Haley Jones
Boston University School of Theology
haleymjones@me.com
REA Annual Meeting, October 7-9, 2014

Community Organizing and Trauma Healing: The Power of Storytelling and Social Action

Abstract

Telling one's own personal narrative can be a liberative experience that shapes one's future encounter with the world and with others. However, the creation of and participation in intentional spaces for storytelling are often privileged experiences, because many lived realities create unreachable stories. Traumatic experiences, for example, cause the body to react in a way that minimalizes the formulation and expression of narrative, ultimately affecting the traumatized individuals ability to make the experience apart of their story. Because learning to story tell and participation in social action are recognized as aspects of trauma healing, this paper suggests that participation in community organizing initiatives provides an outlet for the healing of trauma. Because of a model that seeks out relational conversation, empowerment, and social advocacy, community organizing creates a challenging yet hopeful experience of transformation and healing for survivors of trauma.

Humans are storytelling creatures. We make sense of who we are and our place in this world by creating narratives of our experience. When we have the opportunity to develop and share our own narrative, we begin to discover our deepest passions, our greatest desires, and even our fears. The metacognition that storytelling inspires often culminates in personal calls to action. Moreover, in the creation of a space where we can authentically tell our stories and sincerely listen to the stories of others, we learn to celebrate the dignity and worth that resides in every individual. However, in a world that seems to overwhelm our souls with violence, pain, and heartache, where is an outlet for healing? Where is the escape? In the midst of suffering and injustice, faith based community organizing provides an outlet that creates opportunities for trauma healing. Through the power of storytelling in the community-organizing model, a call to action is cultivated that ultimately becomes crucial for the healing of trauma.

Because of the transformative power found in listening to and telling stories, exploring one particular narrative is exemplary and foundational for understanding the notion of community organizing as a means of trauma healing. December 20, 1993 marks a heartbreaking and life-changing moment for Clementina "Tina" Chery of Dorchester, Massachusetts, as it was the day in which she lost her eldest son to gang violence. On his way to a Christmas celebration with the group *Teens Against Gang Violence*, an initiative that he was deeply committed to, Louis D. Brown lost his life in the cross fires of a gang shooting. As a young man who was committed to the development of his community for peace and nonviolence, Tina knew that she had to honor the memory of her son as well as continue the mission that he diligently worked for

in his short life. In 1994, the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute was created to be a "center of healing, teaching, and learning for families dealing with murder, trauma, grief and loss."[1]

The Peace Institute works to organize the local community around issues of violence as well as with government agencies and NGO's to promote education and policy advocacy on multiple levels. Founded and staffed by families who have been impacted by violence, the Institute works to see families through the pain, grief, and trauma of violence in ways that they "begin to advocate for themselves and others."[2] The Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, created as a result of Tina's story, helps people articulate their own stories and join a movement that is greater than their personal experience. The Louis D. Brown Institute is a community organizing initiative that promotes storytelling and action, ultimately creating space for healing.

Although the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute story in itself seems to express the relationship between community organizing and trauma healing, unpacking an organizing model and trauma studies and their relationship to a greater conversation in religious education creates even deeper connections. For the purposes of understanding the role of *faith-based* community organizing in trauma healing, analyzing portions of the PICO Network model, specifically one to one conversations and group sharing, is most applicable. The model begins with a trained organizer, who is passionate about issues of justice and community development, having one to one conversations, or relational conversations, with members of the community. In these conversations, the organizer asks questions of intrigue, questions of courage, questions of heartache, and questions of challenge, all in hopes of understanding the relationship of the individual to the community and their desire to be a part of change. One to one conversations are meant to be a way for organizers to hear the stories of the individuals in the community. In the gathering of these narratives, the organizer builds up the importance of storytelling and develops leaders who can make a collective narrative.

After the organizer has taken the time to be present to the stories of members in the community via one to one conversations, they bring those conversation partners into a larger dialogue with each other. A space is created for members of the community to share stories of concern and hope for their community through continued conversation. Neighbors who may or may not have encountered one another before are faced with their individual stories as well as the stories of their community. If done well, with patience and perseverance, the group's storytelling process has the potential to incite action, which continues the organizing model as shown below. If intentional time is taken for community members to hear the personal experiences of their neighbors, both successes and struggles, how can an authentic community not act in the name of justice? The sustainability of social action in the community is based on the narratives that are developed and shared in the first portion of the model. Without creating intentional space for *authentic* relationship building, it is easy for actors in the community to forget their connectedness and relationality, which are significant pieces of developing communities that are places of healing for *all*.

---

[1] "Our Mission," Louis D. Brown Peace Institute. Accessed December 10, 2013. http://www.ldbpeaceinstitute.org/content/our-mission.

[2] "Our Story," Louis D. Brown Peace Institute. Accessed December 11, 2013. http://www.ldbpeaceinstitute.org/content/our-story.

