

Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice

Volume 3

Issue 4 *Expressive Therapies Research and Thought
Leadership Authored by Members of Lesley's Institute
for Body, Mind and Spirituality*

Article 17

Summer 2007

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Recommended Citation

Woodall, John (2007) "Suffering, Art, and Healing," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 4 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol3/iss4/17>

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Suffering, Art, and Healing

John Woodall

***Editor's Note:** In this article, Dr. Woodall discusses the effect of trauma on the human identity. He focuses on three aspects of the many effects of trauma on identity; The Rigid Identity, The Shattered Identity, and the Compassionate Identity. The Compassionate Identity, is the desired one. Woodall says “ this third identity is purely a result of ethical choice. . . It rests in a fully conscious assessment of the implications of freedom... It requires a choice to live by a standard of human dignity that is at once highly personal and universal.” He describes the five stages involved in the process of acquiring a compassionate identity, and concludes that art therapy plays a great role in creating experiences that “expand the human heart to compassion.”*

We know from the neurosciences and developmental psychology that our earliest emotional experiences set the tone for much of our cognitive processing. These earliest emotions become a kind of filter that colors our perception and cognition. So, our early emotional environment is important. How different the world would look if we all had been raised in such an atmosphere of love by our parents and teachers that we were made to “tremble with joy”¹ as the Baha’i writings suggest. But we don’t live in that world, at least not yet. We live in a world in which much of our emotional life is colored by the experience of anguish, fear and anger. That being the case, to make peace with ourselves and our experience in the world, we need to have a way to understand our pain. The arts are far more central to this process than we often consider.

The effects of trauma on the mind and soul of an individual are many. The effect of trauma on our sense of identity in particular is what I’d like to consider in this discussion about the arts and healing. The first reason that identity is important is because it defines our sense of what is fair, our sense of justice. Sometimes life hands you a perfect example. So, to illustrate what I mean, here is a little story. Many years ago, a colleague and I were in Israel at a conference on political psychology. As we boarded a tour bus and sat in our seats, I mentioned to my friend that our sense of justice is determined by our identity. She gave me a puzzled look as if asking me to explain. Just then, another attendee of the conference was attempting to hang up his coat on the hook in front of his window opposite us but, noticed he couldn’t see out his window with his coat in the way. So, he reached across the aisle, bent in front of us, said, ‘excuse me,’ and hung his coat up on our hook! Now, we couldn’t see out our window! “See, he doesn’t consider us part of his identity. So, to him, hanging his coat in front of us isn’t unfair.” I continued, “If we complain to him about his act being unfair, he might say to himself, ‘What’s their problem! I said, ‘excuse me!’”

And so it goes. Here is an important principle in all matters of conflict resolution: we often see our acts, which are based on our own perspective, our own identity, as always being virtuous, as fair. We don’t see the other person’s view as being virtuous or fair,

because we don't completely identify with them. Their demands seem selfish and petty. To really begin a dialogue about what is fair, we need to first establish a way to more completely identify with the other. In that way, our standard of fairness will be more inclusive and the solutions we arrive at will be more acceptable, comprehensive and truly able to resolve conflict. Finding ways to explore, establish and reinforce a sense of our common humanity, our common identity, is the first step in any process of conflict resolution. This is because a sense of our common humanity will set a standard of fairness that is inclusive. The arts can be used to explore, establish and reinforce this sense.

Here is another quick example. I was on the island of Cyprus several times in the 1980's working on this theory of justice and identity in trying to work toward a solution to the problems between Greeks and Turks there. I asked a Greek woman what it was that the Greeks felt was the most basic issue, what was it, in the final analysis, that the Greeks wanted? After a pause, she said, "What we want is peace. But, peace with justice!" She then described to me the needs that had to be dealt with for there to be 'justice:' respect for property, human rights, equal voice, etc. I then went across the ominous Green Line that divided the two sides by walls, barbed wire and layers of armed guards. On the Turk side, I asked a Turkish woman what was the most basic issue, what was it, in the final analysis, that the Turks wanted? She paused, and said, "What we want is peace. But, peace with justice!"

Both women said they wanted exactly the same thing. Peace, but peace with justice. How they defined justice was determined by their identity group. Whether it is in the relations between a couple in a marriage, employees at a job, neighbors or countries, people want to live in peace. But they also want their rights and needs honored and protected. They want fairness. They want justice. But, to have inclusive justice, we need to be able to identify in inclusive ways. To expand the reach of justice, we need to first expand the reach of our identity. We need to see the humanity of others in more inclusive ways if we are to have justice and then peace. This is the problem that trauma presents us with, the effects of trauma and suffering on identity. This is the dilemma that the arts have a particular value in addressing.

