This Is America

The case for progress

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We Shall Overcome

Upside is designed to inspire and provide practical help for trauma victims.
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Millions of Americans have experienced or will experience a traumatic event. They will suffer, of course, perhaps from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or related symptoms. For many victims of trauma, however, suffering has become a stimulus for positive change.

In *Upside*, Jim Rendon, an independent journalist and the author of a book about marijuana, draws on the life stories of nineteen survivors of accidents, illnesses, natural disasters, and combat, and interviews with psychologists, to examine “post-traumatic growth.” His book is designed to inspire and provide practical tools for a fuller and more fulfilled recovery.

Rendon acknowledges that “growth needs to be handled carefully.” Individuals who are in acute mental and/or physical pain may be alienated by a post-traumatic agenda that is pushed too soon or too aggressively. Or by a perception that they’re being asked to pretend that “a terrible event is actually great.”

That said, the heroes of *Upside* at times sound too settled and sunny. Can watching *Braveheart* really be that transformative? Do many trauma survivors give thanks that the accident happened because it “has made me the best version of me?” Do they glow, more at peace with themselves, and more appreciative of simply being alive? And, one wonders, do poor people attain the same levels of post-traumatic growth as those who are more affluent?

*Upside* is at its best, it seems to me, when Rendon lays out actions, based on the work of researchers and clinicians, that have a solid track record of promoting positive growth. Most of
us, he points out, have an “assumptive self,” a notion that we are good, live in a safe world, and are likely to be rewarded for our decency. Traumas tear down this worldview, invite the question “why me?,” and open the door to “deliberative rumination” and “narrative reframing.”

The process, Rendon indicates, benefits from writing or talking about the trauma. Interestingly, the more positive language subjects use, the more their health improves. And the health of those who use fewer and fewer negative words to describe their experiences improves even more.

Telling, or even better, writing the story of their lives, helps individuals, who often have a static view of themselves, understand that they have changed a lot over time – perhaps in response to a divorce or a death. This exercise prepares them for an examination of the impact the trauma has had on them. The goal, Rendon writes, is to invite and enable the survivors to decide “how their identity, their sense of the world, can be reinvented.”

Studies of mothers in post-Katrina New Orleans, New Yorkers affected by the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers, and of women in war-torn Bosnia, Rendon indicates, demonstrate that social support is a key favor in helping people recover from traumatic experiences. Friends and family members, he adds, should neither avoid potentially painful topics nor push survivors to discuss them; they should enable loved ones to rebuild their lives in their own ways, not dictate paths that must be taken.

Researchers and clinicians have also discovered that individuals who express gratitude or who help others who are suffering report significantly less depression and significantly greater happiness.

Problem-focused coping (“engaging with the issue at hand, accepting its limitations yet searching for practical solutions to those things that can be changed”), that calls for extroversion and positive emotion, Rendon emphasizes, tends to produce post-traumatic growth among patients.

Survivors thrive when they see the traumatic incident “as one event of many in a lifetime...put it in its proper place, learn from it but not be consumed by it.” This cognitive and emotional odyssey, which begins with “why me?,” and is often accompanied by physical pain, depression, and anger, is, of course, easier scripted than completed. The by no means inconsiderable virtue of *Upside* is that it contains scientifically-grounded recommendations about how to get there and personal testimony about how it feels when you do.