



Reading this book is like looking into a mirror."

— THICH NHAT HANH

"This book is a gift, a wise and compassionate guide for those who undertake the difficult work of caring for the traumas of this world."

— JACK KORNFELD

Author of *A Path with Heart*

Bring me as in your dreams, you dreamers, bring the all of your heart
That I may find them in a blue cloud path. Away from the too bright world
"The Broken Heart" by Sara Teasdale

Trauma Stewardship

An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self
While Caring for Others

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk
Foreword by Jon R. Conte, PhD

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The *five* Directions

N



water

Creating Space for Inquiry



S



earth

Building Compassion and Community

Trauma Stewardship

A daily practice through which individuals, organizations, and societies tend to the hardship, pain, or trauma experienced by humans, other living beings, or our planet itself. By developing the deep sense of awareness needed to care for ourselves while caring for others and the world around us, we can greatly enhance our potential to work for change, ethically and with integrity, for generations to come.

Moving Energy Through

I haven't breathed since last week.

Community-clinic executive director during a crisis period

We can strive for balance in other ways, too. We can't get mired in one overstressed state. We need to keep our internal energy moving, like the wind.

In traditional Chinese medicine, there is a belief that dis-ease in one's being comes in part from stagnant energy. When we talk about energy, we are talking about your life force, your vitality, what it is that makes you *you*, your very essence. It's what gets you up in the morning, what you feel when someone walks into the room, the sensations you recall when you think about a person or animal who has died. An important part of well-being in this tradition is keeping the energy moving and not allowing it to stagnate around any one feeling or issue. This is an invaluable practice for those of us who interact with suffering: being able to exist with awareness amid radiating waves of pain. Rather than absorbing and accumulating them, we can learn to let them ripple out and away.

Peter Levine invites us to learn from animals in the wild to gain insight into why, as humans, we are so often traumatized, while animals so rarely are. Through his decades of study, he found that humans and animals have in common three basic responses to threat, each of them directed by the primitive, reptilian part of the brain. These are the flight, fight, and immobility (freezing) responses.

When we perceive a threat, a great deal of energy is summoned. When we are able to fight or flee, that energy is naturally discharged—and as we see with animals in the wild, it is possible to return to life as it was before the threat. If we are unable to fight or flee from a threat, our organism instinctively constricts (or freezes) in a last-ditch effort at self-preservation. Again, when an animal in the wild survives danger through immobility, it will unfreeze itself, literally shake off the accumulated energy, and continue to graze or care for its young—in other words, it will generally go about its business.

As Levine found, however, this release is not so easy for humans. When we move into the constricted freezing response, a tremendous amount of energy becomes bound up and begins to overwhelm our nervous system. If our reptilian brain impulses were allowed to run their course, we would discharge this expanse of highly charged energy once the threat passed. Instead, however, our highly evolved neocortex (rational brain) often gets in the way. The fear and desire for control that arise in the neocortex can be so powerful that they interrupt the restorative impulses that would allow for a necessary form of discharge. As humans, then, we are stranded partway through the same nervous system cycle that keeps animals well and thriving. In us, undischarged residual energy becomes the seed for deep-rooted trauma. Many of the symptoms of trauma exposure response we discussed in chapter 4 are signs of our organism's effort to contain this undischarged energy.

As Levine sums it up in *Waking the Tiger*, "The neocortex is not powerful enough to override the instinctual defense response to threat and danger—the fight, flee, or freeze response. In this respect we humans are still inextricably bound to our animal heritage. Animals, however, do not have a highly evolved neocortex to interfere with the natural return to normal functioning through some form of discharge. In humans, trauma occurs as a result of the initiation of an instinctual cycle that is not allowed to finish."

Levine has used his research as the basis for an approach to healing trauma that he calls "somatic experiencing." Practitioners of somatic experiencing believe that "the core of traumatic reaction is ultimately physiological, and it is at this level that healing begins." Levine's method applies a variety of techniques to liberate energy that has become frozen as a result of trauma. When it succeeds, the nervous system is able to return to its original resilient and self-regulating state.

Learning how to work with our internal energies is one of the first steps in supporting our body's innate capacity to heal. We can gently explore ways to keep our internal energy flowing. When it is blocked, we can look for activities that unblock it. This will create the foundation we need for long-term wellness.

It's like I feel all this toxicity build up inside of me, and if I don't go surfing or go biking or go for a run, I can't function anymore.

Mark Thanassi, attending physician, emergency medicine, Santa Clara, California

In Jewish tradition there is the practice of sitting shiva when someone dies. For the vast majority of Jews, support for the bereaved during this time takes the form of intimate contact and conversation. In some Orthodox communities, however, one of the guidelines for sitting shiva is that the visitors are expected to talk with the mourners only once they have been explicitly addressed by the bereaved. One reason for this is a respect for the enormous power of bearing witness. It's not about what we do, what we say, or how we touch—it's about being present in a way that tells those who are suffering that they are not and never will be alone. Because we are all inherently connected, the witnesses will share some of the burden of what the mourners are experiencing—even if they do no other thing.