To build to the role of the arts, let's consider the second aspect of identity. That is, how trauma affects identity. Of the many effects of trauma on identity, I'd like to consider three of them. The first two seem to be automatic responses not entirely subject to conscious control, but rather related to personality styles, perhaps temperament. I call these responses the "Rigid Identity" and the "Shattered Identity." They sit at opposite ends of a spectrum. For those who develop a Rigid Identity after a trauma, you see a process of condensation or narrowing of a sense of allegiance to one identity over all others. Before, let's say, 9/11, a person may have considered themselves many things: a Democrat or Republican, white or black, a Rotarian, an American, a Methodist or Jew. But after 9/11, the fear, anguish and anger become very difficult to contain. These strong emotional forces exert a kind of pull on the identity. We might find that one of these identities becomes the repository of all of our emotional allegiances. In psychological

terms, we might say that our anguish, fear and anger are displaced to an over identification with one identity over all others. We become a hyper-Democrat or a hyper-Republican, hyper-Methodist or Baptist, or Jew or whatever, hyper-black, hyper-white, etc. If we were to liken it to a roulette wheel, it is as if all of our emotional “chips” are placed on the ‘red nine,’ that one identity that we come to value over all others. We tend to not be as anxious as a result. We tend to not be as anguished and fearful. But, not so with anger. This Rigid Identity seems to be the identity choice that allows one primal emotion to flourish over others. Our anger takes a front seat while our ability to grieve, to feel the anxiety of uncertainty, to sit with the fear of unknown threats are all quieted. With a Rigid Identity, we see our identity group as all good and other identities as all bad, or at least not as good as we are. The problems arise in the process of trying to resolve conflict. Without an inclusive sense of identity, the standards used to define what is just are defined by the Rigid Identity as what is fair for those belonging to that identity only. Others are simply considered evil, wrong or just don’t register as relevant. Problem solving is then extremely difficult as the solutions that are considered are imbalanced and tend to create more problems, spinning the cycle of conflict to more rounds.

The next effect of trauma on identity is what I call the “Shattered Identity.” With a Shattered Identity, any sense of identity at all is difficult to maintain. If you are the survivor of some terrible atrocity or if you were the perpetrator of an atrocity, your sense of the good is shattered. How can it be that this happened to me? How can it be that I can be the agent of any good in the world if this has happened? If I have seen my family blown up, if I have been forced to commit atrocities against a loved one so that soldiers do not kill my mother, how can there be good in the world? How can I be repaired? How can fairness happen? How can I regain my sense of wholeness? The overwhelming nature of extreme trauma can far outweigh the mental constructs we hold about good in the world and our hope to be good. The effect can be a shattering of our sense of self. Anguish, fear and anxiety become so overwhelming as to dissolve any stable sense of self. Whereas with a Rigid Identity, anger is the predominant emotion to the suppression of anguish, fear and anxiety, with a Shattered Identity, anger is suppressed and anguish, fear and anxiety come to the fore causing a dilution of a sense of self.

Our third aspect of identity is how identity affects motivation. With both a Shattered Identity and a Rigid Identity, there is an effect on our sense of motivation. Ordinarily, we are motivated to work toward what we perceive to be good for us and our loved ones. But what if our sense of the good is shattered by some overwhelming event? What if the center of our being has been uprooted by horror? As W.B. Yeats beautifully described after the horrors of World War I,

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere*

*The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst are
Are full of passionate intensity...*

Those dominated by anguish, fear and anxiety, with Shattered Identities, lack all conviction. While those filled with anger, Rigid Identities, are filled with passionate intensity. I wouldn't, however, describe them as best and worst as Yeats does. They both have best and worst elements. The point here is that these identities also define how a person will be motivated. A person dominated by a Rigid Identity will tend to feel highly motivated. A person with a Shattered Identity will tend to be in a state of internal paralysis, unable to motivate themselves at all. You can see the problem. Those rigid and highly motivated identities will tend to ride roughshod over the shattered and poorly motivated. Or at a minimum, groups of highly motivated rigid identities: left and right, Democrat and Republican, black and white, Shiite and Sunni, husband and wife, will battle each other for what they consider to be the only version of what is just with the shattered caught in the middle. Worse, new generations of shattered and rigid are created.

Suffering, therefore, has a central effect on how we identify ourselves, how we decide what is and isn't just and how we are motivated. Suffering defines what we will hope for. We define ourselves by our suffering. Communities define themselves, in part, by their shared history of suffering. We are known by our response to our suffering. It is not lost on others if we adopt a Rigid or Shattered identity as a result of our suffering. Our responses to our suffering define our character.

