



Waking the Tiger

Healing Trauma

*The Innate Capacity to Transform **

Overwhelming Experiences

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Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.

with Ann Frederick

Waking the Tiger-Healing Trauma

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What people in the Medical, Science, and Health fields

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say about Waking the Tiger

Every life contains difficulties we are not prepared for. Read, learn and be prepared for life and healing.

Bernard S. Siegel, M.D.

Best-selling author of *Love, Medicine & Miracles*,

Peace, Love, and Healing

Fascinating! Amazing! A revolutionary exploration of the physiological effects and causes of trauma expands our understanding of the human mind and human behavior experientially. His ideas on how to resolve and heal traumas seem almost unbelievable in their simplicity. He shows us clearly that trauma can be healed and resolved. It is not a life sentence. It is a must read for professionals and lay people alike. Understanding and healing of trauma may very well save humanity from its path of self-destruct.

Mira Rothenberg, Director-Emeritus

Blueberry Treatment Centers for Disturbed Children, author of *Children With Emerald Eyes*

This book is enormously rich in evocative ideas in one of the most significant areas of all our lives. It is superbly reasoned, passionate and makes beautifully easy reading. Levine's work is full of wide-ranging implications, rock solid science and clearly expressed ideas. It is a most important book. Quite possibly a work of genius.

Ron Kurtz, Author

The Body Reveals and Body-Centered Psychotherapy

Waking the Tiger introduces Somatic Experiencing, an original and scientific approach to the healing of trauma. The treatment approach is rooted in an understanding of the bi-directional communication between our thoughts and our physiology. Levine effectively argues that the body is healer and that psychological scars of trauma are reversible but

only if we listen to the voices of our body.

Stephen W. Porges. Ph.D.

Professor of Human Development and Psychology,

University of Maryland research scientist studying

the neurophysiological basis of emotional regulation, stress, and health.

A compelling, almost lyrical trip through the labyrinth of trauma, blending evolutionary insights with pragmatic clinical practice. One cannot help but be drawn into Dr. Levine's theory of traumatization and transformational vital

contribution to the exciting emerging science of mind/body interaction in the treatment of disease.

Robert C. Scaer, M.D., Neurology

Medical Director, Rehabilitation Services,

Boulder Community Hospital Mapleton Center,

Boulder, CO

Levine knows how to move beyond trauma by engaging the bodily process that should have happened, rather than merely reliving what happened.

Eugene Gendlin. Ph.D.

developer of *Focusing*

Peter Levine has remained at the creative edges of healing, plunging courageously into unknown territories. He has always been consistent in developing an understanding of trauma, its grounding in body tissues, and its healing. This is a book long awaited by students of the healing process.

Don Hanlon Johnson. Ph.D.

Author. Professor of Somatics

California Institute of Integral Studies

Levine's work uncovers the real cause of Traumatic Stress Disorder, thus making it obvious why the usual psychiatric and psychological methods of treating trauma are limited. His approach allows us to "access the problem at physiological roots through the felt sense. The wisdom of the felt sense gives us at once the instinct of an animal and the intelligence of a human being. Lacking either, we are doomed to repeat our hostilities until none of us remain. With the two working together we can move forward on our evolutionary path and become more truly humanable to use all the capacities that are oursable to perceive and enjoy our worldable to bring our children into a world that is relatively safe."

Dolores La Chapelle, Director

Way of the Mountain Center

Teacher of Deep Ecology, skiing, and Tai Chi

I find Peter Levine's work very exciting, because he offers the means to deal effectively with the deep trauma frequently present in the cases of hostages, bombing victims, and other victims of terrorism (and their families, who often become victims themselves). In my work with the State Department, and later, as a consultant on terrorist incidents, I learned that one needs a special mix of patience, compassion, and understanding. Clinically sound procedures are needed to identify the layers of traumatizing experience that may be involved, and to help the victims heal by peeling them away. Anyone who must deal with such trauma cases should read this book and seek Peter

Levine's help. He does not pretend to present a formula, but he knows and explains the critical pathways.

Terrell E. (Terry) Arnold

Ex-Deputy Director of the Office of Counterterrorism.

