

Oh, Lord, help me to be a good animal today.

— BARBARA KINGSOLVER

CHAPTER THREE | How Trauma Affects the Body

EARLY ON IN MY STUDY of trauma, I was involved in brain research. I knew that the instinctive parts of both human and animal brains are virtually identical. Only the rational part of our brain is uniquely human. I also knew that prey animals in the wild, though routinely threatened, are rarely traumatized. Rather, they seem to have a built-in ability to literally shake off the effects of life-threatening encounters, and go on with their lives almost as if nothing unusual had happened.

While studying footage of wild prey animals, I noticed that most animals have a similar physiological process for returning to normal after a narrow escape from death. This process was uncannily reminiscent of the shaking, trembling, and spontaneous breathing that I had watched Nancy move through. (You'll recall that you met Nancy in the introduction to

this book.) I had also observed this process in many shamanic healing rituals performed throughout the world.

You can watch an example of this process from beginning to end on the *National Geographic* video “Polar Bear Alert,” available at many video stores. In this video, a frightened bear is chased down by an airplane, shot with a tranquilizer dart, surrounded by wildlife biologists, and then tagged.

As the massive animal comes out of its state of shock, it begins to tremble lightly. The trembling intensifies steadily, then peaks into a near-convulsive shaking — its limbs flail seemingly at random. After the shaking stops, the animal takes deep, organic breaths that spread throughout its body. The biologist narrator of the film comments that the behavior of the bear is necessary because it “blows off stress” accumulated during the chase and capture.

Now here’s the interesting part: When the bear’s response is viewed in slow motion, it becomes obvious that the seemingly random leg gyrations are actually coordinated running movements. It is as though the animal *completes its escape* by actively finishing the running movements that were interrupted at the moment when it was tranquilized. Then, the bear shakes off the “frozen energy” as it surrenders in spontaneous, full-bodied breaths — just as I had observed with Nancy in her recovery from being overwhelmed as a young child.

As the evidence mounted, I grew increasingly convinced that the healing of trauma — whether it is called “re-association” or, as shamans refer to it, “soul retrieval” — is primarily a biological process or bodily process often accompanied by psychological effects. This is especially true when the trauma involved betrayal by those who were supposed

to protect us. Additionally, I surmised that successful healing methods inevitably involve establishing a connection to the body. Those methods that do not enable people to reconnect with their bodies invariably have limited success.

Now let's put it all together.

FIGHT, FLIGHT, AND FREEZE

When a situation is perceived to be life-threatening, both mind and body mobilize a vast amount of energy in preparation to fight or escape — that's why this is known as the “fight or flight” response. This is the same energy that can enable a slight-framed woman to lift a ton of Detroit steel off of her son's legs when her little one is trapped under a car. This kind of strength is supported by a large increase in blood to the muscles, and the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline.

In the act of lifting 2,000 pounds, the mother discharges most of the excess chemicals and energy she mobilized to deal with the threat. Her son, who was trapped beneath the car, immobilized by pain and fear, would be unable to do so. This discharge of energy from the body, when complete, informs the brain that it is time to reduce the levels of stress hormones — that the threat is no longer present. This is what happens to the mother in a case like this.

If this message to normalize is not given, the brain just continues to release high levels of adrenaline and cortisol, and the body holds onto its high-energy, ramped-up state. This is the situation the son faces. Unless he can find a way to discharge the excess energy, his body will keep responding as if it were in pain and helpless, long after he has recovered from his physical injuries. The central question is: What prevents people

from returning to normal functioning after a threat no longer exists? Why can't we simply release our excess energy the way animals naturally do?

To answer this question, I invite you to visit the Serengeti Plain that dwells in the ancient shadows of our psyches. Take a moment to visualize a crouching cheetah, its eyes focused, its muscles twitching in anticipation, as it prepares to attack a swift, darting impala. I want you to track your own responses as you watch the sleek cheetah overtake its prey in a seventy-mile-an-hour surge of speed. The impala falls to the ground an instant before the cheetah sinks its claws into the haunches of its prey. It is almost as if the animal has surrendered itself to the predator and to certain death.

However, the fallen impala is not dead. Although it appears limp and motionless, its nervous system is still highly charged from the swift chase. Though it is barely breathing or moving, the animal's heart and brain are still racing. The same chemicals discussed earlier that helped fuel its attempted escape continue to flood its brain and body. There is a possibility that the impala will not be devoured immediately. The mother cheetah may drag its (apparently dead) prey behind a bush, then go seek out its hungry cubs, safely hidden at a distance.

While the cheetah is gone, the temporarily "frozen" impala may awaken from its state of shock, then shake and tremble in order to discharge the vast amount of energy it mobilized to escape death. After completing this normalization procedure, the impala will stand up on wobbly legs, take a few tentative steps, then bound off in search of the herd as if nothing unusual had occurred.

The "immobility response" used by the impala is just as important a survival tool as "fight" and "flight." This normal survival strategy is also

called the “freezing” response. Slow and relatively unprotected animals like the opossum use immobility as their first line of defense. Any animal that is trapped in a situation where fight and flight are not viable options will use it.

