

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

Gene Twaronite

A Painless Guide to Trauma

Human life is one long trauma, from the moment you get evicted from your hot tub womb to face the cold glare of an unforgiving world. Then all you hear is, study hard. Stand up straight. Make a lot of money. Marry someone so I can have grandkids. And be happy! Until someday you realize you're just going to die like everyone else and, most likely, you'll be surrounded by people you don't know while you soil yourself on the way out.

But throw some extra trauma into the mix—sexual abuse maybe, severe depression, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—and life can seem unendurable. While some people decide they cannot go on living, most of those afflicted manage to deal with it, often in unexpected ways.

If you dig into the life of any famous author, more than likely you'll find at least one or more traumas lurking behind the scenes.

Take my favorite author Kurt Vonnegut. At the onset of World War II, he enlists in the Army, at which his mother is so upset that she commits suicide. He promptly gets captured by the Germans, is locked up in a slaughterhouse in Dresden, where he survives the firebombing only to emerge upon a scene straight out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting and is forced to dig up the burnt remains of humans who once laughed and made love. The war soon ends, and he goes back to the States to get on with life.

But how does one get on with life after that sort of thing? Don't know about you, but I would want to dig a deep bomb shelter, well-stocked of course with booze, comfort food and every DVD episode of *Friends*, *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, and *Star Trek*, and numb my brain into oblivion.

Fortunately for those of us who love his books, Vonnegut chose not to retreat. Instead he found a way to channel the shock and horror of what he had experienced into *Slaughterhouse Five*, followed by a series of other humorous dark novels. But he paid a terrible price. The shadow of war's absurdity would haunt him for the rest of his days.

Then there was Sylvia Plath, who made an all too brief writing career out of the depression and despair which colored most of her poems and her novel *The Bell Jar*. In her journals she wrote that "the loneliness of the soul in its appalling self-consciousness is horrible and overpowering." Overpowering enough that she took her life at age 30.

You probably won't admit it, but haven't you, in darker moments, idly thought about suicide? You're standing on the subway platform and, just as the train pulls in, you catch yourself wondering, "Gee, what if I really did it?" followed by a string of other thoughts. "What would that be like? Boy, I'll bet they'd miss me. Or maybe not. At least I wouldn't have to study for that exam. I just know I'm gonna flunk."

For James Baldwin, grand master of the personal essay, suicide was an ever-present option. In his semi-autobiographical novella *Giovanni's Room*, his character wrote: "I simply wondered about the dead because their days had ended and I did not know how I would get through mine."

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

In real life, he tried killing himself several times, but failed. The fact that his father considered him hideous because of his so-called “frog-eyes” and actually told him that he was “the ugliest boy he had ever seen” probably didn’t help. Ya think?

OK, what about J.K. Rowling? How could she *not* be happy and fulfilled with all those gazillions from her Harry Potter books? Yet here she is describing her severe depression as “the absence of hope. That very deadened feeling, which is so very different from feeling sad. Sad hurts but it’s a healthy feeling. It is a necessary thing to feel. Depression is very different.”

Stephen King’s life sounds like one long horror story of fear and dependency. Growing up in poverty, he was traumatized at age two by a philandering father who abandoned his family. His mother was forced to take low-paying jobs and hand him off to be cared for by relatives. He was haunted by the fear that she too would abandon him, leading to constant insecurity and nightmare terrors including his own and his mother’s death, falling down toilets, clowns, and *spiders*. He found partial relief through writing stories about these fears, and later through heavy drinking and cocaine use. But with the death of his mother, he sank into a drunken, doped out depression so severe that through much of the 80’s he could not remember how he had written the horror novels for which he is best known.

With the help of his wife, Tabitha, King eventually overcame his dependency, but still writes about his fears as a means of therapy. Someday he hopes to be able to write about his worst fear—spiders.

Some recent studies have suggested a possible link between trauma and creativity. One such study, conducted by Marie Forgeard of the University of Pennsylvania and published in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, showed a strong connection between the number of traumatic events in a person’s life and creative growth.

Admittedly, there are probably many great writers who never suffered a day in their life from trauma, though they escape me at the moment. The closest one I can think of is E.B. White, brilliant essayist and the author of the beloved children’s novels *Charlotte’s Web* and *Stuart Little*. A lifelong hypochondriac, he did suffer from bouts of minor depression. Yet he managed to escape the raging, drunken depression that plagued his friend and colleague James Thurber.

So where does this leave a writer like me, seventy years old, with not a single trauma I can think of that has influenced and shaped my writing?

