

## Linked Descendants – Short readings on Trauma

### **Introduction**

All of us have had traumatic experiences during the course of our lives, and the impact of those experiences continues to exist inside us, affecting how we think, feel, and act, affecting our bodies, our health, and the ways we interact with other people.

Furthermore, we all live in a trauma-inducing culture, and the level of trauma we are exposed to has intensified for some of us over the last four years. We live with structural trauma of various kinds, much more so for Black and brown people.

Finally, there is historical trauma, the unconscious memories, habits, beliefs and reactions that were developed decades and centuries ago during the lives of our ancestors, unaddressed, unhealed and passed down to us. For some Americans, the historical trauma also has a conscious component, recounted in family or community histories and traditions, but possibly still unaddressed and unhealed, still the source of beliefs, feelings and behaviors.

Professor Carolyn Yoder at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University quotes trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk: "... trauma is arguably the number one public health issue in the United States," as well as John Gottman, an expert in personal relationships: "... when our pulse rate increases as little as ten beats above our ... baseline, the rational part of our brain begins slipping out of gear. We then begin talking and behaving from the lower part of our brain, home of our automatic survival instincts."

Yoder goes on to say that being informed about what trauma is and how it affects people helps explain a wide range of phenomena, from feeling insecure to loss of cultural identity to racism and polarization. On the positive side, she states that understanding trauma makes it possible for us to address current multi-generational and historic trauma, to heal wounds, and to transform ourselves and our communities.

So, in the midst of activist struggles for human rights and racial equity, in the context of a global pandemic, widespread economic dislocation, and political turmoil, facing the dangers of unaddressed climate change, there are many reasons for us here and now to experience or re-experience trauma. If we are to move forward to build the communities, the country and the world we want to live in, we will need to examine our traumas, both shared and unique, and work on ways to heal them.

### **Contents**

This document contains excerpts from *The Little Book of Trauma Healing*, written by Carolyn Yoder in connection with the STAR program of the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at EMU, and from *My Grandmother's Hands*, by Resmaa Menakem, a body-centered trauma therapist.

There is also content from other sources and centering exercises from generations of wisdom teachers.

On the last page is information about ways to work on healing trauma, activities you may already be using. Included are two calming and settling practices.

## ***The Little Book of Trauma Healing, Carolyn Yoder. 2005, updated 2020***

### **Defining Trauma, Causes and Types – Yoder, Chapter 2, pp. 10 – 16** (excerpts)

“... the word “trauma” is used to describe reactions to anything from a stressful day to a brutal murder. Indeed, both stress and trauma do affect individuals and groups physically, emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally and spiritually. ... Traumatic events differ from ... stress in intensity and/or duration.

Events that lead to trauma in people can be called “traumagenic” events. They

- Often involve threats to lives or bodies
- Produce terror and [or] feelings of helplessness
- Overwhelm an individual’s or group’s ability to cope or respond ...
- Lead to a sense of loss of control
- Challenge a person’s or group’s sense that life is meaningful and orderly

“Whether or not a situation is overwhelming cannot be determined by looking only at the events. What is merely stressful for one individual or group of people may be traumagenic for another, depending on a combination of factors [including] age, previous history, degree of preparation, the meaning given the event, how long it lasts, the quality of social support ..., knowledge about how to deal with trauma, genetic makeup, and spiritual centeredness. *Consequently, a traumatic reaction needs to be treated as valid, regardless of how the event that induced it appears to anyone else.*

### **Ongoing and structurally induced trauma**

“... Trauma may be induced by living under abusive or unsafe conditions that are long-term and continuous.... [This kind of trauma] has been called *cumulative trauma*; ... *chronic trauma*; ... *plural trauma* ... Another cause of trauma is the ongoing structural violence of the economic, legal and social systems which result in people’s basic human needs for food, shelter, education, health care and justice not being met. Often, ...structurally induced traumas go unnoticed by those more privileged until an event ... or [visual evidence] ... exposes injustices that have festered for years.”

### **Societal or collective trauma**

“When a traumatic event or series of events affects large numbers of people, we speak of *societal* or *collective trauma*. Trauma may be directly experienced, but it can also occur when witnessing (e.g., on television) or merely hearing about horrific events. Whether direct or indirect, a group experience of trauma can set off widespread fear, horror, helplessness, or anger. ... resulting in societal trauma.”

### **Historical trauma transferred through generations**

“Historical trauma is the ‘cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations emanating from massive group trauma.’ Slavery, colonialism, and persecution or genocide of one faction or religious group are examples. The ‘event’ or institution is in the past, but the effects are cumulative and are seen in individual and group attitudes and behaviors in succeeding generations. The trans-generational transmission of these traumas can occur even when the next generation is not told the trauma story, or knows it only in broad outline. A ‘conspiracy of silence’ surrounds events for which grieving and mourning have never taken place.

