

The Problem of International Trauma

I am a trauma therapist. I want to talk about trauma, but childhood trauma, what it looks like and how it needs to be avoided in order to have a healthy child, can be related to global events. So listen with two ears – one for how children are traumatized and healed and one to how trauma is being inflicted on communities, cultures, countries and the world and what must be done to heal them.

I work almost exclusively with children who have been adopted into healthy families after an early childhood of abuse and neglect. Research has shown that trauma has wide ranging impacts on the brain and profoundly impacts personality development. Brain development equals personality development. The chemical and physical make up of the brains of children who have been raised with loving kindness and the chemical and physical make up of the brains of children who have been abused and neglected are demonstrably different as evidenced by various scanning devices where black holes of inactivity and blazing areas of over activity and over reactivity are prominent in critical areas governing sensory input, critical thinking and emotional stability. We know what abuse and neglect look like - sexual assault, physical abuse, inadequate nutrition, unsafe housing, nasty tones of voices, verbal harassment, poor monitoring of child whereabouts and activities, inattentiveness to education issues, inactive response to medical needs, etc. That is all well documented and spelled out in state law as clear guidelines for workers to use when evaluating parents and caregivers for abuse and neglect. What is not well documented is what good care looks like. What does loving kindness actually look like? The absence of abuse and neglect? It is far more than that. Oscar Wilde said "Love is not a feeling, it is a policy". What we call "love" consists of very specific caregiver/child interactions that stimulate and excite certain areas of the brain and slow down and regulate others.

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Anytime a child's fear responses are aroused there is a rush of cortisol through the brain. Cortisol is a neurotransmitter that accompanies a threat to a person and arouses specific survival responses in their system.....faster breathing to pump more oxygen to the brain and away from the skin, leaving the heart and mind racing and the skin clammy, blood to the pupils to cause them to dilate and sensitize their vision to the threat around them, cessation of digestion to focus all of the bodies energy on the threat, sometimes the muscles in the bladder and bowels relax as the energy to control them is directed elsewhere. The entire body responds to perceived and real threats by hyper focusing on the danger in preparation for survival. This rush of cortisol floods the entire body. One of the problems of cortisol is that it is acidic, carving out a pathway through the neurotransmitters in the brain. Like erosion, the more the cortisol rushes through the system the more deeply embedded in the brain the pathway becomes. The more frequently the path is created the more readily it responds so that it takes a smaller and smaller fear stimulus to release it. Because it is acidic it can cause and contribute to all sorts of digestion disorders.....diverticulitis, ulcers, Crohn's disease. It is also implicated in canker sores and bloody noses, as the acid seeks a way out of the system and passes through soft tissues of the nose and mouth. The repeated flood of cortisol does not just affect the physical status of the body. It has huge implications for eroding behavioral constraints and emotional stability. The traumatized child is a watchful child, hyper vigilant for threats. At the slightest sign of a threat, real or not, the child will react defensively. Because there is little difference in the way a fear response and an anger response looks they are often accused of being angry. Wrong! They are scared and have kicked into a survival response. If they are angry at anything it is because they are scared. But fear is the primary emotion and anger is the secondary one. Their behavior may become erratic and violent....completely out of sync with the threat, overreactive emotionally, chaotic and uncontrollable by either themselves or anyone else. They have a tendency to require extra supervision at school to protect the other children. As adults they often require heavy medications and residential treatment, including, but not limited to, jails and prisons.

Defusing a fear response then becomes one of the most important tasks of parents! Parents cannot avoid an infant becoming fearful at times, releasing cortisol into their system as they cry and cry as if their heart would break. They're hungry, lonely. However, a quick, empathic response calms the child and they learn to trust that they can communicate by crying and someone will attend to them. Crying then becomes the precursor to speech and verbal communication of needs and wants rather than acting them out in destructive ways. What does that empathic response look like? There are very specific elements of what we call "love". Anyone who has fallen in love knows them intuitively. When you want to create a relationship the first thing you do is look at someone. If the person looks back then you know you can go to the next step, smile. If the person looks away or does not smile back then you take it as a rebuff and do not pursue it further. With a positive response from the smile one can begin a conversation. If that is accepted then one can touch somehow...shake hands. the next step is to share some sort of food. This is a time honored, intuitive, internationally recognized, cross cultural pattern. And it all begins with a smile. The facial configuration of the caregiver is mimicked by the child. If the parent is angry the child will also screw up his face. If the parent greets the child with a smile the child will attempt to mimic a smile. The very act of turning up the corners of the mouth in a smile releases endorphins and serotonins - neurotransmitters that flood the child with a sense of calm. Friendly open eyes, soft voices, gentle touch, full stomachs all release calming neurotransmitters. The cortisol cycle either does not get started or it is cut off quickly and the pathways carved in the brain make calmness the initial response to a stressor as the serotonin and endorphins keep the cortisol in check.

