"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 KORNFIELD
Author of *A Path with Heart*

Bring me all of your dreams, you dreamers, bring me all of your heart melodies
That I may wrap them in a blue cloud-cloth   Away from the too rough fingers of the world

– "The Dream Keeper" by Langston Hughes

Trauma Stewardship

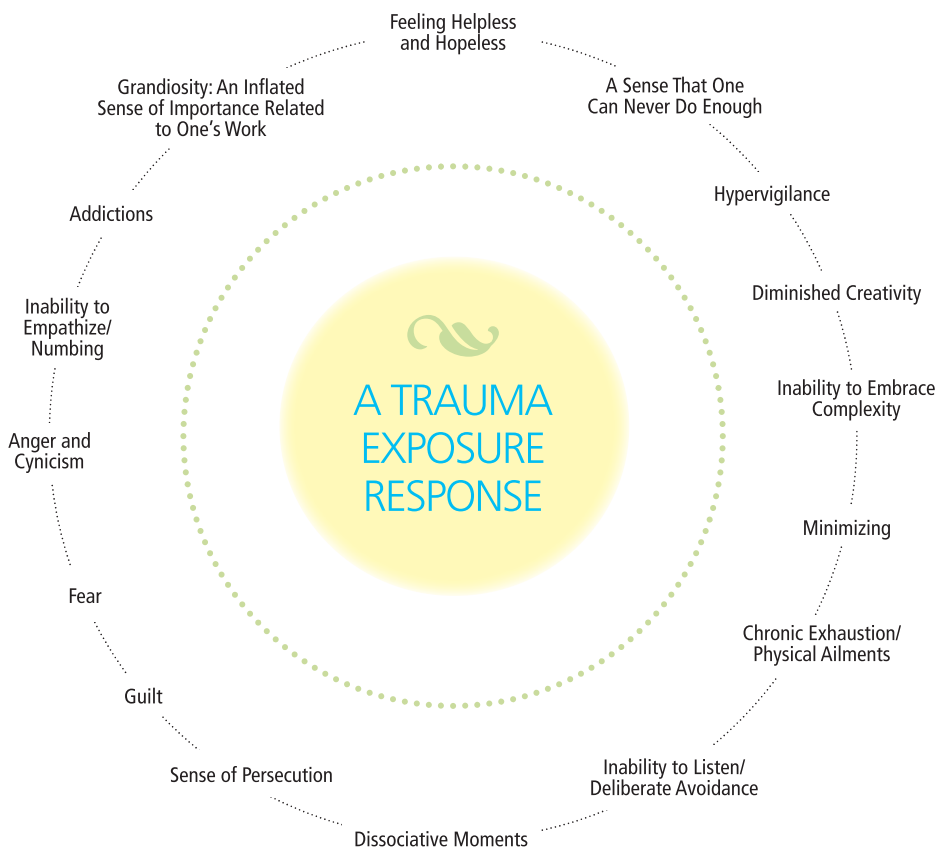## An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others

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

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Feeling Helpless
and Hopeless

A Sense That One
Can Never Do Enough

Grandiosity: An Inflated
Sense of Importance Related
to One's Work

Hypervigilance

Addictions

Diminished Creativity

Inability to
Empathize/
Numbing

Inability to Embrace
Complexity

A TRAUMA
EXPOSURE
RESPONSE

Anger and
Cynicism

Minimizing

Fear

Chronic Exhaustion/
Physical Ailments

Guilt

Inability to Listen/
Deliberate Avoidance

Sense of Persecution

Dissociative Moments

More Praise for *Trauma Stewardship*

"Reading this book is like looking into a mirror. We will see ourselves much more clearly, will understand ourselves much better and will come up with better ways of being It and doing It. Compassion, yes, Compassion is Happiness itself. Enjoy."

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peace activist

"Anyone who works with traumatized people can be caught in the grip of anxiety, irritability, or overwhelming sadness. By shutting out those feelings, you may sink into emotional numbness. You wish for wise words and a fresh perspective. You long for an understanding heart. You can find all that and more in Laura van Dernoot Lipsky's terrific book…It will get you through hard times. It will help you feel better and work smarter. No trauma worker should be without it."

— GINNY NICARTHY, counselor, educator, and
author of *Getting Free: You Can End Abuse
and Take Back Your Life*

"*Trauma Stewardship* provides valuable advice for all those who toil for the betterment of society and the environment we share. Author Laura van Dernoot Lipsky's lifetime of caring and service has given her powerful insights into those who have similarly devoted their lives to the greater good. She reminds us all to embrace the joy of connecting with the people and planet that we cherish and serve."

— JOHN FLICKER, President and CEO, National
Audubon Society

"Laura makes a superb case for 'trauma stewardship' as an approach that will benefit all of us in the service community who must deal with the struggles of our work with a hurting world. Her real-life stories hit home and clearly illustrate the ways that the traumatic situations we experience at work can carry into our personal view of our world. Laura helps us understand our own responses to trauma and provides a path of renewal. Her book offers tools to bring us back to a place of balance where we can be more effective in our work, more present with our families, and more importantly, more at peace in our own soul."

— MICHAEL L. TUGGY, MD, Director, Swedish
Medical Center Family Medicine Residency
Program; Medical Director, Swedish Family
Medicine First Hill Clinic; and recipient of
the Bronze Star from the US Army

"Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and *Trauma Stewardship* gave me language to describe what I was feeling after three trips to Iraq and subsequent work among US service members struggling to heal from war. *Trauma Stewardship* helped me acknowledge that my pain was not weakness to be suppressed or anesthetized but secondary trauma. But perhaps most important, *Trauma Stewardship* has shown me a path—not an easy one, to be sure, but a concrete one—toward a better and healthier life."

—BRIAN PALMER, journalist

"Having been an attorney for only two years, I was both surprised and relieved to recognize many signs of secondary trauma in myself. Surprised because I had never been able to acknowledge the impact of my work as a public defender in such a way; relieved for the very same reason. I have come to rely on this book as a means to help me bear the weight of what can feel like inexorable human tragedy. It is *only* through the practices articulated and encouraged in *Trauma Stewardship* that my spirit remains intact. Each person I represent is better served for my having used this book. I recommend it to every public interest attorney and law student."

—ELIZABETH LATIMER, public defense attorney,
Brooklyn Defender Services

"It is extremely easy, especially as caregivers, to overlook ourselves and our care. Laura takes us, the trauma stewards, on a journey of self-healing: her book's humor will make you laugh; its tools will help make us whole. She reminds us that the work we do as caregivers not only impacts our clients but also deeply affects us. *Trauma Stewardship* provides us with methods to help us get in touch with habits and feelings that no longer serve us, our communities, or our work. A must-read for all those who understand that this work we do is sacred."

—KANIKA TAYLOR-MURPHY, community activist

"Laura is a weaver. She takes the harsh yet resilient fibers that are the stories of trauma survivors and workers, including her own, threads them together with common-sense advice, and creates a warm and soft blanket that comforts and protects. It is an important book because it reminds you to care for yourself as you care for others and then offers practical tools for doing so. I wish I'd had this book when I first began my work with women and children experiencing domestic violence!"

—GRETCHEN TEST, Program Associate for Child
Welfare, Annie E. Casey Foundation

"In this groundbreaking guide to trauma stewardship, van Dernoot Lipsky shines new light on the care of the healers in the helping professions and provides a useful and loving guide to developing our ability to care for ourselves as much as we care for others. Anyone in the helping professions will benefit from the profound insights offered in this book."

—MIA EISENSTADT, consultant, activist,
and anthropologist

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Trauma
Stewardship

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Trauma
Stewardship

An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self
While Caring for Others

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk

Trauma Stewardship

For my ancestors and the sacred wilderness that surrounds me

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The Dream Keeper
by Langston Hughes

Bring me all of your dreams,
You dreamers,
Bring me all of your
Heart melodies
That I may wrap them
In a blue cloud-cloth
Away from the too-rough fingers
Of the world.

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FOREWORD

When my friend and colleague Laura van Dernoot first told me she was thinking of writing a book on secondary trauma, my first internal reaction went something like, "That is the last thing the world needs." She will no doubt remind me if my internal reaction was actually externalized in words. (You who are about to enjoy this book will get a glimpse into the tell-the-truth-with-loving-concern person that Laura is.)

