

**Transcript for Trauma-Informed Worship:  
a conversation between Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Stevens and Rev. Erika Hewitt  
recorded on July 27, 2021**

**Rev. Erika Hewitt (EH):** Welcome to this conversation. However you found it, I'm very glad you're here. I'm the Reverend Erika Hewitt and my pronouns are she/hers. I'm talking today with the Reverend Dr. Elizabeth Stevens. Elizabeth, would you introduce yourself please?

**Rev. Elizabeth Stevens (ES):** Thank you, Erika, my pronouns are also she/hers. I am a minister. I serve our congregation in Moscow, Idaho; the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse. And I believe I'm here because my doctoral dissertation focused on trauma-informed worship.

**EH:** Can you say some more about that, Elizabeth? Let's begin by talking about what trauma-informed worship means. We've been hearing a lot about trauma during the pandemic and during some associated crises and disasters, but could you say more about why we're having this conversation as it pertains to worship?

**ES:** Worship offers a really unique opportunity for us to metabolize or work with our trauma in healing ways. As human beings we evolved to co-regulate. And so some of the activities that we participate in in worship are especially effective in metabolizing or working with our trauma.

**EH:** You just mentioned that we evolved to co-regulate. For people who aren't familiar with what that means and how trauma works, could you say a few things about the nature of trauma and what it means to co-regulate?

**ES:** Sure. So, trauma, at its root, is any experience that sort of shatters our experience of reality. So, it breaks us open; it breaks us apart; it causes a rupture in our self understanding and our understanding of how the world works. Pretty much everybody experiences trauma at some point or another in their life.

One of the things that is important to understand is that trauma is a physiological response, so it's not a cognitive response. It's something that lives in our body. And so we can't think our way through it, but we can come up with cognitive strategies to move through the physiological response and that's the work of--we could call it metabolizing;

we could call it working with trauma--so that we can deal with the physiological response in more skillful ways.

Co-regulation: basically what that means is, as a species we evolved to help each other do the work of metabolizing trauma, of managing our physiological responses to trauma, to danger. We help each other calm down. We help bring one another back to our best selves, to that which is most human: back to kindness and compassion, empathy and connection. All things that we can sometimes lose our grasp on when we're in the throes of that physiological trauma response.

**EH:** How might trauma show up and make itself manifest in our congregational life?

**ES:** So, if I may, I want to back up just a little bit and explain where my interest in understanding trauma and trauma's role in worship and congregational life rose. Essentially, you remember in 2005 we had Hurricane Katrina. There was also an earthquake, I believe in Pakistan. And we also had a local trauma in the congregation that I was serving at the time. And I noticed that in the wake of these traumatic events, the congregational system shifted in certain ways that looked to me like a trauma response.

So I saw people withdrawing. I saw people coming with pastoral needs and complaining about--not complaining but, you know, sharing experiences of feeling depressed and feeling triggered or feeling, not being able to sleep well. All signs of trauma--but the thing that actually tipped it over and made me recognize it as a trauma response was, there would be flare ups of weird conflicts. Somebody would send a flaming email to somebody else, out of the blue--often out of character, actually.

Now, I was able to recognize that as a trauma response because I am myself a survivor of childhood trauma. And so I looked at it and I said my gosh, you know, is this what a congregation that's experiencing collective trauma...is this what it looks like? And if so, how can I acknowledge that and work with it in more skillful ways? Because of course you know if you go into that flaming email, and you just treat it like a conflict and flame back, everything blows up.

**EH:** Right, and your use of the word "flaming" email really does make me think of a structure that's on fire, and that depending on whether we're activated or not, we can either bring our own gasoline to the burning structure or we can bring cooling water. I think that's what you meant by co-regulating: that helps things calm back down.

**ES:** Exactly. You know, trauma is a lot like stress in that there's a productive zone. If you're above a certain level, then you're overwhelmed and you're trapped in those physiological responses and you can't access your most human self. If there's no trauma at all, if you close yourself or wall yourself off, then there's no opportunity for growth. There is a way in which these moments that break us, break us open, and create opportunities for growth -- it's called post traumatic growth -- these moments teach us resilience both individually and collectively.

And so I think it's important to know: when do we calm the fire? When is the system over the line of productivity and need to be soothed? And when do we need to open up a little bit and become more aware of some of the--you know, dip into some of the deeper traumas that still have to be processed?

I mean, we live in a country, here in the United States that was built on slavery; was built on Indigenous genocide. So there's no shortage of historical trauma that needs to be acknowledged and worked through. But if we dig into that stuff, at a time when people don't have the personal resources to work with it in skillful ways, it can actually blow up in our faces.

