

CHAPTER 10

HOW CAN WE PREPARE OURSELVES FOR FUTURE TRAUMA?

Many people who went through a traumatic experience somewhere in their past, will at some stage experience circumstances where they could apply the lessons and principles that they've learnt along the way. Therefore if we can learn from the pain of the past, the crises of the future and trauma are less frightening and we are able to master it much better.

- **The quality of our existing relationships**

The person who survives trauma the best, is the one who've already acquired quality relationships. War prisoners, hostages and other victims are usually extremely thankful to God for the role that their families played because they are the primary social network who gives meaning to our lives and carry us through difficult times. During times of prosperity we have to ask ourselves the question: *Where do I stand in my relationship with my children, my parents, my spouse and my closest friends?*

This is my social network that becomes my life vein when trauma happens. It happens very often that we neglect the basic maintenance regarding our closest relationships and then we have to work through so much guilt when trauma happened.

One of the consequences is that the processing of the real trauma becomes even more complicated because a second trauma might develop due to self-blame because relationships were neglected.

- **A pure faith base**

Furthermore it is also important the person has a true and realistic faith basis because it presents a framework that can help to give meaning during times when no temporary meaning can be found anymore. Our faith is often able to make sense of what is absurd. James Callahan puts it strikingly: *"There is something stronger than memory, and that is hope."*

A further question that we have to ask ourselves in times of prosperity is the following:
Is my relationship with God what it should be?

- **Hopeful determination**

One of the best ways to be prepared for potential trauma is to develop an approach of hopeful tenacity. This is an aspect that carried many people through even in the most difficult circumstances. They received the hopeful tenacity inside of them to stand firm even amidst the most intense psychological- and physical pain and to still remain hopeful – this goes for terminal patients, people who are HIV positive, parents who lost children and war veterans who struggles with the consequences of the war.

Therefore it is important to grow a hopeful spirit in you during normal times of prosperity. Some people might be of the opinion that such a hopeful approach is actually a special gift or that it is only linked to certain special personality types. Against this we might however say that a hopeful approach is available to everybody. Every person has to realize somewhere along the line that the way in which we view our lives, as well as traumas that came our way, in a sense *our own choice is*. This emphasizes once again the importance of an inner intention of what must happen after the traumatic events.

Life may take us along many roads that are rough and dangerous, but even along those ways there could be beautiful things that could inspire us. Even survivors of the Auschwitz camp in Nazi-Germany recalled that they were at times overwhelmed by the beauty of an early dawn in the way that the rays of sunshine shone through the cracks in the walls of their prison – and then they've realized during those few minutes that amidst death and misery around them, there is still beauty and rays of hope that gave them hope for the future!

We could also apply this approach in our daily lives, namely to still see the ray of hope in dark times and to appreciate it – by doing this, we prepare ourselves for any potential trauma situation. In this regard there is a gripping example in Daniel 3:17-18 where the three friends of Daniel were given an ultimatum to either worship the image of the king or to be thrown in a furnace. Their answer was the following:

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^a from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

See also Psalm 119:109

“My life hangs in the balance but I will not give up obedience to Your laws... I am determined to obey You until I die” (Living Bible).

From the answer of Daniel’s three friends it became clear that they had an unflinching trust in God. Even if their expectations didn’t realize, they were still not willing to give up their trust in Him. This also becomes clear in Psalm 119:109. He experiences it as if his life is hanging on a thread, however, he is still prepared to hang onto that thread, he is determined to obey God until his death!

- **A large enough life-frame**

In Chapter 2 we referred to the experience when trauma happens to a person and we compared it with a picture that fell from the wall and the frame and glass shattered to pieces because the frame was too small to include the reality in the life of this person. In closure, it is important to note that this person’s life-frame will have to be big enough in future in order to accommodate all potential trauma incidents. A big enough frame is one in which the reality will fit – it is true to the reality. It implies that the frame must make provision for the true possibility that something unpleasant or traumatic may happen and when it does, it will not shatter our faith.

