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## Forming Restorative Justice Practitioners: Learning to Make Meaning of our Trauma Exposure Response

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## ARTICLE

# FORMING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS: LEARNING TO MAKE MEANING OF OUR TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSE

MARY J. NOVAK\*

*Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning.<sup>1</sup>*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Law students and the lawyers they become are implementing restorative justice theories and practices today in unparalleled ways.<sup>2</sup> The timing of the rise in restorative justice policies and programs in the United States<sup>3</sup> parallels important movements in the law and legal education<sup>4</sup> such that it is

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1. VIKTOR E. FRANKL, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING* 121 (1984).

2. *See, e.g.*, Thalia Gonzalez, *The Legalization of Restorative Justice: A Fifty-State Empirical Analysis*, 19 UTAH L. REV. 1027 (2019).

3. Mark S. Umbreit, et al., *Restorative Justice: An Empirically Grounded Movement Facing Many Opportunities and Pitfalls*, 8 CARDOZO J. CONFLICT RESOL. 511, 519–24 (2007).

4. Among these important movements are Law as a Healing Profession (*see, e.g.*, Susan Daicoff, *Law as a Healing Profession: The "Comprehensive Law Movement,"* 6 PEPP. DISP. RESOL. L.J. 1 (2006)); Therapeutic Lawyering and Jurisprudence (*see, e.g.*, Marjorie A. Silver, *Love, Hate, and Other Emotional Interference in the Lawyer/Client Relationship*, 6 CLINICAL L. REV. 256 (1999)); Lawyer Multiple Intelligences (*see, e.g.*, Aderson Bellegarde François, *Making Out the Ghost Behind the Words: Approaching Legal Text with Psychological Intelligence*, in *THE AFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE OF COUNSEL: PRACTICING LAW AS A HEALING PROFESSION* 109 (Marjorie

hard to imagine they are unrelated. As many of us spoke about during the University of St. Thomas's Law Journal Fall Symposium, *Restorative Justice, Law & Healing*, on October 25, 2019, for our students to be restorative justice ready, they must intellectually and experientially understand the role of trauma in their clients and in themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The legal education movement to teach trauma-informed lawyering has been critical to forming law student understanding of and practice around trauma.<sup>6</sup> Over twenty years ago, I was privileged to be part of a group of clinical legal educators at Santa Clara University developing training programs that have grown to include "segments on trauma, vicarious trauma, and representing traumatized clients."<sup>7</sup> In the early years, the exploration of trauma was, at times, met with resistance by our law students and not universally understood by our colleagues. When I returned to legal education at Georgetown Law Center (after a significant hiatus to, among other things, study theology), education on trauma for our law students was generally normative in the clinical programs.<sup>8</sup> As I have listened to and worked with law students over these years since returning to legal education in a role focusing more on mission integration and chaplaincy, I have found less law student resistance to learning and understanding trauma, either in their clients or in themselves.

Within the trauma-informed lawyering legal education movement, some convincingly argue that the most crucial aspect for our students to carry forward into their legal practice is the awareness of their own trauma

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Silver ed., 2007)); Law Student Well-Being, Satisfaction, Values and Motivations (*see, e.g.*, Lawrence Krieger, *The Inseparability of Professionalism and Personal Satisfaction: Perspectives on Values, Integrity and Happiness*, 11 CLIN. L. REV. 425 (2005)); Professional Identity Formation (*see, e.g.*, Neil W. Hamilton, *Professional Formation with Emerging Adult Law Students in the 21–29 Age Group: Engaging Students to Take Ownership of Their Own Professional Development Toward Both Excellence and Meaningful Employment*, J. PROF. L. 125 (2015)); Religious Lawyering (*see, e.g.*, Russell G. Pearce & Amelia J. Uelmen, *Religious Lawyering in a Liberal Democracy: A Challenge and an Invitation*, 55 CASE W. RES. 127 (2004)).

5. Melanie Randall & Lori Haskell, *Trauma-Informed Approaches to Law: Why Restorative Justice Must Understand Trauma and Psychological Coping*, 36 DALHOUSIE L.J. 501 (2013).

6. *See, e.g.*, Lynette M. Parker, *Increasing Law Students' Effectiveness When Representing Traumatized Clients: A Case Study of the Katherine & George Alexander Community Law Center*, 21 GEO. IMMIGR. L.J. 163 (2007) (describing a comprehensive approach to training and mentoring law students who work with traumatized clients in the clinical context).

7. *Id.* at 194.

