

“bodies tell stories”: On Meaning Making and Trauma in Social Work, Poetry, Pandemics, and Embodied Practice

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Abstract: In my field practicum undergraduate courses, we sit in a circle sharing, listening, and connecting head, hands, and hearts. In so doing, we bring whole selves into our practice. With students struggling with complicated wounds, including police brutality, HIV, hepatitis, and COVID-19, I added a course on trauma-informed practice. The following offers a practice-based reflection. It explores themes of mindfulness, logotherapy, laughter, philosophy, narrative, adventure therapy, and trauma, mixing into a poetics of embodiment. Embodiment brings poetry into practice, connecting trauma theory with humanistic approaches to social work. Embodiment helps practitioners challenge clinical and cultural problems. The question remains: How can educators use embodiment, poetry, and reflection to support practice—and why should they?

Keywords: trauma, narrative, embodiment, poetry

Intro

Trauma—those wounds to the self—is a component of most social work practice, be it micro practice (e.g., clinic practice) or macro practice (e.g., organizing to fight environmental racism). “Psychological trauma is an affiliation of the powerless,” writes Herman (1992):

At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. (p. 33)

Reflecting on his experience in Vietnam, Michael Herr (1977) suggests

It took the war to teach it...that you were responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't know what you were seeing until later... it just stayed there stored in your eyes. (p. 20)

For Herr, trauma is first a physical experience and then a memory to make sense of, or find meaning in. This double experience can be vexing. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920/2015) wonders if it is even possible to ignore the memory. Communities certainly cannot. Social ecosystems experience trauma, often in ongoing ways due to a variety of policies (Fullilove, 2004).

The reflective practice that Herr (1977) describes is part and parcel of the learning I hope students try to engage during my field and trauma-informed practice classes. The process of teaching students, many of whom have witnessed or experienced trauma firsthand, how to handle these dynamics in other individuals and communities is anything but simple. To bridge this divide, embodied experience—the use of body sensations of the self—can and perhaps

should be taught to field students to develop awareness, self-regulate, and manage secondary trauma inherent in social work practice (Shepard, 2013). This essay is how I attempt to do so.

It begins with the body and, by extension, the self. “Although social work practice typically is concerned with physical conditions and experiences such as poverty, addiction, and violence,” write Tangenberg and Kemp (2002), “relatively little attention has been given to the body in professional literature” (p. 9). As a corrective, the authors call for social workers to emphasize “both physical and sociocultural dimensions of the body,” engaging “an invigorated, more complex understanding of the body in social work theory, practice, and research” (p. 9).

Embodiment practice is “central to ecosocial theory and epidemiological inquiry,” notes Krieger (2005):

Recognizing that we, as humans, are simultaneously social beings and biological organisms, the notion of “embodiment” advances three critical claims: (1) bodies tell stories about—and cannot be studied divorced from—the conditions of our existence; (2) bodies tell stories that often—but not always—match people’s stated accounts; and (3) bodies tell stories that people cannot or will not tell. (p. 350)

Recognizing this, in each of my classes we circle up, breathe, check in, and talk it out, sitting, being still with ourselves, listening to the stories our bodies tell. Everyone takes a turn leading us through exercises in guided meditation, helping us become aware and present. Doing so, our class experiences many of the benefits of mindfulness, with breathing and listening to what is going on inside, while minimizing distracting thoughts (Kelly & Okolo, 2016; Pyles, 2018). Sitting in a circle is important because it allows us to see each other, opening space for a parallel process in the teaching. This builds safety and trust, essential elements to explore the trauma of clients and ourselves.

Along the way, the problems of the field find their way into the classroom. Our classroom is thought to mirror the challenges with the client-practitioner and practitioner-supervisor relationships. In our mirroring, we seek to unpack hidden agendas, elements of paternalism, and judgment that often go un-reflected upon in our practice. Writing logs, sharing, reflecting, students are asked to make sense of who they are and how they are listening, recognizing, and reacting to the culture of the city, their clients, and the struggles they encounter, as part of an unfolding dialogue between self, other, and the city. This connects clients and practitioners with an awareness that culture is also in the room, inviting students to step away from detachment toward engagement as participant observers of their own practice (Sullivan, 1954). Viewing the self and client within the culture, students contemplate the bio-psycho-social functioning of each, making sense of who they are, how they feel, what connects and separates lives. This holistic perspective charges students with contemplating their entire lives in relationship to their clients, community, and education. Each class takes shape as an exercise in reflective practice. This is a pedagogy that engages the whole self, connecting bodies, ideas, and awareness of difference, stories about where we come from, in a conversation about our lives (Shepard, 2015).