Whether I said it out aloud or only in my own head, my concern was that in many pieces of literature, notions of vicarious trauma (a.k.a. empathic strain, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, burnout) are being thrown around with little appreciation for what they mean or what taking them seriously would require of us. (The same is true for many other meaningful concepts, including evidence-based practice, cultural competence, and authenticity.) Poor practice, errors in practice, agency insensitivity to employees, rudeness among colleagues, tardiness, sloppiness, and other minor and major events taking place in practice today are excused as "secondary trauma." All kinds of work-related stress, emotional or behavioral responses to the demands of the workplace, and other work-related conditions are also fluffed off as "secondary trauma."

You will find in the pages that follow that Laura has a keen understanding of trauma and the responses to it. This is a book written by someone who has walked the path and knows firsthand what trauma brings and demands of those who walk that path. Her honesty, humor, and no-nonsense approach make these vital topics accessible to all of us. Even the most experienced trauma worker will find a refreshing perspective here. Her idea of trauma stewardship is a great gift to our field. It erodes the artificial line between sufferer and helper. It recognizes that trauma has impacts that can be named and managed. Trauma

stewardship calls into question whether the means of exposure (direct or indirect, through relationships with those directly exposed) has any relevance to the impact of the trauma. Most of all, trauma stewardship calls on us to remember that it is a gift to be present when people deal with trauma; it reminds us of our responsibility to care and to nurture our capacity to help.

You will soon read Laura's claim that she brings no new knowledge to this calling. This is far from the truth. Not only is trauma stewardship a new formulation, but in ways that no other book or trainer has done, Laura links the key components of responding to trauma together in a way that is seamless and natural. One cannot go away from this book without understanding the relationship between oppression and trauma, the importance of purposeful action to protecting others and self, and the vital role that spirituality plays in protecting us from and managing trauma's impact on our own lives, as well as on the lives of our clients and friends. It interests me that Laura comes to this appreciation of the role of spirituality from walking the path, although increasingly this is also a finding from research on vicarious trauma.

Laura directs our attention to the impacts of trauma work on those who help and witness. Rather than pathologizing those of us who experience these reactions at one time or another, she helps us to understand our feelings and behavior as natural responses that flow from our humanity. In the same way that oils splatter on the painter's shirt or dirt gets under the gardener's nails, trauma work has an impact. As psychotherapists, we know that when the sources of anxiety go unrecognized, the anxiety cannot be managed. When that is the case, not only we but also our clients may suffer unnecessary distress. Laura gives us a range of possible emotions, ideas, and behaviors that can indicate that the work is taking a toll.

Perhaps the greatest gift this book gives us lies in the sections on finding compasses. Instead of producing a cookbook, Laura takes us along on her own journey. The Five Directions invite us, it seems to me, on a single direction that is inward so we can again go outward to the work. I haven't told Laura until now that when I first read this, I was angry. "Laura, for heaven's sake"—maybe the real words were a bit stronger—"tell me what to do!" Then I came to understand, as I

took the deep breath she invites her reader to take, that the answer for her cannot be the answer for me. She gives us a compass, but each of us has to find the direction.

Those of you who are about to read this book are at the trailhead of a path that holds great promise for you, for your work, and for those whom you are privileged to work with. In an age when the same ideas get repeated until they lose any meaning, this is a book with fresh ideas. Unlike cookbooks or manuals that invite quick responses that have not been thought out, this book invites us on a journey. On that journey, we are invited to take a fresh look at why we do the work, and how our work must be contextualized in efforts to end oppression and privilege. We are reminded that the work has inevitable benefits and challenges, that we are stewards not just of those who allow us into their lives but of our own capacity to be helpful, and that a mindful and connected journey, both internally and externally, allows us to sustain the work.

We are in this work together, all of us. Our best hope is to understand that it is a long journey. We need to take care of ourselves and each other. Laura has given us a great compass and map to help us on our journey.

JON R. CONTE, PH.D.
Seattle, Washington

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is no end to the people to whom I offer thanks for their much-needed help in writing this book. I am grateful to Aliyah and Mikaela, for teaching me what it truly means to have faith and for forgiving me each and every time I said, *"Solamente dos más minutos"*—a promise on which I could rarely deliver. To Joshua, who is my greatest role model, for reminding me what is truly important in life, and for helping me find my way back home. To Craig, who was the first to help me get back on my feet in life when I fell. To my father, who gifted me with an understanding of what it means to be grateful for my surroundings. To my mother, who gifted me with my passion and whose spirit kept me company throughout the process of writing. To Margarita Gutierrez, for being my sister and showing me what an open heart looks like. To Connie Burk and Jake Fawcett, whom we are proud to call our family and our friends, who inspire us with ceaseless generosity, and who are largely responsible for this book's emergence. To Caleb, who taught me what it means to be present. To Richard Appelbaum, for helping me connect with the rest of my life. To Jon Conte, whose willingness to sit with me and to bring true joy and great clarity has been unconditional and whose wisdom has allowed me to pursue this path. To Billie Lawson, who was a lifeline after many graveyard shifts, and whose humor has taught me so much. To Heather Andersen and Leslie Christian, for being deeply inspiring friends and beautiful mentors, and for their wonderfully generous financial support. To Michael Lipsky, whose tough love and belief in me helped form the foundation for my writing. To David Andrew, whose honesty and commitment to what could be helped the book truly come into its own. To Jerry Litner, who provided the wisdom that led me to a critical turning point, and to Suzanne Litner, for her care and practical support of the book. To

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To my profoundly talented editors Stacy Carlson and Karen Cook, whose endless generosity, kindness, commitment, and phenomenal editorial abilities breathed the necessary life and form into each and every sentence. This book could never have been anything close to what follows if not for their brilliance and exquisite vision.

To Yuko Uchikawa, whose loving friendship and steadfast confidence in this work has been a great blessing and a critical factor in this

book's evolution. Her intuition, wisdom, and marvelous artistic ability are what allow you to hold what you have in your hand.

And to all those valiant souls with whom I have had the privilege of working since I was 18 years old. I hope this book is worthy of all you have contributed to it, and I ask your forgiveness for any ways in which I was not capable of being as present as you deserved during our times together. I carry all of you in my heart and hope that the lessons I have learned and applied may allow others to be well served through the work of trauma stewardship. I feel humble in the presence of your spirits, and I am deeply honored to have your company on this path.

ABOUT THE COAUTHOR

Connie Burk is one of the primary reasons this book exists. Were it not for her vision, generosity, and faith in me, the text would still be floating around in my head. I am forever grateful to have had such an exquisite coauthor throughout the entire process. Connie urged me to turn my ideas about trauma stewardship into a book, and she refused to agree with me when I repeatedly said, "I am so not a writer!" She provided crucial perspective on the book as a whole and invited me to explore and reexplore my beliefs in a way that brought unprecedented depth to my work. Connie has a level of historical knowledge that was essential, and she role-modeled being patient as we tried to put our stream of thoughts into written words. She held the entirety of the process in a joyful embrace.

I met Connie years ago, when she first moved to Seattle. She had been recruited to be the executive director of the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse. Shortly after she arrived, I was asked to work with the organization as an advocate. Connie and I had our first meeting some days into my employment there. Sitting across from me, she asked what I would need to do my work well and how she could be of help. I told her that wherever I did direct service, I made sure to receive outside consultation twice a month to discuss the impact of the work on me, and that I'd need the Network to cover that. There was a memorably long pause. Eventually Connie said, "I had in mind something more in the shape of a muffin."

While obviously we did not start out on the same page about trauma stewardship, Connie is in large part responsible for anything you may glean from this book.

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You can only go halfway into the darkest forest;
then you're coming out the other side.

Chinese proverb

INTRODUCTION
On the Cliff of Awakening

"Are you sure all this trauma work hasn't gotten to you?" he asked.

We were visiting our relatives in the Caribbean. We had hiked to the top of some cliffs on a small island, and for a moment the entire family stood quietly together, marveling, looking out at the sea. It was an exquisite sight. There was turquoise water as far as you could see, a vast, cloudless sky, and air that felt incredible to breathe. As we reached the edge of the cliffs, my first thought was, "This is unbelievably beautiful." My second thought was, "I wonder how many people have killed themselves by jumping off these cliffs."