“Cultural traumas are created when attempts are made to eradicate part or all of a culture or a people. This has happened for many native and indigenous groups worldwide.”

### **Secondary trauma**

“*Secondary* or *vicarious trauma* refers to the effects experience by those interacting with trauma survivors: family members ..., first responders ... [Many journalists] who covered victims’ testimonies

in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported post-traumatic stress reactions, even though they were briefed beforehand on how to avoid becoming personally traumatized. ...”

### **Perpetration-induced trauma**

“Another cause of trauma is rarely discussed: being an active participant in causing harm or trauma to others, whether in the line of duty or outside of the law, such as in criminal activity. ... research suggests that the traumatic effects of harming others, intentionally or unintentionally, can be as severe as or more severe than what victims and survivors experience. ... What are the emotional and spiritual implications for groups or nations that bear responsibility for events such as genocide ... mass incarceration, separating [parents] and children, gender discrimination ...” [race-based slavery and oppression, racial terror and violence]

“... moral injury [is] the damage done when one violates their own values...” as can happen to law enforcement personnel, prison workers, and members of the military.

“... common traumatic events or stressors [include]

- Abuse, assault
- Accidents
- Causing harm to others deliberately, e.g., abuse of power
- Causing harm to others in the line of duty, e.g., military, law enforcement
- Economic policies, poverty
- Homelessness
- Human-caused disasters, e.g., levee failure
- Living under occupation or in conditions of servitude or slavery
- Social revolution, sudden changing of rules, norms
- Witnessing death or injury
- Mass violence, e.g., assaults, massacres, wars
- Natural disasters, e.g., hurricanes, tornados
- Neglect of those who cannot care for themselves, e.g., children, elderly, ill
- Serious illnesses, pandemics
- Structural violence, e.g., social structures and institutions that deprive people of their rights and ability to meet basic needs
- Sudden loss of love ones, status, identify, possessions, employment, income, home, territory
- Medical procedures
- Torture

### **Common Responses to Traumatic Events – Yoder, Chapter 3, pp. 19 – 29 and other sources**

#### **Trauma affects us physiologically**

“The brain plays a key role in how we respond to trauma.”

“There are three major, interdependent parts of the brain ...”

1. *The cerebral cortex, the rational, thinking center. Under normal circumstances, incoming information is routed here first, then to the other centers. In crisis situations, the information goes instead to the emotional center, bypassing the rational center.*
2. *The limbic system, the emotional and memory storage center, including the amygdala, the ‘first-alert’ center activated by fear. In a crisis, information comes to the amygdala first, where the brain registers fear. Chemicals and hormones are released, activating responses such as “fight or flight,” a state of hyperarousal in which heart rate, respiration and metabolism increase.*
3. *The brain stem, the “instinctual brain,” controlling automatic responses, with no rational capacity and a powerful sense of “now.”*

*To protect us from being overwhelmed by emotions or physical pain, we may dissociate or distance ourselves. Time is distorted, slowed down or speeded up. Some people go into a quiet, detached calm. Memories are not processed as usual; they become fragmented, sometimes graphically retained, sometimes lost completely.*

*In the natural cycle of reaction to traumatic events, we are aroused to fight or flee, and when we have acted on those instincts, the reaction cycle is completed. We may feel relief. Sometimes, fight or flight is impossible, and then we may go into the freeze response. We can't think, move or talk, and the trauma is "frozen" in our brains, nervous system and bodies. If the energy of the trauma is not released within days or weeks, it can lead to later, delayed trauma reactions. ... In fact, outside of our conscious control, sounds, sights, smells or behaviors can resurrect the original trauma experience and we respond as if it were happening in the present.*

### **Trauma shatters meaning – Yoder, Chapter 3**

*"Traumatic events shatter the world as we know it, leaving us disordered, disempowered, and feeling disconnected from other people and from life. Our response may be anger, anxiety, depression, and [questioning everything.]" ... When we feel out of control or "unspiritual," we tend to suppress grief, pain, and questions. Feelings of shame, self-blame and humiliation are common ... [along with] guilt at surviving when others [have not.]"*

*What trauma survivors need most are safety and security, along with information about what happened and opportunities to tell their stories. They also need justice and a sense that the moral order has been restored, that perpetrators are being held accountable. When justice is fully served, survivors can release feelings of shame and gain a sense of honor and respect.*

*If the need for justice is not channeled in a productive, healing way, it can turn into a sense of long-term resentment and victimization, an ongoing story of oneself or one's people as victims of "them," and a desire for revenge and vindication. The capacity for seeing one's own part in perpetrating trauma can be lost, along with the ability to see other people's perspective or experience empathy. Justice denied and unhealed trauma can lead to "acting-in," doing harm to oneself, or "acting-out," doing harm to others.*

