

Writing Poetry is Therapeutic in the Aftermath of Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Traumatic memories are filtered by the amygdale & hippocampus parts of the brain that when in a state of arousal sends the signals to be stored in procedural or somatosensory areas, as emotional states, imagery, sensations and will not be integrated as verbal or declarative memory into the cerebral cortex. Poetry has been defined as non-literal language that largely utilizes metaphors. Poetry and the images that are employed to convey an idea or experience can later help the poet to construct a narrative. That would be finally integrating traumatic memories to the consciousness or declarative memory without overwhelming oneself.

Keywords: poetry, writing, trauma, traumatic memories

(Paper received – 4th November 2022, Peer review completed – 5th January 2023)

(Accepted – 8th January 2023)

INTRODUCTION

“The basic problem for a traumatized individual becomes his own self cure.”

Bromberg (1994)

Trauma is different from stress. Trauma is any event that threatened the life or psychological/physical integrity of an individual, exposure to killings of others, actual or threatened sexual violence against the individual (rape/being stripped in public/in private by one or more persons and any form of violation of boundaries) or his loved one, sudden death of a loved one by murder or suicide, bullying, violation of boundaries in public (experiencing slander or circulation of personal material of the person among public i.e. individuals with whom the person did not share a confiding relationship) and also being in disasters [1]. Man-made disasters or personal trauma is more resistant to healing than impersonal or natural disasters, where violence does not carry a personal significance [2]. Events that can cause extreme stress if they occur in quick succession can also cumulatively have the same effect as trauma.

When the brain of an individual is traumatized, as early as 1907, Pierre Janet described "vehement emotions" They interfere with integration of traumatic memories, because they are not adequately processed they become separate from ordinary consciousness [3].

Memory

Memory is of 2 types – Declarative or Explicit (Verbal) and Non-Declarative or Implicit (Non-Verbal).

Declarative memories are usually non traumatic memories, hence can easily become narratives or anecdotes. Declarative memory has both semantic or conceptual memories and autobiographical memories. Declarative memories are about what happened. Implicit or non-declarative memories are procedures, how to ride a bike or how to swim, how to make pasta, how to wear a braid, how to kiss, how to make love. It is about how it happened.

Even teaching these skills requires action and not words. This is why we say what we were taught to say and do what we saw our parents or teachers did! If there is a discrepancy, it is embedded in two separate areas. We learn about ourselves by reflecting on our actions.

Traumatic memories were filtered by the amygdala and hippocampus a part of the brain that when in a state of arousal sends the signals to be stored in procedural or somatosensory areas, as emotional states, imagery, sensations and will not be integrated as verbal or declarative memory into the cerebral cortex. We all have a problem verbalizing experiences that caused intense horror, helplessness, humiliation, hurt because they were not verbal memories at all, they are feelings of hot cheeks, red ears, choking throat, pricking eyes, rigidly clenched fists, weak knees, beating heart, pounding head, butterflies in the stomach, wish to disappear deep inside a crater in the earth Now, is this not poetry? [3]

Poetry has been defined as non-literal language that largely utilizes metaphors. And neural basis of processing of metaphors has been studied using fMRI and it has been found that right hemisphere processes novel or unfamiliar metaphors. Right Posterior superior temporal sulcus is localized as a centre for verbal creativity [4].

Traumatic memories are timeless, like poems ...They bond us to archetypes, we see the similarities in epics, history, as personal transforms in to collective the traumatic effect reduces [5].

Gandhari

She blinded her eyes,
She did not see her husband,
Who could not see her,
She never saw the world,
Her husband did not see,
So believed the world,
The world could only see,
What it wanted to see. [6]

This poem is about an archetype Gandhari who is hailed as a woman devoted to her husband, in Mahabharata. But the poet interprets her action of blinding herself as an act of defiance. Perhaps the poet is deriving solace in connecting with this archetype. As Jeff and Pepper point out connecting with collective unconscious through poetry is comforting to individual consciousness [5].

Traumatic memories are processed piecemeal; heart takes time to accept what the mind already knows. There is even a phobia to remember traumatic memories [7] and very often poetry and the images that are employed to convey an idea or experience can later help the poet to construct a narrative. That would be finally integrating traumatic memories to the consciousness, without overwhelming oneself. Perhaps the essence of art is to transfer what the artist feels to the audience or readers.

Cast away all speech
our words may express
but cannot hold it
the way of the letters
leaves no trace
yet teaching is revealed (Zen)

Stand

At age four my major milestone
was standing on my head
Weeks of practice were
spent achieving this feat
Shaky starts finally led to
standing unaided at will
When grandparents came for
their annual visit

I planned to be the star of the show
dazzling them with feats of my balance
Slowly I walked to the centre stage
and stood on my head
Grandfather bent down, and joined me
on his head [8]

Poetry also demands the first person more often, hence makes the poet acknowledge his or her own stand, however different it may be from the world. Poet is able to draw inner validation from her superego, an essential ingredient of all creativity being union of superego with ego.

