



MICHELLE K.
KEENER

FOREWORD BY SCOT MCKNIGHT

COMFORT
IN
THE
ASHES

EXPLORATIONS in the BOOK
of JOB to SUPPORT
TRAUMA
SURVIVORS



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CONTENTS

Foreword by Scot McKnight—*ix* Acknowledgments—*xiii*

Introduction—*1*

ONE

What Is Trauma?—*11*

TWO

Job's Experience of Trauma—*34*

THREE

The Ministry of Presence—*54*

FOUR

Talking About Trauma—*69*

FIVE

When Words Fail—*92*

SIX

Where Is the Justice?—*108*

SEVEN

Out of the Whirlwind—*125*

EIGHT

Behemoth, Leviathan, and Job—*144*

NINE

Putting a Shattered World Back Together—*155*

TEN

A Church of Dust and Ashes—*170*

Conclusion—*187*

Bibliography—*190* Scripture Index—*194*

WHAT IS TRAUMA?



BEING HUMAN IS AN EXPERIENCE. Our beliefs, worldviews, and approaches to life are often shaped by what we have gone through. Good and bad experiences both leave their mark on us and impact how we view ourselves, others, and the world around us. For example, when I was about five years old, I watched my cousin drink a glass of milk and then immediately throw up. That made such an impression on me, I haven't had a sip of milk since that day. Even though I intellectually know that milk will not make me sick, and even though I bake with milk all the time, I cannot bring myself to drink milk. An experience made a lasting impact on my life and altered how I walk in the world. The circumstances we walk through, the tragedies and joys that fill our lives will have an impact on what we believe and how we live. Our experiences shape our beliefs both for good and for ill. Experience is where the rubber meets the road and our beliefs are formed, tested, and challenged.

Given the connection between experiences and beliefs, it seems not only appropriate but necessary to look at Job's experience of trauma as having a massive impact on his worldview and his fundamental beliefs. Job's losses, his pain, and his response are not a tangential part of the

story; they are central to the story. Without the traumatic events he experiences, there is no text. It is the sudden infliction of these traumatic events that sets the book in motion and leads Job, and his friends, through the winding path of theological reflection that ultimately culminates with God showing up in a whirlwind for a chat with Job. In this theological reflection, questions about the nature of God, humanity, retribution, suffering, and redemption appear on almost every page. With such a banquet of deep questions laid before readers, it can be startlingly easy to skip over the personal and intimate details of Job's experience to focus on those big theological issues. Doctrinal debates can easily become more important than people. Sadly, we can see this play out every day on social media. Frenzied replies and name calling dehumanize the person on the other end of the post as debaters and haters focus on proving their point at any cost. We become so determined to defend our theology that we forget to defend God's people.

Now, before we saddle up and ride into a biblical studies debate, let me say that I am not discounting questions of the historicity of Job. Was Job a real person? Is this a factual account of his experience? Or was Job a literary figure made up by the author? Those are interesting issues and they are worth exploring . . . just not here. What we have in front of us is a biblical text that deals with a man named Job and shares his story of terrible affliction and loss. Could it be historical fact? Yes. Could it be a fictional account? Yes. Could it be combination of a real, historical person and a literary creation? Yes. Ultimately, what we are dealing with is Scripture and the primary question is what can we learn from it. In the case of the book of Job we are dealing with Scripture that tells a story of loss, tragedy, suffering, and restoration that is rooted in the depiction of Job's experience.

From beginning to end, it is Job's experience that inspires, guides, and leads the text. It is not enough for us to simply acknowledge that Job suffered and then jump immediately to the abstract theological implications of the text. "Ah yes, Job suffered terribly. Poor chap. Now,

let's focus on the big question of where evil comes from, shall we?" Those questions are not wrong, but we must remember that it is Job's experience that challenges his theology. So, to understand his theology, we must understand his experience. This is true in churches today as well. We need to know where someone is walking before we give them advice about their footwear.

This connection between experience and belief is also at the heart of much of our own theological reflection. When bad things happen, when we experience tragedy, loss, or illness, we are often propelled into deep questioning of everything we thought we knew. Our faith in humanity may be shaken, our faith in God may be shaken. Those overwhelming experiences of trauma have an impact on what we believe. We have no choice but to reevaluate the fundamental assumptions we built our lives on. It is important as church leaders and believers that we be aware of this response to trauma so we can meet survivors where they are and walk with them to the other side.

