Embodied Learning and Social Transformation:
Opening Space for Expanded Worldviews through
Experiences of Intersectional Dissonance

A Symposium Discussion

by

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Abstract

Stories of those who survive and grow from "disorienting dilemmas," "discomforting transitions," or "moral injuries" reveal how the dissonance of such lived experiences may be the catalyst not only for personal growth, but also social action – helping to create more just and humane social systems. Some of those so affected by disrupted lives include displaced workers, veterans, amputees, persons-in-conflict, and exonerated individuals. The process of personal transformation often involves the presence of *communitas*, in which there is a willingness to accept and give voice to emotion-laden experiences in the presence of supportive – and sometimes challenging – others. The experience of *liminality*, or freeing from previously accepted restraints and beliefs, is also a significant aspect of this transformational experience. From the theoretical intersections of imaginal learning, social construction, somatics, conflict theory, and posttraumatic growth, we consider some principles by which the dissonance of violated moral codes can be transformed into energy and vision for social change and community-building – expanding our collective worldview and social sphere.

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Transformative Learning Theory (Taylor, Cranton, & Associates, 2012) provides insights within the field of education into how transformation of perspective (Mezirow, 1991) and personal growth may be achieved by guiding individuals through the dissonant, and often traumatic, lived experiences of conflict-in-transition (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). These concepts also offer insights into how the dynamics associated with the embodiment of individual change – altering behaviors through increased self-awareness (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014) – may also be applicable to "opening up" collective space for organizational and social transformation. We address this phenomenon from the perspectives of various persons-in-transition, including dislocated workers, wartime veterans, amputees, persons-in-conflict, wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals, and others who have been marginalized through misalignment or disengagement with prevailing socio-cultural systems. The intent is to evoke discussion around the phenomenon of enlarging transformative space through lenses of shared imaginal learning, social construction in communication, somatic awareness, constructive conflict engagement, and posttraumatic growth.

Part 1: The Role of Liminality and *Communitas* in the Social Construction of Transformative Space
John Dirkx, PhD.

Adulthood is often characterized as a series of relatively stable states punctuated by varying levels of discomforting but predictable transitions. However, voluntary and involuntary transitions are increasingly characterizing our individual and collective lives, causing varying degrees of conflict and trauma that are manifest at the psychological, moral, and spiritual, as well as physical levels – contributing to what Vaill (1996) refers to as "permanent white water." Many adults find these periods difficult to work through and succumb in different ways. Others are able grow through and are transformed by these experiences. Jungian and post-Jungian psychology is helpful in examining the

powerful, transformative dynamics evoked in such experiences (Dirkx, 2012), as exemplified in the case of dislocated workers (Dirkx & Lang, 2009).

Downsizing the manufacturing industry within the United States displaced millions of men and women from well-paying jobs that they held for many years. Going to work in factories right after or often before high school graduation, they now find themselves without a livelihood to support themselves or their families. As they seek to retool themselves, they face daunting and often traumatic transitions.

Daloz (1986) uses Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy to illustrate the transformational journey associated with learning in adulthood. The story begins at midlife when "Dante find himself lost in a dark wood, terrified and fleeing in desperation from wild animals" (p. 28). When it seems Dante has lost all hope, Virgil appears and "leads the pilgrim through Hell on the paradoxical journey downward to the light" (p. 28). They encounter those condemned to Hell but Virgil continues to guide and instruct him. At one point, Virgil gathers Dante into his arms and plunges further downward, past evil spirits. He then tells Dante to look directly at the Emperor of the Woeful Kingdom, a reference to Satan himself:

> "my master. . .took himself from before me and made me stop, saying:. . . "the place where thou must arm thyself with fortitude." How chilled and faint I turned then. . . I did not die and I did not remain alive; think now for thyself, if thou has any wit, what I became, denied both death and life" (p. 43).

Daloz portrays a central, powerful characteristic of the transformative journey, that of a liminal space. The encounter with the Emperor of the Woeful Kingdom represents a metaphorical expression of the liminality that characterizes processes of transformation. In contrast to the relatively stable, recurring states that we regard as depicting normal life, the experience of liminality feels like we are pulled by two powerful poles within our beings, one that seeks unity and fusion and another that struggles for separation and differentiation. We are frightened by the prospects of disintegration and coming apart and also by the stark challenges with the struggle for wholeness.