Furthermore we don’t see ourselves as invulnerable. In the same way our assumptions ought to make space for the irrationalities of life – against this we should have an approach of ‘everything will always makes sense’ but somewhere it usually leads to confusion and disappointment.

By the grace of God and with time we will eventually find meaning and at least some of the answers. This is where our faith and hope play a vital role to finally arrive at the

place where we find meaning where there was initially no meaning (especially during the trauma).

The bigger life-frame also helps us to realize that we can't always expect the world to be fair towards us. We are normal beings and we have a very specific God-given sense for fairness – this is however not the perfect world and we live amidst an evil and fallen milieu every day, whether it be in ourselves or in others around us.

- **Reassessing my identity**

To be better prepared for trauma, it is often to thoroughly reflect on my own identity. Do I have the necessary inner security despite my responsibilities or the roles that I have to fulfil? Wherein does my security and personal identity lie? How do I see myself loose from other important people in my life? Is my self-image totally dependent on my titles, my career, my position or my authority over other people? If I should lose these things, is there anything else that will inspire me to go on?

It could also happen that I build too much of my identity on my children and their achievements, or on my spouse's or my own achievements, titles or position. If this is the case, then if I would lose these things the impact of the trauma would be much more intense. Due to other factors such as these, something like retirement could be a traumatic experience to some people.

- **Job satisfaction**

It often happens that people experience dissatisfaction with their careers shortly after a traumatic experience – some even change their career after a traumatic event. What happens during these phases probably relates to the fact that all preceding dissatisfaction and built-up frustrations in our lives are forced to the surface by the latest trauma or crisis. One of the most important identity roles in our lives is our jobs and our careers. If we experience satisfaction at our job, it could become a place of therapy in case of trauma. However if my job is a place of dissatisfaction, this dissatisfaction changes to total disillusionment after the trauma because all of the previous frustrations are activated. One of the consequences is that such a person

tends to resign from their jobs within the first year after the crisis.

The message that derives from this for most of us with regards to the pre-trauma phase is the following: we can prepare ourselves much better for trauma by making sure that we enjoy the type of career that we are in and that we experience maximum fulfilment in it. The next important question to ask yourself is the following: *Am I busy doing with my life what I really want to do? Or to put it differently: Am I busy with what the passion in my heart is?* If the answer is no, then it could be an indication that I am not in the desired position to handle potential trauma.

- **To live on both sides of the street**

The good news for the traumatized person is that you are able to survive trauma. Only when traumatized people isolate themselves and think that nobody understands them, then surviving becomes difficult. However when they are willing to share their pain, anger and fears with others who went through the same trauma, they realize that their reactions are actually normal under the circumstances.

Furthermore it is true that when the traumatized person eventually moves on, they can't ever be the same again. They now have another view of life due to the cathartic experience they went through – they experienced pain and the pain has changed them for the rest of their lives.

Consequently we might say that the street of life has two sides. Both sides are normal with regards to what they represent. The one side represents all the good and pleasant things of life. This is where most of us would like to build our houses, move in and stay for the rest of our lives – when we are still young, we usually move to this side of the street first and we estimate bright long-term schemes and plans for the future. Traumatic events however force us at some time to move over to the other side of the street – to some people this is a totally strange environment because they often get to know it at a late stage in their lives – others unfortunately had to get to know it early in their lives. Some of this is clear in Luke 6:26 in the *Message*::

“And it’s trouble if you think that life’s all fun and games. There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it.”

However there is a key that encloses life and it could be formulated as follows:

To be able to in a sense learn to live on both sides of the street at the same time – without on the one hand ignore the possibilities and realities of trauma and on the other hand not to deprive yourself of the best that life can offer you.

Ecclesiastes 7:15 in the Message translation sums this up in a striking way:

“On a good day enjoy yourself. On a bad day examine your conscience. God arranges for both kinds of days so that we won’t take anything for granted.”

The wonderful truth is furthermore the fact that God also lives on both sides of this street. Whenever we experience pain and sorrow, He experiences it with us. Whenever we call as wounded people, then He also calls with us because He is in no way a stranger at any side of the street.