**EH:** Can you offer some thoughts about the factors that go into how much we're impacted by any given trauma? And maybe you could also talk about types of trauma.

**ES:** Sure. You know, as a worship leader you have this experience where Saturday, the news breaks--however you get your news--the news breaks and there's a big, bad horrible event that's happened in your community or somewhere in the wider world, and you look at your plan for leading worship that next day and you're like, "What do I do now?" You know: "I know that people are going to come into that room or that Zoom room, holding this, and I need to to hold it with them." Right? And--"What do I do? Do I have to--Do I throw away the sermon and start from scratch? Do I just acknowledge it in the prayer?...."

And, you know, that discernment process I think is the most important piece of trauma-informed worship.

**EH:** So Elizabeth, would you take us through this? Whether I'm a minister who's had lots of teaching and years of experience doing this, or whether I'm a layperson, would you

take us through that discernment of whether and how to shift plans on a Saturday to address in worship on Sunday, some painful crisis or disaster?

**ES:** Sure. So I think the first and most important thing is to acknowledge the impact on yourself and do whatever practices your body requires to bring you back into that productive, creative, human zone, right? None of us are able to serve effectively when we are activated or feeling overwhelmed. So that's the first step.

The second step is to do some careful thinking about how big the impact will be for your congregation. The impact of a trauma depends on two factors. The first is intensity, which is how bad it is. And that might have to do with numbers of casualties. Traumas that involve children are often far more intense than... so different kinds of trauma. There's natural disasters. There's accidental human error that causes trauma. And then there's deliberate trauma caused by human choices, and that third kind of trauma tends to be even more intense than the other two. So the first variable to get a handle on intensity: How big is this particular trauma?

And then the second variable is proximity: how close. And when you're talking about proximity in terms of trauma, it doesn't just mean geographical location. It actually involves questions of identity. So, you have to think about the people who are going to be in the room, and how close this is going to feel to them. So for example, one of the reasons traumas involving children are really intense for parents in the room: there's a lot of identification with the parents of the children.

**EH:** You're suggesting that worship leaders first process and attend to any activation that's in their body to come back and make sure they're in the productive zone. And then you're suggesting an assessment of the impact of the trauma, both in terms of how intense it is, and its proximity, not just geographically but to the identity. Let's talk a little bit more about that identity piece. Can you provide a concrete example, please?

**ES:** Sure. I mean the easiest one is to think about, you know, when a new story breaks that is about police brutality, that's going to feel a lot closer to people who are--to Black people. Because they're going to identify more strongly. It's going to hit a lot harder than it might for somebody who identifies as white.

A lot of it is really about knowing your folks, knowing who's going to be in the room. And in this process, give yourself enough grace. You're not going to be perfect. There's things you can't know, and somebody may reach out to you after the fact--after you've made

your discernment and done your best to hold this in worship--someone may reach out to you and say, "I needed you to do more because I felt this really strongly." And that's just a door opening to do additional pastoral care.

I try to make a point of having conversations with people in my community who are people of color, or hold other historically marginalized identities. I try to talk to them before and then, like a month or two after. When the trauma's acute you can't really, you know--it's almost abusive to then say, "Well, what do you need?," you know, to like right in their face right in the way. But once there's a little bit of space, or ideally you can do it ahead of time, to just have an open and honest conversation with the actual people in the room. And, you know, ask them, "How can I best hold you when things like this happen?" You know: What do you need?

As a concrete example, I have one member of my congregation who has asked for a heads up, like: "I need to know ahead of time, you know, what you're going to talk about and what you're going to say so that I can make choices about whether it's the right thing for me or not to be present that day."

So, I guess in a way it's getting consent. There's so much nuance and there's just so much trauma. Right. You know, there's just so much trauma and pain and finding that balance between, you know--I think people who grow up and brown and black bodies know so much more about trauma and resilience than those of us who carry more privilege in our, in our physical presentation. We need to center their voices and take them as our teachers without overburdening or going back to them over and over and over again to, you know: "Tell us how to do this hard thing." At some point, you know, I'm just going to do the hard thing and acknowledge that I'm not going to do it perfectly but I'm going to do it best I can and if I make a mistake or if I do it in a way that causes additional harm, please tell me, and I will do better the next time.