As the opposites pull at our being, we find comfort in moving towards one end or the other but also are plagued by the sense of incompleteness that this comfort creates. We find ourselves betwixt and between (Turner, 1964). These transition spaces reflect rites of passage that, according to Turner, are associated with change from one state to another, with feelings of being neither here nor there, a sense of marginality, of not belonging to this group or that group, of a deep and painful loss of identity. Dante captured psychological and spiritual dimensions of this transition in powerfully imagistic and poetic language.

Dislocated workers experience this transition as a crisis. As they show up for class each morning, the trauma and worry is clearly palpable in their bodies, as well as in their language and tone of voice (Dirkx & Lan, 2009). They feel desperate and alone, grieving the loss of a way of life, a sense of who they were as a person. This leaves many of them feeling empty, emotionally spent, and bereft. If not hell, many of them would agree it is pretty close. As they begin retraining, they are ready to bolt at the first hint of employment to the security of the familiar, the certain.

Framed through the lens of Dante's experience and post- Jungian psychology, two points of this experience seem important to highlight. First, the workers are challenged to re-imagine their sense of self. Having spent 20 – 30 years as a factory worker, they now need to re-imagine themselves and to re-write their story. The emotional struggle of letting go of who they once were and coming to re-imagine themselves as students, shifting their identities away from the factory worker (Dirkx & Lan, 2009), is perhaps their greatest challenge.

The dislocated workers can and do use vocational retraining programs as a context for this reworking of their sense of self. This process, as Dante so clearly saw, evokes our inner demons, a darkness to this journey that should not be underestimated. Yet, this darkness must be "gazed upon" and a relationship established with the figures that arise; despair, grief, doubt, as well as hope and longing (Dirkx, 2012). The texts, teachers, fellow worker-students provide the contexts which evoke this process and the emotion-laden images associated with it.

Individuals in this transition need to learn to be open to these emotion-laden images and experiences associated with this transition, and be willing to work with them through a process like the imaginal method, which engages them through image, symbol, ritual, fantasy, and imagination (Dirkx, 2012). In addition, however, this process needs to occur within a particular context. Learning to live with and work through the sense of liminality that comes with these powerful transitions also involves the presence of communitas (Turner, 1964). The experience of liminality creates for the individuals a shared sense of marginality, resulting in intense solidarity and togetherness. A leveling of social status within the group also occurs, providing students with the opportunity to imagine and explore new and more egalitarian social roles or self-identities. When conducted as a cohort, the group itself provides a kind of container or "holding environment" (Ward, 2008) that contributes to the students' ability to entertain and engage a learner identity.

When it is part of an intentional organizational intervention, working through trauma associated with involuntary transitions is mediated through liminal experiences created by the transition, and reshaped by the emergence of communitas within the group. This

container provides a safe space in which individuals can, through imaginative engagement, reconstruct and try out the self as a different kind of worker.

Part 2: Resolving Dissonance at the Intersections of War and Peace: Moral Injuries and the Transformation of Worldview
Barton Buechner, PhD

Much attention in public policy has been devoted to address the difficulties experienced by many combat veterans with their reintegration with civil society. While conventional approaches consider this as an individual psychological disorder related to combat trauma (classified as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or "PTSD"), there is increasing evidence that at least part of veterans' experience of *dissonance in transition* results from their returning home with heightened levels of awareness that have emerged to promote cooperative survival in hostile conditions (Buechner, 2014). Paying attention to this *transformation of perspective* (Mezirow, 1991) among returning veterans by deeply listening to the stories they are telling – or not telling, may uncover troubling "*moral conflicts*" (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997) or "*moral injuries*" (Shay, 1995) that change the way veterans come to see our social world, and its meanings. Opening up space for these difficult conversations may require the perspective of many disciplines. Put simply, it "takes a village" to unravel the meaning of the stories told, or not told, by returning veterans. This process of shared meaning-making in community is potentially transformative for the village, as well as cathartic for the individual.