If we are to remain physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, however, sharing the pain cannot translate into soaking it all up. The energy of pain must be kept moving. If all the struggle and hardship we witness accumulates and takes root, it will grow so large that any light we have within us will be obscured. Uprooting this accumulated anguish is much, much harder than preventing it from taking root in the first place. Jack Kornfield says, "What has been entrusted to us, and what do we do with it? It's simple. When we possess [others' sufferings] in an unhealthy way, we worry, we're caught, and we're neither at peace nor free. Since it all changes, it's guaranteed that it's going to change, we need to discover a capacity to let go, a graciousness of heart."

For many of us, this concept may require some radical reframing. Letting go may sound like being passive or going limp. The thought of relaxing our grip may fill us with fear. You may be someone who was raised to believe that action = movement = growth = survival, and so when you think of stillness, you may come up with the equation stillness = surrender = powerlessness = death. Although eventually you may want to question these associations, it is not necessary to abandon them overnight. We are talking about moving

energy not necessarily through stillness per se but through a mindful and disciplined approach of detoxing, cleansing, and putting our burdens down. Some can do this using rapid actions such as running, while others move toward the equation of stillness = awareness = connection = action = life. Those people may practice focused breathing, meditating, walking, gardening, chanting, and so on. As Thich Nhat Hanh said to a student who asked just how much she needed to slow down, “You never see us monks running. We walk slowly. It’s too hard to be present when you’re moving quickly.”

So we talk about moving energy through as a way to keep ourselves at our optimal level. One way to move energy through is by conscious breathing. It may come as a surprise to many of us that attention to the breath is central to keeping ourselves in a state of balance, yet every ancient tradition has as a critical element mindful and deliberate breathing. Native Americans have held Sun Dancing and sweat lodge Ceremonies for centuries; Tarahumara Indians have run as a tenet central to their well-being; East Indian traditions have practiced yoga since the beginning of recorded time and, more recently, have held focused-laughter gatherings. Meditative traditions all over the world have developed techniques that sharpen the mind’s awareness and cultivate insight using one’s own breath as the primary guide. Breathing is the one regular, life-sustaining process we can always observe within ourselves. It is evidence of the present moment rising and passing away. It is a constant reminder that everything, including our own lives, is subject to a universal law, the law of impermanence. This perspective can free us to realize the myriad choices we have to live harmoniously, with deeper awareness, in this life.

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud. . . . Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told.

Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery* and associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School

When I was in New Orleans facilitating trauma stewardship workshops after Hurricane Katrina, I had the privilege of working with the People's Hurricane Relief Fund. Many of the city's residents had been left with a pained, hollow look in their eyes, but at the Relief Fund I met two women who stood out because of their radiance. Kimberley Richards and Kanika Taylor-Murphy are community organizers, activists, and educators. Neither was in New Orleans when the storm hit land and the levees broke. Both survived the trauma as first responders. One lost everything but her brick house in Picayune, Mississippi. Both continued to live with ample subsequent trauma exposure as they worked with the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and the People's Instituté for Survival and Beyond, as well as other organizations, family members, and friends, in an effort to rebuild New Orleans.

I had the opportunity to inquire what they had done to care for themselves that was helpful. Kimberley Richards said, "For a month after the storm hit, I wasn't doing anything to take care of myself. And then I started getting sick, like in my head. Since then I have walked every morning for an hour or two. I'm joined by about seven other women now, and we walk through the neighborhoods and I breathe. It's hard because my oppression tells me if I have that time, I should be helping other people. My oppression tells me that if I'm up that early, I should be writing a grant. But I keep doing it, I keep walking." Kanika Taylor-Murphy said that practicing qigong and walking with Richards and their comrades were what allowed her to keep on keeping on.

Billie Lawson has spent her career on the front lines of trauma as well as immersed in trauma debriefings throughout the state of Washington. She creates cues throughout her day simply to remind herself to breathe deeply. Each time her phone rings at work, she takes a full inhale and exhale before she picks up the receiver. It's an exercise she gets to perform frequently!

Other ways of moving energy through include working out, writing, singing, chanting, dancing, martial arts, walking, and laughing, just as long as these activities are done with mindfulness. One colleague who works with bombing victims in northern Iraq as part of a Christian peacemaking effort said, "I like to do emptying

exercises—meditation, deep breathing, touching nature, and thinking about how I am not keeping or holding on to anything.”



- 1.** Stand or sit in a comfortable position. As you raise your hands above your head, breathe in. As you lower your arms, breathe out. Do this 20 times, slowly.
- 2.** Commit to walking or running or wheeling or biking outside for five minutes during every hour that you're working. During this five minutes, focus on breathing in deeply and breathing out slowly. Notice anything beautiful around you and breathe that in as well.
- 3.** Initiate a co-counseling type of relationship with a colleague or friend whom you can call on regularly. Agree to counsel each other, if only for five minutes. Let your friend start the talking and listen attentively with a calming presence. Then it's your turn. Say whatever is in your heart and mind, moving it out of your system, while your partner in the exercise listens attentively for five minutes. Repeat frequently.