One can imagine a kind of centripetal pull our suffering has on our identity. It tends to pull us into a definition of ourselves we might not have otherwise chosen. How do we escape the gravitational pull of our suffering? Are we destined to be the victims of external events, to lose our sense of freedom over our own destiny, to wallow in anger, anguish, fear and anxiety? What does art have to offer us in this inquiry?

History shows us that there is a third identity, another way. This third type of identity response to suffering is qualitatively different from a Rigid or a Shattered Identity. Whereas Rigid and Shattered Identities seem to be the result of natural, even instinctual responses to trauma and suffering, this third identity is purely a result of ethical choice. It is therefore not unconscious. It is not determined by external factors. It rests in a fully conscious assessment of the implications of freedom. It requires a choice to live by a standard of human dignity that is at once highly personal and universal. It is, therefore, highly resistant to external manipulation. I call it the "Compassionate Identity."

A person with a Compassionate Identity is able to accept the anguish, fear, anxiety and anger that severe suffering cause, but still choose to see the common humanity of all parties. A person with a Compassionate Identity sees that the response to suffering is, at a fundamental level, a choice. Without minimizing the loss, the pain, the tragedy of suffering, a person with a compassionate identity is able to place the experience of suffering into a kind of ethical cost/benefit equation, to see the human condition of suffering with a compassionate eye.

A Compassionate Identity will see the anguish, fear, anxiety and anger of suffering as possible choices. They will not deny these feelings. But a compassionate identity will not see these emotions as destiny. We are not destined to have these emotions be what defines us. Our response to suffering can be one of an embrace of what is noble in the human soul, despite our suffering. We come to understand that there is an imperative to see our common humanity made clear by our suffering. Suffering, then, fuels our compassion, and not our anger, fear, anguish and anxiety. Healing is then possible because our expanded sense of identity includes those with whom we are in conflict. The possibility exists for inclusive problem solving and to escape the morass of cycles of mutual violence. Surely one of the great values of the arts in times of crisis and trauma is to creatively explore this choice: the choice between Rigid and Shattered Identities on the one hand, and a Compassionate Identity on the other. To remain stuck in our pain, or to use it creatively for healing.

Chuck Willie is a wonderful man. Among many distinguished honors, he is a retired sociologist, educator, minister, activist and Harvard Professor. He was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s roommate at Boston University. He studied Doctor King's methods of social activism. He told me about Dr. King's method of organizing the Birmingham bus boycott.

The African-American community of Birmingham was highly motivated. Each Monday night, regardless of church affiliation, they would meet at Dr. King's church. There, they would explore through common worship, sermons and speeches the values that would guide them. They would review the reality of the history of pain they had suffered, the reality of the threat posed to them by participating in the boycott: dogs might be set on them, hoses fired at them, they could be shot, they or their loved ones lynched. They would clearly lay out the pros and the cons, the values they wanted to advance and the costs in doing so, the expression of dignity and the reality of suffering. With this clear eyed clarification of the pros and cons, the costs and benefits, each individual could make their own ethical decision. Chuck said that by the time they were finished with this process, each participant in the marches was themselves a Dr. King. They did not need a leader to motivate them. They all had made a deeply personal choice based on an assessment of the real costs in terms of suffering, and the ennobling principles they preferred to live by despite their suffering. That is what is meant by a Compassionate Identity.

The arts can be used to explore the nature of our pain, to understand its sources, to define for ourselves our anger, anguish, fear and anxiety, to name the central emotions involved. But, to be healing, a point of connection must be made, a type of connection that allows for moving the identity respectfully and consciously to a "blessed community," as the civil rights movement called the grouping of the universally minded, a compassionate identification with at least the therapist, the compassionate ideal and then with a compassionate community. Once this is done, larger principles of compassion and understanding need to be explored so that a choice can be made. Perhaps repeatedly over

the course of a lifetime this choice must be made in the face of our pain revisiting us uninvited. The arts can be used in each step of this process.

There are important strengths that emerge from this type of compassionate decision making. First, it mobilizes our latent capacities, but in an inclusive way, not in ways that can be used to dominate others, but towards mutually beneficial goals. It establishes the inclusive standards of justice which are required for comprehensive problem solving. The arts can be used to identify and harness these strengths.

How do we facilitate the desire to make this compassionate choice in the face of our pain which screams at us to form a Rigid Identity against those who harm us or to become paralyzed by the anguish, fear and anxiety that characterize a Shattered Identity? What fuels compassion? What allows us to escape the centripetal pull that pain has on our identity?