DEFINING TRAUMA

Trauma is a response. Sometimes we see something catastrophic happen or we hear a terrible story and think "that is traumatic." However, when we talk about trauma, what we are really talking about is the response someone has to a terrible event. The event itself is not the trauma. Trauma is the response the survivor has to the event.¹ For example, two people may experience the same catastrophic event, maybe a natural disaster, war, or a car accident, but they may not have the same response. One person may walk away from the event without trauma while the other may experience a trauma response. Both responses are valid and neither implies strength or weakness, great faith or a lack of faith, maturity or immaturity. We are all unique individuals, and we all react to our circumstances differently. Trauma is one possible response to an event.

¹MaryCatherine McDonald, *Unbroken: The Trauma Response Is Never Wrong* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2023), 7.

This is an important distinction because if we, as survivors or comforters, focus on the details of the event, we may find ourselves judging just how traumatic the event was and whether the survivor's response is justified. What may strike us as not such a big deal may, in fact, be a very big deal to the survivor who experiences a trauma response in the aftermath. When we focus on the event instead of the response, we run the risk of introducing shame, blame, and dismissal. Shame conveys to a survivor that their reaction to the event is not appropriate. Blame puts the responsibility for the event on the survivor and thus communicates that they deserve what happened. Dismissal ignores, critiques, or downplays the survivor's response and says, essentially, "get over it." In order to come alongside a survivor in a healthy and compassionate way, we must be willing to let go of our perception of the event and focus on the survivor's response.

The trauma response is an intricate and involuntary network of physical and chemical reactions in the brain and body that take place in response to a threatening event. Please note that I said involuntary. We do not choose to have a trauma response. It is a deeply rooted survival instinct that exists to keep us alive. When we face a threatening situation, we don't have time to analyze all the details, make a list of pros and cons, and form a committee before making a decision. That event may be physical, emotional, spiritual, or something else, but it is an event that triggers a survival response in the brain. If the crocodile is racing toward us, our brain will trigger a survival response without waiting for us to make the conscious decision to run. Ordinarily, the survival response does its job, gets us out of the threatening situation and then resets. But when the survival response lingers and cannot be resolved, when it keeps firing even after the situation has passed, when it shakes the foundations of our world, and we continue to feel unsafe or threatened, that is trauma.²

²Stephen W. Porges and Seth Porges, *Our Polyvagal World: How Safety and Trauma Change Us* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2023).

Now, having said all that, defining trauma is actually not as simple as it sounds. For example, my daughter is a paramedic, and when she says “trauma” she means broken bones, physical injury, and driving fast with lights and sirens blaring. On the other hand, clinical mental health providers who are diagnosing patients for treatment and insurance purposes may rely on a very different definition of trauma found in the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5-TR (DSM-5-TR)*. The difficulty here is that this clinical definition of trauma has undergone a series of changes through the years. In its current iteration, the definition of what constitutes trauma is very narrow. John Briere and Catherine Scott, in their textbook on trauma therapy, suggest this current definition unnecessarily excludes many experiences of trauma and therefore underestimates the true prevalence of trauma.³

This book you are holding in your hands is not a mental health manual and it is not intended to be used for diagnosis. It is intended to help equip churches to support and minister to trauma survivors and to help survivors heal, so I am choosing to use a broader definition of trauma, one that is still supported by research. The American Psychological Association offers this definition of trauma that will serve as a working definition for us moving forward:

Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual’s view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.⁴

³John Briere and Catherine Scott, *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 10.

⁴“Trauma,” *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, American Psychological Association, <https://dictionary.apa.org/trauma>.

This is not meant to discount the importance of the *DSM-5-TR* definition, just as I do not discount my daughter's definition of trauma; it is simply an acknowledgment of two different purposes. So, with that caveat in mind, let's forge ahead.

Trauma is a shattering.⁵ Imagine each one of us as having a unique window through which we see the world. We all have certain assumptions, beliefs, and worldviews that color the window we are looking through. Like looking through a stained-glass window that makes trees look blue or landscapes look pink, the colors influence what we see and how we understand it. Those beliefs and assumptions that make up our window affect how we interpret information, how we understand different experiences, and how we process information. It's like our very own mental Instagram filter that is automatically applied to everything. For example, I believe in God. That belief impacts and shapes how I interpret the world around me. If I see a mountain or a platypus or a sunset, I will recognize the incredible creativity and artistry of the God who created those incredible things. However, if I did not believe in a Creator, I might see the mountain, platypus, and sunset, and perhaps think about the amazing accident of nature that brought all those molecules together at just the right time and in just the right way. My belief in God shapes how I interpret those experiences. It is part of the window through which I look at the world. Trauma shatters that window. Trauma shakes and breaks the fundamental beliefs that make up our worldview window. When it falls apart, we lose our window. We no longer have those basic assumptions that helped us interpret and understand the world around us.