*Unaddressed trauma is retained in all parts of the body, usually at an unconscious level, affecting our hearts, muscles, digestive systems, brain functioning and nervous systems. The physiological effects of repeated and long-term trauma can lead to chronic conditions of poor health and illness. Ultimately, trauma is a whole-body experience.*

*When the retained energy of unhealed trauma is re-activated, it can lead to acting-in – turning the energy in on oneself – or acting-out – turning the energy outwardly, on others. Acting-in can be seen in substance abuse, eating disorders, self-harming, workaholism, depression and anxiety; acting-out shows up as abuse, gang or criminal activity, and high-risk or aggressive behaviors. Apathy, disengagement, lack of empathy, intolerance, "either-or" thinking, and distrustfulness are trauma-related signs of distress.*

### **"Addressing trauma means – Yoder, Chapter 3**

1. "Releasing the physical effects of [the instinctual] fight, flight, freeze and collapse [responses] ... to restore access to the [thinking brain and] the social engagement system.
2. "Acknowledging the impact of polarizing meaning-making narratives on our beliefs and behaviors and exploring new stories.

3. “Working non-violently to transform relationships and systems to meet basic human needs for security and justice.”

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**An Historical look at Racialized Trauma in the U.S. *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Resmaa Menakem. 2017.**

**Acknowledging Our Ancestors – p.xv – xvi (excerpts)**

“Our bodies exist in the present. To your thinking brain, there is past, present and future, but to a traumatized body, there is only *now*. That *now* is the home of intense survival energy. ...

“First, we’ll trace trauma as it was passed from one European body to another during the Middle Ages, then imported to the New World by colonists, and then passed down by many generations of their descendants. ... Second, we’ll trace trauma as European colonists instilled it in the bodies of many Africans who were forcibly imported as indentured servants, and later as property, to the New World. They, in turn, passed down this trauma through many generations of their descendants.”

**Your Body and Blood – p. 3 – 26 (excerpts)**

“... We’ve tried to teach our brains to think better about race. But white-body supremacy doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies. ... Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experienced as a felt sense ... Often this knowledge is stored in our bodies as wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous. ... If we are to upend the status quo of white-body supremacy, we must begin with our bodies.

“New advances in psychobiology reveal that our deepest emotions ... involve the activation of our bodily structures. ... Trauma always happens *in the body*. ...”

**Our Bodies, Our Country – p. xvii – xviii (excerpts)**

“... As I write ... in early 2017, America is tearing itself apart. ... These [social and political] conflicts are anything but recent. One hundred and fifty-six years ago, they spawned the American Civil War. But even in the 1860’s, these conflicts were already centuries old. They began in Europe during the Middle Ages, where they tore apart close to two million white bodies. The resulting tension came to America embedded in the bodies of Europeans, and has remained in the bodies of many of their descendants. Over the past three centuries, that tension has been both soothed and deepened by the invention of whiteness and the resulting racialization of American culture.

“At first glance, today’s manifestation of this conflict appears to be a struggle for political and social power. But as we’ll see, the real conflict is more visceral. It is a battle for the souls and bodies of white Americans. ... the real battlefield is inside our bodies. If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict will need to be resolved.”

“White-body supremacy is always functioning in our bodies. It operates in our thinking brains [cerebral cortex], in our assumptions, expectations and mental shortcuts. It operates in our muscles and nervous systems ... But it operates most powerfully in our [brain stem]. Our [brain stem] cannot think. It is reflexively protective, and it is strong. It loves whatever it feels will keep us safe, and it fears and hates whatever it feels will do us harm.

“... The traumas that live in white bodies ... are also deep and persistent. However, their origins and nature are quite different. ... The trauma in white bodies has been passed down from parent to child for perhaps a thousand years, long before the creation of the United States. ...

**European Trauma and the Invention of Whiteness, Menakem, p.57 – 66 (excerpts)**

“... While people from England, Spain, Portugal, France, Scotland, Sweden, and Holland had all colonized parts of America by the late 1600s, it was the English who controlled nearly all the colonized territories in what would become the United States in 1776.

“The 1500s and 1600s in England were anything but gentle times. People were ... burned at the stake for heresy, a practice that began in the twelfth century and continued through 1612. Torture was an official instrument of the English government until 1640. ... During much of the Middle Ages in England, torture wasn't just ... popular, it was a spectator [event]. ...

