Trauma can bring about growth

by Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea

Hell, hope and healing
Analysis

Editor's note: This is Part 3 of "Hell, hope and healing," an NCR four-part series on sexual abuse. You can read the series introduction, Part 1, and Part 2, which are also available at the feature series page Hell, hope and healing. Part 4 will be published first in our print edition first and then posted to our website. Special feature: Download the complete report here.

In the second article of this series, I focused on hope and healing for survivors of sexual abuse. Here, I extend the discussion beyond healing to discuss the possibility, now validated through research, that some trauma survivors actually experience post-traumatic growth.

If healing can occur from the truly devastating consequences of adverse childhood experiences -- including sexual abuse by clergy -- can survivors also experience meaningful growth through their confrontation with trauma? Can post-traumatic growth also occur in institutions that fostered abuse, as well as in the advocacy organizations that have worked on behalf of survivors?

Let me be very clear: No one ever is "better off" because they were abused or suffered other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Every child and adolescent is entitled to a "good enough" childhood where suffering is manageable and betrayal is minimal.

Unfortunately, too many children and teens are faced with soul-battering betrayals, abuse, neglect or terrifying family dynamics that send normal developmental pathways, including those related to the brain, off the rails.
At the same time, none of us gets from the cradle to the grave without a full measure of suffering in some way or another. Studies have shown that the meaning we derive from our suffering and how we carry the remnants of that suffering into the future determines to a great extent what kind of life we live and how fulfilled we are by it.

**Post-traumatic growth**

Over the last decade or so, researchers have begun to study post-traumatic growth, defined by Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi, University of North Carolina, psychologists and post-traumatic growth experts, as "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances."

Trauma survivors who achieve post-traumatic growth develop a perspective on life that is balanced and pragmatic. Through a tragic loss of innocence early on in life, these survivors accept that life is not fair and therefore demonstrate greater resilience when it is not.

They embrace the reality that there really is no justice for a survivor of ACEs because a shattered childhood can never be returned whole. Continued anger and resentment for them is, as the saying goes, like swallowing poison and hoping the other guy dies; these survivors do not want to give more of their soul space to the trauma or to those who caused it.

Post-traumatic growth thus engenders a greater appreciation of life and a changed sense of priorities that privilege living and loving and making life work.

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Often these survivors are generous and want to help others who suffer, which may be one reason survivors are overrepresented in the helping professions. This group of former victims tends to form warmer and more intimate relationships and have an enhanced sense of personal strength and a deepened spiritual development.

I was still practicing in New York on Sept. 11, 2001. Many trauma survivor patients with whom I worked were significantly less devastated and showed fewer acute stress responses to the horrible events of that day than nontraumatized individuals.

The trauma survivors already had accepted that life as they knew it could be catastrophically dismantled in an instant and forever. They were on a first-name basis with betrayal and evil violation. They had a pragmatic perspective on 9/11, recognizing that life both would go on and that it would be altered in fundamental ways for a very long time. They did not rage about the unfairness and injustice of it all because they had already come to terms with and mourned the loss of innocent expectations that life can be fair, that betrayals never happen, or that justice inevitably prevails.

At the same time, these individuals were not cold or indifferent. Many of them volunteered for long hours to help victims and first responders, and they wept with friends and relatives who lost loved ones.
This combination of empathic outreach to their own and others' suffering and pragmatic acceptance of the horror of 9/11, coupled with both hope that healing could occur and the knowledge that it would take a very long time, suggested that post-traumatic growth had emerged from the survivors' deep working through of their own earlier traumas.

While trauma survivors who experience post-traumatic growth maintain a clear sense that really bad things can happen in life, they also feel that having survived the original trauma(s), there is not much else they cannot handle.

Again, that does not mean that they will not hurt -- terribly sometimes -- but they have a confidence forged in the fires of trauma recovery that they will also survive and even thrive through future losses, betrayals and traumas.

**Can the church grow?**

When ACEs are exposed, perpetrators, abusive or neglectful families, enabling institutions and others are often traumatized.

Here it is important to differentiate between "victimized" and "traumatized." Victimization occurs when a person or group exerts destructive power over an innocent person or group. Trauma is a response to an experience, including but not limited to one that is victimizing.

Even a perpetrator can be traumatized when she/he is exposed for victimizing another. Life is changed forever. Shock, anger, fear and other post-traumatic symptoms may ensue, including minimization, denial and dissociation.

A central issue here is whether individuals or groups can engage with a traumatic experience in a way that promotes growth. Or do they harden defenses and avoid the kind of self-examination, pain and mourning that a victim has to endure in order to heal, become resilient and grow? Post-traumatic growth here emerges primarily from rigorous self-examination and a painful mourning process.

