamental linchpin in my healing and ongoing regulation. Coined as ‘The Compassion Practice’, it is a process of self-restoration rooted in extending grounded care to the activated states within us. (The Compassion Practice is described in depth in Rogers 2015, 2016.) Along the way, I was introduced to Internal Family Systems (IFS), a radically non-pathologizing and compassion-based therapeutic process rooted in the same insights and protocols (Schwartz 2021). As both an evidence-based trauma therapy and a liberative contemplative practice, self-compassion proves to both heal and sustain. For me, it was also spiritually realigning. The compassion accessed to hold the suffering within me was fused with the sacred source of compassion that holds all suffering with tender care. Cradled in those arms, life itself is resuscitated.

## 5. Distilled Coordinates in Recovering from Childhood Sexual Abuse

It is a sober truth—healing from sexual abuse is an odyssey, a long and wandering journey with many upheavals along the way. Each person’s voyage to a Promised Land of emotional stability, sustained freedom from the triggers of trauma, and a life lived with contentment, connection, and purpose is utterly distinctive. The winds that whip and then dissipate into a dead sea calm; the storms that strand us in desolate shores; the routes that we navigate; and the ports of call that replenish us, are as unique for each survivor as the circumstances surrounding the horrors from which we are recovering.

For all the idiosyncrasies, however, several things seem true for each voyage, that the journey is lengthy—spanning across years if not a decade or two; the journey circles and spirals, stalls and speeds up, gains ground and regresses, ever defying any linear progression; and the journey is hard—it demands resilience, determination, confidence, and courage. It is truly a hero’s and shero’s epic quest.

To adequately delineate all that I had learned about recovering from sexual abuse, I needed to tell the entire story. *Cradled in the Arms of Compassion* is that story—with all its sordidness, and all of its dead-ends and misdirection, in the midst of all of its discoveries. On this side of the telling, however, I can distill a few of the components that helped me to heal and recover over time.

Judith Herman, in her landmark book, *Trauma and Recovery* (Herman 1992), suggests that recovery from trauma happens in three stages—three legs in the epic journey to the homeland of healing. The first stage is “Safety and Stabilization”. Trauma dysregulates us. Furies, flashbacks, nightmares, and instinctive reactivities typically overwhelm the survivor and perpetuate a chronic sense that the world is unsafe. In this first stage of recovery, support needs to be put into place to sustain a season of healing, and skills need to be developed to navigate difficult emotions and regulate the body’s fight, flight, and freeze impulses.

The second stage is “Remembrance and Mourning”. This is the season of deep and therapeutic healing. Traumatic memories need to be processed and metabolized. The losses that one has experienced—of innocence, connection, trust, and self-worth—need to be acknowledged and grieved, and the resilient spirit of a survivor—as opposed to a passive victim—needs to be discovered and internalized.

The third stage is “Reconnection and Integration”. On the far end of recovery, trauma no longer defines who one is. The horrors that one has lived through are integrated as but a single chapter in one’s overall ongoing story. A life of agency and vitality can now be claimed—meaningful relationships with others can be cultivated; work that is intrinsically fulfilling can be pursued; and a heightened meaning can be given to the trauma—perhaps by companioning other survivors, sharing one’s story and wisdom, writing about it, speaking publicly, volunteering for support organizations, or even engaging in political advocacy work. That which could have defeated one now inspires a life well-lived.

As I look back on my journey, I recognize this three-fold arc. I loosely followed its trajectory, although, for me, each stage circled back multiple times and interlaced with the others. Throughout this meandering journey, I found the following coordinates most helpful in continually pointing me back in the right direction and keeping me on the course toward healing:

1. **Circles of Support:** It was indispensable for me to find people in whom I could confide about my abuse and its tortured aftermath. Be it friends, confidants, support groups, or professionals, I needed people like my therapists and spiritual directors who would say repeatedly and unequivocally, “I believe you; something happened to you that was horrific and wrong. You are not crazy; you feel what you feel for a reason. You are not alone; others have been through this too. And yes, the way is hard; but you can get through it.”
2. **Setting Boundaries:** I needed to suspend contact with the still living person that abused me as their presence only triggered me into a state of chronic agitation. A prolonged period of separation not only removed me from physical proximity with the external source of my activation, but it also reassured my inner world—the wounded ones within me and the defensive impulses that protected them—that I would keep them all safe from any further violation.
3. **A Season of Recovery:** Mike Lew (1988) suggests that survivors leave a shingle for a spell on the door front of their lives, ‘Shop Closed for Repairs.’ I needed to give myself a season dedicated to my recovery, both minimizing the demands on my life as much as possible and mobilizing myself with the determination that it takes for the hard work of recovery.
4. **Learning about Sexual Abuse:** I went through a spell of devouring works depicting sexual abuse—everything from self-help books to novels, films, and documentaries. For me, this was not a masochistic wallowing. It was profoundly consoling. I was able to recognize myself in the portrayals thus validating my experience. I learned how trauma impacts the body and soul which normalized my own crazy-making symptoms. And with the vast number of accounts available, I felt like I was not alone—others knew the horrors of assault as well and had discovered resources for overcoming it.
5. **Trauma Therapy:** Finding skilled counseling with people trained in working with trauma was essential for me. Trauma work is more than talk therapy. Memories need to be surfaced and shared; neural circuits of reactivity need to be rewired; physiological symptomology needs to be released and restored. The trauma does not need to be re-experienced—which only re-traumatizes and further entrenches protective systems—but it does need to be reimagined and metabolized. I found such therapeutic modalities as the Internal Family Systems (IFS), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Bio-Spiritual Focusing, and Jungian Active Imagination particularly suited to healing the trauma that I had endured. In explaining why such therapies are necessary for trauma recovery, and summarizing the most promising among them, I have found Bessel van der Kolk’s book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, both brilliant and definitive (van der Kolk 2014).
6. **Trusting My Body:** Foundational for cultivating the stability necessary to plunge into the deep work of therapy, I needed to stop fighting my body and to learn to trust it. It was a hard-won recognition—the body does not lie. The rages, reactivities, and

