

Homily – Healing from Community Trauma

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Three weeks ago, I shared with you some of what I am learning in an online class called “Introduction to Wisdom Schools.” At that time I shared that God has created us all with a three-fold way of knowing through our heart, mind, and body. When we use all three of these ways of knowing in a balanced way then we are fully awake. However, most of us in the West only use our heads or minds to know things. We are out of balance and not growing into the fullness that God has created in us. Since they are little used, wisdom says that we need to practice using our heart centers and our moving centers. In this way we will have integrated knowing.

So this week I want to focus once again on our most underutilized center of knowing, the moving center. The moving center is “basically about intelligence through movements. It’s the way that our body is able to put its tentacles out and explore, and gain information from the world. It includes a wide range of skills, ranging from simple things, like knowing how to walk up stairs without having to look at every step. Something in your body knows how to measure and gauge distances. That kind of intelligence, which we mostly underuse, is a huge reservoir of connectivity and information with the world.”

Three weeks ago, I tried to use the head-center to explain the moving center. Using one center of knowing to explain another is not very effective, so I also introduced to moving practices. I demonstrated a full prostration which is lying flat on the ground before God. In addition, we did a moving practice with our feet. Engaging the moving center can be as simple as bringing your attention to your feet. Go ahead and bring your mind’s eye to your feet. Focus on how they feel. Focus on how you are using them. You can even focus on how they look. Watch with wonder as you engage with your feet, or your hands or your breath. Paying attention to your body, for even short periods of time, can help activate your moving center. It can help settle the body. Focusing on your feet can be an effective way to reign in a mind or heart that is out of control. In the coming week, when you feel out of balance in life, focus on your feet. Try it, and see what happens.

And today, I want, once again, to connect the Gospel we just heard to the wisdom of the moving center.

During his lifetime, and even today, Jesus is all about helping us live into the kingdom of God in which our true self comes forth. So many of us wander aimlessly through life guided by our false, shallow self. Jesus is relentless in pointing out the way money gets in the way of our relationship with God. He is tireless in showing how we

must reach out of our bubble to those that are different. We must share power with the other. And, Jesus insists that we must get outside of ourselves and take care of others. We must serve. And, he is uncompromising in his rejection of violence. Two thousand years ago, there was a pervasive cycle of violence in which the wounded become the wounder who then became the wounded and again the wounder. Throughout the Gospels Jesus had a lot to say about violence and about forgiveness. It is through forgiveness that we can live into the kingdom of God here on this earth. God gives us grace, or unmerited love. And, by extension we can also share grace and let go of the wounds that we have given to one another and to ourselves.

But, grace and forgiveness are not easy. We all know this from our lived lives. If forgiveness was easy then we might be a bit better at it. In today's Gospel reading Jesus calls us to forgive an offense seventy-seven times. Jesus recognizes that we relive things in our minds, over and over and over. Maybe a sense of justice has not been satisfied. Maybe we are not yet in a place of safety and there is fear that a wrong will be done again. Maybe we conflate forgiving and forgetting and think that if I forgive then it will seem like nothing bad was done to me. These are all valid concerns so that our minds just keep churning and churning on past hurts and wounds.

In my own life, in my own mind I know the benefits of forgiveness. I can release the grip that a painful memory has on me. I can get the offender out of my head. I know that forgiving doesn't change the past but it sure does change the future. Forgiving someone won't make them nice, but it will make us nicer. As Louis Smedes says "Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future." You and I both know all of these benefits from forgiving. We know them, but why does it have to take an endless number of repeats to let go of resentment? Why does Jesus have to be right again about the nature of being a human being? "Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Somehow after his death and resurrection, Jesus seems to short-circuit this endless cycle. Somehow Jesus was able to let go of resentment and forgive those who crucified him on the Cross.

And this is where I want to link in the Wisdom School stuff about the three-centered knowing. In my own life I overuse the intellect or head center, and I underutilize the moving or body center. And, I think this is true in my quest to let go of resentment and embrace forgiveness. These days we have a word for the resentment or pain that resides in our moving center. And that word is trauma. Trauma is caused by the wounds that are imprinted into our bodies. It is the crushing sensation in the chest that might get labeled as anxiety or depression. Trauma is the fear of losing control

and always being alert for danger or rejection. Trauma includes self-loathing and flashbacks that fog the mind and keep you from opening your heart to another.

