



Why Minding Matters and Betrayal Trauma

By Liz O'Donnell, PhD

There is no shortage of literature written on the trauma of betrayal, perhaps because it is likely that most human beings have experienced some sort of betrayal in their lives, from the slight to the immeasurable. However there really are no 'slight' betrayals because betrayal itself is an enormous word; cloaked in treachery and shadowed by deceit. Betrayal does not evoke irritation. It is a perfidious wound upon the soul and just like most wounds that injure the subject of the subjective - there is no agreed upon cure because there is no agreed upon diagnosis. A betrayal in my eyes might simply be a lapse of judgement when reflected in yours. I describe betrayal as a word whose meaning permeates the cells of the heart and damages the human spirit at its most fundamental point of operation. Betrayal hurts us deeply and can sit for years in the holes that it leaves. We aren't designed to live well in betrayal. Betrayal leaves us hyper-vigilant, off kilter, unpredictable, and terrifyingly lonely. Betrayal does to the psyche what cancer can do everywhere else.

When we are injured at the core we must begin healing at the core. When we are injured at the core there is damage that occurs concomitantly in every interdependent system, physiological, emotional, sociological to name but a few. Human beings are as much a lived ecology as natural science. We don't function in containers protected from insult by silos of our own making, or perhaps we do? Betrayal is a laceration, upon a sore, beneath a gash, on top of a gouge and camouflaged by a fourth degree burn. If I feel betrayal then I have to heal that feeling whether the offending cause of my betrayal agrees with me or not. Of course, betrayal between people can be partially healed by honest expressions of regret but rarely, is the experience of deep betrayal recognized at its first calling. Betrayal has history and personhood;

an emotion most foul that it is deserving of our reification. Betrayal often starts small, wearing diapers and toddling around looking for curious spots to land and investigate. As it grows it learns to lie poorly and gradually, with experience, it learns rebellion, stridence, and the art of intentional falsehood. Then comes a time, possibly for most of us, when betrayal's propaganda is revealed; a time when we hear the lie and know the truth and choose more often than not to step toward that truth. This is the period of conscience and consciousness when we are presumably ready to live who we are and align ourselves with others who think they know who that is. Pay attention to the nebulous nature of the language here because who we think we are and betrayal are intimately linked.

People who betray cannot stand on who they are. They are busy fabricating an image of who they need to be seen as. Sometimes this begins as insecurity and only ends in destruction and other times it begins with destruction as an end goal. There is a difference between these two betrayal perpetrations. Betrayal that begins with insecurity is sloppy and naïve. It is a little boy in long trousers pretending to be Peter Parker. Who hasn't dreamt of having super powers, saving humanity, and changing the world? Insecure betrayal remains childish but as we all know children can still inflict damage, resist steady guidance, and scoff in the face of exposure. Insecure betrayal is the person who says "I didn't" while the evidence shows they did. It is the discordant dance around the truth that looks like swan -lake being performed in soccer boots. We can all see it doesn't work but Peter Parker is sticking to his story and attempts to show him how ludicrous it is will fail until someone throws him off a tall building and asks him to fly. Of course some people will still prefer to crash land but others will scream out, "yes, yes, I did the thing, it was me, it is me." And then the dubious edict that we must face ourselves begins. People who live by betrayal have many flies in their web and flies by classification are attracted to things that rot, smell bad, and often end up in shit. So there is a lot of cleaning up to do when someone has betrayed and a lot of damage to restore when someone has been betrayed. Love definitely means much more than never having to say you're sorry. Love means that you are committed to the unwinding of the lies, not the betrayer's lies in the name of the truth but the betrayed(s) truth in the name of the lies. You see when we are caught in the spindly lattice of someone else's trap it doesn't matter that it is made of silk. It only matters that we get out alive. I am not saying that you cannot love your betrayer, more likely in fact that you have and you do. I am saying that you have to love yourself and your truth more because even in recovery and release from their own delusions the betrayer will still keep spinning webs. Peter Parker is after all a hard man to give up.

Betrayal is born like all of us, as a consequence of action whose future is unknown. All betrayals begin small and grow into something else, sometimes so far removed from its origin that it cannot be identified. People who have been betrayed know this state well. It's Never Land, Narnia, and Middle Earth. A state of delusion so vast that when betrayal is discovered you

have to know where you stand at all times in case the ground begins to move beneath your feet. Betrayal's discovery not only unravels deceit but also the minds, hearts, health and souls of those it has betrayed. Why do I say this with such conviction, it is surely not to simply vilify betrayal? I say it to give power to the healing of the betrayed. You must take what you know of yourself and make it the template upon which you press forward. Yes, much of who you have become might have been through the prism of a relationship that turned out to be duplicitous but now you know that, you must build a new relationship with truth that has you at its foundation.

