Stefanie Hofer Podcast Transcript

The most recent issue of the journal *American Imago* featured four essays focused on grief and loss. The issue, titled "Memory and Remembrance: Essays in Psychoanalytic Autobiography", contains "Lockout: Spacing Trauma and Recovery in the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings," an essay written by Virginia Tech University faculty, Stefanie Hofer. She lost her husband, Jamie Bishop, on April 16, 2007 during the deadliest school rampage in the US history. Hofer joined us to talk about her post-traumatic writing and how it has helped her to persevere and heal.

**How did you end up choosing American Imago for this essay?**

The trauma of losing my husband, Jamie Bishop, on April 16, 2007, during the Virginia Tech massacre, left me in an emotional turmoil. In this long-term struggle I searched for a tool that could relieve some of my inner tensions which, luckily, I found in writing. True to psychoanalysis, I address these emotional problems in my essay by exploring memories, feelings and, dreams. I also analyzed how narrating can have a healing impact. *American Imago* as a journal committed to the enduring relevance of Freud’s legacy across the humanities, arts, and social sciences, seemed fitting. Working with editor Lou Rose turned out to be a truly fruitful experience. After I had approached him about my writing project he encouraged me to send him the two articles I had finished. He suggested to combine the two essays into one and even encouraged me to expand the content. After relieving me from page limit he emphasized that I should only write about what was helpful in my healing process---trusting that such narration would be of benefit to readers as well.

**How important is it for journals to provide a home for essays like yours and the others in this issue dealing with such trauma and grief?**

I often have encountered a certain fear, if not open aversion, of subjectivity and personal reflections in scholarly writings. The essays in this issue gain their strength
by relying on personal experiences, as Elyn Saks puts it in the outset of her article: “I write on psychosis, pain, and time from a personal standpoint. I do not do a study, nor even review the literature. Rather, I reflect on my own experiences” (Elyn R. Saks 321). These essays testify that through writing both authors and readers can find insight, also pertaining to theory. Such applied approaches are extremely valuable as they express our memories and remembrance and enhance the role of autobiographical narration in their formation. In addition, they can be of concrete help—beyond the ivory tower of academia—when dealing with profound losses and its emotional ramifications—something we all have to face at same point in our lives.

Writing didn’t always come easy as you worked through your trauma. When you started in 2010 or even earlier, did you think you would have a completed, published essay in five years?

I actually started writing in the first days after the murder of Jamie in 2007. These reflections and thoughts were handwritten in a journal. Then the need for an imaginary reader became stronger and stronger because it forced me to not simply vent but to sharpen my thoughts by sharpening my language. This was when I started typing on my laptop. I started approaching my personal experiences in the way I did my scholarly writing. That meant that one of the most fruitful stages of the writing process was the editing and revising part. This would allow me to gain understanding where my highly emotional (or traumatic) reactions were coming from. For instance, I noticed the interface between the trauma and my professional life as an assistant professor in the department Jamie worked as an instructor and in the small town of Blacksburg that is so much connected with the university, Virginia Tech. There were so many triggers on a daily basis, even months and years after my initial traumatization. While writing and then rereading my story, patterns, resemblances and repetitions became visible and that helped me to better predict and cope with potential reminders. Writing enabled me to slowly move the traumatic events into the past, and to establish a certain emotional distance to the traumatic memories. Consequently, it helped to deflate a strangely inflated memory preoccupied with the past by accepting that, as in narration, remembrance has to
become more selective. Ultimately, through writing, I regained emotional control in and over literary and figurative spaces of traumatization which enabled my gradual reintegration into the public life.

Coming back to your initial question—no, I didn’t think that I would publish my narration at all. At the beginning of the writing process, the question of privacy was still of paramount importance to me. Intrusion of privacy was a highly traumatizing experience in the aftermath of April 16. Information about my person in connection with Jamie and his murder seemed to be flooding on campus, the town of Blacksburg, and even on the Internet. Consequently, protecting privacy was my primary goal. Never would I have thought that there would come the time when I want to publish such personal material. Making my story written from my perspective and publicly available, gave me a feeling of taking control of the once uncontrollably spread information out there. It is an empowering feeling. What was once so frightening because out of my hand, is now edited and sanctioned by me. Again, I consider it a step towards reintegration into public life. I also withdrew from people because I didn’t know what they knew about me. Since I didn’t know much, or often nothing, about them I considered it an unwanted and unfair imbalance of personal knowledge in interpersonal relations. I felt naked, exposed. My essay counteracts this unwanted exposure by allowing me to have a choice--and I chose to have a voice—now, when I feel ready for it.

**Early in the essay, you write you are "still standing." How important was that declaration for you to make to readers?**

Originally, it was addressed at myself. If you have been at a point in your life where the only thought that keeps you alive is the fear that your beloved cat could end up in an animal shelter, you feel pride for being alive. I derived strength from it. It was an encouragement to continue the uphill path, the hope that things would continue getting better. Although I had read about trauma, including in my research, it was beyond my imagination to what extend and time an emotional injury can be paralyzing. It felt like being knocked to the ground.
At first, though, I didn’t perceive myself as a victim of trauma at all. The term “victim” was preserved for the people killed on April 16. The survivors of the classrooms and first responders were “victims of trauma” in my eyes. It was difficult for me to wrap my mind around the idea that not being exposed to the violence directly but losing a loved one under these circumstances, being on campus that day, and living through the aftermath could have such profound emotional effects.

Having the line of me “still standing” in the first paragraph of the essay, invites the reader to learn, with me, what it means to be traumatized and what it takes to recover. I feel very fortunate that I had so many resources, including writing, available, to assist me in this healing process. I am afraid the majority of trauma victims worldwide don’t have such assistance which can be devastating for these victims, and potentially their environment.

How do you hope your essay will help others whether they are victims of trauma or just have it somehow in their lives?

During times of frequent mass shootings in the US, American troops’ involvements in conflicts abroad often returning with PTSD, and—not to forget—the daily violence in US inner cities, we, as the society, need to be wary of trauma and its impact on the human mind. Hopefully my essay can be a contribution in this matter. In my opinion there is a widespread misconception of trauma and recovery from traumatic loss. As mentioned earlier, I myself was not aware of the long-term emotional effects of such loss. There seems to be the assumption that recovering from traumatic losses can be achieved through mourning. At least that is how I interpret why so many people felt the need to give me books on mourning after April 16. My first thought upon opening these well-intended presents was, “I wish I had only this problem to deal with.” Mourning doesn’t heal trauma though. When faced with traumatic loss one has to tackle grief, trauma, and the environment around. One of the goals of my essay is to learn how to predict my traumatic reactions while mourning Jamie’s death as well. Such coping was the best way of healing for me. Victims of trauma react differently though and therefore individualized healing processes are
necessary. I hope that my essay will be a source of encouragement for other trauma victims to keep looking for the right ways and resources comforting them.