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How Wounded Healers Help: A Culture-Specific Response to Recovering From a Natural Disaster

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There's a great story Antoinette K-Doe told me about (Ms.) Lollipop bringing her dress to Houston after Hurricane Katrina. You're evacuating a hurricane, you're lucky to bring your toothbrush, and she brought her Baby Doll outfit with her. Anyway, everybody at the shelter was depressed, so to cheer them up she decided to put on her Baby Doll outfit and second-line in the crowd. And somebody yelled out to her, "Hey lady, put some clothes on!"

Rob Florence author, *New Orleans Cemeteries: Life in the Cities of the Dead*

Mardi Gras “masking” traditions and the art and practice of the second-line music and dance embody a spirit of protest and resilience that have traditionally been used to survive collective traumas in African American communities in New Orleans since the late 18th century. Because African Americans were not allowed by law and social custom to participate in White Mardi Gras balls and festivities, they developed their own Mardi Gras traditions, giving it a new name (i.e., Carnival). African American survivors of hurricane Katrina whose families for generations created and perpetuated Carnival masking and the second-line parade traditions are carrying their culture into the post-Katrina Recovery era. This paper discusses the meaning making process that is based in the survivor's culture as a key indicator of a community's ability to thrive and be resilient. The first part of the paper will provide background on the concepts related to posttraumatic growth through expressive cultural practices such as the “wounded healer” and the culture bound practice of intergenerational transmission of creativity as a response to trauma. A discussion is provided on the background of the African American traditions of ritual and masking in New Orleans. A brief illustration follows of one family's experiences with post-Hurricane Katrina recovery and the New Orleans second-line and masking tradition they tapped into to develop a dance production company to foster what they call "The Resurrection." Their use of the masking practice taps into a century-old tradition of the "Baby Dolls," in which music, dance, and the spirit of defiance blended to create a cultural legacy that endures and empowers its descendants to the present day. The paper concludes by offering implications for clinical practice for posttraumatic growth.

The Wounded Healer

The concept of the “wounded healer” is one in which the recovered individual, who, because of her or his own personal suffering, relies on psychotherapeutic facilitating behaviors and speech, including sometimes spirituality, ritual, and the expressive arts to assist others in their own recuperations. Long the purview of writers and religious people, the concept of the ‘wounded healer’ has been elaborated upon by poets and clergy who have left their writings behind to attest to how their own suffering, once endured, understood, and overcome, was used to console others.

For example, the 19th century poet, John Keats, felt that if left to the poet’s own devices, the artist would surrender to the lure of remaining in an emotional state that could only entertain pleasant thoughts. He called the mind unfettered with worry the ‘chamber of maiden thoughts’. Keats described the experience of thinking as being moved by an imperceptible force. The mind for him was the origin of inspiration and where ‘creativity created itself’. He wrote that one’s nerves must be convinced to go inside the mind’s many dark chambers. Keats’ concept of ‘negative capability,’ demonstrates the theory of the artist who must mentally hold the tension between superficial understandings of reality (i.e., a preoccupation with happy and pleasant thoughts) and those thoughts that spring forth from an encounter with the dark passages of the mind under stress. Being pushed to contend with the mind’s dark passages ultimately provides a multiplicity of ways of seeing human experience. Keats called this ‘making soul’ or what results when one creates from the burden of seeing and encountering human misery (e.g., heartbreak, pain, sickness, and oppression) and the complex symbolizing such a process affords (Williams & Waddell, 1991). In recent times, the concept of the wounded healer has been richly developed in the theoretical frameworks of Jungian, Existential, and pastoral counseling, and in the indigenous psychotherapies of the shaman and in the self-help movement (Jackson, 2001). For over a century, the African American community in New Orleans, in contending with the end of Reconstruction and the imposition of legal and social segregation, incorporated the wounded healer practice through the mechanism of formally organized social aid and pleasure clubs that assisted the weak and celebrated the living as well as the dead. They created celebrities out of their own talented neighbors and made ritual spaces where they practiced “soul making.” These traditions have endured and make the region and its people unique.

