

disorder known as post traumatic stress syndrome. It is not a mental illness. Dr Matthew Friedman of the National Center for Post traumatic stress disorder says that the etiological agent or the traumatic event was outside the individual rather than an inherent individual weakness or a traumatic neurosis. The traumatic event is something outside the range of usual human experience for instance the Holocaust, war, severe abuse, torture and genocide. Not all people exposed to these events will have Post traumatic stress disorder. It has been recognised that trauma, like pain, is "not an external phenomena that can be completely objectified". Like pain, the traumatic experience is filtered through cognitive and emotional processes before it can be appraised as an extreme threat".¹ Some aspects of the traumatic event seem to get fixed in the mind, unaltered by the passage of time or by the intervention of subsequent experiences.² People with Post traumatic stress disorder have difficulty sleeping, are extraordinarily concerned with issues of safety and freedom, and can suffer physical illness. In addition people with Post traumatic stress disorder can be easily triggered by visual and or audio input.

How does someone with Post traumatic stress disorder cope in community?

To understand this, we must first know the nature of Post traumatic stress disorder. This disorder confines people to the past, not through any inherent weakness they might have, but by the traumatic event itself. So for instance, someone who was involved in a bombing might be thrown into the past when a car backfires or she hears a loud bang. All the memories are reborn once again and all the feelings of horror and confusion return.

The Holocaust is the name given to the systematic execution of six million Jews in Europe during the Second World War. Since the Holocaust, there have been many, many other traumatic events and many more survivors. Ritual abuse is a terror endured by children and adults alike. This is a particularly brutal form of sexual, physical and mental abuse and takes place in a group setting. It renders the survivors very wary of group activities. The survivor can not trust the group and feels vulnerable, unsafe and at times terrified.

One of the differences between the Holocaust survivor and a ritual abuse survivor is that while there is almost no denial about the former, there is still an absence of belief about ritual abuse. This denial makes it much more difficult for survivors to recover.

We have people in our community who have experienced war, ritual abuse, torture and have witnessed genocide. How do they see the world? A woman who survived the

Holocaust was asked how, after all the terrible things that happened to her, she found the strength to live each day. She replied, "It's more a view of the world, a total worldwide view of extreme pessimism ... [a sense] of really knowing the truth in a way that other people don't know it. And all the truth is harsh and impossible to really accept, and yet you have to go on and function. So it's a complete lack of faith in human beings, in all areas you know, whether it's politics or whatever, you hear one thing and you believe something else. I mean you say, 'Oh, well, I know the truth'. 3

I found this to be a most enlightening statement. The survivor sees the world with extreme pessimism, sees it as no one else sees it, does not have faith in human beings, and does not believe in what they say. Can you imagine how it must feel to live a life which has these elements in it? What can be said to the survivor?

The survivor of ritual abuse also knows the truth. She knows that her teacher, or her doctor, or her lawyer or the next door neighbour is capable of great evil and sadism, while at the same time presenting a public face which would deny any accusations against them.

Refugees from terror and persecution also know the twin faces. They remember that one day they were sending their children off to school, going to work, thinking about painting their roof and before the day was over, they were fleeing for their lives. They absolutely know that life is unpredictable and unsafe. And there is another aspect. I met a Bahá'í refugee from Iran who is no longer in New Zealand. He was filled with guilt. He asked was not his blood the same as those being martyred? And yet he was safe and sound in a free country with his wife and children. He had enormous guilt because he was able to leave Iran.

Shoghi Effendi wrote that a tempest, unprecedented in its violence is sweeping the face of the earth, that it is a cleansing force and it is disrupting the homes of its

peoples and harrowing up the souls of its inhabitants.⁴ The promised day is come, the day when tormenting trials will have surged above your heads, and beneath your feet, saying: "Taste ye what your hands have wrought!"⁵ This is the day that we are living in. It is a day fraught with danger, both spiritual and physical and we know as Bahá'ís, that it's going to get worse in the short term. Having said that, however, I am concerned with process: how do we as a community respond to the sufferings of others? How do we help people make sense of their suffering? This suffering is real and at times paralysing.