Here's another way to think of it: my daughter has terrible eyesight. Terrible. Without glasses or contacts, she can't see anything but different shades of light. She was five years old when we first figured out her eyesight was bad. When we left the optometrist's office with her new glasses,

⁵Lisa M. Cataldo, "I Know That My Redeemer Lives: Relational Perspectives on Trauma, Dissociation, and Faith," *Pastoral Psychology* 62, no. 6 (December 2013): 791.

she stopped on the sidewalk and gasped. She pointed to the trees across the parking lot and said, “Those are leaves! There are leaves on the trees!” Her entire life she hadn’t seen clearly. Suddenly, with these new glasses, she could see the world. Our worldview, our fundamental beliefs are like those glasses. It impacts how we see the world. When trauma comes crashing in, everything shatters, and we can no longer see clearly.

Trauma is what happens when a rock comes flying through the window. It is not the size of the rock that matters, it is the impact. Even a tiny pebble can shatter a window if it hits just right. That is why we cannot judge someone’s reaction as justified or not simply by the event that precipitated it. Pebbles, boulders, river rocks, they can all do unspeakable damage. The way a trauma survivor had previously understood the world is shattered and undone by the rock of the traumatic event. Suddenly everything that seemed certain is questionable. The psychological approach of schema theory presents one way of understanding the impact of this shattering on trauma survivors.⁶ A schema is like a file folder in our brain that is stored in our memory. It has a label: *dog*, *pain*, or *love*, and that folder contains our accumulated information about that topic. Basically, these schemas are a way for our minds to process data. Our brains like patterns and pattern recognition, so when we have an experience or encounter new information, our brains want to put it with other similar experiences. Stub my toe? That goes in the minor pain category. Lost my job? That goes in the stress and disappointment (and maybe anger) categories. These schemas help us recognize which experiences are expected, which ones are unexpected, and how to interpret each one. When we encounter something new, our brains pull up one of our existing schemas in order to explain

⁶A very technical definition of a schema is “an abstracted knowledge structure, stored in memory, that involves a rich network of information about a given stimulus domain.” (Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, “Assumptive Worlds and the Stress of Traumatic Events: Applications of the Schema Construct,” *Social Cognition* 7, no. 2 [1989]: 115). For a fuller treatment of schema theory see also Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

it. If we imagine our worldview window as a stained-glass window, all of our schemas would make up the different colored panes that fit together to make up the total beautiful mosaic. These schemas make up an entire conceptual system, a window, for processing life experiences.⁷ But a trauma-inducing event doesn't fit into any of those schemas. Traumatic events are so far outside the realm of our existing schemas that they threaten to bring down the entire framework.⁸ It's like a system overload that makes a machine start smoking and shut down.

Using the psychological framework of schema theory, trauma expert Judith Herman suggests that trauma shatters these inner schemas by which people process and understand the world around them.⁹ Trauma is so catastrophic, so outside of the norm, that the inner schemas a person has previously relied on are no longer able to explain the experience. There is, essentially, no way for their mind to fully understand the trauma. Switching up the metaphor for a moment, if we imagine our cognitive framework as a filing cabinet and all of our inner schemas as the files where we categorize and store our experiences, a traumatic experience has no file. It is so far from what we are accustomed to it has no place to go, we have no existing file for it. So, our brain leaves it open, like an item on a to-do list that we can't cross off. The trauma sits in the inbox of our brain, waiting for a place to go, unable to be filed and unable to be ignored. For me, when I have an item on my desk that needs to be completed but I don't know how to do it yet, or I'm missing some piece of information, it sits there on my desk and nags me. I can always see it out of the corner of my eye. I may be working on something else, something totally unrelated, but I know it's there. Waiting. It's like an itch we can't scratch, and so it remains ever-present, and ever-painful.

⁷Janoff-Bulman, "Assumptive Worlds," 114.

⁸Janoff-Bulman, "Assumptive Worlds," 116.

⁹Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books), 41.

Theologian Shelly Rambo picks up on this idea of shattering and fragmentation. She writes, “Trauma is described as an encounter with death. This encounter is not, however, a literal death but a way of describing a radical event or events that shatter all that one knows about the world and all the familiar ways of operating within it.”¹⁰ The survivor’s fundamental beliefs about the world, her safety in it, his perception of the self, and a sense of meaning and order in the world are all called into question by the rupture caused by the traumatic event. It is the cataclysmic destruction of an existing worldview that leaves a void of unmoored confusion.¹¹ It is only when the trauma survivor can create a new inner schema that is big enough to integrate the traumatic experience in a coherent manner that the trauma will be resolved.¹² We must, essentially, create a new file so the traumatic memory has a place to go . . . and sometimes we have to rebuild the entire filing cabinet.

