

Emotional Trauma and Change to Self Image

© 2015, Richard Routledge, M.A., RCC, Arbour Counselling Centre, Victoria, BC

During the course of my career I've specialized in various types of counselling with diverse populations, yet I've noticed a recurring pattern. I first noticed it in the early 1990s while doing career counselling with adults who had sustained serious injuries or medical diagnoses, and later noticed the same pattern with women and men who had been abused. Over time I observed much the same thing while working with people who had been displaced in their careers, with people whose partners had abandoned them after long-term relationships, and with people who had lost family members through separation or death. I came to realize the common denominator is the emotional trauma that occurs when a huge part of one's sense of self is suddenly and unexpectedly threatened or lost.

Strictly speaking, the term *trauma* is correctly applied when we feel we or those we love are in imminent mortal danger, and when this happens a common experience is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But when a core element of our identity as a person is threatened—such as when we experience the sudden loss of a primary relationship, or lose our taken-for-granted status as able-bodied, healthy individuals or suddenly discover we are victims of assault—psychologically the experience is in many ways similar. I believe that's one reason the most common question I've been asked as a therapist is, "Am I going crazy?"

After unexpectedly losing something that in some way defines for us who we are as a person, our identity undergoes a kind of journey before we can feel whole again, though we often don't realize it. While I was working with women who had been raped or abused (either emotionally or physically), I came across a narrative therapy book which described their journey as a "migration of identity" in three stages.

These migration of identity stages are essentially:

1. "the person I was before I left the relationship"
2. a long "betwixt-and-between" phase of disorientation, despair, and many changing emotions, and finally
3. "the person I have come to be" which is different from the sense of self during the first phase because it encompasses all the loss, all the growth, and all the learning along the way.

I noticed that every woman I was working with could relate to this "migration" in sense of self, and most could pinpoint a particular moment when they realized they had 'made it' to the third phase of feeling 'whole' again but different from where they had started.

I recognized this emotional migration as the very same pattern I had observed with adults who had sustained serious injuries or medical diagnoses, or experienced prolonged career displacement, and many other major losses. (The first phase of the migration can be described more broadly as 'the person I was before I lost that part of my self). In most cases clients were able to pinpoint the moment when they realized they had 'made it' to the third stage. I experimented with applying the "migration of identity" framework in working with men who had

been abused, and in working with families undergoing separation and divorce, and so on. In short, I have found this three-stage pattern is fairly universal when people's sense of self is shattered. I have also found there is a natural healing process that is already in place, similar in some respects to the healing process that occurs with PTSD, when clients come to see me. We can readily work with this natural healing process therapeutically, and helping people understand their emotional journey as a three-stage process over time helps to 'normalize' their experiences and provide hope for the journey forward. Recognizing that the journey to redefining 'self' is inherently a developmental one, over time I have cultivated an approach to healing that combines narrative therapy and more recent developments with lessons I have gleaned from the vast field of developmental psychology.

An American developmental psychologist named Jerome Bruner described his experiences with clients this way: "It is as if they were embarking on a journey without maps; and yet, they possess a stock of maps that might give hints — and besides, they know a great deal about journeys and mapmaking." That about summarizes what I have observed over and over again in the course of this work. Knowing that, no matter how painful or complex the changes in self-image may be, it is nearly always possible to move forward with determination, hope, and dignity.

For those who are interested, the narrative therapy book I mentioned is, *Reauthoring Lives: Interviews and Essays*, by Michael White (1995). The quote from Jerome Bruner comes from his book, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986).