Extreme trauma destroys one's ability to trust the world. The person actually lives in two worlds - the one around us and a world which is like a deep well of sadness. The traumatic event seems to violate the integrity of the essence or nature of the person.

One of the ways for a survivor to live with Post traumatic stress disorder is for other people to listen to them. Survivors need to have a hearing in community. In other words, they need people to listen to what has happened to them and not make judgements. However, this process is fraught with difficulties. In working with Viet Nam veterans, Jeffrey Jay of the Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Studies and Treatment in Washington D.C found that despite all the different therapies they tried, the young men were not recovering from their night and day mares. He writes With our therapeutic weapons of catharsis and confrontation in group therapy, we marched resolutely through the desolate landscape of the veterans' alienation and isolation. Slowly, we began to understand the depths of the problem and the meager impact of our methods, which centred on the private, inner experience of the survivor. Only when we started to understand that the veterans, like most trauma victims, cannot fully recover until they can find meaning for their experience did we begin to realise the intimate connection between public

acceptance
and private resolution of the trauma.⁶ Jeffrey Jay and his colleagues decided
to have
gather people together to listen to the veterans' experiences. This was at a
time in
America when being a Vietnam vet was very unpopular. A young man told his story
of
how he threw a Vietcong family out of a helicopter to their deaths and wondered
how he
can now take up a normal life. At that meeting was an older man who had fought
during
World War II and his response was I want you to know that I was in the Pacific
in the
WW2. I landed on Corregidor. What happened to us was much worse than what
happened to you, but I have never talked about it, I have never complained, and
I never
will.⁷ To the older man, the young Viet Nam veteran had violated a fundamental
code of
privacy that rigidly forbade the public revelation of terrible truths. However,
the younger
man had decided it was better to tell the truth to whomever wanted to hear than
to go to a
pub and drink it off.

The older man could be replaced by an older woman admonishing a young woman
that
rape is part of a woman's life, or religious refugees who say, we did it for
God, do not
complain I do not think the trauma victims are saying oh woe is me, look at how
hard life
is, I believe they are trying to share what has happened to them to widen the
human
experience and speak their terrible truth.

We have all had the experience of being with someone who sounds like a broken
record.
All they can talk about is this terrible thing that happened and we can't seem
to get them
off the subject. We can't seem to get them to look at the bright side of life.
These people
are so negative we say. We should start to avoid them and let them get on with
their own
lives.

This is a very predictable pattern for human beings. At first we will reassure
and offer
cheering homilies. But the person keeps on talking in fact feels driven to a
howling, self-

centered outrage that exactly corresponds in ferocity to the pain and terror of the trauma itself.⁸ So we, the community begin to give subtle warnings, but the person who experienced the trauma can not take heed. The ultimate trump card is shame. Only shame is powerful enough to squelch the victim's desperate need to be heard. The power of shame is known and sanctioned in the Bible: In the story of Job, neither God nor the community would tolerate even a good and innocent man's crying out against the most outrageous betrayal and unjust violence.

The Greek root of the word shame is scham, which refers to a skin that is used to cover the exposed, vulnerable parts of a person, specially what is seen as shameful. The shamed person feels both exposed and condemned, uncovered and seen through - in a sense, flayed by the community's disgust and contempt. The trauma survivor already wishes, on some level, to disappear, to withdraw, to die. Therefore, the best technique for silencing the trauma victim, whose outraged and betrayed sense of self cries out for expression, is shame, which alienates the private, violated self from the social self. Shame causes the private self to retreat into numbness, to repress feelings and dampen personal engagement with others.⁹

