

# Chapter 10

## Your Worst Trauma

### *Type A Trauma*

Frank had a violent, alcoholic father. His father would often come home drunk and would beat his mother. Then he would come looking for Frank to beat him. When Frank was about five years old, he found a place in the back of a closet where he could hide, and his father never found him there. He felt so secure in his little hideout. It didn't get any better than this, being safe from the bad stuff going on out in the world.

But the worst thing that had happened to Frank as a child wasn't the violence – the bad things going on in his family. The most damaging thing going on in his life was the absence of the good.

We were all built for love. Love is the thing that makes us "tick," and we need lots of it to function. We were made in God's image, and God is love. Without love we are terribly wounded. In fact, research is now showing that the "absence of the good" is much more wounding than is the "bad" that happens to us.<sup>1</sup> When children are not copiously loved, they are fractured in the deepest places inside them. Their very foundation is destroyed.

### **The "Absence Of The Good" Is Trauma**

Trauma is something that wounds us. In Christian counseling and in secular psychotherapy it was always assumed that what wounded us was the bad things that happened to us. This seemed logical and reasonable, because many people who struggle in life came from families where many bad things happened. It is true that when bad things happen to us, we are traumatized. These traumatic events wound us, and we need to be healed.

However, there was another type of trauma that remained hidden to counselors until recently. This trauma comes to us when we do not receive the good things that we need, and these experiences wound us grievously. The "presence of bad things" has now been labeled "Type

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<sup>1</sup> See Schore, Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self, pp 85ff, for more details.

B Trauma" ("B" for bad), and the "absence of the good" has been called "Type A Trauma" ("A" for absence).<sup>2</sup>

Frank was totally unaware of the Type A Trauma in his life. For him, neutral (lack of abuse) was great. Not being found and beaten by dad felt as good as it can get. On the continuum below, he was satisfied with the middle (neutral) position.

**Neutral** **The Bad**

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He was willing to live in the middle, because he was unaware that there was more. After all, he had never experienced the good. So in reality he experienced both Type B Trauma (the beatings from his father) and Type A Trauma (the absence of a loving father). It should be noted that when Type B Trauma is present in a family, Type A Trauma is also always present; because a loving parent cannot be abusive to a child. So there was a whole dimension to life to which Frank was blinded. Neutral is not good enough for a child (or for an adult!). A picture of the full range of experiences is like this:

**The Good** **Neutral** **The Bad**

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If we are to be whole, we need to experience our childhood to the extreme "good" side. So the degree of Frank's wounding was much greater than he was aware. An analogy from the physical realm may help make this clear. Before the space program we had no idea what the other side of the moon looked like, because we had never seen it. Even so scientists had an advantage over Frank, because the scientists knew that the backside of the moon existed. Not only had Frank never experienced being loved (seeing the other side of the moon), he didn't even know that one could be loved (that the backside of the moon existed). Of course, since he didn't know that part of life even existed, he had no idea of how

important being loved was to him. And he was completely unaware that it had been missing!

## Starvation

Another analogy might help make Frank's problem clearer. If we equate feeding a person poison with "The Bad" (Type B Trauma), and giving them good, nutritious food with "The Good," then what equates with "Neutral" below?

The Good	Neutral	The Bad
Good Food	<u>Starvation</u>	Poison

Wouldn't "Neutral" equate to absence of "The Bad" (Poison) and also absence of "The Good" (Good Food)? We call this place **Starvation**. Not getting any food at all (Type A Trauma) would allow us to live for awhile, certainly a lot longer than if we were being poisoned. But if the absence of Good Food went on long enough, it would also be deadly. No longer being poisoned would be a relief, but ceasing to be poisoned would not be adequate. People also need good, healthy food or they will get sick, and eventually die. "Neutral" is a bad place to be for very long.

## My Childhood Story

I am a classic case of a child who experienced Type A Trauma. I came from a "good" family. My parents never fought, they almost never got angry, and they never spanked my sister or me. My father had a good job, and so we were always provided for. But as an adult I recognized a lot of bad fruit in my life. What could possibly be the root was a mystery to me. My own early experience with counseling started with a focus on uncovering the "bad" things that had happened to me. However, one day the Lord showed me what a small amount of "bad" had actually happened to me. This revelation was a bit devastating to me, and I felt like the "bad seed." Why was I so fragile that such a small amount of "bad" could be so greatly wounding?