Dissociation

Penetrating my mind without consent,
Penetrating my body without consent,
Mind during the day,
Body during the night,
Dictionary lost many pages,
Experience no longer needed words,
Atlas showed the way out,
I went out of my body,
I also went out of my mind,
He calls it love,
I call it rape,

I am searching for myself in poetry. [9]

And it creates a dialogue with authority that refuses to communicate in words [10] It is an effort to bridge the verbal left brain with the silent feeling right brain the two hemispheres of human brain that do not coordinate when there is psychological trauma. Right brain will see the forest; while left brain is counting the trees [11]. Poetry requires both to be alert.

Speaking Hands

I wanted to speak to you,
With my hands,
The very same hands that
Were once tiny fists,
Clenched against the world,
Holding mother in a tight grip
Then creases formed
Heart line and head line in right direction
As I lost the grip,
Fists became hands,
Hands reaching out to the world,
Growing bangles decorating them
The grown-up world,
Broke these bangles,
Hands became fists,
Clenched against myself,
These fists are silent,
They would never become hands and
Speak to you, I feared.
So, I spoke about their speaking.....
You thought, I was a shameless hussy. [6]

This poem clearly is verbalizing a nonverbal experience; hence a narrative is being constructed.

Farewell to Arms

One of my hands wanted to be free,
 I severed it.
 Now my hand is free
 I am freed of that hand
 Except for the phantom pain
 Reminding me of how you held, that hand.

All the traumatic reactions around the themes of flight fight freeze or fawn can be reframed in poetry, so that poet can normalize these somatic experiences and not necessarily view them in abnormal context. This is a technique used often in poetry therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy.

To My Father My Friend

Your two fingers
 Pointing at me
 You knew to make me a statue,
 You would also be a statue,
 So that I could stare
 Fearlessly into your honest eyes
 Tempting you to laugh or grimace,
 Without touching you
 Rules were rules,
 You tickled me,
 Without actually touching me
 I was defeated by my own laughter,
 You never laughed at me (6)

This poem does change the context of being laughed at as shaming in to the context of teasing or good natured joking or tickling. It also changes the context of “freeze” in to ultimate self-control rather than loss of control. Involuntary freeze that is an automatic response to trauma, hence symbolizes loss of control and humiliating or shaming is being reframed as a game and in a pleasant context.

We Are A Circus

My heart is a little clown
 She does cartwheels
 On bumpy roads
 You will laugh at her red nose and
 Tearful laughter
 My head is a dwarf,
 She won't scale the heights
 She consoles the clown who falls and falls
 Holding out a torn net
 My body is a tamed wild animal,
 She obeys the ring master
 Jumping across rings of fire
 The master who put a ring around her neck.

This poem is defiant towards “Fawn” response of trauma comparing it to circus and taming. This causes shame after the survival mode is passed. It is laughing at self in tears that transforms the narrative towards self-compassion instead of self-blame or shame [13].

To My Son

Birds fold their wings,
 When there are floods

They nest in backwaters
 Tiny wings hatch in a sanctuary
 When the sky is friendlier
 With cotton fluffy pillows of clouds
 They soar in it, teaching
 Their babies to fly,
 Even away from them
 Loyal to the motherland
 I am not a bird,
 I am a human mother,
 I want you to fly but
 I want you to come back [6]

This poem is referring to flight in a normal context, yet convincingly discouraging the flight.

The numbness of post-traumatic stress disorder is mourned in the following poem.

Paper Flowers

These flowers have no fragrance,
 These petals don't bleed,
 There will be no juice,
 When crushed,
 Nerves don't end here.
 They opened from birth,
 There is no mystery,
 They don't bloom more,
 Or less with fall of the night
 The rain drops soak,
 Them in to bland
 Colourless shapes
 Threatening to disintegrate
 But they are immortal,
 They don't die,
 Because they never lived [6]

Poetry therapy is used as a complementary clinical treatment for many disorders, like alcoholism [11] to schizophrenia [4]. One recent review suggests that poetry therapy is an evidence-based practice in a myriad of medical contexts. For instance, one person with aphasia claims to have found his "voice," in part, through poetry [12].

The poetry therapy method of choice varies according to clinical philosophy and patient. In aphasia rehabilitation, poetry has been applied in a group setting, where poems are written individually or collaboratively with the guidance of a group leader. Collaborative approach increases group cohesion [12]. Art is increasingly being recognized as a therapeutic medium. Poetry can be taught and is sometimes spontaneous, when a traumatized individual is unable to express the details as a narrative. In fact dissociation a classic and prototypical response to trauma, often converts a psychic conflict in to a physical symptom that is symbolic of the conflict just like a poem merely using the bodily symptom as a metaphor. Here the body keeps the scores as Vander Kolk put it, but in poetry language keeps the scores [14].

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Acknowledgements – Nil
 Conflict of Interest – Nil
 Funding – Nil