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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RESPONSE

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

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

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

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.

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'

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

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

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

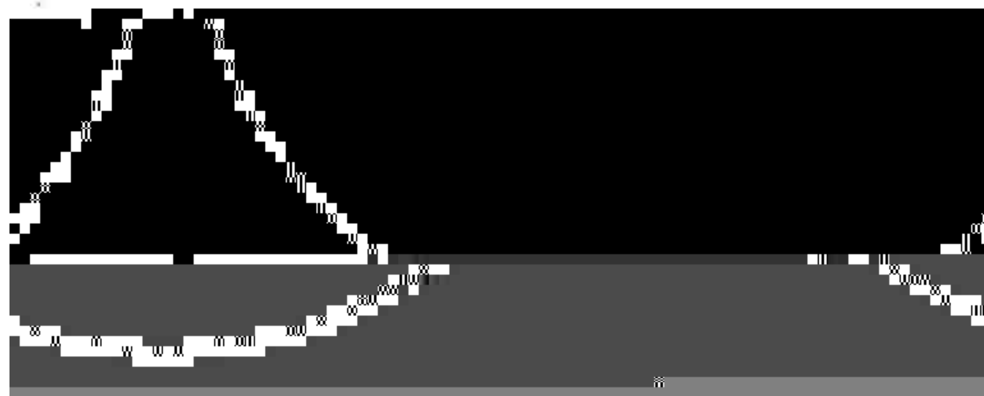
with a meaningful guide to becoming a trauma steward.

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.

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

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

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

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."

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.

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.

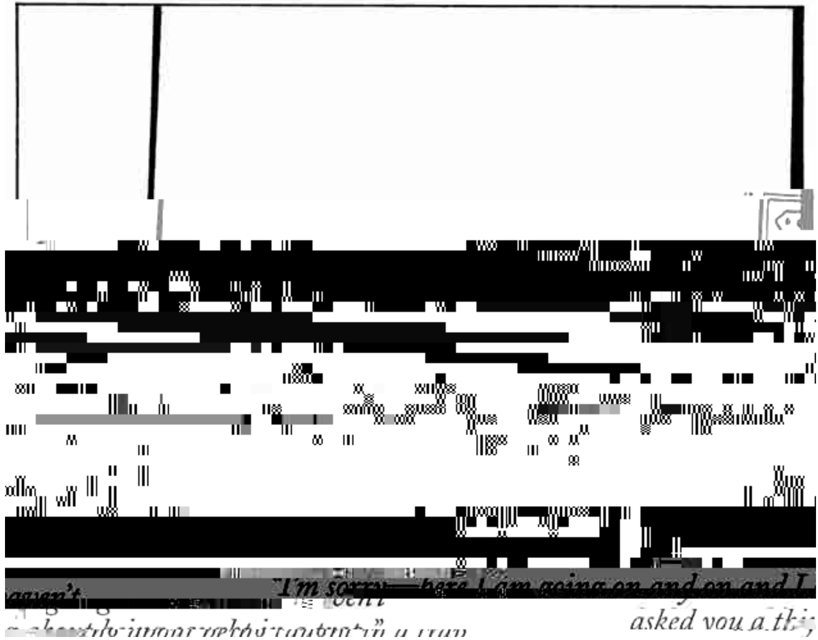
People may come to believe that feeling happy or lighthearted is a betrayal of all of the countless humans, creatures, and environments that are under siege on this planet. They may act as if the only way they can express solidarity with suffering of any kind is by suffering themselves. Even for many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

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.



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

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Trauma Stewardship: