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### **Imagining in Fractures: Adult Christian Education with Trauma in View**

This paper claims that the experience of trauma is both woefully unacknowledged and that wherever it is present its influence is profound. Consequently, it asks how adult Religious Educators can best proceed given the realities of trauma and its effects. How can we facilitate deepening a person's relationship with God and others when trauma has damaged a person's capacity to relate? Suggestions are made for future work by integrating trauma analysis from Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk with theological insight from Mary Elizabeth Moore and Rebecca Chopp.

The heart of religious education could be understood as a quest to know and respond to God. And at its heart, this quest is a search to be in relationship with God.<sup>1</sup>

– Mary Elizabeth Moore

Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging.  
Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms.  
Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her.  
Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity.<sup>2</sup>

– Judith Herman

This paper asks how Christian educators called to work in situations of adult Christian education (ACE)<sup>3</sup> can best proceed given the often unacknowledged realities of trauma and its effects. In short, how can we facilitate deepening a person's relationship with God when the very fabric of that person's relationality has been rent by the effects of trauma? While the terms “holistic” and “integrated” currently have significant cachet, to focus on these as goals of ACE may inadvertently discourage those who have been affected by trauma and its fracturing wake. Rather than focus on the formation of a particular kind of “unified and whole” person we suggest that ACE may be served by concerning itself more with the development of imaginative practices of connection and courageous risking-taking, the presence of which would be beneficial to all and particularly to those grappling with trauma. We wish to explore these issues to reinvigorate our collective attention on an important opportunity. In so doing we hope to find others who share our commitment that together we might move forward.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Moore, 1994, 23.

2 Herman, 1992, 214.

3 We follow Jeff Astley's position in that while “Christian Education” can mean education “about Christianity” or “education in a Christian context,” our use of it here is in the sense that it “marks out those educational processes through which people learn to become Christian and to be more Christian” (Astley, 2000, 2).

4 As far as we have been able to discern, the *only* piece of published literature explicitly addressing adult Christian education and the long-term effects of trauma is S. Niranjana Rodrigo's 2009 dissertation from

## Trauma and Relationality

Stress is a part of our lives. Most stress experienced in daily life is managed through familiar coping responses. Stress affects a person's mood, cognition, and behavior, usually resulting in outcomes that deviate from the normal base-lines for that person. Two people will not necessarily respond to the same stressor in the same way. Following this, trauma is most easily understood as an instance where the levels of stress generated overwhelm a person's normal functioning. Such a traumatic instance could be acute, like a car accident or robbery, or emerge from persistent and/or inescapable circumstances like spousal abuse or racial profiling. The threat of harm can be just as traumatic as an actual violent event, and in both cases the repercussions can be profound psychologically and physiologically.

Discussing trauma and adult learning, psychiatrist Bruce Perry suggests that nearly "one-third of the adult population bring to their classroom a history of abuse, neglect, developmental chaos, or violence that influences their capacity to learn."<sup>5</sup> The symptoms generated by trauma can range from the neurotic to the somatic,<sup>6</sup> but in this paper we will focus on the ways in which trauma can impede the ability of the survivor to develop new relationships, both with people and ideas.

In *Haunting Legacies*, Schwab writes that "trauma disrupts relationality... [it is] an attack on the capacity for linking."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Judith Herman writes that "the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others."<sup>8</sup> Theorists suggest this is because the effects of trauma are not merely due to the precipitating event – or series of events – but because of the ways in which those events are not integrable into the healthy psyche. Supporting this claim, Cathy Caruth argues that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather, in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on."<sup>9</sup> Relatedly, Judith Herman writes that "traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning."<sup>10</sup> Having overwhelmed a person's systems of meaning-making and responsivity, trauma leaves the survivor not only wounded but also less able to communicate to others the extent and nature of that wound. That is, "language falters in the abyss; it fractures at the site of trauma."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the challenge – and sometimes inability – to communicate the experiences of trauma is often itself a wounding experience.

In the wake of trauma, survivors often find it hard to articulate how the trauma has affected them. In some cases this is due to how trauma can override a person's cognition for language altogether, and in such cases, talk-based therapies can fail to facilitate life-giving reflection. When language *is* available, a traumatized person may struggle to find words that

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Fordham: *How Religious Education and Christian Spirituality Can Restore Lost Trust and Foster Interdependent Relationships Among Adult Children of Alcoholics*. We would love to learn if additional work has addressed this topic.

5 Perry, 21.

6 Herman, 187; van der Kolk, xxi; Beste 43; et al.

7 Schwab, 2.

8 Herman, 133.

9 Caruth, 4.

10 Herman, 33.

11 Rambo, 164.

meaningfully articulate his/her experience. It is to this point that trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk questions talk-based therapeutic models.