Another of the vital functions of the immobility response is numbness. If the impala (or human) is killed while “frozen,” it will not suffer pain or even terror during its demise.

We humans use the immobility response — frozen energy — regularly when we are injured or even when we feel overwhelmed. Unlike the impala, though, we tend to have trouble returning to normal after being in this state. The very feelings that we need to access in order to us help steer ourselves back to the present are, in effect, numbed-out.

This difficulty in normalizing ourselves is very important. I believe that the ability to return to equilibrium and balance, after using the “immobility response,” is the primary factor in avoiding being traumatized.

How do wild animals successfully return to their normal state?

The answer lies in the particular type of spontaneous shaking, trembling, and breathing that I described earlier. I remember that when I shared my observations about animal behavior with Andrew Bwanali, chief park biologist of the Mzuzu Environmental Center in Malawi, Central Africa, he nodded excitedly, then burst out: “Yes . . . yes . . . yes! That is true. Before we release captured animals back into the wild, we make absolutely sure that they have done just what you have described.”

He looked down at the ground, then added softly, “If they have not trembled and breathed that way before they are released, they will not survive. They will die.”

Although humans rarely die from trauma, if we do not resolve it, our lives can be severely diminished by its effects. Some people have even described this situation as a “living death.”

So, why can't we shake off the immobility response, just as the animals do? What's to stop us from releasing that frozen energy?

There's some really good news here. My research led me to believe that people do, in fact, possess the same built-in ability to shake off threat that animals do. And in my clinical practice, I have found this to be the case. I found that, if given appropriate guidance, human beings can and do shake off the effects of overwhelming events and return to their lives using exactly the same procedures that animals use.

Over time, I have worked to develop a safe, gentle, and effective way for people to heal from trauma. It works by understanding that trauma is primarily *physiological*. Trauma is something that happens initially to our bodies and our instincts. Only then do its effects spread to our minds, emotions, and spirits.

MOVING OUT OF IMMOBILITY

The question is: how can humans become unstuck from immobility? Moving out of this frozen state can be a fiercely energetic experience. Without a rational brain, animals in the wild don't give it a second thought — they simply do it. When humans begin to move out of the immobility response, however, we are often frightened by the intensity of our own energy and latent aggression, and we brace ourselves against the power of the sensations. This bracing prevents the complete discharge of energy necessary to restore normal functioning. Un-discharged energy is stored in the nervous system, setting the stage for the formation of the

symptoms of trauma, which we discussed in the previous chapter. So, how do we get unstuck? How do we release this frozen energy so that we can move from trauma, which is fixity, to flow?

That is precisely what you are about to learn in my Twelve-Phase Healing Trauma Program.

A GENTLE, GRADUAL APPROACH TO HEALING TRAUMA

In the twelve phases introduced in the next chapter, and available on the CD that accompanies this book, you'll learn how to release yourself from the bondage of unresolved traumas from your past.

When we can discharge our residual survival energy, we feel less threatened and overwhelmed by life. We are no longer frozen in fear. While we are frozen, any movement is frightening, chaotic. As we move from fixity to flow, we begin to experience a sense of coherency. We begin to feel reconnected to life. We feel more peaceful, at home with others, the world, and ourselves. We are no longer trapped by events in our past, some of which we may not even remember.

This brings up a very important fact: that is, you don't have to consciously remember an event to heal from it. Visiting one's trauma is quite different from reliving it. Because trauma happens primarily on an instinctive level, the memories we have of overwhelming events are stored as fragmentary experiences in our bodies, not in the rational parts of our brains.

When we are able to access our "body memories" through the felt sense, then we can begin to discharge the instinctive survival energy that we did not have a chance to use at the time of an event.

Regardless of what your particular situation is, you can learn to discharge and transform this energy. The discharge can be dramatic and

visible, or subtle and quiet. It can be an intense shivering or the slightest sense of inner trembling; or it may be a changing of temperature between hot and cold, between warmth and coolness. Afterwards, you might notice that things fall into place a little easier, or that you're calmer and more relaxed. Perhaps things that once upset you won't seem to bother you as much, and you are significantly less critical of yourself. Or, you might experience a subtle deepening of your sense of well-being.

It's also entirely possible that the change may be more profound. Chronic pain may disappear. You might be able to do things that you've never before attempted. Your relationships with loved ones and others might become freer and easier. You might experience a surge in your feelings of passion and personal power. When trauma is healed, shift happens.

This approach to trauma is not psychotherapy, nor does it replace psychotherapy. I often worked with people who are referred to me by their therapists. Just as often, people who come to me are not involved in psychotherapy. Many of them have been in automobile or other types of accidents, and are suffering from short- or long-term chronic pain.

Psychotherapy can be an important tool for many trauma sufferers. Sometimes, professional help is necessary, and you may choose to share this book with your therapist, social worker, doctor, or any other professional with whom you might be working.

But I want to emphasize that, by using the techniques presented in this integrated book/CD, many of you will be able to help each other, your children, family and friends, both prevent and resolve your own traumas. I wish you the best of luck in your personal healing journey.