TRAUMA AND SPIRITUALITY:
THE JOURNEY TO AWAKENING

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Introduction

Trauma can be a journey to a spiritual awakening. If sin and moral failure can be the catalyst to lead one to repent and spiritually return to God, then perhaps the same can be seen in the realm of the wounds of trauma. Trauma challenges us at the very core of our self and our spirit. Trauma opens us to spiritual questions and new worldviews. Many have travelled this path of healing and wholeness that leads to spiritual enlightenment, but in today’s contemporary society, those that could help us navigate through the darkness of traumatic injury to spiritual healing are few in number. Finding an inclusive spiritual model that transcends religious denominations for chaplains in institutional settings is vital.

We have guides, however, who have traveled the terrain before us. Through the work of existential and transpersonal psychologist, Dr. Robert Grant, we will seek to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of trauma from a clinical and theoretical perspective.1 Joined with the insights of Dr. Shelly Rambo we will provide a hermeneutical, theological and spiritual lens for understanding the journey to the healing of trauma. Finally, from Dr. Viktor Frankl we will seek to explore the journey of transformation through trauma that leads can lead to a life of deeper meaning, purpose and hope despite the wounds of trauma.

1 Robert Grant, The Way of the Wound: a Spirituality of Trauma and Transformation (Oakland: Self published, 1999). Grant is a worldwide lecturer trainer on psychological trauma, sexuality, and spirituality He works with religious, business, military and international relief organizations; clinical provider and supervisor for clergy, counselors, psychologists, and other mental health workers in areas of trauma and victimization
**Trauma Defined**

Psychological trauma from experiences, such as child abuse, domestic violence, rape, violent crime, war, vehicular accidents, terminal illness, unexpected loss of loved ones and natural disasters, are becoming increasingly common. The DSM-IV-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) states that a trauma involves the threat or the perceived threat to one’s life. \(^2\) Trauma can involve a negative experience outside of our normal realm of experience. Trauma is like an earthquake that can shake the foundations of our beliefs about life and shatter all our assumptions of trust. When violent crimes happen, like “Columbine” or “911” or the recent Aurora movie theatre massacre, the trauma is felt nationally. Grant says that to be “traumatized is to be rendered helpless, powerless and/or living in fear of losing one’s physical, emotional and spiritual integrity.” \(^3\) A traumatic event can trigger intense emotional reactions. Some people respond to trauma with few reactions; others with many. The types of emotional reactions people have following a traumatic event are based on many factors: whether the event was sudden, how long it lasted, how directly affected the person was and whether the person experienced traumas in the past. When intense reactions last for months or longer, experts refer to this as "post-traumatic stress." Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the most common diagnostic category used to describe symptoms arising from emotionally traumatic experience(s). It is a psychological diagnosis in the DSM-IV-TR. \(^4\) There are three clusters of symptoms in PTSD: “Intrusions, such as flashbacks or nightmares, where the traumatic event is re-experienced. Avoidance, when the person tries to reduce exposure to people or things that might bring on their intrusive symptoms. And hyper-arousal, meaning

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\(^2\) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

\(^3\) Robert Grant, *Growth through Adversity (coming Out the Other Side of Trauma, Illness and Loss)* (San Mateo: Self published, 2008), 9.

\(^4\) *DSM-IV*. 
physiologic signs of increased arousal, such as hyper-vigilance or increased startle response.”

Grant believes that only a minority of traumatized people meet the true criteria of the diagnosis of PTSD. Most people experience “subclinical presentations of PTSD, such as mental illness and loss, along with other forms of human distress.”

Trauma can alter, damage and even destroy our world view and create feelings of being lost, insecure, disoriented and powerless. Trauma that is not addressed finds itself then “suppressed and/or overcompensated” in a number of ways, through personality disorders, eating disorders, addictions, attention deficit disorders, sexual dysfunctions and a host of bodily complaints. Grant lists the symptoms as:

- **Hyper-vigilance** that can involve a constant checking of the environment to ensure that individuals are safe and not at risk of being re-traumatized.

- **Increased startle reaction** is a strong reaction to any stimuli (sound, smell or sensation) reminiscent of prior traumatic stimuli. These stimuli typically frighten individuals; make them feel that they are heading back into danger and/or about to experience another traumatic event.

