

# CULTURAL HEALING; WHEN CULTURAL RENEWAL IS REPARATIVE AND WHEN IT IS TOXIC

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The mind is its own place, and in itself,  
 can make a heaven of hell, and a hell of heaven.  
 — John Milton

## INTRODUCTION: ZOROASTRIANISM AND THE CHOICE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

The religion I was born into is called *Zoroastrianism* by the West, and derives from the Greek name for the prophet, Zoroaster.<sup>1</sup> We Persian Zoroastrians call ourselves *Zartushti*. We are one of the early earth-honoring spiritual traditions that holds all elements — earth, air, fire, and water — as sacred and imbued with consciousness. As part of our reverence for the spirit of the Earth Mother, we revere all earthly creations, including humankind. We believe in fighting evil by enjoying an abundant life on earth. This religion has no notion of “original sin,” and characterizes the Creator-human relationship as friend to friend, beloved to beloved. Indeed, humans are considered partners with God in caretaking and preserving Creation and bringing heaven to earth.

We were once the people of the great Persian Empire until my ancient homeland was invaded and occupied 1400 years ago by newly converted Muslim tribes of Arabia. After a millennium of genocidal acts, our numbers had been reduced from many millions to about 25,000 remaining in Iran at the time of my birth, and about 100,000 scattered throughout India and the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup> Yet though we are now few in number, our history remains of great importance.

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1 One of the problems of being an ancient spiritual tradition, with an ancient language, that has been colonized is that we don't have an agreed upon name and spelling for our tradition and people. For example, commonly used spellings and names for the prophet are Zarathustra, Zarathushtra, Zart-hustra, Zarthusht, and Zartusht while the religion is also referred to as Zarathustrian and Zarathush-trian. In my own Persian community, the prophet is called Asho Zartusht (the prophet Zartusht), the religion is called “Din-e-Zartusht” (the religion of Zartusht) and the people describe themselves as Zartushti (also spelled Zarathushtis and Zarthushti).

2 Interestingly, the numbers of Zoroastrians have dramatically increased in Iran in recent years! The 1996 Iranian government census tell us there are now 157,000 Zoroastrians living in Iran. I suspect that this is not because all of a sudden Zoroastrians are procreating more rapidly, but because the oppression of people in Iran in the name of an Islamic regime has made many Persians turn away from their Muslim identity and embrace being Zoroastrian. A similar thing happened in the counting up of Native peoples in the United States. After the 1960s, the US government census saw the exponential growth of the Native population, probably because Native pride was on the rebound and people increasingly claimed their Native identity.

Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world-religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith. In its own right it was the state religion of three great Iranian empires, which flourished almost continually from the sixth century BC to the seventh century AD and dominated much of the Near and Middle East. Iran's power and wealth lent it immense prestige, and some of its leading doctrines were adopted by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as by a host of Gnostic faiths, while in the East it had some influence on the development of northern Buddhism. (Boyce, 1979: 1)

The concepts of heaven and hell were adopted from Zoroastrianism by Judaism and later imported into Christianity and Islam. For example, the term *paradise* originated in Zoroastrianism and means “garden.” In the original teachings, paradise was not to be established on some distant ethereal dimension, but on our own good, green earth. The original teachings tell us that we are responsible for bringing this heaven to earth, and we do so by the choices we make in every moment.

The first ditty we learn as Zartushti children is “*Pendar-e-nik, goftar-e-nik, kerdar-e-nik,*” which translates roughly as “good thoughts, good words, good deeds.” A child will understand this as an injunction to take notice of her thoughts, words, and actions, but adults will realize that it also teaches that our thoughts themselves have power and help shape how we manifest reality. Indeed, Zoroastrianism teaches us that in each and every thought, we make a choice toward heaven or hell. We are taught that we bring paradise to earth not just by doing something out there — fixing what’s out there — but by first and foremost *being* heaven. Paradise is a state of mind that is to be brought to earth.

According to the original teachings, an inclination toward “the good” is related to creative and constructive thoughts; an “evil” inclination is related to destructive and pessimistic thought forms. It is that simple. And out of our thoughts — constructive or destructive — emerge qualitatively different words and actions, life-affirming or life-negating, healing or toxic. This notion has had a long and powerful history in world cultures. Today, a whole science has emerged to reaffirm these ancient understandings in the power of constructive and optimistic thinking: the Positive Psychology Movement, spearheaded by former head of the American Psychological Association, Professor Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. While much of this

article addresses the negative powers of our thoughts, I will argue at the end that it is imperative for cultural healing that we embrace the positive — that which affirms life.

## CULTURAL RENEWAL: HEALING OR TOXIC?

As a doctoral student at Harvard University in the 1990s, I was interested in explaining why so many of our Indigenous relatives continue to struggle under the yoke of poverty. I found many explanations but it soon became clear to me that not enough economists were looking at the effects of long-standing collective trauma on Indigenous peoples. I argued in my dissertation that unresolved collective trauma continues to reverberate in our communities with devastating outcomes, and that to alleviate poverty we must address these underlying issues of collective trauma. Moreover, I argued that healing collective trauma necessitates cultural and spiritual renewal — of institutions, narratives, relationships — as well as healing individuals, so that, at a minimum, trauma is not reproduced into the next generation.