One way to understand the expansion of social space is through the realization that the "reality" we experience in our social worlds is co-constructed in communication (Pearce, 2007). Within the social construction paradigm, communication is more than just the transmission of information, but acts as a constitutive force that dynamically shapes (and re-shapes) our identities, social worlds and worldviews as a "generative" force (p. xiii). In the case of individuals who have experienced incoherence in the social world through moral conflict, "moving forward together productively requires breaking out of the 'normal' patterns of communication" of that social world (p. 17). Therefore, facilitation of communication across moral conflicts involves *creating a new space* for discourse, in which dissonance around specific differences between value systems or groups may be transcended. This is accomplished by shifting the focus of attention to the system-level interactions that created the problematic "contradictions, conflicts, and paradoxes" in the first place (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997, p. 136). This level of engagement requires deep and purposeful listening to the experiences of those at the intersections between differing social worlds, and the specifics of how their stories vary from common experience. The otherwise "unheard stories" that emerge may produce transformative insights based upon previously unexamined perceptions of self, society, and worldview.

Since nearly all returning veterans in the current era will pass through the world of higher education as students, educators in general, and the transformative learning community in particular, may have much to contribute to this process. Stories and writings of these veterans have similarities to the warrior archetypes of classical literature and philosophy (Campbell, 2008). These warriors nearly always have trouble when returning home and encountering moral and ethical inconsistencies in the society which has sent them to war in their name (Sherman, 2015, Meagher, 2015). These experiences of ethical betrayal, or moral injuries, are phenomenologically distinct from the psychological syndrome classified as PTSD (Jinkerson & Buechner, 2016). Simply stated, these are wounds of the psyche that are sustained not in combat, but in the process of coming home. In that sense, they can serve us as indicators of where our social structure or "container" is inadequate. Treating these experiences of dissonance in transition as a form of mental illness that affects only them and not us forecloses opportunities for learning about the true nature of the conflicts to which we have sent them, and how these conflicts themselves may be transformed. Creating space in which this moral complexity can be explored can be both healing to the warrior, and transformative for the global "village."

Transformative Learning Theory offers useful conceptual models, as well as a viable theoretical context, for examining and rebuilding moral codes in transition. For example, Mezirow describes "communicative learning" as a process of understanding, describing, and explaining "values; ideals; moral issues; social, political, philosophical concepts; feelings and reasons" (Mezirow, 1991, p.75). These are all essential components for rebuilding shattered belief systems and broken moral code, which often result from encountering the *liminal space* of combat, in which the rules and moral codes of society no longer apply (McConnell, 1997). Mezirow also identifies dynamics of "collective transformation" of perspective that are applicable to removing perceived barriers of understanding between returning veterans and the broader society. It includes the ability to listen to stories of other that "we initially find discordant, distasteful, and threatening, but later come to recognize as indispensable in dealing with our experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 185). The collectively transformative aspect of this process comes in "making an imaginative interpretation of it, (construing) it to make it our own" (p. 185).

While the potential for this type of transformative dialogue with an estimated 1.5 million returning student veterans exists on many college campuses today, a number of social barriers – including the "firewalls" between academic disciplines and separations between professional communities of professional practice – more often than not serve as a deterrent to effective reintegration (Buechner, 2014). Removing or lowering these socially constructed barriers, and focusing attention more on what we can collectively learn from dissonant experiences of returning veterans and less on consoling or "fixing" those afflicted by trauma, can help to create more transformative space for reflexive

homecoming in our communities and social institutions. There is increasing evidence to suggest that community-based approaches which privilege interpersonal communication and storytelling are more successful in attracting and engaging veterans and their families, as well as producing observable improvement in social functioning and personal growth (Konvisser, 2016). This shift in approach from the expert/programmatic to the community/relational focus can in turn serve to further transform our social spaces: "classrooms, hospitals, workplaces …where the lived worlds can seem alien until we morally engage each other, and do what we humans do best: recognize and acknowledge each other, and invoke and convoke community through our emotions and understanding" (Sherman, 2015, p. 161).