Assuming that everyone around me would be having exactly the same thought, I posed my question out loud. My stepfather-in-law turned to me slowly and asked his question with such sincerity that I finally understood: My work *had* gotten to me. I didn't even tell him the rest of what I was thinking: "Where will the helicopter land? Where is the closest Level 1 trauma center? Can they transport from this island to a hospital? How long will that take? Does all of the Caribbean share a trauma center?" It was quite a list. I had always considered myself a self-aware person, but this was the first time I truly comprehended the degree to which my work had transformed the way that I engaged with the world.

That was in 1997. I had already spent more than a decade working, by choice, for social change. My jobs had brought me into intimate contact with people who were living close to or actually experiencing different types of acute trauma: homelessness, child abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, community tragedies, natural disasters. As I continued on this path, my roles had grown and shifted. I had been an emergency room social worker, a community organizer, an immigrant and refugee advocate, an educator. I had been

a front-line worker and a manager. I had worked days, evenings, and graveyard shifts. I had worked in my local community, elsewhere in the United States, and internationally.

Over time, there had been a number of people—friends, family, even clients—urging me to "take some time off," "think about some other work," or "stop taking it all so seriously." But I could not hear them. I was impassioned, perhaps to the point of selective blindness. I was blazing my own trail, and I believed that others just didn't get it. I was certain that this work was my calling, my life's mission. I was arrogant and self-righteous. I was convinced that I was just fine.

"The ringing in your ears—I think I can help."

And so in that moment, on those cliffs, my sudden clarity about the work's toll on my life had a profound impact. Over the next days and weeks, I slowly began to make the connections. Not everyone stands on top of cliffs wondering how many people have jumped. Not everyone feels like crying when they see a room full of people with plastic lids on their to-go coffee containers. Not everyone is doing background checks on people they date, and pity is not everyone's first response when they receive a wedding invitation.

After so many years of hearing stories of abuse, death, tragic accidents, and unhappiness; of seeing photos of crime scenes, missing

children, and deported loved ones; and of visiting the homes of those I was trying to help—in other words, of bearing witness to others' suffering—I finally came to understand that my exposure to other people's trauma had changed me on a fundamental level. There had been an osmosis: I had absorbed and accumulated trauma to the point that it had become part of me, and my view of the world had changed. I realized eventually that I had come into my work armed with a burning passion and a tremendous commitment, but few other internal resources. As you know, there is a time for fire, but what sustains the heat—for the long haul—is the coals. And coals I had none of. I did the work for a long time with very little ability to integrate my experiences emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, or physically.

Rather than staying in touch with the heart that was breaking, again and again, as a result of what I was witnessing, I had started building up walls. In my case, this meant becoming increasingly cocky. I had no access to the humility that we all need if we are to honestly engage our own internal process. Rather than acknowledge my own pain and helplessness in the face of things I could not control, I raged at the possible external causes. I sharpened my critique of systems and society. I became more dogmatic, opinionated, and intolerant of others' views than ever before. It never occurred to me that my anger might in part be functioning as a shield against what I was experiencing. I had no clue that I was warding off anguish, or that I was secretly terrified that I wouldn't be able to hold my life together if I lost my long-held conviction that all could be made well with the world if only we could do the right thing. Without my noticing it, this trail I was blazing had led me into a tangled wilderness. I was exhausted and thirsty, and no longer had the emotional or physical supplies I needed to continue.

I could have ignored the realization that began on those cliffs. In the fields where I work, there is historically a widely held belief that if you're tough enough and cool enough and committed to your cause enough, you'll keep on keeping on, you'll suck it up: Self-care is for the weaker set. I had internalized this belief to a large degree, but once I realized that this way of dealing with trauma exposure was creating deep inroads in my life, I could not return to my former relationship with my work.

Instead, I began the long haul of making change. I knew that if I wanted to bring skill, insight, and energy to my work, my family, my community, and my own life, I had to alter my course. I had to learn new navigational skills. First, I needed to take responsibility for acknowledging the effects of trauma exposure within myself. Second, I had to learn how to make room for my own internal process—to create the space within to heal and to discover what I would need to continue with clarity on my chosen path. I had to find some way to bear witness to trauma without surrendering my ability to live fully. I needed a new framework of meaning—the concept that I would eventually come to call *trauma stewardship*.

Seung Sahn, the founder of the Kwan Um School of Zen, once said, "The Great Way is easy; all you have to do is let go of all your ideas, opinions, and preferences." Following his advice, I began to reconnect with myself. I learned how to be honest about how I was doing, moment by moment. I put myself at the feet of a great many teachers, medicine people, healers, brilliant minds, and loved ones. I asked for help. I began to reengage the wilderness around my home and to learn all the lessons I could from the endless intermingling of beauty and brutality that makes us so keenly feel the preciousness of life in the natural world. I began a daily practice that has allowed me to be present for my life and my work in a way that keeps me well and allows me to work with integrity and to the best of my ability.

Ultimately, I recognized that it was ego that had motivated me to keep on keeping on in my work long after I stopped being truly available to my clients or myself. Over the years, I gradually let go of that façade, and I reached a deep understanding of how our exposure to the suffering of others takes a toll on us personally and professionally. The depth, scope, and causes are different for everyone, but the fact that we are affected by the suffering of others and of our planet— that we have a *trauma exposure response*—is universal.

Trauma exposure response is only slowly coming to the fore as a larger social concern rather than simply an issue for isolated individuals. It was first recognized a decade ago in family members of Holocaust survivors and spouses of war veterans, but it has only recently attracted wide attention from researchers, who are working to assess its broader societal implications. To cite one example:

According to a March 2007 *Newsweek* article, a U.S. Army internal advisory report on health care for troops in Iraq in 2006 indicated that 33 percent of behavioral-health personnel, 45 percent of primary-care specialists, and 27 percent of chaplains described feeling high or very high levels of "provider fatigue." The article concluded with this blunt appraisal: "Now homecoming vets have to deal with one more kind of collateral damage: traumatized caregivers."

In 2007, CNN.com published an article by Andree LeRoy, M.D., titled "Exhaustion, anger of caregiving get a name." It begins, "Do you take care of someone in your family with a chronic medical illness or dementia? Have you felt depression, anger or guilt? Has your health deteriorated since taking on the responsibility of caregiving? If your answer is yes to any one of these, you may be suffering from caregiver stress." The article reports a finding by the American Academy of Geriatric Psychiatrists that one out of every four families in the United States is caring for someone over the age of 50, with projections that this number will increase dramatically as the population in America ages. Another source for the article is Peter Vitaliano, a professor of geriatric psychiatry at the University of Washington and an expert on caregiving. He reports that many caregivers suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, a compromised immune system, and other symptoms that can be linked to prolonged exposure to elevated levels of stress hormones. Unfortunately, many "don't seek help because they don't realize that they have a recognizable condition," the article says. In addition, Vitaliano explains, "caregivers are usually so immersed in their role that they neglect their own care." The article cites online conversations among caregivers who acknowledge that in such an emotional state, it's difficult to provide high-quality care to their loved ones.

While most research to date has concentrated on the effects of trauma exposure on those who watch humans suffer, we know that responding to trauma exposure is critical for those who bear witness to tragedies afflicting other species as well. Among these are veterinarians, animal rescue workers, biologists, and ecologists. We cannot ignore emerging information about the profound levels of trauma exposure among people in the front lines of the environmental movement—those fighting to stop the juggernaut of global warming

and those who strive desperately, in the face of mounting losses, to ward off the extinction of countless species of plants and animals.

Pioneering researchers have given our experience of being affected by others' pain a number of names. In this book, we refer to "trauma exposure response." Charles Figley uses the terms "compassion fatigue" and "secondary traumatic stress disorder." Laurie Anne Pearlman, Karen W. Saakvitne, and I. L. McCann refer to the process as "vicarious traumatization." Jon Conte uses the words "empathic strain." Still others call it "secondary trauma."

Here, we include trauma exposure response under a larger rubric: *trauma stewardship*. As I see it, trauma stewardship refers to the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are affected by it, and how we make sense of and learn from our experiences. In the dictionary, *stewardship* is defined as "the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care." These days, the term is widely used in connection with conservation and natural-resource management. In the January 2000 issue of the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, Richard Worrell and Michael Appleby defined *stewardship* as taking care "in a way that takes full and balanced account of the interests of society, future generations, and other species, as well as of private needs, and accepts significant answerability to society."