- **Intrusive/repetitive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors** also referred to as flashbacks and reliving experiences where unaddressed trauma is actively thrust into awareness.

- **Difficulties concentrating** are also as a result of trying to manage and/or hold out of awareness intrusive material. Emotional labiality - mood swings that involve a roller coaster of feelings (usually some form of sadness, depression, anxiety or rage).

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6 Grant, Growth Through Adversity, 9.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 10-11
• *Sleep and dream disturbances*, such as, difficulties falling asleep and staying asleep; including repeated awakenings and nightmares/night terrors. The aforementioned often involves feeling vulnerable and trying to ward off or protect against traumatic material and/or further injury.

• *Physical complaints* related to chronic arousal of the Sympathetic Nervous System, such as, nausea, diarrhea, sweating, and gastrointestinal problems etc…

• *Compulsive repetitions* (e.g., counting over and over from 1-10) as a means of distracting self from traumatic material that is trying to force its way into consciousness.

• *Innumerable forms of self-medication* that help individuals manage and/or de-escalate anxiety, through the use of depressants (usually alcohol and/marijuana), along with an assortment mood-altering behaviors and processes (e.g., compulsive gambling, shopping, T. V. watching, sex, over work, self-cutting etc).

All the above symptoms can desensitize (emotionally numb) and/or distract individuals from anxiety-provoking material that is pushing for conscious acknowledgment. And all of the above symptoms reflect surface manifestations of deep shifts in victim’s identity structures, in their world views, and in their images of God in the wake of a traumatic event.⁹

Another form of trauma called *secondary trauma*, is experienced by people who work with traumatized populations. Therapists, clergy, chaplains, nurses, public-health employees, doctors, spiritual directors, police officers, firemen, paramedics, relief workers, probation officers and teachers are seriously affected by the injuries, stories and struggles, for they see the worst side of human nature and those with whom they care for. “Trauma is both toxic and contagious. One cannot enter the "underworld" of trauma without having to pay a price or make a sacrifice. Those who constantly bear witness to the wounds of others absorb trauma vicariously.”¹⁰ Among health professionals, like nurses, the problem of "Burn-out" and

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⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Grant, Way of the Wound., 15
"compassion fatigue" is a significant problem. Many in the health care field want to "make things right."

Internalizing the pain of another can disrupt personal frames of meaning and lead to feelings of powerlessness. Continually seeing or hearing stories of pain and horror can challenge a professional's basic beliefs about self and society, as well as his/her need to be competent and in control. Counter-transferential reactions such as numbing, distancing, over identifying or rescuing are common amongst those who work with traumatized populations. This is especially true of professionals who carry unresolved traumas from their own childhoods. Many working with traumatized people experience a variety of post-traumatic stress reactions.¹¹

If one is not to live a life of addictions or illusions of control and other distractions, then a pathway out of the continued impacts of trauma must be found. This journey of transformation is an awakening to the spiritual dimension. Examining some definitions is necessary at the outset of this exploration.

**Spirituality Defined**

Religion and Spirituality are terms often used interchangeably, but religion is associated with adjectives such as institutional, liturgical, formal, structural, doctrinal and authoritarian. Sandra Schneiders defines spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives.”¹² Whether they are “separate enterprises with no necessary connection, or “conflicting realities” or “two dimensions of a single enterprise” is not central to our exploration of this topic, suffice to say that both religion and spirituality are concerned with providing a person with a sense of meaning, value and direction for their lives.¹³ So it is in this vein that my exploration of spirituality and trauma is directed; in what sense can a victim of

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¹¹ Ibid., 14.


trauma be benefited by embarking on a spiritual journey? Trauma creates an opening for spirituality like no other event in our lives. It open us up to the possibility to search for meaning, value, direction and healing in an intensely personal and even private way not normally dealt well by the structures of religions. Spirituality is a lens for one’s world-view and of how things work and of the forces that power them. Trauma challenges or shatters our worldview and creates uncertainty and instability about life. Whether or not a person is religious or spiritual, trauma is a spiritual experience because all the values and meanings once held beg to be reexamined. Trauma pushes the self to expand and contain the trauma.