Student Stories

Most classes usually begin with a check-in about the week: discussing what's bothering everyone; what is happening in the city, internship, the community; how people are coping with the ever-increasing trauma narratives, from climate change to the global pandemic to ongoing police brutality, making their way through the news.

In December 2020, students and I talk about Casey Goodson Jr.'s death at the hands of a Sheriff's Deputy in Harris County, Ohio, and the vigil and march coming up. Others want to know more of what happened. “Casey was walking home with a sandwich in his hand,” notes a student. The policeman involved thought it was a gun and shot him. It is like the unarmed Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo, who police shot multiple times after mistaking his wallet for a gun on February 4, 1999; Diallo's death similarly ushered in waves of civil disobedience. “It’s a wallet, not a gun, police misconduct 101,” everyone chants after the four officers responsible for Diallo’s death were found “not guilty.” This feels like a repetition, a feeling that becomes all the more vexing.

Trauma happens everywhere. You see it in the streets, on the subways. People go to hospitals to recover from it or try to talk it through, only to encounter more of it there. Students experience it working with traumatized clients in internships or their jobs, with waves of secondary or vicarious trauma following. We try to understand how to cope with it in our classroom. The experience teaching trauma-informed practice is complicated. And that is before the pandemic, which at the time of this writing has taken over a million lives in the US alone while many deny its impacts. Over and over, it seems to mirror the experience of amnesia that Herman (1992) says is part of the secret history of trauma.

We tell stories about it, connecting the dots between personal lives and public histories—unpacking our reactions to the secret history of trauma, self-inflicted harm, PTSD, racism, news reports of kids in cages separated from parents at the border, differentiating between capital T and lowercase t traumas—for 15 weeks. And then came COVID, teaching it all online. Each week a different set of dynamics, each of us sitting at home, students in intergenerational households with their abuelas on one side of the room, their kids on the other; they do their best to participate, as the pandemic ebbs and flows, each of us losing connections and regaining bandwidth as we all learn online together. Week in, week out, students report details of completing volunteer internships in hospitals as case rates soar. I read their logs trying to make sense of it. Each day a new story: a friend from high school murdered by her boyfriend; a father a student is taking care of who dies; a pregnancy; a Zoom funeral for one of the faculty members in the department who ran an anti-poverty community space; students arriving late or disappearing, unable to keep track; others coping as they take care of their own families, giving presentations as they wait for COVID results in between shifts at work. Coping with grief, many struggle to concentrate. Others drop out. And still others support each other each week, during the class presentations, one after another—students teaching, sharing their understandings, integrating Herman’s (1992) recovery model of safety, remembering and reconnecting.

One young woman tells the story of her father’s untimely death, committed by a foreman in the construction industry. Chemical dependency follows, as she reels from the loss, and ends up blacked out in bars in Harlem. “Get some therapy,” someone tells her. She gets some help to talk it out, relating these experiences as lessons for her practice.

Another shares the story of her mother in the killing fields of Cambodia, illustrating the ways that survivors share stories as coping, creating meaning in their narratives of survival. “During the time of Pol Pot, where did the violence start for you?” she recalls one of the survivors saying to her mother, referring to the ways survivors of the Cambodian Genocide tell stories of the Khmer Rouge, eluding a most random and cruel of times, without truth or reconciliation, just multiple narratives helping them cope, express themselves, and find meaning. She relates little of the intergenerational trauma often witnessed among children of survivors. “See what we went through,” her mother tells her, almost comically, as they watch Dith Pran drink cow blood to survive in the 1984 film *The Killing Fields* (Joffé).