If we are talking about moving to a larger identity for ourselves, we are talking about functions of the transcendent. Not merely a national, ethnic, racial, partisan identity, but a human identity. Not an ideological identity, but one that viscerally sees the human condition and is moved to compassion by it, the suffering of ourselves and of others. This transcendent understanding needs to be experienced, cultivated.

Our responses in this way to suffering, in fact all sincere attempts to work through suffering, represent a form of the beauty of human nature. As the Persian mystics say, love is the natural outgrowth of beauty. We are attracted in love to beauty. Beauty generates love. If we elicit the beautiful in human character, we elicit love and attraction. This language is quite useful. If our focus with those who suffer is on the beauty of the sincerity of responses to come to terms with pain, we have a language that can reach across identities. We have a universal language of the nobility of the human soul. We have a means to attract and bind together, and by doing so, to heal. The experience of the aesthetic in human character is a powerful means, then, of healing.

The ancient Greeks knew this when they described the goddess Athena as the ruler of war and of creative artistic civilization. Civilization comes out of the pain of destruction. Our humanity is born of our suffering. Pain generates the beauty of noble responses of character. These beautiful noble responses generate love. This love is the foundation of civilization, the social contract, our obligations and responsibilities to each other. The aesthetic, then, is the central organizing impulse of civilization. To not delve into this exploration of human nobility in response to our pain is the opposite of an aesthetic experience. It is anesthetic.

How might this work today? Consider a racial divide in a town in Mississippi. Blacks want to be included in the town's historic archives. Many whites in the town resist, thinking this is a recipe for social unrest since some of that history involves lynching, secret graves and persistent racial oppression. Instead of focusing on a recitation of the raw historic events, an approach consistent with our discussion would be to focus on the character strengths exhibited by individuals on both sides that were the response to the pain of those events. The idea would be to not avoid the story of loss and suffering, but to

focus on the universal human nobility in the responses to suffering that are shared across cultural, racial, national and partisan divides. This is a way to develop a basis for compassionate identity in the face of a shared history of pain and oppression. In this way, people can identify across historic divides by seeing the common human strengths, for example, the patience, tenacity and the courage in the face of adversity that arise from suffering. These universal virtues become the basis for a shared human identity, for a shared language of dignity, standards of justice that are inclusive and, therefore, healing.

How might the arts play a role in this type of healing process, or for any process that requires the transformation of pain into a level of meaning that can be healing and uniting? We might consider the process of making the ethical choice of a compassionate identity as having five stages.

First, the person must have the experience of a personal strength. They must live the experience of their own sincerity, compassion, love, courage, patience, fidelity, trustworthiness, etc. in the face of their own pain. The arts can be used to elicit this lived experience of both suffering and the strength demonstrated in response to it.

Second, that strength needs to be rendered symbolically by the person. This can be in the form of words, visual representation, music or movement. The point is that we need an internal representation of our strengths in order to be able to conceptualize it. We need an internal scaffolding of words and symbols to be able to manipulate a concept. We need to symbolize the strength, to name it, so it can have an internal representation that is available to thought and reflection. This can be done in the context of a parallel representation of the pain that elicits the strength so the two can be symbolized. The arts can be used to symbolize our experience to ourselves even before language is available to us.

Third, we need to be able to assess the value of the strength over other choices. We need to be able to compare the value of this strength in relation to the cost of our suffering. How has our pain influenced our identity? What features of a Rigid or Shattered Identity are operating in our response to our pain? How might our strengths be seen as an option that can be chosen in spite of our pain? How might a Compassionate Identity influence the way we see our pain and allow us to give meaning to it?

Fourth, is the very personal and fundamental human act of choosing. What is required for us to move toward a choice to create a compassionate meaning of our pain? The multifaceted elements of the moment of decision are ripe topics for artistic exploration.

Fifth, is the ability to act based on our ethical choice. To act in ways that are not determined by unresolved anger, fear, anguish or anxiety, but rather to act in ways that allow us to heal our own pain by giving it compassionate meaning, to assist others in the alleviation of their pain, in the facilitation of their compassionate choice. This is real freedom and nobility in the face of pain.

We see then, that this form of aesthetic choice is fundamentally moral choice. Our ability to respond in compassion to the human condition of suffering is what elicits the beautiful

in human character. It is this form of aesthetics that undergirds our moral sense, our ability to expand our circle of identity to include others, even those who have harmed us. It becomes a calling, then, for the art therapist to create these experiences of human beauty and, therefore, love; to do so in ways that expand the human heart to compassion when our pain would pull us toward rigidity and intolerance, to a shattered self and paralysis. In so doing, we increase the experience of justice in the world, the possibility of peace and the hope of healing ourselves and the world.

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