Many people turn to religion as a source of help when they experience trauma. Through the support of a congregation, the ministry of clergy/chaplains and religious literature persons can feel more empowered, comforted and even find coping strategies. Because trauma is such a universal experience that transcends religious boundaries created by humans, we need a spirituality equally universal that would transcend for example, “Catholic Spirituality” or “Buddhist Spirituality.” Grant may have provided such a model as he weaves together the diverse research and writings of Joseph Campbell, Evelyn Underhill, and the depth psychology of Viktor Frankl and Rollo May with the traditional spiritualities of Thomas Merton and Adrian Van Kaam. Grant believes the task is to awaken the call of the Spirit and follow the call.

**The Ego, Self and Spirit**

Before moving on to a discussion of the psycho-spiritual journey for the healing of trauma, we must clarify some terms as Grant employs them. Grant uses the term “ego” in a broad sense to designate the “self,” self-concept, self-image, identity, self-understanding and “false self.” The ego or social persona is the sense of self that most of us identify with. Ego is

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15 Ibid., 236

concerned with survival, happiness, pleasure, wearing masks to make a good impression in the world, achievement, control, acquisition, social acceptance and role management. Ego is concerned with decision-making, planning and analysis.17 “Ego not only seeks, but often demands, personal and highly anthropomorphic understandings of reality and the Spirit. It wants nothing to do with faith, risk, ambiguity, paradox, mystery, uncertainty or being led to the truth…ego, like the psychotic wants to depend on no one.”18

Trauma has the power to expose the ego and crack open its lack of substance and cohesiveness. But it is precisely at this point when the cracks are exposed that the initiation for the transformative journey of healing can begin. Grant says that the “radical lack of substance, underlying the ego, is where the Spirit initially seems most remote…[but] where the Spirit resides.”19

The “Self” on the other hand is intuitive and in Eastern culture understood to be in a “realm of consciousness existing beyond the ego….often referred to as the "Non-Self " or that part of consciousness that can unite with all that is other….knows that life is eternal, unchanging and that all forms of life are linked together.”20 The Self wants to relate to all of creation, seeks truth, is holistic, and questions the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. Whereas the ego wants little to do with matters of the Self and Spirit, the Self seeks to become whole through relationships whereas the ego seeks to become whole unto itself.21

The Spirit “animates and sustains all of life…is shared by all, resides in the essence of all…invites all beings to participate in a divine plan…draws all life towards itself and its

17 Ibid., 39.
18 Ibid., 40.
19 Ibid., 18.
20 Ibid., 41.
21 Ibid.
goals.” Although Robert Grant is a loyal son of the Catholic Church, in his writings, God is not part of his map of the journey of transformation from trauma. However in relation to the Spirit Grant says that God is a “manageable image of partialisation of the Spirit. God is to the Spirit what ego is to the Self. It is the Self that relates to the Spirit while the ego relates to God.”

All of us Grant says live in a socio-historical reality or prepackaged version of reality he calls the “Box.” It is the created image given to us and enforced by culture and all the gatekeepers of culture (i.e., parents, teachers, priests, coaches bosses, politicians medical professionals editors of media). It is a paradigm, a linguistic map, a matrix we grow up believing is reality. When something happens that falls outside this “box” – this is trauma. When these things happen, we try to explain it away from within our “box” with statements like “this is not supposed to happen to me, it happens to others” or we may resort to a theological or spiritual explanation within our “box” such as, it is “God’s will” or “God is testing me.” Whether it is scientific or theological, our explanations are the frameworks that try to make sense of our trauma. Most people don’t know we live in these “boxes.” Like the character “Neo,” in the movie “The Matrix,” we live in an illusion about reality until something happens – trauma. We don’t want to believe there is even a “box,” so in our fear and confusion, we would rather crawl back into our comfortable “box” and be with the “herd.” We either “stay on the margins of society and remain marginalized (i.e., homeless, mentally ill, criminal or revolutionary), or we edit our traumatic experience and then cram it back into our pre-trauma world view and belief system.”

The third option is the path of transformation; it is the hero’s journey, the mystical spiritual path to wholeness that deconstructs the ego that has been painstakingly been built over

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22 Ibid., 43-43.
23 Ibid., 43.
25 Ibid. 
years. Grant says a traumatic event is like tasting the “fruit of knowledge,” it has the power to knock you out of the “box” and can be the opportunity to send you down a new road from which both mystics and madmen have emerged. Often people try to journey without maps or guides, but even when we do have a map, we must remember the “map is not the terrain.”