**EH:** Elizabeth, I've heard you use the term "trauma landscape." Could you talk more about what that means?

**ES:** One of the things that's hard about trauma is, I think maybe there's a cultural story that we heal; that we should be able to heal; that we should be able to fix this. And that's just not how trauma works. Trauma is something that we hold going forward, and so I found it's a really useful metaphor to think about a trauma landscape. And we can think about that in terms of ourselves, you know: How do I make space for my traumas? What are the layers of trauma?

You know we're living in a time right now where, where there's there's global climate change, there is, you know, this history of slavery and an indigenous genocide, there's the pandemic. There's the epidemic of police brutality. You know we got individual traumas and community traumas and so thinking about that as a landscape, or mapping it out a little bit and having an understanding of the layers and the locations... you know, as I said, it's a physiological response from our bodies. So we often hold traumas in particular places in our bodies. So it's another way to kind of get into that understanding what trauma we're holding and how we're holding it.

And you can think about that as an individual, but I think it's important when you're planning worship, and making the call about *How am I going to change what I'm doing in response to this trauma that we're collectively holding?* to think about the trauma landscape of the whole; of the community that's likely to be gathered, so you know the individuals in the room but also have a sense of what are we holding together. Because we hold things together because of that-- Because we co-regulate, we hold things together with a lot more graciousness and spaciousness than sometimes we can hold as individuals.

**EH:** Let's talk again about worship. How do we do any of this in worship, whether it's helping-- together helping each other, hold the trauma and metabolize it, or whether it's helping individuals soothe and attend to the trauma in their bodies?

**ES:** One of the things that's super important about any kind of trauma work is to acknowledge that everybody metabolizes trauma a little bit differently. Again, just like those conversations with your folks, you know, just like specific conversations with folks, I think it's important to have conversations--general conversations about trauma--when there's not something acute, right, when there's not something acute.

So, naming for your folks that this is how trauma works and this is how we metabolize--and this is the important part--really empowering them to figure out for themselves what their body needs when they are experiencing acute trauma, and giving them permission to do the things that their body needs, so that then when you are in worship and in an acute trauma situation, if the response that you choose isn't one that works for a particular person, it's already part of the culture. Because any given Sunday you could have somebody there for the first time, you also have to name for everybody that whatever you do to address trauma and worship is an invitation, not an instruction. So consent is super important.

That said, ritual is a really really powerful way to metabolize trauma. My sort of philosophy and ritual is that we're manifesting in the physical world an internal shift that we're wanting to happen. So when you're working with trauma, if you locate where it is in your body, you know, just simply putting your hands on that spot and sending it love and compassion can be a really powerful ritual.

I've also done rituals where you send your trauma to a different location: where you hold a stone, and you send the trauma into the stone. And then you can even put the stone in water and let the water carry some of the trauma away for you.

There's just something very simple and powerful about being together, and naming what's true; naming the trauma and normalizing the fact that this feels like trauma. The number of times, Erika, that I've gotten up in front of my congregation to say, *This horrible thing happened. I don't understand how it could have happened. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. But I know that being together helps.*

To just name that for them can be a really powerful tool; just a really powerful moment that creates space so that I'm not holding this hard thing by myself, but we're holding it together and together, it gets a little bit lighter and a little bit more spacious.

**EH:** You're making me think of two things, Elizabeth. The word that comes to mind is *lamentation*: the power of simply naming pain and grieving together.

**ES:** Absolutely.

**EH:** And you've named that consent is important to do that so it's not forcing it on anyone.

You're also making me think of the vigils and worship services that many of us as clergy have crafted in which--not that we explain or fix things but we sometimes jump to the prophetic and to the justice and to the horizon. And sometimes--I know I've been guilty of this--we don't linger in the naming; in the invitation to scan your body; in the acknowledgement of the power of breath or of holding a place in our body that we perceive as holding the pain. And sometimes I think we launch ourselves forward when what we really need to do is to hold still and steady and present. And that takes a spiritual maturity, because it requires whoever is holding the space to have the capacity

to sit with pain, and to be the anchor for other people to do that. That's emotionally exhausting work.

**ES:** It's the way. It's the way forward. It's the only way to do this work.

One response--and I think it's really rooted in white supremacy--one response to trauma is to try to reassert control. And the thing about trauma is, you're not in control. This isn't something that can be fixed. This is a place to stay. It's a place to hold, it's a place to be present. It's a place to witness.

What actually happens as we metabolize trauma is this great mystery and testimony to the resilience of the human spirit: that somehow together we're able to hold and face these big horrible things that would overwhelm us otherwise, and we find our way through to a place of deeper wisdom, resilience, and spiritual maturity.

But I mean think of that moment when Emma.... Emma I forget her last name, held silence.