Now you might be saying to yourself, how very cruel of community to silence these people who have suffered so much. But the other side of the coin is this reality: To discuss in public the lasting effects of trauma would defy the assumption of acceptable, safe relations between consenting citizens of a decent society. Basically, the victim who will not remain silent is challenging society's vision of itself, bearing witness to uncomfortable moral truths and demanding from everyone ... a kind of moral accounting: 'And where do you stand', the victim asks 'not on abstract issues of truth and justice, but on this war and this violence and this brutality, this terrible thing that happens every day in our world, yours as well as mine?'"¹⁰

Ah, we respond to the trauma victim: but tests are a healing medicine, my calamity is my providence, God must really love you, no one is given a test beyond her own capacity, don't be so negative, the world is not like that, forgive the people who hurt you and you'll get over it. And why do we say those things? Because we cannot bear to live without hope. We believe that the world cannot be as bad as we are being told. But this is what the Post traumatic stress disorder survivor does not have - hope. Many survivors have a great well of sorrow within them which cannot be filled. Robyn Morgan writes about a Cambodian woman who saw her family and friends tortured and executed by the Khmer Rouge. The woman said that one day they picked out one woman and one man and hit them again and again. She began crying again, and couldn't stop. She recalls that 'it felt like there was a big needle pushing through my head.' When she stopped crying, days later, she could no longer see.¹¹ The woman was blinded by sorrow. Can you imagine what that must be like? To be so sad, you decide that you no longer want to look out at the world. Some people advise the person to forgive and forget. In other words, forgive the people who hurt you so you can get over it. I am not saying that we should not forgive, but I think we need to know what kind of forgiveness we are talking about when such advice is given and by forgiving the individual, will the event really be forgotten? First of all, when we advise someone to forgive, what kind of forgiveness is it? Is it forgiveness based on the reversal of moral judgement, or as a remission of punishment, or is it to overcome resentment?¹² I do not think any of these are appropriate when a person or persons have inflicted great harm on another. In a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice regarding the forgiveness of a father who has abused his daughter, it states: To forgive him will not be easy, and this is not something to which

either you or the members of your family can force yourselves. Nevertheless, you should know that forgiveness is the standard which individual Bahá'ís are called upon to attain. It is an essential part of the spiritual growth of a person who has been wronged. To nurse a grievance or hatred against another soul is spiritually poisonous to the soul which nurses it, but to strive to see another person as a child of God and, however heinous his deeds, to attempt to overlook his sins for the sake of God, removes bitterness from the soul and both ennobles and strengthens it." 13 This is the kind of forgiveness we are called upon to deliver: it is not in a soul's best interest to harbour hatred.

I think one of the hardest things about forgiving is if the wrongdoers have not been punished by society. However the above quote indicates that forgiveness is an individual act, rather than a community act, so it is possible for a wronged one to forgive, whether or not the wrongdoer is repentant. And it is up to the community to punish the wrongdoer as 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed:

But if criminals were entirely forgiven, the order of the world would be upset. So punishment is one of the essential necessities for the safety of communities, but he who is oppressed by a transgressor has not the right to take vengeance. On the contrary, he should forgive and pardon, for this is worthy of the world of man." 14

I read a wonderful book entitled *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner. His son had a degenerative disease and his book explores not why bad things happen to good people per se but the human response to pain, our own and others. I found his book to be a great eye opener because it distances God from the evil that humans inflict on each other, and puts disease and accidents in their rightful place in the scheme of things. In examining the life of the Prophet Job, he comes up with three statements he says we would all like to believe and they are:

that God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens in the world. Nothing

happens without His willing it;

that God is just and fair, and stands for people getting what they deserve, so that the good prosper and the wicked are punished;

that Job is a good person.

These three statements do not contradict themselves as long as nothing goes wrong. As we know, everything went wrong for Job, one of God's most devoted followers, therefore since God is all powerful and God gives people what they deserve, then Job must have been a sinner. But we know that Job was not a sinner, therefore was God testing him?

But why kill his children to see if Job could pass a test? Would you want to believe in a God that murders innocent children? How do you pray to such a God?

