Can We Create Social Justice? Toward an Ethic of Justice in Trauma Psychology

Laura S. Brown, Ph.D. ABPP

Presidential Address, Division of Trauma Psychology, August, 2010

Copyright, Laura S. Brown, 2010.

I was an accidental tourist in the field of trauma psychology. When I first wandered into this territory sometime in 1973 or so there was no field of trauma psychology. As Judy Herman has so eloquently said, our culture was then, despite its recent immersion in an unpopular war, in denial about the reality of trauma. What I did have was my passionate engagement with the social movements of the time, which took me to a place where trauma could not be denied.

I grew up in a household where social activism was a norm—one of the few values that I share with the people who raised me is a commitment to making the world a more just and fair place. My parents, who forty years ago were still liberals, had introduced me to Jewish history and the two millennia of harms done by the evils of anti-Semitism. They had taken me at the age of three to my first Pete Seger concert when the singer was still on the blacklist, and had been active in efforts to stop racist block-busting in the suburbs on the edges of Cleveland where I grew up.

So it was entirely natural that I became involved in movements for social justice as I became an adolescent. When, at the age of 15, I understood the history behind America's military presence in Viet Nam, I dove headlong into the anti-war movement. It was not very far from there to feminism. As I had been raised in a relatively non-sexist household, the crude sexism of the anti-war crowd made feminism both attractive and sensible to me.

It was via feminism that I took my ultimate journey to working as a trauma psychologist. When I started my training I wasn't intending to become a specialist in trauma; I was interested in working with women, lesbians in particular. Because feminist practice required me to listen carefully to women's stories of their lives, and to take those stories seriously, to bear witness to their realities rather than dismissing them as hysterical fantasy, I found, by the early 1980's, that without realizing it, that I had gone from being someone who worked with lesbians to someone who worked with trauma survivors, some of whom happened also to be lesbian. Feminism opened up my eyes, and the eyes of many other people our fields, to the ubiquity and invisibility of interpersonal violence. I'm surrounded in this room today by colleagues who had similar awakenings. I had landed in an invisible world, a place in the universe that few people wish to look at or know about, even, at times, when they are living in it themselves.

This invisible world of trauma is a world of wounded humans. It is populated by people who have been the targets of the cruelty and indifference and viciousness and dangerousness of other human beings, people who have had their lives forever transformed by someone else's moment of carelessness, someone else's years of violence, someone else's unwillingness to acknowledge them as fully human, someone else's willingness to skip the necessary protective step. They are people who have experienced human nature as red in tooth and claw, not lovely, who have had the taken for granteds of life –eating, sleep, trust in the goodness of others and the world-shattered by experience.

The invisible world of trauma is all around us, a bit like the ghosts of Thorton Wilder's *Our Town*, visible and audible if only we are willing to look and listen. As a society we are sometimes shocked when a trauma survivor throws off her or his cloak of invisibility—and the shock is as much that she or he threw off the cloak and exposed a personal history of trauma, as that this person—high functioning, respected, well-liked—is among the dwellers in that invisible world. And then we repress that knowledge. When I occasionally remind people, in conversations about survivors of childhood sexual abuse, that Oprah Winfrey is one of those folks—and that her well-documented life story of early unwanted pregnancy, struggling with food and body, keeping marriage at bay, and the use of work as a coping strategy are all familiar themes in one set of survivor narratives—people act shocked, as if they are hearing this well-publicized piece of information about America's richest woman for the very first time.

Despite society's best efforts at making trauma invisible, and marginal, trauma is deep in the history of being human. I often have wondered how many aspects of our stress response system, the HPA axis, which is activated in the trauma response, developed precisely because the evolutionary history of our species is one of loss, terror, and pain. Reading the epics and sacred texts of every civilization, or listening to the tales of those cultures that commit stories to memory rather than stone or clay or paper, we learn of battles, of death and destruction, of violence and violation. We see the forms of human distress that today are codified as PTSD when we read the prophet Ezekiel's description of having a "heart of stone" or Homer's telling of Achilles's intrusive images of his beloved dead Patroclus. We see the ruins of Pompeii, the abandoned cliff dwellings of the Anasazi people, we read the stories of the plague, the great fire of London, the Lisbon earthquake. We encounter tales of rape, of beatings, of hate crimes committed in the name of a divine being for millennia—and we know that trauma, and its biopsychosocial and existential aftermaths, have been with us always. Earlier humans seemed more willing or able to speak some of the truth of trauma. In our hyper-controlled modern age, though, the messiness, emotional, physical, and otherwise of the events that are traumatizing, are a terrible reminder that we are in fact not in control—so perhaps the stigmata associated with having been traumatized have grown greater.