As far as I know, I’ve never been abused, sexually or otherwise. My wife, Josie, upon reading the graphic scenes of sexual abuse from the first draft of my young adult novel *My Vacation in Hell*, did once ask me, “Are you sure you were never abused?” I took this as a compliment. But then, one never knows. Someday, in my nineties, with the aid of a good therapist, I could discover that I was abused. And Josie will say, “See, I was right.”

I did have a high school algebra teacher who gave me a hard time, especially when, as was usually the case, he noticed I had my nose in a sci-

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

ence book during class. He would choose me to go to the blackboard as he sneered and said, "See if you can solve *this* problem, Twaronite." Thankfully the nightmares have stopped, though I still hate algebra.

My gym teacher in junior high school was a former Marines drill instructor, who often treated us students as if we were a bunch of new recruits. He would bark out questions to us, and when none of us could answer, had us run or do extra calisthenics. Pity the poor little fat boy who couldn't keep up or climb a rope. He would launch into him unmercifully with a string of colorful insults. Some of the tougher boys, however, would stand up to him in defiance. For their reward, they would be forced to either run laps around the field till they dropped or fight him after school. Reasonably fit, I mostly escaped his wrath, though later, as my physique developed, he would badger me constantly to go out for the football team. "What's the matter, Twaronite? Are you un-American or something?"

Besides teacher bullies, there were the usual bullies in class. The worst one was in elementary school. I was the teacher's pet and always knew the answers. So he was always in my face asking, "Ya think you're smart, don't you? Well, why won't you fight me, huh?" I don't know whether it was my size or my scintillating comebacks, but he never started anything with me, like shoving me or grabbing my girlfriend, whom I walked home after school each day to protect her from the likes of him. It really bugged him that he couldn't get me to fight. As I think back on it, he displayed a certain intelligence and seemed more of a reluctant bully, as if it were just a job he had to do. Nothing personal. He had a real code of honor, and would not hit someone unless he could somehow provoke him to hit first.

One day, he pushed the envelope a little and said he wished me to address him with the prefix "Master" added to his name. I think he had just heard it somewhere and it sounded cool. So I simply shrugged and, for the next couple of days, obliged him until he forgot.

What about my parents? you say. No luck there, either. Alas, they were both perfectly stable, with a happy marriage that lasted over 60 years. Our family wasn't exactly rich, but we weren't poor. My dad was a mailman, while my mother worked occasionally at a nearby factory, where she sewed parachutes. Not exactly the stuff of Dickens. Worse yet, they actually loved me and thought I was the smartest, handsomest boy on the planet, except for my brother, of course. To the annoyance of relatives and friends, they bragged about us constantly, and never pressured us into becoming anything other than what we wanted to be. They were the best parents a guy could possibly ask for. Damn!

No physical ailments to speak of, either. I was healthy as a horse. And, despite the fact that most of high school was one long emotional trauma because of all the screwups, hang-ups, and people I managed to hurt, there did not seem to be any lasting psychic damage.

During my senior year at college, however, I discovered drinking in a big way. This was largely the result of two things. I had commuted from home the first three years, and was about as socially isolated and deprived as a lone hermit crab in an aquarium. And as a devout Catholic, I actually took a Confirmation pledge not to drink until age 21. Does anyone still do

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

that?

So when at that magical age, I finally made it to campus, populated by numerous lovely female students, it all hit me like a tsunami. I would go to so-called mixers where, with the aid of keg beer, you were supposed to dance and mingle. Hard to believe, but I was painfully shy in those days and had not yet learned that the real secret of dancing is not to give a shit about what anyone thinks of you on the dance floor. I would drink myself stupid trying to summon up courage to dance, which I never did. As for lovemaking, it was pretty much a disaster, since I always insisted on getting drunk first. I somehow managed to graduate with high honors, though don't ask me how I did it.

The heavy drinking continued into my twenties and thirties. I'm not proud to admit it, but sometimes I would get behind the wheel and drive. Once again, dumb luck saved me from disaster. Killing myself was one thing. I could live with that. Killing someone else was entirely different. It could have been my first trauma.

I could have also gone the way of several uncles on my mother's side, both navy veterans of WW II, who lost the battle with booze. I could have developed into a full-blown alcoholic. Who knows what great writing it would have inspired, as I daily grappled with my demons. But by middle age, getting shit-faced every time you drink had gradually lost its appeal, while my body was no longer willing to endure next morning's aftermath. Several times, I had even tried to write while drunk, as some of my writer heroes had purportedly done. I am here to report that the resulting gibberish left me unimpressed.