8. For example, in the fall semester, my colleagues in the Juvenile Justice Clinic provide in-depth education on the role of trauma in the youth they represent and explore the accommodation reforms necessary in the juvenile legal system. *See* Eduardo R. Ferrer, *Transformation Through Accommodation: Reforming Juvenile Justice by Recognizing and Responding to Trauma*, 53 AM. CRIM. L. REV. 549 (2016).

exposure response<sup>9</sup> and the skills to ameliorate its effects.<sup>10</sup> We are seeing this lived out as our clinical programs increasingly include segments, often taught by or in conjunction with psychologists, reviewing the psychological and physiological signs of a response to trauma exposure and then exploring preventative and ameliorating strategies.<sup>11</sup> These strategies include balancing and limiting trauma-heavy caseloads, supervision and reflection, and multiple dimensions of self-care.<sup>12</sup>

In my pastoral work and seminar teaching since returning to legal education after studying theology, I have found the aspect of how students and lawyers come to make meaning of their trauma recovery processes to be an underdeveloped area of our education and training. This article explores meaning making as an important component of trauma recovery for law students and the lawyers they become by drawing from recent developments in the area of trauma, theory, and practice. The first section below explores how trauma intersects with our categories of meaning making and section two offers a case example of a group of lawyers, scientists, and communicators as they grapple with their trauma exposure response, offering an exemplar for your own meaning making in the study and practice of law.

It is important to acknowledge the concern that too much focus on the law student too early can inappropriately take the focus away from the client, who we are training our students to understand is our first priority.<sup>13</sup> While that may be true, it is also true that by becoming aware of<sup>14</sup> and attending to their own trauma recovery, law students and the lawyers they become increase their potential to become better able to create the trauma-informed conditions necessary in the “legal work being carried out and developed under the rubric of restorative justice.”<sup>15</sup> For that larger purpose, we should take the risk to make our legal education as trauma-informed as possible, including the deep exploration of our own personal trauma expo-

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9. For ease of reference, this article uses “trauma exposure response” to include secondary trauma and vicarious trauma as well as the other ways one can experience the trauma of others, including the triggering of one’s own past direct trauma. This language comes from Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk in their excellent book. LAURA VAN DERNOOT LIPSKY & CONNIE BURK, *TRAUMA STEWARDSHIP: AN EVERYDAY GUIDE TO CARING FOR SELF WHILE CARING FOR OTHERS* (2009).

10. Sarah Katz & Deeya Haldar, *The Pedagogy of Trauma-Informed Lawyering*, 22 *CLINICAL L. REV.* 359, 390–91 (2016) (positing that teaching trauma-informed lawyering is critical for preparing law students for many legal careers).

11. *See id.* at 391–92; Parker, *supra* note 6, at 189–95. *See also*, Yael Fischman, Ph.D., *Secondary Trauma in the Legal Professions, a Clinical Perspective*, 18 *TORTURE* 107 (2008).

12. *Id.*

13. We have this conversation every semester among the team of clinical professors, psychologists, and myself as we prepare to teach about trauma exposure.

14. *See* Leonard L. Riskin, *Awareness in Lawyering: A Primer on Paying Attention in THE AFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE OF COUNSEL: PRACTICING LAW AS A HEALING PROFESSION* 447 (Marjorie Silver ed., 2007).

15. Parker, *supra* note 6.

sure response. I write this in the midst of COVID-19, which is scourging through our country's most vulnerable and historically traumatized communities and just after George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis with the resultant country-wide reactions. This trauma-filled context will most certainly amplify the typical student experience of trauma in law school and underscores the need for all of us to step up our trauma-informed legal education now more than ever.

## II. MAKING MEANING OF OUR TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSES

When our law students and the lawyers they become realize we are prone to trauma exposure responses<sup>16</sup> in the study and practice of law, it is such a critical step because, “[i]f we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.”<sup>17</sup> In her excellent book, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky clearly lays out the warning signs of trauma exposure response.<sup>18</sup>

The warning signs of trauma exposure response include: feeling helpless and hopeless, a sense that one can never do enough, hypervigilance, diminished creativity, inability to embrace complexity, minimizing, chronic exhaustion/physical ailments, inability to listen/deliberate avoidance, dissociative moments, sense of persecution, guilt, fear, anger and cynicism, inability to empathize/numbing, addictions, grandiosity, and an inflated sense of importance related to one's work.<sup>19</sup>

Coming to terms with the actual fact that we are exhibiting signs of a response to trauma exposure is a courageous step indeed. As we become conscious of our own suffering, we are well on the way. Making a choice about what to do with that suffering is our ultimate goal, and in so doing, we must grapple with how we make meaning of our suffering and the suffering of others.

By its very nature, trauma interferes with how we have made meaning in the past and “rebuilding meaning after trauma” is essential to our recovery and ongoing resilience.<sup>20</sup> This is the gift Viktor Frankl gave us after he survived the death camps of Dachau and Auschwitz, the understanding that trauma and meaning are inextricably linked. What Frankl observed in the camps is that people making meaning (relying on old ones or creating new

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16. A good primer on trauma in the practice of law is included in Katz & Haldar, *supra* note 10, at 364–67.

17. Richard Rohr, *Suffering: Week 1*, CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION (Oct. 17, 2018), <https://cac.org/transforming-pain-2018-10-17>.