Trauma is also the spoor of the monster of social injustice. War, genocide, interpersonal violence and abuse of power, poverty, bias, all of these things and more, which constitute the rotten foundations of the invisible world are the evidence that the visible world is not as just as it pretends to be. The irony, of course, is that we wish to believe in the justness and goodness of the world and the people in it, so much so that, as Janoff-Bulman described nearly thirty years ago, one of the marks of a traumatizing experience is that it explodes that vision of a just world, no matter how illusory such beliefs might be. Humans have scores of faith traditions built around explications of the world's injustice, all of which imply that, were humans not so impulsive, so self-indulgent, so unwilling to forgo pleasure, the world would indeed be just. In English we use the term "edenic" to refer to a state of affairs described in Hebrew scriptures as existing before humans gave in to impulse and began to behave badly- in other words, a subtext that the world is good, and a just place, somewhere underneath the layers of human misery and acting-out behavior. So we cling to that illusion, and pretend that the stink of that monster isn't in our nostrils.

Because I have been privileged to know so many people who have lived through trauma—not only clients, but also family and friends-- I know its pervasiveness, its presence in the world that surrounds me. The hidden world of trauma walks the streets, peers at me from the window, blares from the television screen. It is a world that I now enter voluntarily, not accidentally, every day, because I know, as do many of you, that even if we pretend not to enter that invisible world, we are in fact swimming in it, surrounded by it. Better to see, hear, feel and acknowledge it willingly and mindfully, because in so doing we take into our hands the power to transform that world.

I begin with my story of traveling into the invisible world because it illustrates how the topics of social justice and trauma practice are joined at the root in my life. When people ask me how I can tolerate doing the work that I do, which is largely with people who have survived a childhood from hell, I tell them of the Jewish tradition that teaches that to save one life is to save the entire world- and that I can do my work because it feels like I am given the privilege of saving the world one life at a time.

Recently, though, I've done a great deal more thinking about this whole connection between social justice and trauma psychology. Some of this has to do with the existential dilemmas of midlife—what is the meaning of what I do? Of what use am I on this planet? Does any of this matter much? Am I really helping to create justice? My answers trouble me.

When I first became involved in the movements to stop sexual abuse and assault, I had the youthfully optimistic belief that if we simply told the truths about what was happening to vulnerable people in their families, the world would respond with outrage, and the abuse of children would come to an end. In my ideal fantasy world I awaken one morning to find that violence and hatred have ended, that children are safe in their homes, that adequate and high-quality medical, emotional, spiritual, and material support are available to all of those in need. A distinctly utopian vision, in this world my services as a trauma psychologist are no longer needed. The specialty of trauma treatment has been mostly retired.

I never predicted that the world would respond to our truth-telling by cooking up false memory syndrome. I did not think that a social justice movement to stop violence against women and children and bear witness to the emotional scars left by such violence would become subsumed by the institutions of mainstream mental health, which would then stigmatize the psychological sequelae of these confusing, terrifying experiences. I didn't think that the veterans of yet another war would come home to find their combat trauma reframed by the government they had served as a pre-existing personality disorder which would exclude them from services and compensation. I could not imagine that hurricanes would be followed by disasters of governmental neglect. I certainly did not think that, three plus decades on, I would still be seeing women and men coming into my office whose experiences of emotional and physical and sexual abuse—and frequently, of being ignored or punished when they cried out for help—happened well after I, and all of us, began our quest for justice for those so targeted as children. I did not want us to need a Division of Trauma Psychology.

How things have turned out almost 40 years after I started has been the source of some rude awakenings. The more I've pondered these questions about the meaning and value of my life's work, the more I have found myself staring at some unpleasant facts—and thus, the more I have found myself wanting to bring those facts into the conversation with all of you, my friends and colleagues in this field in which many of you were initially also accidental tourists.

So here's my unpleasant fact. This field of ours, trauma psychology, requires the presence of social injustice in order for us to exist. That's a problem. That's a fact about which we need to do something, because we need more justice.

Look around us; we are specialists in the study and treatment of the traumas of combat, genocide, torture, sexual assault, child physical and sexual abuse and neglect, sexual abuse by clergy, hate crimes, discrimination and micro-aggression. Even the disaster psychology experts among us rarely get to work with trauma survivors where the bad behaviors of humans and our institutions have not been implicated somehow in the disaster. The disaster we call Katrina, after all, was not simply a hurricane. The disaster was mostly about the flood, which was entirely a failure of the federal government to keep the levees working. It was then a further failure of all governments involved to rescue people, and then another failure restore them to their homes and lives. Alaska Airlines Flight 261, which went down off the California coast a decade ago with the loss of all on board, was not simply an terrible tragedy that reverberated all through Seattle, where the airline is based and many of the dead had lived. It was the result of what, on investigation, appeared to be a deliberate failure on the part of the airline to do adequate maintenance on a part—a jackscrew- so that money would be saved. This was the part that failed, and doomed the flight. For want of a nail… Buffalo Creek was not simply a flood; it was caused by the thoughtless actions of a mining company building unstable slagheaps of waste for years. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is clearly not a natural disaster; men died, and the environment of the Gulf and surrounding regions sullied, because someone had turned off the alarms on the Deepwater Horizon rig.

The unavoidable fact is that most of us in the room make our living because there is injustice. Without injustice, small scale or large, the field of trauma psychology would wither away. There will likely always be truly natural disasters, vehicle accidents, traumatic illnesses and injuries that would require our study and care. But the bulk of what most of us in the room today research, teach about, practice with, or advocate for is there because there is injustice, large-scale and small, in every corner of the planet. That little line in the DSM description of trauma about it being worse when it is, or appears to be, of human design—well, the hands of humans are in almost every trauma, and many of those humans are not the innocent drivers of the car that happened to swerve into our lane when it hit the invisible patch of black ice. They are humans who are abusing their power, their privilege, their role, acting indifferently, behaving with a notable absence of justice.