When we talk about trauma in terms of stewardship, we remember that we are being entrusted with people's stories and their very lives, animals' well-being, and our planet's health. We understand that this is an incredible honor as well as a tremendous responsibility. We know that as stewards, we create a space for and honor others' hardship and suffering, and yet we do not assume their pain as our own. We care for others to the best of our ability without taking on their paths as our paths. We act with integrity toward our environment rather than being immobilized by the enormity of the current global climate crisis. We develop and maintain a long-term strategy that enables us to remain whole and helpful to others and our surroundings even amid great challenges. To participate in trauma stewardship is to always remember the privilege and sacredness of being called to help. It means maintaining our highest ethics, integrity, and responsibility every step of the way. In this book, I will attempt to provide readers

with a meaningful guide to becoming a trauma steward.

The essayist E. B. White once wrote that the early American author, naturalist, and philosopher Henry Thoreau appeared to have been "torn by two powerful and opposing drives—the desire to enjoy the world, and the urge to set the world straight." This book is written for anyone who is doing work with an intention to make the world more sustainable and hopeful—all in all, a better place— and who, through this work, is exposed to the hardship, pain, crisis, trauma, or suffering of other living beings or the planet itself. It is for those who notice that they are not the same people they once were, or are being told by their families, friends, colleagues, or pets that something is different about them.
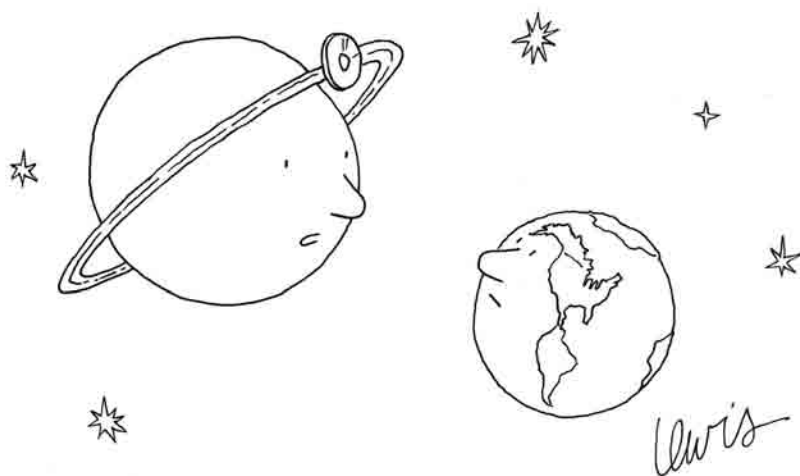
"I'm afraid you have humans."

If even a few of the readers of this book can enhance their capacity for trauma stewardship, we can expect to see consequences, large and small, that will extend beyond us as individuals to affect our organizations, our movements, our communities, and ultimately society as a whole. In part 1, I talk more about what trauma stewardship is and how we can embark on our journey of change. Since the first step toward repair is always to understand what isn't working, I've devoted part 2 to mapping our trauma exposure response. Many readers may be startled by how intimately they already know the 16 warning signs I present in chapter 4. Even if you haven't experienced

these feelings or behaviors yourself, you are certain to know others who have.

How do we escape the constriction and suffering that often accompany trauma exposure response? In part 3, I provide some general tips, along with an in-depth exploration of the importance of coming into the present moment. In part 4, I offer the Five Directions, a guide that combines instructions for personal inquiry with practical advice that can greatly enhance our ability to care for ourselves, others, and the planet. I have included numerous brief exercises that you may choose to try as you develop your daily practice. Throughout the book, you will encounter profiles of inspiring people, perhaps much like you, who are deeply committed to the struggle to reconcile the hardships and joys of doing this work. As we illuminate the path of trauma stewardship, we will also shine light on the larger contexts in which we interact with suffering. We will delve deeply into how to carefully and responsibly manage what is being entrusted to us.

This book is a navigational tool for remembering that we have options at every step of our lives. We choose our own path. We can make a difference without suffering; we can do meaningful work in a way that works for us and for those we serve. We can enjoy the world *and* set it straight. We can leave a legacy that embodies our deepest wisdom and greatest gifts instead of one that is burdened with our struggles and despair.

As the author of this book, I don't believe that I am imparting new information. Rather, I'm offering reminders of lore that people from different walks of life, cultural traditions, and spiritual practices have known for millennia. There is a Native American teaching that babies come into the world knowing all they will need for their entire lifetimes—but the challenges of living in our strained, confusing world make them forget their innate wisdom. They spend their lives trying to remember what they once knew. (Some say this is the reason why the elderly and very young children so often have a magical connection: One is on the cusp of going where the other just came from.) This book aims to guide you, the reader, in finding a way home to yourself. All of the wisdom you are about to encounter is known to you already. This text is simply a way to help you remember.

PART ONE

**Understanding
Trauma Stewardship**

"You've got to _want_ to connect the dots, Mr. Michaelson."

CHAPTER ONE
A New Vision for Our Collective Work

Trauma stewardship is for social workers, ecologists, teachers, firefighters, medical personnel, police officers, environmentalists, home health aides, military personnel, domestic violence workers, biologists, the staffs at animal shelters, international relief workers, social-change activists, those caring for an elderly parent or a young child—in short, anyone who interacts with the suffering, pain, and crisis of others or our planet. It is an approach that applies equally whether the trauma we encounter is glaring or subtle, sudden or prolonged, isolated or recurring, widely recognized or barely perceived. Our stewardship involves but is not limited to our intention in choosing the work we do, our philosophy of what it means to help others, the tone our caregiving takes, and our daily decisions about how we live our life.

Trauma stewardship is not simply an idea. It can be defined as 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. Those who support trauma stewardship believe that both joy and pain are realities of life, and that suffering can be transformed into meaningful growth and healing when a quality of presence is cultivated and maintained even in the face of great suffering.

Trauma stewardship calls us to engage oppression and trauma—whether through our careers or in our personal lives—by caring for, tending to, and responsibly guiding other beings who are struggling. At the same time, we do not internalize others' struggles or assume them as our own. Trauma stewardship practitioners believe that if we are to alleviate the suffering of others and the planet in the long term, we must respond to even the most urgent human and environmental conditions in a sustainable and intentional way. 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.

The rewards of such a practice are obvious, and it is also a profound challenge. Effective trauma stewardship may require that we question some of our most deeply held beliefs about our lives and work. Many of us might believe, secretly or not so secretly, that our commitment to our work may be measured by our willingness to martyr ourselves. It can be a terrific effort to adopt behaviors or ways of thinking that defy such internal convictions, even when you know the changes are self-respecting, healthy, and entirely necessary.

Because the practice of trauma stewardship demands such a high level of consciousness from us, I feel it's important to lay some groundwork for the process of self-transformation and to explain my intention when I call for a new approach to our collective work.

The most important technique in trauma stewardship is learning to stay fully present in our experience, no matter how difficult. The early American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed." Our goal is the opposite: When we arrive at a frightening place, we want to slow down enough to be curious about what is happening within ourselves. We want to be "present" with ourselves, an activity that in this book we can consider synonymous with being "mindful." According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, a scientist, author, and educator who has written extensively about the uses of meditation in medicine, mindfulness can be defined as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." Daniel Siegel, a doctor, researcher, and educator, describes mindfulness as "being aware of your awareness and paying attention to your intention."

As you begin to observe yourself, be fascinated, intrigued, and in no way critical. Avoid thinking in terms of right or wrong, good or bad, pathological or healthy. As we move away from habitual binary thinking, we can assume an internal posture similar to what a coach might suggest to a runner training for a marathon: chest open, shoulders lowered, jaw relaxed. When we do this, we're more able to go the distance in our self-exploration.

We might phrase our inquiry as follows: If I am exposed to suffering in a single moment or over the arc of time, is there the possibility that I will be affected by such exposure? Like that. No conclusions, no judgment, no defensiveness—just curiosity. We ask, "How am I different now than I was?" Our awakening to some changes may edify us and bring us closer to our values. At moments, our noticing may leave us feeling estranged, angry, or confused. With our tool of curiosity, we can observe the changes in ourselves, our relationships, and our work. The Soto Zen priest Suzuki Roshi said, "All of you are perfect, and you could use a little improvement."

"And now at this point in the meeting I'd like to shift the blame away from me and onto someone else."

Maintaining compassion for ourselves and others is of paramount importance as we explore our trauma exposure response. This is the term we use for the wide range of strategies we may have evolved, whether consciously or unconsciously, to contend with the trauma we have witnessed or shared in our lives or our work. We will look closely at these responses in part 2. The more we try to protect ourselves through not being fully present to what is unfolding in our

lives, the more we feel the effects of trauma exposure. As you take this in, waste no time in being self-deprecating or in indicting others; be as openhearted and open-minded as you can. When we lose compassion, our capacities to think and feel begin to constrict. If we are going to work optimally on this journey, we will need thinking and feeling in abundance. And the more you can laugh through these chapters, the better.