Other students tell stories about immigration policies separating their families and mass incarceration or abuse. One tells the narrative of Gwen Araujo, a trans woman, murdered, the student only then becoming aware how common such occurrences are. Another student recalls her young Black son asking her why George Floyd was killed. She didn’t know how to tell him. “For healing to happen, we have to acknowledge this,” says this student, referring to the lingering wound of institutional racism. We talk about the pattern of deaths that never quite seem to slow. Referring to the story of the Black Panthers, several students compare the painfully similar deaths of Fred Hampton by police bullets in his own bed in December of 1969 to that of Breonna Taylor in March 2020. We spend the rest of the semester connecting the dots between these stories and trauma theory. Questions follow: Why do people self-injure or hurt themselves? What happens when the blues or the blue demon grabs you as they did with William Styron (1989)? What do you do? Do you greet it? How do we find meaning in it? How do we let it move through us?

Each student has a different approach. One student stumbles into class late and sleeps. When awake, he knows the issues, but always seems tired and unfocused. But he keeps coming, year in, year out, class after class. At some point, he finds his way into internship, where he’s assigned to work with homeless youth. And he thrives, seeming to understand them. He was one of them. Over time, his internship agency helps place him in housing. I run into him in the hall before school let out.

“Are you close to graduating?” I ask. “One more research exam and I’m done. If I can get through that.”

Other students watch their parents deported, fretting over the stress of the crumbling Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Another student works with women at Rikers, the notorious jail where the Department of Corrections does not even provide tampons. She collects money from the tips she earns working ‘til midnight at a bar to pay for them. Another student works with a foster care system full of kids whose parents are lost to overdose. One of the students watches his dad deported, back to Haiti. Another sees her dad in

handcuffs after ICE picks him up. Another student's dad is assaulted for speaking Spanish on the phone. Others watch their classmates show up with guns and open fire. They walk out of school across the country. Others commit civil disobedience in front of the White House fighting to preserve the DACA program. Some point their rage outward, others inward. Some pour into the streets in collective rage and passion; others check out. One jumps off a building, leaving a whole class of 9th graders in shock, the pressure just too much. And others keep going, creating spaces, mosh pits where they slam their bodies against each other.

And we talk it out. Students reflect on sexual assaults they endure. Some sit quiet; others share. One says she feels like collateral damage in a war on the poor.

"I pray my 13-year-old son will not find himself in solitary," confesses our final presenter. The students see a lot, responding the best way they know.

Faculty Reflections

Questions about trauma first cross my mind working with people with HIV a quarter century ago. With little to no treatment, our clients bring countless wounds. Routes of transmission quite often have to do with violations of the self, including sexual assault and injection drug use, or in later life, survival sex and/or homelessness (Gibbs et al., 2018).

I work in a syringe exchange program across the street from the Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx the Youngs Lords took over in 1970. The neighborhood has the highest rates of people experiencing homelessness and coping with HIV and chemical dependency in the city. Death is constant. Members play drums and read poetry during memorials after one of the program members passes. Each seems to know they can make it through the grief when a smile creeps into the somber moment. Doing so, members face the negative, move through it, and emerge, accomplishing the task that Hegel argues as the challenge for modern life. Marshall Berman (2007) explains, "if we can 'look the negative in the face and live with it,' then we can achieve a truly magical power and convert the negative into being" (p. 29). Staffers watch members of the program face incarceration, another is thrown out a window, another succumbs to Hepatitis C. Staff cope as best they could, bearing witness, making memorials of the dead. After leaving the syringe exchange, I stay in touch. Many struggle with problems related to the work. One of the most thoughtful of the group, who'd gone on to work at a university hospital, sitting on the board of a new start up syringe exchange, overdoses. His death brings the case of vicarious trauma and wellness to bear for many of us (Shepard, 2013).

I have my own problems, including a painful bike accident, flying over my handlebar and crushing my collar bone on my crash the day before news surfaces about the death. I am lucky I am not hit by an oncoming car. I stop everything and begin writing about what happened; reflecting on the ways we both cope with and inflict pain on ourselves. Some of us bike; some of us use. There is no one solution. At the syringe exchange, it's a free for all, many self-medicating, feeling pain, letting it make its way through us, finding meaning, grieving for all the losses, which this one opens.