We also know that from this traumagenic exposure to injustice usually flows further injustice for the traumatized individual. In the midst of working on this talk I spent an afternoon in one of our state prisons, conducting a forensic interview with a young man who has been a resident of the department of corrections since he was seventeen years old-almost half of his life now. He killed a man who was sexually abusing him, a fact about his murder victim that he could not bring to consciousness until he had been in prison, and clean and sober, for several years. Dave Green, as I'll call him, had been in the control of one state agency or another since being removed around age eight from his biological parents, who sadistically abused him and his siblings. The state agencies that deal with abused children are chronically underfunded, and their staff, even when caring, change frequently because their pay is low and their work painful—so as He bounced from one foster placement to another, including into a few where he was abused again, there was no consistent person around to notice his downward spiral. His last caseworker was buddies with the murder victim-Green's last foster father, who legally adopted him over Green's protests. When Green fought off an advance and cried for help, his caseworker dismissed his complaint as made up. When Green murdered this man, who had the appearance of a pillar of the community, he was offered an attorney who spent perhaps a total of forty hours preparing his defense, and who did nothing to stop the juggernaut of the criminal justice system from rolling over Green—including almost nothing to place Green's history of terrible abuse before the judge and jury as possible mitigating factors in sentencing.

So the state's narrative about Dave Green—that he was a terrible violent young man who needed to be charged at the highest level and locked away until he was old and gray—prevailed. The growing stack of information about the murder victim's history of sexually harassing the young men in his care—Green was not the first, nor even the only target of this persistent pedophile at the time of the murder—was never brought before the triers of fact. The defense attorney's lackadaisical behaviors, even though commented on for the record by the judge, were not reason enough for the county to spend the dollars to get him a better defense.

With the exception of the dead man, everyone else who ever abused Mr. Green is free and walking around in the world. His biological father and mother, each of whom served very short prison sentences for the truly horrendous things that they did to the children and animals in their care, have gone about their lives. The other foster parents who harmed him never spent a moment in custody. The caseworker who ignored his cries for help and tried to cover up the murder victim's pedophilia, kept his job. Injustice piled on injustice piled on injustice.

Mr. Green's story is extreme—most of the trauma survivors with whom we work do not face a lifetime in prison because of the concatenation of injustices emerging from their initial trauma exposure. They may become ill from living in a toxic FEMA trailer, or underemployed because the flashbacks and nightmares from childhood complex trauma make it hard to study at school or function in the workplace. They may lose custody of their children because their ability to parent has become badly impaired, or access to veteran's benefits because their PTSD led to acting-out behaviors and an other-than-honorable discharge. They may be sleeping under a bridge, because the self-hatred and substance abuse that developed after protracted sexual abuse by a priest. All of these spirals from injustice are, of course, painful and terrible ones. To say that Dave, with his nearly life-long sentence, has an extreme outcome to his trauma story only underscores that for many trauma survivors, the spirals of injustice range on the continuum from terrible to extreme. We make our livings- we exist as a field—because there is injustice.

There may yet be justice, though. In fact, what there may be is an ethic of justice that can inform everything that we in the field of trauma psychology do. The rest of Mr. Green's story is the story of the pursuit of justice and the enactment of that ethic. One psychologist bore witness to his life. My friend, who had conducted the psychological evaluations on this man and his siblings when he was a child first in the foster care system, and who, on learning of the murder from media stories, had made many attempts to get his defense attorney to make use of her services on his behalf, did not stop being Mr. Green's witness—and eventually his advocate, from that time to the present day. Even though he had no recollection of her work with him when he was little, even though when she re-encountered him in prison he was unable to recall any of the documented horrors that had been perpetrated on him, my friend remained Mr. Green's witness. She did not wash her hands of him—instead, she became a constant presence in his life, using the power of her role as a psychologist in the world, the power of her knowledge of what had been done to him, and the power of her relationships within the community, to become a voice for justice for Dave Green.

It was in her presence, in a prison visiting room, that his first conscious recollections of being sexually abused by the dead man began to emerge. It was through her efforts, calling on favors owed from her many years of practice, that an excellent criminal defense attorney became interested in his case and willing to work with him pro bono. It was through her persistence that I became willing to spend all of a day traveling to the prison on the remote western reaches of the state, and more hours reviewing records and testing results. When he himself could not bear witness to what had been done to him, my friend and colleague bore witness for him until the day when he could begin to do so for himself. The team that she has created for him is now bearing witness to the injustice of his being given an extraordinary sentence. Mr. Green told me that he knows that what he did by committing murder is indefensible—that he deserved prison time, and deserves the mark of a felon. But no one on his team today thinks that 50 years in custody is a reasonable outcome for his act of self-defense.