The overwhelming nature of trauma and the failure of existing schemas to explain the events is one of the cornerstones for understanding a trauma survivor’s response. As survivors, we need to create a whole new file, but that is no simple task, and it can be scary. It isn’t easy to face such a big challenge to our worldview, especially if it involves beliefs we have held onto for years and have never had a reason to question before. As human beings, we like our existing schemas, and we don’t really want to change them. Even when we are faced with a mountain of evidence that our schemas may be wrong, we generally resist changing them.¹³ Change can be scary and changing some of our deeply held beliefs . . . well, that is down-right terrifying. This inherent reluctance to changing our schemas is called cognitive conservatism.¹⁴ It’s not unlike when they rearrange your grocery store

¹⁰Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 4.

¹¹Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

¹²Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 41.

¹³Marcia Webb, “The Book of Job: A Psychologist Takes a Whirlwind Tour,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 158.

¹⁴Webb, “The Book of Job,” 158.

and you want to pitch a fit in the middle of the cereal aisle . . . or what used to be the cereal aisle . . . because you can't find the Lucky Charms. The evidence cannot be denied, the Lucky Charms have been moved, but we may stand in the middle of the now-unfamiliar aisle and try to make things go back to the way they were. Change is disorienting and it can be difficult, especially when it involves our fundamental beliefs or assumptions.

While the precipitating events that may lead to a trauma response can take many disparate forms—war, sexual assault, terrorism, natural disasters, physical, emotional, or spiritual abuse, injury, adultery, medical diagnosis, financial crisis, job loss, and many other types of experiences—it is the *effect* of the event on the survivor that makes it traumatic. What may be a traumatic experience for one person, may not be traumatic for someone else. Two people can experience the same event but process it completely differently. One person may experience a trauma response while the other does not. That does not imply one is stronger or more mature than the other. We all have our own mental schemas. We each have our own filing cabinet. That is why it is so important that we, as comforters, recognize the inherent dignity and uniqueness of each person we encounter. The shattering and the psychic overwhelm of trauma prevent the event from being filed in a survivor's mental filing cabinet and transform the event into the thorn that remains. It doesn't matter what we, as the comforter, think we would have done or how we think we would have responded. What matters is the wounded and hurting person in front of us and how they have responded.

With ordinary events, we experience them, understand them, and file them away without much thought. The traffic jam on the way to work is generally forgotten by lunch. It doesn't linger because we are familiar with the experience, and we know where it goes. When we can file the event away, we understand what happened and we process the emotions tied to it, the event has meaning or a place in the big story of our life, and we can move on and think about other things.

Not so with a trauma-inducing event. The failure of our existing worldview or inner schemas to explain a trauma-inducing event as it occurs creates a gap between the event itself and our filing of the event in our mental filing cabinet. It becomes a “missed encounter.”¹⁵ In this missed encounter gap, the event sits in the to-do list pile, and we keep going back to it. Rambo calls this gap between the event and the understanding “the middle.”¹⁶ It is in this middle space where the reality of a traumatic event smashes up against a cognitive schema that cannot explain it and results in a crisis of meaning.¹⁷ It is when the rock hits the window, when the event collides with our beliefs, when what we experience crashes into what we know and everything shatters.

In this middle area, trauma makes us ask questions. Big questions. The very nature of the conflict between a lived experience and an established mental schema that cannot explain it leads to a search for another explanation. In other words, the rock broke my window so now I need a new window . . . one that is rock proof. Biblical scholar Christopher Frechette writes, “Traumatic events prompt interpretation, processes by which survivors consciously and unconsciously appropriate what the events mean for them, leading to changes in beliefs about self, others, world and possibly God.”¹⁸ Trauma changes us. It forces us to rethink what we thought we knew. The experience doesn’t fit anywhere, we don’t understand it, we don’t get it, and our minds and our bodies react. The traumatic event remains an unresolved and unhealed wound until we can find a way to understand what happened and how it fits into our life. In other words, we will keep stepping on the broken glass and continue to be in pain until we are able to rebuild the window.

¹⁵David G. Garber Jr., “‘I Went in Bitterness’: Theological Implications of a Trauma Theory in the Reading of Ezekiel,” *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 4 (December 2014): 348.

¹⁶Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 7.

¹⁷Webb, “The Book of Job,” 159.

¹⁸Christopher G. Frechette, “The Old Testament as Controlled Substance: How Insights from Trauma Studies Reveal Healing Capacities in Potentially Harmful Texts,” *Interpretation* 69, no. 1 (January 2015): 25.