“Not to suppress mourning (suffering) (the stupid notion that time will do away with such a thing) but to change it, transform it, to shift it from a static stage (stasis, obstruction, recurrences of the same thing) to a fluid state,” writes Roland Barthes (1977/2012, p. 142) in his *Mourning Diary*. “Does this make sense?” I ask students in trauma class. My friend Prageeta Sharma (2019) highlights this in her poetry collection about losing her husband, our former neighbor. Writing through our pain is an important part of taking it on, moving it through consciousness and getting it out of our bodies. Transforming suffering, embodying and discarding it, this is a lesson repeated anew and anew. Everyone has something sad in them. When we share stories, talking through the challenges, we usher the hurt through us so it no longer debilitates and immobilizes. At least that is the hope.

Throughout the class, we talk about these stories. Why does artist Sophie Calle tell people her story and then ask people to share theirs (Schilling, 2017), I ask the students, inviting them to role play sharing their stories with each other, trying to answer that lingering question, why do people self-injure? Why do people inflict pain on themselves?

On Finding Meaning and Laughing

At some point in coping with trauma or pain, we encounter a moment in which nothing makes sense, assumptions shatter, and we are left to find new ways to cope with a crisis of knowing. The struggle is to find meaning, however we can, integrating the painful memory into our stories, as Herman (1992) suggests; her work *Trauma and Recovery* is the central text of our class, along with Loretta Pyles’ *Healing Justice* (2018) and van der Kolk’s (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score*. “To study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events,” writes Herman (1992, p. 3). Battling amnesia, illuminating secret histories, and naming these horrors, we “re-create the flow,” finding meaning in our experiences, integrating them into our lives.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor E. Frankl (1962) argues “any attempt to restore a man’s inner strength in the camp has first to succeed in showing him some future goal” (p. 67). In the camps, Frankl paraphrases Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how,” (p. 76). One has to give them a why, something to live for, a reason to stay engaged between the self and the community. “It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful,” says Frankl (p. 76).

Meaning creation becomes an active process connecting head, hand, and hearts, looking at the world, making meaning of an often-tragicomic continuum of experience. Tragic implies coming to grips “with inherently flawed and painful realities; ‘comic’ captures the pragmatic, problem solving view that changes can be made to bring about a happy ending,” psychoanalyst Nancy McWilliams (2004, p. 28) writes. An awareness of this quality of experience opens room for agency and a capacity to act, even amidst the ruins. The capacity to see tragedy and comedy allows us to take ourselves a little less seriously, and to see ourselves in our full experience, good and bad.

“The problem is that, when we begin to realize the potential goodness in ourselves, we often take our discovery much too seriously,” writes Chögyam Trungpa (1984/2009): “We might kill for goodness . . . What is lacking is a sense of humor . . . a light touch . . .” (p. 32). With each class, we try to embody some of this—embracing the lightness and heaviness, the absurdity and the beauty, inviting levity and humor. Such a perspective allows us to laugh and cope.

Looking, Seeing, Thinking, and Writing

In listening, we consider the stories behind the stories, inquiring into the complicated realities of people’s lives. The second week of class, *The New York Times* runs a provocative editorial written by one of my former students, Arlene Adams (2019). “While she and her children slept, Arlene Adams was attacked by their abusive father. Defending herself, she killed him. She served her time, and is now rebuilding her life,” reads the paper’s introduction to the piece. We unpack the interwoven dynamics of her life, including domestic violence, time she spent in jail, working through her guilt with a counselor. Adams writes:

I began working with a therapist on the tremendous shame and guilt I felt for leaving my daughters at such a critical time in their lives. During the therapy I began to understand and recover from the post-traumatic stress I realized that I was suffering. (para. 9)

Over time, Adams (2019) is accepted into our college’s human services program, serving in a work study job, “sav[ing] enough money to rent an apartment for [herself] and [her] children” (para. 10). In class, she’s tough; over time, her leadership skills began to show. She leads discussions of shame, stigma, and the perils of working with families coping with separation and incarceration. Says Adams: “I tried to make them understand that they weren’t alone and that things would get better” (para. 11). Hers is one of many secret histories of trauma and violence against women we encountered. Unpacking her story, themes of disconnection, vulnerability, and resilience emerge as themes, helping us consider the ways stress impacts the brain, as well as the body. Understanding it, we come closer to coping with it.