Now some of you, listening to me share what my friend has done, might be thinking, “But what about dual roles? What about ethics?” After all, as a forensic evaluator whose initial client was the state department of children’s services, what business does she have meddling in these matters? What is she doing visiting him in prison for years on end, and taking his collect phone calls on days when the flashbacks of his abuse, which are frequent now, torment him, and the prison mental health staff, although sympathetic, are constrained from offering him treatment because Washington State forbids the treatment of PTSD in its men’s prisons? That’s right—you cannot treat male prisoners for PTSD in Washington State—which is really too bad, considering that our prisons are now starting to fill up with Iraq and Afghan war vets with PTSD, not to mention the many survivors of childhood trauma who were already there. What is she up to, recruiting people to work on his behalf?

I would like to argue that in fact my friend is behaving with the highest possible ethic. She is modeling what I would like to describe today as an ethic of trauma psychology in her pursuit of justice for Mr. Green. The ethic of pursuing justice where there has been none as a foundational value for trauma psychology is the concept that I will spend of the remainder of my time today explicating and illustrating. This ethic of creating social justice is an ethic dictating that the psychologist’s task is to bear witness, and to continue to bear such witness until the time that justice has been served.

My challenge to all of us- how can we create an ethic of trauma psychology be it research, teaching, psychotherapy, or advocacy, in which our actions, large and small, expose the injustices inherent in the invisible world of trauma, and in which our actions, at micro and macro levels, create justice when and wherever possible? Such an ethic of creating justice as a foundation for trauma psychology is an ethic founded in our collective recognition that our life’s work—the things that pay our bills, bring us honor and recognition—exist only because of terrible injustices, and that only by telling the truth about that in all that we do will we cease to be accidental enabler of the injustice. Advocating for an ethic of justice in trauma psychology seems to me to be a way to respond to the reality that trauma psychology sits on the foundation of injustice.

Having a justice ethic isn't a new idea. Many of us don't buy clothing made in sweatshops, or food grown under conditions of oppression—we boycotted grapes and iceberg lettuce, and look for the Fair Trade certification on our food today. But do we question that our own livelihoods depend on the realities of injustice underlying trauma? No one in this room is a silent bystander to trauma- we are here because we are willing to see trauma and engage with it. What I'm hoping you'll leave with today is a heightened purpose to not only see trauma, but also to see and call by name the injustices that underlie it and create it, thus considering how we set our field on its path to obsolescence-although, sadly, not in my lifetime, nor that of anyone in this room.

So let me talk about the components of an ethic of trauma practice as I am beginning to envision them. These are aspirational, not enforceable ethics, and they are not terribly different from several of the bedrock aspirational principles of social justice ethics to which many psychologists are already attracted. They represent, to some degree, a re-ordering of the usual ranking of aspirational principles, because this justice-focused ethic of trauma psychology does not begin with avoiding harm, or even with simply behaving beneficently. Instead, this is an action ethic, "tzedek tirdof," in the words of Torah, running towards justice.

The first component of this ethic of the pursuit of justice for trauma psychology is the willingness to tell the truth about the link between trauma and injustice, and to do what is possible to make that truth visible, audible, palpable, and known everywhere that we can. This will not always be simply done. Many of us work in systems and institutions that would like to construct PTSD and other of the forms of distress arising in the wake of trauma as simply one more form of psychopathology to be categorized and dealt with. It is essential to all of us that trauma psychologists remain a viable presence and credible voice in such settings, particularly the formal institutions of power and authority in society. We gain much, as a field and as a culture, because there are trauma psychologists in hospitals and prisons and universities, working with law enforcement and in the military.

There is also the ever-present risk, though, that any of us-whether in the apparently less-fettered world of independent practice, or the administratively rich world of a quasi-military system, becomes institutionalized to that system. This is certainly true for me. After all, when I work with a client who is living with the wages of injustice known as complex trauma and I am billing to an insurance company, I have an obligation to use a diagnosis, with its inherent ascription of pathology to my client, rather than to the larger culture. No matter how many times I get to proclaim in my writings or speeches that I believe that the pathology lies outside of us, and only the distress and behavioral dysfunction within it, the seductive nature of repeatedly calling something pathological has to be having its effects on me. For all of us, the ethic of naming injustice's omnipresence in the work of trauma psychology, the making visible of the invisible, can be a challenge.

So how might we fulfill this first component of a justice ethic of trauma psychology? I would like to suggest that we do this aspect of speaking the truth about injustice through the ways in which we frame our work day to day. So, for instance, in addition to the question, "What is the most effective treatment that I can offer to this person," add the question, "What interventions can I offer that will lead to the most justice for this person?" In addition to thinking about the symptoms being manifested by the person we are treating, we must think about the ways in which that person might have a more just world available to them through the ways in which we invite them to understand those symptoms. When we are writing the syllabuses for our courses in trauma psychology, in addition to insuring that we have the best texts with the most current research and the most founded evidence bases for practice, we must also be sure to include the history of the cultural and social realities of oppression and injustice that create the contexts in which trauma has been born.