Expressive Arts in the Midst of Anxiety-Provoking Situations

After being corrected by a parent, a child goes to her room, takes up her pen and paper and begins to draw. This drawing habit, a spontaneous effort at self-soothing and affect regulation, can lead to a reduction in the anxiety she feels so that the emotion will not overwhelm her. After the death of their father, two young women choreograph dances to his favorite songs and find various public venues to perform them. When stressed, a college student writes in her journal, adds sketches, but never shows anyone – the journal contains a private aspect of her. In the despair of coping with feelings of being different and excluded, adolescents turn to poetry to communicate their emotional pain. Graduate students of color often discuss the role of their writing spoken word poetry to cope with

their feelings of marginalization in majority white institutions and programs. Clients bring in these creative expressions into their therapy sessions and they may serve as a focal point through which an intra-psychic or interpersonal problem will be identified and understood. Therapists rely on their storehouse of poetry, literature, and mythology in their technique toolkit to introduce metaphor and meaning-making, thus deepening the understanding of their client's emotional distress. These examples illustrate the role of expressive arts and culture in coping with everyday garden-variety sadness and anxiety associated with emotional suffering. Expressive art as a method of coping with even large scale-collective and secondary trauma is common, but is underappreciated in counselor education and research.

Holocaust concentration-camp survivor, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst, Anna Ornstein (2006) writing from a self-psychological perspective, views creativity in the context of massive social trauma as serving as a mechanism for emotional regulation. Expressive artistic practices help to make possible psychological survival and the future recovery of a relatively integrated mind. Josef Nassy, an African American artist and expatriate of Jewish and Surinamese descent was living and working in Belgium when America entered World War II. Once the Americans entered the War, those in Belgium holding American passports were declared enemies of German-occupied Belgium and were arrested. Nassy spent three years in concentration camps and produced 200 paintings during his detention. Nassy's portraits provide one of the few visual records of camp-life from the perspective of a member of one of the persecuted groups. Specific to marginalized group members, Ornstein (2006) sees art as enabling internal resistance against the impact of humiliation and debasement and as a means of uniting the past and the present and the intrapsychic and the interpersonal.

Counseling theories can inform scholars, educators, and clinicians of the range of functions expressive practices serve in the context of massive social trauma. Not only are they a vehicle for affect regulation, a 'time out' for the survivor, an opportunity to reflect on what is happening and to anticipate what the "new normal" will look like; but importantly, practiced over time, the inclusion of the mechanism of the expressive arts, can lead to self transformation. On August 25, 2010, the ramp into the San Jose mine in a remote region in Chile, left 33 miners buried underground without any means of communicating with the outside world. For the trapped Chilean miner, Victor Zamora Bugueno, poetry was a way of coping. But his writing became not only a record of observation of the miners' plight, but an opportunity for self-reflection which revealed his process of transformation. His poems were said to transition from the theme of despair to that of hope. A line from his poetry has been widely quoted and is becoming iconic "Under the earth there is a ray of light, my path, and faith is the last thing that is lost ... I have been born again" (Richard, 2010).

The people who survived Hurricane Katrina come from a heritage in which their ancestors fled or were forced into the area under very traumatic social circumstances. For the Sicilian immigrants to the Gulf Coast, their immigrations were fueled by the need to escape hunger, famine, invasions, unfair taxation, poverty, and discrimination in their home region of southern Europe. These immigrants brought a tradition with them of appealing to St. Joseph in hard times. St. Joseph is the patron saint of Catholic widows, orphans, workers, and the dying. Their ancestors began "giving" an altar from ancient times. The legend tells of a time their ancestors were delivered from famine through the

intervention of St. Joseph. In gratitude they set the “table” or “altar” to St. Joseph annually, which consists of a smorgasbord of symbolic foods, their ancestors’ most important possession (Ware, 1992). As immigrants to the Gulf Coast, over time, the table setting ritual in churches and in private homes continued and expanded to include thanksgiving for deliverance from job loss, health crises, survival and recovery from natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes), and for the granting of various favors. The expressive art of altar making stemmed from a paradigm shift on the part of the ancient community. From a secular perspective what happened was that they re-visioned the fava bean. Originally, the fava bean was the food they gave to their animals. To enable such a dramatic shift of the transformation of a formerly taboo food into culturally acceptable nutrition for humans, they created a ritual. Now the hardly little fava bean is cooked and added to the altar as well as being distributed to visitors of the altars as a keepsake and talisman against bare cupboards and poverty.