We listen for the words behind the words, in the silences. We observe the affect, ways of speaking, cadence. We look for the circumstances of the anguish, the way different bodies are viewed in public space, ways to reduce harms of living, without blaming clients for the poverty they endure. After all, stories are formed in social contexts, by social forces; we make sense of them, learning to see, think, speak and write about it, as Nietzsche (2006) counsels. Our work involves hearing the stories of clients on their own terms, without preordained judgment or countertransference, without reacting. There are countless ways of looking at lives. These stories hold the anguish; they give us clues. Holding them, we mirror, try to understand, and reflect.

Checking in with the Body, Yoga in Brooklyn, Hiking the Camino in Spain

Growing up, I suffer the usual challenges—alienation, divorce, romance—of living, taking the awkward feelings and learning to run through them, so they didn’t get stuck inside.

Much of the clash and coping takes shape playing.

“You develop GRIT that way,” says my Uncle Bruce, a Vietnam vet and Army football player. Working out together, a twinkle shows up in his eye when the burn starts. “Hurts so much,” he smiles, “so good.”

It’s easier to cope with life’s problems when you are on the move, checking in with the body. Cycle through as pain enters, look at it, feel it, and move through it. Quite often we’re ok afterward. There are forms of pain we are better off addressing with medication. People have their opinions. Others are better experienced through breathing, bluesology, poetry, and movement work. Everyone has their approach.

“Give yourself permission to be here now,” say my yoga instructors over and over again, “don’t worry about the past or the future. Be here now.” Go back to the scene of the crime. Face up to it. Look at it. Let it transform us (Pyles, 2018). It’s a point my therapist and I used to talk about a lot. His strategy for coping with depression without medication involves an active mix of therapy, exercise, spiritual practice, group work, and community engagement (O’Leary, 2008). It’s a point echoed throughout the literature. Get out of your head, allow yourself to be moved by art, look around (Styron, 1989). Connecting with others, with the wider community is a primary task of healing, says Herman (1992).

Shortly after my father dies in 2014, my family and I embark on a medieval pilgrimage hike, known as the Camino de Santiago, that brings a cavalcade of hikers across Europe. The destination: Santiago de Compostela, where the bones of St James are fabled to reside (Frey, 1998). Watching people from across the world hiking, the trip gets me thinking about embodiment as a tool for recovery. A digression about the hike informs the point.

“Hiking the Camino in Spain and France offers something far more precious than an exciting vacation,” says my younger brother, William, who had walked with his entire family the previous year.

You only take what you can carry. Your goal of each day is to walk from your starting village to another village. Just keep walking West... Everything slows down just enough so you can find yourself. Don’t expect it to happen immediately. It will take time to let go of your life back home. Hopefully you will be able to sit back at the end of a long day, sore in your body but content with where you are, how you got there, and where you are going. (personal communication, 2014)

Our first summer on the trail, my wife and two grade school daughters hike for a little more than a week, from Pamplona to Logrono in Northern Spain. A few notes from my journal speak to a few of the feelings of this embodied practice:

After a night in Pamplona, we made our way, stopping in the Iglesia de San Surtino, the 13th century gothic church, on the way out of town. Sitting in this quiet place, the silence reminds me of otherworldly beauty, of mystery, of trips past, sitting in Florence years earlier. Light moves from the stained-glass windows of colors through my eyes, sound through my ears, incense through my nose, my heart, moving the senses, reminding me of

a panorama of people hiking through here for thousands of years. Instead of the head, this space appeals to an interior space. In some ways, my Camino begins as a reminder of sitting and just being in the silence, as a balance to the movement. In the stillness, so much can move through us. And then we connect it with our movement. Walking out of town, we are immediately lost. Some elders help us find our way, something that occurs a lot along the trail.

Each day, we make it out of our accommodations by half past seven in order to get most of our hiking in by lunchtime and before the heat of the day. A week into the trail, we are running late, and our eight-year-old declares, “I’ve lived eight long years and now I’m ready to die.” None of us are feeling anything but tired and despairing. Just then, an elderly man approaches us on the road with a greeting of “Buen Camino.” He offers us peaches and directions up the winding road to the city awaiting us beyond the hills ahead. The peaches are delicious, lifting our spirits, reminding us the Camino can open things up for us if we are open to them.

As I walk and think about oblivion, Caroline, my wife, interrupts me.