The Journey of Awakening

Trauma can be a hellish experience but it can also be the catalyst or initiation of spiritual growth and enlightenment. Grant maps out the journey that “shamans, mystics and mythic heroes” have traveled by drawing on the work of Campbell and Underhill. The journey of transformation is usually not begun until there is a shock or trauma where the ego surrenders before the Spirit and acknowledges that “it” is “no thing” and needs to be connected to something greater than themselves, Grant calls this the “Shock Phase.” This journey needs an initial catalyst to start us off on the way. Indeed all of the greatest mystics in the Christian tradition Grant cites become great, not in spite of, but because of their traumatic experiences.

Ignatius was nearly killed on a battlefield and left to die. John of the Cross was tortured by his own confreres and put in prison. Looking at the lives of almost every church father and mother, they grew up in the midst of plagues or catastrophes, were surrounded by cultural upheaval and war, and often underwent numerous traumas of their own...(Christ) had at least six Criterion A Events according to the DSM[-IV]. He had a price on his head as a kid. I’m sure he had some questions about who his biological father was. People were trying to kill him, at several different times in his life. His best friends betrayed him. He was publicly humiliated, scourged and crucified. That’s a lot of trauma. I believe that Christ became what he was supposed to become because of his traumas. More specifically, he fully became himself – he developed the core or essence of his person – because he learned the lessons of his wounds.

26 Eric Von Clausewitz, a 19th century military strategist is credited with this phrase. Grant quotes it in “Growth through Adversity”, 27.


28 Ibid., 46-47.

29 Grant, “Trauma, Addiction and Spirituality” lecture.
Grant mentions that not many people know that Francis of Assisi was a prisoner of war and nearly died in a prison camp; he believes this was the beginning of his conversion. When we sanitize the lives of saints to show their spiritual profundity, we then find we cannot relate to their lives and see how their traumas were really the path to their wholeness.\textsuperscript{30}

With the shock experienced, a crisis is created that demands one turn inward with profound questions about the meaning of life because the old answers no longer suffice. Stanislaus Grof defines this as a “spiritual emergency.” It is a “critical and experientially difficult stage of a profound psychological transformation that involves one's entire being.”\textsuperscript{31}

Grant believes that a victim of trauma must move through the stages of purgation, illumination and union (Underhill) or Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey,” also known as the “Mono-myth that is found throughout the world as a blueprint of growth and experience in life. It is reflected in movies, literature ancient myths and all the world religions. First, the hero faces the crisis or “Shock” then comes, “The Call,” but the hero may avoid and even refuse the call. Then comes, a separation from one’s own familiar world where the “Purgation” must happen. During this phase, the “call is answered” followed by the “entering of the unknown.” Grant then discusses the “dark night of the ego” similar to John of the Cross and “dark night of the self” (soul). In this phase, the ego and self once separated, undergo initiation and transformation, where the old ways of thinking and acting are altered or destroyed, opening the way to a new level of awareness, where compassion, skill and freedom can be found.\textsuperscript{32} After successfully meeting the challenges through the dark nights, and encounters with evil, the initiate takes the journey's final steps, to “Illumination” and the “return to his world” or “Union.”

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., The Hero’s Journey can be divided into either 3 steps, of separation, initiation, and return, but it also mapped out with 8 or 12 stages too. The Spiritual Emergency blog cited above has a discussion of these. Grant’s model inspired by Underhill is discussed in “Way of the Wound.”
The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed discussion of all the stages whereby the ego and self with all its illusions are to be stripped down, so as to re-build the Self with compassion, interconnectedness and wholeness, nevertheless, the journey from victim, to heroic survivor, to “wounded healer” is the journey of transformation. Grant’s work is an amazingly detailed map and contribution to chaplains and all who work with trauma victims and survivors for it reminds one that the only way out of trauma is through it, no going around it or escaping it with reinforcement from our theological “boxes.”

