

## Shooting FLIES WITH CANNONBALLS: *trauma and relationships*



BY STEPHEN MUSE, PH.D.

*When our oldest child Ami, age six, was run over by a car in a sledding accident in 1982, my wife Claudia and I were numb and crushed. After the initial emergency and alertness, it was difficult to be of comfort to each other because we were both hurting. This kind of pain can wreak havoc in marriages by leaving partners depleted and unable to be a source of support and renewal for each other. Sometimes we argued because the intense, unremitting interrogation of grief was pressing us for answers that couldn't be given, but only lived into. Later our startle reflexes and awareness of lurking, hidden dangers was in overdrive, and we realized we had to fight against being overprotective of our other children. At other times there was a heavy numbness making it difficult to enjoy all that was good in our lives. The intrusion of the accident and death of our daughter had come out of nowhere and we had been*

*helpless to intervene. The shock and subsequent suffering left a deep etching in our nervous systems to try and avoid helplessness and further loss.*

*Several years later when Christi, our youngest, hid with another little girl in the church choir robe closet during church, and no one could find her, we found ourselves becoming intensely alarmed. The emotions of previously suffered tragedy surfaced in a rush of adrenaline as we and the rest of the church combed the corn field across the street from the sanctuary looking for her. My mind raced among thoughts like, "What if someone has picked her up on the road and kidnapped her?" to heart-rending scenes of her being somewhere afraid, lost and helpless to do anything about it. My stomach seethed with pangs of dread...*

The amygdala never forgets... That's right. The amygdala. You thought I

meant to say 'the elephant never forgets,' but I didn't. Amygdala is Greek for almond and refers to a very small almond-shaped organ located at the center of the limbic system, which acts as survival central for our brains. The amygdala is like a thermostat regulating automatic emergency fight/flight/freeze responses generated by intense fear. It mobilizes every ounce of protective capacity available in less than a nanosecond without having to think about it in order to preserve a person's life. Once having been bit by a cobra, should I survive, it is likely that every crooked stick in my path will evoke a startle response or an involuntary deep freeze. This is the sign of the amygdala trying to save my life.

*Shooting a fly with a cannonball* is an expression I use with people whose reaction to an event carries with it the kind of incendiary explosive power of an amygdala in high gear identifying

the event as highly dangerous and threatening when in reality it is not. This reaction may be an indication of a traumatic event *that is no longer there, but once was*. Intense reactivity can alternate with the opposite reaction - a kind of removed numbness that isn't responsive at a feeling level. Persisting alternating hyperarousal and psychic numbing can tax the patience of Job, let alone the ordinary family, creating instability in a person's life and relationships. People do not understand the reason for the seemingly unpredictable emotional reactivity or unresponsiveness. Family and friends may feel unfairly blamed and withdraw from the traumatized person which in turn leads to a greater sense of helplessness, isolation and shame, leading to further instability and a sense of impending abandonment, conflict and danger, further intensifying the protective defenses in a vicious cycle.

A combat veteran came for therapy with his marriage in turmoil after it was discovered that he was having meaningless sexual encounters, using pornography and spending less and less time with his wife by taking on second jobs that weren't needed financially. Closer examination revealed how he was trying to avoid memories arising from what he'd experienced in the war. He felt his memories would "poison" his wife and cause her to hate and reject him (like he was doing to himself!), a common experience of returning vets. Ironically, it was because he loved and needed her, but felt unworthy of her, that he was feeling increasing pressure to avoid the accompanying images of pain linked to his vulnerability. Feelings related to war injuries were in exactly the same place as his capacity for love and tenderness. To avoid the one he was instinctively avoiding the other without realizing they were linked.

Survival again. When he began to examine this, he experienced questions of conscience lingering from the war along with intense grief and helplessness associated with his best friend's lifeless, decimated body held in his arms while he was helpless to do anything to save him.

The feelings he hadn't allowed himself at the time of the battle were suspended in his heart waiting for a time of safety to be able to experience and reflect on them. Back home he was haunted by questions arising from the fact that he himself had *survived*, intensifying the

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seeming meaninglessness of it all. What he'd done well and honorably in conditions of war now became a block to enjoying life with his beloved wife and a source of shame for him, which he was unconsciously avoiding. The protective psychic mechanisms that had saved him at the time were now killing his marriage. He felt *unworthy* and couldn't allow himself to be emotionally intimate because he no longer had access to his own visceral sensitivity, which was still in protective isolation mode. By coming to therapy he was beginning to learn one of the major tasks of every combat soldier - to be fit for war *and* fit for life<sup>i</sup> - a dual mission that must be completed by every trauma survivor as well, for what

psychologically saves us in the trauma, when it persists, cripples our possibilities for a normal life.

Combat, death, rape, domestic violence, mental illness, prolonged sickness and a host of other events are all capable of programming the nervous system into traumatic formation. The key elements of trauma are a person's sense of helplessness, the unpredictable invasiveness of the event and the degree to which dissociation occurred at the time. The more frequently these elements are experienced, the more difficult they are to undo. When the programming continues into subsequent life after the trauma has passed, it is no longer functional and puts a strain on the relationships with others, particularly those closest to the traumatized person.