During my counseling I became acquainted with many other people who were also in counseling, and some of them had horror stories about

their lives. I could easily understand why they had problems, because they had experienced so much “bad” as they grew up. Both my counselor and I were unaware that my problems really came from neglect.

My entire childhood had been lived in the "neutral" position. Very few really bad things happened, but very few good things happened either. Though my parents were physically present, they were emotionally absent. Their emotional separation gave my sister and me a clear but subtle message that we weren't really important. After all, people give time and attention to what is important to them, and we got very little of our parents' attention.

I remember an incident when I had greatly outgrown my pants. I put them on and went to my mother to demonstrate that I needed some new ones. She looked at me, and it was almost as though she was coming out of a trance. She said, “Oh, yes. We had better buy you some,” and we went and bought some. Though I had been walking around for weeks with my pants too short, she had never even noticed. Her lack of attention was not out of meanness or stinginess. She had not purposely been depriving me, but rather it was just as though I was invisible to her. I felt unimportant. That was the story of my life.

## **Why Is Absence Of The Good So Devastating?**

The reason that the absence of the good is so devastating is that it causes us to build The Wall inside. When we experience an absence of the good, we build The Wall for two reasons.

1. We see the Treasure Inside as the source of the problem. We believe we are being ignored and not loved because there is something wrong with us. It is our fault.
2. We experience the pain coming up from inside us, it doesn't feel good, and we have to do something to stop feeling it.

## We See The Treasure Inside As The Problem

When we are actively loved, it builds into us a sense of well being. On the other hand, when we are neglected, that builds into us a sense of inferiority. Children instinctively know that people give time to what is important to them. When parents don't actively love us, we realize there is a problem. We try everything we can to get them to fill that empty place inside us, but we never succeed. Finally we decide that the reason they are not loving us is because we aren't loveable. We decide this because that is the way little children think.<sup>3</sup>

**The "Absence of the Good" is devastating because it causes us to build The Wall inside.**

So if as a child I am not loved, then the problem must be in me. I conclude that I am not loveable, and I judge myself (I judge the Treasure Inside).

## We Have To Find A Way To Stop The Pain

This self-judgment is devastating to my Treasure Inside, because I was designed and intended by God to love myself. As I explained in Chapter 9, "There Is Buried Treasure," I become separated from myself, and I always feel the pain of this separation. This is the "Big Hurt," which is the worst emotional pain there is.

I would like you to again revisit the Big Hurt for a moment. This time remember an incident when you were rejected by a boyfriend or girlfriend, someone you liked a lot.

**Take a moment and allow yourself to feel how you felt then.**

That awful feeling is the feeling that little children experience when they are ignored. Imagine feeling that way all the time! That is the life experience of children whose parents don't pay attention to them. When

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<sup>3</sup> This way of thinking is called "egocentricity," and it is normal. Developmentally, small children's brains are not yet capable of putting themselves in another person's place. The world seems to them to revolve around them. Therefore little children think that they cause everything to happen. If daddy and mommy get a divorce, the child will often ask, "Do you think they would have stayed together if I had been a better little girl?" Little children aren't able to see that daddy and mommy have problems of their own.

parents never pay attention to their children they are rejecting them in a subtle way every moment of every day!

The pain is there all the time, and these children must find ways of keeping that pain at bay. They can't make their parents act differently, so they are stuck with the pain. The problem is that then the children come to believe that they themselves are the reason their parents aren't loving them. There is something wrong with them. They are "bad."

Since these children now believe that being bad is the very nature of who they are, there is no way to fix it. They cannot delete the source of the pain, because the one who is "bad" is a part of themselves. Though these children can't delete that part from which the pain arises, they can (and feel that they must) find a way to escape the pain. So they separate from themselves in the only way they can, by building The Wall. Then the wound is still inside, but the child doesn't have to feel it as intensely.

As I have said previously, this fleeing from the "Big Hurt" is what causes addictions and denial. This judgment of ourselves results in self-hatred, which is often referred to as "low self-esteem" or "shame." The definition of "shame" is "I am bad."