“To my mind, healing from trauma starts with noticing yourself and coming to terms with the sensations in your body... This doesn’t mean that language is not helpful. The function of language is to be able to articulate your internal experience for yourself and for the people around you, and to establish a bond between you and other people. You cannot share your reality with somebody else until you put it into words... But it has less to do with exposing people than helping them to know what they know and feel what they feel.”<sup>12</sup>

While ACE is not the place for therapy, it *is* a place to “establish a bond.” Indeed, Mary Elizabeth Moore suggests that task of RE itself is to facilitate a series of such bonds. She identifies five types of “meetings” at the heart of the practice: (1) meeting the Spirit, (2) meeting other persons, other cultures, and other parts of the environment, (3) meeting texts, (4) meeting oneself, (5) meeting pain and conflict.<sup>13</sup> If creating bonds and engendering “meetings” is sought after, van der Kolk suggests we pay attention both to language *and* to our bodies.

Since trauma re-writes a person’s expectations for self and others, sharing stories of trauma requires courageous risking-taking from speaker, hearer, and the community that holds them both.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the devastation that trauma can wreak, it does not necessarily have the final word, and current research suggests that there are factors that can contribute to “post-traumatic growth.”<sup>15</sup> Here we find new possibilities for application and development within the ACE context.

## **Trauma and Religious Education**

For Moore, ACE’s goal is “encouraging people to know themselves and to relate with the world around them with depth and integrity... It has to do with knowing our own bodies, with their rhythms; it has to do with knowing our passions, hopes, and fears.”<sup>16</sup> Following from Moore’s position, ACE must be responsive to the world, be sensitive to individual interiority, and be relational to its core. It is less about the development of a certain type of virtuous person or faith and more about the ability of an individual to be responsive to ever-changing contexts.

Education thus needs another kind of commitment, namely to embrace chaos, to risk destabilization, and to teach skills for living with the instability that emerges in the natural flow of life or in the intentional disruptions aimed at reshaping a stable but

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12 van der Kolk, “Interview,” 520

13 Moore, 1994, 1-23

14 See: Brian Arao & Kristi Clemens. “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces.” We prefer the use of “brave space” over “safe space” specifically because of the ways in which “safety” is can be an often illusive feeling for someone struggling with trauma. They can, perhaps, more readily seek out bravery and courageous risk-taking in the face of feeling the effects of trauma. See:

15 Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Pargament, Desai, McConnell, 2006

16 Moore, 1997, 240

destructive situation. Such education will involve discerning, analyzing, and even provoking destabilization, while teaching knowledge and skills, that help people to engage unstable social institutions with courage and wisdom, and to imagine new futures.<sup>17</sup>

Given Moore's sense that part of RE can be developing the “skills for living with the instability,” we see two primary ways in which the effects of trauma can play out in the ACE setting. First, when participants struggle with aspects of the programming as a result of trauma, such that the RE situations are “provoking destabilization” without “teaching the knowledge and skills” to flourish in that instability. Second, when, as a result of trauma, possible participants opt out of programming to avoid potentially “unwanted” situations. That is, just because there “don't seem to be any issues” with trauma does not mean that its effects are not operative. We ask the following questions in preparing for ACE.

1. How is my pedagogy encouraging an environment where thriving might happen?
2. How is my pedagogy excluding to some?

Sometimes – perhaps many times – you can be simultaneously encouraging to some and excluding others. These are healthy questions to be asking generally, but they have particular ramifications when trauma is in view.

Consider, for example, that it has often been noted that “women who have survived trauma have done so because of their strength and the positive aspects in their life, however limited and few and far between those positive aspects may be,” and that as a result of this fact, it is important “to teach to that strength,” being “careful not to connect to shame and humiliation that forms part of abuse.”<sup>18</sup> In this context, imagine the implications of references to John 3:30: “He must increase, but I must decrease” or Philippians 2:3 “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” Given such instances, how do we support an environment that neither dismisses suffering nor denies the possibility of growth and transformation?

Although many argue that learners who have experienced trauma should “heal” elsewhere through counseling, there are major problems with the attitude that learners can go away and heal and then come back and learn. There is no pure place to retreat for healing; nor should we tilt at windmills trying to create an RE environment free from human suffering. Even learners who have sought out therapy still bring their trauma issues along when they come to “class.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Perry, the key to understanding the long-term effects of trauma on an adult learner is to recall that “he or she is often, at baseline, in a state of low level fear... [thus] the major challenge to the educator working with highly stressed or traumatized adults is to furnish the structure, predictability, and sense of safety that can help them begin to feel safe enough to learn.”<sup>20</sup> Superficially, this seems like common sense, but if part of RE entails the need “to

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17 Moore 2005, 200

18 Horsman, 184-5

19 Horsman, 75

20 Perry, 25

embrace chaos” and to “risk destabilization,” RE itself might be intrinsically *unpredictable*. In a trauma-informed approach, the ACE facilitator must attempt to “furnish the structure” while simultaneously engendering an environment that is conducive to connection and courageous risking-taking in the face of the potentially fearful prospect of entering into a fuller and unpredictable relationship with God.