18. Van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, *supra* note 9, at 47–113.

19. *Id.*

20. Elizabeth M. Altmaier, *Meaning and Connection After Trauma*, in RECONSTRUCTING MEANING AFTER TRAUMA: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE, i, xi (Elizabeth M. Altmaier ed., 2017).

ones) meant the difference between life and death.<sup>21</sup> To begin, let us explore how trauma intersects with our categories of meaning making.

### A. *How Trauma Impacts Our Meaning Making*

C.L. Park offers an important model of meaning making for our purposes. She suggests people:

[N]avigate their lives through their global meaning systems. These meaning systems comprise people's fundamental beliefs—about themselves, the world, their place in the world, and their sense of meaning and purpose—as well as their unique hierarchies of goals and values. Global meaning systems inform people's understanding of themselves and their lives and direct their personal aims and projects and, through them, their general sense of well-being and life satisfaction.<sup>22</sup>

These global meaning systems include beliefs about the self and the world such as predictability, controllability, and the benevolence of humanity. They include our goals for companionship, self-acceptance, financial security, and achievement, as well as a general sense of meaning or purpose.<sup>23</sup> When we are faced with a trauma, whether consciously or not, we make appraisals related to the situational meaning of the event (e.g., why did it happen, the degree of threat, and controllability). And we experience distress when we find a discrepancy between our global meaning and situational appraisals; this distress then initiates a process of meaning making.<sup>24</sup>

Oftentimes, students first experience this distress as they become exposed to the legal system, especially the part of the system that addresses criminal law, generally a requirement for all first-year law students. Legal practitioners in that part of the system, as well as those in the area of immigration and family law, are confronted with this discrepancy relentlessly. Increasingly, we are seeing this discrepancy in those who practice environmental law as we will discuss below. This discrepancy does not usually happen in a moment, but rather over the course of time and thus, it can sneak up on us. How we navigate this meaning making in the face of the discrepancy between our global meaning and situational appraisal can often determine our ability to grow from our trauma exposure, or not. But first, we have to prepare ourselves to do this meaning making.

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21. D.P. McAdams & B.K. Jones, *Making Meaning in the Wake of Trauma: Resilience and Redemption*, in RECONSTRUCTING MEANING AFTER TRAUMA: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 3, 3 (Elizabeth M. Altmaier ed., 2017).

22. C.L. Park & M.C. Kennedy, *Meaning Violation and Restoration Following Trauma*, in RECONSTRUCTING MEANING AFTER TRAUMA: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 17, 18 (Elizabeth M. Altmaier ed., 2017) (citation omitted).

23. N. Wade, et al., *Forgiveness Therapy in the Reconstruction of Meaning Following Interpersonal Trauma*, in RECONSTRUCTING MEANING AFTER TRAUMA: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 69, 71–72 (Elizabeth M. Altmaier ed., 2017).

24. *Id.*

### B. *Preparing the Way for Meaning Making*

Like those who are directly exposed to trauma, those of us in the legal profession who are exposed secondarily or vicariously, or who have our previous traumas triggered, can have physiological and emotional impacts that need to be addressed prior to the difficult work of meaning making. For example, if we are experiencing difficulty with emotion regulation or sleeping, addressing those symptoms takes the first priority. This is where the basic practices of self-care are crucial.<sup>25</sup> Once this baseline healing is underway and our strength is returning, we can start the multifaceted process of making sense of our trauma exposure and the making meaning of our trauma exposure response.

### C. *Making Sense of Our Trauma Exposure*

At the outset, let us be more specific about what we seek to convey when we say, “Making meaning out of our trauma exposure response.” A good place to begin is with trying to make sense of the trauma exposure we have experienced by thinking about what caused this situation to happen, how, and why it came to be. Making sense of our experience is an invitation to understand more fully the general systemic dynamics at play. We might be drawn, for example, to understand better the oppression institutionalized in our society’s structures and how our clients experience the embedded violence which systematically implements ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and all other isms.<sup>26</sup> Or we might be drawn to a better understanding of the newest research of the causes for the growth in child pornography worldwide or the rise in domestic violence in areas where women’s empowerment programs are flourishing.<sup>27</sup>

Making sense of the how and why can also be an invitation to understand the pain and suffering in the people we accompany and represent as attorneys and law students. In other words, what is happening in the specific situation of our clients. For example, if we are representing juveniles in the local juvenile legal system, it can mean understanding how adverse childhood experiences impact the growing brains of youth who end up in that system.<sup>28</sup> It can mean understanding how the national “war on drugs”

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25. J. Shakespeare-Finch & K. Adams, *Growth and Meaning from Negotiating the Complex Journey of Being an Emergency Medical Dispatcher*, in RECONSTRUCTING MEANING AFTER TRAUMA: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 117, 121–29 (Elizabeth M. Altmaier ed., 2017).