However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the notion of *cultural renewal* can be as dangerous as it can be rehabilitative. In the past, many revival efforts by Indigenous peoples ended tragically, like the Ghost Dance and the brutal December 29, 1890 Massacre of Wounded Knee. The soldiers that mowed down women and children that day were envoys of a government that neither understood the pain nor cared about the deep yearnings of Native peoples, and feared these sorts of spontaneous attempts at healing the gaping collective wound.

We associate other attempts at cultural renewal with recent atrocities and human rights violations. Over the past few decades, my own birth country of Iran has oppressed women and minorities in the name of Islamic spiritual and cultural renewal. In the last century, Hitler had cultural revival in mind when he engaged the idea of National Socialism. His vision was the renewal of the great Aryan nation, but he set out to accomplish this vision by dehumanizing, demonizing, and then murdering millions he believed to be of a lesser race. We have also been witness to Serbia's attempt at cultural resurgence and the resulting rape, plunder, and devastation of many innocent lives in the former Yugoslavia. In this century, Al Qaeda envisions itself as working to bring forth a cultural/religious renewal in the Muslim world and consid-

ers all who oppose their vision worthy of death. **These attempts at cultural renewal have been toxic.**

I will argue in this paper that it is possible to guard against such toxic cultural renewal efforts and instead to create models of life-enhancing cultural and spiritual renewal. However, to understand how to produce these life-affirming, positive models, we must first excavate the roots of toxic cultural renewal. In seeking cultural renewal, people and their communities are responding to experiences of collective trauma. A society's preoccupation with cultural renewal might be thought of as an instinctive attempt to address its collective wounding. But how this trauma is channeled and dealt with can be life-affirming or damaging.

Preventing toxic cultural renewal requires paying close attention to the quality and tone of the *stories* we tell ourselves about who we are in relation to others, why misfortunes have happened to us, and who or what is responsible for our current situation. The stories we tell rest upon what I call our *meta-narratives*: the deeper level; the stories beneath our stories; the melodies beneath the words; the deeply held ideas and beliefs that are the hidden scaffolding for our stories, songs, ceremonies, rituals, traditional and religious observances, even our laws. **These hidden narratives, I argue, critically determine the quality of the renewal process.** In the pages that follow, I will make the case that **toxic cultural renewal is an outcome of toxic collective narratives.** Moreover, I suggest that **toxic collective narratives are one outgrowth of trauma.** I explore this argument about the damaging effects of trauma on our narratives by looking first at individual experiences, then at groups (specifically Indigenous peoples), and finally at religion, one of the most powerful packaging of narratives on our planet.

Indigenous peoples have always recognized the power of stories. We have known that the way we tell our stories is not benign — that our stories, our underlying narratives can be the difference between healing and toxic attempts at cultural renewal. If, as I posit here, *collective trauma generates toxic narratives which in turn are the underpinnings of toxic cultural renewal*, then the first — and perhaps most important — step in the regeneration of healthy, affirming cultures is the creation of life-affirming and healthy cultural narratives.

## TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT ON PEOPLE

There is general consensus about the nature of trauma. A person experiences trauma when s/he experiences a severe shock in response to an event or another person, often in the form of emotional or physical violence of any type. For example, child abuse, beatings, rape, verbal assault and threats, imprisonment, war, earthquakes and other natural disasters can be traumatic. A person in the throes of trauma feels terrified, helpless, and captive; he or she experiences a lack of control over the situation in which it seems annihilation is imminent.

When someone experiences trauma, it is normal to feel things like fear, outrage, anxiety, and despair. People who have experienced trauma may have night terrors, can be more aggressive than usual, or may turn wary and withdrawn. Trauma tends to throw individuals into a state of existential crisis, a crisis of faith. They ask questions like: How could this have happened to me? Why couldn't I have stopped it? Where were my trusted protectors when I needed them? Where was God? People who experience trauma can lose faith in themselves, in others, and in a Higher Power. It is no surprise, then, that survivors of trauma can come to feel betrayed and mistrustful of those in positions of authority. Sometimes this is because offenders have a power relationship over those they victimize; as well, victims may feel let down by entrusted authority figures (i.e., parents, elders, police) who failed to protect them from traumatic harm.

Not everyone who experiences trauma remains traumatized, however. For those who have had limited experiences with trauma, whose lives have tended to be trauma-free up to that point, and who can return to a supportive environment and a healing context, symptoms eventually fade. But what happens when these shocks are prolonged and inescapable, and no one comes to the rescue? In these situations, the effects of shock tend not to fade. Rather, they can become more permanent fixtures of life, affecting behaviours and relationships. This is when people are said to be **traumatized**.

