

My Lexicon of Trauma-Informed Spiritual Direction

Shannon Michael Pater, Psy.D. | Trauma-Informed Spiritual Director

www.noticethejourney.com | @NoticeJourney | smpater@noticethejourney.com

These are words I use in my practice of Notice the Journey Trauma-Informed Spiritual Direction, a specialized method of spiritual direction that I developed (and am continuing to develop). I frequently add words and edit definitions; current edition is marked at the top.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

agency

the ability to make your own free choices.

alchemy

an ancient protoscience that, among other practices, sought to turn lead into gold. The etymology is complicated and crosses several linguistic traditions; my favorite definition is “the process of transmutation by which to fuse or reunited with with the divine or original form.” When I use it in TISD, I’m usually referencing the journey of transforming our suffering into *redemptive empathy*.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

attachment (theory)

the affectional (emotional) bond between an individual and the attachment figure, e.g. a child and a caregiver. The theory is that we are born with a need to form close bonds for safety and emotional regulation. If these needs are not met, the relationship to Self and others is disrupted.

autonomic nervous system

the "operating system" that runs in the background. The ANS regulates bodily functions that are mostly unconscious (e.g. heart and breathing rates, vasodilation and blood pressure, digestion and elimination, pupillary responses, etc.).

The ANS is a biological *polarity* that consists of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). Both are needed for wellbeing.

Very broadly speaking, the SNS is responsible for "fight or flight" and the PNS for "rest and digest, calm & connection."

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

Beloved/Dear Heart

These are two terms that I often use to address other people. They are in *no way* meant to be “cute” or “sweet,” although they may be tender.

They are meant to invoke the core unalienable, indestructible, authentic Self that is at the core of every person, even when concealed.

I am sensitive to the cultural appropriation in the use of the Sanskrit greeting “Namaste,” and while I do use it, I instead generally address a person as “Beloved” or “Dear Heart.”

I also use the terms for the sake of self- and co-regulation. Even when my kindness fails, my equanimity collapses, and I am dysregulated, I still try to use the titles in order to remind *myself and the other* of what is true, even if unavailable and obscured in the moment.

compassion

a heart courageous act of turning toward our own suffering and that of others, not away. It is NOT the same as being “nice.” It seeks to bear witness, provide skillful support, and alleviate suffering. It is a critical component of *redemptive empathy*.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

contemplative curiosity

see also *felt sense* and *Self*

a non-judgmental wondering, witnessing, and noticing what is being held in the entirety of our experience. It recognizes that Wisdom speaks most clearly in silence and rest.

Frequent questions:

- Where is "this" being held in the body;
- How is the breath in the present moment;
- Whose voice said "that;"
- Is "this" true;
- What comes next?

dissociation scale

dissociation is a scale of cutoff.

We can dissociate from parts of ourself by denying their existence (creating exiles); we can keep distance from those who have hurt us or of whom we are afraid.

Toxic theology and spiritual abuse can cause us to dissociate from spiritual/faith communities.

A few examples: bored daydreaming, detachment, depersonalization, desensitization, or complete shut down. The climate crisis is a dissociation from the planet.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

dysregulation

see also *Window of Tolerance*

being “out of control,” meaning that the *autonomic nervous system* is increasingly “driving” our behavior (thoughts, feelings, actions, sensations, etc.). The four most common variations of reactivity are fight, flight, freeze, feed, and fornicate (there are also other automatic responses).

Dysregulation is not a moral failing (meaning a question of our inherent goodness); it is a part of being human. It can, however, have consequences.

Part of the key to managing dysregulation is to increase our *Window of Tolerance* and to learn *self-regulating* techniques.

exteroception

see also *felt sense*, *interoception*, *neuroception*, and *proprioception*

sense of stimuli that originates outside of the body. In classic yoga, the withdrawal from the senses (pratyahara) is part of the pathway to *samadhi*.

However, persons suffering from trauma often need to reconnect to external stimuli as a means of (re)connecting neural pathways of safety.

Avoidance and dissociation as a result of the *dysregulation* that comes from being outside the *Window of Tolerance* is not the same as yogic pratyahara.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

felt sense

see also *exteroception*,
interoception, *neuroception*, and
proprioception

the fullness of being alive, whole, integrated. First coined by [Eugene Gendlin](#) (*Focusing*, 1978) and significantly developed in the work of [Peter Levine](#), it is often a pre-verbal sensation; it can be difficult to name, even by the most skilled poets. It's the inner knowledge and bodily-felt meaning. It is a synthesis of awareness of bodily sensations, emotions, memories, and consciousness, but mostly carried by implicit knowing (that which you know but cannot yet fully experience or express).