I encourage you to remember that nothing has to change in the world for us to transform our own life experience. This may be difficult to accept—we may be committed to repairing society on multiple levels, and we may think about our work in relation to large questions of justice, equality, and liberation. We may feel that if we focus on ourselves, we are abandoning our mission. The truth is that we have no authority over many things in our lives, but we do control how we interact with our situation from moment to moment. If we allow our happiness and sense of success to hinge on things outside of ourselves, we will wait for our well-being indefinitely. For example: "When my boss leaves, I'll feel better." "When we get more funding, things will be smoother." "If I can wrap up my research project, I'll be happier."

Many traditions teach us that regardless of anything external, we can create and re-create how we feel, view the world, and experience our surroundings simply by shifting our perspective. We can ask, "Where am I putting my focus?" If we put aside our fears and simply observe what is in front of us, there is something in every moment to honor. As the Holocaust victim and diarist Anne Frank said, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Remembering that we have the freedom to choose our path is a central tenet of this book. We are drawing a map that will help us navigate our way to trauma stewardship; the more we understand about where we are, the better our choices about where we go. The first step is to slow down and take stock of where you are now. As you do so, keep in mind that you can decide your course of action with respect to the work you are doing, and resolve to interact with what is in front of you in an honorable way. Intentions like these can go a long way toward sustaining a life of meaning and purpose.

We probably can all identify with the experience of having our friends, our family, or our pets trying to communicate with us about how we've changed, and we probably all know that for any variety of reasons, hearing it from others can create a dynamic of defensiveness or alienation. If we rise to the challenge of becoming aware of our transformation, we'll be acting responsibly not only toward ourselves but toward others. If we've laid the groundwork internally to listen to ourselves with empathy, we may be able to hear others' concerns, feedback, and reflections in a more open way as well.

Although trauma stewardship tells us we have choices about where to put our focus, it does not simply involve putting on a happy face. This approach demands that we embrace a paradox: If we are truly to know joy, we cannot afford to shut down our experience of pain.

We know that there have been many attempts to hide the evidence of suffering in the world. During the Rwandan genocide, Tutsis tried desperately to catch the attention of the international community—but the story was often passed over in favor of less complicated fare. In the aftermath of the killing, many around the globe expressed dismay that people could perpetrate and suffer so much violence without their stories penetrating the consciousness of the world community. It was the question "How could such suffering go unnoticed?" that eventually made the headlines, not the suffering itself.

Many of us who do frontline work to ease trauma and bring about social and environmental change understand that bearing witness, amplifying the story, and taking right action are our most important tasks. But how do we witness, and what is right action? In living out these questions, we often confront choices that leave us feeling anguished and overwhelmed. Which reality should we focus on? Should we focus on the trauma itself? Should we focus on the heroism of women, men, and children who continue to struggle? Should we focus on the economic, environmental, and political practices, past and present, that have created conditions in which violence and destruction thrive? Or should we focus on the amazing capacity of humans to survive, help, love, repent? If we choose wrong—or, worse yet, if our attention strays—how much more

suffering will go unnoticed?

The answers to such questions are not easy to find. Even as we struggle to arrive at a usable answer, thornier philosophical questions arise. They are the stuff that has fueled the work of theologians, artists, politicians, healers, poets, and activists for millennia. There are nearly as many theories as there are thinkers about the helper's relationship to those who need help and to the world that created their need.

Of course, too often, suffering does go unnoticed and unattended. Still, people who are working to help those who suffer, or who are working to repair the world to prevent suffering, must somehow reconcile their own joy—the authentic wonder and delight in life—with the irrefutable fact of suffering in the world.

People may come to believe that feeling happy or lighthearted is a betrayal of all of the countless humans, creatures, and environments that are under siege on this planet. They may act as if the only way they can express solidarity with suffering of any kind is by suffering themselves. Even for many well-intentioned, noble, responsible people, the scope of disease, hardship, and pain from the individual to the global level can be overwhelming. People who experience a sense of helplessness may come to believe there is nothing to be done but keep their heads down and hope for the best.

Somewhere between internalizing an ethic of martyrdom and ignoring ongoing crises lies the balance that we must find in order to sustain our work. The more we can attend to this balance, the greater our odds of achieving a sustainable practice of trauma stewardship.

My work for trauma stewardship starts with each of us as individuals. This emphasis comes from my personal belief, rooted in life experience and years of study and professional practice, that our capacity to help others and the environment is greatest when we are willing, able, and even determined to be helped ourselves. As Gandhi, the political and spiritual leader of India and its independence movement, said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

When I say that each of us should take responsibility for becoming trauma stewards, however, I do not mean that any of us is in this alone. This book does not propose a "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" approach to coping with the effects of exposure to trauma. Our ability to function as effective trauma stewards is

directly influenced by the organizations we work for, as well as by the systems and attitudes that prevail in society at large. Every larger system has an obligation to the people who make it work, as well as to the people it serves.
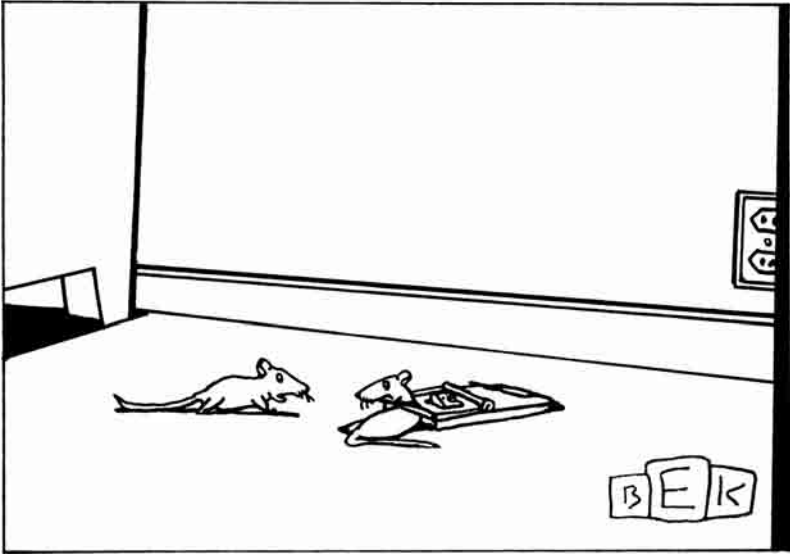
"I'm sorry—here I am going on and on and I haven't asked you a thing about being caught in a trap."

At the same time, each of us must recognize that we have a role to play in shaping the organizations and social systems we participate in. Trauma always creates a ripple effect, the same as when someone throws a stone into a still pond. The initial impact creates repercussions that expand almost infinitely, reaching and having an effect on many people who didn't experience the blows firsthand. The shockwaves soon move beyond individual caregivers to influence the organizations and systems in which we work and, ultimately, the society as a whole. The harms of trauma exposure response radiate in this way, but so do the benefits of trauma stewardship.

Like individuals, organizations and institutions may unwittingly respond to trauma exposure in ways that prevent them from fully realizing their mission to help. Lacking the resources and means to realize their goals, they can actually increase their clients' distress and create hardship for workers.

The same is true on the societal level. Larger systems may also contribute to suffering even as they attempt to alleviate it. In the United States, we see this dynamic in examples as diverse as the health care industry and the justice system. The health care industry is intended to limit suffering but instead often winds up magnifying trauma exposure for patients, their workers, and the organizations that interact with them. Similarly, cooperating with law enforcement or testifying in court may inadvertently increase the anguish of crime victims. Reflecting on the lessons of my own extensive experience in organizations, I have come to realize that sometimes I was a part of the problem even as I aspired to be part of the solution.

This can be difficult to acknowledge; as workers, we may have a lot invested in these systems. But as we explore trauma stewardship, we must be willing to recognize that there are major flaws in our organizations, institutions, and societal systems—and that these short-comings affect us and the way we do our jobs. We will talk more about the three levels of trauma stewardship in the next chapter. Although a complete exploration of the organizational and societal ramifications of our work is beyond the scope of this book, all of our discussions of personal change are intended to take place in the context of this larger framework.