Now, being free of symptoms is in fact one sort of justice. While the Hindus and Buddhists among us believe that the karma of bad acts will eventually catch up to the perpetrators of injustice in this life or a future existence, those of us in the Abrahamic traditions are more likely to sigh, along with the Biblical Psalmist, that "the evil flourish like the green bay tree," and indeed those who commit or enable harm to others often do not appear to be suffering much, if at all. It's not a small thing for us to find ways to reduce suffering. As a Division we were thrilled when Time Magazine named Edna Foa, to whom we gave our Lifetime Achievement Award last night, one of its 100 most influential people, because her development of Prolonged Exposure therapy for PTSD has helped so many people's suffering diminish.

And at the same time, we need to tell the truth about the circumstances that led Time to focus on Dr. Foa. To quote from the U of Pennsylvania's own press release about her being honored, "The recent dramatic increase of PTSD sufferers in the U.S. and around the world, following increased terror attacks and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has resulted in urgent need to disseminate Dr. Foa's treatment for PTSD, called Prolonged Exposure (PE), to mental health professionals."

So, the truth about why a trauma psychologist finally made the Time list of 100 is that there has been a dramatic increase in injustice. We're in the midst of two terrible wars. One of them, in Afghanistan, began as a war of self-defense against the people behind the September 11th attacks, which were themselves unjust. But the other war, in Iraq, I would argue, and many people would agree, happened because of a series of lies and deceptions perpetrated on the Congress of the U.S., because of the personal agendas of a few powerful people, or the willingness of those people to be willfully ignorant when the truth became available to them. I do not think it hyperbole to say that the men and women who served, and sometimes through multiple deployments, in Iraq, were betrayed by the leadership of the U.S. government at its very highest levels.

I was an intern in the VA just a few years after the last such experience of betrayal of the military from the top down, also known as the war in Viet Nam, had officially ended. We were seeing the first few Viet Nam vets at the hospital then—and since we didn't have a diagnosis of PTSD to give them, they were being stigmatized, one and all, as personality disordered. It was not the official line to tell the truth to them, that their distress and feelings of betrayal made sense. We have colleagues who sit honored among us today because they were among the psychologists who stood up to say that these men, and others like them, were not disordered- that they were traumatized, and doubly so, by combat and by then being abandoned and betrayed by the government that had, in so many cases, insisted that they serve. Standing up in that way, at a time, and in places, where such a truth was not popular is an example of this ethic of speaking the truth about injustice.

In fact, if we look at many of the distinguished colleagues sitting in this room, we realize that they have become distinguished not simply because they did the ground-breaking research or developed the best measure or implemented the most effective treatment. They have become distinguished as trauma psychologists because they have practiced this ethic of speaking the truth about injustice that underlies trauma. Their work has stood out from the crowd and stood the test of time because that work says, directly and clearly, that the most forms of interpersonal violence trauma are a human rights issue—that they are about abuses of power There are others of you, my colleagues currently in the VA and the military who are distinguished in my mind because of your unswerving willingness to see the injustices spiraling outward from the traumas suffered in war, and to bring empathy, compassion, and awareness to the clients you serve and the research you conduct.

Sometimes, practicing this first ethic of the trauma psychologist and telling the truth about injustice must happen quietly, in our own minds. Because if we are to bear witness with our presence and relationships to trauma survivors, which I propose is the second principle of the ethics of trauma psychology, we must remain present and able to do so. Sometimes those of us who are members of the sisterhood and brotherhood of survivors must remain silent as to our membership, so that our ability to be credible and powerful on behalf of those who suffer may be preserved—we must live with the injustice that labels survivors less sane, smart, and capable than those of us who have not experienced trauma. Being thoughtful, careful, and quiet does not mean that we should abandon the first ethic of trauma practice, however. We must, instead, find ways to ask ourselves how our work will allow others to see the invisible world—how the ways in which we ask our research questions, develop our treatments, teach our students, and frame our policy, will expose the realities of social injustice woven into the narrative of trauma at every single point possible.

Sometimes this can be a simple as the studies we cite on the way to our description of our methodologies. A justice-informed literature review does not simply offer a précis of the research that has gone before. It also embeds in the narrative references to the social conditions creating the contexts of the kinds of trauma we comment upon. Sometimes this can be as simple as being dedicated to cultural competence in our practices of research and therapy and teaching, so that we do not create new injustices. A justice-informed approach to psychotherapy or research or teaching, which simply asks the psychologist to integrate knowledge of social injustice into what s/he brings to the relationship, and not replicate social dynamics of oppression and devaluation, makes the injustices underlying trauma more apparent because they are being placed in contrast to the attempts to create justice in the consulting room or research lab or classroom. Sometimes this can be as simple as asking your state psychological association to lobby for a bill that gives more choice of therapist to impoverished victims of crimes- something we did successfully this year in Washington State when some of my trainees (one of whom is in the room today) determined that to cap the injustices of complex trauma and poverty and crime victimization with state-mandated loss of choice of therapist was just too much for us to stomach.