RECOGNIZING TRAUMA

This chapter, while fairly heavy on theory to this point (are you still with me?) gives us an idea of some of the things we can be on the lookout for when it comes to recognizing trauma in the church. Now, this does not necessarily mean trauma *inflicted* in the church or by church leaders. Do churches and pastors inflict trauma? Unfortunately, yes, some do. It's an awful reality that breaks the heart of God and has no place in his kingdom. But sometimes the trauma we will encounter as pastors, church leaders, and believers, will be in people who come to our churches because they are already hurting, because they have been deeply wounded, because they are searching for hope, for help, and for answers. Being able to recognize the possibility of trauma or a trauma response becomes important as we prayerfully consider how to come alongside the suffering. Most churches do not have licensed counseling professionals on staff, and there will be times when the trauma and wounding you encounter will require the intervention of a qualified and licensed professional. Please do not hesitate to refer people to mental health professionals. That is not a failure by you or your church. In fact, it demonstrates wisdom and maturity to recognize when a person needs more help than you or your staff can provide. There is still a place for the church to support someone in their healing who is also working with a professional counselor or doctor. Survivors need community and a healthy local church can provide that community, friendship, and relationship as the survivor heals with the help of a professional. One does not replace the other. As the church we can support, encourage, and walk alongside a survivor and provide them with a community that will love and accept them as they heal.

There will be many times when the church community and leaders can responsibly and ethically minister to someone who is a trauma survivor. Understanding what makes trauma so fundamentally different from other types of sorrow, sadness, depression, anger, or

disorientation is vital to being a help and not a hinderance in their healing journey. The church is meant to be a safe place where the broken can find healing and the suffering can find solace. Unfortunately, we have often turned it into a business or a brand, a self-perpetuating institution running on getting people in the pews and money in the buckets. But Jesus told us that *we* are the church. Not a building or a platform, people are the body of Christ and when one person hurts, we, as the church, hurt too. From the pastor to the newest believer, we are all broken and in need of healing in some way; trauma is just one aspect of the beautifully broken and wonderfully healing body of Christ.

So how can we recognize trauma? The above discussion, though brief, highlights some of the defining characteristics. It is overwhelming, unable to be immediately processed, and challenges our fundamental assumptions about the world. We may see this overwhelming nature when a trauma survivor has difficulty remembering the event. Because traumatic events and trauma memories are “missed” they are not processed neatly and logically like ordinary memories, so the survivor’s memory of the experience may be jumbled and fragmented. Instead of reacting with suspicion—Did that really happen? Why is your story changing? Are you sure about that?—recognize that traumatic memories are messy, disconnected, and chaotic. This is to be expected, and it is a normal part of a trauma response. You wouldn’t walk into a room with a broken window and expect all the pieces to be organized by size and color on the floor, right? When a window shatters, we will find broken pieces scattered everywhere—under a chair, on top of a picture frame, on a shelf—and it will take several inspections to make sure we picked up all the pieces, and even then, we may find ourselves stepping on a stray shard of glass in our bare feet months later. Understand that the survivor’s memories of a traumatic event exist in a different form and in a different cognitive space. Be patient as they try to reassemble them.

Next, as trauma survivors we may have difficulty talking about the trauma. This goes beyond a simple reluctance to talk about something bad. I have a few middle school memories I don't want to talk about, not because they are traumatic but because it was the 1980s and I was given unfettered access to blue eyeliner and aerosol hair spray. It's not that I can't talk about those days, I am choosing not to talk about them (and burying the photos in a box in the garage that no one will ever open). Trauma, on the other hand, has a physiological impact on the brain that can make expressing or talking about the event difficult. Trauma theorists expect this crisis of language in the wake of a traumatic experience. As Webb explains, "trauma—as cognitive material which cannot immediately be integrated into broader schematic representations of reality—may be accompanied by sudden language deficits."¹⁹ This is not a statement about the intelligence of the survivor, rather it is an acknowledgment of the impact of trauma on language itself. It is not simply an issue of a trauma survivor not wanting to talk about their experience, though that may also be present, but it is an issue of the physiological effect trauma has on our ability to speak about it.²⁰

Bessel van der Kolk's neuroscientific research on trauma has demonstrated this physiological impact of trauma. He has noted a lowered function in Broca's area in the brain which is one of our primary speech centers.²¹ He writes, "Without a functioning Broca's area, you cannot put your thoughts and feelings into words."²² Trauma hits this speech center of the brain and pauses it, so it doesn't function the way it normally does. Trauma, as a survival response, shuffles energy

¹⁹Webb, "The Book of Job," 162.

²⁰Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 5.