**Shelly Rambo**

Having discussed the structure of trauma and its impact on the human person, I will turn to the insights from another scholar of trauma and spirituality, Dr. Shelly Rambo of Boston University. Shifting to examining trauma from a Christian context, what does the Christian narrative teach us about how to understand trauma? The story of Jesus’ passion, his death, resurrection and ascension form the paradigm for how Christians understand trauma and death. Jesus is crucified, but he is resurrected; this is at the center of the Christian faith. Christian tradition refers to this story as the *triduum*, the three-day event attested to by the Gospels. Jesus is crucified on Good Friday, buried on Holy Saturday, and raised on the Third day. Easter Sunday is God’s day of victory, God has the last word. Death is not the end of life. In the resurrected Christ, death is conquered, we mortals are free to live without fear of death for it has no power over us. But for people who have experienced trauma and death in a tragic manner, does the Christian redemptive lens adequately speak to those who have had these life altering events? For Rambo, the redemptive narrative of a victorious life over death is too linear. Even though this “outlook can provide a sense of promise and hope, the linear reading of life over-and-against death runs certain dangers. It can gloss over difficulty, casting it within a larger
framework in which the new replaces the old, and in which good inevitably wins out over evil.”

To those who are suffering through trauma and its impact, comes the realization that life is forever changed and can never be the same, the old life can never be recovered. Life does not always follow our chosen storyline. One cannot just “get over” trauma.

Given what we know of trauma, we know that there is “double structure” to trauma, the actual event and the aftermath or an awakening to the event. Trauma keeps returning it is not finished. “Suffering is what, in time, can be integrated into one’s understanding of the world. Trauma is what is not integrated in time; it is the difference between and closed and open wound. Trauma is an open wound.”

Traumatic suffering remains. The disciple’s experience of the crucifixion is a traumatic experience; its impact shatters their reality, their “box” what remains is their trauma and they don’t get over the trauma because of the resurrection. For Rambo, the resurrection is not the victory of life over death, but the survival of love through and along with death.

Rambo searches for a “middle discourse,” the figurative place between the event and the awakening, the middle that is overshadowed by the two ends, or somewhere between Good Friday and Easter. Rambo’s goal is to resist putting a “redemptive gloss” over trauma and instead use trauma as a hermeneutical lens to discover an alternative theological vision of healing by bearing witness to the “distance and fragmentation” trauma creates. Trauma then becomes the lens by which we create a theology of redemption rather than the problem to overcome.


34 Ibid., 7


37 Ibid., 11.
When trauma destroys our reality, our foundations, our “box,” what remains? Rambo looks to theological concepts of love, divine presence and redemption through the lens of trauma to witness to what remains.38

Rambo looks to Holy Saturday and the reflections of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr’s for a theology of trauma. For Balthasar, and “animated by Speyr’s twenty-five year mystical participation in Christ’s descent into hell on Holy Saturday, imagined it as the day a dead Jesus experienced the suffering of a tormented soul in hell. For Rambo, reflection on this suffering allows us to consider the logic of redemption rooted not in the passion or the resurrection, but in the space between the two.39 Holy Saturday is the day on which Jesus’ death is completed, yet there is no hope yet. It is still an abyss of darkness. “The parallels with experiences of trauma are fairly transparent: because the effects of trauma remain long after the immediate threat has passed, victims have no reason to think that things will get better with time.”40 Rambo believes that Balthasar and Speyr ask us to consider how trauma survivors live in the aftermath of death. What if “Holy Saturday, rather than Easter Sunday, is the moment of redemption for humanity, the event by which God is in complete solidarity with us? If God was willing to suffer in hell for humanity, then divine love knows no boundaries.”41 And that is precisely the hermeneutical key Rambo uses to unlock the next stage of her “theology of remaining” by focusing on divine love and presence. It would be a daunting task for this writer to explain all of Rambo’s theology in the space allotted, so I will attempt to touch on some key points and extract the useful elements of her approach for dealing with trauma survivors.

