

"Reading this book is like looking into a mirror."

—THICH NHAT HANH

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

—JACK KORNFELD

Author of *A Path with Heart*

Bring me 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-tough fingers of the world  
— "The Dream Keeper" by Langston Hughes

# Trauma Stewardship

An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self  
While Caring for Others

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

An Excerpt From

***Trauma Stewardship:  
An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self  
While Caring for Others***

by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk  
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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



## 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.

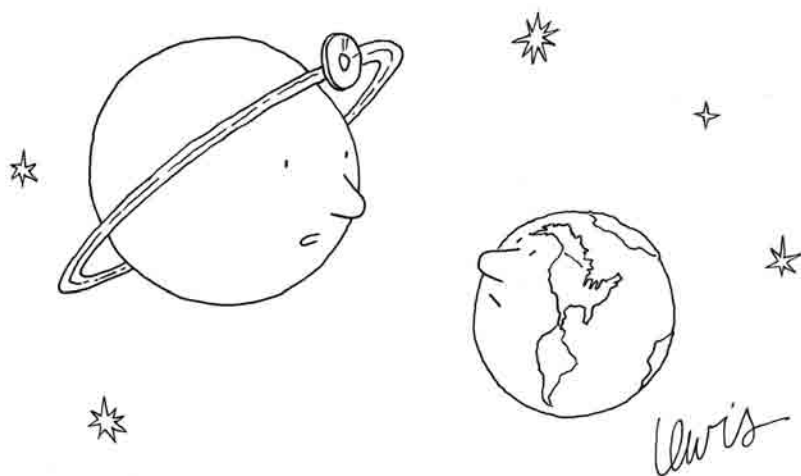
Pioneering researchers have given our experience of being affected by others' pain a number of names. In this book, we refer to "trauma exposure response." Charles Figley uses the terms "compassion fatigue" and "secondary traumatic stress disorder." Laurie Anne Pearlman, Karen W. Saakvitne, and I. L. 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**

## **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.

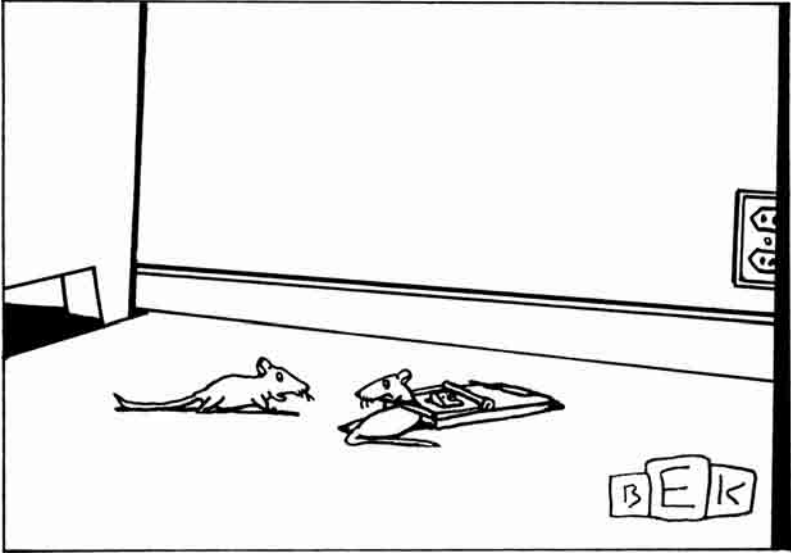
People may come to believe that feeling happy or lighthearted is a betrayal of all of the countless humans, creatures, and environments that are under siege on this planet. They may act as if the only way they can express solidarity with suffering of any kind is by suffering themselves. Even for many 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 shortcomings 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.

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