26. For example, in the criminal system, MICHELLE ALEXANDER, *THE NEW JIM CROW: MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AGE OF COLORBLINDNESS* (2012); PAUL BUTLER, *CHOKEHOLD: POLICING BLACK MEN* (2018); POLICING THE BLACK MAN: ARREST, PROSECUTION, AND IMPRISONMENT (Angela Davis ed., 2017).

27. Mara Bolis & Christine Hughes, *Women’s Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence*, OXFAM (Mar. 2015); Fed. Bureau of Investigation, *The Scourge of Child Pornography: Working to Stop the Sexual Exploitation of Children* (Apr. 25, 2017), <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/the-scourge-of-child-pornography>.

28. Ferrer, *supra* note 8.

has impacted the segments of the local community from which those juveniles are hailing.<sup>29</sup>

This kind of activity is labeled “sense making.”<sup>30</sup> By way of this process, we gain constructs for our understanding of our client’s pain and suffering, the pain and suffering caused by those we are adjudicating, or whatever is the nature of the pain and suffering to which we have been exposed in our work as law students and lawyers. With these understandings, our own trauma exposure response can begin to be ameliorated<sup>31</sup> because we have begun to make meaning of it.

As we progress in the practice of any specific area of the law, our sense making must be updated over time as the knowledge in our area of the law grows, especially when leaps of knowledge occur. This requires updating our knowledge of the law as well as the underlying conditions in which it operates, for example, sociology, psychology, criminology, foreign affairs, etc. If we are not continually updating our knowledge of the portion of society in which we are operating, we will be engaging the law with antiquated constructs that neither serve us nor the people we serve. Such antiquated constructs can, over time, limit our ability to make sense of what we are experiencing and thus limit our ability to understand the trauma to which we are exposed. On the flip side, if we are engaging in what one author describes as the “unremitting pursuit of learning and an unrelenting exercise in self reflection,” we just might likely become “the closest modern incarnation of and most faithful heir to a renaissance person.”<sup>32</sup>

#### *D. Making Meaning of Our Trauma Exposure Response*

In whatever way we make sense out of our trauma exposure, we need to also do the hard work of examining and potentially changing our own global meaning systems if we are to healthily stay engaged as legal practitioners. The personal meaning making we do of our trauma exposure response requires us to understand how the part of the legal system we engage affects us, our worldview, and our ongoing life narrative. While this personal meaning making process is an individual one dependent largely on previous experiences, education, and formation, the categories for this exploration are generally applicable to all who wish to move towards posttraumatic growth.

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29. JAMES FORMAN, *LOCKING UP OUR OWN: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN BLACK AMERICA* (2017).

30. See C.G. DAVIS, *The Tormented and the Transformed: Understanding Responses to Loss and Trauma*, in *MEANING RECONSTRUCTION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSS* 137, 137–55 (R.A. Neimer ed., 2001).

31. See *id.*

32. François, *supra* note 4, at 138.



### 1. *How Does Trauma Exposure Affect Us?*

When reflecting on our own trauma exposure response as law students or lawyers, the work of emergency medical dispatchers (EMDs) is very instructive:

EMDs cite that they all have their own personal triggers, as seen with Julia's description of hers: ". . . those teenage suicides, they throw me off my game. They're not the kids with SIDS [sudden infant death syndrome], not the big cases, but the unnecessary ones." Personal connections to a caller's story also reverberated as a traumatic moment. Julia recalled a case that was particularly difficult because she felt an emotional and personal connection to the caller: "There was a call when I first came to [location] who sounded just like my mum and I think that call was a trigger. Like my heart rate went up and when I was off the phone I said I have to get out of here and I think that was what triggered it all." Here Julia is referring to the symptoms of traumatic stress she began to experience. Personal connections can allow for a permeation of their thin but clear professional emotional boundary with the caller. And the caller's trauma can then seep into their own psyche.<sup>33</sup>

Like EMDs, how we legal practitioners are aware of our personal connections to the trauma to which we are exposed demands consistent attention to what is happening within us. Like Julia does in this example, we need to notice when our bodies respond and when we feel like fleeing or any of the other base responses to trauma (freezing, fainting, or fighting). With the knowledge of our personal triggers, we can then find strategies that maintain our mental health in a context where the threat of trauma exposure is constant. With this knowledge also comes the invitation to explore our prior connections to trauma—the ones that were triggered. Of course, the bodily responses must first be addressed as discussed above.<sup>34</sup>

### 2. *How Does Trauma Exposure Affect Our Worldview?*

Once we are ready, however, the invitation would be to revisit how what we experienced in the prior trauma was discrepant with our global sense of meaning. In other words, how our prior trauma was inconsistent with our belief about ourselves in the world, how predictable and controllable it is, and whether humanity is good or not.

