



*A nation is not
conquered until the
hearts of its women
are on the ground.
Then it is finished
no matter how brave
its warriors or how
strong their weapons.*

— TSISTSISTAS, CHEYENNE PROVERB

TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE IN A FIRST NATION COMMUNITY

BY SONIA PLEWA, RCC

We cannot talk about trauma without acknowledging the resilience, strength, power, and creativity of the human spirit, which has the ability to survive, and even thrive, in spite of — and sometimes because of — horrific life circumstances.

May this small piece of writing be a tribute, an acknowledgment, an honouring of my relationship with all the beautiful, brave, resilient Indigenous women, whom I was privileged to encounter over the last three years in my therapist office in a small reserve community on the central coast of B.C.

May it also serve as a platform to publicly express my deeply felt gratitude for the time we have been able to work together. Gratitude for the trust you put in me, an outsider with a strong East-European accent,

trust in the therapeutic process and in your own healing powers. When I kept apologizing for my real or imagined cultural inadequacy, you kept reminding me about our common humanity. How much you have taught me about trauma and resilience, suffering and strength, pain and forgiveness, so hand in hand, inseparable in your everyday lives from a very young age.

It has been a fascinating, rewarding, and, at times, heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching journey. Here, between the four walls of my counselling office, we closely examined all possible (and seemingly impossible) combinations of the little t and capital T traumas you have encountered and endured: the pain of loss and grief, violence and sexual abuse, neglect and abandonment, chronic pain, self-harm, suicide, murder.

In time — actually, I think it was quite early on — it became clear to me that we cannot talk about t and T traumas without acknowledging G and H trauma: the generational and historical trauma of 150 years of colonization and genocide against the Indigenous People in Canada. Always, in every case, we needed to remember the bigger context. After attending to the personal wound, we had to give attention to the collective hurt of your people, to bear witness to the pain of dislocation, loss of culture and identity, confusion, despair, anger.

Interestingly, for many of you, becoming consciously aware of how the bigger, historical picture informed your intimate, personal reality has brought relief and given voice to a long-stifled compassion towards self, your close relatives, and even towards the very

people who had hurt you. “Now, I get why mum never showed me or told me that she loved me.” “Now, I understand why he did this to me; the same must have happened to him.” I heard these comments over and over and over again.

GETTING MYSELF OUT OF THE WAY

Our rich therapeutic journey offered all of us incredible opportunities to grow. As you gained more courage and trust to share your story and cry in front of a stranger, I learned to get myself out of the way. “Don’t just do something, sit there” became my therapeutic motto, even though at times I felt the strong pull of a well-known temptation to “make things better.” But when, in the face of unimaginable events of your life, no words of comfort would come, we learned to take respite in the silence.

In that safe and quiet therapeutic space that grew between us, you slowly started to befriend your body. We know now that the body keeps the score,¹ and we cannot ignore the body on the healing journey. Trauma nuggets are stored in the nervous system and in the muscles, and they manifest in sometimes strange, mysterious symptoms of aches, pains, rushes, depression, anxiety, and many other forms of expression. Trauma robs us of that precious relationship with the body: we no longer feel or hear, no longer understand why we do what we do. Therefore, it was really important for us to focus on the body (and drop, for a moment, the narrative or the story line), ask into it, attend to it with kindness so it could reveal its wisdom. We decided not to judge the symptoms or simply try to get rid of them; instead, we got curious and even inquisitive, trying to understand.² I think there is usually a hidden answer in a question, the same way a symptom often offers the medicine needed for healing. And

indeed, once we started shining the gentle light of attention onto the body, solutions for healing came.

I never assumed the position of an expert telling you what to do. Instead, I acted out of a place of curious not-knowing, encouraging you to lead the way towards healing by highlighting your strengths and getting in touch with your intuitive ways of being and knowing.

“Don’t just do something, sit there” became my therapeutic motto, even though at times I felt the strong pull of a well-known temptation to “make things better.”

For some of you, the medicine meant connecting more strongly with the culture and the village Elders: doing the river baths, dancing and singing in the Big House, being part of a traditional cleansing ceremony during the Potlatch, smudging and brushing. Once, the Elder told me we are never alone: there is always the land and there are always the ancestors. It was beautiful to witness how both came to the rescue: the forest, trees, and ocean provided respite for all. Many of you went fishing, made jam, and baked bread.

Others found the strength in simply remembering that your ancestors have been on this land for 14,000 years. Some of you reconnected with the image of the powerful grandmother or the loving grandfather, and some wrote them letters and burned their favourite food as an offering. At times, their presence in the counselling room was palpable: we could feel their blessing, support, wisdom — and also hope. I believe the same hope informed all our sessions,

the hope that nudged you to ask me for help: hope for the future of your people, for healing, for life in wellness, dignity, and grace, for a life where your dreams and plans and visions can be nurtured and realized. You knew your healing was making that kind of a future that much more possible. And you felt responsible to keep going.

There was also humour. Let us remember the laughter that came to the rescue in the darkest, most intense moments. The metaphor of the shit always brought a smile onto your face: we compared our counselling sessions to shovelling manure and transforming shit from our lives into valuable compost.

As the work of self-discovery continues, some of it is beginning to pay off. Many of you have created some pretty potent compost concoctions, and the inner and outer landscapes of your lives are being patiently, lovingly transformed and beautified. I have been privileged to witness some of those radical changes: you depend more on the support of family and friends, you have patience to play with the children, you are walking to work, you had your first sober Christmas in years, you got a new job and are exploring what a healthy relationship looks like, you write a journal, you smile. You are beginning to bloom. ■

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REFERENCES

1 A phrase borrowed from the title of Bessel van der Kolk’s book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2015).

2 See Indigenous (formerly Aboriginal) Focusing-Oriented Therapy (IFOT) and the founder Shirley Turcotte. <https://focusinginternational.org/about/aboriginal-focusing-oriented-therapy-initiative/>