## POST-TRAUMATIC NARRATIVES: THE MEANING WE MAKE OF TRAUMA

Human beings are amazing creatures. We are different from other animals, even the ones closest to us, the apes, because we are meaning-making machines. We like to make meaning out of everything that happens to us, and thus we create stories to try to explain why things have happened to us. Even after an awful experience ends, the story and meaning we make of that experience remains long after, channeling our thoughts back to the experience. Therefore, even when something horrible happens to us only once, we do not just experience it that one time. We recreate the experience through our stories, and in those stories we live it again. We can begin to see, then, how story-telling and meaning-making are not always benign or benevolent. Our underlying narratives have the power to magnify or to ameliorate the effects of a stressful event. Sometimes we make meaning in less than productive ways and tell ourselves stories that perpetuate pain, false entitlements, and cycles of violence. These are toxic narratives that hold us back and keep us from healing. However, if the narrative helps us solve our real problems, then the narrative is adaptive. **Depending on the tone and content of our narratives — the way we make meaning — they can be more or less toxic, more or less adaptive.** By adaptive, I mean generating ways to thrive in new ways and challenging environments.

Traumatized people tend to make meaning in characteristic ways. The meanings we make when we have been traumatized, the meta-narratives that emerge out of trauma, tend to be similar because of our universal human reactions to trauma. I call these characteristic ways of making meaning, “post-traumatic narratives.” Note that I am using the term “narrative” loosely. Typically, “narrative” refers to an explicit story that links events in a particular sequence in time — this happened, then this happened — with a beginning and an end. In contrast, I use the term “narrative” as a shorthand for *meta-narratives*, to refer to the *subtext* of these stories, that is, the meaning or moral we draw from the sequence of events we have experienced: the distillation or significance we derive from our version of history. We are usually not even aware of these stories going on in our minds or of the conclusions we have drawn about ourselves and the world. We take them to be truths.

Trauma that takes place during childhood is particularly damaging. Because of their level of developmental maturity and interpretative capacity (technically known as “preoperational thinking”), young children tend to interpret whatever happens to them as if it happened somehow because *they* willed it or *they* were responsible for it. Because children are so dependent on their caregivers, their overriding imperative is to defend their relationships with their caregivers and maintain an idealized view of them at all costs. That’s why an abused child will still cry and resist, kicking and screaming, when he’s being taken away from a parent who just a few hours earlier burned a hole through his skin with a cigarette because she thought he was whining too much. Because, cognitively, they are incapable of blaming their accusers, children often come to believe that they are unworthy of attention and care, or have done something to deserve abuse. Indeed, they often come to believe not just that they have *done* something wrong, but that they *are* wrong: deeply flawed, inherently bad, and deserving of mistreatment.

An example: Sam is young and talented, a graduate of a prestigious college, known for his creativity and dedication in working with inner city youth. Yet he has suffered most of his life from debilitating depression, low self-worth, and intermittent self-destructive tendencies that baffle him and his loved ones. Recently, he sought out therapeutic help and uncovered memories of early childhood sexual abuse at the hands of an uncle, beginning at the age of three and continuing sporadically for the next couple years. A paragraph from his diary, written as a note to his father when he was seventeen as he was thinking of applying to college, reflects clearly the self-loathing, shame-filled, and self-doubting narrative of many of those suffering the after-effects of childhood abuse, even when they are not aware of the abuse:

Dad, I want you to understand why I did what I did: I’m desperate and I’m really no good. Everyone has more confidence in me than I have in myself, and it seems no matter how many times I disappoint you all, you keep believing in me. I don’t understand it. I’m no good! I know I’m no good! I know that because I know myself better than you all know me. I’m really not worth the hope and faith you have. I’m a big zero! I really am a fake. That’s all I’m good at — faking. Faking intelligence, faking kindness, faking precocity. I’m nothing. I’m sick of pretending. I’m a lie. A fake. A nothing. I am. I know.

It is important to note that the beliefs about himself reflected in Sam’s diary passage — the stories he had made up about himself being “no good



and a fake” — were conclusions drawn by a young child who was abused and who had inadvertently created a narrative for himself that implied he had done something to deserve it. Luckily, Sam comes from a family with some resources: he has loving and engaged parents, mentors who care about him, a family network, and a friendship circle. Many of these people were present to him and saw him through his years of despair, continuing to support and believe in him even as they were baffled by his bouts of self-destructiveness. As a result, even though he waged a continuous internal battle, he was able to function relatively well and succeed in his world for some time, without attending to his earlier hidden traumas. In other words, Sam’s life-defeating post-traumatic narratives — the unconscious conclusions he had drawn about himself — were offset and challenged by the external messages he was getting in his family and social environment. This enabled him to muddle along and even succeed in some terms — though not with as much joy as he might have wanted — until he received the help he needed. It would have been quite a different story if his parents had been harsh, unloving, and preoccupied with their own pain, or if they had been the source of abuse. It would also have been a different story if his system of support in general had been less stable and caring because it was caught up in its own despair, or if he had not had access to the help he needed in terms of therapeutic care. These are the kinds of conditions that lead to serious substance abuse, crime, revictimization and suicide.