US Department of State

Author of *The Violence Formula*

Acknowledgments

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To my parents, Morris and Helen, I give thanks for the gift of life, the vehicle for the

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acceptance, and to Ida Rolf for her inspiration and catalysis in forming my identity as a

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Theoretical teachers include Ernst Gellhorn, who informed my neuro-physiological

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Thanks to Guy Coheleach for kindly allowing me to use his passionate and masterful

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Finally, I humbly thank Medusa, Perseus, and the other powerful forces of the body

unconscious, for informing my archetypal field of being.

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If you bring forth that which is within you,

Then that which is within you

Will be your salvation.

If you do not bring forth that which is within you,

Then that which is within you

Will destroy you.

from the Gnostic Gospels

Introduction

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For more than a quarter of a century-half of my life-I have been working to untangle the

vast mysteries of trauma. Colleagues and students often ask me how I can possibly

remain immersed in a subject as morbid as trauma without completely burning out. The

fact is, in spite of having been exposed to bone-chilling anguish and "terrible

knowledge," I have become passionately engaged and nourished by this study. It has

become my life's work to assist in the understanding and healing of trauma in its many

forms. The most common of these forms are automobile and other accidents, serious

illness, surgery and other invasive medical and dental procedures, assault, and

experiencing or witnessing violence, war, or a myriad of natural disasters.

I am endlessly fascinated with the subject of trauma, with its intricate relationship to the

physical and natural sciences, to philosophy, to mythology, and to the arts. Working with

trauma has helped me to comprehend the meaning of suffering, both necessary and

unnecessary. Most of all, it has helped me to fathom the enigma of the human spirit. I am

grateful for this unique opportunity to learn, and for the privilege of witnessing and

participating in the profound metamorphosis that the healing of trauma can bring about.

Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence. Not only can

trauma be healed, but with appropriate guidance and support, it can be transformative.

Trauma has the potential to be one of the most significant forces for psychological, social,

and spiritual awakening and evolution. How we handle trauma (as individuals,

communities, and societies) greatly influences the quality of our lives. It ultimately

affects how or even whether we will survive as a species.

Trauma is traditionally regarded as a psychological and medical disorder of the mind. The

practice of modern medicine and psychology, while giving lip service to a connection

between mind and body, greatly underestimates the deep relationship that they have in the

healing of trauma. The welded unity of body and mind that, throughout time, has formed

the philosophical and practical underpinnings of most of the world's traditional healing

systems is sadly lacking in our modern understanding and treatment of trauma.

For thousands of years, oriental and shamanic healers have recognized not only that the

mind affects the body, as in psychosomatic medicine, but how every organ system of the

body equally has a psychic representation in the fabric of the mind. Recent revolutionary

developments in neuroscience and psycho-neuro-immunology have established solid

evidence of the intricate two-way communication between mind and body. In identifying

complex "neuro-peptide messengers," researchers like Candice Pert have discovered⁸

many pathways by which mind and body mutually communicate. This leading-edge

research echoes what ancient wisdom has always known: that each organ of the body,

including the brain, speaks its own "thoughts," "feelings," and "promptings," and listens to those of all the others.

Most trauma therapies address the mind through talk and the molecules of the mind with

drugs. Both of these approaches can be of use. However, trauma is not, will not, and can

never be fully healed until we also address the essential role played by the body. We must

understand how the body is affected by trauma and its central position in healing its

aftermath. Without this foundation, our attempts at mastering trauma will be limited and

one-sided.

Beyond the mechanistic, reductionistic view of life, there exists a sensing, feeling,

knowing, living organism. This living body, a condition we share with all sentient beings,

informs us of our innate capacity to heal from the effects of trauma. This book is about

the gift of wisdom we receive as a result of learning to harness and transform the body's

awesome, primordial, and intelligent energies. In overcoming the destructive force of

trauma, our innate potential now lifts us to new heights of mastery and knowledge.

Peter Levine

Written on Amtrak Zephyr

October, 1995

Prologue

Giving the Body Its Due

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Body and Mind

Whatever increases, decreases, limits or extends the body's power of action, increases decreases, limits, or extends the mind's power of action. And whatever increases, decreases, limits, or extends the mind's power of action, also increases, decreases, limits, or extends the body's power of action.