If we are to contribute to the changes so desperately needed in our agencies, communities, and societies, we must first and foremost develop the capacity to be present with all that arises, stay centered throughout, and be skilled at maintaining an integrated self. For many, this requires a daily practice of "handling your business," as the singer and social activist Stevie Wonder says. Our goal is to reach the places where we can conduct our own lives with ethics and integrity—day after day, and in situation after situation. The more that we can accomplish this, the clearer our path at every level of trauma stewardship will be.

CHAPTER TWO
The Three Levels of Trauma Stewardship

> The rule of no realm is mine, neither Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail in my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything that passes through this night can still grow fairer or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I too am a steward. Did you not know?
>
> Gandalf, in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*

In the following pages, we will consider some of the specific ways in which suffering may be perpetuated at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. Reactions to the hardships of humans, animals, and our planet—that is, trauma exposure response—may manifest very differently at each of these three levels, but the risk of behaviors that inadvertently magnify the pain and suffering of direct trauma is always present. The more deeply we realize this, the more we understand the potential—and the necessity—for a trauma stewardship approach. I encourage you to keep all three levels in mind as you read this book. If we can transform ourselves, we have the potential to change the world.

Personal Dynamics

One of the most profound influences on trauma stewardship is who we are as individuals. What is our own history of hardship, pain, suffering, and trauma? What resources were available to help us? What led us to the work we do? The more personal our connection to our work, the greater the gifts we bring to it—perhaps. At the same time,

"Why do you think you cross the road?"

the more we identify with the type of trauma we're exposed to, the greater its impact on us may be.

Prison work will have a different impact on someone who has never been incarcerated or had a friend or relative in prison than on someone who lives in a community where 40 percent of the men are currently incarcerated. If you have no personal history linking you to your work, you may be able to care deeply about it while still maintaining some useful distance from it. This distance may limit your insights about your work, but you may retain greater reserves of psychic strength if you are not also reexperiencing the pain of familiar wounds.

On the other hand, if you are working with a population with whom you have a history, you may feel a rawness as you approach your work. This rawness may allow you to connect with the work in an intimate, knowing way. Although we can never presume to fully understand what it's like to walk in another's shoes, you may indeed have a very good sense of what that walk feels like, looks like, sounds like, and tastes like. While this awareness may help guide you, it also can dramatically heighten your own vulnerabilities as someone who can truly feel the other's pain.

For many workers, it is difficult to perceive a clear line between

the personal and the professional. Obviously, this is not the case for everyone whose work and personal history overlap, but there is often a correlation. To be an effective trauma steward, it is important to know where our own self ends and another's self begins. This can be a hard distinction to maintain even when we are working with other adults, who, whatever their difficulties, are clearly separate people with agency in their own lives. Ironically, it may be even more challenging when we are working with populations that seem particularly defenseless—young children, for example, or abused animals or endangered species. When we speak up for people or creatures or environments that are unable to speak for themselves, we may gradually lose the ability to distinguish their voices from our own. If we don't pay careful attention, our feelings of identification and responsibility may increase to the point that we experience their anguish in a debilitating way. In the long run, this can diminish our ability to be effective advocates. We can sustain our work with trauma only if we combine our capacity for empathy with a dedication to personal insight and mindfulness. This is difficult terrain to navigate.

Organizational Tendencies

> I honestly think every person I work with in my division is on antidepressants at this point . . . everyone here.
>
> Child protective services caseworker

Organizations play a multifaceted role in trauma stewardship. The people who make up any organization help to shape its culture, so in some ways each organization is a reflection of the collective capacity for trauma stewardship of all the individuals involved. At the same time, organizations themselves have the potential to either mitigate or exacerbate the effects of trauma exposure for all of their workers. The way those workers manage trauma will in turn have an impact on the experiences of already traumatized clients. Golie Jansen, an associate professor at Eastern Washington University, recently concluded a study in which she found that "when people perceive their organizations to be supportive, they experience lower levels of vicarious trauma."

Because of multiple and conflicting objectives, insufficient resources, and other difficulties, organizations often ask employees and/or volunteers to perform demanding jobs without adequate support. As a result, people are unable to do their jobs as well as they would like. For example, many teachers in the United States find themselves unable to attend to their students' emotional needs—an essential element of creating a good learning environment—and at the same time prepare them for the rigorous state exams required by the No Child Left Behind legislation. Doctors are unable to attend to the psychosocial needs of their patients because they work for medical organizations that limit the time for each patient visit.
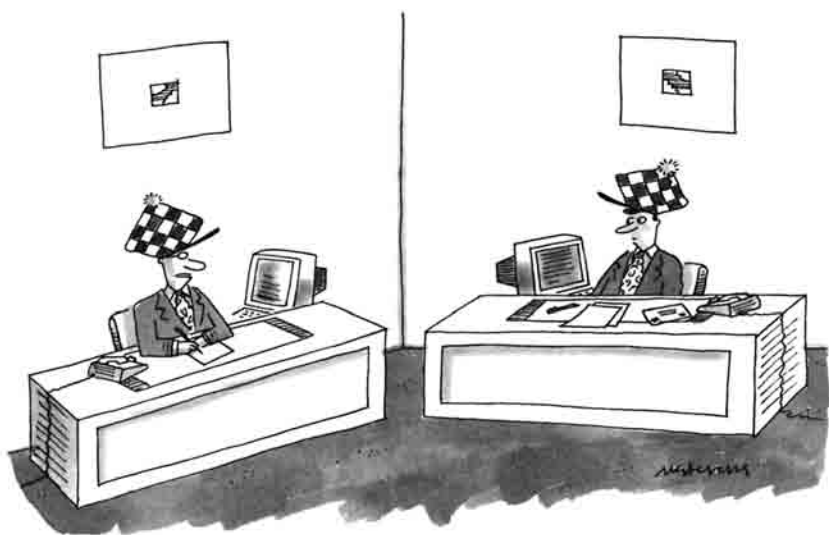
"I don't know how it started, either. All I know is that it's part of our corporate culture."

This leads to a phenomenon that Michael Lipsky, a political scientist and the author of *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, calls *service rationing*. Service rationing refers to the process that workers go through to bridge the everyday divide between the ideal of how they *would* work if they were free to function to the best of their ability and the reality of how they *can* work, given the numerous obstacles in their way. An effect of service rationing is the continual defining and redefining of one's job. If it's not quite the work you had originally hoped to do, you mentally redefine it in some way that allows you to reconcile the growing contradiction.

How much these cognitive shifts are necessary varies from organization to organization, policy to policy, and supervisor to supervisor. Still, many workers walk a common path, trying to find a satisfactory compromise between what they can do and what they are asked to do. Service rationing surfaces when a legal aid attorney is more sympathetic to a compliant client who seems willing to take direction than to one who is belligerent, for example, or when a homeless shelter worker prioritizes the resident talking loudly about suicidal fantasies over the resident who is morose but just as severely depressed.

Initially, many workers may find that these choices go deeply against the grain. They truly want to attend to everyone equally. But over time, rationalizing such behavior may be the only way to contain remorse and preserve a sense of satisfaction in your work. A social worker in the Office of Indian Child Welfare who is in the 28th year of her career told me, "I had three supervisors in one year and a coworker who committed suicide. I was so overloaded that I had to figure out, given my caseload, what the bare minimum was that I could do while continuing to serve my clients well and trying to not get in trouble myself."

Service rationing is paradoxical. It may diminish people's spirits and possibly the quality of their work, but at the same time it is often an essential coping mechanism. Without it, many people simply couldn't stay in their jobs at all. As we can see from Lipsky's research, there is a desperate need for environments that help people to do good work and achieve personal satisfaction even when compromises are inevitable. Without effective policy in place, both direct service delivery and efforts at larger social change are undermined. Ethical work cannot be sustained in an eroding environment that fails to support its workers.

Lipsky also coined the phrase *street-level bureaucrat*. This is a neutral term that describes many police officers, lower court judges, social workers, and countless other public service workers. It refers not to their personalities but to the characteristics of their work. Street-level bureaucrats are workers who interact with people in ways that significantly affect the clients' lives, who have broad decision-making power with respect to these interactions, and who lack sufficient

resources to do their job the best they can. Furthermore, they are in positions where it is hard to hold them accountable because of the wide discretion they have in their jobs.