**EH:** Gonzalez.

**ES:** Huh?

**EH:** Emma Gonzalez

**ES:** Emma Gonzalez, thank you. So when Emma Gonzelz held silence... Wasn't that in D.C.? On the Mall? That--*that* is what we can do. That was a moment of beautiful prophetic trauma-informed ministry.

**EH [for background]:** Emma Gonzalez was one of the teenagers who survived the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. And I believe the shooting lasted, something like seven minutes and I believe that [she held silence for seven minutes](#), so it was intentional. It was powerful. It was weighty; it was emotional, but it was not contrived or gimmicky. And I think what worship leaders are called to do is to be authentic, and to go belly to belly with the raw emotions in the room, rather than doing something that seems like a "neat idea," especially when we're on such delicate territory as trauma.

**ES:** Right. It requires authenticity and vulnerability. Lamentation isn't a practice of being a hero. It's a practice of being real.

[Rev.] Bill Sinkford said to me once, the purpose of worship is to prove that we can tell the truth and survive. And what I would say is, it's the practice of telling the truth so that we can survive *together*.

I talk about co-regulation, but really it's deeper and more mysterious and more powerful than just "co-regulation." There's a way in which, somewhere on the other side of trauma, there's wisdom, there's gifts. There's a breaking down of barriers, there's a greater wholeness. There's a deeper humanity. But we can't get there solo. It absolutely requires that community around us, those connections. It's like the web does the work.

**EH:** We started this conversation by saying that you can't think your way out of trauma. That being said, some of these ideas will be very new to some of the people who are encountering them for the first time. What are three of your favorite resources for people to learn in more detail how to understand the trauma that may be inside of them or someone they love?

**ES:** The classic resource on understanding trauma is by Judith Lewis Herman: *Trauma and Recovery*. That's a really good place to start.

I'd also send people to *Trauma Stewardship* [by] Laura van Dernoot Lipsky. She also is part of what's called the [Trauma Stewardship Institute](#), and they do trainings and there are video resources and online resources that you can access there as well.

And then the third place I would actually send people; I would read *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem, especially when it comes to issues to trauma related to issues of race, just because that is such a--well it's a transformative experience to move through the book, especially to move through the book in community, but it really helps us understand how to bring the trauma lens to the work of creating beloved community, and navigating some of those nuances in especially delicate places.

**EH:** Elizabeth, what you've offered us in this conversation is going to be so helpful and healing and transformative for so many of our worship leaders. So I want to thank you. Is there anything else that you'd like to leave with us as we start to wrap up this conversation?

**ES:** I think I'm going to name one of those horrible truths, which is that it's going to get worse before it gets any better.

The reality is that we're going to continue to see more natural disasters related to climate change. I live in the West. We're having a very visceral reminder of the fact that we're heading into increasing droughts; earlier and earlier fire seasons. So we're going to have more climate-related disasters.

We're a long way from having the country that's faithful to our ideals so we're going to have more trauma as we watch that journey. It's going to get worse before it gets better and in my mind there is no more important work than helping our folks metabolize trauma and stay in that productive zone; stay human; come back again and again to the best parts of ourselves.

I think that's what worship is for. I think that should be the focus of our worship for the duration, or at least a major focus of worship for the duration. I think it should be the focus of religious community. This is what church is for right now, is helping people stay human in the face of inhumane circumstances.

**EH:** And, as you said earlier in our conversation, to get to the post-traumatic growth and resilience. Because the goal is not just to survive, which is the crucial work, but to get to that place where resilience is possible.

**ES:** Exactly. And, you know you hold the trauma, but you're also, at some point, you circle back around and hope the hope.

The word *apocalypse*, as I'm sure you know, just means lifting the veil, right? So what we're seeing as the veil is lifted is the end of capitalism, the end of the carbon economy, the end--please God--of systems of oppression and hierarchy. What we're seeing is the ugliness that is keeping us from the dream of Beloved Community; of sustainable planet; of the world that's worthy of our children and our children's children.

So, being present to the awful is part of the work that gets us to the amazing and the miraculous and the wonderful that we dream of and work for and live for and love.

**EH:** That is a beautiful, beautiful way to end. Thank you.

**ES:** Thank you,

**EH:** Thank you so much, Elizabeth. I want to thank again the Reverend Doctor Elizabeth Stevens for joining me and for helping us move through the lifting of the veil toward hope

and--thank you again, on behalf of all of the Unitarian Universalists and people of faith who will find healing through your words.

**ES:** Thank you. Thank you. It's been a deep honor.

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