Spinoza (1632-1677)

If you are experiencing strange symptoms that no one seems to be able to explain, they

could be arising from a traumatic reaction to a past event that you may not even

remember. You are not alone. You are not crazy. There is a rational explanation for what

is happening to you. You have not been irreversibly damaged, and it is possible to

diminish or even eliminate your symptoms.

In trauma we know that the mind becomes profoundly altered. For example, a person

involved in an auto wreck is protected initially from emotional reaction and even from a

clear memory or sense that it really happened. These remarkable mechanisms (e.g.,

dissociation and denial) allow us to navigate through those critical periods, hopefully

waiting for a safe time and place for these altered states to "wear off."

Similarly, the body reacts profoundly in trauma. It tenses in readiness, braces in fear, and

freezes and collapses in helpless terror. When the mind's protective reaction to

overwhelm returns to normal, the body's response is also meant to normalize after the

event. When this restorative process is thwarted, the effects of trauma become fixated and

the person becomes traumatized.

Psychology traditionally approaches trauma through its effects on the mind. This is at

best only half the story and a wholly inadequate one. Without the body and mind

accessed together as a unit, we will not be able to deeply understand or heal trauma.

Finding a Method

This book is about resolving traumatic symptoms using a naturalistic approach I have

developed over the past twenty-five years. I do not view post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD) as pathology to be managed, suppressed, or adjusted to, but the result of a natural

process gone awry. Healing trauma requires a direct experience of the living, feeling,

knowing organism. The principles I'm going to share with you are the result of working

with clients as well as following clues about the origins of trauma. This study has led me

into the fields of physiology, neuroscience, animal behavior, mathematics, psychology,

and philosophy, to name a few. In the beginning, my successes were the result of

happenstance and blind luck. As I continued working with people, questioning what I

learned, pushing what I knew further and further into the mystery of trauma, I was able to

succeed predictably rather than by chance. Increasingly, I became convinced that the

instinctual repertoire of the human organism includes a deep biological knowing which,

given the opportunity to do so, can and will guide the process of healing trauma.

While the growing emphasis on attending to these instinctual responses was healing

clients, my inquisitiveness was paying off in understanding. People were immensely

relieved to finally understand how symptoms were created and to learn how to recognize

and experience their own instincts in action.

Somatic Experiencing® is new and is not subject to rigorous scientific research at this

time. What I have to support the validity of this approach are several hundred individual

cases in which people report that the symptoms which once impaired their ability to live

full and satisfied lives are gone or greatly diminished.

I usually work in a one-to-one therapeutic context and often in conjunction with other

modalities. Obviously this book cannot replace individual work with a trained therapist.

However, I believe that many of the principles and much of the information offered here

can be used to facilitate the healing of trauma. If you are in therapy, it may help you *t&2*

share this book with your therapist. If you are not in therapy, it is possible to use this

book to help yourself. However, there are limitations. You may need the guidance of a

qualified professional.

The Body As Healer

The body is the shore on the ocean of being.

—Sufi (anonymous)

Section One of this book introduces trauma and explains how post-traumatic symptoms

begin, develop, and why they are so compelling and persistent. It lays a foundation of

understanding that dispels the tangled web of myths about trauma and replaces them with

a simple, coherent description of the basic physiological processes that produce it. While

our intellects often override our natural instincts, they do not drive the traumatic reaction.

We are more akin to our four-footed friends than we might wish to think.

When I speak of our "organisms," I refer to Webster's definition of "a complex structure of interdependent and subordinate elements whose relations and properties are largely

determined by their function in the whole." Organism describes our wholeness, which

derives not from the sum of its individual parts, i.e., bones, chemicals, muscles, organs,

etc.; it emerges from their dynamic, complex interrelation. Body and mind, primitive

instincts, emotions, intellect, and spirituality all need to be considered together in

studying the organism. The vehicle through which we experience ourselves as

organisms is the "felt sense." The felt sense is a medium through which we experience

the fullness of sensation and knowledge about ourselves. You will gain a more clear

understanding of these terms as you read through the material and do some of the

exercises.

Section One: The Body as Healer—Offers a view of trauma and the process that heals it

as natural phenomena. It addresses the innate wisdom to heal that we all have and weaves

it into a coherent whole. We'll take a journey into some of our most primitive biological

responses. You will emerge from Section One with a fuller appreciation of how you?3

organism operates and how you can work with it to increase your vitality and well-being

as well as enhance your overall enjoyment of life, whether or not you have trauma

symptoms.