Some street-level bureaucrats do their jobs ethically and well, hold their heads high, and find satisfaction in their efforts. Others may become defeated by their work, make poor choices, and shirk their responsibilities. Street-level bureaucrats are prime candidates to adopt service rationing as a coping mechanism. Facing overwhelming challenges, they salvage job satisfaction by shooting for lowered goals that they have some hope of meeting. A high school math teacher with too many students may seek professional gratification by focusing on the most advanced pupils, who are more likely to be boys; as a result, the girls, who often begin to lag in math and science after receiving less encouragement in their middle school years, may not get the attention they need to catch up. In the long run, such coping mechanisms add up to policies detrimental to society.

Good policy, both political and personal, takes into account the reality of the need for service rationing. Effective policymakers look without flinching at the possibility that scarcity of resources will require workers to take shortcuts. We should strive for policy that eliminates the need for shortcuts—and, if they are unavoidable, tries to preserve results that are as close as possible to what we want as a society.

Our responses to trauma exposure can foster a defended, exclusive, and hopeless culture in the organizations we work for. Think about how your workplace feels. What's the energy level? What's the vibe? These qualities have nothing to do with the intensity of the work. Instead, they have to do with the degree to which the organization's structures, policies, and attitudes support or impede the workers' efforts to fulfill the mission.

In the early days of HIV/AIDS in Seattle, there was an organization (still around as of this writing) called People of Color Against AIDS Network. This was one of the most exquisite places I had ever encountered, and every time I left the building, I couldn't wait to go back. The work was intense, difficult, and often very sad, but the feeling we had working together was amazing. There were people who were radiant, who sang while they worked, who took time to

catch up daily on each other's families, who lovingly greeted everyone with whom they came in contact, who remained inspired in spite of the despair around them.

And then there were other organizations whose buildings I left desperate to take a shower and rid myself of the feeling I had experienced just being there. It wasn't about the condition of the carpet or how many multicultural posters were on the walls. It was whether light and hope and feelings of possibility were emanating from the institution or whether the organizational culture felt negative, exclusive, and hopeless. There are many factors affecting organizational culture. The negative ones range from irrational norms to ineffective leadership to nonsensical personnel policies.

A longtime leader in the domestic violence movement, Beth Richie, recounts a story illustrating how organizational culture can become confused over time. During a visit to a confidential domestic violence shelter for women and children, she happened to overhear one of the advocates preventing a child from taking a banana off the kitchen counter. The advocate said, "Oh no, I'm sorry, the bananas are not for the children." It was an eerie moment, Richie said. An organization's culture can become so steeped in notions of scarcity that it enforces policies radically incongruent with the original mission.

We frequently see trauma exposure response manifest in our work in two other ways: lack of accountability and unethical behavior. A *New York Times Magazine* article in 2000 told the story of Kerry Sanders, a man with a history of mental illness who was arrested for sleeping on a park bench, mistaken in court for a fugitive with the same last name, and sent to prison, where he served two years for a crime he had never committed. The article traced the progression of this horrendous story from the police to the mental health workers to the prison guards to the probation workers to the attorneys and so on. Ultimately, over 20 professionals were deposed to try to make some sense of how this had occurred and why Sanders had spent years in prison unjustly.

No decent answers were found. From prosecutor to prison guard to recreational therapist to psychiatrist to nurse, everyone claimed they were blameless. They replied to Sanders' pleas for help with a range of responses from "I let him know there was nothing I could

do" to "I am not a legal aid society" to "It's not my job—I don't do that." The article described how "a prison psychiatrist who treated Mr. Sanders said that given his mental problems and homelessness, he was better off in prison. 'He should say, "Thank you, for two years you guys treated me very nicely."'"

The article concluded, "The issues of responsibility and culpability, of quality of care and of monumental and systematic failings, continue to surround the lawsuit. Yet in 2,000 pages of depositions, there have been few displays of compassion and fewer of outrage. At Green Haven [the prison where Sanders was held], no one on the staff was even told what happened, and no one asked. One day, Kerry Sanders just disappeared."

In almost every paragraph of the article is an example of how a trauma exposure response, on both the individual and organizational levels, was a contributing factor in the lack of accountability and the unethical behavior that led to the incarceration of an innocent man. This is partially a testament to the power of denial and rationalization as they relate to unethical behavior; I imagine the people involved in this story truly believed on some level that they were not to blame. A follow-up article the next year quoted a New York correctional services spokesman, James B. Flateau, as saying, "The commissioner's feeling was that as unfortunate as the outcome was, there was no venality on the part of any employees. It was just an incredible confluence of events that we had never before seen happen." Robert Gangi, executive director of the Correctional Association of New York, a prison monitoring group, said, "It's definitely a worst-case kind of scenario, and at the same time it reflects the lack of attention and lack of resources that the state devotes to prison mental health services."

Often, people begin recognizing the effect of trauma exposure when they realize they are behaving in ways they never would have when they first started working in their field. Perhaps when workers start out, they have the energy required to navigate the gray areas of their work, to question their assumptions, to stay open-minded about what is possible, and to truly believe that it matters if they do right in the work and in the world. Over time, the complexity of the issues may surface, the scarcity of resources may feel overwhelming, and one may feel more and more isolated. At that point, a sense of entitlement

creeps in: We may feel so desperate for satisfaction that we will try to meet the clients' needs by any means necessary—and so what if it compromises the integrity of the work? After all, who is going to notice? Who is going to care?

The vast majority of people I've worked with are not stealing office supplies or embezzling money. Instead, just as in the examples above, they may be unknowingly abusing their power in their client interactions, or developing policies that are not mindful and consistent with the values of the organization, or competing with other organizations instead of collaborating. In my experience, when this type of behavior takes root, born out of some of the reasons we discussed above, it can become a tremendous source of guilt. Later on, when we survey the specific aspects of a trauma exposure response and how they surface in our lives, we'll see that guilt, fatigue, a sense of entitlement, and other deeply ingrained habits are all facets of the same cumulative effect.

Societal Forces

To fully comprehend trauma stewardship, we must pull our perspective back even more. We want to understand how society at large interfaces with our trauma exposure response. If we are ever to realize our hopes of creating and re-creating a society in which we are all free from suffering, we must take a macro view. Without a sense of the big picture, it is impossible to have any meaningful conversation about what we want to do collectively to improve the circumstances of our lives and work.

We can use the analogy of cleaning up a river. Retrieving and recycling the plastic bottles or other debris we find floating toward us is a needed step in a cleanup. But to be stewards, more is required. We can't just pick up trash and dig out polluted sediments at the stretch of river directly in front of us. We need to identify and address all the sources of that pollution. We start with the local community, asking people to stop littering or dumping household chemicals down the drain. Beyond that, we need to go upstream. We need to look for factories piping chemicals to the river, septic systems leaking contaminants to its banks, and polluted rainwater as it runs off a hundred

roadways to contaminate a dozen tributaries. We need to look to the sky, where the toxic emissions produced by distant coal plants fall from the air as acid rain. To do the cleanup right and to make sure that it lasts, we need to foster a stronger sense of conservation in the citizens and businesses of an entire region. Trauma stewardship works much the same way. Numerous forces contribute to the flow of trauma, and to accomplish lasting repair, we need shifts in attitudes and practices by ourselves, our organizations, and our infrastructures, thus protecting the watershed for years to come.

Rooting our concept of trauma stewardship in a larger framework of systematic oppression and liberation theory is extremely important. Oppression plays a leading role in creating and maintaining systems that perpetuate suffering and trauma for all sentient beings, as well as the planet we share. The more we can understand this relationship, the better our insights into the ways that trauma affects us individually and collectively around the globe.

Oppression can be defined as the negative outcome experienced by people who are targeted by the cruel exercise of power; the term is generally used to describe how a certain group is being kept down by unjust use of authority, force, or societal norms. When a society institutionalizes oppression formally or informally, the result is called *systematic oppression*. Around the globe, liberation movements promote the undoing of negative outcomes and the elimination of the causes of individual and systematic oppression.

In recent decades, many liberationist thinkers have made their voices heard in indigenous and diaspora freedom movements, as well as in environmental justice movements worldwide. Examples include Father Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian Catholic priest and liberation theologist; the late Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator; Rigoberta Menchú Tum, a Guatemalan advocate of indigenous land rights and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize; Reverend Allan Aubrey Boesak, a South African anti-apartheid activist and theologian; and Vandana Shiva, an Indian biophysicist and environmental ethicist. There are many others.