Traumatization is thus in part the outcome of events that happen to us and our experiencing of those events, but it also emerges out of the ways we interpret and integrate these experiences: the stories we come up with to make meaning of these events. When adults have unfinished business around traumatic childhoods, they take these post-traumatic narratives rattling around in their minds as givens, as truths, and they allow them to have a hold on their lives, making them miserable and shaping how they behave with others. Ordinary objects and life events associated with their childhood traumas can trigger those traumas and overwhelm the traumatized person with feelings. Often these adults will then regress and revert back to childhood states. To someone viewing the situation from outside, unaware that an association is being triggered, the person’s behaviours may seem inappropriate and exaggerated for the current context. But though those being triggered

may be adults chronologically, they feel and behave as though they were still children, flooded and overwhelmed with feelings associated with the original traumas, frozen in an earlier state.

Another example: Jeanne is a middle-aged mother of three who experienced severe childhood neglect at the hands of parents preoccupied with their own addictions. She also witnessed repeated and violent arguments between her raging parents. Her older brother, overwhelmed by his own issues of abandonment, was rarely of comfort: he ignored and pushed Jeanne away and ran away to make a life on his own by the time he was sixteen. Jeanne grew up, got married, and left home herself, but she never really reconciled with her family. She first came to my attention as an adult after having attempted suicide. Exploring her feelings, she disclosed how overwhelmed she was: her father had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and her husband was acting particularly distant. Jeanne's husband had just lost his job, so his self-absorption was understandable, but she was re-experiencing the abandonment of her parents and her older brother all over again.

As she worked toward recovery, along with a host of grief and anger work, Jeanne did a written exercise designed to access childhood feelings triggered by this current experience. The exercise asked her to complete the sentence beginning with "The real issue is..." and see where it took her.<sup>3</sup> Here is her response:

The issue is that I don't feel cared for.

The issue is that I feel ignored, abandoned, not valued. Expendable.

The real issue is that I wonder if I matter, if anyone loves me.

The real issue is that I wonder if I'm lovable.

The real issue is that I get angry thinking that I have been made unlovable.

The issue is really that I'm sad and lonely.

I'm scared.

What I'm feeling is really scared. Little girl crouched in a corner, head down, cradling her legs and rocking back and forth in a tight ball. Sobbing inside, but silent for fear of drawing any more attention to herself, or being punished, or being abandoned.

I also feel rage. Why is this happening to me?

And under that feeling is deep hurt. Aloneness.

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3 See Robin Casarjian (1992: 59) for "the real issue" exercise and other fabulous exercises.

And under that feeling is “GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?”

And under that feeling is annihilation.

What I’m afraid of is that life is meaningless, that life is just about pain.

What I’m afraid of is that there is no caring in the world for me — that it is indeed a dog-eat-dog world, and that even I am like that in the end.

What scares me is that I too am the walking wounded, the living dead, and that I pass on this despair everyday to those I love.

I am broken, damaged beyond repair.

I despise myself and all that I have created and am creating. . . .

Like Sam, Jeanne clearly articulated what is in fact a persistent and recognizable set of patterns of self-damning post-traumatic narratives.

## DISEMPOWERED AND FALSELY EMPOWERED VARIETIES OF POST-TRAUMATIC NARRATIVES

There are actually two extreme varieties of post-traumatic narratives. Some traumatized people, like Sam and Jeanne, are affected by *disempowering* post-traumatic narratives that tell them they are seriously flawed, damaged, unloved, unlovable, unworthy, alone, isolated, lacking in support and understanding, helpless, targeted and unsafe. But other traumatized people suffer from *falsely empowering* narratives that are grandiose, entitled, irresponsible, blaming, preoccupied with settling scores and getting revenge, categorically condemnatory, judgmental, disdainful, and righteously indignant.<sup>4</sup> Where **disempowering** post-traumatic narratives are self-condemning, judging oneself as *less than* others, **falsely empowering** post-traumatic narratives condemn others and see themselves as *superior* to others. Indeed, those afflicted by falsely empowering narratives often become the traumatizers of the next generation.

At heart, however, both kinds of narratives share several essential characteristics. In both, people believe falsehoods to be truth, lies about the impossibility of equality and the inevitability of painful hierarchy. Both extremes of post-traumatic narratives are ultimately cynical and disillusioned, portraying the world as a singularly hostile, immoral, and unpredictable place, where life is unfair and people are unreliable and unworthy of trust. People often

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<sup>4</sup> See Pia Mellody (1989) for a discussion of false empowerment as an outcome of childhood trauma.

cannot contain this level of despair for too long, however, so they will tend to flip to the extreme and idealize others, demanding perfection from them and life. Of course, they are disappointed when the idealized subject can't possibly meet their exaggerated standards, and they then flip back to disillusionment and cynicism.

It is important to point out that post-traumatic narratives are not totally false, but they are extreme. As we know only too well, the world can be dangerous, people can be deceitful, life can hurt, and parts of us can be broken. However, this is only part of the story, only part of the time.

## POST-TRAUMATIC NARRATIVES AND DEEP PESSIMISM

Another way to describe post-traumatic narratives is to say that they are characterized by *deep pessimism*. Deep pessimism leaves us convinced that our problems are permanent, pervasive, and personal (see Reivich and Shatte, 2001; Seligman, 1990 for descriptions of these pessimistic explanatory styles and other individual styles for explaining adversity).