For the African Americans of the area, there were experiences of enslavement or living as second-class citizens as “free people of color.” Either way, by the last decade of the 19th century, legalized segregation was not only the rule in New Orleans, but had become the law of the land with the loss of the New Orleans-initiated suit of *Plessey v. Ferguson*. Black progress and the interracial cooperation that had developed in New Orleans were halted. Out of their experiences with the segregation of Mardi Gras parades, balls, and festivities, this group formed a Mardi Gras of their own. They gave it a new name: “Carnival” or “Old Fools Day” and created masking traditions that still endure (Ya Salaam, 1999). Very recently, the large Catholic Vietnamese community has been very successful at using their social and religious traditions to create a new life for themselves as they escaped the destruction of their country as a result of the Vietnam War and the brutal practices of the new communist leadership in the 1970s. Over 12,000 found refuge in the coastal regions of the American South. In New Orleans East, for example, their traditions can be seen in their preference for their Vietnamese food, the ubiquity of their urban gardens, and the retention of the New Year celebration of Tet (Kilbourne, 1990).

Culture-Bound Protective Factors: One Family’s Story

New Orleans is made up of groups of residents who wear costumes during Mardi Gras, an annual street festival that dates to the 18th century. Such groups, especially those from “marginalized and aggrieved groups” are often members of mutual aid and pleasure clubs. Many clubs have been established since the early 20th century to care for community members in times of illness, poverty, and death. Residents continue to create their own clubs because rarely are these collectivities larger than 30 members. They parade in the streets several times a year, including Mardi Gras, in what scholars have argued is the use of public space to embody dissent of their social marginalization and exclusion. The selection of a mask is not a fly by night decision. It reflects certain claims about identity. Groups of people, who mask, as it is called, see Mardi Gras simply as an opportunity to publically display a private sense of self that guides their entire lives. These masking traditions stemmed from the period of the establishment of Jim Crow during the Progressive Era and functioned to cope with losses in their freedoms, material resources, and citizenship.

The field of trauma research is beginning to discover the usefulness of ritual for healing and recovery from disaster and large scale social trauma situations. It has long been understood in New Orleans' communities that the creation of a separate space away from normal everyday life to mark the traumatic event helps to avoid long term consequences of posttraumatic stress disorder and lays the groundwork for posttraumatic growth. In his studies of resilience in African American children in New Orleans before and after the levees broke in 2005, Cunningham (2010) noted that rather than merely being weakened under such challenging conditions as crushing poverty and discrimination before Hurricane Katrina, African American children had instilled in them a spirit of defiance to make it against the odds. He noted that resilience in this context must include the notion of defiance. The operative social supports such children had included parental monitoring and support, school support, and teacher's high expectations. The resilience these children developed before Katrina would serve them well after the levees broke. Cunningham introduces the concept of "untested privilege" which became evident post Katrina. While more African Americans were severely, adversely impacted than other groups, they were more optimistic about returning to the City and rebuilding. Those who had the bigger challenges were those with "untested privilege" (i.e., those who did not have adversity in their lives prior to Katrina). They found it difficult to cope. In contrast, because of the hardships imposed by income disparities, lower income residents sprung into action and into resistance over their deliberate exclusion in the planning of the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans (Cunningham, 2010).

In New Orleans, ritual which often makes generous use of the expressive arts has been central to mental health recovery and growth after trauma for generations. Communal rituals and artistic practices have been found to contribute to survivors' sense of recovery (Metzl 2009). Masking during ritual conditions provides experiential opportunities to elicit memories and feelings that may be inaccessible to consciousness, to register protest and disdain against those responsible for the disaster, as well as providing opportunities to mourn losses and to express triumph.

These activities have been used traditionally to assist in the process through which personal and collective relationships to the changed life conditions after the disaster are transformed and normalized. The research on survival, recovery, and posttraumatic growth has borne this out especially as meaning making based in the survivor's culture is a key indicator of thriving and resilience and central to posttraumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) define posttraumatic growth as development that surpasses the emotional functioning of the individual before the disruptive events occurred: "The individual not only survived, but has experienced changes that are viewed as important, and that go beyond what was the previous status quo," (p. 4). They identify five factors that represent for them posttraumatic growth: "greater appreciation of life and changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships with others; a greater sense of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities or paths for one's life; and spiritual development" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, p. 6).

