



Joan Borysenko on The Link Between Trauma and Kindness

BY GINA MAZZA HILLIER



BY HER OWN facetious definition, Joan Borysenko, PhD is momentarily in the bardo of her worst nightmare. Hundreds of conference attendees await her scholarly wisdom on the language of the heart, and her PowerPoint just went kaput. Attempts to retrieve handwritten notes from her hotel room prove futile as the lobby elevators suddenly become inoperable. Joan is left to go on instinct for the next two hours - no slides, no notes. "Oh well," she shrugs it off, "often in life you don't get what you want; you get what is."



What most of us want is some degree of peace, balance and security in our lives. Instead, what is thrown our way is oftentimes the contrary. The past few years have been rife with epic natural disasters, acts of terrorism and warfare, and other national and global travesties. How do intense experiences such as these impact us on an individual level - how do we personally traverse times of such uncertainty?

After Joan's talk - which was brilliant and insightful in its extemporaneousness - I asked if she'd lend me her thoughts on this topic. Ever gracious, she agreed.

Trained at Harvard Medical School as both a medical scientist and psychologist, Joan is among the world's top new thought leaders in the areas of behavioral medicine, psychoneuroimmunology, women's health, creativity and the great spiritual traditions of the world. She is co-founder and former director of the Mind/Body clinical programs at the Beth Israel/Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and former Instructor in Medicine at Harvard Medical School. A prolific author, Joan's twelfth book was released by Hay House in January 2006. Titled *Saying Yes to Change: Essential Wisdom for Your Journey* and co-written with her husband, Gordon Dveirin, the book offers a framework for psychological and spiritual transformation during times of uncertainty. The authors speak of a three-part rite of passage that individuals go through when dealing with a trauma.

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Part 1 - Separation from the Known World

"This is very well known in anthropological literature and it's a spiritual archetype, as well," Joan begins. "You can see this occurrence in spiritual stories cross-culturally when the hero or heroine is separated from the known world. In some way the earth opens up and swallows you - whether, God forbid, it's a diagnosis of cancer, Hurricane Katrina wiping out your house and killing your loved ones, or being an Iraqi soldier. At that moment of separation, essentially you die to who you were and haven't yet been reborn to who you might become."

Part 2 - The Liminal Phase

"The second phase is what anthropologists call the liminal phase [Latin for "threshold"]. You're on the doorstep of becoming something totally new or different. This is the wandering-in-the-wilderness phase. You don't have your bearings and all your old beliefs and opinions just disappear on you. That can be a good thing because our opinions can become idols that we worship. They sometimes become ruts instead of open spaces of possibility. It's a very frightening time, one of uncertainty. I always think of it as sacred time.

"Really unusual things can happen in the liminal period. For instance, unexpected allies can appear; rules about time and space part and you're in another world. But it's a dangerous place in terms of trauma. Many people despair, they get depressed, they commit suicide or give up in that space, while others transform. It's been my interest for a really long time to look at what predisposes a person to transformation instead of despair. What makes people resilient?"

Joan is well acquainted with the field of positive psychology and particularly intrigued with the work of Dr. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman has extensively researched optimism versus pessimism and has outlined three P's - personal, permanent and pervasive - as indicators of how people will fair when faced with trauma. "People who respond to difficult events by blaming themselves for something or taking it

personally, who think their bad luck is pervasive, that it's the story of their lives and it's permanent, these are the people who become helpless quickly," Joan explains. "They are therefore less likely to see opportunities and more likely to develop depression. The work of positive psychology is to help people say, 'Okay, how does somebody who is more optimistic view this kind of terrible trauma?' The answer to that, of course, is that an optimistic person is more able to see it as an experience for personal growth."

According to the work of Seligman and others, optimism is a trainable skill (read Seligman's book, *Learned Optimism*, to learn more). However, as Joan explains: "The difficulty with serious trauma is that it's different from the kind of trauma such as a job loss, bankruptcy or death in the family. All of these things are terrible losses but they're very different than, for example, a war, genocide or even a hurricane that comes and sweeps away everything you know. Those kinds of traumas are imprinted in the brain. People have flashbacks. They get traumatic stress disorder. It becomes more than a matter of optimism. There have been all kinds of new advances in studying this type of trauma but the fact is, we're still not good at [determining how to deal with] it."

In certain spiritual circles, the word "karma" is tossed around and even used to explain why horrible things happen to good people. I wondered what Joan's research has borne out about the emotional or psychological impact of ascribing karma as cause. "It's not a universally easy thing to look at," she answers "because people who believe in karma hold that belief in the same way that someone does who believes in a punitive god. It's extremely disempowering." In her book, *Guilt is the Teacher, Love is the Lesson*, Joan discusses how people attribute the cause of trauma. And she wrote *Fire in the Soul: the New Psychology of Spiritual Optimism* specifically for people who've gone through a difficult, traumatic experience. The writings challenge readers to look at their beliefs "whether religious, spiritual or psychological - and see how such beliefs can be cast in a more positive way. *Fire in the Soul* was used by many support groups around the country in the aftermath of 9/11.



