

War and the Body

Serving the Survivors

By

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As a survivor of torture I know how wounds of violation can live in the body and the mind. My recovery included bodywork and so I know both its assets and liabilities in resolving shock of this magnitude. I am now both a practitioner and a teacher of somatic therapies for survivors, adding substantially to my perspective on what it takes to rebuild one's life from the pyres of hatred.

The war I lived through was a political uprising, a struggle for equality with strong racial overtones. The armies at battle were street fighters, indigenous forces with primitive resources and police armed with advanced technology. I lived for almost four years in an environment of ongoing violence, followed by years of hiding after being beaten and tortured, ostensibly for information, but actually as punishment for my beliefs and choices.

I have been able to uproot most of the nervous system behavior instilled during this period and resulting from these horrors. The successes and failures on this journey orient me now as I construct resources with the clear intention of serving both survivors and therapists. In addition, this is my outreach to perpetrators of war, torture and human violation for once the cycle ends, it ends for everyone.

This article is about saving lives by touching bodies with intelligence, consciousness, compassion and sensitivity. It contains some of the essential resources for cultivating the loving awareness needed to help those ravaged by all violations of human rights, all forms of abuse and cruelty. This article, however, is hardly comprehensive, as the subject is greater than the space available. I put in my vote for more articles such as this one,

because we need abundant resources now for this core service in our ancient and enduring profession.

This article focuses specifically on the somatic interventions that restore vitality and presence for someone who has been in war or who has been effected by combat or the violation of human rights. Indeed, massage therapists, energy healers and bodyworkers of all kinds are the most likely candidates to contact the truth of war. Our hands traverse territories where secrets are embedded. Our fingers walk the borders between sanity and hysteria.

War is like chemotherapy or radiation for cancer. The residual toxins, however, live even longer. These toxins include environmental pollutants, like depleted uranium or Agent Orange that enter the soil of the earth and the bodies of the survivors, including the DNA of the children they bear. These toxins shape muscles, limbs and embryonic development. They direct nervous system behavior, relationships and the expression of emotions. Bodyworkers committed to this population require education about the role of toxins in shaping motor behavior and physiology. This is excruciatingly relevant in a world at war.

Guilt, rage, frustration, horror, grief and shame are also toxic byproducts of war. They burrow into the folds of the brain and therefore into muscles, ligaments, tendons and nerves. War lives in our bodies and in the body of the earth for generations. Unless the energies of war are resolved, pacified and repatterned, wars are inherited, passed like a monstrous load, from generation to generation in palpable ways.

When you touch the body of a survivor of war or political torture, you are likely to encounter buried land mines. All survivors are always, of necessity, keeping something down, like someone about to vomit, having been instructed not to. Without guidance about dismantling their own explosive energies, survivors all too often go under. This is evidenced, horribly, by the fact that the number of Vietnam War vet suicides now doubles the number of combat deaths, and continues to rise. (Daniel Hallock, Hell, Healing and Resistance, Plough Publishing, Farmington, PA, 1998.)

Who Are the War Survivors?

“It’s not just the soldiers who are living on hair-trigger alert. It’s all of us. That’s what bombs do. Whether they are used or not, they violate everything that is humane. They alter the meaning of life itself.”

--Arundhati Roy

War is everywhere now. Chris Hedges, author of *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*, tells us that modern war is really a war against civilians. On occasion we may foolishly think we are not the civilians Hedges is referring to, but we are. We are all living in the midst of war. You and I are the survivors. We now all participate in a world shaped by responses to threat. The truth of this is in our bodies and in the bodies of all those we touch.

To treat the long-term, deeply ingrained wounds of war and torture, our attention must first go to the nervous system. This is what bodyworkers, knowingly or unknowingly, unravel from the strangleholds of fear and denial. The intricate interaction of skin, spinal column and neurology is what we aim to free. Our hands communicate directly with survival mechanisms. We, of necessity, evoke memories that reside, like throngs of insects, just on the other side of a wall that combat veteran Farley Mowat calls “the cotton wool of protective forgetfulness.” To honor our profession, we must prepare ourselves for this. This means having a basic knowledge of the neurological mechanisms that are engaged in shock and how these mechanisms rule the body both during attack and long after.

Somatic therapists put their hands on the body of truth, not the myth of war. We enter the physical space between denial and surrender, between history and personal reality. Our clients are not only those who survive experiences that are beyond the nervous system’s healthy capacity to integrate. Our clients are also the wives, husbands, mothers, fathers

and children of the combatants, living or dead. Our clients are the young people threatened by the wars to come and the descendents of those who fought in previous wars. They are the people who work in the war industry – the secretaries and engineers who play a role in the machinery of war. Anyone touched by war and torture bears its marks, indelibly, like a brand depicting human suffering. This is why bodyworkers now, more than ever before, need an immediate education in the physiological, neurological and spiritual consequences of overwhelming experience.

DENIAL

Denial is omnipresent in the body of the survivor. It is the sacred box in which survivors keep their secrets. Denial is the best friend of those who witness or experience combat, torture, horror and abuse, including the war criminals themselves. Denial is neurologically established for the purpose of survival. It is the commander in the reptilian brain's control center. Here the commander, with the key to the box in hand, obsessively issues orders to the body to survive terror. But the reptilian brain only speaks in present tense. It needs education to vacate its past protective role at the necessary time, like an overprotective mother you must inform, even cajole, to step down when she is no longer needed in this role.

Pay attention to this: Bodywork inevitably seduces out the body's stories, and therein lies both its gift and its warning. How precisely can we honor the release of massive energies long withheld that tell of encounters with evil without reactivating original shock? And what happens to us as we do so?

