Naomi Ruth Cohen Trauma Conference

2 June 2013

In recent weeks, both the lay and professional press have noted the terrible finding that, for the past decade and more, suicide rates among middle aged adults rose by almost 30%. Among adults in their 50s, the rate rose nearly 50%. Suicide by hanging increased nearly 80%. What these awful numbers mean, how precisely they quantify a rising tide of despair, is open for interpretation but as we gather today, for communion and collaboration in deepening our understanding of trauma, I am aware that we step through a fragile time when the prevalence of human suffering and anxiety can be vividly captured in so sterile a thing as statistics. Each of us carries an intensely personal definition of trauma, and an equally personal definition of spirituality. In these few moments of opportunity to launch our shared conversation, I would like to offer a bit of language that we might use as we weave through the common and private purpose that brings us here.

Trauma is a thing that happens without permission or invitation, a darkness that slips through the curtain, an intruder that breaches the walls of the self that each of us holds sacred. Trauma is the violation that is sometimes the very first event to illuminate these sacred boundaries. It is an undeserved and jarring loss of freedom, the rough handling of another’s autonomy. It is the organ within that suddenly betrays, switches function; the trusted hand that touches the wrong way, the wrong place. Trauma is not just the absence of justice, it is an inversion of justice, a superimposed definition of self that correlates with nothing we knew about ourselves before. It is the acute state of suffering without haven, the desolate lack of sanctuary in a time of great vulnerability. It is the unceremonious dunk in the muck of shame with no clear place to wash and dry. In his play No Exit, Sartre says, “Hell is other people.” Trauma folds into a human life, into a community, like an egg into batter, diffuse, reconfigured, irretrievable in its original form.

I am moved that we are hundreds of souls here on a Sunday morning to gather round the fire of this thing that burns around us and within so many, here in our nation of freedom and plenty. We are survivors and handmaidens to survival, and people who have also caused great suffering to others with or without intent. Beyond therapists, medication, acupuncture, meditative practices, sometimes bitterness and, ideally, the funneling of our hurt in redemptive energies, with what tools do we hold our place in the community of the living, the well, the whole? I’ll call that part of our strategy Spirituality. For many, spirituality wears the garments of a particular religious tradition that preordains times for joy and times for lament, offers rules of engagement and prayers for healing, points clearly to a Force in charge and the means of reckoning for all comers. For others, such traditions are foreign or were tried and discarded as a poor fit, especially where those traditions were silent or worse damning about a one with our particular injury, status or need.

Spiritualty is a certainty that our individual experience is not all there is, that the larger cartography of the created world has irreducible beauty and goodness, that hope for ourselves and others is not a fool’s mission. None can fully understand the design of the Creator, but to live through the years is to see that the infinite variety of human suffering is matched and exceeded by the breathtaking beauty of love and the loveliness of the natural world. Spirituality is the witnessing that sometimes those with the most unimaginable pain summon the most astonishing grace and power to do well, change the world for others and feel whole. Where they go, we may follow.

In medicine, we have many mechanisms and much language for healing. In the language regarding physical wounds, our first goal is to “approximate the edges,” to try as faithfully as we can to line up the parts that once were a single whole, then place something mechanical to hold these parts together, a suture, a staple, a bandage. Over time, the severed parts learn to recognize each other, to make a new alignment that will more or less serve the function of the old way. Through the conversations, learning, teaching and revelations that occur throughout our day ahead, let this be our goal, to approximate the edges. In our varying states of service and healing, let us see the beauty and the function of the new self. May our endeavors be blessed.

Rabbi Eleanor Smith

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