“Sheep!!!!” she screams with a laugh.

“There are puff balls,” notes our eight-year-old, gesturing at a herd of sheep. I thought I was having a Dali moment, with the trail transforming into a furry, moving amoeba.

“New experience,” a cyclist chimes in as he rides, parting the sea of sheep.

“If we’d walked along the path more traveled, we would have missed that,” gushes Caroline. Though it’s a cliché to say things are darkest before the dawn, the girls are now smiling and laughing.

“It takes sometimes eight kilometers to get my walking legs. Then I can walk and walk,” says Caroline. The road reminds us not to let one bit of hurt dominate our whole selves. It’s just one part of ourselves. Walking through pain is one of the great pleasures of the Camino. Along the way, we meet people with cancer; coping with obesity; or family separation, loss, depression; and taking the next step forward. People cope with a lot along the way. The Camino seems to grab us, offering direction. A retired actor from Korea gives everyone massages. We share food and stories every night, meeting strangers, everyone coping and walking.

The trail reveals wounds, notes Frey (1998)—grief, loss, anxiety, stigma, chemical dependency, alienation—among the residue of everyday life in late capitalism, leaving them exposed. An accommodation falls apart, a bed bug grabs you, the best days become the worst in a matter of seconds, before the mood shifts yet again. Old thoughts and memories open, revealing themselves in daydreams. Walking with nothing but feelings and exposure to the elements; pilgrims describe these feelings as “la ruta de la terapia, the therapy route” (Frey, 1998, p. 45). It opens countless emotional experiences. Walking in the forest, I find myself talking to the trees and sometimes receiving answers, my dream life opening up into a dialogue between myself and the characters from old novels from Tolkien and Cervantes.

“Walking and crying, this is what the Camino is about,” says a friend, who’d been agonizing crossing the Pyrenees. We all suffer.

I find myself talking with Dad on most days, telling him about the trail, carrying his memory, imagining him in dialogue, and certainly he’s here. But it is not the same. It is never quite as simple as a John Donne poem. Over time, it becomes ok, letting go of seeing him, instead telling him about the road, expanding a dialogue, reveling in the wonderment of it all.

Hartmann (2006) suggests the trail presents a space to work through unresolved issues, supporting creativity and health, including five distinct steps for processing problems:

1. Define the issue.
2. Bring up the story.
3. Walk with the issue.
4. Notice how the issue changes.
5. Anchor the new state. Process the shift. Learn from it. (p. 65)

Social workers around the world borrow from this embodied approach. Over dinner one night, we meet a social worker accompanying delinquent youth along the trail. She says lots of social workers use the walk as a way to help their clients grow and heal.

A similar method called Adventure Therapy is described as “adventure experiences . . . in natural settings that kinesthetically engage clients on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels” (Gass et al., 2012, p. 1). Most everyone has time for a hike, even if they don’t live in Spain. The road to Santiago starts wherever we are.

Journaling and Poetry

From hiking to poetry, a core element of embodied practice requires activities of reflection, journaling, and sharing. Like Sophie Calle, US poet Maya Angelou (1969) tells the story of her pain. Abandoned, her parents put her on a train across the country, to a precarious home in the US South. Coping with rape and neglect, she stops speaking. An elder in her world reads her poetry, giving her cookies and tea. After a few years of this, the elder tells her that if she really loved poetry, to let it come out of her mouth. In other words, embody it. And she did.

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you,” said Angelou (1969). Her life demonstrated to us how to cope with trauma and still live a joyous life (Jones, 2014). No one can control everything that happens to them, but we can decide not to be controlled by them (Angelou, 1969).

Poets write their way through trauma, taking the concrete grief and transforming it through words and stories. In each of my classes, I ask students to reflect on their own lives and stories, drafting weekly reflection logs. Some embrace it; others recoil. Many end up with a greater awareness of themselves in relationship to others as observing participants of themselves

(Sullivan, 1954). I ask for answers to prompts or to read poetry, reflecting on the first lines of Dante’s *Inferno* (1935) or John Donne:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main (Donne, 1623, p. 1)

What is the resonance for our work? We talk about islands and isolation, and a view of our lives as interconnected. We are all impacted by others, observing, hearing and seeing the stories of people living far different lives than we have. The question is how we make meaning of it.