You don't have to stand up and shout that injustice is the bedrock of trauma. You just have to keep noticing it—and keep asking yourself, how do I keep this fact in front of me, informing my choices, my strategies, my work? How do I keep it in front of me and not reduce what I'm doing to symptom reduction, or getting results at $p<.05$? You have to be willing to not passively take the side of the perpetrator which, as Judith Herman noted in the quote I began with, is usually the easiest thing to do—and is what we do, by accident and without intention, when we do not, on purpose and with intention, stand by the side of those targeted by injustice and tell the truth about the presence of that wrong.

Which leads me to the second principle of an ethic of justice in trauma psychology- the ethic of witness. Charlie is the name our neighborhood gave to the homeless man, standing in the rain speaking with his hallucinations, who lived in the doorways of our neighborhood for the last few years. At first glance Charlie is scary; long blond dreadlocks, unwashed like the rest of him, face and hands filthy, clothing in tatters, gesticulating and muttering to himself. I am humbled to say that one of the reasons I began to pay attention to him as a human being was that one of my clients, herself a survivor of complex trauma, bopped into the office one day to tell me about the wonderful conversation that she'd had with him on the benches outside of Starbucks. "He's like me," she said, "only worse off." In other words, an alumnus of the school of childhood horror. Chastened and humbled by her display of compassion, I began to say hello to Charlie, to make eye contact, to notice the human under the symptoms. When he asked, I would buy him coffee or a sandwich. My massage therapist, whose office is on the other side of my building, had also taken him under her wing, and over time, many of us working in my neighborhood started looking out for Charlie. During the bitter cold winter of 2008-09, when temperatures plummeted and Charlie was continuing to refuse our offers of coats and shoes, some of the merchants made sure that he knew he was welcome to sleep in the relative warmth and shelter of their business's doorways. When we suddenly stopped seeing him this spring we worried until someone spread the news that he had been seen downtown—although we worried about him in that rougher environment, where no one knew him. He never did tell anyone his actual name, or where he came from, although there was some evidence of a middle-class education that would sputter to the surface during his lucid moments. But what I was privileged to do was to be in relationship with Charlie-to be a witness to him, rather than someone who passed him by, not seeing the human under the rags and dirt and angry conversations with someone unseen.

Being in relationship with, and witnessing the experiences of trauma survivors, is thus my second proposed component of an ethic of justice in trauma psychology. We need to not look away. Charlie, and other people who have no homes and no ability to politely contain the horrors within them, or Dave Green, and the other trauma survivors living in the corrections system, represent easy examples of the survivors from whom we draw ourselves back, as people and as cultures. Yet in many other ways, most of us distance ourselves from the realities of trauma, embodied in trauma survivors. We pretend that we know of their lives only from the safe distance of the therapist's chair, the researcher's lab. We speak of trauma as something out there, trauma survivors in the third person plural.

An ethic of speaking the truth about injustice requires us to speak the truth about the omnipresence of trauma, and its survivors. We are here in the room today—and I say we, because the empirical research done by our colleagues Ken Pope and Shirley Feldman-Summers teaches us a third of us are survivors of childhood trauma. Others of us are refugees, lived through combat, survived domestic violence or sexual harassment or a hate crime. We are very careful, we trauma survivors in the field of trauma psychology, not to witness one another, or be witnessed ourselves, in these gatherings of the experts. Yet I wager that if I asked any one of us who have met the monsters of injustice to stand up at your seats, more of the room would be on its feet than in its chairs. I ask no one to stand up, and would expect no one to do so—the injustice of trauma which pervades our field makes such honesty risky. But we can enact the ethic of justice in trauma psychology by, at the very least, beginning to everywhere and always speak of trauma survivors in the first person plural, whether any of us, as an individual, is her or himself truly a survivor of trauma. This creates justice, by telling the truth of the normalcy, the quotidian nature, the very pervasiveness of the invisible world of trauma.

In this regard I find myself informed by Jewish tradition. On the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, we collectively confess to our failures of decency; in the first person plural we intone, "Ashamnu, bagadnu- we have all trespassed, we have all betrayed trust," despite knowing that most of the list accurately describes no one in the room. But by using the first person plural, we bring those who have committed these acts into the congregation of the whole-we acknowledge that we might have done so, and create an avenue by which the one who has may, with no shame, make amends. Thus, in speaking of we, trauma survivors—we bear witness to the ordinariness, the pervasiveness of this experience, we create a space in the room for ourselves and you and us, we allow you and us to be seen as all of who you and us are—not simply your and our wounds and your and our encounters with injustice.

When we take this simple step, we enact the ethical stance of witnessing and being in relationship in a very basic way that then allows us to reconsider how we might do this across the rest of our lives. The concept of risking connection developed by Laurie Pearlman and Kay Saakvitne embodies this ethic of witness as a force for justice in trauma psychology. To witness, and thus make visible, audible, and palpable the injustices inherent in trauma, trauma psychologists must risk being in relationship with its survivors, and truly perceiving their experiences. It is too easy to let our professional socialization to other-ize suffering people get in the way of genuine witness—just as my own training and its inherent prejudices about unwashed people speaking loudly to someone unseen got in the way of me seeing Charlie. We would not see Moses or Jesus or the Buddha either, if we kept not looking at folks like Charlie.

