

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Trauma: Spiritual R

The flash of a bomb, and then another: in an instant, our world is changed. We are glued to screens of all sizes, the “false comfort of flashing pixels” besieging us with information. The screens consume us; we are consumed by the full catastrophe, the full knowledge and horror. We run on the adrenaline that rises in waves to combat sensory overload. And then we wait and pace, “sheltered in place,” strangely, willingly, gratefully imprisoned in our homes, the streets of our post-apocalyptic city empty, while armed officers scour our streets and backyards.

Bearing witness to mayhem and heroism, we tilt wildly between bottomless sorrow and tears of pride. But the distance between us and what unfolds on those screens is also dehumanizing. “Can you hear yourself think? Can you manage more than bursts of confusion and anger[, sadness and grief]? Can you feel your humanity...?”¹²

And now, how can we begin to process all that transpired in those few, long days? How do we begin to *live* again in the aftermath of catastrophe? This morning, I want to share a little bit about recovering from trauma. In this time together, let us come to rest, and reflect, and refresh our souls.

¹ David Sirota, “Silent introspection may be one way to deal with events,” *The Gazette* (Colorado Springs), Saturday, April 20th, 2013, p. A13

² On Monday, April 22nd, one week after the bombing, 38-year-old Heather Abbott’s left leg was amputated below the knee, the fifteenth explosion victim to lose a limb. She hasn’t had time to think about the perpetrators; she says “I don’t even know how to pronounce their names. *I haven’t watched TV since the incident, and I think that’s one of the things that’s helped me get through this, ... [just to] focus on my recovery and how to proceed with my life.*” Emphasis mine. Please see commonhealth.wbur.org/2013/04/marathon-bombing-victim-makes-the-decision-to-amputate?utm_source=cc&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=nwsltr-13-04-26

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“After a traumatic experience, ... when [our] sense of safety and trust are shattered, ... it’s normal to feel frightened, sad, anxious, [numb] ... disconnected ... [and a little] crazy.... It’s very common to have [nightmares,] ... and to find it difficult to stop thinking about what happened. These are normal reactions to abnormal events.”³

For most of us, these symptoms will be short-lived. As the shock abates, the symptoms will lift.

Some of us, however, get stuck. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is the result of remaining in shock. PTSD is characterized by re-experiencing the trauma with intrusive memories and flashbacks; avoiding re-engaging in life; ... having a hard time feeling anything; having trouble focusing; feeling mistrustful, being hyper-vigilant; and feeling guilty, ashamed, irritable, alienated, depressed. If you or someone you know is experiencing PTSD, please speak with me, or anyone on the ministry team. It’s important to know that there’s help – good help – and the earlier you get it, the better.

For the rest of us, there are several ways to transform and heal our experience of trauma. I’m going to share four ways that will help.

We’re already doing the very first thing we can do for ourselves and one another: *connect*. Don’t isolate. Be with others. We’re here, together, this morning, and it’s critical that we keep showing up. Everyone in this city has a story about Marathon Monday and about “sheltering in place” during the manhunt that Friday. Keep telling the stories, and talking through your feelings.

“When Copley Square reopened Wednesday, ... patrons bounced from bar to bar, some leaving twenty dollar tips after ordering just one drink.... Hotel staff and bartenders patronized their competitors to try to spread the money around. Restaurants sent food to employees at other restaurants still cleaning up after the blasts.”⁴ *Connect*.

³ For the source of this information (and more) about response to trauma and healing from its effects, please see Helpguide.org, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Symptoms, Treatment, and Self-Help*

⁴ Andrew Ryan, “Mayor Menino an eager customer on Boylston St.,” *The Boston Globe*, 4/26/13

I learned this lesson during the AIDS crisis. My friend Ronnie⁵ and I were part of a circle of caregivers in the trenches. Eviscerated by some particularly horrible death, or shattered by some new diagnosis, we'd gather and, in being together, find the strength to carry on. But Ronnie never joined us. He remained detached, dealing with it on his own, in his own way ... or so we thought.