Children are easily spooked and months of calm can be destroyed by one major parental outburst. I think, for the most part, I raised 10 children with a high degree of equanimity. I was mistaken. Rachel, about 12, spent the night at a friend's house and when she got home I asked her how it was and she said that it was not that much fun as the mother is angry all of the time. I knew the mom and believed her to be very clam and funny. I could not believe she was "angry all the time". So, I asked Rachel, what would you say about me and she replied, "You are angry all of the time too." Stunned, I asked her when the last time was that I was angry and she said, "5 months ago." For her, 5 months ago, my anger left such an impression that she felt she had to walk on egg shells around me! It traumatized her and I did not even remember the event at all! That is in our families.

Our first line of offense to creating a more calm and just society is creating calm and just families. We cannot reach into every home and make sure parents are empathic. What we can do, however, is find ways to create conditions for parents that they have the energy and resources to be empathic, find ways to bring down the stress of the parents and we impact the children. Here I become a little political! Immigration reform is critical to creating a safe environment for parents so they can create a safe environment for their children. People who fear the knock on the door may be for them live on an edge of tension that permeates the home and affects the children. A living minimum wage. How can parents who are working two, three jobs, 50 - 60 hrs week, to financially provide for their children, be present to provide the loving care children need. Unattended children are more likely to be bullied and taken advantage of. Their diet is more likely to be inadequate, filled with Kraft macaroni and cheese. "Nothing says lovin like something from the oven and Pillsbury does it best" is the old advertising jingle. It is true, a home filled with the wonderful smells of fresh cooking is welcoming and inviting, comforting to children and their families, bringing down the stress level so all can thrive. Parents need to be home to read to their children, do homework with them, play with them and not just leave them to be babysat by a television. Raising the minimum wage will not solve all of the problems of poor parenting, but it is something we as a society can do to minimize the stress in the home and help parents be more available for their children

In a county wide partnership of Rotary, Lord of the Mountains, and the Elks Lodge we provide a free community meal every Tuesday night. One of the drivers is to make sure children have access to a healthy, fresh, nutritious meal at least once a week. It is a time for families to come together and relax. The Friday food bags, making sure that 180 Summit County students and their families are not hungry over the weekend. That food not only de-stresses the family but de-stresses

the schools! Teachers report the children are not as anxious on Fridays and are more relaxed on Mondays when they return. The classroom environment lifts when the children have enough to eat, stealing goes down, positive energy goes up. We also provide snacks for all of the teachers at Dillon Valley Elementary, Silverthorne Elementary and Snowy Peaks alternative high school, so students eat prior to tests and when they feel their energy go down during the day. The ability to learn goes up when children are not worried about whether there is enough to eat. Silverthorne Police Department's sponsorship of a safe summer program contributes to our community and family health as well. Children get bike helmets, car seats are checked, friendly smiling faces are associated with police and emergency response teams. Working street lamps, snowplowed roads, rec centers. As a prosperous community we are able to provide a less stressful environment for our children and families. When we take care of the poorest among us we raise the safety level in our entire community for all of us! Our children are safer and less stressed when all children are safer and less stressed! It is nice to be altruistic, but we serve ourselves when we serve others! Currently the number of people who are being affected by the cessation of unemployment benefits is affecting families and children across the country. What do stressed people do? They act out from their cortisol driven fear.....they are less empathic with their children and with each other. They become more aggressive drivers, angry at a world that has left them without sufficient resources to take care of themselves and their family. We have a large contingent of people who believe that our country is poorer when we take care of our most vulnerable citizens and non citizens.....when the opposite is true.....we are all safer and therefore richer in countless other ways when we govern with empathy. Transitioning now to international trauma! How do our policies and interventions traumatize the world and make it less safe. If our goal is security for us, we must ensure security for others!

If we want a safe world, our policies internationally must take into consideration the cultural and national implications of mass trauma on a country and its population! How do we as a nation contribute to the creation of populations that feel unsafe? We know what we do that is not helpful!