“It was only by listening to my body that I realized I was living a lie,” says Vietnam vet Steve Cannon who specifically requested that his real name be used in this article. Steve was adamant about the crucial role somatic therapists and bodyworkers play. “I survived by suppression, by burying everything in my body. What I needed was direction about how to just be with my body and my feelings.”

“It should be a requirement,” Steve continued with intensity, “that every bodyworker dedicate themselves to studying how shock lives in the cells of the body and how it can be reactivated. Bodyworkers need to create a context for their clients to manage their emotional and physiological responses or they are in danger of re-enforcing denial and perpetuating suffering.”

The Light at the End of the Tunnel: Somatic Repatterning

The three keys to somatic treatment for survivors are sensory awareness, integration and grounding. These cannot be accomplished by touch alone. Words to accompany somatic interventions and a spacious receptivity are essential ingredients in the recovery formula. Appropriate interventions, in combination with intentional dialogue, point to the light and the life at the end of the tunnel. These particular skills, given the nature of our reality now, have to be included in the curricula of a bodyworker’s training.

Somatic therapists are the guides to the reclamation of the body for those forced to sacrifice their relationships with their bodies to live. Reclaiming the body is the treasure that is rediscovered after an arduous journey underground. The body glows like a beacon when reclamation is achieved. The rewards of life is what survivors earned but were unable to claim alone. Thus treatment becomes rebirth, and bodyworkers are the midwives. They feel the delivery in their hands.

Immobility and constriction, otherwise known as freezing or parasympathetic shock, is a common muscular condition for survivors. Vigilance or hyper-alertness is its sympathetic twin. Becoming conscious of the specifics of both tonic immobility and hypertension is an important step out of hell. Gentle mirroring by the therapist of these holding patterns is a good introduction to the unifying potential of sensory awareness. But the mirroring must be done carefully and wisely. Both integration and grounding must be assured before any bodywork session can be complete.

The danger in bodywork with survivors is always the danger of intense reactivation and emotional flooding. In fact, Amber Gray, massage therapist and Clinical Director of the Rocky Mountain Survivor's Center, does not recommend bodywork for torture survivors. "For the torture survivor, physical contact is torture. All assumptions about the body must be left behind when you approach survivors of war and torture."

Subtle interventions, such as energy medicine, * are the most effective and even they should be introduced in a titrated way, making sure that the effects of each intervention are observed before another is introduced. This is the way to respectfully open somatic portals to the wounded body and spirit.

Listen. That is what somatic therapists must do. They must listen to the cacophony of horror in their hands and in the voices that report and release. This requires that the therapist not run from pain. Bodywork with survivors is both active and receptive meditation, slowing us down, centering us by attending to what is. It is the direct opposite of denial. Thus it is living compassion, having the tolerance to be with the dark as well as the light, the shadow that is in all of us.

There are two other primary cautions to bodyworkers who choose to serve survivors. One is not to move quickly and the second is to never be formulaic. I asked Steve Cannon what did not serve him in the bodywork he experienced as he sought relief from the wracking pain that followed him long after the Vietnam War was over. He replied that it was the mandatory instruction to "drink lots of water" or the smile that belies denial. When you bring the darkness of the world to the massage table you don't want to be reminded to "have a nice day," he said.

Two Survivors

Brian O'Leary's sparkling eyes and joyous laugh told me that though he lost all his friends (they were teenage soldiers in World War II) at the Battle of Midway and nearly lost his mind, he has healed. Ralph Peters, on the other hand, could not look me in the eye

at all. His plane crashed in Vietnam and now he crashes his car and his head, over and over again. The terror, guilt, rage and grief still tremble in his hands. The keys to his new car, the one he had just gotten after his last crash, rattled as he held them while we spoke. In the end, he left them on the table, racing off to get to an appointment he clearly would not make on time.

Brian chose the course of nature, using five element, or nature based healing systems** to find his way back to himself. His life now is one of deep contemplation and well boundaried self- respect.

As a former pilot, Ralph keeps diving in. He has been Rolfed, structurally reintegrated, and medicated. He has gone on and off anti-depressants as often as he has been in and out of businesses and relationships. He grasps for one hand after the other. Desperate to be handsome, manly, youthful and successful, he struggles to keep his emptiness at bay, whereas Brian opened to it. This is the difference between organic pacing that allows a knotted nervous system to find its way home and healing that is pushed to its limits.

Interactive and carefully paced interventions hold the most promise. These, however, require courage and mentoring. The therapist cannot become mechanical. Mature attunement to titrated ways that the body can respect its imperative to speak its history will revolutionize the benefits of bodywork for all survivors.

I think somatic therapy is central to recovery from war and torture, but only with the education and honed intention of bodyworkers. When our training instructs us how to free the body from barbaric re-enactment, the profession of somatic therapy will fulfill its purpose of empowerment and embodiment. Then, those we touch will live to tell their stories with dignity and we will be able to stop war at its source.

*Subtle energy interventions that include education about recovery from abuse and violation and are specifically available for bodyworkers are Trauma Touch Therapy, The TARA Approach, and Somatic Experiencing.

**Five-element healing systems include Five Element Acupuncture, Ayurvedic and Tibetan Medicine, Chi-Kung and the TARA Approach. These are beneficial adjuncts to psychotherapy.

Note: Stephanie Mines, Ph.D., is the founder and director of the TARA Approach, a holistic treatment design for the resolution of shock and trauma. She is also the author of *We Are All in Shock: How Overwhelming Experience Shatters You and What You Can Do About It* (Career/New Pages, 2003). Her program's website is www.Tara-Approach.org.