**IST3034 /THEO 6357 Post-traumatic stress disorder: Pastoral, psychological, and theological responses**

**Sample assignment: Carrie Doehring**

*Remember to first use a spiritual practice that you can return to if you start experience distress. The experience I describe is one I have written and talked about in the past in various contexts; I feel comfortable sharing it in the context of the learning community we will form. It’s has been a central part of the life experience I bring to the vocation of spiritual care, particularly to those who have experienced sexual or family violence.*

**Part 1: Describe a traumatic experience**

I was fortunate to grow up in middle-class suburbs where violence was a rare occurrence (at least violence outside of homes; there was no doubt family violence going on that no one knew about). My family was stable, without any kind of abuse (but with emotional neglect), and with many routines that made life ordered and predictable. I had no experience with violence until 1966 when I was twelve years old and I was sexually assaulted by a sixteen-year-old stranger on my way home from a friend’s house. I told my parents what had happened when I got home and they called the police. I had to describe the assault to two male police officers who seemed cold and judgmental. The next day at school, I was called down to the principal’s office. There were more police offers and I again described what had happened, while the principal, a nun in full habit, listened impassively. I felt embarrassed and awkward. The seriousness and gravity of the response from these adults did convey the sense that something terrible---indeed a crime---had occurred. Going through the police procedure of looking through pictures of possible assailants did reassure me that something was being done, and indeed my assailant was eventually apprehended.

In the months and years that followed I experienced anxiety whenever I had to go somewhere on my own, imagining that my life would be in danger. I didn’t tell anyone about my fears since my parents seemed overwhelmed. I didn’t stop going out, or, when I was an older teen, travelling on my own. I kept confronting my fears by being independent. Since I did travel on my own, mostly on public transportation, I had to put up with a certain amount of unwanted attention from men, which confirmed some of my fears that the world was a dangerous place for young women. Becoming more assertive and forging ahead with my goals was the way I coped with my anxiety. (330 words)

**Part 2: How did you experience God or a sense of transcendence?**

I was a dutiful Roman Catholic girl. I often felt shy and self-conscious about going to confession and receiving communion. I worried about making mistakes. For example, I rehearsed the prayers in my mind before confession, convinced that I would get stuck in the middle of one and the priest would yell at me (this did happen once).

After I was sexually assaulted, I experienced struggles with a judging God. It was somehow my fault; there was something wrong with me that had made me a target. God was a distant judge, and I was on my own. I had to look out for and try to protect myself by anticipating danger. I didn’t have other ways of making sense of sexual violence at the time; there was no one to help me with this. My particular Catholic upbringing simply exacerbated my guilt, anxiety, and sense of being responsible for myself.

I experienced intrapsychic moral stress. My family’s Germanic-American values were to be self-reliant and independent, so I coped by keeping my traumatic symptoms to myself and travelling on my own as a way to defy anxiety, which only exacerbated it.

I experienced interpersonal religious stress. Those in authority who were supposed to protect me, offered no words of comfort. Their stern demeanor made them judges: male police officers who interviewed me the night of the assault and next day at school with the religious nun who was the principal.

A couple of years later when I was 15, I sometimes attended mid-day Mass at my high school chapel. I liked the quiet peacefulness of the service. I found my greatest sense of comfort and most life-giving experience of a divine transcendence in the beauty of classical music and novels. (300 words)

**Part 3: Describe the dangers of theological naïveté inherent in your experience.**

“If survivors, their families, or communities do not draw upon second order reflections on violence, suffering, and evil available to them in their religious traditions, their theological naïveté may result in theologies that are part of a web of violence, rather than a web of life.”

In 1962, most adults did not know how to talk to children about sexual violence. This was certainly true in my experience. My parents felt overwhelmed and helpless. My mother never talked about what had happened to me. My father tried to talk to me once. He was an experimental psychologist who did research on reading disabilities. He told me he had consulted with other psychologists and no one knew what to do, so I assured him that I was okay. The nun who was the principal seemed to embody most vividly a sense of God’s aloof judgment.

The violence of the assault was magnified by the familial and cultural neglect that followed. I didn’t recognize that I was caught in a web of neglect, created by parents, police, religious figures and my Catholic upbringing until I felt a mother’s sense of fierce protective love for my infant son, which awakened for the first time a sense of compassion for myself as a child. (161 words)

**Part 4: Did anyone function as a pastoral caregiver to you as you struggled to experience God’s presence and make sense of this traumatic event?** If so, describe what this was like; if not, describe how such a person could have helped.