**Permanence:** Always — Never: It's not just that we were colonized and mistreated, perhaps even for centuries, it's that we will *always* be discriminated against, and they will *never* change. It's not just that we are hurting in this time period; deep pessimism reflects the belief that we have been permanently and *forever* broken as a people. It's not just that people can't be trusted when they're drunk, it's that people are *never* to be trusted. Labeling people or oneself as "a fraud" or "a drunk," for example, becomes a fixed and unchangeable condition. *People or things will always be bad and will never change.*

**Pervasiveness:** Everything (totally) — Nothing (none): We were not just hurt, but *totally* damaged. They did not just act badly in that moment, *everything* they do is wrong. It's not just that our abusive uncle is not to be trusted, it's that all men are not to be trusted. *Everything is spoiled and nothing can be done about it.*

**Personalization:** Me — Them: If something is not my fault, it is your fault. Our vision is constricted — too narrow — and we take other people's behaviours too personally when they have little or nothing to do with us, or we take responsibility when someone else blew it. It is as if we need revenge

**TABLE X: Select Examples of Post-traumatic Narratives**  
**[Black for disempowering post-traumatic narratives; Blue for falsely empowering post-traumatic narratives]**

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Post-traumatic Narrative (Subtexts)</i>
Defenselessness and helplessness	The world is hostile, immoral, and unpredictable. I am powerless to change my fate and am unable to protect myself from constant dangers. <i>That group or person is vulnerable, but we are invincible.</i>
Injustice	Life is unfair; God will fail us/me. <i>God is on our side (we are the just ones.)</i>
Untrustworthiness	I am untrustworthy; I can't be trusted with responsibility; our people can't be trusted with authority. <i>Those "others" are unreliable, dangerous and not to be trusted; but I am or we are impeccably trustworthy.</i>
Unworthiness	I am not worth helping and don't deserve abundance; Humanity in general is debauched (original sin notion) and deserves to suffer. <i>The other is unworthy of love and respect; we alone deserve authority, prosperity, control, sovereignty.</i>
Insufficiency	Nothing I ever do is good enough; I am incapable. Humanity is never good enough. <i>Nothing s/he does or they do is good enough, but I am or we are perfectly competent.</i>
Toxic Shame	I am bad at my core; I must be crazy to feel and act this way. We (Humanity) are pitiful and shameful creatures. <i>S/he or they are degraded and shameful; but I am shameless — everything I do is honorable.</i>
Chronic Guilt	It must have been my fault — it always is — I'm responsible and deserve to be mistreated. Humanity has everything to atone for. <i>It is always the fault of that group (scapegoating), but we are blameless.</i>
Brokenness	I am broken, irreversibly damaged by what was done to me, and I can't be put back together again. <i>That person or that group is damaged beyond repair, but I am inviolable.</i>

— even if we have to beat ourselves up to get it. Somebody must suffer for what happened, and we must personally get revenge. We must discredit explanations that do not blame someone. Someone is to blame! I cannot seem to understand the possibility that the guy at the bar slugged me because

he was drunk and angry about having lost his job or distraught after his wife walked out on him; rather, he slugged ME and deserves to be beaten to within an inch of his life. I cannot accept the explanation that Dad, himself raised in a violent family, was an immature adult and a poor parent when he beat us senseless; rather, we must have done something to incur such wrath. *It's my fault or it's your fault*; somebody must suffer for it.

We hear in these descriptions and examples not only the disempowering post-traumatic narratives, but also the tone of the *falsely empowering* narratives which tend toward **righteous indignation, disdain, and contempt**. Falsely empowered post-traumatic narratives are deeply pessimistic about people and life as well as profoundly arrogant: I hold the truth; I am entitled to behave as I wish; I am accountable to no one. Sometimes, people can be disempowered in one situation, and falsely empowered in another. A child who is repeatedly beaten by his father receives two lessons simultaneously. By, in effect, communicating that "I am bigger than you and can do whatever I want with you," the father disempowers the child. But at the same time, the child is falsely empowered by the implicit message, "And when you get to be an adult man like me, you too can do whatever you want to those smaller and less than you." People thus often draw multiple conclusions from events in their lives, leaving *contradictory* narratives vying for dominion in any one person's mind at any given moment in time. In moments of crisis or stress, a traumatized person's *default setting* is to fall back to early-formed stories.

## THE POWER OF POST-TRAUMATIC NARRATIVES

To summarize, post-traumatic narratives tend to be *habitual* and automatic. When we return to these thoughts over and over again, the groove deepens and the thoughts become habitual. Tacit and taken for granted, our cherished narratives become like the air we breathe, but in this case, the air is poisoned. These damaging assumptions about the self, others, and the world become the *default setting* that people return to, particularly in moments of stress. They dangerously motivate behaviours and permeate interpersonal and social interactions. These unspoken narratives are a form of self-hypnosis that keeps us enslaved to the past and frozen. We respond not to what is happening to us right now, today, but to something that happened in the past. When traumatized peoples are in part *frozen in the past and not present to*

*this moment's reality*, it gets in the way of solving today's problems and enjoying today's blessings.