There are many ways to enact witness. We can begin by truly listening and not drawing away. We can believe that what we are told is what is real for the people telling us their stories, even when such stories seem to challenge everything we know to be true about the world, even when, as is oftentimes the case, these realities violate the laws of physics. After all, Constance Dalenberg, who sits here today, has done the research showing us that the children who we know with certainty have been sexually abused are the ones telling us stories in which giraffes fly through their bedrooms. We can listen to, and believe the pain, and not become distracted by the details. When the terrible details are factual, we can keep listening and looking, not draw our gaze away even when to continue to look brings us pain of our own. We can listen to truths about our various sacred cows; that families, religious institutions, nations, have all been direct perpetrators of injustice, or have enabled those injustices when not directly perpetrating them. As Steve Gold has pointed out, it is not simply the trauma of the violation of a child that creates the injustice in which that survivor then lives—it is all the other forms of injustice to a child inherent in a disrupted family and social context that ultimately put that child at risk for suffering and continuing vulnerability in life. We can, and ultimately must, witness the harms that we, or those with whom we associate, have done, and be allies.

How can we enact an ethic of witness? I believe that an example of the answers to this question lies in the story I told of Dave Green. The take-home message is, broaden our gaze. As I was being walked out of the prison by the psychologist, who told me about our state's policy of not treating PTSD in its men's prisons, and as I encouraged her to get involved in Division 56, she commented that she hadn't really thought of herself as part of the trauma psychology fold. She was right. Even though we know that our nation's prisons house the largest concentrations of trauma survivors in the country, even though Kat Quina and I did a special issue of the J of Trauma Psychology on just that topic not too long ago, trauma psychologists have not typically come from the ranks of those working in the corrections system, and haven't been looking to work in prisons, either. This is not a call for you all to go out and get jobs in corrections settings. But it is a call for trauma psychologists as individuals, and trauma psychology as a discipline, to notice where we have been failing to witness the effects of injustice that are trauma.

Enacting the ethical principle of witness requires that we notice, and then ask ourselves how we can cease to distance, and become more involved. While I am unlikely to give up my practice and clinic and seek a job in the state prison system, I know that one of my personal priorities for life after this presidential year will entail working with my state legislature to end the policy banning treatment of PTSD in our men's prisons. Ironically, Washington State is treating PTSD in its women's prison—doing so in part because of two dissertations I chaired which piloted a no-cost-to-the-state CSA survivor treatment program there. But now that I know that similar treatment is denied the many male survivors incarcerated on my taxpayer dime, I would fail in witness should I not make it my business to fight for their access to trauma-informed care as well. Similar options for action are available to many of us. We need to ask ourselves where we have not looked, not heard, not witnessed, and then ask how we might enact our witness to trauma in ways that make that particular segment of the invisible world visible. We can frame the questions of our research, broaden the scope of who we study so that the trauma in their lives becomes part of the narrative, modify our understanding of human distress and dysfunction so that trauma's presence in pain becomes more central to our conceptual frameworks.

We can also, individually and as a field, challenge notions that some things are not traumatic because they are somehow not bad enough to qualify, a statement which functions as a professional looking-away. For those here who reasonably have raised questions about so-called "criterion creep", we need to ask ourselves, as honest scientists, whether it is more important *to a priori* circumscribe the human experiences that we wish to allow to qualify as traumagenic, or whether we will be more able to more effectively understand the entire panoply of trauma response, suffering and post-traumatic growth alike, if we witness everyone who tells us that their experience was traumatic to them. Work by my friend Maria Root examining the experiences of oppressed people who are exposed to small daily doses of violation and invalidation has demonstrated to us that the reality of what is unjust-and thus the reality of what is trauma—is not always easy for the person standing outside the shower of acid rain to accurately comprehend. When we expand our witness, and allow trauma survivors to tell trauma psychologists what is real, what is painful, what is helpful, what is confusing, then we are more likely to develop a trauma psychology that reduces suffering, and increases justice.

A third principle of an ethic of pursuing justice in trauma psychology is a stance of humility and ignorance. This is one of the hardest of these ethical constructs to enact, in my experience, because being trained in a doctoral profession encourages neither of these ways of being. Yet some of the best, most justice-promoting work that I know of in our field is being developed by trauma psychologists who practice this ethical stance. Kathryn Norsworthy, who chairs our International Committee, has spent many years in Thailand teaching and learning with, rather than teaching to, the indigenous Thai and Burmese refugee healers of her acquaintance. Her work acknowledges that long before Western psychologists with our prolonged exposure and EMDR and evidence-based treatments rode into town, the cultures of the global south had powerful and effective ways of assisting the survivor of trauma and injustice to heal. The recent popularity of mindfulness-based treatments is our best evidence of that fact, given that they are all derivatives of Vipassana Buddhist meditation. I noted at the beginning of my talk today that trauma is the heritage of being human. So, too, are healing responses to trauma that developed outside of our science, be they sweat lodges or meditation, acupuncture or chicken soup with knoedlach.