When we allow ourselves to engage these more ultimate beliefs in the face of trauma, we open the door to subjects many of us have not examined since childhood or maybe never examined directly but simply received indi-

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33. Shakespeare-Finch & Adams, *supra* note 25, at 121.

34. The bodily responses are also personal, and often culturally as well as racially based. *See, e.g.,* RESMAA MENAKEM, *MY GRANDMOTHER'S HANDS, RACIALIZED TRAUMA AND THE PATHWAY TO MENDING OUR HEARTS AND BODIES* (2017).

rectly from our families and society. Our spirituality, whether located in a religious tradition or not, whether conscious of it or not, often informs the global beliefs so important to our making meaning out of our trauma exposure responses.

For many, spirituality, including their beliefs about God or of the Divine as a loving and benevolent, wrathful, or distant, informs their core beliefs about the nature of people (e.g., inherent goodness, made in God's image, sinful human nature) and this world (e.g., the coming apocalypse, the illusory nature of reality), as well as, often, the next (e.g., heaven, reincarnation . . . ).<sup>35</sup>

Uncovering how our core beliefs are informed by our spirituality can be revelatory in making meaning of our trauma exposure response. Generally, our spirituality can be a positive influence on our global beliefs,<sup>36</sup> leading to profound healing when we do the deep work of exploring and integrating our trauma exposure response.<sup>37</sup> When our spirituality promotes the following traits, not only is it the basis for a good integration of our trauma exposure response, it might even serve as a protective strategy against the deleterious effects of trauma exposure:<sup>38</sup> honest self-esteem, which includes an accurate assessment of our limitations; wonder in the face of inexplicable grace; friendship through betrayal and pain; courage to forge such friendships; a willingness to learn; tolerance of pain, suffering, and difference; finding joy despite adversity; interdependence on the journey; perseverance; freedom to choose; love; generativity; balance; various prayer forms including external and internal; careful and well-boundaried forgiveness;<sup>39</sup> gratitude for simple gifts; situationally appropriate playfulness and lightness; commitment and fidelity; theological hope; and non-anxious restlessness.<sup>40</sup>

For many, this reflection may also be aided by examining and interrogating our understanding of suffering and evil. Often, this is an area of our global sense of meaning we indirectly inherited from our families and/or communities and have never examined directly as adults. Possessing an un-

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35. Park & Kennedy, *supra* note 22, at 20 (citation omitted).

36. However, "[s]ome spiritual beliefs can have negative content or exert negative influences on the believer as well. For example, some religious beliefs, such as those in an angry, uncaring, or punitive God, can have powerfully destructive implications for personal and social functioning in the context of stress or trauma." *Id.*

37. See, e.g., TERESA RHODE MCGEE, *TRANSFORMING TRAUMA* (2005); Fischman, *supra* note 11, at 113.

38. Linda L. Murdoch, *Psychological Consequences of Adopting a Therapeutic Lawyering Approach: Pitfalls and Protective Strategies*, 24 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 483, 494 (2000).

39. DENNIS LINN, ET AL., *DON'T FORGIVE TOO SOON: EXTENDING THE TWO HANDS THAT HEAL* (1996).

40. See MELANNIE SCOBODA, *TRAITS OF A HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY* (1996).

developed theodicy can seriously limit our ability to process and integrate our trauma exposure response.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. *How Trauma Exposure Affects Our Ongoing Life Narrative*

Similarly, how we understand ourselves in our roles in the legal system we inhabit must integrate our trauma exposure experiences and how we make meaning of them. The good news is the process of professional identity formation has been well-developed in the last decade for law students<sup>42</sup> such that this kind of reflection begins for many lawyers before they graduate from law school. To stay healthily engaged as legal practitioners, reflecting on our life narrative needs to continue on an ongoing basis to incorporate and integrate our experiences, especially to integrate how we make meaning of our trauma exposure experiences. In other words, once formed, we must actively reform our identities at critical junctures in our lives as lawyers because this is not a one-and-done process.

As part of some of the clinics at Georgetown University Law School, when the clinical psychologist and I are introducing trauma exposure responses, I invite law students to reflect on who they are to their clients and who their clients are to them. Then I give them two poles as examples, explaining they are probably somewhere between them.

The first pole is where the students understand themselves in relationship with their clients at arm's length. It can mean the client relationship is one for the student to get a chance to "give back," "make a difference," "empower them," or "be a voice for the voiceless."

The other pole draws from the aboriginal saying: "If you are coming to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." In other words that you were sent to the margins *not* to make a difference, but rather so that the folks on the margins (the clients) will make you different; that you are called to surrender to their leadership and listen to them. Or, that your clients return you to yourself, to your own brokenness, and your deeper desire to show mercy. Or, how the Qur'an teaches that God created diverse tribes, so that we might come to know each other, simply know each other. Or, in a hope that was not about some assurance that everything will work out but rather about a confidence that purpose and luminous meaning can be found in this work together, no matter how things unfold.<sup>43</sup>

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41. One of the most popular and helpful explorations of theodicy across the faith traditions is HAROLD KUSHNER, *WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE* (1981).