Part 3: Somatic Generativity and Transformative Change of Organizational Teams
Deedee Myers, PhD.

Principles of embodiment from the field of somatics offer conceptual models for how social and organizational space may be transformed. Somatics stems from the Greek *somatikos*, or *soma*, which refers to the life in the body, living, awareness, attention, and action, not separated from mind (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014). Somatics can also be seen as a transformative change theory for individual and collective embodied transformation. Sustainable and intentional organization change requires a leadership team to experience somatic transformation as a catalyst to organizational change. Somatic theory provides a framework for facilitating deep change within the individuals and teams, integral to a new organizational somatic shape. An outcome of somatic transformation is the expanded capacity to feel and make sense of one's body in relation to self and others in an organization (Myers, 2015). A somatically aware team comprised of sensitized individuals has a wider range of capacity to think and act together strategically, engage with others, and make and fulfill powerful commitments.

Teams have a soma, a certain shape to how they self-organize, engage in deliberate dialogue, coordinate, collaborate, communicate, and commit to and move into action. A person—and, by extension, a team—is shaped by a collection of experiences that produces conditioned responses. Team members have a collection of experiences in their individual somas, which create a container for the team's soma. Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranston (2006) discuss engaging the emotions of students in the classroom in the learning setting. By extension, engaging the emotions of the team members creates a *somatic opening* for advanced learning, understanding resistance, and a sense of purpose through generative dialogue and action on how they have historically coordinated and mobilized and to imagine future possibilities.

Generativity, crucial to adult development, is a constructionist concept (Gergen, 1978, 1982) that creates new sources of meanings and actions. Taking a generative approach in a team creates a somatic opening for the team to challenge its status quo and open the door to a new somatic shape with intentional, supportive practices and accountability (Myers, 2015). Teams using generative practices create an organizational culture of ongoing and continuous learning of the self and of the self in connection with others. The more connection, the deeper and more meaningful relationships and trust are among team members.

A team is the byproduct of the collective somas with each individual bringing to the table their individual experiences. A body stores memories and produces *armor* in the form of unconscious muscular contractions (van der Kolk, 1994), which can manifest as minimizing one's voice in the team, not listening, or being creative or disruptive, for example. Attention and awareness to the life in one's soma increases the capacity to live more authentically, step into one's potential, and create an identity of being an exemplary leader.

The body, which is the integrated mind–body–spirit, is the unified space in which humans act, perceive, think, feel, sense, express emotions and moods (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014) in a unified space in which the individual reacts, responds to, or contributes to the team soma. By extension, the embodied team practices and automatic responses either produce a desired or an undesired organizational culture. A precipitative event or overwhelming dissatisfaction with organizational performance produces a fork in the road for the organizational leadership: continue with the status quo or move toward a generative practice of leadership, which itself can be disorienting in letting go and taking on a new shape, or soma, that is more vibrant and connected.

Disorienting dilemmas and conscious intentions to transform (Mezirow, 2000) are two of the principles of transformation that can potentially increase awareness of the team soma. Is what is being created today sustainable for those who will come after? A team that continues with a status quo of mistrust, lack of commitment to the collective purpose, and competing personal agendas produces a different future than a team declaring a different future and committing to generative practices that reignite the organization's soma.

Haines (1999) theorized that the somatic process for transformation includes three components: awareness, deconstruction, and learning new practices. This three-step process can release and heal the symptoms of somatic armor, such as emotional numbness; avoidance; irritability; difficulty focusing; lower levels of activity (Leitch, Vanslyke, & Allen, 2009); disassociation and distancing in relationships; loss of appetite, sleep, and energy levels; and depressed moods (Tylee & Ghandhi, 2005). Haines (1999)

theorized that transformative changes in the body occur through relevant practices, an important distinction fulfilling the potential of life (Myers, 2015).