Throughout the whole medieval period there was popular demand for malefactors to receive punishment that was both harsh and purposefully terrifying. This reflected people's enthusiasm and the desire to see justice being done. (Sean McGlynn, *Violence and the Law in Medieval England*)

“... Many of the English who colonized America had been brutalized or had witnessed great brutality first-hand. Others were the children and grandchildren of people who had experienced such savagery in England. ... Barbarism was not the only reason to flee England. The Great Plague raged through much of the country in 1665 and 1666, killing an estimated 100,000 people in London alone. ... Many English immigrants were desperately trying to get away from poverty, starvation, and overcrowding.

“... the Pilgrims and Puritans ... were refugees fleeing imprisonment, torture and mutilation [because of their religious beliefs].”

*In addition, British, Scottish and Irish peasants were moved off their lands because of changing agricultural practices intended to further enrich landowners. In the cities, lack of food and housing led to homelessness, starvation and crime. Poor people were punished severely for minor crimes. Debtors were imprisoned in harsh conditions and then deported to the colonies.*

*And to one extent or another, European colonists from France and Germany brought similar experiences of trauma with them from their home countries.*

*Various forms of trauma continued in the lives of European colonists of all socio-economic classes after their settlement in North America. In addition to brutal treatment inflicted by Whites on Whites, in all communities where race-based slavery existed, White people perpetrated, participated in and witnessed torture, imprisonment, beatings, starvation and family separations carried out on enslaved people.*

(Menakem, p.57 – 66) “...The trauma in African American bodies is often (and understandably) more severe but in historical terms, also more recent. ...”

*The trauma began with the frightening circumstances of armed conflict and capture in Africa, followed by harsh imprisonment in “slave castles” at the coast. Then, for many weeks, the African captives existed in the most degraded and dehumanizing conditions during the Middle Passage, and were often further brutalized as they were displayed, auctioned and “seasoned.”*

(Menakem, p.57 – 66) “... many Black bodies do not feel settled around white ones, for reasons that are all too obvious: the long, brutal history of enslavement and subjugation; racial profiling (and occasionally

murder) by police; stand your ground laws; the exoneration of [murderers]; outright targeted aggression; and the habitual grind of everyday disregard, discrimination, institutional disrespect, over-policing, over-sentencing, and micro-aggressions.

“As a result, the traumas that live in many Black bodies are deep and persistent. They contribute to a long list of common stress disorders in Black bodies, such as ... PTSD, learning disabilities, depression and anxiety, diabetes, high blood pressure and other physical and emotional ailments.”

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***See below and on the next page for calming and settling practices to use now or at any time stress or remembered trauma arises.***

**Calming and Settling Practices**

Given the close connection among the brain, the emotions and the body, when we experience stress and trauma, remember it, or read and discuss it, we can feel unsettled. There are many ways to calm and settle ourselves. Each of us may already use some of them.

- Yoga
- Guided imagery
- Mindfulness
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Sports
- Massage
- Drumming
- Singing
- Journaling
- Music
- Art
- Dancing

Two widely used practices are:

<p>A. <u>Just Breathing</u>: Can be used anywhere, anytime, without being obvious to anyone else</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Stand still or sit down in a chair.</li><li>2. Gradually take in a deep breath, filling your lungs and noticing the air coming into your body.</li><li>3. Hold your breath for a moment or two, but without forcing yourself.</li><li>4. Let your breath out gradually, emptying your lungs as completely as you can, noticing the air leaving your body.</li><li>5. Pause and repeat.</li></ol> <p>Repeat inhaling and exhaling several times, if you can. Keep the rhythm slow and gentle – you don’t want to hyper-ventilate!</p>
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B. Breathe and Relax: Can be done anywhere relatively quiet, where you can sit in a chair undisturbed for 5 - 10 minutes.

1. Sit quietly and comfortably in a chair, and breathe normally. Let your eyes close or shift focus.
2. Turn your attention inward. Put your focus on your feet and ankles. Breathe “into” your feet and ankles, and feel them relax.
3. Put your attention on your calves. Breathe into them and let them relax.
4. Bring your attention to your thighs. Breathe fully into them. They often hold tension. Give them enough breaths and time to relax fully.
5. Now put your attention on your butt. Pull your breath into it and let it relax as you exhale.
6. Bring your attention to your belly. Breathe in deeply enough to push it out. Let it relax as you exhale.
7. Move your attention to your right hand and arm. Notice any tightness and breathe into it. Let your arm relax.
8. Turn to your left arm and do the same.
9. Pay attention to your shoulders, to the joints and to the muscles across the top toward your neck. Notice any tightness. Inhale gently and exhale, maybe two or three times, until all those muscles release.
10. Focus on your neck and jaw. Breathe into them enough times, until they relax.
11. Pay attention to your face and scalp, full of so many expressive little muscles. Breathe into them and let them relax little by little, breath by breath, until you feel no more tension.
12. Sit for a moment in this peaceful, relaxed state. Then gradually open your eyes or shift your focus to the space around you, and prepare to re-engage.