

Healing From Tragedies Past and Present

Tuesday, Sept. 11, circa 9:00 a.m. The phone rings. I'm trying to write. I have a deadline. I am annoyed. But I answer anyway because I feel like I should. It's my partner. She's telling me that a plane just crashed into the world trade center. I thank her for letting me know and try to get her off the phone so I can finish writing, but before I get her off the phone she tells me that another plane has crashed into another tower of the trade center.

I am numb. I want to care, but I can't. This is too much and I have a deadline. I finally ask her what she needs, tell her I love her, get her off the phone and get back to my article. Something of epic proportions has just happened, but I can't feel it. It's sort of like an itch that is so deep that you can't scratch it. I don't turn on the radio, the T.V. or look for news reports – at least not at first.

But of course I am sitting at my computer and I get e-mail after e-mail announcing the tragedy and seeking some sort of emotional response. Usually I am good at helping people process their feelings in times of crisis, but this time I can't. I respond with theory. I have a Ph.D. in sociology. I am good at theory. Theory doesn't require acknowledging feelings. I can't cope with feelings; theory feels safe.

At dinner, my partner wants to tell me more about the attack on the trade center and the Pentagon. Again, I respond with theory. But she's not online. She's not just words on a screen. She's alive and in front of me, shrouded in feelings. My theoretical explanations do not stop her need to emote. She goes beyond the abstract into the human content of what happened. It isn't just buildings made of glass and steel and other inert materials that were destroyed. People's lives were destroyed; many died. She describes some of these deaths in vivid, horrific detail. I find an excuse to leave the table and find myself washing dishes, even though it's not my turn.

Forty-five minutes later, we're fighting. Like a scratched record, I keep repeating, "Why are we fighting? I don't understand what's going on."

Thursday, Sept. 13. A friend e-mails me seeking to process the tragedy. I had spent Wednesday lost in flashbacks of being physically, emotionally and sexually abused. I still can't cope with Tuesday's devastation. I respond with theory to counter her prediction that this

will lead to global disaster. Finally, after three paragraphs of global analysis, I realize that perhaps her fears are valid. Not necessarily that I agree that a third world war is imminent, but that in times of crisis, it's normal to be afraid. So I assure her that it's normal to be afraid. Then I invite her to explore her fear – to pinpoint exactly what she's afraid of. I suggest that rather than focusing on what she's afraid will happen to the U.S. she try focusing on what she's afraid will happen to her.

As I write this to her, I realize that I'm also afraid -- terrified. My fear seems less obvious to me because I am not afraid of war or of terrorists. I'm afraid of my feelings and my memories. Usually I can shut them out. But hearing about people dying in graphic detail, especially the couple who jumped out the window together and the people who were burned alive, takes me right back to being a child and living in a nightmare that was real. I can feel my brother choking me and then slapping me and punching me to get me to "wake up" so that he can rape me. I can empathize with how it feels to think I'm going to die and that feeling is terrifying. All of the sudden, Wednesday's flashbacks make sense.

Finally, my rape crisis training kicks in and I remember that any sort of crisis can trigger flashbacks. And as with reactions to rape, there are lots of reactions to this crisis. Some people respond like I did, with numbness. Others are really angry, sad and/or afraid. These are all very normal responses to a horrific situation. At the same time, it's very likely that this crisis has ripped open some old wounds and that some of the numbness, anger, grief, and fear that you are feeling relates as much to these old wounds as it does to the present horror.

I'd like to invite all of you to look beyond the obvious reasons for your feelings this week and search your past. Try asking yourself, "What does this remind me of?" Going back into your past will not only help you to heal from past wounds, but it will also help you to better cope with your current feelings, whether they involve day to day issues or last week's tragedy. In the meantime, be gentle with yourself and the people around you. Give yourself time to heal from traumatic events such the ones from last Tuesday, and know that healing is possible.

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