[3]

How does the opportunity for narrative sharing and social action in the organizing model create space for trauma healing? Reflection on the work of trauma studies expresses the multilevel relationship and provides both depth and breadth to answer this question. In her iconic book *Trauma and Recovery* Judith Herman wrote, "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of the individual victim."[4] Herman's words express the importance of narrative in healing from a traumatic experience. As meaning making individuals that seek to understand our lived experiences, we turn to our ability to narrate in order to recall, remember, and incorporate events that shake our self-identity into our understanding of the world. The intentional space created for one to one conversation and listening and sharing of concerns is a prime opportunity in the model to share and tell stories.

However, as organizers and participants in organizing initiatives are made aware of the possibilities for healing, it is important to note how trauma studies also provides a challenging lens into the effectiveness of the narrative sharing portion of the model for those living in the aftermath of trauma. In the wake of a traumatic event there is a disconnection "from what one knows to be true and safe in the world."[5] This disconnection often results in the inability to articulate the event and make it apart of one's larger narrative. Serene Jones, author of *Trauma and Grace*, wrote, "When we are overwhelmed, what fails us most profoundly is our capacity to use language."[6] Trauma disables normal systems of response that give people a sense of control. In the overwhelming of these systems, the body can react in a variety of ways, including but not limited to hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. When the body enters a constant state of alertness and is in protection mode, it has moved into a state of hyperarousal. Minute stimuli can incite fear and destroy the nervous system. Intrusion is a result of the return of the traumatic experience into every day lived experience. Any sense of normality freezes in the wake of trauma, because the experience continuously interrupts the individual in both a sleep and alert

---

[3] "PICO Model," Accessed on December 12, 2013, http://www.piconetwork.org/about/model.

[4] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 1.

[5] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 4.

[6] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 29.

state. Finally, with the break of normality from the intrusion of the traumatic experience, there is an alteration in the sense of time. The world begins to slow and there is a constriction, or numbing, of lived experience.[7]

Although storytelling through the organizing model has the potential to help give language to a traumatic experience, organizers must be aware of the dangers caused by retriggering that are made possible by pushing for a concise story too quickly. What role does the community organizing model and organizer play in creating a space for individuals living through the somatic affects of trauma? If the ability to story one's life is missing due to a traumatic experience, can and how does organizing remain a means of trauma healing? Herman refers to the process of narrative sharing in trauma healing as "reconstructing the story." In the reconstruction of the story, the traumatic memory is transformed into the survivor's life story.[8] In the one-on-one, relational, conversation portion of the model the organizer becomes a witness to the story, or "the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time."[9] As the story surfaces, the witness, or organizer, holds space for both the words and even the silence that comes with articulating one's story after trauma. The witness takes a journey with the storyteller on uncharted territory of trauma that fragments language, unravels agency, and creates a sense of isolation. According to Dori Laub, this is a journey that "the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone," making a case for the development of deep connections during one to one conversations over time. [10]

In the development of genuine and sincere relationships through one to one conversations, the organizer leaves an open invitation for each community member to join the larger conversation about their hopes and dreams for the community. Through relationship building the organizer highlights and celebrates the dignity of each voice and creates space for further conversation amongst neighbors. The hope in community group conversation is that the people of the community will decide together what kind of community they wish to create and develop. Together they challenge, dream, and act against injustices that keep all individuals from thriving and flourishing. In this time of dreaming, powerful and positive relationships are built, which create a sense of safety for traumatized individuals that often feel isolated and alone with their trauma.

According to the lens of trauma studies, the joining of social action provides an even greater chance of healing. Herman believes there is a significant minority who feel called to engage in the wider world as a result of their traumatic experience. "These survivors recognize a political and religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action."[11] Social action offers a survivor the power that draws from their own initiative and energy, and it creates an alliance with a group of likeminded people that share a purpose. The building of positive relationships is a crucial step in the creation of safety after a traumatic experience. Social action for healing can take shape in many ways, but many survivors find energy in helping those who have been

---

[7] Herman, 35-38.

[8] Herman, 176.

[9] Laub, Dori, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* written by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, 57-74 (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.

[10] Laub, 58-59.

[11] Herman, 207.

similarly traumatized.[12] With this learning from trauma studies, the story of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute becomes even more powerful. By calling on families who have been victims of gun violence to join the initiative, the Peace Institute offers a means of healing for them through narrative sharing and social action.

If there is a transformative power in community organizing models that can help create communities of trauma healing, what is the significance of this conversation for religious education? Faith communities across the United States are joining organizing initiatives as a means of living into their theological commitments. Faith based organizing models, like PICO, are founded on the notion that the world's diverse faith traditions have the ability to unite rather than divide because of their commitments to standing against injustice.[13] Religion is playing a significant role in the social action that communities are participating in. If religious education seeks to be a liberative window for the transformation of individuals and communities, the conversation must include the commitments that faith communities are making to community development/enrichment/engagement through community organizing initiatives.

Community organizing is a call to seek justice, equality, and hope for the future. Many faith based community organizations turn to the wisdom of Amos 5:24, "But let justice roll down like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream," as they seek to gain faithful leaders for action from the Christian tradition. However, the theological call of community organizing, and ultimately trauma healing, is much more expansive than what Amos provides. Religious education has a significant role in helping articulate the deep theological commitments of community organizing because of the potential for liberation and transformation in the initiatives. The conversation around community organizing and trauma raises ecclesial questions that have the potential to shift or transform one's understanding of "being church".