Part 3 - The Return

"The third part of the rite of passage is returning to the community transformed, with greater authenticity and wisdom than when they left, capable of offering a set of gifts that maybe you didn't even know you had," Joan continues. "There are unexpected gifts to be had, gifts of growth. We oftentimes see this with people who endure a difficult experience; they come back to enrich and inspire others, they set up centers for other people or

contribute in some way, whatever it may be."

If this is the case, have all the traumas we've sustained since 9/11 made us more compassionate, more unified, more humane? Are our own tragedies inspiring us to offer assistance to others in unprecedented ways? To answer this question, Joan refers to the work of futurist and cultural anthropologist Jennifer James, PhD, who defines civilization as "a gradual increase in kindness." According to James' research, we're essentially becoming more civilized over time as we endure the long process of learning to be kind.

"Sure, there's still plenty of inhumanity to go around," Joan continues, "but if you look at the trends gradually in a global way, there is more kindness emerging. Jennifer talks about a cultural mythology that people subscribe to that we used to be kinder and now

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we're going downhill - when in fact it's the other way around. Yes, there's a huge amount of murderousness, and technology is a two-edged sword that we've used badly in some ways. On the other hand, if you look at the worldwide web and the

capability of people knowing what's happening around the globe, that has to make people more responsible because it leads to better feedback and more accountability."

"Trauma has always brought out cooperation and this has been known in psychology for quite a long time. There was a famous experiment about 40 years ago that studied disharmony and aggression. They set up a color war at a camp - a typical camp activity, but it got out of hand. The two sides of the camp had created true strife between the two factions, and the instructors realized they needed to do something to reunite the campers. So, they staged an event where supposedly a truck carrying water to the camp had fallen in a ditch and it required all the campers to work together to get the truck out of the ditch. That brought the campers back together and overcame their strife. So, when I saw different nations pitching in and offering money to the victims of Katrina, my basic thought was, there's an example of a water truck in that people who were not thinking well of us before suddenly met us at the level of simple human need and care."

"So, let's not succumb to the myth of the noble past because it's always been a mixed bag. We live in a dualistic universe with good and bad, but if we're gradually getting



kinder, as the data shows - and Jennifer is a careful scientist, from what I know, - then that's a good thing. My own belief is that human beings are by nature compassionate unless we've been wounded. If we're wounded enough, we become sociopathic and there IS no compassion. But most people are not THAT wounded so there is some compassion. And now that we know what's happening around the world, people of good heart can show up and help - that didn't used to be the case."

Joan and Gordon have thought deeply about how to

educate the heart of people. They've been encouraged by the work of the late Brother Wayne Teasdale, PhD, a monk, teacher and activist who inspired the interspirituality movement. "He really did believe that at this point in time, the only hope for [educating individuals' hearts] is to have people of different religious traditions meet at a level beyond dogma. A level of common, shared humanity, which is a level of common, shared divinity. A mystical, deep level where suddenly we realize there's something beyond the differences that we can share."

In response to this philosophy, Joan and Gordon have joined with Janet Quinn, PhD, RN to form an institute for interspiritual inquiry called Claritas Institute. Its mission is to provide experiential and theoretical training in spiritual mentoring that draws on the diverse strengths of the world's wisdom traditions, and to provide a "community of inquiry" that supports the student's own spiritual formation.

In August 2005, the institute launched its first interspiritual mentor training program. "We train people to be interspiritual mentors to others in the hope that by overcoming dogma and training people in being present, compassionate and open to inquiry, we can meet as a civilization in that place of the heart," Joan explains. "All types of people have shown up [for this training]. Some are members of religions and very nurtured by that. We have Christians, one Native American, some who are Jewish, a couple of ministers, and for next year's program, we just accepted two Catholic sisters. Others are spiritual but not religious. We also have doctors, nurses and therapists - a tremendous cross-section of human beings."

The August program filled to capacity and a second class, to be held in September 2006 in Asheville, North Carolina, is in the works. Joan attributes the positive response to the institute's program to the fact that "there seems to be a tremendous hunger in people for meeting at that level of greater depth. There's something in us that knows we're living through a very critical, pivotal time in history and if we wish to create a future that's different from our past, it's time to do it. No one else is going to do it. It's got to be us. It's definitely the time. With everything that's going on in the world, we're way beyond being able to pretend that we're all isolated and separate. In other words, the water truck has just overturned in a big way."



To learn more about Claritas Institute's upcoming programs, contact Kathleen@claritasinstitute.com or visit www.claritasinstitute.com. To learn more about Joan Borysenko's work, visit www.joanborysenko.com.

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