²¹Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 43. For an additional discussion on the physiological impact of trauma, see also Dr. Stephen Porges's work on polyvagal theory and the role of the vagus nerve in trauma responses.

²²van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 43.

around to prioritize survival. The job of the survival response is to keep the victim alive, to get them through the ordeal, so the brain and body work together to prioritize the things the person needs to survive. Things like the speech center and memory storage are less of a priority when the issue is survival. When we are running from the crocodile, we don't need to talk more, we need to run faster, so the brain puts more energy into our running than it does to our talking. This combination of psychological and physiological effects of trauma has a significant impact on the survivor's ability to express themselves and describe their experience. There are literally no words. Imagine living in the first century and by some strange feat of time travel or space portals, you see an airplane. You are the only person who saw it. It was there and then gone. How would you describe it to your community? None of your normal words or adjectives would work. You've never seen anything like it before and neither has anyone else. You don't know what it was, and you have no idea how to describe it. Trauma is like that. There simply are no words.

We must also recognize the crisis of meaning prompted by trauma. When the window shatters, the survivor cannot simply order a new window and patiently sip their tea while they wait for their two-day delivery truck to arrive. The pieces have to be picked up, and this process is messy. There are sharp edges everywhere. Many survivors will engage in repetitious behavior while trying to heal from trauma. This may be simply repeating a story about the trauma or talking about the same thing over and over. What others may perceive as "not letting it go," or "obsessing over it," may, in fact, be an important step in their healing process. Like that to-do list item in our inbox, we have to keep going back to it until we know how to tackle it. Repetition may also be physical repetition as the survivor returns to the scene of the trauma or continues similar behavior patterns. It may be present in flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts that appear without warning as the mind returns again and again to the event. Repetition,

in its many forms, is an expected trauma response. Because the mind doesn't know how to categorize the event or how to file it away, it has to return to it over and over attempting each time to figure out what it is and where it fits. But trauma does not fit easily. Perhaps it's a bit like working on a jigsaw puzzle and you keep picking up that one odd-shaped piece because you know it has to fit somewhere, but you haven't found the place yet. As comforters, it can be exhausting and even frustrating to hear someone say the same thing over and over again, or if they seem to reject our well-intentioned advice. We may try to push them to move on, to get over it, but the repetition that seems unnecessary to us may, in fact, be a vital part of their healing process. Survivors may need to pick up that piece over and over until they figure out where it goes. As comforters, it is not our job to rush the process, but to support survivors as they work through it. However, as important as repetition can be, we definitely don't want anyone to return to an abusive or dangerous situation, and that may be a time to involve professionals or law enforcement.

Finally, trauma messes with a survivor's nervous system. The presence of observable physiological changes in survivors illustrates that trauma is not simply in our mind, it's also in our body. A trauma response can include a physical reaction to an overwhelming experience. Trauma can effectively rewire a survivor's nervous system. The autonomic nervous system that functions to help us survive in life-threatening situations can be impacted by trauma. Dr. Stephen Porges suggests that the vagus nerve responds to how safe we feel.²³ When we feel unsafe (notice that says when we *feel* unsafe, not necessarily that we *are* unsafe) our fight/flight/freeze survival instinct can switch on involuntarily as our body instinctually acts to keep us alive.²⁴ The challenge arises when we get stuck in this survival mode or when we are triggered into it by something that isn't a genuine threat. We often

²³Porges, *Our Polyvagal World*, 27.

²⁴Porges, *Our Polyvagal World*, 28.

see this manifesting in survivors in panic attacks, anxiety, hypervigilance, distrust, and physical symptoms like stomach distress, illness, migraines, and the list goes on. The complexity of a survivor's nervous system and the way it is intertwined with memories, even just fragmented and disorderly snippets, of the traumatic event may lead to a reaction that is beyond the survivor's control. Panic attacks, freezing, anger: a survivor can have a wide range of responses to a triggering event. Our nervous system reacts without our consent and without our planning. It is an immediate reaction to what is perceived as a threatening situation. Remember, our minds and our bodies like patterns. Trauma stitches together certain memories of the traumatic event with our survival instinct to protect us from further harm. When that alarm gets triggered, even if it's a false alarm, the nervous system is off and running. For trauma survivors this can be incredibly disorienting. We may feel like we are hopelessly lost with no way out. We may feel like things will never change. We may feel like there is something wrong with us. What we need to remember is that a trauma response does not mean we're broken; it is simply a sign that our survival instinct needs help to reset.