From Sallie McFague's theology of creation as God's body to the African theology of Ubuntu or Martin Luther King's understanding of beloved community, there are multiple theological arguments that support participation in community organizing. In response to Augustine's comment regarding God in the world, "Since nothing that is could exist without You, You must in some way be all that is," McFague makes the claim that Christians should attend to the world *as* God's body.[14] It is in God's nature to be embodied in the world and that is the nature in which we live and move. Christians understand the God-world relationship through the incarnation; therefore, creation must be "like" incarnation. God is not only the source of existence but all are born into God.[15] From the understanding of the world as God's body, people of faith are called to an intricate care of creation. It calls for a protection that runs deeper than stewardship. Creation as God's body is a call to focus on the neighbor and neighborhood—a call to develop an understanding of how we exist relationally in the world together. "We meet God in the world and especially in the flesh of the world—in feeding the hungry and healing the sick."[16] Can faith communities live fully into McFague's understanding of the God-world relationship if their conversations do not include traumatized individuals' experiences? Arguably, no. How can

---

[12] Herman, 208.

[13] "PICO Values," Pico National Network: Unlocking the Power of People. Accessed September 7, 2014. http://www.piconetwork.org/about/values

[14] Sallie McFague, "Is God in Charge?" in Essentials of Christian Theology, ed. by William C. Platcher. (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 110.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid, 110.

community-organizing initiatives shift faith communities' lens of caring wholly for members of their community?

Community organizing provides a channel for living out this theology. Both storytelling and social action allow for the creation of relationships of mutuality and care for the dignity and worth of individual in which God is fully present—a central theme for McFague. In the call to seek justice for our neighbor, a theology of a God who is fully present *as* the world prevents apathy in the care of every aspect of creation. Joining an organizing initiative with people who are committed to their care and the naming of their worth can be a powerful and transformative experience for a traumatized individual.

This same care and dignity for humanity is evident in the African theology of Ubuntu, which states, "Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others."[17] In this relational understanding of the world, our humanity does not exist without living in relationship with others. The way in which we encounter others in this world develops our own identity and makes us the people that we are today. The theology of Ubuntu calls us to listen for understanding to others as well as speak the truth in love. Community organizing is centered on the development of relationships in a way that creates a genuine inquiry towards one's neighbors. Living into this theology supports the creation of positive relationships that are crucial to trauma healing. According to the community-organizing model, the work of justice cannot be done alone but must be done in community. The social change that is desired by a community is bound in its ability to articulate the stories of one another in a way that seeks change in a broken system, which can only be done by recognizing the sacredness of individuals.

There are deep theological resonances for faith communities who take on commitments to community organizing initiatives that work on issues like homelessness, poverty, violence, and education. There is a genuine care for the individual that comes from working closely with organizing initiatives. The work of organizing is messy, difficult, and by no means easy, but there is an ecclesial stake in the conversation, which should generate discussion in the field of religious education. If churches, looking specifically from the lens of Christianity, are to seek the "shalom of the city"[18], and can begin doing this by joining organizing initiatives, how must they understand trauma in their work? The theological commitments under which churches do the work of justice are reasoning enough to be equipped with an understanding of trauma studies. In order to be a place of healing and transformation, a place where individuals can thrive and flourish, churches must understand what the traumatized individual needs. The community-organizing model provides a foundation for the conversation—a safe place to tell one's story, opportunity to regain agency through action, and the formation of powerful relationships.

The community-organizing model is not just a means of systemic change. Faith based community organizing should be recognized as an opportunity for traumatized individuals to thrive and flourish. In the promotion of storytelling in the organizing model, traumatized individuals are given a place to articulate their experience to a group of people that they form genuine relationships with over time. They are also given a channel for social action that can provide a sense of purpose despite the traumatic experience. Moreover, the call to community

---

[17] Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 39.

[18] Jer. 29:7 (NIV)

organizing is not an empty call. The theology of community organizing creates an open invitation for healing to traumatized individuals. A God who is believed to be present in the workings of the world incites action from organizers against injustice, action against systems that create and perpetuate traumatic experiences. When organizers live into this theology, trauma survivors are shown the possibilities of an alternate lived experience—one that embraces the reality of trauma and works to transform it. Community organizing is a form a trauma healing, because it is a call of accompaniment with the broken and the hurt that is ultimately acted out in the care of all of creation, in the care of God's own body, through narrative and social action.

Bibliography

Battle, Michael. *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Jones, Serene. *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening." In *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* written by Dori Laub and S hoshana Felman, 57-74. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Louis D. Brown Peace Institute. Accessed on December 9, 2013. http://www.ldbpeaceinstitute.org/

Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

McFague, Sallie. "Is God in Charge?" In Essentials of Christian Theology. Edited by William C. Platcher. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press

"The PICO Community Organizing Model." PICO National Network. Accessed on December 12, 2013. http://www.piconetwork.org/about/model