We may not say these things out loud to ourselves, especially being Bahá'ís and believing that we know God's Plan for humankind. However, I believe in the collective memory of humanity and I believe that we have all kinds of unchallenged assumptions about God and life on this planet. So even if we are Bahá'ís we are liable to have a belief system which dates back to the time of Job. This is not a criticism, but rather an acknowledgment that it takes many generations to discard outworn beliefs. So in endeavouring to make meaning out of suffering, and knowing that God is good, and wants only the best for us, it must have been on some level, we think, that Job was the sinner. However, as we know, when Job questioned God, God neither gave him a reason nor call him a sinner. God said in part:

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations for the earth? Declare if thou has understanding. Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days; and caused the dayspring to know his place?¹⁵

Or as Bahá'u'lláh revealed: From His retreat of glory His Voice is ever

proclaiming:

'Verily, I am God; there is none other God besides Me, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise".16

According to Kushner, there is an old Iranian folk proverb about God and suffering and

our response to one another's suffering: If you see a blind man, kick him; why should you

be kinder than God ? He explains: In other words, if you see someone who is suffering,

you must believe that he deserves his fate and that God wants him to suffer.

Therefore,

put yourself on God's side by shunning him or humiliating him further. If you try to help

him, you will be going against God's justice".17

I don't know if this is an Iranian folk proverb. Perhaps it's just a human folk proverb

because some part of me immediately understood the proverb. If God is an all-loving

parent, then He would never hurt us, so therefore the blind man must have done something to deserve his blindness. This is one way of trying to understand suffering, but

upon close scrutiny, it does not stand up to reason. Does God really make people disabled

so that the person will know and love God more? I think not. I think sickness occurs

because there is disease. There is something out of order in the body. God is there so

that one can find strength and comfort. How can one pray to the One that caused the

illness? It's like being nice to a thief that robbed you of a precious jewel.

God does not

cause evil. Humans inflict evil on each other.

"Indeed the actions of man himself breed a profusion of satanic power. For were men to abide by and observe the divine teachings, every trace of evil would be banished from the face of the earth. However, the widespread differences that exist among mankind and the prevalence of sedition, contention, conflict and the

like are the primary factors which provoke the appearance of the satanic spirit.

Yet the Holy Spirit hath ever shunned such matters. A world in which naught can be perceived save strife, quarrels and corruption is bound to become the seat

of the throne, the very metropolis, of Satan."18

I would now like to talk about the soul. I am conscious of the fact that Bahá'u'lláh

revealed that the soul is a mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel.¹⁹

The Bab revealed "As this physical frame is the throne of the inner temple, whatever occurs to the former is felt by the latter. In reality that which takes delight in joy or is saddened by pain is the inner temple of the body, not the body itself..."²⁰

Abdu'l-Bahá writes "But when sadness visits us we become weak, our strength leaves us, our comprehension is dim, and our intelligence veiled. The actualities of life seem to elude our grasp, the eyes of our spirits fail to discover the secret mysteries, and we become even as dead beings."²¹

John Bradshaw, the author of *Creating Love: the next great stage of growth* believes that the soul is what recognises that we are being degraded in an act of abuse.²²

This is what I believe happens when traumatic events occur and people develop Post

traumatic stress disorder: I believe that when people suffer a traumatic event, it's like someone has heaped a lot of garbage on them - invisible garbage. And they have to find their way out of this labyrinth of awfulness and it is their soul which knows something terrible has happened and it seeks relief. It is imperative that the community prays for the soul to assist it in its long journey out of the invisible garbage heap.

Remember, for Post

traumatic stress disorder survivors, their world has been turned into a nightmare. At any time, due to some outside influence they can return to the place of the trauma. Sometimes the sadness and grief is so great that even listening to music can be the cause of great pain.

I do not believe it is useful to mouth the platitudes I mentioned above to people who suffer from Post traumatic stress disorder. To say to someone that because this traumatic event happened to them proves that God must really love them places both God and the survivor in a very precarious position. Where does the survivor now go for love and succour? Is this really what God is all about - personally visiting chaos on

unsuspecting
people?