42. See, e.g., Hamilton, *supra* note 4.

43. This framing comes generally from GREGORY BOYLE, *BARKING TO THE CHOIR: THE POWER OF RADICAL KINSHIP* (2017); BRYAN STEVENSON, *JUST MERCY: A STORY OF JUSTICE AND REDEMPTION* (2014); JON SOBRINO, *NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE POOR: PROPHETIC-UTOPIAN ESSAYS* (2008).

It might come as a surprise that the students and lawyers who are grounded closer to the first pole will likely experience fewer impacts of trauma exposure initially than those who fall closer to the second pole, while at the same time experiencing dissatisfaction at the very least.<sup>44</sup> It is because their meaning making constructs distance them from their clients. Those closer to the second pole initially experience more trauma exposure impact<sup>45</sup> because, by way of their empathy, they open themselves up to the client in ways their colleagues closer to the first pole do not. As we move towards the second pole in our practices of law by way of various movements in legal education,<sup>46</sup> we therefore need to train ourselves to do the important work with our own trauma exposure as do those in other helping professions. This essential work includes forming (and reforming) our philosophies as well as our narratives of life and work consistent with our chosen roles in the legal profession while we employ practices of care for our bodies, emotions, and spirit.

### III. CASE STUDY OF GEORGETOWN CLIMATE CENTER

Recently, the Georgetown Climate Center (GCC) engaged in just this kind of grappling with philosophies and narratives of life and work; they have graciously agreed to let their experience be shared. I am including their experience as exemplary because while restorative justice framing is new to the environmental law context,<sup>47</sup> the experience of trauma in the life and work of environmental practitioners mirrors that of so many other lawyers who engage in areas that we more traditionally understand involve traumatized clients, those areas where restorative justice theories and practices are being implemented today.<sup>48</sup>

When I first started at Georgetown Law Center, I quickly became familiar with the GCC and its internationally recognized analytic, policy, and advocacy work. As a former environmental lawyer myself, I was both drawn to and in great admiration of their multidisciplinary approach to climate change. As I got to know them, however, I started to note very familiar signs of the deleterious impacts of this work when individuals and groups engage it for the long-term. I myself had experienced what I later came to understand as a significant trauma exposure response when I practiced California environmental law over twenty years ago, except no one

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44. See Murdoch, *supra* note 38, at 484.

45. See *id.* at 494.

46. See, e.g., *supra* note 4.

47. See Chaitanya Motupalli, *Intergenerational Justice, Environmental Law, and Restorative Justice*, 8 WASH. J. ENVTL. L. & POL'Y 333 (2018).

48. See Gonzalez, *supra* note 2.

was making the connection back then between my symptoms and my vocation.<sup>49</sup>

While today we know so much more about the impacts of climate change on mental health and well-being, especially for those who work on it day-in-and-day-out,<sup>50</sup> when I started to experience the symptoms of trauma exposure response over two decades ago, I began to question my vocational choice to be an environmental lawyer. This led me to engage the more ultimate questions of meaning and purpose, but I had no faith community with which to dialogue about them. I was therefore left to simply engaging healthcare practitioners to alleviate my mounting symptoms and reading apocalyptic literature, both ancient and new, without the theological training to put it in context. By sheer grace, a friend invited me to his faith community which engaged faith and reason, religion and science, contemplative practices, as well as the work for the common good. In this community, I both found a home and a place to engage my ultimate questions, including my deep concerns about what we humans were doing to the planet, the role of religious traditions in our collective disconnection from Mother Earth, and my finitude in the midst of it all.

These reflections and ponderings led me to teach law and study theology at night to continue the process of integrating my trauma exposure responses and the meaning I was making out of them. It is now my privilege to serve as a trauma-informed spiritual director and law professor to law students and lawyers. It is also from this space of gratitude that I received the invitation to journey with the GCC last year.

### A. *Exploring Trauma Healing, An Integrated Approach*

Preparing to celebrate their tenth anniversary in 2018, the GCC's director invited her staff to retreat from the office to do some strategic planning. She invited me into the process of planning the retreat, as I had been sharing with her the literature on the impacts of climate change on mental health and well-being. In the middle of fall, when autumn's beauty was still so apparent, the GCC's staff and I gathered at Georgetown's Calcagnini Contemplative Center near the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. We intentionally chose to be outside of Washington, D.C. because the GCC's offices are located on and near the Georgetown's Law Center campus on Capitol Hill, an intense place under the best of circumstances.

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49. Frederick Buechner defines vocation broadly to be that place "God calls you to . . . where your deep gladness and world's deep hunger meet." Frederick Buechner, *Your Deep Gladness & World's Deep Hunger*, CALLING (Dec. 22, 2014), <http://www.calledthejourney.com/blog/2014/12/17/frederick-buechner-on-calling>.

