Transforming Trauma
by James Gordon

The following is excerpted from Transforming Trauma: The Path to Hope and Healing.

Trauma comes to all of us, and its consequences can be terrible.

That’s the truth and the bad news. The good news is that all of us can use tools of self-awareness and self-care to heal our trauma and, indeed, to become healthier and more whole than we’ve ever been. If we accept the pain that trauma inflicts, it can open our minds and bodies to healing change. If we relax with the chaos it brings, a new, more flexible, and more stable order can emerge. Our broken hearts can open with tender consideration and new love for others, as well as ourselves.

This is the timeless wisdom of the shamans, our planet’s oldest indigenous healers, and also of our great religious and spiritual traditions: suffering is the soil in which wisdom and compassion grow; it is the school from which we graduate, committed to healing others’ hurt. Recent scientific studies on post-traumatic growth yield similar conclusions.

This is what I know after fifty years of clinical work with traumatized people and from wrestling with and learning from the ordinary challenges and heartbreaking losses of my own long life.

In medical school in the 1960s, I’d learned to enter the inner world of troubled children and older people struggling with life-threatening illness and also to listen to my own confusion and troubles. I reached out for help to Robert Coles, a young psychiatrist at the Harvard Health Services, who was working with the Black kids who were braving murderous mobs to integrate New Orleans schools. Bob helped me learn for myself the lessons that Freud had taught—how early childhood trauma of loss and forgotten abuse had made me more vulnerable to present loss. He also set an example of personal vulnerability and courageous commitment, sharing with me his own pain and loss and showing me I could make a healing difference in the larger world as well as with individual patients. And Bob helped me begin to know who I was, to appreciate my identity—an enduring sense of myself that has pulled me through troubled times.

While I was working as a student on medical and psychiatric wards, I was also welcoming other teachers who began to appear—in books as well as in my life. Early on, there was Man’s Search for Meaning, a slim memoir by Viktor Frankl, an Austrian Jewish psychiatrist whom the Nazis had confined in concentration camps. In Auschwitz, in the midst of the most inhumane abuse and unimaginable suffering, Frankl had found the meaning and purpose of his life. “Suffering ceases to be suffering,” Frankl wrote, “at the moment it finds a meaning.” He found himself appreciating, understanding, and having compassion for his fellow inmates and himself. He realized, even while his wife was being condemned to death in another camp, that “love is the ultimate good to which man can aspire.” He
learned to “say yes to life in spite of everything.” Reading Frankl, admiring him, I knew I wanted to do the same.

Thirty years ago, I founded The Center for Mind-Body Medicine (CMBM) to do just this, and since then, my CMBM colleagues and I have created trauma-healing programs in every part of the United States and in places all over the world overwhelmed by violence, devastation, climate-related disasters, and poverty. Our now international faculty of 160 has trained more than seven thousand clinicians, teachers, religious and community leaders, and peer counselors. And they in turn have shared our program with many hundreds of thousands of children and adults: people here in the US; survivors of wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Israel, Gaza, Syria, and South Sudan; those who’ve lived through hurricanes in New Orleans, Houston, and New York, the earthquake in Haiti, the wildfires in California, and school shootings in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, Broward County, Florida, and Santa Fe, Texas. We’ve trained twelve hundred clinicians and veteran peer counselors who work with active-duty US military, veterans, and their families and created programs for New York City firefighters and their families after 9/11, and the US Capitol Police after the January 6, 2021 invasion of the Capitol.

In 2015, after several years of volunteering, we also began to work intensively on the impoverished Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Twenty kids had killed themselves in the year before we were invited to offer our training to teachers, counselors, and elders who combined it with traditional Lakota healing; in the five years since, there have been only two youth suicides and very few young people have made attempts or needed to go to the emergency room.

The people our CMBM trainees work with seem so different from one another, but this is only apparent. The Gaza widow in the black, body-denying, face-obscuring burqa, and the stylish Silicon Valley executive whose recent divorce is calling up the grief and terror of childhood neglect are sisters in suffering. They are alike, too, in the way they use the comprehensive approach that I present in Transforming Trauma: The Path to Hope and Healing. They learn to use slow, deep breathing to quiet anxiety and agitation, Shaking and Dancing to melt trauma-frozen bodies, surface buried emotions that need tending, and feel physical and emotional freedom. As these techniques bring them into greater physical and psychological balance, they are able to successfully use all the other tools and techniques in Transforming Trauma—guided imagery, creating a trauma-healing diet, using biofeedback and genograms (family trees), accessing gratitude and nature’s healing powers, and expressing themselves in words, drawings, and movement. They are able as well to more effectively reach to others—family and friends as well as professional counselors—to find support, sustain long-term healing, and build toward a future of greater purpose and meaning.

The research we’ve continued to do—on traumatized and depressed children and adults, on stressed-out, often burnt-out medical students and professionals, and on vets with PTSD and chronic pain—can inform and comfort you. Published in medical and psychological journals, these research studies reinforce the years of our CMBM experience with definitive, visible, verifiable scientific evidence. What we’re doing works.

Sometimes this learning can and will be challenging. It’s not pleasant or easy to feel long-suppressed pain or deal with present or anticipated threats. But it turns out to be such a relief to finally face our losses and fears, so satisfying to reverse the biological damage that trauma inflicts, to free ourselves from past suffering and present fear. And it turns out to be such a joy to share the lessons that are enriching our lives with others who
want and need them.

Through engaging with and participating in the comprehensive approach to trauma healing and resilience building that I teach in Transforming Trauma, you will discover hidden resources of physical and mental energy and hope, as well as the capacity to imagine and make use of perspectives and solutions that may have previously been unthinkable. You may also, as shamans and spiritual teachers have long taught, discover in the ruins of trauma the treasure of Meaning and Purpose, and a Love for others and yourself that will warm and brighten all the moments of your life.

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For more inspiration, join this Saturday’s Awakin Call with James Gordon. More details and RSVP info here.