Post-traumatic narratives also *act like filters*: they allow in some light, but not all, letting certain kinds of information be absorbed, but not others. Specifically, they filter out perceptions of unfolding events and interpretations that contradict them. Karen Reivich calls this the Velcro and Teflon effects: information from the outside that fits our narrative bylines sticks like Velcro; evidence that does not glide right off like Teflon. In the end, we come to notice and see those things that confirm our stories, stories that, you will recall, are themselves only partial. In this way, post-traumatic narratives become powerfully *self-referential and self-reinforcing*. Because we see the world through these narratives and act as though they were true, we begin to elicit from the world those behaviours that in turn support our narratives. Tragically, post-traumatic narratives thus tend to be *self-fulfilling prophecies*: if you believe that you are unlovable, that people are untrustworthy, or that life is unfair, then that is the experience you will more likely continue to have.

One last individual example: When Shirley was a child, she saw her overburdened mother being battered by her father. Now, as an adult, her life is run by a variety of post-traumatic narratives characterized by the themes "men are not to be trusted" and "women always get used." Shirley is being courted by Henry who has returned early from work in order to prepare a surprise dinner for her birthday. With every one of Henry's loving acts, Shirley's post-traumatic narratives are being challenged, but her pain is deep and has never been soothed before, so she continues to hold on to her belief in his inherent untrustworthiness. Arriving from work at Henry's house, to a cooked meal and a romantically set table, she is not only ungrateful but accusatory: "If you think you're going to get sex out of me for cooking me a meal, you've got another thing coming..." Henry finally explodes, slamming the door as he leaves. He gets drunk that night and spends the night with one of Shirley's inebriated friends. She has elicited in him the behaviour she expected in the first place.

## THE COMMUNITY IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA

Now, there's nothing new or exotic about trauma. Human beings have been exposed to trauma throughout time. Some people might even say that it is a

precondition to being alive. In an ideal world, healthy families, communities, and societies can provide a healing context for people that are traumatized (we saw this in the case of Sam). A person who has experienced trauma can return to families and communities that will challenge their individually-formed post-traumatic narratives. In the case of Henry and Shirley, if Henry could have taken things less personally, if he had only understood what was going on and that Shirley's behaviour had nothing to do with him, the evening might have played out differently. If he and others around Shirley could have patiently continued to contradict her narratives, Shirley over time might have begun to dismantle her post-traumatic narratives and replace them with more healthy and true ones. But Henry and Shirley were both members of damaged communities.

A healthy society has a medicine cabinet full of balanced, optimistic, gratitude-inspiring, and abundance-oriented collective narratives that tell of getting through dark times, the goodness of life on earth and the goodness of people, and how people are deserving of love, abundance and joy. These healing narratives honour the self that was hurt and all others, and offer understanding of trauma as a stage in growth. Healthy traditional societies were aware of what happens to people when they experience terrible things, and they had well-developed methods of dealing with individual trauma. Some communal mourning rituals and ceremonies like the sweat lodge released feelings of sorrow and despair. Other traditions and norms countered deep pessimism, like the practice of providing meat to the wives and children of dead members of a tribe, and of adopting orphaned members into one's care. They had means of soothing and de-catastrophizing: ceremonies, rituals and stories that reinforced a sense of worth, possibility and optimism, that channeled interpretations of events along lines that fostered acceptance, integration, and transcendence, and that allowed for life to continue and even be enhanced after disasters had taken place. There were always humour and joyful celebrations of gratitude to balance out the reality of suffering.

Thus, though Indigenous peoples were not new to trauma, they have had pre-existing institutional mechanisms to cope with and channel pain, as well as ways to re-establish hope and confidence. Under more stable circumstances, when an individual experienced the various traumas that make up life on earth, that individual would be able to reach into his family and community,



and, utilizing whatever sociocultural and spiritual resources were available, heal from the trauma and move on with life. Most traditional societies have a great deal of innate resilience and strength. However, **these social and cultural resources that help to deal with life's traumas — that help people to heal and to make positive meaning out of the events that happen to them — are themselves vulnerable to damage.**

What happens if you come from whole families or communities that have had the same traumatic experiences over an extended period of time — when there's been widespread and prolonged collective trauma? For example, consider the boarding school experience in which generations of young Native children were reared and socialized into particularly limiting personal narratives. What kinds of stories could children possibly make up to explain separation from families, chronic neglect and abuse at the hands of caregivers? What justification could children see for the hostile and discriminatory treatment many received? What were these children as adults likely to believe about the world in which they lived and about themselves? What would they teach their children?

As in the case of the boarding schools, many colonial policies traumatized not only individuals but also collectivities and, therefore, collective resources to deal with trauma. The trauma was so severe that it damaged the entire community's medicine chest of health-giving, life-enhancing narratives. When enough people in a society have experienced enough trauma long enough, the narratives in the society's medicine chest become corrupted. Previously healthy narratives become infected with the very virus of despair, revenge, inferiority and superiority that the healthy narratives are supposed to counteract and heal. When all those around you are mesmerized by these damaging narratives — when whole families, whole societies or collectivities of peoples suffer from trauma — it's easy to stay stuck in debilitating personal narratives and behaviours. And when a whole group is frozen in trauma, it can mean that over time, their *collective* narratives become post-traumatic.