When our military family moved across the country (again) we rented a house on a golf course for a few months. At one point a golf ball flew way off course and smashed into one of the windows. The window didn't break, but it was hopelessly cracked. Our landlord sent a window repair company out to replace it. When that golf ball smashed into the window we didn't move out. Our landlord didn't throw up his hands and sell the house because it was broken and useless now. It was just a window that needed to be repaired. Just as trauma shatters a survivor's window and may trigger an involuntary response, the survivor is not broken. It is just one part of them that needs to be recognized, honored, and helped. A trauma response is not a sign of weakness or immaturity or a lack of faith. A trauma response is part of how God designed us. A trauma response protects

us from harm and helps us survive situations no human being should have to go through. That is a miraculous and beautiful thing. We would do well to recognize the good that response did in the moment, and then focus on how we can honor the trauma and help the survivor resolve it.

To the outside witness, these reactions may not make sense. As comforters, we may not understand how a leadership meeting at church triggers a new member to have a panic attack. What is quite simple and enjoyable for us is setting off all kinds of alarms in the survivor's nervous system. Maybe it is a word or a phrase that brings up a memory of betrayal and that connection between the memory and the trauma causes a trigger and panic ensues. Maybe it is a smell that triggers a connection to a car accident, or a whiff of cologne that takes a survivor back to a sexual assault. Maybe it is a television show or a sound that takes the survivor's mind back to the loss of a loved one. The connections the mind makes between these fragmentary memories and the initial trauma is a type of pattern recognition. The mind wants to categorize things and recognize patterns so it knows how to respond. When this happens with a traumatic event, the mind digs up the original survival response and instinctively returns to it to protect the survivor from further harm. What seems like an overreaction or an out-of-the-blue response to us as witnesses is actually a complex and involuntary response by the survivor's nervous system. We must remember that we did not go through their trauma—they did. It is their nervous system that is reacting in a way that is meant to protect and defend against further wounding. What doesn't make sense to us makes perfect sense to the survivor's nervous system. As leaders and believers who are in positions to minister to trauma survivors, recognizing the complexity of this connection between a traumatic event and physical reactions is important, and it will require us to be willing to accept what we don't understand. No, a pastor saying the word *family* shouldn't send someone into a panic attack, but it did. That is an opportunity for us to meet a

survivor in the ashes of their trauma, sit with them, and learn about their experience without imposing our assessment of the situation on them. To reply with something like “that’s not what I meant, you’re overreacting” is not helpful. It may have been a completely safe and even loving situation, but the survivor’s nervous system did exactly what it is meant to do . . . it recognized potential danger and sent up a warning flare. The difficulty with trauma is that it can associate danger in the wrong places. That will take time to rewire and heal.

To sit with someone in their trauma and in their pain should be a ministry of presence, not pressure. They may need to talk about what happened to them a dozen times, a hundred times. Each time is serving a purpose. It is our privilege as the church to provide a safe space for that processing. We will explore more characteristics of trauma and trauma responses throughout the following chapters as we look at Job and his experience, but for now, two important points remain. First, recognizing our limitations as comforters and knowing when to refer someone to professional care is responsible, wise, and ethical. Second, as Christian leaders and believers it is not our job to sweep away someone’s ashes and drag them to their feet. It is our task to meet them in the midst of the grime and be present.

THE THREE STAGES OF TRAUMA RECOVERY

In order to get to a place of trauma resolution, a place where the outstanding file finds a home in our mental filing cabinet and the shattered window is rebuilt, a trauma survivor must first engage in the work of “adaptive rumination.”²⁵ Adaptive rumination is a scholarly way of saying that we are willing to do the hard work of rethinking our schemas and rebuilding our window. This process is the opposite of cognitive conservatism, or the resistance to changes in our worldview. It allows for the possibility of letting go of long-held schemas in

²⁵Webb, “The Book of Job,” 161.

favor of rebuilding a more comprehensive framework that can enfold the totality of the survivor's experiences. For example, if we are convinced that good things happen to good people and bad things happen only to bad people, what will we do if we are struck with a sudden illness or loss? In the face of our own experience, we may find ourselves needing to rethink that basic assumption. If I've been a good person, why did this bad thing happen to me? That is a shattered schema that needs to be rebuilt, but we cannot build a new schema unless we're ready to let go of the old one, right? In this rebuilding process, the trauma survivor "faces a double task: not only must she rebuild her own 'shattered assumptions' about meaning, order, and justice in the world but she must also find a way to resolve differences with those whose beliefs she can no longer share."²⁶ Not only do we have to rebuild our own window, but we have to figure out how our new window fits in with the rest of the neighborhood.