Our school is located within a stone’s throw of the Brooklyn Bridge, where many American poets have found inspiration. We frequently read Walt Whitman (1881–1882), who wrote a metaphysical poetry of Brooklyn, reminding us we are all interconnected:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (stanza 1)

We unpack it, looking at the city and our lives, aware we are connected, separated, together apart. At some point in the semester, a student or two confess to writing poems themselves. I ask if they would like to turn them in as logs. And many do. Fall of 2018, Felicia Rumble turns in the following poem as a log entry about her life in the concrete jungle, which she granted me permission to present here:

Trapped
Boxed in
Days on days
Scattered thoughts
Searching for a way out
Not alone, rooms filled
Noise and noise
Can’t think
Need a break
Need SILENCE
No one is stopping
I’ve had enough
Scream, in my head
“Quiet”, I said
I need silence
Noise doesn’t stop
Louder and louder it gets
“Quiet!” I yelled
Why won’t they stop
Can’t they hear me?
I can’t believe this

“QUIET!!!”
Everyone stared, stunned
Finally silence
“Why are you screaming?” One said
Unaware
No 1 ignored me?
Trapped, trapped, trapped
It was all in my head

A deeply human feeling, being trapped—Rumble connects her life with a larger struggle to find autonomy and the connection with others that Angelou, Whitman, and Donne describe, between solace and solitude. “Bodies tell stories,” notes Krieger (2005, p. 350). Rumble connects her experience of the city in her mind and body, her words embodying a deeply conflicted self. Journaling is a way to get that feeling out, rather than leaving it lingering inside.

Broader Perspectives and Connections

Throughout the class, we consider micro, mezzo, and macro traumas. We explore the experiences of students involved in the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 or my friend, social worker Amy Cohen, who started Families for Safe Streets (FSS) after her son was hit by a car speeding on Prospect Park. In the years to follow, her efforts changed laws, transforming pain. Yet, when I see her in the subway, she still had tears in her eyes. What do these stories have to do with trauma, we ask over and over, reflecting on the various experiences of trauma, of racism, of structural violence, in countless lingering memories. How do we fight it and cope with it, without succumbing to despair? For many, acknowledging the problem publicly is a useful step in addressing it. We read James Baldwin together, sharing words and reflections on the enduring love seen in Baldwin’s narratives. We each find meaning in our own ways of thinking about trauma. “How has your personal philosophy of coping evolved since you started this class?” I ask over and over, reminding students to see their lives in a broader perspective. We share with each other, connecting and uncovering.

Remembering, Repeating and Forgiving

Of course, the cliché about teaching is that we learn more from our students than they do from us. But it’s never simple. Some bury themselves, pulling their hats over their heads, leaning back in their chairs, almost shielding themselves from the difficult accounts other students relate. Some take long bathroom breaks or nap or turn cameras off. Others embrace the stories, offering feedback, finding voices, speaking out, sharing insights, processing complicated narratives, as we try to create a safe space to talk, learn, breathing it out as class begins, and ends.

One of the students is a young man, possibly twenty, who had nearly flunked my community organizing class the year before, pulling it together only at the end. Sometimes he slept in class. When he was awake, he had amazing things to say, comments about the texts: “Herman is about how bad life gets; Pyles is how to cope.” Toward the end of the class, we read “Remembering,

Repeating, and Working-Through,” the seminal essay by Freud from 1914, about our tendencies to repeat our traumas. “After severe shock... the dream life continually takes the patient back to the situation of his disaster from which he awakens with renewed terror... the patient has undergone a physical fixation to the trauma,” writes Freud (1919/1954, p. 207–210). This student led the discussion, reminding everyone we are not cured because of *what* we remember, we heal *when* we remember, connecting Freud and Herman’s conclusions. Each student processes material in their own way. Dialogue engenders a process of ideas moving from the head to the heart, through the body into a community of embodied learners, actively listening and working together.

When we say “processing” and “coping,” what we are really referring to is resilience. We name elements—such as emotional, spiritual, physical, and cognitive coping. Learning to identify and enhance these, we look at life’s obstacles as openings. We can’t control the things that happen to us, says Maya Angelou (1969). But we are in charge of how we respond. In this way, we can let go. Forgive others, even those who hurt you, says Angelou (1969). It takes time (and most certainly there are crimes that students are not ready to forgive). In our class, we all struggle, stumble, and forgive. Together we laugh at our foibles, with a little levity.