Without remedies for trauma, whole communities lose trust and retreat into a frozen state. Collective post-traumatic narratives emerge out of the resulting sense of alienation, isolation, and disillusionment: "We are all alone in this.... We have been abandoned.... Nobody outside cares about us.... Our suffering does not count to them.... They only do things for us when there's

something in it for them. . . . Those others only care about themselves.” If the prevailing mood, perceptions and evolving post-traumatic narratives are not countered effectively, disenchantment develops into more enduring cynicism and paranoia. Boundaries drawn between “us” and “them” become ever more rigid. Over time, the alienation generates collective narratives of “better than” and “less than” — of racism, sexism, chauvinism, ethnocentrism, and other “isms.” In extreme cases, this can lead to the dehumanization and demonization of “others.” This downward spiral can ignite aggression and violence, and eventually can lead to exhaustion and the collapse of the society.

Nazi Germany provides an examples of an entire society caught in a web of collective *post-traumatic narratives*. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Germany was in the throes of extreme economic pain, cultural disorientation, and political instability that allowed the Nazis to take hold of their society. Germany had been defeated in World War I and was dealing with the loss of life, the sting of political humiliation, and economic collapse and depression. In these circumstances, Hitler misled his people off a cliff by reinforcing their post-traumatic narratives. These false narratives explained Germany’s actual trauma as the fault of the Jews. It also justified dramatic action: Jews (and many others) were *inferior* to Germans, and the innate superiority of German “civilization” entitled them to dominate over and annihilate all those they considered inferior. This particular virulent strain of post-traumatic narrative resulted in the murder of six million innocent Jews and many other millions worldwide. It also turned ordinary, hardworking Germans into forces of profound evil — to those around them, but, as significantly, to themselves.

## COLLECTIVE POST-TRAUMATIC NARRATIVE STRANDS IN RELIGION

The institution of religion is one of the key “shelves” in a community’s medicine cabinet that promote healing. The “bottles” on this shelf — the religious narratives, rituals, beliefs, ceremonies — are designed to help people get through and transcend experiences of suffering. One of the central acts of colonization was the imposition of Christianity (and Islam) on the Indigenous world. Cultural renewal necessarily requires that we clarify what to keep from the “bottles” that were imposed and what to leave behind — discerning which swapped “medicines” have been in fact toxic all along and which have

served their shelf life and need to be tossed out, which continue to restore health and can be kept, and others available from the larger store that might be worth adding to the inventory in one's particular cabinet.

Unfortunately, institutions like religion that are supposed to help us heal become instruments of trauma when they are infected by the virus of post-traumatic narratives — these are the bottles in the medicine cabinet where the skull and bones on their labels have been omitted and are therefore mistaken for healing medicines. Post-traumatic collective narratives can come to colour the way we interpret our religions and the way we tell our histories. They are embedded in how we conduct our ceremonies and rituals, what we commemorate and how we frame our commemorations, the kinds of memorials we set up.

Disempowering post-traumatic narratives in religious teaching include the portrayal of humans as pitiful and degraded beings, an obsessive preoccupation with apocalyptic world endings (with the message that the world is totally unsafe), and a powerful belief in the saviour or Messiah to come who will fix it all because, after all, we are helpless, broken, and incapable of solving our own problems. Other post-traumatic strains in religious narrative include: the glorification of suffering; the instilling of fear, shame, and unworthiness; and an insistence on the value of self-denial, total sacrifice, and punishment. In effect, says the religious post-traumatic narrative, “we are unworthy and life on earth is about suffering.” There is no starker evidence of a post-traumatic narrative than the chilling message left by the Al-Qaeda spokesman following the 2004 Madrid bombings: “You love life, and we love death.” Post-traumatic narratives are the parts of all of us, like Al Qaeda, that exalt death over life.

The falsely empowered post-traumatic narrative often emerges in religion as the absolutist belief that one knows the unqualified truth of what God wants, and that as “God’s chosen warrior,” one is entitled to promulgate this truth. All three of the Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — have in common what one of my teachers, Rabbi Zalman Shaechter, founder of the Jewish Renewal Movement, has described as *triumphalism*. Triumphalism is the belief that “When Judgment Day comes, WE [if you’re a Jew, the Jews; if you’re a Christian, the Christians; if you are a Muslim, the Muslims] will be the ones that the Holy One will draw close to Him; we are

the ones God will choose to sit by His side; and the rest, well, the rest, finally, will be disavowed.” According to triumphalism, “We are the *first/last, best, true* religion, and only through devotion to our first/last/best prophet and our Way — the true and only way — will you find redemption. Some of the other ways may, with great luck, get you a long way in the direction of God, **but all other ways are incomplete and lesser than ours...**” Triumphalism, with its suggestion of a special and exclusive connection to the Divine and to Truth, is falsely empowering and grandiose. For, of course, no one is any more special to the Divine than anyone else.