No one functioned as a pastoral caregiver to me. I relied on myself and coped as best I could. A few years later, when I was about 15, I had more resources to draw on. Through reading novels, I could escape into fictional worlds that were safe. Adult fiction helped me understand that violence was sometimes part of life and that it didn’t have to destroy people. Music also gave me a sense of self-transcendence. Neither of these resources really helped when I faced danger and felt anxious, when it seemed as though I could drop through the ordinary safe world and become trapped in a world of violence.

It’s hard to imagine who could have possibly functioned as a spiritual caregiver when the assault happened. I don’t recall ever having a one-on-one conversation with a priest or nun as a child. My best friend’s mother, who was a warm person with a wonderful sense of humor might have been able to talk with me if she had been able to draw upon the kind of wisdom about sexuality and sexual violence that more women have today.

I didn’t really feel the complete emotional impact of the sexual assault or make sense of what had happened until 1981 when I was 27 and became a mother, three years after I was ordained. This was when I returned to this formative traumatic event in the context of a silent retreat at a Jesuit retreat center, and felt anger, questions, sorrow, and finally a sense of God’s compassionate presence. There were some positive aspects of my Catholic upbringing that survived the neglect and judgment that was so much part of my embedded theology. The beauty of the contemporary Catholic art and the modern liturgy, as well as the kind compassion of the Jesuit priest who was my spiritual director created a safe place where I could experience a range of intense feelings that had long been buried. (325 words)

**Part 6: Elaborate the embedded theology of values, beliefs, and coping that was energized by trauma/stress-related feelings.** Use Chapters 5 to think about different theologies of suffering and Chapter 6 for example of these kinds of theologies of trauma. Use my assignment as a model for how to do this part. For those of you from nontheistic traditions, see the file on Buddhist orienting systems.

MY EMBEDDED THEOLOGY

**TRAUMA-RELATED EMOTIONS**

Fear, embarrassment, shame, guilt, anger, shyness and self-consciousness, courage

**COPING**

***Religious rituals***: Pre-Vatican II theologies of God as judge became real in the sacrament of confession. As a child in Roman Catholic schools where we went to confession as a class, I took the distinctions between venial and mortal sins very seriously and sometimes obsessively worried about whether I had confessed all of my mortal sins, knowing that if I died I’d go to hell.

***Friendship*** with a close friend and her mother created an alternate home infused with humor and fun.

***Exposure to danger:*** I confronted my fears and tried to ‘master’ them by traveling and being independent.

***Anticipating danger and hyper vigilance:*** I tried to anticipate danger as a way of protecting myself.

***Experiencing beauty:*** Music and literature were resources for me as a child and teenager that helped me create a space for experiencing beauty

***Intellectual pursuits:*** Questioning the meaning of my life helped me eventually find more complex meaning

**VALUES**

***Responsibility and duty:*** I was a responsible child with a strong sense of right and wrong. I felt responsible for protecting myself by being vigilant whenever there was potential danger. For many years I felt a distorted sense of responsibility for my parents’ sense of helplessness. My sense of duty about being a ‘good’ girl and daughter made me silently rebel against my parents and eventually helped me become my own person differentiated from them.

***Self-reliance, stoicism, privacy*** were part of my family’s Germanic-American middle class ethnic values, which made me keep my vulnerability private and handle my fears on my own.

***Intellectual achievement (higher education and high culture); skepticism:*** As a child and teenager, I was always aware of my father’s intellectualism and agnosticism, which devalued my mother’s religion and in the long run undermined all of my Catholic beliefs. When I left the Catholic Church at 18, I was in essence embracing his skepticism. This became an arrogant kind of intellectualism until I read the Gospel of John and critical commentaries, and then began theological studies, and realized that more complex theological ways of understanding suffering were possible.

***Adventure:*** This value made me venture out and travel on my own in spite of my fears.

**BELIEFS**

***Traditional moral theology:*** I used an embedded traditional moral theology (pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism) to understand my experience of violence privately during my teens. I felt that suffering was a result of my personal wrong doing and sinfulness. I experienced God as a disengaged judge; authority figure—the police officers and the principle of my school were experienced in the same way. By limiting God to being a distant judge I wasn’t able to experience God’s compassion, which contributed to the sense of being neglected/abandoned. Eventually when I left the church at 18, this disengaged God had become irrelevant and meaningless.

***Redemptive theology:*** If I looked after myself and bore the cross of anxiety I could redeem my suffering. After my assailant was arrested I heard some details about his vulnerability, which reminded me of my brother’s vulnerability and I felt a sense of responsibility towards boys like this. My sense of responsibility for others was like a cross that I was supposed to bear, which could redeem others.