Trust is a most crucial element in a human being's life. It's a firm belief in the reliability or truth or strength of a person or thing; it's a confident expectation. We trust gravity will work every time we put our feet on the ground. We trust when the traffic light is green, it's safe to proceed. Now I want you to picture for a moment what it would be like for you not to trust anything around you. What would it be like not to be able to rely on anything? This is what it is to varying degrees for people with Post traumatic stress disorder. For instance, for people who have been ritually abused this overhead shows the world they might inhabit. [Overhead]. Words take on different meanings, the young woman is thrown back to the experiences of the past and can not trust the psychiatrist because he has now become in her mind "one of them".

So how is trust regained? It is my experience that there are some very important elements in rebuilding trust and they are love, listen, and believe.

Love: Bahá'u'lláh revealed O ye rich ones of the earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.²³
'Amatu'l-Bahá
Ruhiiyih Khanum said that there is so little love in the world that those of us who have an abundance of it should share it. And this is what this Hidden Word means to me. If we are rich in love, then we must share it with those who have known abuse and degradation.

Listen: Sometimes all it takes is for someone to extend a hand and reach in the invisible garbage heap and help the survivor find her way. This means listening to the person. It can take hours and hours, sometimes years, but eventually the person is finally able to stop talking and resume some sort of life.

Brenda Ueland says listening is a great and powerful thing, a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. She writes Think how the friends that really listen to us are

the ones we
move toward, and we want to sit in their radius as though it did us good, like
ultraviolet
rays.²⁴ She says that when we are listened to, really listened to as if what we
have to say
means something, ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. When
we have
problems, who is that we go to she asks? Not to the hard, bossy practical ones
who can
tell you exactly what to do, but to the listeners: that is, the kindest, least
ensorious, least
bossy people that you know. It is because by pouring out your problem to them,
you then
know what to do about it yourself.²⁵ I think people with Post traumatic stress
disorder
are always trying to make sense of what has happened. They are trying to find
the
meaning of their experience.

Belief: Often the traumatic event is unbelievable and to take the step towards
belief is to
go against what one might have thought previously about the goodness of human
beings.

But belief is essential because as more and more people believe that human
beings can
become lower than animals, the person with Post traumatic stress disorder is
not living in
an isolated world of terror. They are able to talk about it knowing that people
won't think
they are crazy.

How does all this relate to community? I would like to share with you a recent
incident,
although none of the people involved have Post traumatic stress disorder. It
was at a
study class, and there were two people who arrived late. One of them was very
upset
because a friend of hers had just committed suicide. She asked that in our
round of
prayers we remember her friend. The study class continued after the prayers and
there
was some tension. When I was driving home, I realised that what we should have
done,
had we been true community, was to listen to the woman tell us how she felt
about this
terrible news, and ask if there was anything we could do, perhaps pray, or let
her cry, or
let her tell us about the dead woman. Now I know some may be thinking about

justice

and how it would not have been just to all the friends who came for the study class. Well

I have thought about it, and I think if it had been Feast or an LSA meeting, perhaps that's

correct because these are institutional meetings. But this was a study class where a great

big white elephant walked in and everyone ignored it.

Shoghi Effendi wrote to an individual believer in 1935 that Bahá'í community life provides

you with an indispensable laboratory where you can translate into living and constructive

action, the principles which you imbibe from the teachings...."²⁶ One of the outstanding

writers of our time is M Scott Peck, author of books like *Different Drum*, *The Road Less*

Travelled, and *A World Waiting to be Born*, who writes at length about the laboratory or

community. I think he has some wonderful insights about the nature of community.

Community is and must be inclusive. The great enemy of community is exclusivity.²⁷

Community: a group that has learned to transcend its individual differences.