**The "Absence Of The Good" is the most disabling trauma we can experience as a child. It causes self-rejection and The "Big Hurt" that accompanies this judgment against ourselves.**

## **We Can't See It**

The consequences of Type A Trauma are very hard for us to see in ourselves for two reasons. First of all, there was not any single event to identify, as there is with Type B Trauma. Our trauma was more like the drip-drip-drip of a leaky faucet. We are not being loved in this moment, and it hurts. We are not being loved five minutes from now, and it still hurts. We are not being loved this afternoon, and it still hurts, etc. Since our parents are incapable of giving us the love we are continually needing and craving, relief in the form of loving attention never arrives.

The second reason Type A Trauma is so hard for us to see is that we don't feel the pain anymore. The Big Hurt impelled us to shut our conscious self off from the source of the pain - our Treasure Inside crying out. The Big Hurt was so painful that we

**Living separated from myself now feels "normal" to me, so I can't see that something was wrong with my childhood.**

needed to create defenses to avoid feeling it. The pain was too big to live with every moment of our life. Since relief in the form of love never arrived, our only way to avoid the pain was to build The Wall inside. To the degree that we were successful in building The Wall, to that degree we became unaware that there was ever a problem! Existing with The Wall inside then feels "normal" to us; so we may not even be aware that something was wrong with our childhood.

## What is "Normal?"

This is a huge question, and I will simply address it in respect to Type A Trauma. Children are adaptive and resilient. They can survive in all sorts of home environments, although they need a special sort of environment to thrive. When a childhood environment is less than optimal, a child has to find a way to get through each day. For each of us, when we were born, this was our first encounter with life on earth. We have to learn by experience. Unless our childhood is bad in the extreme, we come to see life as we experience it as "normal." After all, we have no other benchmark or standard for comparison. We may be aware that it wasn't pleasant, but usually we can find a way to make it tolerable. The Wall is a part of our way of adapting. Living with The Wall inside feels "normal" to us, because we cannot remember the earliest part of our life when we were still in communication with our Treasure Inside.<sup>4</sup>

## Bonding

A major focus of current psychological research is the phenomenon called "bonding." Bonding is a connection that occurs between a

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<sup>4</sup> See Endnote #10-1 for more on our inability to know what is "normal."

caregiver, usually the mother, and a small child. Bonding begins in the womb and continues for the early years of childhood. The most crucial period is from the pre-natal time to about eighteen months.

Bonding events actually affect the physical development of a child's growing brain. Through these bonding events there are certain messages that become built into the child's brain. When bonding successfully occurs, the messages that become a part of the child are: "Someone is loving me, so I must be loveable;" "My needs are going to be met;" "Mama is here for me, and so it is safe."

When bonding does not occur, the opposite messages become built into the child's brain: "Nobody is loving me, so I must not be loveable;" "My needs are not going to be met;" and "Nobody is here to protect me, so it isn't safe."

Since these messages have actually become a part of the child's brain structure, they constitute the way the child views the world. These perspectives then color all of his or her subsequent life experiences. An absence of bonding is a very deep and pervasive wound, which only the Lord can heal. And God can, because He provided a way by which the actual structure of a person's brain can be changed!<sup>5</sup>

## What We All Need

When we don't get what we need emotionally, we protect ourselves by shutting off the awareness of the "absence of the good" in our life. Since we are then oblivious to the absence of the good, we can't possibly tell you what is missing.

**There are five good things that we all need, as a child and as an adult.**

Exactly what is the "good" that we needed but didn't get? There are five things we all needed as we grew up, and still need as adults.

1. We need eight non-sexual meaningful touches in a day. When I first read this, I thought that was ridiculous. I didn't feel like I needed that. On the other hand, if someone had asked me whether I received this, I could have easily answered, "Seldom if ever." However, I was totally unaware that I needed these touches. My denial was very

effective. It was my protection from feeling the pain of not being actively loved.<sup>6</sup>

2. We need spoken words. Spoken words tell us that the other person knows we are present and that they desire to communicate with us. Being ignored is the opposite of this. Children would rather be loved than beaten, but they would rather be beaten than ignored. Being ignored tells us that we are not even worth the other person's time.
3. We need our parents to see high value in us, and to express it. When they genuinely appreciate us and compliment us, it makes us feel good. We think that because they are interested in us, we must be worthwhile. And they are telling us specific ways in which we are worthwhile. For instance, they might notice that we are good at math and will tell us something like, "You certainly have a gift with numbers. You are much better at math than I am." (Of course, the statements have to be true). The opposite of this is negative talk, such as "You are a lazy bum." These negative statements have the effect of adding to our self-judgment.
4. We need our parents to picture a special future for us. When they do this, we feel optimistic about the future, and we feel worthy of such a future. Statements like, "You are so good at math. Maybe someday you can teach it." The opposite would be a statement such as, "You'll never amount to anything."
5. We need our parents to actively help us to pursue our special future, as much as it lies within their means. Even if they don't have the resources they can help us to find ways to achieve our dreams. Such actions tell us that our parents really meant it when they affirmed our gifts and talents; that they genuinely see these attributes as worthwhile; and that they see us as valuable enough for them to put forth effort on our behalf. The opposite of this would be to force us to do what they want us to do, regardless of our desires and talents. For instance, they may have a family business and want us to take it over someday. Because of their own desire they are blind to the fact