***Eschatologies of hope:*** I experienced hope through the beauty of literature and music; also through travels and novels that opened up new worlds that helped me transcendent the narrow introverted world constricted by my shyness and fears.

***Theologies of lament and protest:*** I experienced increasing spiritual struggles fueled by anger about God, patriarchy, and my mother’s pre-critical religious faith. My intellectual development and studies helped me begin to question and explore ways of understanding suffering and God.

***Theologies of ambiguous suffering:*** As a teenager I rejected my mother’s dutiful and pre-critical religious faith and embraced my father’s skepticism and arrogant intellectualism which made it hard to find meaning beyond intellectual pursuits, but which did push me to search for more complex meanings.

**Part 7: How is the embedded theology you experienced in your stress reactions/ emotions shaped by intersecting social systems, like religious sexism, heterosexism, racism, classis, ableism….?** Use Doehring (2015) The Practice of Pastoral Care, Chapter 7 (see charts on pp. 35 & 162 for examples). Rather than using a chart, use subheadings for each social system that gave you advantages of or disadvantages in ways that shaped your embedded theologies in this experience. Be specific about how this social system shaped the embedded theology of your children/was internalized by you and then shaped your stress and emotional reactions in this experience or trauma/moral stress you are describing.

Sexism:

My birth order (as most responsible child among 5 children) combined with my socialization as a girl in the 1950’s and early 1960’s made me blame myself for the sexual assault (there was something about me as a girl that made me a target; I had not been vigilant enough).

I also felt emotionally responsibly as a girl for my parents’ helplessness, wanting to take care of myself, hide my PTSD, in order to take care of them.

Religious Sexism:

My religion reinforced the internalized sexism that caused me to feel ashamed. It did not provide any life-giving ways of coping or meaning-making.

Classism & Ethnic Family System (Germanic American):

Even though my father was a psychologist, who tried to consult with colleagues about how to be a good father, there were no psychological perspectives available at the time to help him help0 me. Our Germanic American values made us an isolated nuclear family in which emotional self-reliance and independence were emphasized, so I coped by looking after myself and trying to manage my PTSD.

**Part 8. INTENTIONAL THEOLOGY**

**EMOTIONS**

Compassion and anger about suffering and neglect were experienced initially when I became a mother.

Courage in facing challenges

Sadness about the interconnected and ambiguous nature of suffering developed over time.

**VALUES**

**Social justice:** Belief in the power of goodness motivated me to become an advocate. I volunteered in a rape crisis center, did research on sexual assault, childhood violence and women’s images of God, and wrote about how easily we all get pulled into power struggles in family and helping relationships.

**Interconnected responsibility for healing and spiritual integration:** I shifted from a private sense of personal responsibility to a relational and communal sense of responsibility for my own healing and spiritual integration that led me to become involved in communities of faith, first as a member and then as a minister. A search for healing led me to pursue counseling in a variety of forms. My sense of duty makes me accountable for living out my values.

**Intellectual achievement and skepticism**: My skepticism led me as an undergraduate to explore post-structural literary criticism in the 1970s. My MDiv studies on the one hand encouraged a critical approach to the study of religion; however, it separated intellectual studies from preparation for ministry. As a result, when I went through the ordination process I felt like a secret heretic because I was so skeptical about exclusivist claims to religious truth. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s I had fears that if my Presbytery colleagues knew how skeptical I was, I would be kicked out of the ministry (my mentor minister at the church where I was the choir director during my M.Div. studies actually went through a Presbytery heresy trial for preaching process theology in 1974; he was found “not guilty”). In my fourth year of ministry (1982) I started a part-time MTh involving many units of CPE and exposure to postmodernism in religious studies, which allowed me to integrate my long-standing skepticism and alleviate fears of being judged as a heretic.

**Adventure and courage:** My sense of adventure has led me to take risks and face many challenges.

**BELIEFS**

***Moral theology***

As an M.Div. student I gained second order ways of deliberating over my embedded theologies. I wasn’t able to connect my traditional theological studies with my experience of violence because there was no public theology about sexual violence in 1975. In 1980 I was able to draw upon the work of Marie Fortune and her public theology about sexual violence. She provide a complex moral theology of accountability for naming sexual violence a sin and holding perpetrators as well as the church community accountable for violence and for supporting victims.

***Redemptive theology***

In my early twenties when I started M.Div. studies I began to use redemptive theology to think generally about suffering and these theologies became more meaningful through the liturgical year, especially the seasons of Advent, Lent and Holy Week. When I returned to this traumatic event as a new mother (in my third year of ministry), I used a redemptive paradigm in a new way. I experienced the cross as a sign that God knew what it was like to suffer violence, that God never intended such violence to occur, and that God was enraged about such suffering.