38 Ibid., 26.


40 Julia, “Reflections On Holy Saturday with Shelly Rambo”

41 McDonald, review of Spirit and Trauma, 2
Rambo next examines the Johannine Passion and Resurrection narratives, in particular Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple at the tomb, and the subsequent Last Discourse with the Disciples to “unearth a pneumatology of witness” that is absent from traditional interpretations.\(^2\) Rambo says that Mary’s “witness reflects the complexities of seeing in the aftermath of death rather than an apologetic function other scholars Johannine scholars normally see in the John 20. 1-18.\(^3\) Rambo focuses on Mary’s experiences at the tomb:

First, the text tells us that it is still dark outside. Second, she is weeping throughout, indicating that she sees through a film of tears. Third, her look into the tomb is partial. The encounters that she has are encounters in which her sight is limited. In terms of being an *eyewitness* to the events following the passion, Mary appears to be a rather unsuccessful one. Instead, something is taking place through her unseeing.\(^4\)

This thing that is taking place Rambo point towards is Jesus calling Mary’s name and her confession of faith. Mary “recognises his voice, a voice she can’t identify when she was facing him…If there is a turning between the two, it is not dependent on her seeing. The sound of her name breaks through the obstructions of sight.”\(^5\) And so another theme in John’s Gospel gets highlighted which is the role of the sheep knowing the voice of the shepherd. It is not in seeing that we believe. Rambo adds, “What, really, is she able to see? The text, I am suggesting, indicates that her inability to see does not really hinder her witness. The moment of recognition is, startlingly, not dependent on sight.”\(^6\) Rambo’s point is important, she goes on to say that the reader, John recognizes, does not understand that the name Mary uses is so important because John has to translate the meaning of the term, “Her moment of recognition is the reader’s moment of misrecognition.”\(^7\) Mary’s witness Rambo asserts, is different and is

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\(^2\) Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 82.

\(^3\) Ibid., 83.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid., 8.

\(^7\) Ibid., 13.
“dominated by ‘unseeing;’” it is not direct, clear, or easy. The text dismantles sight, sound, and even touch as vehicles constituting Mary’s witness."

Rather than Mary Magdalene being a witness to seeing Jesus, Rambo says Mary’s role is to be a witness to a love that remains. Mary is a trauma survivor trying to make sense of her new world; the old “box” has to now reintegrate a new perspective, a new vision. Rambo has a literary almost poetic writing style for a theologian; she describes this movement in this way.

Mary witnesses a movement of love between death and life that reflects the movement of spirit, the breath of death breathed out on the cross making its way towards life. In the Johannine text, this spirit is breathed out on the cross in Jn 19:30 and is breathed into the disciples at Pentecost in Jn 20:22. Mary’s witness, between these two texts, is a witness to the spirit between the events of the cross and Pentecost. She witnesses the unlocatable breath of spirit that neither takes form in Jesus nor in his disciples. And this witness to spirit suggests that she is witnessing as much to an absence as she is a presence, to the pause before life, the space where life is an impossibility. To name this space between ‘love’ is to recognise that Mary is witnessing something taking place; yet it is not a clear and definable presence. Framed within the farewell discourse, we see that the time and space that Mary witnesses is fraught with temporal and spatial distortions. It is neither clearly absence nor presence, neither death nor life. What she hears and ‘unsees’ is love in a form unfamiliar to her; it is the breath of spirit persisting in the aftermath of death, not claiming her but naming her for and out of her grief. A weary breath of love.

Jesus is therefore present in a new way, in a pneumatological dimension. Mary has never known Jesus before, thus her misrecognition. Rambo’s approach captures the redemptive work of the Jesus and Spirit in a totally refreshing new way by approaching the traditional Easter story not as one of new life replacing death, but of love surviving in the midst of death. Instead the miracle of Easter is that death haunts life and remains alongside of it, just like the trauma that remains alongside the healing. Healing from any trauma for us and healing from the trauma of the crucifixion does not happen in a logical or natural manner.