## A Trauma-Informed Approach to ACE

While we do see the wide-spread and dis-connective effects of trauma impacting the practice and goals of ACE, we believe this can be seen as an opportunity. Rather than framing the situation as one in which the religious educator has yet *another* obstacle to overcome to facilitate effective programming, we envision ACE as one place where deepening connection – and re-connection – can be encouraged for everyone present.

This shift in articulation potentially places the ACE facilitator at the front of the curve in which serious attention and supportive responses are generated in the context of Christian congregations. While liturgies and preaching often bear the weight of denominational and traditional expectation, it is generally the case that what happens in ACE is able to proceed with greater freedom. As such, we see those facilitating ACE as possessing a great gift: the opportunity to seriously reflect on the effects of trauma *and take actual steps to* support healing and re-connection. While there is much work to be done to develop concrete ACE curricula that acknowledges trauma, we offer a recommendation of a possible approach that could be productive for such development.

In her essay “Theology and the Poetics of Testimony” Rebecca Chopp unpacks the ways in which the social, psychological, and epistemological silences around trauma might be broken with a notion of “poetic testimony.” She notes that clear, discursive accounts of traumatic events are insufficient to communicate the – sometimes personhood shattering – effects of trauma. She argues that an overemphasis on rationalism inherently suppresses the expression of experiences wherein one’s very sense of self is violated, ruptured, or damaged. As a corrective, she suggests that a form or style of discourse that takes seriously the roles aesthetics and language play in mediating experience.

[Poetics] is an invention, for it must create language, forms, images to speak in what in some way has been ruled unspeakable or at least not valid or credible to modern reason. Compared to rhetoric poetics does not seek so much to argue as to prefigure, to reimagine and refashion the world. Poetics is a discourse that reshapes, fashions in new ways, enlarges and calls into question the ordering of discourse.<sup>21</sup>

Resonant with van der Kolk’s emphasis on the body, Chopp is skeptical of the capacity of rational language to capture the entirety of knowledge or experience. She advocates for a creative and poetic discourse that may be able to communicate something more. Language arts, for example, emphasize the generative power of our words to create new understandings by breaking language from its moorings as ordinary and immediately correlational. In the wake of

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<sup>21</sup> Chopp, 1998, 6.

this fracture, the world to which the old language referred is reconfigured as well, and new ways of seeing, doing, and being can emerge.

I believe that poetics is essential to the work of theology. The poetics of theological discourse is about the conversion of the imaginary, which works not only by stirring “up the sedimented universe of conventional ideas,” but also by shaking “up the order of persuasion,” thus generating convictions as much as settling or ruling over controversies... theology must refigure and reimagine the social imaginary.<sup>22</sup>

Chopp advocates for the use of the poetic and the literary precisely because it shakes us up and offers us – through our fusion with its horizons – a strange world. Or the “normal” world but seen with new eyes. A world where the voices of those impacted by trauma are affirmed instead of denied and marginalized. Not only is this a beneficial move educationally, but also has significant positive theological ramifications as well.

While the tendency might be to focus on scripture, theology, and/or doctrinal tradition as the primary content areas of ACE, there is an argument to be made that the personal narratives of individual participants are equally relevant places to explore, especially when trauma is being considered. The interpretive and pneumatological work of Shelly Rambo is especially useful here in that she reads the Johannine Gospel's account as one in which the Holy Spirit serves as a kind of “witness to the emergence of life out of death.”<sup>23</sup> That is, in the clearing of space and place for traumatized voices to speak – should they wish to – the ACE facilitator models God's witness in the Holy Spirit. This would suggest a turn from the ACE facilitator as an “epistemic agent”<sup>24</sup> who hands over some piece of knowledge or scripture that “makes everything better” to an “agentic witness”<sup>25</sup> where the action is a ministry of holy listening and acknowledgement. The presence of this listening itself may be transformative.

Our ability to know God will actually be nurtured, formed, and re-formed as we engage in talk that matters – in other words, in discourse that contributes to emancipating and transforming the world. In short, our discourses *with* God and our discourses *about* God go together and affect one another. The questing to know God includes both.<sup>26</sup>

By turning to practices that have a greater emphasis on embodiment as well as the aesthetic and imaginative, the ACE facilitator does not lose time that could have been used on other content: she gains open space in which connections and courageous risk-taking can be imagined as worth attempting. The move toward practices like “agentic witnessing” and “poetic testimony,” demonstrates our willingness to hold such space and model such courageous and creative risk-taking, inviting others to be present and participate with greater humanness.

Our hope is that just as attention has been slowly turning to the necessity for greater training and reflection on the value of cultural competency in faith communities, so too will conversation pertaining to trauma begin to make in-roads into our places of worship. The

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22 Chopp, 1998, 9-10

23 Rambo, 44

24 Hope & Eriksen, 110.

25 Ibid.

26 Moore, 237.

importance of relationality to RE is profound, and trauma's capacity to fracture relationships equally so. The task as we see it is to explore best practices for nurturing a space in which participants courageously imagine that – for the sake of connection and relationship – some risks are worth taking.

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