



TRIUMPHING OVER AN UNSEEN ENEMY

By Tian Dayton

On a beautiful September morning four hijacked planes were transformed into human terrorist bombs. Appearing like demons of destruction out of a bright blue sky they penetrated our zone of safety, shattering structures, lives, and our sense of a predictable, orderly world. What was never supposed to happen on American soil happened, leaving us to experience the trauma of war, a constellation of psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual effects that have come to be identified as post traumatic stress syndrome.

As we looked on in sheer disbelief, the first effects of trauma set in: shut down emotions. In an orderly and responsible manner New Yorkers and Washingtonians, numb with shock, did what they needed to do.

Bystanders witnessing the surreal horror of the unfolding events swung from numbness and disbelief to terror, sadness or bursts of crying. Reactions varied, but for nearly everyone the ideal of the peaceful and orderly life they had always known and depended upon was challenged. This is one of the legacies of trauma, the symptoms of which can be a loss of trust and faith in an orderly, predictable world.

In our television society there may be many Americans and others around the world who experience some form of vicarious traumatization from watching the disaster over and over again on TV. After all, this is an attack on all of us, on our way of life in the free world. Guilt, sadness, fear, helplessness, and rage may be part of the set of reactions from those witnessing this assault from the supposed safety of their living rooms.

For those among us who have histories of addiction, neglect, or abuse, present-day trauma gets mixed up with the past and separating the two becomes difficult. We feel anxious, vulnerable, and at risk all over again. We may have an urge to cope in some dysfunctional way, such as self-medicating with excessive use of drugs, alcohol, food, sex, gambling or what ever else we've used in the past. Acting on these urges can lead to relapse for those who have been addicted.

After a traumatic event, time is often measured as life before the disaster and life afterwards, and the ground rules may feel different for each. This can mirror previous traumatic events. For example, a feeling that you need to walk on eggshells to keep something bad from happening. Trying to get opposing realities, like the drunk one and the sober one, or the world before the disaster and afterwards, to match up and make sense can leave us feeling crazy, discouraged, or confused. Don't try.

Accept it for what it is, sad and tragic, process it with any and all tools available to you, including self help groups and professional support, and keep going. Don't forsake your ordinary pleasures: laughter, dance, playing and smiling are natural stress busters and more important than ever. While you hypervigilantly scan your environment for signs of danger, scan for signs of beauty and hope as well; it uplifts the spirit and elevates the immune system. Looking for ways to find or create positive meaning can be healing. We can see ourselves as rising to meet an important challenge, rather than as helpless victims.

The meaning that children make out

of this disaster may be magical. One nine-year-old boy felt upset because he shot down the World Trade Towers over and over again in his video game. In his world they always bounced back up. Here they did not. He worried about his possible complicity.

When the terror of September 11 happened, one out of every four or five children in America did not go home to a calm, soothing, reassuring home environment. These are the children living with addiction, who are being robbed of what should be their primary source of support. They need help from other adults to restore a sense of normalcy. Listen to their fears and anxieties without minimizing, let them tell you their version of what they think happened, and understand that some extra acting out behavior may be related to this extra stress. Children may have fears of continued injury, death or separation from their loved ones. The more they witness competent adults taking charge, coping, and restoring normalcy, the more reassured they should be.

In Greek culture we have something that we say to each other at funerals after we lay out loved ones to rest and turn them over to God. It is "Zoes e mas," "life to us." These words of comfort at our most vulnerable moments reflect the accumulated wisdom that informs a people's faith, understanding our most pressing and profound human need to affirm life in the face of deep loss, so that we can have the strength to go on with our day to day lives. "Zoes e mas, life to us."

Tian Dayton, Ph.D., is the author of Trauma and Addiction, and the Director of Program Development, Caron Foundation, New York City.