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48 Ibid., 14.
49 Ibid., 19.
50 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 91.
51 Ibid., 3
Jermaine McDonald questions the “utility” of Rambo’s “hang in there” message for trauma survivors. “She cannot offer the hopeful promise of ‘things will get better.’ Instead, she insists that for those suffering through trauma, hope must be paired with imagination such that, “the practice of imagining life in new ways and in new forms [becomes] an essential aspect of witness.” I think McDonald misses the essential argument from the start and that is that the traditional linear Christian life from out of death proclamation misses the reality of trauma for those in its aftermath. Rambo acknowledges that “imagination” is a much more “tenuous and suspect term than hope,” but I think it is precisely that “imagination” that must be sought when we embark on the Hero’s journey of healing that Grant proposes. McDonald says Rambo’s theology acknowledges loss but it “does not offer much in the way of how to remain with that sense of loss besides acknowledging it and sharing the story of it with others.” True, but that is an essential part of the journey of transformation and healing that Grant and any mental health professional would propose. Rambo makes a valuable contribution to a theology that makes sense to survivors of trauma for what remains is love. The ending of the Gospel of John asks the disciples to remain in his love and Peter is asked three times if he loves Jesus. The Gospel of John and the Beloved Disciple’s message is that to witness to the resurrection is to remain in God’s love which is to remain with Jesus through the Spirit. We are witnesses to what survives, to what remains, and what remains is love.

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52 McDonald, Practical Matters, 3. He cites Rambo, 168.
53 Ibid., 3.
54 I can attest to the practical theological truth of this approach, as just this week as I continue to provide pastoral care to a family in the aftermath of a suicide of their daughter a Navy nurse. They were not ready to hear the traditional Easter message; instead we are in Holy Saturday.
Viktor E. Frankl

If there is one book that has influenced me more deeply and been more useful than any other in my work as a chaplain, it is a little volume I read in high school called, *Man’s Search for Meaning: an Introduction to Logotherapy* by Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl.\(^55\) He became internationally famous as the proponent of a psychological theory known as Logotherapy. He personally experienced the trauma of being a prisoner in a German concentration camp. Frankl lost everyone; father, mother, brother and his wife who all died in camps or were sent to gas ovens, except for his sister, and yet he managed to continue to find life meaningful and purposeful. His experiences in the German concentration camp became the testing ground for the philosophy of life he had already formulated before he was imprisoned. Logotherapy is a term based on the Greek word *logos*, which he translated as meaning. The essence of Frankl’s philosophy and therapeutic approach is that what man needs above all, is a sense that his life has meaning. Life holds a potential meaning under any conditions whatsoever, even the most traumatic conditions. In his book he describes how the value of human life and human dignity were robbed, the ego crushed and all values he held were in doubt. In such a situation, as Frankl observed, many a man simply gives up. Usually this happened quite suddenly.

We all feared this moment - not for ourselves which would have been pointless, but for our friends. Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds. No entreaties, no blows, no threats had any effect. He just lay there hardly moving. If this crisis was brought about by an illness, he refused to be taken to the sick bay or do anything to keep himself. He simply gave up.\(^56\)

Such is the close connection between body and mind that it was not long before the man died. Occurrences such as these provided negative confirmation of Frankl's conviction that man must find a meaning in his life or else he would psychologically and spiritually collapse


\(^{56}\) Ibid., 95.
from the trauma. Recalling Nietzsche’s words: "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how,"57 became the guiding motto for all Frankl’s psychotherapeutic efforts.

Frankl recognizes that the meaning of life differs from person to person, and from moment to moment, thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in an ultimate or general way.58 Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements but are unique for each person.

Logotherapy is based on three tenets: First, life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable ones. Secondly, every person has an innate desire to find meaning and this will to meaning is man's principal motivation for living. Thirdly, every person has the freedom to find meaning.59

According to Frankl, meaning can be “discovered” in life in three ways: First, through what we give to the world and through what we do, in what we contribute, in what we add to life, and what we create. Frankl calls these creative values. The most effective way to find meaning is to engage oneself into commitment and action in one’s life. Secondly, through what we take from life and what life gives us, in what we experience. These are realized in receptivity toward the world - for example, in surrender to the beauty of nature or art, and above all in experiencing human beings in their uniqueness. To experience a person, in their uniqueness is to love them. Frankl calls these experiential values. Thirdly, for those who are deprived of the opportunity to find meaning in a deed, or in work, or in love, and are faced with an irreversible fate (for example, a concentration camp or an incurable disease, or going blind) then the doorway of meaning is open to them through the attitude they take towards their situation. One choice remains no one can take away from us - the choice of our attitude toward it.60

57 Ibid., 97.
58 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 131.
59 Ibid., 135-137.
60 Ibid. 133-134.
Frankl used the term “spirit” but not in a "spiritual" or "religious" sense rather in the sense of the “will” of the human being. For some persons searching for meaning is the same as the search for God. Although there seems to be some disagreement about whether he believed in God, he did pray and practice aspects of his Jewish faith. In his later book called “Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning” Frankl says, “God is not one thing among others but being itself or BEING (capitalized by Martin Heidegger).” Frankl ultimately came to believe in a God that looked more like this, “…whenever you are talking to yourself in utmost sincerity and ultimate solitude — he to whom you are addressing yourself may justifiably be called God” God is, ultimately, me – and you. The “spirit” then was a participation in BEING.