Betrayal that begins with destruction as an end goal is a different animal. Not that it hurts differently along the way – both forms of betrayal are devastating – but betrayal that begins with destruction as an end goal has narcissism and nihilism as its master. N squared or betrayal to the power of 2. This kind of betrayal doesn't lend itself to remorse because it stands defiantly in its power to create the universe. You live in it to serve the story but you are neither part of the story or the point of the story. The distinction between these two types of betrayal, (I am not saying there aren't more I am just attempting to distill the common and the lethal into recognizable forms), is crucial to your understanding of the possibility that after you have resurrected yourself there might be something to resurrect from a relationship with the betrayer. N squared betrayal in my experience does not respond to the language of forgiveness, even forgiveness without reconciliation. N squared betrayal is a serious sign that a relationship is lethal and attempts to resuscitate it are likely to result in brain death or worse a persistent vegetative state. It is important that we can tell the difference between these two types of betrayal because this differentiation is the arc upon which solid healing is built.

Betrayal and forgiveness are predictable bedfellows. Like the yin and the yang and the unity of opposites. They stick to each other like unlike poles on a magnet, absurdly compelled. Now I am not saying that forgiveness should always just get out of betrayal's bed and march on to its own room but I am saying that forgiveness should never forget that it has been sleeping with the enemy. Forgiveness like the person betrayed has a right to exist despite betrayal. It is not contingent upon betrayal nor should it be practiced only at betrayal's request. Forgiveness is not something to be dragged into betrayal's magnetic field. Of course without betrayal you might ask why there is ever anything to forgive. Well this is where betrayal gets even murkier. We all betray on some level or, as I said before, betrayal starts small and as we grow bigger we pick up the truth like milestones on our developmental path only some people don't, they just continue to pick up betrayal. So you have to understand your own relationship to betrayal to understand your own relationship to forgiveness.

Forgiveness is gentle and compassionate and has self-care at its center. Forgiveness isn't a word or even a paragraph it is an infinite poem that is autonomous and self-generative.

You must ask yourself what forgiveness means to you? You must define it and feel it and smell it and touch it. You must personalize forgiveness to the story of your life and then stand in that story with all of its betrayals, both yours and theirs, and still know who you are before you offer forgiveness to another. Forgiveness is like trust in this way. Trust must reside in you. It is not a commodity to be transacted but a state of existential grace that confirms your humanity. Neither trust nor forgiveness is to be given away it is ours to keep.

I have seen many, many betrayals in my life and work - betrayals so large, so cruel, and so stupid that I have all but given up on my ability to maintain the posture of a therapeutically neutral face. Some things just aren't neutral and by the way, some things are worthy of shame. I am not one of those therapists who believe that all shame is bad although I don't believe that only shaming someone will rehabilitate their soul. If you are reading this and you are the betrayer you might be raging at my words although I am hopeful that if you reached this far you are taking stock of how lying to those you say you care for is a form of spiritual and physical battery. More importantly, please embrace that your relationship with truth is at the heart of your recovery. Not 12 steps or the interminable repeat of each 12 step. Not apology or amends or a cataloguing of your failures and an admission of your powerlessness. You are not that powerless – you really can always tell the truth. If not to others at least to yourself and from that place of personal honesty you can choose actions that reconcile who you know yourself to be with the 'who' that you present to the world.

If you are the betrayed then you know the pain I have described. You have lain frozen in your bed as night fell while the ruptured images of your life played across your brain in 35 millimeter slow motion, frozen stills and all. You might feel as though you are stuck on rewind and that somehow, although it is up to you, you cannot release that loop. Not because you deserve what happened to you but because you have to stay on replay until you figure it all out. Let me tell you that this does not happen. It is a futile task trying to establish reasonable motive for someone else's unreasonable behavior because this implies that there is some logic to the harm inflicted and there absolutely is not. It is simply a brutal artifact of life. Not inevitable but always possible. However you can move forward by making a commitment to honor your own truth and accepting that betrayal is a part of that truth is liberating because it is honest and the truth truly will set you free. Betrayal is a form of loss that can leave us feeling achingly orphaned and like death it can be grieved, mourned, memorialized and moved on from. You are not less than because you have been betrayed, you are gloriously human because you have suffered.