Then one day, when the worst was over, about six months after the discovery of the anti-retroviral "cocktail" that brought people living with AIDS back from the brink of death, Ronnie was in the produce department, choosing melons. In digging through the bin, he uncovered a completely rotten one. He backed away, stricken, then turned and walked out of the supermarket. A mutual friend found him curled up in a little ball, sobbing, inconsolable. He was incapacitated for weeks. Later, as Ronnie told the story, he explained, simply, "The melon was dead."

Obviously, it wasn't about the melon.

We can grieve now, or we can grieve later ... but we will grieve. Opting to put off working through trauma now only insures that it will fester, sneak up on us when we least expect it, and make our lives a misery later.

The first way we can begin to heal from trauma is *connect*. And a second way is to *just say no* to alcohol and other drugs.

Anything we put between ourselves and truth of our experience will only serve to numb us, to make us angrier and more depressed, and to separate us from each other and from help. Whatever temporary benefit we experience from self-medicating will be outweighed by the ways that, over time, it amplifies the effects of trauma.

Connect. Just say no to alcohol and other drugs. And a third way we can deal with the aftermath of trauma is to *get out* and get into nature.

The night after the bombings, after the healing service here, we filed out of the sanctuary in a candle light vigil, surrounding the lagoon in the

⁵ not his real name

Public Garden.⁶ While I had envisioned it as a kind of “lighting up the darkness: love wins” gesture of defiance, it was profoundly soothing and peaceful to be outside. American writer and farmer Wendell Berry wrote,

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Connect. *Just say no* to alcohol and other drugs. *Get out* into nature. And a fourth way to begin to heal and transform our experience of trauma is to *challenge hopelessness*.

Trauma is the aftermath of having been rendered completely out of control: vulnerable and powerless. It’s up to us to muster the will and find the ways to determine to overcome any image of ourselves as helpless or hopeless. We are, in fact, *able* helpers, and there is hope. The words of dear Mr. Rogers, of all people, went viral on Facebook: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news,” he said, “my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day,” he continued, “especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.”

On the Wednesday after the bombings, Heba Abolaban, a 26-year old physician, was pushing her nine-month-old daughter in a stroller down Commercial Street in Malden when she was attacked by a crazed

⁶ Wendy Ellertson shared her sense of how good it was that the slight breeze kept blowing out our candles; we had to get the light from someone else, and pass it on. That was *connect*.

Islamophobe. This past Monday evening, many of us from Arlington Street made our way to Malden for an interfaith service for peace, organized in response to the attack. It was standing room only, a powerful testament to a community that will not stand for bigotry and violence in its midst. One of the best ways to challenge helplessness, to feel a sense of agency in our lives again and to reclaim our power, is to show up and be counted.

Labor organizer Mother Jones said, “Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living.” You challenge hopelessness every time you raise your hand and volunteer, give money, give yourself and throw your weight to stand on the side of love.

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Just one more thing: A young man grew up very near here and graduated with lots of friends from one of our public high schools. He won a scholarship, and began to attend one of our public colleges. And then, somehow, at 19 years old, he went on a killing spree, the latest in a long line of young man with similar stories.

Another young man had been missing from Brown University for more than a week, and was briefly accused of committing that crime. His body was found in the Providence River this past Thursday, an apparent suicide. His family said this: “This last month has changed our lives forever, and we hope it will change yours, too.... Be open to letting someone in when it is you who is faltering. Take care of one another. Be gentle. Be compassionate. Lend your hand. We need it. The world needs it...”⁷

We may never know what happened to the Boston Marathon bomber, or to the Brown Student; we may never really know what happens to very lost boys. But let us search our souls and do what we can to do better by them, and by our children who are, after all, all ours. We are called to stand on the side of love.

Beloved spiritual companions, our world is changed. We are changed. As we, and this city we love, begin to heal, may we remember to

Connect,
Just say no to alcohol and other drugs,
Get out,

⁷ Meghan E. Irons, “Body of missing Brown student is ID’d,” *The Boston Globe*, 4/26/13

and
challenge helplessness.
May we be changed for the better.
May we stand on the side of love.