Though, technically, I am still a moderate to heavy drinker, consuming my daily ration of two or three beers and wines, I never went down the rabbit hole. It remains to be seen how my liver and other organs will fare.

I also escaped the trauma of PTSD, since I never served in the military, or played football, for that matter. While the Vietnam War raged, I was attending college and getting good grades, so I was temporarily exempt from the draft. Until December of 1969, that is. That was when the U.S. Selective Service System instituted the lottery, for men born from 1944-1950. Based on the number of days in the year, it would determine who would be called up next, college or no college. I remember all of us guys sitting in the dormitory anxiously listening and drinking as the numbers were called out. Some guy in the back would moan as he heard his name and the unlucky number 7 or 11. My number ended up in the low 200's. If my birthday had been one day earlier, my draft number would have been called for sure. My lifelong friend from kindergarten, born only a few days later, ended up home free in the 360's. I was of course happy for him, the lucky bastard.

As things turned out, they never called up past number 195, but it was still way too close for me. In those days, I was largely apolitical, though I had read enough to know that the Vietnam War was immoral, unwinnable and just plain stupid, and the mere thought of being drafted filled me with horror. So much so that on the day I was called to report for my physical, my body reeled in existential angst. During the train ride down to New Haven, all I could think of was having to crawl through some rice

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

paddy while bullets sailed past my helmet. When I got there, it was surreal, straight out of the movie scene from *Alice's Restaurant*, though without the Group W bench. When I was finally examined, the doctor took my pulse and it read 140. "What are you on?" he asked, in a most sarcastic tone. I assured him that I was drug free, but he insisted on keeping me in the exam room for hours and hours. But 140 it remained, until late in the afternoon, when the doctors shook their heads and released me to take the last train home, along with a written order to have my pulse taken for three consecutive days.

Dutifully, each day, I ran to the infirmary, after drinking copious amounts of coffee—no sense taking chances—where my pulse remained near 120 for three days. High enough so that I was eventually classified by my local draft board as 1-H, which meant that I was "not currently subject to processing for induction or alternative service," though I suspect that if things got really bad I could still be called up, high pulse rate or not.

Watching all ten episodes of the Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam War was as close as I ever got to what happened there. The film forced me to confront the war's tragic aftermath and the complicated stories of men who volunteered and served there honorably, only to be spit upon and called baby killers upon their return. Some served just as honorably by actively protesting the war, or becoming medics or conscientious objectors. Others chose Canada. I never had to face that choice, and it still haunts me today. I was given a free pass and I gladly took it.

The closest I came to a real trauma involved rejecting religion. Throughout my college years right up into my early twenties, I took the Catholic faith in which I had been raised seriously—I mean, really seriously—so much so that at one point I considered a vocation as a Franciscan brother. Never a priest, however. Too much chanting, drama, and ritual. I just couldn't see myself up there on the altar performing my sacred duties in the spotlight. And those vestments seemed too much like dresses, reminding me of the minor trauma suffered in sixth grade, when I had to don a dress for a lead in a humorous play shown in front of the entire school. I preferred to be a brother, quietly performing some humble task in the background for the glory of God.

For a brief time, I thought I had found the perfect answer to life. If the God of my Catholic faith really existed, then to risk an eternity in heaven for the brief pleasures of a mortal life would be folly. Why not go for the sure thing? The idea of a simple monastic life fully given to God was one I devoutly wished to believe in—I also liked the robe. It would make choosing what to do with my life so much easier.

But the central question remained: *if this be true*. For years, I read and studied deeply the tenets of my own faith while also taking courses in philosophy and comparative religion. After considerable internal debate and reflection, I found all the arguments used to support Catholicism, and other religions as well, thoroughly unconvincing. For me to embrace their extraordinary claims would require that I renounce my rational side and simply accept them based on nothing more than conflicting, anecdotal accounts of miracles and events I know can't possibly be true. It was a wrenching personal struggle, but in the end I came out stronger and better able to understand myself. I had left the comforting belief system that had

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

sustained me from my earliest years. But I had gained a new, more open way of looking at the world unchained by dogma or preconception. And I have learned, after many years, to simply smile and not get angry when someone stops me on the corner and presumes to ask if I've heard the "Good News?"

Meanwhile, I'll just have to play out the trauma-less life I've been given, writing about all its little dramas, waiting for the inevitable blow. Not that I'm looking forward to it. Take your time, I say. No rush. But one thing I know. You don't get out of here without at least one trauma. I guess there's hope for me yet.