Religious post-traumatic narratives have played a particular role in the traumatization of Indigenous peoples. European post-traumatic narratives imagined a special relationship with God. Out of this perceived special relationship, Europeans felt falsely entitled to meddle, and, indeed, had the obligation to convert masses to what they believed to be their superior Christian narratives. These beliefs epitomize false empowerment, yet if you believed in earnest that the *only* way to be “saved” was to believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, (or, if you were Muslim, to be “saved” is to believe the last true prophet is none other than the prophet Mohammed), then, as a compassionate and good person, you had to do whatever it takes — intimidation, war, colonization — in order to save a people. For centuries, these sorts of religious post-traumatic narratives have fueled abuse of Indigenous peoples in the name of saving them, and it’s still happening today in places like Africa.

It is important to note that most of the Europeans who traumatized Native peoples were not themselves necessarily traumatized. They were possessed by the infection of post-traumatic narratives, but many were privileged Europeans whose lives contained few stressors or negative experiences. In other words, many Christian missionaries and western settlers were not necessarily victims of trauma themselves. Nevertheless, they were under the influence of powerful falsely empowering post-traumatic narratives. I describe these religious narratives as post-traumatic because much of Christian doctrine, and for that matter the doctrine of all three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism and Islam also), emerged out of a context of trauma. For example, many of the writers of the New Testament had witnessed the excruciating torture and crucifixion of their beloved brother and teacher Jesus. They experienced brother betraying brother, as well as betrayal at the hands of parts of their own community,

especially the authority structure. The whole beginning of Christian history is one of persecution and suffering. The many dedicated people who wrote down the story of Jesus and, later, those who decided which of the many doctrinal pieces would form the New Testament had perceptual filters that were no doubt affected by the extreme nature of traumas they had endured. It is no surprise then that, along with all the wisdom and the glory found in the New Testament, we also find post-traumatic narrative strands that are responsible for perpetuating trauma into the future.

But it is also important to note a healthier narrative strand in Christianity, one that draws our attention not so much to Christ's agony, but instead to life-enhancing and uplifting doctrines regarding Jesus' life and inevitable resurrection. In this narrative, there is suffering, but life is not all about suffering: it can be good, God wants us to thrive, and the possibility of rapture is here in the present time without leaving this world. Heaven on earth is possible. It is to narratives like these that we must turn as we try to undo the damage of post-traumatic narratives and create new healing narratives for our communities and ourselves.

This paper is not meant to be an exposition on Christian narrative *per se*, but the larger question is: How do we distinguish whether the general direction of a narrative, religious or otherwise, is healthy-giving or post-traumatic? A first test is exquisitely simple: How does it make you *feel* to rehearse this narrative in your mind? Does this narrative enhance your joy or deepen your fear? Shedding post-traumatic narratives is a learning process: we move away from post-traumatic narratives when we move towards greater states of joy. We might imagine a continuum of emotional states, with collapse (paralyzing depression, fear, powerlessness) at one end, and, at the other end, joy (freedom, empowerment, delight). Close to the "collapse/depression" endpoint but still a step closer to joy are feelings of anger and blame. These difficult emotions are nonetheless a step towards greater joy because they take people out of numbness and paralysis and into feeling greater power. Beyond rage and blame, even emotions like being overwhelmed, frustrated, and bored can be a move forward toward joy. Eventually, along the continuum closer to joy, we find emotions such as acceptance, hopefulness, optimism, and finally empowerment, freedom and joy. So then, shedding post-traumatic narratives is a process over time of always reaching towards those narratives that yield us

greater states of joy. Shedding post-traumatic narratives is an act of personal sovereignty, of being free of limiting beliefs that have held us hostage.

There are at least two other points to consider. In this process, the intention is to move out of negative, destructive states as fast as possible. The only way to do this, however, is one step at a time: rarely can anyone move from depression to ecstasy in one fell swoop. You move up the continuum (alter your narratives) incrementally. Also, because emotions serve as a guidance system, the healing of any underlying personal trauma is of utmost importance since trauma tends to numb and dissociate us from our feelings. Trauma interferes with our capacity to truly feel, and therefore prevents us from using our feeling state as a guidance system towards altering our narratives.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we revive our collective mechanisms for healing — our various rituals, ceremonies, dances, and songs — we have to be deeply aware of the stories they tell so that we don't perpetuate a post-traumatic culture into future generations. Anything that makes us feel “less than” or “better than” others, anything that either disempowers us or falsely entitles us, has got to go. Anything that makes gross generalizations, that includes “always,” “never,” “everything,” and/or “nothing” statements, anything that is blaming has got to go. In their place, we must revive those narratives and practices that help us release our pain and give us perspective; that instill hope, optimism, and a sense that life can be good and abundant; that embrace the notions that people can be tested, then trusted, and that we are whole, regardless of life's trials. Life-enhancing cultural renewal requires a willingness to weed out those elements of post-traumatic subculture that no longer serve us and keep us stuck. When we retrieve practices and norms from the past and innovate new ones in the present, we need to be discerning, also, of what we are bringing in.

As the Zoroastrian teachings instruct, the choices we make individually and collectively in how we direct our thoughts can make the difference between creating heaven or hell in the here and now, on our beloved Mother Earth. We choose paradise.

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