

Chapter 1

How Have We Tried to Heal From Complex Trauma?

When I was a young child, I looked around my world and realized that the adults were not okay. They clearly didn't know what they were doing. They were saturated with their lives, their misadventures in love, and their moods. They were not functional enough to have the capacity to be of much real assistance to me. Work for them was exhausting and numbing. This was the mid-1970s, and it felt as though everyone had just survived something horrible. There was a backstory that a six-year-old couldn't quite understand but could feel its full sad weight pressing against him. Children were not the irreplaceable things that they have become. We were things that happened to you. Then, more of us were born as though springing straight out of their disillusionment and resentment in each other.

I realized young that I had to figure things out largely by myself. So I figured out how to survive. I learned quickly that the only thing worse than being ignored was being noticed. When I could very little measure of safety at home, in the community, or at school, I figured out how to disappear. I learned how to smile and to pretend that I was okay. When I could not connect, I learned how to feign connection. I learned to ride a bike in a city faster than anyone could catch me. Eventually, I learned that I could be smart. I could disconnect from my body and pain. Later, I came to Catholic mysticism and discovered that I could make a spirituality of self-erasure. I found community support and spiritual endorsement for my earliest survival strategies. I made a practice of disappearing nearly everything that made me human. I learned to master my teenage body and will. I told myself when I was hungry and when I would sleep. I chose to sleep on hard surfaces for the lesson of it. I did worse to rid myself of self. I did not need the church to remind me that bodies were bad. But it was nice to have a formal blessing and an altar thousands of years old for those central ideals. In some ways, everything worked remarkably well. Until it didn't. When I was 21 my mystical spirituality collapsed, and I fell unexpectedly into a fully male body with decidedly human emotions. I felt huge things moving and pressing around inside of me, not one of which I

could name or tolerate. It took a long time for things to settle. It took decades longer for the actual work of healing to start.

Healing from complex trauma will be my life's work. It is the onion I will endlessly peel, and I will probably never find the little green sprig in its center. I have had the fortune to do great healing work. Much of what I learned from my recovery informs what you will read about here. Now that I'm in my 50s and have done a sizable piece of my own healing, I'm amazed at the ingenuity of my younger self. I tried many of the best cultural strategies that were available to me: I practiced staying ahead of it, disconnected from the worst parts of it, learned how to self-erase, grew the parts of me where I could find peace and competence, and connected with people and systems who could help me nearly perfect my earliest survival strategies. None of these early strategies helped me heal. They allowed me to survive long enough to start healing.

Carrying trauma necessitates survival strategies. The same cultures that wound us construct obstacles to healing. They dictate our options for survival and recovery. They instruct us on how we should best carry the wounds they give us. They shape which healing strategies “make sense” and which are “woo-woo.” Many of us have survived by using culturally available survival and healing strategies. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Trying to Make Sense of the Trauma/Ruminating
- Forgiveness of Abusers
- Trying to Be Understood by Abusers
- Emotionally/Somatically Numbing Strategies
- Intellectualizing
- Dissociating from the Reality of It
- Trying to Be Loved Whole
- Trying to Love Someone Else Whole/Caretaking
- Giving It to God
- Repetition Compulsion
- Controlling Self, Others, or Things
- Mindfulness/Emotion Regulation Strategies
- Staying Ahead of It/Distracting Ourselves from It
- Making Ourselves Relevant to Others
- Telling the Story
- Addictions

None of these strategies reliably and predictably resolve the experiences that accumulate into complex trauma. Many of them result in additional traumatization. I tried many of them, and they represented much of the best cultural wisdom accessible when I was younger.

In 1991, when I could have most used a trauma-focused guide, I am certain that there was not a single therapist within 200 miles of me in rural Louisiana who had a single solid idea about how humans actually heal. Even in 2024, only a small percentage of therapists in the United States practice transformational trauma therapies with any regularity. Culturally, we are becoming more trauma-aware, but too few of us have any workable understanding of how healing actually happens. EMDR therapists sit a few feet from people who regularly and permanently resolve memories. We see clients astonish themselves every day. We once had a front-row seat to suffering; now we have a front-row seat to deep and astonishing healing. Even EMDR therapists struggle to explain clearly what we witness when we see clients recover from horror. Often, it simply feels like magic. One of the core arguments of this book is that magic is the least helpful, compelling, or sustaining metaphor. Once we see healing clearer, we can describe it better. We can be more precise about how our nervous systems learn. We can discover new and more efficient ways to heal.