The Catholic church is an institution traumatized by the sexual abuse crisis. The earliest response of the institution was to preserve its long-held identity as a source of goodness and godliness.

Yes, its leaders acknowledged in a vague way that of course there is sin within the church, but the sense was always that sin was somehow a general thing and not assigned to specified actors in the church drama. I sin, you sin, we all sin was an implied mantra that attempted to diminish the criminality and evil of priests who sexually violated kids, and of bishops who protected perpetrators and covered up abuse.

Church officials lied, denied and projected blame on victims, parents of victims, a sexually liberated and sexualized culture, bad apple priests, the '60s, the media. They had seen the enemy and it was not them.

It is still happening today, as when Germany's Cardinal Gerhard Müller recently excoriated the Oscar-winning movie "Spotlight." In his mind, the movie led to the generalization of blame for sexual abuse by some priests onto the shoulders all priests, and it was too hard on bishops who did not respond appropriately to reports of abuse.
To be fair, another prelate*, Malta Archbishop Charles Scicluna, once the Vatican's chief prosecutor and deeply involved in investigation of the sex abuse crisis, said that all bishops and cardinals should see the movie to understand that reporting the crimes, not silence, "will save the church."

Here and in older cases, arrogance and clericalism abounded as a church official worked hard to restore power, control and an idealized view of the church and its clergy. The 2,000-year-old monarchy refused for a very long time and, in some places, still refuses to embrace self-examination and mourning, and it hoped that this, like so many past scandals, would just blow over. It didn't and it hasn't, and that's a good thing.

There is also now a papal commission mandated to develop policies and procedures on sexual abuse. Victims, experts and clergy on that commission are talking with each other and are listening to each other. They are getting to know each other as people and not as straw figures. They are determined and most are hanging in even when the going gets discouraging.

Many are justifiably doubtful about the ultimate success of this commission, but its members deserve suspension of judgment about the outcome until there is one, and they deserve support for their mission.

Still, it is too early to determine if or when the church will do enough self-examination, engage in enough honest investigation of all the root causes of sexual abuse, and submit to a thorough enough mourning for the church that never was and can never be again. It is too soon to tell whether the hierarchy can or will grieve and repent enough for the destruction visited upon all of the people of God through sexual abuse of its youth.

It would be indicative, for example, of real post-traumatic growth and institutional change if bishops and provincial superiors were clearly instructed to report all known or suspected abusers to secular authorities like the police and child protective services. Further, if church officials who cover up abuse lost their jobs, it would reassure Catholics that the church is convinced that covering up abuse is just as sinful and criminal as committing it.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign of potential change is the election of Pope Francis. The cardinals knew who he was when they elected him. And he has not stopped surprising.

Although he has been imperfect, contradictory and even at times infuriating when it comes to sexual abuse, he also has attacked the kind of clericalism and ecclesiastical arrogance that fueled decades, even centuries, of the vilest sexual violations of the young. Welcoming the homeless into the Vatican; washing the feet of women; caring for the incarcerated; taking a relatively passive position on homosexuality; embracing other religions and even atheists as fellow travelers; rehabilitating previously excoriated "dissenters"; chastising bishops to get out on the street and pastor; modeling humility, humor, joy and mercy; reminiscing with the press about once having been in love -- all are death by a thousand cuts to the hierarchical hubris that enabled priests to soul-murder the young, with bishops and provincial superiors serving as accessories.

There are reasons to hope and reasons to remain doubtful that the church is capable of post-traumatic growth. It is understandable that many victims and advocates judge change to be too slow and too circumspect. While we wait to see how far change will go, advocacy organizations like the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) keep the pressure on. But would post-traumatic growth advance their effectiveness as well?
SNAP and healing trauma

The major advocacy group for Catholic sexual abuse victims is SNAP. It is unquestionable that SNAP courageously and tirelessly has kept sexual abuse by clergy in the consciousness of people across the world. Its members dragged the whole issue into the public square and have insisted that it stay there for more than three decades. They have spoken truth to power and have been clobbered by those powers; they have gotten up, bruised and scorned, to speak again.

Those efforts have enabled thousands of victims who had been trapped in silence to come forward and to speak their stories. That alone represents a priceless gift to victims, to their families and to those whose hearts and minds have been changed by listening and taking in the destruction caused by sexual abuse.

Is it time, however, to ask if SNAP can grow beyond its work of confrontation? Twenty-seven years is a long time to be battling such a formidable institution as the Catholic church. To do so has required a herculean degree of dedication, as well as a high level of agreement about what needs to be done.

Over time, understandably, SNAP has developed its own program of orthodoxy, a view upon which it relies so that it isn't distracted from its primary work. A paradigm of hierarchy, what appear to be automatic reactions to anything the church does, and a rigid approach to the right ways to advocate and support, however, can be viewed as coming close to a mirror image of some aspects of the church.