My deliberative theology of the cross, shaped by the writings of Marie Fortune and others, helped me retrospectively understand that even though violence should never have happened to me, I had survived and had not been ultimately destroyed. My understanding of collective sinfulness and accountability also fostered a new theology of an interconnected web of life that helped me share the burden of responsibility.

***Eschatologies of hope***

I experienced hope through the beauty of literature and music; also through travels and novels that opened up new worlds that helped me transcendent the narrow introverted world constricted by my shyness and fears. My love of literature also shaped a sort of conversion experience I had when I was twenty. The minister of the church where I worked as an organist (I was very skeptical about religious beliefs at the time) convinced me to read the gospel of John, which I did in one sitting. I was blown away by its beauty. Reading a commentary that used literary critical studies was similar to undergraduate literature courses I had taken which were formative. The beauty and complexity of the gospel was what initially propelled me into doing an M.Div.

***Theologies of lament and protest***

The anger I felt toward God and my parents as a young mother was a form of protest/lament theology, in which I lamented my suffering. Returning to traumatic experiences as a new mother opened me to a sense of outrage that was liberating and healing. Biblical stories of lament and God’s/Jesus’ anger at injustice were healing. Being part of the feminist movement and its support of survivors of assault and abuse helped me protest and do something about this suffering.

***Theologies of ambiguous suffering***

I began to use a theology of ambiguity to understand my parents’ helplessness, the perpetrator’s violence and how I had coped with trauma. I appreciate the ways in which my parents and even the perpetrator were caught in webs of violence and neglect that generated the suffering that ensued from this event tragic.

Understanding how aspects of my social identity compounded and/or eased trauma/neglect helped me make sense of the trauma and its aftermath in complex ways. For example, having the gender role of being the family caregiver made me feel responsible for my parents’ suffering (a liability) and responsible as a new parent for protecting my children (an asset). Being from a home where higher education was valued, especially psychological studies, eventually gave me access to knowledge that helped me understand and become resilient in the face of future traumatic experiences.

Many units of CPE and also many kinds of therapy were helpful in processing and making sense of my experience of trauma and neglect communally and in more complex ways. Pursuing doctoral studies and becoming a professor allowed me to fully explore, articulate and embrace a postmodern approach to ministry and theological studies. I also try to incorporate symbols from process theology into my spiritual practices (for example, envisioning being held within a web of life)

My relationships and the kind of work I do help me integrate meanings that encompass ambiguity and radical theologies of God's power as relational. I have a supportive spouse and an extensive support system (friends and family members who are faculty, clergy, psychologists, psychiatrists....) that I draw on in crisis and dealing with every day stress, although I tend to process stress privately because of temperament and ingrained values.

**COPING**

**Intellectual meaning-making**: As a minister I made sense of suffering through pastoral care and preaching; later as a doctoral student and faculty member, I used writing and teaching to construct ways of understanding suffering and integrating.

**Becoming an advocate**: In my early thirties I volunteered in a rape crisis center, and later as a graduate student did research on sexual assault, childhood violence and women’s images of God, and wrote about how easily we all get pulled into power struggles in family and helping relationships.

**Appreciating beauty:** As an undergraduate in a music degree program and as a church organist and choir director I participated in religious choral music, which helped me experience a sense of God’s mystery in a communal and not simply a private way. I connect with a sense of God’s transcendence and mystery through beauty, especially religious choral music of a certain kind, novels, short stories, and films.

**Therapy and counseling:** I have rarely not been in some sort of counseling since I began psychoanalytic treatment (4 times a week for 6 years) in 1988. For the past twenty years I have continued in wellness-oriented marriage counseling that focuses on living out my values in my marriage and family life.

**Women’s consciousness-raising groups:** As a minister in the late 1970s and 80s I participated in women’s consciousness raising groups, including the first generation of women Presbyterian clergy in Canada. I wrote and published prayers, hymns, and worship resources using poetic language.

**Singing in the choir of my community of faith:** Participating in an Episcopalian community of faith by singing in the choir helps me experience a second naiveté about my religious beliefs and values. I believe less in a personal God and more in the goodness of creation and humanity, using an ambiguous way of understanding suffering. The liturgy and beliefs of an Episcopal tradition provide spiritual practices and meanings that can encompass the complexity of my life. I affirm these in postmodern ways as contextual truths.

**Leading and participating in adult renewal and educational programs:** Leading and being part of these kinds of integrative learning programs (like a program called CREDO) provide ways of integrating my trauma experiences into my faith and life story. (2153 words)