One example of systematic oppression is *structural violence*. This concept was introduced in the 1970s by Johan Galtung, a pioneering Norwegian researcher in peace and conflict, and founder of the

"Speaking personally, I haven't had my day,
and I've never met any dog who has."

International Peace Research Institute. He describes structural violence as "a form of violence which corresponds with the systematic ways in which a given social structure or social institution kills people slowly by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Institutionalized elitism, ethnocentricism, classism, racism, sexism, adultism, nationalism, heterosexism and ageism are just some examples of structural violence. Life spans are reduced when people are socially dominated, politically oppressed, or economically exploited. Structural violence and direct violence are highly interdependent. Structural violence inevitably produces conflict and often direct violence including family violence, racial violence, hate crimes, terrorism, genocide, and war." Paul Farmer, an American medical anthropologist and founder of the international health and social justice organization Partners In Health, elaborates: "Structural violence is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of scientific and social progress."

If we lived in a society where equity, respect, access, and justice were realized, and unearned privilege and inequality and oppression were transformed, the impact of trauma exposure in our lives would look dramatically different. Suffering would still occur. People would sustain injuries and contract illnesses and even hurt each other. The

difference is that we would only have to confront that suffering at face value: an injury, an illness, a hurtful act. We would not have to wonder if disparities between rich and poor, white people and people of color, heterosexual people and gay/lesbian/bi/transgendered people, and so on contributed to the suffering. We would not have to wonder if we personally benefit from the disparity that underlies the suffering. We would not have to wonder if we are vulnerable to the same disparity. We would not have to decide whether we should act to change the disparity, or if we should blame the person suffering for the disparity, or if we should ignore the disparity altogether.

In this ideal society, people would respond to our work differently as well. If, when you told others what you did, they stopped, looked you in the eye, thanked you, and offered to make a donation, the impact of your work would look very different than it does now. If we feel that it's consistently a conversation stopper, or if we believe we have to lie about what we do because so many people don't understand it, or if we perceive that others constantly judge us when they express disgust about our work or make objectifying comments like, "You're such an a–n–g–e–l! I could never do that job!" the toll of our work is that much higher.

We can see an example of that toll when we look at those who attend to our elders. "Caregiver stress is directly related to the way our society views the elderly and the people who care for them," elder-care expert Vitaliano says in the LeRoy article on CNN.com cited in the introduction. The text continues: "Today, caregiving is viewed largely as a burden in this country. If it were viewed as more of a societal expectation and people were willing to offer more support, fewer caregivers would suffer in isolation, [Vitaliano] says. In turn, fewer elder and disabled people would experience abuse or neglect at the hands of caregiving individuals or institutions."

The researchers and trauma experts Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane write, "Reason and objectivity are not the primary determinants of society's reactions to traumatized people. Rather . . . society's reactions seem to be primarily conservative impulses in the service of maintaining the beliefs that the world is fundamentally just, that people can be in charge of their lives, and that bad things only happen to people who deserve them."

I have frequently seen such irrational and defensive "conservative impulses" applied to organizational systems over the years, but perhaps never more than when I have collaborated with child protective services (CPS) workers and firefighters. Both groups have grueling, scary, demanding jobs, and yet the way people react to them is strikingly different. CPS workers carry a heavy burden of feeling that they are hated—by everyone. Firefighters, on the other hand, tend to have the benefit of an age-old image of them as saviors and heroes. This contrast speaks to every level we've touched on: the personal, the organizational, and the societal.

There are several underpinnings to this discussion of systematic oppression. Oppression thrives on misunderstanding, alienation, and us/them binaries. Many people have judgments about those who are hurt, raped, sick, addicted, and so on, and as a result, people are often uncomfortable when we tell them what we do. The way people act toward us in response to our work makes the impact of trauma exposure more profound because it increases our sense of isolation, and isolation is one of the staples that keeps systematic oppression firmly in place. Of course, we participate in sustaining this dynamic of isolation ourselves—for example, when we avoid speaking about our work because we fear it will initiate a debate we don't have the energy to engage in, when we lie about what we do because we believe that others will not understand, when we react defensively because we expect other people's comments to be judgmental or dismissive, or even when we, in a particular field, keep to ourselves because we anticipate that our work—with families in the suburbs, with abandoned animals, or with endangered ecosystems—will be derided as diverting resources from more urgent human service needs.

We are hardly alone in avoiding potentially troubling interactions. In the book *Traumatic Stress*, van der Kolk and McFarlane write that "individuals, and even entire cultures, build up elaborate defenses in order to keep these stark realities out of conscious awareness." In writing these chapters, I have tried to begin a weakening of these defenses. This overview aims to alert you to the far-reaching consequences of trauma exposure response and to its effects on trauma stewardship. I am drawing the atlas for a terrain that you already inhabit, although you may not know exactly where. In a sense,

I have sketched out the borders of a large country—and in part 2, I will provide you with the information you may need to determine exactly what state you are in.

PROFILE **CINDY PARRY**
THE OZARKS, RURAL MISSOURI

CURRENTLY: Clinical resource manager for Air Evac Lifeteam, an emergency helicopter service for rural America, with 68 bases.

FORMERLY: Paramedic, nurse (emergency room, post-anesthesia care, and flight), childbirth educator, community activist.

I was fine. I mean, I was tired of taking care of sick people. It was always best for me when they were intubated and paralyzed and couldn't talk at all . . . so . . . well, so I guess it was time for me to get out.

Here's the deal. When I first got into the paramedic field, I was one of a very few women in the profession, and I think that made a difference in the attitude that was out there. The attitude was, if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen. The critical incident stress debriefing, or recognizing a normal response to an abnormal event, was just starting to come around; there was not much consciousness about a trauma exposure response. You just toughed it out, and if you weren't able to deal with it, then you needed to get another job. You just quit.

I can clearly remember the day and the specific call when I had had enough. I was like, "That's enough, I'm done." I realized then how it had impacted me. You see so much, and there are certain things that get revisited that still come up, certain situations and calls, and I remember this one so clearly. We'd gone to a motorcycle accident, and as you approached the scene, it was clear he was dead and he was in several pieces, his body. I had this long-standing irritation with my paramedic partner about his leaving his belongings all over the place when we worked. I was always having to clean up after him. So at this accident, for some reason I thought it'd be funny to take his camera from the ambulance and take photos of this motorcycle accident so that when he developed his film, he'd come across these photos. I was clicking these pictures, and I thought it was a great joke. And a couple of days later I thought, "You know what, maybe I need to do something else."

It wasn't that I could not do my job, because I did it extremely well, partly because I could get totally disconnected from what I had to do. And I saw those people who'd been doing it a while, and I thought, "I don't want to be like those people; those people are

assholes." This motorcycle accident was the turning point for me. It wasn't necessarily the bloodiest or the worst accident I'd worked on, but the fact that I could start taking pictures with my partner's camera and the fact that that would be a big joke to me—it was like, how the hell could you do that? I mean, that is just sick.

After quitting being a paramedic, I moved to southern Missouri, which is a place where it's really hard to make a living unless you have a portable skill. I intended to train as a midwife, but instead I got back into this emergency medicine thing. That is what I knew how to do, so I finished up my bachelor's degree and took care of my dying mom while going through nursing school. I thought I'd do anything but the ER, but then there's something about the ER that I just love. There's something very compelling about it. I like the variety of what you see. It's real. It's amazing to save a life. I mean, my God, it's just totally amazing. When you feel like you've had an impact in a big way, that a person wouldn't be alive, and not only just alive but recovered, and you've had a big part in that, that's pretty compelling.

One of the ways I've been impacted by my work is I just view everything as a head injury waiting to happen. I'm a lot less callous about things. I'm much more aware of how fragile everything is. [At Air Evac Lifeteam, where she works now] part of what I do is read through flight records, and with some of the more dramatic calls I think, "This is the day the person's life changed forever, this family's life changed forever." I am much more aware of the impact that has on people. It's so easy to slip back into the "You're just dealing with the broken arm," the compartmentalizing. It's a struggle to keep a consciousness that you're dealing with human beings and not just dealing with body parts, and it's a struggle to be present on all the levels you need to be for people and their families. . . . Ohhh, I hate the families. It's so easy to check out and just fix the thing that's broken. I'm aware that I need to have my whole self present, but it's so hard to do.

Most of the people who survive and go on and who are people I want to be like are people who keep their whole selves there while doing this work. I guess that's about compassion in some way.

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