Frankl’s work can be placed in the field of spirituality, but only in the broad sense of Schneider’s definition of spirituality. According to Frankl, three factors characterize human existence: spirituality, freedom, and responsibility. The spiritual dimension is the very core of our humanity, the “spiritual dimension [it] cannot be ignored, for it is what makes us human.” Frankl believed that the single most important thing that kept a survivor alive was faith, for a loss of faith was to be “doomed” because the will to live seldom returned. Therefore, the human capacity to tap into the spiritual dimension in order to transcend trauma and suffering is vital. The human spirit may be traumatized, but it remains intact. The objective of logotherapy is to guide the human spirit to fulfill its tasks. Frankl called this lack of meaning an “existential vacuum” and it creates a “noögenic neurosis.” The human spirit has the capacity to self-heal by tapping into its own inner resources such as love, the will to meaning, purpose in life, hope,

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62 Ibid., 151.
64 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 95.
65 Ibid., 123.
dignity, creativity, conscience, and the capacity for choice. Logotherapy focuses on this spiritual or “noetic” dimension through three techniques:

1. Dereflection – in which a person is told to stop focusing on oneself and search for the meaning outside of the self, which decreases anxiety and frustration that can come in the task of searching for meaning. Search for meaning outside self to decrease anxiety.66

2. Paradoxical intention – in which a person is told to create in one’s mind a worst case scenario or nightmare, so ridiculous or impossible so one can laugh at it, thereby taking responsibility over them. Paradoxical intention is based on the human capacity of self-distancing or self-detachment. It helps one gain some clarity and perspective on the problem so that it no longer defines or consumes him. 67

3. Tragic optimism – gives survivors hope from the ashes of disaster and trauma. “I speak of a tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.”68

Frankl’s techniques are being effectively used all over the world by therapists, clergy and chaplains to treat patients and trauma survivors. It adds a final dimension to the journey from wounded survivor to being able see meaning from the impact of trauma and the suffering it causes. When meaning is found, suffering ceases to be suffering, it surrenders the pain and it becomes the pathway to a deeper spiritual understanding of the new reality of life.

66. Ibid., 146-147.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid. 162.
Conclusion

Trauma, despite its pain and brutality we have seen, has the power to open a person to profound spiritual growth. You either take the journey or the trauma will take you. It is a life or death journey for the traumatized. We have guides for the journey of transformation from wounded victim of trauma; it is Christ’s journey and that of countless other mythic heroes of the past in our classic literature and cinema. While we are in the midst of trauma, we cannot see, we are in darkness, still waiting for the dawn. Mary Magdalene is a witness to both the loss and the darkness as she struggled to see a new reality and when she did see through her tears, she saw that what remains is love. The Spirit is the guide that leads us out of the darkness to the new light with all it shadows. To emerge out of the darkness into the light requires a period of reflection on where we have been; the insights of a survivor like Frankl, serves as an example of that wounded healer who can see the meaning and purpose of loss, powerlessness, disasters and death.

Chaplains and anyone guiding the sensitive work of ministering to trauma survivors must have a map of this journey. The terrain is not always clear on the map, it helps to go on this journey with a wounded healer. Many in ministry and in the mental health profession have recovered from trauma, but far too many have not. It is my hope that this academic paper may be of some descriptive and constructive value to those of us in the field of ministry to not only understand the power of trauma and its ability to initiate us into deeper spiritual awakening.

T. S. Eliot’s epic poem, “Little Gidding,” expressed the hero’s journey of awakening when he wrote, “And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” If our journey into wholeness is to come full circle, we must struggle to awaken from our darkness and recognize the light that is before us, calls us to remember that healing comes through remaining in the Spirit.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