For example, it's the sensations you experience, even before the greeting, when seeing a beloved after a period of absence; it's the expansiveness you feel when the sense of separateness falls away when you are in nature.

The felt sense is the deep knowing held by silence, awe, mystery, and centered intuition. It's just "there."

The felt sense has elements of the four perceptions: exteroception, proprioception, interoception, and neuroception.

[Here's a video](#) of Peter Levine discussing felt sense.

Four Noble Truths (Buddhism)

Dukkha (the truth of suffering), Samudaya (the truth of the origins of suffering), Nirodha (the truth of the end of suffering), and Magga (the truth of the path to end suffering).

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

four perceptions

see also *felt sense* and *somatic wisdom*

- *exteroception*: sense of stimuli outside of the body;

- *proprioception*: sense of body position, movement, and equilibrium;
- *interoception*: sense of the internal state of the body;
- *neuroception*: subconscious neural process of sensing danger, threat, and safety.

glancing

“bearing, but not staring” at uncomfortable feelings and stimulation. It’s the liminal space between avoidance and overwhelm; it’s a skillful means of staying inside the *Window of Tolerance*.

hermeneutics

our methods and skillsets of interpretation. Our hermeneutic of a red traffic light means “stop.” We have hermeneutics for poetry, plays, sacred writing, and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

interoception

see also *felt sense*, *exteroception*, *neuroception*, and *proprioception*

the awareness of what is going on inside your body (feelings of hunger or thirst, pain and pleasure, location, etc.)

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

miksang (Tibetan)

a Tibetan word that means “good eye,” it is a form of contemplative photography that attempts to have a “pure perception” moment where the space between the “clicked” and the “clicker” dissolves and is captured in the “click.” It’s one of my spiritual practices and definitely helps me “be with better” my own self, others, and the planet. You can see some of [my clicks here](#).

moral injury

a traumatic bruise or wound that comes from violating our sense of morality or witnessing others doing so. It calls into question ours and others’ fundamental goodness.

neuroception

see also *felt sense*, *exteroception*, *interoception*, and *proprioception*

a significant contribution from the work of [Stephen Porges](#) on polyvagal theory. It is the bodily detection of safety, danger and life threat.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

Persistent, Invasive, Chronic Stress (PICS)

see also *social location*

The stress that comes from not being seen, heard, and safe for something fundamental to your person; an attack on your person for your *social location*. The stress comes from you simply trying to exist in the world against the tyranny of the "normative."

exactly what it sounds like:

- Persistent (intensity): keeps coming, despite your resistance; obstinate in its presence, a thick, shadowy pall that seems impervious to light;

- Invasive: intruding into the space of *you*, without your permission and usually over your objection; it's in the air you breath, suffocating by its presence, leaving you with a subtle (or not subtle) *felt sense* of not being safe, feeling a potential for danger, even experiencing life threat;
- Chronic (frequency): happening regularly, recurring, repeating, frequent, can feel never-ending, sticky.

An important point to note: *being* safe is important; *feeling* safe is equally important. Both are "real." Someone may never actually strike you or even threaten to do so; but the feeling like they might can be activating your nervous system for safety and defense.

polarity theory

a non-dualist perspective that acknowledges most seemingly opposites in conflict are a connected pair out of balance.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

proprioception

see also *felt sense*, *exteroception*,
interoception, and *neuroception*.

the sense of body position,
movement, and equilibrium.

redemptive empathy

grounded in the awareness that
trauma and suffering are a "fact of
life" (see *Four Noble Truths*), there
is a potential of post-traumatic
growth that in no way glorifies
suffering.

Those who become good
stewards of their own suffering
are better equipped to
authentically bear witness and
skillfully support those who are in
pain.

From the mud, the lotus rises.

The resurrected Christ still
bears the wounds of crucifixion.

The flowers of spring smell
sweetest to the one who has
crossed through the long nights
of a harsh winter.

salaam (Arabic)

see also *samadhi*, *satori*, *shanti*,
and *shalom*.

an Arabic linguistic kin to
shalom and carries many of the
same meanings. It is a blessing
that you be free from harm and
invokes one of the names of the
divine.

italicized words have their own entry;
[Underscored](#) indicates a clickable link.

samadhi (Sanskrit)

see also *salaam*, *satori*, *shanti*, and *shalom*.

a concept from Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and yoga philosophy. A Sanskrit word with multiple possible translations, but my favorite is: a putting or joining together; to acquire integration, wholeness, truth. For me, it's the sloughing off of perceived dualism and finding absorption into the radical connection, the unity, that was always present and waiting to be discovered.

sankalpa (Sanskrit)

a sacred intention.

satori (Japanese)

see also *salaam*, *samadhi*, *shanti*, and *shalom*.

the "goal" in Zen Buddhism of intuitive, [inner awakening](#) or enlightenment; clear seeing. It is related to [kenshō](#), "seeing one's true nature." Trauma often distorts our perception.