50. See, e.g., van Dernoort Lipsky, *supra* note 9, at 52–58; AM. PSYCH. ASS'N, CLIMATE FOR HEALTH & ECOAMERICA, MENTAL HEALTH AND OUR CHANGING CLIMATE: IMPACTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND GUIDANCE (Mar. 2017), <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>.

At the beginning of the retreat, we invited the GCC staff of attorneys, climate scientists, policy and communications experts, and administrators to share with each other what moved them to devote their lives to climate change work. The stories were rich, moving, and sometimes quite humorous. We then suggested the GCC staff take a thirty-minute silent walk in nature, inviting them to choose either a secular or theistic version of a mindfulness exercise, whichever was most comfortable to them and which fit best within their own meaning making constructs. Later in the afternoon, after exploring where the GCC had been and where it is going in light of the national, state, and global situation, we took a break to hike, read, rest, or play. Each GCC member was then invited to read the “Introduction” to *Trauma Stewardship*, which includes this paragraph:

We cannot ignore emerging information about the profound levels of trauma exposure among people in the front lines of the environmental movement – those fighting to stop the juggernaut of global warming and those who strive desperately, in the face of mounting losses, to ward off the extinction of countless species of plants and animals.<sup>51</sup>

After grounding ourselves in our vocation stories, directly experiencing the creation to which we are devoting our lives, reflecting on our work, attending to our bodies, and being invited to consider trauma exposure as a framework, we reconvened to explore and reflect upon our own trauma exposure responses in the face of climate change. To a person, the GCC staff acknowledged how they did not feel entitled to these feelings—or to labeling them as trauma—as a result of climate change. They explained their resistance was because their own exposure paled in comparison to what the people they served were facing, for example, forced relocation due to climate change, often while simultaneously navigating the adverse effects of chronic poverty.

Acknowledging and honoring this disparity of experience, I invited them to consider how they could be suffering even if those they serve were suffering more. I noted how I had no investment in whether they were experiencing a trauma exposure response but invited them to be open to the possibility. We then reviewed the definition of trauma exposure response and how recognizing it in ourselves is not easy. After inviting them to take a deep breath, remain curious and inquisitive, be non-judgmental, and maintain a sense of humor, I suggested they write down any trauma exposure warning signs that resonated for them.<sup>52</sup> The room got quieter and heavier as I made my way through the warning signs listed above.

Explaining how “if we are to alleviate the suffering of others and the planet in the long term, we must respond to even the most urgent human

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51. van Dernoort Lipsky, *supra* note 9, at 5–6.

52. *See id.* at 47–113.

conditions in a sustainable and intentional way,”<sup>53</sup> I channeled my clinical psychologist colleague with whom I often teach on this subject. At this point in the process, he aptly notes how bearing witness to trauma forces us to juxtapose our lives with the lives of others. Often, we are called to acknowledge that we have experienced significantly more privilege than the people we serve, and our own trauma exposure response often forces us to engage in the resultant philosophical questions about life. This internal dialogue happens with or without our consent, consciously or unconsciously, and if we are not mindful of it, our core values can shift without our even knowing. He goes on to explain how often people find out that they have had a trauma exposure response when they become shocked by their own behavior. People catch themselves behaving in ways they never would have thought they could, and this happens often because they were not aware of the small and large ways in which what they were exposed to had begun to change them. Trauma stewardship is about developing an awareness of those things and being able to reconcile personal joy and privilege with the undeniable suffering we have witnessed in others.<sup>54</sup>

My clinical psychologist colleague also explains how many of us might believe secretly—or not so secretly—that our commitment to our work may be measured by our willingness to martyr ourselves, to suffer alongside our client. Others may believe the only way they can show up to work every day is by compartmentalizing or walling off the degree of trauma and injustice they witness. Neither are optimal ways of living. He wisely advises that we must find a balance, and that begins with paying attention on purpose to what is going on within us as we engage in our world. We can be preventative by cultivating an awareness which allows us to gauge our trauma response level and assess what we need to do about it, and the earlier, the better.<sup>55</sup>

With that foundation, I announced to the group gathered how strategies existed for coping with our trauma exposure responses once we become aware of them and realize the need to employ these ways forward. Starting with the practices we had been employing together on retreat, I named the self-care strategies of sleep, eating healthy, exercising, being outside and appreciating our environment, breathing, and practicing mindfulness. From there, we spoke about spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, and rituals in communities of faith as well as doing things just for fun. When seeking social support from folks, we spoke about being with those who “get it” so we can be seen and truly heard, and we spoke about how important it is to also be around folks who are completely outside our realm. Raising up the importance of a disciplined debriefing with peers as well as

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53. *Id.* at 11.

54. Justin S. Hopkins, Psy.D., Presentation at Georgetown Law Juvenile Justice Clinic: Secondary Trauma and Self-Care (Feb. 26, 2019).