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding the power of human touch: "Experiments with rabbits fed atherosclerosis-inducing diets show that those rabbits which are held and petted by laboratory workers tend not to get atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries). Those rabbits which are not held and petted tend to get atherosclerosis." (Whitfield, p.19). (Note: atherosclerosis is characterized by the deposit of plaque in arteries).

that we have different talents and desires. Experiencing this tells us that what we want, and who God made us to be, doesn't matter. Our needs are unimportant.

When we receive these five good things, we are blessed, and we prosper. Behind all of these elements of blessing is one enormous theme. When parents truly relate to their child in these ways, it is abundantly evident that they are students of the child. They see their child as important enough to spend time, attention, and energy focused on him or her.

Those parents then understand the unique person that God created their child to be, and are delighted with who he or she is. For example, an athletic father is willing and able to delight in his artistic and uncoordinated son. He does not try to push him into athletics, but enthusiastically promotes the son's artistic pursuits. This is sometimes a challenge for parents, and can require a sacrifice of their own dreams for their child.

When this sort of awareness happens, children know their parents are paying close attention to them, as well as being delighted in them. This causes children to conclude that they must be valuable and loveable just the way they are. Their parents love them, so they must be loveable. Children are thus enabled to obey God's command to love themselves, and so life will go well for them.

## **Read The Blessing**

These five elements I have just listed are my paraphrase of what Gary Smalley and John Trent wrote in their book, The Blessing. I greatly encourage you to prayerfully read their book. You will then find it much easier to identify your own Type A Trauma.

As you read this book, take plenty of time to reflect. At the end of each chapter ask yourself if you received that particular element of the blessing. Again, as was my case, you may not have any awareness of the hurt connected with not receiving it. But you can probably answer the objective question of whether or not you received it. Be aware that to the degree that you didn't receive the blessing, you were wounded with a Type A Trauma.

Though Gary Smalley and John Trent have focused their book on children, the truth is that we all need to receive these blessings throughout our whole lives. In addition, if we give these blessings to

those who are important to us (spouse, children, friends), the relationship will never wither up and die. When we give another person these blessings, they shine as though all the lights have been turned on inside them; and they will always want to be around us. After all, we are giving them what they need the most – love. If we find this difficult to do, that is bad fruit, and we need to find the bad root so that we can be healed and begin to do this naturally. We can't bless ourselves or others through our own willpower, but we will be able to as we are changed into the image of Jesus.

## Summary

There are two types of trauma that we can experience as a child: the "Bad" (Type B), and the "Absence of the Good" (Type A). Of the two, we are more aware of the "Bad," but the "Absence of the Good" is actually more devastating. The "Absence of the Good" denies us the fulfillment of our need for love. The most damaging result from this type of trauma is the destruction of our self-image and all the bad fruit stemming from judging ourselves.

Because the "Absence of the Good" is a silent killer, we are much less aware of its' presence. Because of the consistent pain that neglect causes, we build The Wall to separate us from the pain. Then, since we can no longer feel the pain, we are very unlikely to know that we are hurting inside. Thus the wounds may remain, and our lives don't go well.

If we have experienced a lot of bad things as a child, this may make it difficult to realize we also suffered from Type A Trauma. When a person has experienced a large amount of the "Bad," this hurt can speak so loudly that it covers up any awareness of the "Absence of the Good." But when there has been the "Bad," there has always been "Absence of the Good." Loving, healthy, sensitive parents don't subject their children to Type B Trauma. They could not bring themselves to hurt their children.

Though the "Absence of the Good" causes deep wounds in our very foundation, God's provision for us through the blood and the cross of Jesus is sufficient to heal us.