Just before coming here I had the pleasure of reading my friend Carl Auerbach's proposal for his work in Rwanda, developing a Rwandan trauma psychology in concert with colleagues and students there. I was struck, as I often am by the work of those of us who practice trauma psychology in the developing world, by the humility of his stance, his total commitment to learning together, rather than teaching-to. This ethical stance of humility and ignorance, of knowing what we cannot or do not know, might seem strange as a strategy towards greater justice. Yet once we tell the truth about injustice, once we witness its realities and the suffering it has conferred, it is too facile for us to promote ourselves as knowing the solutions. We think, ah, now that I see it I know what to do-how could people have missed that? And then we offer our expertise, and in the process risk disconnecting from, silencing, and dismissing everything that individual trauma survivors, and their cultures and social contexts, have been doing to try to solve this problem before we appeared on the scene—and thus create conditions for more injustice, rather than less. After all, humans have been trying to solve this problem of trauma and its attendant pain for as long as our species has had consciousness, and perhaps longer.

If I wish to avoid the kind of injustice that is intellectual colonialism and the abuse of the power of my role as a member of the cultural and intellectual elite, and rather enact a stance of humility and ignorance, then I will have to continually remind myself that if I witness, and act informed by what I have learned from those I witness, I will be most likely to develop practices in trauma psychology that more effectively alleviate suffering, and consequently increase justice.

This Division honored the team of Barbara Rothbaum and her colleagues last night for their development of virtual reality therapy for PTSD. We don't know whether or if Dr. Rothbaum and her colleagues had noticed how many young trauma survivors seem to have been running their own crude version of VR therapy through their incessant playing of single-person-shooter video games. What we do know is that the generation of trauma survivors coming into adulthood today may already be developing technologies for soothing their own suffering that, if we are humble and ignorant, we can notice, and perhaps learn something from. When we stop telling people what will help them, and instead ask to be shown and taught what people are already doing that helps them, then we will be better positioned to distill and generalize those naïve experiments done by individual trauma survivors into practices and policies that could benefit the many. An ethical stance of humility and ignorance is not one of passivity—it is, rather, one of accepting knowledge from non-authorized sources of wisdom, and then using the power and privilege of our position to disseminate what we have learned, given credit to our teachers as we go.

Last, there is the ethic of action. I will be 58 at the end of this year, and I no longer harbor illusions about my ability to change the world. But an ethic of justice for trauma psychology requires that we refuse to be swept into the trance of despair and helplessness that is so pervasive among us when we realize that our youthful utopian visions of transformation will not be achievable in our lifetime. When we see through the illusions of our youthful grandiosity it is tempting to run into the arms of hedonism and passivity, disclaiming responsibility for the world if we cannot control it. If we land in that place of despair masquerading as indulgence, we will have empowered injustice just as surely as if we went out and practiced it actively ourselves.

Taking action is a very personal thing. How we act, where, and in whose company, are not things that I, nor anyone, should be dictating to you. The ethic of pursuing justice as a foundation for trauma psychology is not one that flourishes in ivory towers—and you all know that, because most of you have already been taking action. You've been doing pro bono work with street kids, lobbying for bullying-prevention curricula in your state's schools, writing letters to the editor, showing up at fund-raisers so that your legislator will listen to you when you come calling. You've been traveling to conflict-torn parts of the world; you've been doing restorative justice work with indigenous communities. You've been taking action, not necessarily because you thought of it as an ethical imperative, but because you could see no other reasonable choices to make, once you had witnessed injustice.

Taking action toward justice can be frustrating, confusing, discouraging—and it can be very sweet. So as to remind you palpably of the sweetness of justice, and encourage all of you to consider incorporating an ethic of justice into your work as trauma psychologists, I'm going to end today with a little ritual that comes from the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition of giving candy and other sweets to children embarking on their religious education. This creates a classically conditioned relationship between learning and the yummy taste in your mouth-something that obviously worked for me! I believe that when we enact these four ethical stances- telling the truth about injustice, witness, humility, and action-in trauma psychology, we not only create more justice in the world, and balance out the reality that our work is founded on the presence of injustice. We also do something that sweetens our lives.

Behind you at the back of the room three of my trainees are stationed with bowls with bits of chocolate that represent justice in the world of chocolate-growing and making. As many of you know, this world has terribly exploited farmers and workers. The chocolate you will try today comes to you just, and free of exploitation and oppression, being made a block from my office in the only completely fair-trade, organic, artisanal chocolate factory in the U.S. Theo Chocolates. As Theo says on every wrapper, "We support cocoa farmers by ensuring living wages; we promote the health of our planet through organic growing processes; we give back to our community and create artisan food manufacturing jobs in the U.S.” When I eat my daily dose of 72% cacao with hot chili peppers, I am participating in creating justice-and justice is very sweet indeed. Plus, chocolate comforts me, and contain anti-oxidants that are good for me.

Trauma psychologists have the privilege of being able to see, hear, and know truth in the world. However we arrived here, we have been honored to have become residents of the invisible world; we have been troubled, and yet we have been transmuted and refined like gold in the alchemist’s pots, by our witness to the injustice that pervades human life. Our field, wonderfully and tragically, stands at the brink of an explosion of knowledge and influence. If we can embrace an ethic of creating justice through the work of trauma psychology, then the tragedy of injustice that is trauma will be redeemed through the sweetness of justice that we increase through our work.