In this section, I refer to exercises that will help you begin to know the felt sense through

your own experience. These exercises are important. There is really no other way to

convey how this fascinating aspect of the human being operates. Entering the realm of the

felt sense is for many people like entering a strange new land, a land they've often visited

without ever bothering to notice the scenery. As you read and experience this section, you

will find that some of what is said about the way your body works are things that you

already know.

Section Two: Symptoms of Trauma—Presents a more in-depth account of the core

elements of a traumatic reaction, its symptoms, and the reality a traumatized person lives

with.

Section Three: Transformation and Renegotiation—Describes the process by which we

can transform our traumas, whether they be personal or societal.

Section Four: First Aid for Trauma—Includes practical information to help prevent

trauma from developing after an accident. Also, a brief discussion of childhood trauma.

(This latter subject will be covered exclusively in a future book.)

I believe that we all need to understand the essential information in this book. This

information deepens our experience and understanding of trauma's healing process and

helps us develop a sense reliance on our own organism. Furthermore, I think the

information is pertinent on both personal and societal levels. The magnitude of the trauma

generated by the events that are affecting our world exact a toll on families, communities,

and entire populations. Trauma can be self-perpetuating. Trauma begets trauma and will

continue to do so, eventually crossing generations in families, communities and countries

until we take steps to contain its propagation. At the moment, the work of transforming

trauma within groups of people is still in its infancy. Section Three includes a description

of a healing approach used for groups that I am developing with some colleagues in

Norway.

Because I often recommend that individuals working therapeutically engage the help of

trained professionals as allies in this process, it is my hope that the book will also be of

use to these professionals. Few psychologists have sufficient background in physiology to

recognize the aberrations of experience that can be produced when physiological

processes are not allowed to follow a natural course. Ideally, the information in this book

will introduce new possibilities for the treatment of trauma. My experience has taught me

that many of the currently popular approaches to healing trauma provide only temporary

relief at best. Some cathartic methods that encourage intense emotional reliving of trauma

may be harmful. I believe that in the long run, cathartic approaches create a dependency

on continuing catharsis and encourage the emergence of so-called "false memories."

Because of the nature of trauma, there is a good chance that the cathartic reliving of an

experience can be traumatizing rather than healing.

Psychotherapy deals with a broad spectrum of issues and problems that go far beyond the

single topic: shock trauma, the focus of this book. Shock trauma occurs when we

experience potentially life-threatening events that overwhelm our capacities to respond

effectively. In contrast, people traumatized by ongoing abuse as children, particularly if

the abuse was in the context of their families, may suffer from "developmental trauma."

Developmental trauma refers primarily to the psychologically based issues that are

usually a result of inadequate nurturing and guidance through critical developmental

periods during childhood. Although the dynamics that produce them are different, cruelty

and neglect can result in symptoms that are similar to and often intertwined with those of

shock trauma. For this reason, people who have experienced developmental trauma need

to enlist the support of a therapist to help them work through the issues that have become

intertwined with their traumatic reactions.

When shock trauma is the result of an isolated event or series of events and there is no

consistent history of previous trauma, I believe that people, in community with family

and friends, have a remarkable ability to bring about their own healing. I strongly

encourage this practice. I have written this book in relatively non-technical language. It is

also for parents, teachers, child care workers, and others who serve as guides and role

models for children to be able to give them a gift of incalculable value by helping them

immediately resolve their reactions to traumatic events. In addition, doctors, nurses,

paramedics, police, fire fighters, rescue workers, and others who work routinely with the

victims of accidents and natural disasters will find this information useful, not only for

the work that they do with these traumatized individuals, but for themselves. To witness

human carnage of any kind, especially on a regular basis, exacts its own toll and is often

as traumatic as experiencing the event firsthand.

How To Use This Book

Give yourself time to absorb the material as you read through the book. Do the exercises

suggested in the text. Take it slowly and easily. Trauma is the result of the most powerful

drives the human body can produce. It demands respect. You may not hurt yourself by

moving through the material quickly or superficially, but you won't get the same benefit

that you would if you take the time to digest the information slowly.

