

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Creativity

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1. The definition of PTSD has changed over time, first, in the sense of what is considered trauma.

When PTSD first recognized in 1980, only those who had suffered direct life threat or physical harm were considered to be traumatized. The latest definition (DSM-V) now includes family members of persons who have been murdered or committed suicide, as well as police officers, health care workers, and others who are exposed to images of or who are in direct contact with children and others who have been mutilated, etc., due to crimes or burns (e.g., nurses on burn units who are exposed to horrible wounds of the burned).

2. Just because a person is exposed to a trauma or suffers one directly doesn't mean they automatically get PTSD. More commonly, a person can develop a depression or some kind of anxiety disorder other than PTSD.
3. PTSD is an anxiety disorder; but its unique feature is the recurrent replaying of the traumatic event either visually, emotionally, somatically, through dreams, flashbacks, etc. PTSD is the only diagnosis in the DSM-V that has this recurrent repetition of the traumatic event.

One way I've heard this described is that the person is trying to discharge the enormous anxiety associated with life threat through reliving it. So, in a way, nightmares are a kind of purging.

Hence, art, dance, drama are all ways of discharging the anxiety and expressing it. In fact, the expressive arts are often used to help trauma survivors.

4. Excuse me if I'm skipping all over the place, but, going to back to the definition of PTSD. First, a person has to have suffered a traumatic event. Secondly, they have to develop symptoms, such as hyperalertness, etc. that you mention in your writing.

However, in order to get the full diagnosis, the symptoms have to significantly affect a person's ability to love, work, or play. In other words, a person cannot receive social security in the US or a veteran cannot be compensated for combat trauma if his nightmares etc. do not significantly affect his ability to have a job. On the other hand, if they prevent him from having certain occupations because the occupations remind him of the trauma, but he can perform other jobs, but these other jobs pay less, he may get a partial compensation.

5. Related to #4, there is such a thing as "partial-PTSD" where persons have some of the symptoms, but not enough to qualify for the full diagnosis. This explains why intelligent

gifted artists such as you describe were not totally debilitated by their experiences: i.e., they kept on being productive and didn't end up committing suicide or sitting in their room all day staring at the wall.

6. A person can have full or partial PTSD, which then abates, but then subsequent stressors retrigger it.
7. You mention the terror and helplessness portrayed in various poems. One of the prime indicators that a person might develop PTSD is that their initial reaction to the trauma is one of terror and helplessness. Think of it this way: if you're in a situation of great danger, but there's a way out (an acceptable, safe way out), you are far less likely to develop a traumatic reaction (whether PTSD, depression, a phobia, etc.,) if you have some control or safe avenue of escape.

It's not just having your life or the lives of your loved ones being threatened, but being trapped AND having no way out (that doesn't cost you your life, the welfare of your family, the betrayal of your values, etc.,) that's the core of trauma.

8. Historically some artists lived in an atmosphere of violence, given the politics of the time; and since others had been executed as the result of slander, the artists realistically knew that being slandered could mean their death.
9. Symptoms of PTSD can be identified in the visual arts. And the visual arts can contribute greatly to healing. But the arts alone can't do it. There needs to be some mental processing of the event, and also, the person has to have an emotional support system, as well as freedom from new threats or from financial destitution.
10. One more thought: One definition of trauma is being or being rendered helpless in a situation of great danger. It's this powerlessness that's so destructive to the rest of the victim's life.

However, taking action (like talking about the trauma, writing music about it, making a movie of it, drawing about it, etc.) is a way of taking back SOME (not all) of the power that was lost during the trauma.