New Orleans is a city on the Gulf Coast, and was at the epi-center of Hurricane Katrina in August, 2005. While the City survived the storm itself, it was the failure of the levee system that caused massive flooding, catastrophic property damage, displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents, separation of tens of thousands of children from

their relatives, and a tragic loss of life. The levees failures destroyed the majority of the city's homes and the city infrastructure, creating the conditions for post-traumatic stress disorder on a scale unfamiliar to U.S. citizens. Many of the citizens relied on the long-established cultural traditions of masking and second-line parading in the streets to convey a sense of endurance and perseverance after the tragedy on the designated Carnival Day. One sister and brother, Millisia White and D.J. Hektik returned to the City shortly after the water receded and were determined to initiate a cultural Resurrection (D. Hektik, personal communication, April 24, 2010). Using her newly formed New Orleans Society of Dance, Incorporated (NOSD), Millisia turned to an age old tradition in New Orleans, dressing up as "Baby Dolls," and connected with the elders in the community who had been part of this custom.

Dressing up as a Baby Doll on Mardi Gras is a popular masking tradition among Blacks in New Orleans. The Baby Dolls had their origins around 1912. The Million Dollar Baby Dolls were women from the Back o' Town/Jane's Alley/Uptown/Battlefield section of town, the neighborhood of Louis Armstrong. Initially, the Baby Dolls were a kind of Carnival Club for women working in the dance-halls and brothels. The practice spread to the mixed race Creole families in the Treme area, a section of the city that borders the French Quarter and is located in the Sixth Ward. Married women in the Treme neighborhood formed Social and Pleasure clubs to plan their masking for Carnival. These women generally were mothers of large families. Some groups wore short sexy costumes imitating the Million Dollar Baby Dolls and some innovated and wore Baby Doll costumes resembling toy dolls, complete with lollipops, pacifiers, and bottles. The Treme neighborhood Baby Doll groups were often accompanied by a mock band consisting of the women's husbands, sons, and other family members. Many in the mock band were real musicians and members of well known jazz bands, such as the Dirty Dozen Brass Band (Vaz, 2010/2011).

Ms. White recruited young women of color to join her professional dance company and adopted and adapted the Baby Doll masking tradition to serve as the "face" of the company. All the women had been survivors of the environmental catastrophe and "coming through the muddy water" was an act of rebirth that framed their participation in community-based post-Katrina recovery efforts. Their membership in NOSD reinforced their perceived sense of posttraumatic growth. Speaking of her and D.J. Hetkik's call to the City's residents for a cultural "Resurrection" White (personal communication, April 24, 2010) remembered:

We felt like everything was in jeopardy when Katrina happened. We were going through things were unpredictable. What has been constant since 1719 is that we have always been surviving extreme devastation of life and property. We brainstormed about how we could connect the people through what was familiar to us all. We wanted to resurrect the things that unified us, what makes New Orleans. It is not enough to beat the drum. "What are you resurrecting?" We are still developing it.

Resurrecting the Baby Dolls, a tradition that was dormant before Katrina was akin to resurrecting hope, dreams, traditions, and culture.

We put the music, song, and dance together to do that. In 2007 we presented a proposal to the City and was awarded a small sponsorship let

us do shorts and info reels. My brother, turntablist DJ Hektik, was able to get the celebrities to join in. The celebrities liked the idea of the cultural resurrection, and did not want to let it die. We want to shine light on all things being resurrected that are positive about the place. Holding true to our customs and culture, we started where we stood. We put on a floor show, a production benefit, and the city came out. We thought about what we could contribute; what could we resurrect. By means of videography performances, we informed the world about what Creole culture is all about: the artistry of it. In that way we served as that example of hope. If someone starts a band, we want to collaborate. We aren't waiting. We are doing it with the means at our hands. (personal communication, April 24, 2010)

Millisia White's New Orleans Society of Dance, Baby Doll Ladies perform the second-line dance and they incorporate Creole folk dances like "The Fever" and "The Sugar Cane" that are expressions of the ways of life and experiences of by-gone days in the nearby River Parishes. They also infuse their dance with contemporary "Bounce," the New Orleans expression of Hip Hop. They dance through an arduously long parade route on Mardi Gras Day. Their ritual journey is cast to shake off the troubles they encountered in a recovering City.