Over the course of decades the United States government created a population in Haiti that was traumatized by the Duvaliers. Papa Doc and Baby Doc were subsidized by our government in exchange for a listening post on Cuba. The American Embassy in Port au Prince is one of the larger ones in the world. Because we have such an avid interest in Haitian welfare and our relationship to Haiti? No, because some influential members of our government were scared by what they thought Cuba would do so sold the Haitian people down the river to be beaten and subjugated by the Tanton Macoutes - Duvalier thugs - in exchange for a piece of ground for our embassy. The collective trauma to the Haitians was huge! Not only did they stop trusting their government....they stopped trusting each other! As people sought a piece of the American dollar flowing to the Duvaliers the government, the hospitals, the roads, the electric grid, the schools became less and less functional.....more and more dollars lost to graft and greed. Even the Catholic church became less empathic as higher levels of the clergy sought political favors and disregarded the needs of the people in their pews. Haiti became a very dangerous place as a traumatized population fought each other for survival. Haitians mourn their loss of civility to each other. The examples of our misguided efforts to create safety for the United States at the expense of the populations of other countries are numerous. What the United States has done in the quest for oil has been criminal. The wars started. The people killed. The corrupt governments subsidized..... The populations, cultures, religious groups who seek to stop the onslaught of American influence seeing that nothing good has come of it in the past.

Now, we as a country state we seek a safer world. Now we are sorry we have unleashed the hordes of terrorists by our warmongering. Now we are sorry for all of the trauma we have inflicted on others, leading to a massive overflow of collective cortisol throughout entire nations. The hope is that it is not too little, too late.

What would we as individuals, as churches, as communities, as a nation have to do to make the world a safer, more empathic home for its inhabitants?

We would have to start by recognizing that the way parents treat children and the way the US treats nations can be either traumatizing or empathic, can either arouse terror or cooperation. One increases the likelihood of escalating violence and one decreases it.

We know what abuse looks like with children. It is the same for world affairs. A country can bully, neglect and abuse other countries just as parents do their children. The equivalents would be bombs, not alleviating hunger, verbal threats, destroying homes, inattention to education and medical issues. That is international abuse and neglect on a grand scale. And...it leads to the behaviors and emotional states that cause retaliation and vindictiveness on international levels. Fear is the primary response of the nation and it leads to putting in place policies and actions to increase their level of safety....., Iran building nuclear bombs, comes to mind, as a way to make sure the US will never depose their government again. They are not building nuclear bombs in anger!!! They are building them to pursue national security! Ensuring their safetyonly now it is with guns and bombs.....not the fists of children.

We took the fear engendered by a few terrorists who flew planes into buildings and reacted by attacking an entire country – a country that had nothing to do with the suicide jihadists - an escalation completely unwarranted by the facts – and the world will never be the same. The fear response our bombs caused have reverberated around the globe to the point where entire generations in some cultures are being raised with fear in anticipation of participating in retaliation against the United States.....in order to keep themselves safe from us!

So what would we be doing if we wanted to bring the hostilities in the world down a notch? We would be working to ensure people's safety. So now we are back to where we started. "Pivotality prominent in the demonstration of loving kindness is a deliberate avoidance of anything that activates fear responses in the child and proactively choosing responses which calm a child." Or, "Pivotality prominent in the demonstration of loving kindness is a deliberate avoidance of anything that activates fear responses in a country and proactively choosing responses which calm a country". Greg Mortenson in *Three Cups of Tea* describes how he came to be involved in a campaign to build schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He was later discredited for some errors in his books and the mismanagement of donations but the fact remains he was on the right track. The schools he built changed the lives of the people and gave them hope for a future. They don't have to fight their way to their future, they can peacefully explore it. Mortenson repeatedly went to the US government for funds to build more schools, more roads, more medical centers, suggesting that less money be spent on bombs, and he was repeatedly rebuffed. However I believe he was on the right track. More money needs to be spent on creating safe spaces and opportunities for people to raise their families in peace.

When I was a little girl I visited my grandpa in Wisconsin every summer. He taught me how to tame the wild squirrels in his walnut trees. I had to sit very quietly....to find a pose that was comfortable. I had to have food in my hand....walnuts the squirrels would enjoy. Then I had to wait.....not make any sudden moves....be very still and quiet. As a squirrel approached I would have to remain still until the squirrel came up to my palm and took the walnut. Then I would start over and hold the walnut closer to me, repeating the process over and over, moving the walnut ever closer until the squirrel would run up my arm and jump on my head to get the walnut. I had to woo the squirrel!

As a community, as a state, as a nation we need to be using resources to woo our families, communities and the world to peace and the only way to do that is to increase people's feelings of safety, meet their basic needs for education, medical care, roads, electricity, water in order to diffuse fear. This is what is required for the cause of justice. By working for the creation of a just world, a secure world, for all of us results.