Now, I am relying on two books as a share about trauma and the pain that is held within the moving center. The first book is about the healing of individuals who suffer from trauma. This book is “The Body Keeps the Score” by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk. In this book, Van der Kolk writes that trauma is a fact of life. Veterans and their families deal with the painful aftermath of combat. One in five Americans has been molested. One in four grew up with alcoholics And, one in three couples have engaged in physical violence. Van der Kolk, is one of the world’s foremost experts on trauma, and he has spent over three decades working with survivors. In “The Body Keeps the Score,” he shows how trauma literally reshapes both body and brain, compromising our capacities for pleasure, engagement, self-control, and trust. He explores treatments—from neurofeedback and meditation to sports, drama, and yoga. These non-pharmacological options offer paths to recovery by activating the brain’s natural neuroplasticity.” I find Van der Kolk’s learnings to be a breath of fresh air. Imagine the possibility of releasing pain and trauma from our moving centers.

And the second book I am relying on is about community trauma. This book is “My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies.” This second book is by Resmaa Menakem, and in it she speaks directly about “bodily knowing” and the transmission of trauma from a historical and corporate perspective. She says that “our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experienced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, numbness or energy. Often this knowledge is stored in our bodies as wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous.”

Menakem goes on to say “The body is where we live. It’s where we fear, hope, and react. And what the body cares about most are safety and survival. When something happens to the body that is too much, too fast, or too soon, it overwhelms the body and can create trauma. Trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma is the body’s protective response to an event—or a series of events that the body perceives as potentially dangerous. This perception of danger may be accurate, inaccurate, or entirely imaginary. Be that as is may, trauma gets stuck in the body and stays stuck there until it is addressed.

Now this second book extends individual trauma to corporate or communal trauma. Menakem explains how layers of trauma have built up in the United States. America is tearing itself apart. On the surface, this conflict looks like the natural outcome of many recent social and political clashes, but it’s not. Our conflict is the result of centuries of trauma that have been passed from generation to generation. We have

not followed the wisdom of Jesus in continuing to let go of our resentments and wounds. They have built up inside our bodies. If we are to survive as a country, then it is inside our bodies where this conflict will need to be resolved. If we are to upend the status quo of racism and political deadlock, we must begin with our bodies. 9-11, the Coronavirus, global climate change and these fires have layered in even more trauma. Life feels out of control and our bodies react.

“We cannot hope to bring peace to the world if we are not at peace within ourselves. Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body. If you can settle your body, you are more likely to be calm, alert, and fully present, no matter what is going on around you. A settled body enables you to harmonize and connect with other bodies around you, while encouraging those bodies to settle as well. Gather together a large group of unsettled bodies, or assemble a group of bodies and then unsettle them, and you get a mob or a riot.

But bring a large group of settled bodies together and you have a potential movement, and a potential force for tremendous good in the world. A calm, settled body is the foundation for health, for healing, for helping others, and for changing the world.”

Now, pain that is held in the moving center needs to be healed by techniques that are specific to the moving center. Earlier I mentioned that Van der Kolk found neurofeedback, meditation, sports, drama, and yoga, he found of these to be effective releasers of trauma. Menakem has solutions to trauma that are even more basic. Her solutions are ones that are often done instinctively by a grandparent with a baby. These simple releasers of trauma include belly breathing, slow rocking, humming, singing aloud, or rubbing your belly. In addition here is an moving center practice called “Breathe, Ground, and Resource,” This exercise can be done standing, sitting, or lying down. It can be done with eyes open or closed. Take a few deep breaths. Let your body relax as much as it wants to. Now, think of a person, an animal, or a place that makes you feel safe and secure. Then imagine that, right now, this person or animal is beside you, or you are in that safe place. Continue to breath naturally, simply let yourself experience that safety and security for one to two minutes. Afterward, notice how and what you experience in your body.

Like Jesus, God created us a embodied beings. For some reason, these bodies can collect trauma, but God has created us to release that trauma. Our bodies can forgive past hurts and move together with other healed bodies so that we can heal the world. I invite you to a place of healing in which you can more effectively be the hands, and feet, and voice, and eyes of Jesus in the world.