An integral framework is needed to support an organization through the transformative somatic change and help the organization hold its commitment to the desired transformation. An outcome of a somatic organization transformation is increased capacity for the organization to be a container for participants to feel deeply and sense themselves as they engage in commitments, participate in rigorous debate, and extend offers and requests. Somatically alive leaders and executives increase trust, build connection, and foster relationships that appropriately support and challenge team members. The opening for somatic shifts requires a deconstruction of what no longer adds value, what no longer works, and the organization and intentional design of new practices that will increase energy toward a new organizational somatic shape. Such a somatic deconstruction and reconstruction can be disruptive, unfamiliar, and chaotic and requires the participants to increase attention and volition, as well as their level of commitment to and engagement with the new collective shape.

Organizations that consciously shift embodied practices and conditioned tendencies that have created an unhealthy culture that contracted innovation and increased mistrust toward a somatically aware culture and way of being are on the path to sustainable embodiment of somatic practices. Such practices include listening rather than being listened to and increased access to inner wisdom because participants are not behind or in front of the wisdom; rather, they are with it in the moment (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014).

Intentional organizational somatic development is a major transformation because it requires a disengagement with or letting go of the organization's historical self so that an opening occurs in which the leaders can construct the new organizational shape, followed by embodiment of different practices that will sustain the life of the organization. The start for organization transformation is awareness of what we already embody and then use our imagination to envision the future and commit to intentional practices to strategically create a somatic organization shape that is life-giving and sustainable. Using a trained somatic change catalyst coach with organizational skills can help with setting the framework, understanding the journey, and appropriately challenging the group and its members.

Part 4: Transforming Adversarial Interactions into Constructive Conflict Engagement
Tzofnat Peleg-Baker, PhD (ABD)

A conflict happens when there are incompatibilities or perceived incompatibilities in needs, goals, interests, resources or views by at least two parties (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Pruitt & Kugler, 2014; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2011). It emerges within the broader context of human relationships, which are complex, continuously changing and evolving (Lederach, 2003). Thus, conflict and change are inseparable and interdependent aspects of human life.

While a conflict is a daily event, it can be painful and draining; an interruption within the *natural,* ongoing relationships. When conflicts surface, we stop and feel as if something is not right. There is confusion along with a flood of negative feelings from uneasiness and worry, through distress, anxiety to horror and fear, contingent upon the magnitude of the conflict and how important the relationship in which the conflict arises. The relationship becomes complicated, and not as flowing as it was. Growing energy is invested in trying to figure out what happened and its implications. The invisible starts attracting our attention. As communication becomes increasingly challenging, so is our ability to express how we feel and what we think, and to understand what others think and do.

Similar to a traumatic event that involves physical, emotional, and psychological instability and distress, conflicts affect our physical well-being, self-esteem, emotional stability, capacity to perceive accurately, and spiritual integrity (Lederach, 2003). A conflict is often perceived and experienced as a threat to a person's self-esteem and identity, and stability in the world. When people encounter opposing views, they typically cling to their beliefs (Cohen et. al., 2000). Since beliefs represent valued sources of identity, people are reluctant to give up on them even when confronted with strong contradictory evidence. When beliefs are challenged, there is a perceived threat to one's identity. As long as there is no end in sight, there is a growing sense of uncertainty and disorientation. People enter a *liminal space* – an in-between zone characterized by tension, ambiguity and not-knowing. In this transitional stage the relations are no longer the way they used to be, and their next form is yet to be created, and unknown. However, it is an opportunity for improving relation and growth.

A problem-solving approach to conflict focuses on the immediate issues or problems the parties are presently dealing with and the content of the conflict. However, conflict transformation is a way of looking at conflict. It provides a set of lenses through which we can make sense of a conflict as a pattern of relationships within a social context. Lederach (2003) refers to these as progressive lenses in which each lens brings a specific aspect of a complex reality into focus, but within a single frame. By shifting lenses, we can look at immediate solutions, the deeper level of the relational patterns along with ways to maximize long-term personal and relational growth.