Late in the semester we watch the end of the film *Ordinary People* together (Redford, 1980). Conrad, whose brother perished in a boating accident, is wracked with survivor guilt. In a seminal conversation with his therapist Dr. Berger, Conrad is asked to remember what happened. “What did you do?” Dr. Berger asks over and over again. “I held on,” says Conrad, trembling and weeping. “Yes, you held on,” says his therapist, imploring Conrad to forgive himself (Redford, 1980). Conrad’s whole life changes when he remembers with an essential other. We all need our essential others, our supporters, our community, even in the classroom.

Conclusions

After her father passes away, French artist Sophie Calle becomes sick (Schilling, 2017). Gradually Calle starts telling anyone who would listen to her story, asking to hear their stories in return. Embodied practice takes shape as we talk, listen, share, create safe spaces, and breathe.

A subtext of the class involves questions about why people self-injure or hurt themselves. According to *The New York Times*, suicide rates are up 56 percent (Brody, 2019). On the second to last day of class, a young student wearing a hijab, who has been quiet all term long, stands up, telling the class about her struggles with cutting and self-injury, confessing she’s come close to killing herself. The whole class gives her support and feedback, holding a space for her. Over time, students learn to see, hear, observe, and support each other, even in difficult moments.

All semester long, students become more aware of themselves as living, breathing, embodied observers and participants, community builders, and providers. Their journal entries become richer, their presentations more compelling, their affect more aware, more supportive even in the online setting, clicking hearts and applauding each other in the chat during check-ins and presentations. There is no neutral participation, argues Harry Stack Sullivan (1954). Over time, students come to observe themselves and then to see their relationships with others.

“Failure is instructive,” one student says, paraphrasing from pragmatist John Dewey, recognizing we all have something to contribute, in our own ways. “The person who really thinks, learns quite as much from failure as from successes.”

Throughout this essay, I explore ways of understanding and teaching trauma-informed practice as taught to field students to manage secondary trauma and to develop awareness and self-regulation, with the use of embodied experience and storytelling. I try to answer the question of how to use embodiment, poetry, and reflection to support practice, reflecting on experiences in the classroom, hiking, biking, journaling, and remembering, tracing student narratives and poems, as well as responses to pedagogical challenges and trauma theory.

Yet, questions remain. If the cases explored here highlight anything, they speak to a vast gap in our understanding of the double experience of trauma—as memory and embodied experience. This gap highlights a need for more qualitative research on the lived experiences and meanings of various forms of trauma as well as the ways those experiencing it move through it, sometimes regressing, sometimes beyond it, finding new ways to tell their stories, integrating and transforming the pain.

“You taught me patience and resilience in the COVID-19 era,” says one student who gave me permission to quote from her after the class ended. “Two things that resonated with me are safety and self-care.” Recovery takes place in relation to others, she explains. “Treatment works better as a collaboration and safety. To get back to the center one must do some self-healing such as meditation and breathing exercises.”

“Embodiment begins with getting into the self and getting comfortable with the discomfort felt in the body,” says trauma scholar Deb Courtney (personal communication, 2020). Over time, embodiment in the classroom opens space for a holistic experience in collective processing, meaning making and healing. The parallel process of holding in the classroom and reflecting on the field opens a space for growth. Students feel safe enough to be seen, share their stories, reflect on their narratives, make meaning, and begin to integrate the trauma into a healthier more empowered way of being and breathing. To get there, we start with the body, sitting, being still, breathing, becoming aware of ourselves and those around us, and the stories our bodies are telling us.

Through our stories we narrate a community together. And over time, we all become a little more patient with each other, with the process, with those struggling to heal, and find meaning in it. “Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love *the questions themselves...*” says poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1904/2021). “*Live the questions now.*” Why laughter and humor, we ask. It helps us heal us cope with that uncertainty we feel. Sharing that space together, we build a healing community. This takes shape as we work through the challenges of living, listening, reducing alienation, creating poems and art, remembering, breathing, practicing mindfulness, recovering lost stories and histories. Bodies tell stories. Our job is to listen to them.

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