Community is contemplative. The members are thoughtful about themselves, and become

thoughtful about the group. ²⁸

Community is a safe place. As soon as it is safe to speak one's heart, as soon as most

people in the group know they will be listened to and accepted for themselves, vulnerability snowballs and community members find themselves being valued and appreciated. They become more vulnerable. Love and acceptance escalates. They become intimate friends, and true healing begins.²⁹

Community requires the ability to expose our wounds and weakness to our fellow creatures. It also requires the capacity to be affected by the wounds of

others, to be

wounded by their wounds.³⁰

He also writes about the stages community goes through, over and over again.

The stage of pretense. The communication in pseudo-community is filled with generalisations. It is polite, inauthentic, boring, sterile and unproductive.

The stage of chaos: the attempt to obliterate the differences which have escalated during

pseudo-community.

The stage of emptiness: I call this the suffering stage because it is the time

that members
of the community are striving to become community and must relinquish
prejudices, snap
judgements, fixed expectations, the desire to convert, heal or fix, the urge to
win, the fear
of looking like a fool, the need to control. Peck writes Other things may be
exquisitely
personal: hidden griefs, hatreds or terrors that must be confessed, made
public, before the
individual can be fully 'present' to the group. This is the time of risk taking
and requires
great individual courage.

Peck believes that community must become empty for a kind of miracle to occur.
Is this
not what Bahá'u'lláh tells us about teaching either ourselves or others? -
that we cannot
fill an overflowing cup. It must be emptied first.

Only after these three stages can there be true community, which then must go
through the
stages again and again as it advances towards perfection.³¹

If we have people in the Bahá'í community who have terrible stories to tell
and they have
no one who will listen to them, how then will we become true community? How
will be
enriched by their courage and their will to live in the face of denial, if we
do not hear their
stories? I believe we have a lot to learn from people who have suffered trauma
because
we will learn how to be truly human as God has intended us to be. And the
community
also has an important part to play in the healing process. In a letter to an
individual
believer, the Department of the Secretariat wrote on behalf of the Universal
House of
Justice, Your letter refers to experiences in the Bahá'í community such as
group activity,
chanting, embracing, and referring to 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Master, which have
the effect of
triggering in your daughters the revival of the painful memories they are
seeking to
overcome. While this is unfortunate, it might also be viewed as an important
part of the
healing process that they learn to clearly distinguish between people motivated
by a
corrupt inclination to abuse and manipulate others, and a community which has

as its
watchword the protection of the rights of each individual, and which is
striving to
strengthen the bond of mutual love and respect which binds it together.³²

When people share it also brings about incalculable public good. Jeffrey Jay
writes that the
effects of trauma cannot disappear from the history of the victim so there are
two choices
for the victim: introspection or extrospection. The latter allows the victim to
understand
not only how the traumatic state is maintained by public ostracism, but how
they can
transform their personal shame into effective public witness. Even though the
community
resists what trauma victims have to say, it needs their knowledge in order to
understand
that trauma begins in the community and belongs in the community.³³
The Bahá'í community has an awesome responsibility. As world conditions
worsen, there
will be more and more traumatised souls coming into the Bahá'í community.
Unless the
community is able to listen and believe what has happened, and unless the
community
allows these people to speak their pain, then they will come in and go out
again. Because
remember many of them have a complete lack of faith in human beings, in all
areas you
know, whether it's politics or whatever, you hear one thing and you believe
something
else. ³⁴

I have attempted in this paper to address the issues that accompany post
traumatic stress
disorder, its challenge to the community, and steps which may assist the
community to
face this issue.

Notes

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3 Jay, J. Terrible Knowledge, *Networker*, Nov/Dec 1991

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5 Bahá'u'lláh as quoted in *Promised Day is Come*, page 1

6 *ibid*, page 24

7 ibd

8 ibid

9 ibid, page 25

10 ibid, pages 26, 27

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26 Ltr from the *Guardian* to Allen Tichener, 1935

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31 Peck, *A World Waiting to be born, Civility Rediscovered*, page 275-275

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