55. *Id.*

getting consultation/supervision in our trauma exposure response, I also mentioned how counseling, psychotherapy, and working with an elder in one's spiritual tradition can be especially helpful when we have not attended to our trauma exposure responses in a while. To that, the GCC staff suggested pets as a critical strategy, and this led to a lively discussion of what else to add to the list. After a scrumptious dinner, we finished the evening playing instruments and singing together, celebrating our common journey in this important work.

### *B. The Unfolding Process of Trauma Healing*

It has been about a year since we gathered and in preparation to write about our experience, I asked GCC staff members how they have navigated this period since becoming conscious of the impact of trauma exposure on their lives. One of the lawyers noted she has more readily been able to name her trauma response and has given herself permission to take breaks, to work out, to leave work at work when not completely necessary for deadlines, and to do fun things/vacations, even if short and brief. This attorney noted how she is growing in the “understanding that we are fortunate and in a privileged position to do this work—rather than dealing with the impacts directly—but this does not exempt us from trauma; and to be able to do this work properly and create a positive impact for those affected, we must take care of ourselves.” In her list of strategies, this attorney explained how she is now “building a stronger relationship with God and has joined a church officially” to which she is “tithing (sharing my blessings from this work for the greater good).”

Another GCC staff member was also more readily able to name her trauma exposure response and acknowledged that doing this work for decades and not seeing much progress sometimes feels overwhelming. “As one person,” she said, “no matter how hard or how much I work, I will not be able to solve the climate crisis alone and [therefore] strive to find some balance and take breaks from thinking about and working on it.” She now tries

[T]o take walks in nature, to reconnect with friends and say yes to opportunities to get a break from work – sometimes very short (coffee or lunch break with an old friend) or more extended (trip to the Grand Canyon, off-the-grid for a week and feeling the long arc of geologic time and our relatively small place in the universe).

She further noted how she seeks to be more spiritually grounded when feeling frazzled or depressed by using the Ignatian Examen<sup>56</sup> and spiritual

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56. “St. Ignatius Loyola’s Examen is an opportunity for peaceful daily reflective prayer. It invites us to find the movement of God in all the people and events of our day. The Examen is simply a set of introspective prompts for you to follow or adapt to your own character and spirit.”



reading as well as being outdoors. Out of her own more balanced approach, she also explained how she learned:

[T]hat different people react differently in the face of information that is difficult to absorb. In addition to being more attuned to the toll it is taking on me, I am trying to be more aware of how recent developments on climate change (increasing scientific certainty about adverse impacts, devastating fires, etc., as well as policy setbacks) affect my staff, students, and the audiences to whom I speak. I try to balance raising awareness of the threat with a message of hope that we can meet the challenge if we all pull together. I also emphasize self-care and the need to enjoy life in conversation with others.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Andrew Solomon challenges us to “forge meaning” and “build identity” in the face of adversity to find hope and build resilience.<sup>57</sup> At first, the adversity I experienced as a result of prolonged environmental work led me away to forge new meaning making constructs, reflect on my identity and rebuild it anew by integrating these constructs into my life narrative. During this exploration, I spent time with my tradition’s understanding of the role of martyrs,<sup>58</sup> those who suffer persecution and death for advocating a religious belief or cause. As the earth continues to create/advocate for life while slowly dying because of humanity’s destruction and greed, her struggle could be a source of desolation and despair in me. Like the martyrs in my tradition, however, the earth’s process is for me one of great inspiration as is being amidst colleagues whose sacred path has been the devotion of their lives to her healing and salvation. Being with those who are grappling with what this all means on all levels for us individually and communally has changed everything for me; instead of running from this important work, I am leaning into it with far more sanity and maybe a bit more wisdom. We cannot do this kind of meaning making alone, and I am grateful for this community of trauma-informed legal practitioners within the broader context of a Catholic and Jesuit university, a community of people who remind me often why we do what we do. Because of them and so many in the public realm like Andrew Solomon, I am called to go deeper into myself and into the world when challenged by trauma exposure.

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JESUITRESOURCE.ORG, <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/jesuit-a-z/terms-e/daily-examen> (last visited Dec. 1, 2020) (citing to SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, *THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF SAINT IGNATIUS* (1997)).

57. Andrew Solomon, *How the Worst Moments in Our Lives Make Us Who We Are*, TED, at 4:43 (2014), [https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew\\_solomon\\_how\\_the\\_worst\\_moments\\_in\\_our\\_lives\\_make\\_us\\_who\\_we\\_are](https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_solomon_how_the_worst_moments_in_our_lives_make_us_who_we_are).

58. Also helpful is Niels Gregersen’s concept of “deep incarnation” as a “radical divine reach.” ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON, *CREATION AND THE CROSS: THE MERCY OF GOD FOR A PLANET IN PERIL* 184–85 (2018).