Beyond the mental healing and adaptive rumination that is necessary for the trauma to be resolved, Herman suggests three stages of recovery for a trauma: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life.²⁷ Establishing safety generally refers to immediate physical safety. Is the trauma survivor physically safe? Are they at risk for abuse? Are they in danger? Safety also refers to emotional, mental, and spiritual safety. As Christian leaders, we can work to make sure our churches are safe places for healing where members are protected from abuse and exploitation. Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer highlight this in their outstanding book *A Church Called Tov*.²⁸ They offer several important elements of a church centered on *tov*, or goodness, including nurturing empathy and grace, putting people first, telling the truth, and

²⁶Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 178.

²⁷Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 155.

²⁸Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020).

nurturing justice, service, and Christlikeness.²⁹ In order to minister to the wounded we must first cultivate an environment of safety.

A significant portion of the following chapters will focus on the second stage of recovery, remembrance and mourning, because that constitutes much of what we see in the book of Job. The book of Job, in many ways, resembles a trauma narrative. A trauma narrative is an intentionally crafted testimony or retelling of the traumatic event that allows for survivors to begin to integrate it into their mental filing cabinet. Since the traumatic event was cognitively missed when it occurred, the trauma narrative becomes a way to reengage with the missed encounter and process it. There are several important similarities between the book of Job and trauma narratives that offer interpretive insights that not only help us understand the text, but they also help us understand how trauma survivors process their experiences and how we, as trusted listeners and comforters in a local church body, can support that journey.

Because a traumatic event is not processed and filed as it occurs, the trauma becomes disconnected from the rest of the survivor's life story and memories. It's like a puzzle piece that doesn't fit. Even better, it's like a puzzle piece from an entirely different puzzle. We don't know what to do with it. Traumatic memories often exist not as a cohesive story with a beginning, middle, and end, but as fragments and images, snippets of sensory memories, a smell, or a sound, or a fleeting picture that pops into our brains. The traumatic event caused a rupture in our life story. We may even look at our life in two pieces, before the trauma and after the trauma, with the traumatic event itself as the middle turning point. A trauma narrative functions as a way to help give coherence and meaning to the traumatic event and bring it into one, complete story of our life. In a trauma narrative, the events begin to be understood in a way that the mind can recognize, incorporate, and

²⁹McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called Tov*, 97.

file. The construction of a trauma narrative can help provide structure, expression, and meaning to an otherwise incomprehensible experience. When this trauma narrative is coupled with adaptive rumination and a new, more resilient cognitive schema, the trauma survivor can begin to experience healing and wholeness. This is not an easy process, and the survivor will need support, compassion, and trusted listeners along the way.

The third stage in trauma recovery is reconnection with the community. In the coming chapters we will look at how Job's friends react to his trauma and what happens to their relationship through the course of the text. The ugly truth is trauma often results in social isolation and loneliness. This can happen for a few reasons. It may be that the overwhelming nature of the trauma and the hypervigilance, distrust, and fear that often results may make social interactions difficult, even terrifying, for a survivor. It may also be that the survivor's community and support system simply don't know how to respond. Often, as human beings, when we don't know what to do we choose to do nothing. We may stay on the sidelines, giving the survivor "space" and waiting until things blow over. Many trauma survivors find themselves alone because their experience is frightening, disorienting, and confusing, not just to them, but to those around them as well. Trauma has ripples and oftentimes those ripples carry much further than we know. A survivor's community is in a unique position to be of great help or great harm. How the survivor's community responds to their experience and the healing process is incredibly important. If handled well, the community can be one of the biggest contributors to a survivor's healing. If handled poorly, the community can be a cause of additional wounding, suffering, and pain.

Be warned, the journey is not a straight line from trauma to healing with boxes to check off and schedules to follow. There are twists and turns and curves and setbacks and for survivors and comforters this can be challenging. There is no map in trauma recovery, and there is

no timeline. Trauma survivors have experienced the worst this world has to offer. The storm is raging and it's dark and scary, but there is another side. There is joy on the other side. There is purpose and laughter on the other side. Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday there is the silence of Saturday. That is where the trauma lies, in the middle space, where everything seems lost, and we can't imagine how it will all work out. God calls us to walk with our brothers and sisters as they find their way through the middle and emerge into the light and promise of Sunday.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Trauma is a response to an event. We cannot decide how traumatic something is for someone else. We must be humble and curious as we learn about a survivor's experience.
- Trauma responses have both psychological and physiological characteristics. Trauma is not a sign of weakness, immaturity, or lack of faith. Our survival instinct was designed by God to help keep us alive.
- Healing from trauma is a process that will have ups and downs. Our community can play an important role in healing from trauma.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Are there any times you have judged yourself or others for how they are suffering?
- How does knowing that trauma is not just in the mind but in the body as well impact how you view people who are suffering?
- What does a healthy church for trauma survivors look like?

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