revulsions to touch; the instinctive stone walls of unyielding invulnerability; the sordid images that invade one's mind both night and day—it all comes from some place. We were not born that way. Something gave rise to it. Instead of minimizing my body's maladies, battling to subdue them, or lacerating myself in self-condemnation, it helped when I learned to listen to what my body was telling me and to trust it to lead me to the truth of my anguish.

7. ***Giving Expression to my Emotions***: The passions and impulses that warred within me needed an outlet. Simply smoldering in their possessive energy did not help. Nor did trying to suppress them, judge them, or find a way to manage them. I needed to honor and validate them by giving them a safe space to express themselves. For me, this came through incessant journaling, drawing them with colored pencils, working them out with clay, emoting them on a stage, howling in the woods, and venting them to my therapists. The energy was seared into my cells. Giving my chaotic emotions expression discharged their intensity and dissipated the power with which they were wreaking havoc within me.
8. ***Befriending and Restoring My Psychic States***: Perhaps the single most restorative game-changer for me on my journey of recovery was the discovery that every one of our interior movements—the emotions, impulses, fantasies, and self-talk that whip through our psyches—they all serve some life-promoting purpose. To be sure, in their cry to get our attention, they usually overwhelm us with their force, prompting us to try to suppress, numb, or manage these interior psychic states. My recovery took a radically restorative turn when I learned the process that came to be known as the Compassion Practice, cultivating a grounded, mindful awareness of the presence of these interior states within me; listening to the deep cry or need hidden within them; extending a loving care to the wounded parts of me buried underneath my reactivities; and accessing a sacred source of compassion—sometimes personified in divine figures or ancestors, sometimes experienced as a spiritual energy of care and vitality—that restored me to my best self. (The Compassion Practice is described in depth in Rogers 2015, 2016.) I engaged this process most consistently through meditation that evoked my imagination. I also discovered that this process could be engaged in other ways, such as writing it out in both fictive and non-fictive narratives; acting it out on stage; working it out with externalized figures drawn on a page or symbolized with objects; and talking it through with spiritual directors and confidantes. The mode may be multiple, but the liberation is revolutionary.
9. ***Physical Activity***: Frequently, my body merely needed to discharge energy. I had to move, and to move vigorously. When I was physiologically flooded and emotionally overwhelmed, I tended to power-walk through the hills or run for miles, though cycling, swimming, dancing, and yoga would all have been equally effective. Sometimes, it was necessary just to exert myself mindlessly to get away from the barrage of my inner torment. Other times, I ruminated over memories while pushing myself physically, which helped metabolize the pain without being consumed by it. And sometimes, I simply needed to tire myself out to at least approach a good night's sleep.
10. ***Transforming Trauma into Art***: Art takes human experience and crafts it into objects of beauty. The art can be in many forms, such as composing music, painting, poetry, and pottery. For me, it was crafting stories—giving shape to my experience through playwriting, writing a novel, and molding accounts of abuse, my own and others, into short stories that I could share at speaking events. Whatever the form, art is more than simply sharing one's experience. Art takes the raw material of experience, reflects upon it, and fashions it with meaning and purpose—to provoke the mind and pierce the heart. In doing so, creating art resists the passivity of despair and births life out of the death-dealing tomb of trauma. In the midst of the horror, the human spirit endures. A creative life-spark is uncovered. Power and agency are reclaimed. And the ugly is transformed into something sublime. The music may be

blues; the poetry may be bleak; and the sculpture may be replete with jagged edges and barbed hooks. But the truth is told with emboldened vitality. In the end, I wrote a spiritually themed autoethnography, *Cradled in the Arms of Compassion* dedicated to my sister, who suffered similar trauma but did not live to recover from it. I told my truth unveiled from fiction. And with it, I share the hope of all art that is born from the crucible of trauma. If that story inspires a single other survivor to claim the truth of their experience; to know that they are not alone; and to launch, even with trepidation, a journey toward healing, then my odyssey would be complete.

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