One of the most frustrating outcomes of SNAP's current approach to advocacy is that SNAP talks at the church and the church resolutely ignores SNAP's voice. It may be too late for that to change.

It is so unfortunate, however, that each has been so closed to the possibilities offered by the other that productive encounter, honest exchange of information and expertise, and openness cannot be negotiated. The church has much to learn from SNAP. On the other hand, SNAP might be even more effective were its leaders to listen in a nuanced way to all the contradictory, confusing and sometimes vague messages coming from chanceries, provincial offices and the Vatican, searching for those that might offer common ground.

Healing requires a very different program than advocacy. SNAP has never taken an organized approach to that part of the process. For example, SNAP is ideally situated to develop a sister organization, one headed by researchers, academics, clinicians and victims, completely dedicated to addressing the healing needs of survivors and separate from advocacy activities.

Sometimes, it is a really bad idea for a survivor to join a lawsuit, protest outside a church, hear again how uncaring the church is, or even get emails and notices of those activities. It may be harmful for a victim to attend a SNAP conference in any given year or at all.

Because of these sometimes antithetical tasks of healing and advocacy, an arm of SNAP dedicated wholly to healing and cordoned off from accountability to the advocacy arm could strengthen the great good SNAP already does for victims while preventing unintended potential harm.

It was instructive for me to hear a SNAP advocate once report at a meeting that SNAP told "our" victims that their moment of victory occurred the day their lawsuit was filed. To me, it was inappropriately possessive and patronizing to characterize survivors seeking help from SNAP as "our[s]," and I wondered how a survivor might feel about being referred to that way.

Further, it is unsound from a healing perspective to tell any survivor when their moment of victory will be
or even to predict that there will be one. Survivor suicides have occurred the day a lawsuit was filed, during litigation, and after the settlement was completed and the money deposited in the survivor's account.

In 30 years of practice, I have never encountered two survivors whose healing proceeded in exactly the same way. I know a lot about a lot of healing approaches that work for a lot of survivors, but I know nothing about what healing will be like for the survivor with whom I am meeting for the first time. Their journey of recovery will be unique and surprising in ways I cannot anticipate.

It is crucial for everyone involved with survivors to maintain a dialectic tension between what we "know" and the willingness not to know anything about a particular survivor until we have spent a long time being invited into their experiences.

Rather than predicting what may nor may not ever feel like a victory, one might extend hope to survivors by saying, "I believe that if we do our work well, you will grow from being a survivor who happens to be a person, to a person who happens to be a survivor." That is the ultimate victory, but how or when or if it will happen is the mystery of every journey.

Because every survivor heals differently, it seems inappropriate when SNAP criticizes meetings between victims and a pope. Last fall, David Clohessy, SNAP's director, dismissed the pope's meeting with victims as a "smart public relations move," asking, "Is a child anywhere on Earth safer now that a pope, for maybe the seventh or eighth time or ninth time, has briefly chatted with abuse victims? No."

SNAP's president, Barbara Blaine, meanwhile, wanted the pope to meet with victims in public, not private, and devalued the invited survivors as apparently not the right ones.

"He won't publicly meet with victims who would potentially question him on his record, question what he's doing to actually protect the children," she said. "If you notice, they are always devout and the response is carefully scripted."

Few others characterized these meetings as intended to address policies and procedures, although one can argue that any time a cleric, including a pope, hears the stories and sees the faces of actual victims, change can happen. These were to be pastoral encounters, however, between victims and the pope.

Further, it is a bit ironic to chastise the pope for staging a moment only for its public relations value while simultaneously suggesting that he conduct it in public.

Finally, it is certainly not supportive of healing to assume that a given survivor might not experience something affirmative in that setting and it is antithetical to supporting someone to shame a victim for desiring or acquiescing to a moment like that. Such judgments raise a question about who is using whom for public relations value.

Both the church and SNAP have some self-examination and painful mourning to do.

It might indicate growth, for example, if SNAP were able to acknowledge positive steps taken by the church even while keeping the pressure on for more. The church cannot and should not be a single-issue institution. We all can celebrate the good it brings to the world while holding its hierarchical feet to flames of accountability and transparency -- both operationally negotiable terms -- in protecting kids and supporting survivors.

It would be indicative of church growth, on the other hand, if it could genuinely express gratitude to
SNAP for the gift it has bestowed in forcing the church to recognize the scourge it visited on hundreds of thousands of kids worldwide, and in compelling the church to do penance and to make real, lasting change in policies and procedures that will keep kids safe.

ACEs, especially sexual abuse, create deep and long-lasting wounds. Healing, however, is possible, as are strengthening resilience and attaining post-traumatic growth.

*This story has been updated to clarify Archbishop Charles Scicluna's title.*

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