

Clip 2: Trauma, Oppression and the Body

My coach and teacher in this work, Dr. Vanissar Tarakali, defines trauma as those “experiences that diminish our ability to feel safe (in our bodies; in the world) and connected (to ourselves, others, the earth, and spirit). [It] can take the form of individual, personal threats to our well-being, vicarious or secondary traumas that our work exposes us to, or social traumas (oppression). Trauma shows up in the body as contraction.” The body narrows in on what will keep us alive. This focus makes complete sense. But as the threats repeat, our body can “become stuck in contraction.” We can start to feel that our dignity, our safety and our connection to one another and the world are at odds with one another. Without trauma, all of these experiences are complex and variable.

When we’ve survived trauma, the wires can get mixed up in terms of our sense of safety. Somatic work can help us reacquaint ourselves with safety and the choices to create safety within ourselves, our spaces and communities. Belonging - our connections to other people as social creatures -- is betrayed when we experience trauma. We also want to know ourselves as worthy and deserving of love. Our UU theologies tell us this is true. But traumatic experiences and oppression can disrupt our trust in this knowledge, or our feelings of worthiness develop into feelings and

actions of entitlement when we experience privilege in our context.

With practice, somatic practice work restores our creativity and reconnects us with our agency, freeing up stuck energy to act in relation to what we value. Social justice work, central to our faith, is an opportunity to work with trauma as it lives in our bodies. For Unitarian Universalism if these practices gain more traction, my hope is that we can heal ourselves through the body and consider somatic work as integral to our work for justice as well as transforming our institutions and congregations. We cultivate resilience, navigate conflict well, and generate systems that correspond to who we say we want to be. Building beloved community, pursuing collective liberation, is dramatically affected by the survival strategies that have, for centuries, secured white supremacy culture and disrupted the safety, belonging and dignity we need to collectively resist oppression.