#### **More common that we realize**

Often we don't realize how much exposure the general population gets to traumatic events. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 899,000 children were victims of abuse or neglect in 2005.<sup>ii</sup> Approximately one million U.S. teenagers currently suffer from PTSD. A child's exposure to his or her father abusing the mother is the strongest factor for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next. Children who are witnesses of domestic violence between their parents are *six times more likely to commit suicide*.

While the number of soldiers over the past five years has remained fairly constant, divorce rates among officers is up 78% from 2003, the year of the Iraq invasion, and more than 3.5 times the number in 2000 before the Afghan operation.<sup>iii</sup> This is particularly significant in light of the fact that



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*trauma*

studies show soldiers' worst fear is not death, but loss of their significant relationships. War is ultimately in protection of loved ones back home and yet, fallout from the trauma of combat following deployment can lead to their destruction. This was brought home starkly during a six-week period in summer of 2002 when there was an unusual clustering of four homicides of spouses of active duty soldiers returned from deployment in Afghanistan. Two of these husbands took their own lives immediately after murdering their spouses, while a third committed suicide after he was incarcerated.

The core issue in post traumatic stress is the inability of the soul to integrate the reality of particular experiences and the resulting psychic numbing, hyperarousal and repetitive intrusion of the trauma in the form of disconnected images, behaviors, feelings and fluctuating physiological states, which create problems for interpersonal relationships. The

experience of helplessness and shame at the core acts as a kind of biochemical fixative stabilizing traumatic stress in the autonomic nervous system like a photograph that doesn't change so long as the victim is voiceless and the community refuses to *see and hear* what happened.

"The critical ingredient that makes an event traumatic is the subjective assessment by victims of how threatened and helpless they feel."<sup>iv</sup> Shame and the attack on character resulting from helplessness in the face of victimization dismembers a person. When there is silence and lack of responsiveness or a willingness to listen on the part of the person's family and/or community, it has the further effect of demoralizing and discouraging the survivor. Such silence allows shame to attack the root of a person's sense of belovedness, severing the connection between self, others and God in the depths of the heart where it remains frozen in helpless,

mute despair. Dismemberment in these areas is the spiritual core of the traumatic injury which, if it remains unheard, evokes despair that paralyzes freedom of choice and blocks joy, injuring the very *personhood* from which hope, faith and love arise.

### What can we do?

"It doesn't matter what I say or do I just can't get through to you anymore! I guess you married the wrong person!" Probably not so, the partner's post traumatic stress protection is in operation, that's all.

"You're not the same person I married. Something happened to you and you need to just get over it and quit punishing us for something we didn't do!" There is no way to *just get over it*. The past is always *present* until the related feelings and meanings have been experienced and woven into the meaning of a person's subsequent life.

The simple answer of how to heal, which I often tell my clients regardless of their problem, is to, "Speak so that your body confirms the truth of your words." Otherwise, words have little effect in changing the situation. The body must be involved in order to reconfigure the brain. This requires intention, attention, trust, safety and a willingness to bear the feelings in the present moment. For the spouse, friends and colleagues of a person who has been traumatized, the key is to have patience and try not to take it personally. When your partner shoots a fly with a cannonball or simply 'isn't there,' *it is not because of you.* This is not an excuse to evade responsibility for our actions, but only to invite a deeper listening to the situation on the part of each. It isn't about blame. The traumatized person is surviving as best he or she knows how and should not be blamed for that; the amygdala is just doing its duty as the captain of the body's survival control center. But neither should friends and family accept blame because they don't understand or 'weren't there.' Blame should rest with the trauma itself and this is what must be clearly understood. Otherwise, shame and fear of hurting loved ones or being hurt oneself increases the resistance to being vulnerable.

A mother screaming at her children complained that she couldn't understand what was happening to her. She loved her children and had never behaved this way before. All they were doing was playing and not obeying the rules of the house the way children do. What was making her so rigid and angry to the point that it made her almost panicky? She had experienced a devastating,

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life-threatening event some years before which had imprinted her limbic system, and now the lioness in her was emerging in trivial, ordinary events to which she was responding as though they might present a grave danger to her children. In effect, her anger was protective. To her credit, she recognized that it was out of proportion to the event but didn't understand why. She was shooting a fly with a cannonball and had wisely sought help to figure how to recover her ordinary gentleness. This she did, but only by first going through the helplessness, fear and loss stemming from the earlier incident which she had never allowed herself to fully experience at the emotional and meaning levels. She had tried unsuccessfully to 'put it behind her.' Questions with herself, life and God had been there quietly unanswered and were interfering with her freedom to fully live her life now until they were addressed.

Our lives are full of events that are potentially overwhelming. The more we love, the greater is our potential for being hurt. Yet, the potential for growth and healing is even greater than the potential for loss. We are injured because we are vulnerable, and we heal only when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to feel the life that we are separated from by the original trauma. When we do this we become more compassionate and forgiving people.



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