If at any time the material or exercises seem disturbing, stop and let things settle. Sit with

your experience and see what unfolds. Many of the misconceptions about trauma go

surprisingly deep and may affect your experience of as well as your attitude towards

yourself. It is important to recognize when this has happened. If you keep a portion of

your attention on your reactions to the material, your organism will guide you along at the

proper pace.

Body sensation, rather than intense emotion, is the key to healing trauma. Be aware of

any emotional reaction swelling up inside you, and be aware of how your body is

experiencing these emotions in the form of sensations and thoughts. If your emotions feel

too intense, i.e., rage, terror, profound helplessness, etc., you need to enlist competent

professional help.

Trauma need not be a life sentence. Of all the maladies that attack the human organism,

trauma may ultimately be one that is recognized as beneficial. I say this because in the

healing of trauma, a transformation takes place—one that can improve the quality of life.

Healing doesn't necessarily require sophisticated drugs, elaborate procedures, or long

hours of therapy. When you understand how trauma occurs and when you learn to

identify the mechanisms that prevent it from resolving, you will also begin to recognize

the ways in which your organism attempts to heal itself. By using a few simple ideas and

techniques, you can support rather than impede this innate capacity for healing. The tools

presented here will help you move through the trauma and continue on your way with a

fuller, more sure sense of yourself. While trauma can be hell on earth, trauma resolved is

a gift of the gods—a heroic journey that belongs to each of us.

No matter where we are, the shadow that trots behind

us is definitely four-footed.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D. from

Women Who Run With The Wolves

Section I. The Body As Healer

*... our mind still has its darkest Africas,
its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins.*

Aldous Huxley

1. Shadows From a Forgotten Past

Nature's Plan

A herd of impala grazes peacefully in a lush wadi. Suddenly, the wind shifts, carrying

with it a new, but familiar scent. The impala sense danger in the air and become instantly

tensed to a hair trigger of alertness. They sniff, look, and listen carefully for a few

moments, but when no threat appears, the animals return to their grazing, relaxed yet

vigilant.

Seizing the moment, a stalking cheetah leaps from its cover of dense shrubbery. As if it

were one organism, the herd springs quickly toward a protective thicket at the wadi's

edge. One young impala trips for a split second, then recovers. But it is too late. In a blur,

the cheetah lunges toward its intended victim, and the chase is on at a blazing sixty to

seventy miles an hour.

At the moment of contact (or just before), the young impala falls to the ground,

surrendering to its impending death. Yet, it may be uninjured. The stone-still animal is

not pretending to be dead. It has instinctively entered an altered state of consciousness

shared by all mammals when death appears imminent. Many indigenous peoples view

this phenomenon as a surrender of the spirit of the prey to the predator, which, in a

manner of speaking, it is.

Physiologists call this altered state the "immobility" or "freezing" response. It is one of the three primary responses available to reptiles and mammals when faced with an

overwhelming threat. The other two, fight and flight, are much more familiar to most of

us. Less is known about the immobility response. However, my work over the last

twenty-five years has led me to believe that it is the single most important factor in

uncovering the mystery of human trauma.

Nature has developed the immobility response for two good reasons. One, it serves as a

last-ditch survival strategy. You might know it better as playing possum. Take the young⁸

impala, for instance. There is a possibility that the cheetah may decide to drag its 'dead'

prey to a place safe from other predators; or to its lair, where the food can be shared later

with its cubs. During this time, the impala could awaken from its frozen state and make a

hasty escape in an unguarded moment. When it is out of danger, the animal will literally

shake off the residual effects of the immobility response and gain full control of its body.

It will then return to its normal life as if nothing had happened. Secondly, in freezing, the

impala (and human) enters an altered state in which no pain is experienced. What that

means for the impala is that it will not have to suffer while being torn apart by the

cheetah's sharp teeth and claws.

Most modern cultures tend to judge this instinctive surrender in the face of overwhelming

threat as a weakness tantamount to cowardice. However, underneath this judgment lies a

deep human fear of immobility. We avoid it because it is a state very similar to death.

This avoidance is understandable, but we pay dearly for it. The physiological evidence

clearly shows that the ability to go into and come out of this natural response is the key to

avoiding the debilitating effects of trauma. It is a gift to us from the wild.