The idea that challenging life situations can lead people to meaningful change is ancient and prevalent. Hidden possibilities for growth from experiencing pain and suffering is central in philosophy, religious thinking, and social science. What is fairly recent is the intentional and systematic study of this phenomenon by scholars in the arenas of psychology, counseling, psychiatry, conflict, and others. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) identified positive psychological changes that can happen ensuing a potentially traumatic event as *posttraumatic growth*: improved relationships with others, openness to new possibilities, greater appreciation of life, enhanced personal strength, and spiritual development. Similarly, Lederach (2003) sees conflict as an opportunity for growth at physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. It calls for a deliberate intervention to gain from the disruption and the enormous energy accompanying conflict. The energy can be channeled to positive change through reassessing our perspective, relationships, and the social situation.

Based on Lederach's (2003) personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of change, I propose a framework to think about and practice conflict transformation- an intentional intervention to maximize cooperation through recognizing and changing the relational roots of the conflict. When focusing on the following dimensions, it is important to also bear in mind three considerations: short and long term goals, and improving awareness to underlying issues and skills. Acquiring skills, as attentive listening, asking questions, suspension of opinions, and challenging assumptions, are inseparable from changes in perspective.

Personal – reflects the need to increase mindfulness to our perspective of conflict. If we are able to see the hidden benefits of conflict, we can embrace a positive outlook toward it. Transforming conflict is contingent upon envisioning conflict as having the potential for change.

Relational – transformation indicates revisiting how we position each other in the relationships, and how we view the other, the relation, and ourselves within the relation. Probing into the nature of our connections--how we use and share power, and compare existing relational patterns to what we aspire to have can support change. Concurrently, it is as important to increase awareness, not only to our relational mode, but also to what impedes healthy connections. Therefore, understanding biases and psychological defenses to reject those who seem opposite to our way of thinking, is critical. These propensities are inseparable parts of human interactions and conflicts, and pose a severe threat to cooperation.

Structural – calls attention to how social structures, organizational processes, and procedures shape human interaction. The ways organizations are built govern how much accessibility people have to resources and decision-making, how they feel and interact,

whether they experience negative or positive emotions, and whether interactions become destructive or constructive. Galtung (1969) has long emphasized the role environment plays in fostering adversarial interactions and destructive conflicts, and similarly, Burton (1984; 1996) views the environment as a critical factor in determining whether and how basic needs are fulfilled. Transformation refers to understanding existing social contexts and underlying conditions that generate destructive conflict. And at the same time, calls for intentional efforts to construct social environments that nurture a relational perspective to reduce adversarial interaction through meeting basic human needs and maximizing participation in decision making.

Cultural - denotes the ways that conflict changes cultural patterns of an organization as well as the ways shared culture affects the understanding and response to conflict. Transformation seeks to increase awareness to these patterns, and improve cultural resources for constructively addressing conflict.

This framework focuses on the social context and relationship in which conflicts emerge and develop. Since conflicts can become quite complex, this scaffold can support in developing a purpose and direction for conflict transformation. It provides practical guidance as to where we are heading, what social bonds we are hoping to construct and for what purpose. Without it, especially in the case of intractable conflict, we can easily focus on immediate problems, and lack a clear long-term meaningful purpose. Likewise, if we leave out the underlying sources of the conflict, we will not be able to generate the necessary foundations for compassionate and respectful connections, as well as sustainable social spaces conducive to learning and growth.

Part 5: Transforming the Trauma of Wrongful Conviction

Zieva Dauber Konvisser, PhD

Transformative Learning Theory describes a "disorienting dilemma" as an experience within which a current understanding is found to be insufficient or incorrect and the learner struggles with the resulting conflict of views. Such experiences are sometimes described as creating a state of "disequilibrium" for the learner and often are those to which learners point as the beginning of the process of questioning their understanding and views and entering the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1991).

Traumatic life events are "disorienting dilemmas" that can shatter our fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our world. In the aftermath of extreme experiences, coping involves the arduous task of reconstructing our world to incorporate the traumatic experience (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), as survivors "struggle with assimilating the new and

often frightening worldview with the old and familiar one, and…integrating the newfound fragile sense of self with the relatively secure one of the past" (Berger, 2004, p. 237). In this struggle to transform and transcend their traumatic experiences, they may experience positive psychological changes, i.e., the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun, 1998) that often coexists with ongoing personal distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The trauma of wrongful conviction has been compared to the trauma suffered by torture survivors, concentration camp survivors, refugees, and asylees who similarly have been arrested, wrongfully incarcerated, and released back into society (Konvisser, 2015, pp. 306-307). Their experiences may also be likened to the "moral injury" experienced by returning veterans of war, i.e., trauma to their spirit, values, or deeply held beliefs and expectations (Buechner & Jinkerson, 2016). They are all survivors of "sustained catastrophes" that extend over long periods and can change their lives – and the lives of their loved ones – forever.