One member of the NOSD Baby Doll Ladies articulates how it is possible to constantly get back in touch with the uninhibited spirit of the original Baby Dolls, known as "ladies of the jazz," in spite of everything that is going on. To Davieione Fairley (also known as "Beauty from the East," referring to New Orleans East), the happiness that comes from collective street dancing and masking "keeps you creating."

You forget about the bad stuff and separate yourself from it. When we are masking and dancing, it is not about the bad stuff. We release the tension through dancing. That is where we get our energy and our motivation. We express ourselves to each other and the world. If we can go out there like we don't have a care in the world and dance, we can rub off on someone else that is going through something. This is New Orleans where we speak to each other on the street. Imagine what we can do as a group when we are performing in front of thousands. We are like them. It is just that we are together and we say, 'It's ok to feel free.' (Fairley, personal communication, April 24, 2010)

Implications for Clinical Practice

In a study of 80 survivors of Hurricane Katrina who had lost their homes, creative thinking (i.e., originality and flexibility) was a significant predictor of level of clinical stress, life satisfaction, and well-being for African American respondents and those with low incomes (Metzl, 2009). Creativity, flexible thinking, originality, creating art, and creating culture as part of making sense of traumatic events were found to be helpful in recovery. In addition, especially for African Americans and those with low incomes, participating in the cultural traditions of New Orleans enabled respondents to make strides in their recovery efforts. She recommends adding creative thinking to conceptual

models of resilience. In addition, Metzl suggests that “although some might spontaneously use art making for coping with traumatic events,” (p.121) many others could benefit from it as well. Disaster survivors should be encouraged and supported in their recovery efforts by educating them about the importance of the meaning making process about the traumatic event. Mental health providers can identify and offer culturally relevant expressive art activities.

Counselors should make generous use of expressive arts in disaster mental health responding. Those who have experienced substantial disruptions of their lives due to trauma, operate on a timeline of “before” and “after.” The deliberate processing of the thoughts and memories and experiences of the events results in a revised life story that is essential to facilitating posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) recommend metaphorical and narrative approaches when working with survivors of traumatic events, as there is a need for emotional release, cognitive clarity, and the appreciation for paradox.

Antioch University’s New England Multicultural Center for Research and Practice has developed two exciting clinical techniques for use with adults and adolescents struggling with identity that can be adapted to work with survivors of disaster. Grappling with one’s identity before and after a traumatic event shapes the direction and quality of recovery and adjusting to the “new normal.” “The Mask” activity is used to encourage a dialogue among adolescents to explore the alignment or congruence between what they feel and experience and what they outwardly show. Increasing their awareness and ability to articulate the incongruence of these inner and outward feelings and expressions is an important element of the activity. Counselors can adapt this to discuss identities before and after the traumatic event. “The Two Sided Mask” activity is specifically designed for adults, but both incorporate the actual construction of masks from commonly available materials. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) note that the transformative result of cognitively processing a trauma is achieved most often when people are able to narrate their experiences in a supportive setting. This type of setting probably characterizes the cultural milieu of New Orleans as noted by Metzl (2009) in which creativity can arise under conditions in which the people in charge provide a supportive, nonjudgmental, noncontrolling setting free of intrusions. Though Tedeschi and Calhoun limit the sources of survivors’ personal disclosure to the spoken and written word, the expressive arts have been used by the African American community in New Orleans for generations, and to good effect, as a designated “Carnival” time is merely the culminating activity for self-expression that has been harnessed, practiced, thought about and encouraged throughout the year for those who participate.

Conclusion

This article addressed the role of cultural and ritual practices in recovering from, adapting to, and struggling with major life crises that arise from significant collective trauma and disaster. The article focused on the specific case: New Orleans Katrina survivors' use of their cultural practice of second-lining and masking to respond to trauma of the property destruction and loss of life and other crises. Based on the discussion, it is recommended that mental health practitioners incorporate the expressive arts in disaster

mental health responding. They can also identify community members who spontaneously use their art forms to help regulate the mood of disaster survivors. In so doing, mental health providers will learn more about culturally-appropriate practices. Then they will be able to tap into community resilience practices; practices that have served as protective factors and fostered that particular community's resilience in experiencing and recovering from previous crises.

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