Why Look to the Wild? Trauma is Physiological

As surely as we hear the blood in our ears, the echoes

of a million midnight shrieks of monkeys, whose last

sight of the world was the eyes of a panther, have their

traces in our nervous systems.

—Paul Shepard⁹

The key to healing traumatic symptoms in humans is in our physiology. When faced with

what is perceived as inescapable or overwhelming threat, humans and animals both use

the immobility response. The important thing to understand about this function is that it is

involuntary. This simply means that the physiological mechanism governing this

response resides in the primitive, instinctual parts of our brains and nervous systems, and⁹

is not under our conscious control. That is why I feel that the study of wild animal

behavior is essential to the understanding and healing of human trauma.

The involuntary and instinctual portions of the human brain and nervous system are

virtually identical to those of other mammals and even reptiles. Our brain, often called the

triune brain, consists of three integral systems. The three parts are commonly known as

the reptilian brain (instinctual), the mammalian or limbic brain (emotional), and the

human brain or neo-cortex (rational). Since the parts of the brain that are activated by a

perceived life-threatening situation are the parts we share with animals, much can be

learned by studying how certain animals, like the impala, avoid traumatization. To take

this one step further, I believe that the key to healing traumatic symptoms in humans lies

in our being able to mirror the fluid adaptation of wild animals as they shake out and pass

through the immobility response and become fully mobile and functional again.

Unlike wild animals, when threatened we humans have never found it easy to resolve the

dilemma of whether to fight or flee. This dilemma stems, at least in part, from the fact

that our species has played the role of both predator and prey. Prehistoric peoples, though

many were hunters, spent long hours each day huddled together in cold caves with the

certain knowledge that they could be snatched up at any moment and torn to shreds.

Our chances for survival increased as we gathered in larger groups, discovered fire, and

invented tools, many of which were weapons used for hunting and self-defense. However,

the genetic memory of being easy prey has persisted in our brains and nervous systems.

Lacking both the swiftness of an impala and the lethal fangs and claws of a stalking

cheetah, our human brains often second guess our ability to take life-preserving action?

This uncertainty has made us particularly vulnerable to the powerful effects of trauma.

Animals like the agile, darting impala know they are prey and are intimate with their

survival resources. They sense what they need to do and they do it. Likewise, the sleek

cheetah's seventy-miles-an-hour sprint and treacherous fangs and claws make it a self-

assured predator.

The line is not so clearly delineated for the human animal. When confronted with a life-

threatening situation, our rational brains may become confused and override our

instinctive impulses. Though this overriding may be done for a good reason, the

confusion that accompanies it sets the stage for what I call the "Medusa Complex"—the

drama called trauma.

As in the Greek myth of Medusa, the human confusion that may ensue when we stare

death in the face can turn us to stone. We may literally freeze in fear, which will result in

the creation of traumatic symptoms.

Trauma is a pervasive fact of modern life. Most of us have been traumatized, not just

soldiers or victims of abuse or attack. Both the sources and consequences of trauma are

wide-ranging and often hidden from our awareness. These include natural disasters (e.g.,

earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, and fires), exposure to violence, accidents, falls, serious

illnesses, sudden loss (i.e., a loved one), surgical and other necessary medical and dental

procedures, difficult births, and even high levels of stress during gestation.

Fortunately, because we are instinctual beings with the ability to feel, respond, and

reflect, we possess the innate potential to heal even the most debilitating traumatic

injuries. I am convinced, as well, that we as a global human community can begin to heal

from the effects of large-scale social traumas such as war and natural disaster.

It's About Energy

Traumatic symptoms are not caused by the "triggering" event itself. They stem from the

frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged; this residue remains

trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits. The

long-term, alarming, debilitating, and often bizarre symptoms of PTSD develop when we

cannot complete the process of moving in, through and out of the "immobility" or

"freezing" state. However, we can thaw by initiating and encouraging our innate drive to

return to a state of dynamic equilibrium.

Let's cut to the chase. The energy in our young impala's nervous system as it flees from

the pursuing cheetah is charged at seventy miles an hour. The moment the cheetah takes

its final lunge, the impala collapses. From the outside, it looks motionless and appears to

be dead, but inside, its nervous system is still supercharged at seventy miles an hour.