When innocent persons are suddenly wrongfully arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for a crime they did not commit, they describe their experiences as "surreal" and their feelings as devastation, shock, horror, and terror as they were vilified and harassed by members of the criminal justice system. For them, prison is a culture shock – a strange, new world with its own rules and language – and a process designed to destroy their self-esteem and sense of who they are (Konvisser, 2015, pp. 317-321). Later, when they are exonerated, their release is usually abrupt and without any time for pre-release programs; nor are they generally qualified or appropriate for the post-release systems and transition programs that are in place for parolees. They therefore re-enter society without the support that is needed to re-establish a sense of independence and control over their lives that were taken away from them while imprisoned. Like others in unplanned states of transition, they are thrown into *liminal space* – a place of uncertainty, waiting, and not knowing where and how to belong – no longer knowing their purpose, worthiness, and identity.

The traumas and dissonance that exonerees have experienced compel some of them to seek out opportunities to further understand and overcome those experiences. Having been raised with a belief and faith in a safe world and just society, then having been violated by the justice system, all exonerees understand its flaws and some wish to take action to remediate the injustices they have suffered, as well as find meaning in their experiences (see Konvisser, 2012). The existence of the "innocence movement" (Innocence Project, n.d; Innocence Network, n.d.) that helped many to be exonerated in the first place creates safe space for their personal growth, as well as collective avenues to channel their energies to correct injustices in the system through organized activism. In

the process, these victims of the criminal justice system grow organically into effective new leaders and advocates for criminal justice reform (Konvisser, 2012; Weigand, 2008).

The author's study with women exonerees (Konvisser, 2012, 2015) identified a variety of techniques they used to make sense of what happened and to cope with the untenable reality of their wrongful conviction and exoneration experiences. Some do this by continuing to work on their restitution; helping other prisoners they left behind or who have been released (both the rightfully and the wrongfully convicted); and supporting those currently going through the wrongful conviction process. Others speak publicly about their cases to educate and raise public awareness, which also can help them normalize the trauma and build confidence through acknowledgment and affirmation (Konvisser, 2015, pp. 358-360). While such speaking engagements can be healing for some exonerees, they also can be triggers of PTSD symptoms for others, especially when speaking to a legal audience or with the media (Weigand, 2008, p. 256). Nevertheless, many exonerees understand that it is important "to share such stories to help others who might encounter wrongful convictions and so that society learns as much as possible from these events" (Weigand, 2008, p. 257). By doing so, they give testimony to their resilience, "if only to reduce the likelihood that it would happen to someone else" (Vollen, 2005, p. 7).

In a second study with exonerees and innocence organization personnel engaged in innocence policy reform (Konvisser, in press), exonerees describe their participation in the innocence movement as individuals, as consultants to and speakers for innocence organizations, and as founders of or participants in related organizations. Although not all exonerees are able to participate and advocate to correct the injustices that they and others have suffered, the actions of those who are able to do so has the power to transform the innocence movement, and possibly the criminal justice system, as well as themselves, and holds potential lessons for building a more inclusive society, which lies at the heart of America's constitutional values.

These survivors of wrongful conviction, like other survivors of seemingly hopeless situations facing a fate that cannot be changed, "discover for themselves that the meaning does not lie in the disaster, but in the way they respond to the disaster" (Konvisser, 2014, pp. 266-267) and "that healing doesn't mean the damage never existed; it means the damage no longer controls their lives" (Konvisser, 2015, p. 348). They have learned to *live next to* their feelings of grief, pain, and helplessness, overcoming suffering, growing, and moving forward to hope and healing.

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