Self (intentionally capitalized)

the fullness of our being. It is the body (soma), breath, nervous system, feelings and cognition, sensations, and memories. It is our enfleshment of a sacredness; it is individual, but not separate from all that is.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

self-regulation

see also *dysregulated* and *self-soothe*

mindfully inside the *Window of Tolerance*. The ability to act with *agency* despite competing opinions from within and without. The ability to *self-soothe* when irritated, agitated, anxious, or in distress. The ability to skillfully utilize interior and exterior resources to stay mindful in the present moment.

self-soothe

see also *dysregulated* and *self-regulation*

techniques of *self-regulation* that help you to stay present with discomfort while recognizing that "this, too, shall pass." Examples include restorative yoga, pranayama (breathing techniques), somatic practices, managing self talk, etc. Here's a good article.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

shalom (Hebrew)

see also *salaam*, *samadhi*, *satori*,
and *shanti*.

a Hebrew word for "peace" that carries a surplus of meaning like *samadhi* in Sanskrit. Unlike *shanti*, *shalom* most definitely carries an external orientation. *Shalom* is rooted in justice within and between communities. It is wellbeing and wholeness. *Shalom* requires that we live justly with creation and is the foundation of covenant living. Walter Brueggemann describes it as "peaceable life together...so that everyone has enough resources to live a life of safety and dignity."

shanti (Sanskrit)

see also *salaam*, *samadhi*, *satori*,
and *shalom*.

a Sanskrit word that means "peace." It is an inner peace of mind, body, and essence/spirit. Without inner peace, there can be no relational peace; even in the absence of external peace, you can grow *shanti* as an internal quality.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

social location

see also *Chronic, Persistent, Invasive Stress*.

the social categories that shape our perception of ourselves and others. For example, gender, race, affectional orientation, age, socio-economic status, caste, religion, etc.

We often struggle internally with our own terms of social location; we may claim them and later slough or redefine them.

We may have internalized oppression as a result of our social location. When our social location grants us "privilege" (meaning, making some things automatically easier), we may have internalized dominance.

Chronic, Persistent, Invasive Stress is a result of injuries resulting from our social location.

somatic wisdom

"soma" refers to the body; this is the wisdom held in the body. As Bessel van der Kolk says of trauma, "the issue is in the tissue." Sometimes the body has information and wisdom that is pre-verbal and unavailable to "the brain."

In TISD, I often ask:

- What do you notice in your body;
- How/where is the body holding "this;"
- How did your body feel after...?

Peter Levine has a highly effective method for trauma treatment called Somatic Experiencing.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

Spirit (capital "S")

the visible and invisible web of radical connection of everything to everything. It has lots of names. It holds the liminal space of the seeming opposites in unity and wholeness.

spirit (lowercase "s")

see also *Self*.

the spark of *Spirit* that animates our living. The energy that moves within the nervous system; the radical enfleshment of Spirit.

spiritual bypassing

coined by John Welwood, it is using a pseudo-spirituality to avoid or sidestep "unfinished business." My childhood pastor use to say it this way: some people are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good. Here's a helpful article with examples; and another.

spiritual directee

one who seeks *spiritual direction*.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

spiritual direction

see also *Trauma-Informed
Spiritual Direction (TISD)*

a specialized and supportive relationship of contemplative and skillful listening between a *spiritual director* and *spiritual directee* with the *sankalpa* of growing safe and nurturing connections within the Self and in our relationships with others, Spirit, and the planet. Modern and ever evolving, it is an ancient practice found within many of the *Wisdom Traditions*.

spiritual director

the skillful, compassionate companion with specialized training who creates a safe space for *spiritual direction*.

spiritual formation

the intentional use of *spiritual practices* to grow *spirituality*.

spiritual practice

see also *trauma-informed spiritual practice*.

any practice that increases the *felt sense* of safe and nurturing connections to *Self, Spirit, others* and/or the planet.

spirituality

the *felt sense* of safe and nurturing connections with one's *Self, others, Spirit, and the planet*.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

Threshold of Transformation

see also *Window of Tolerance*

the margins at the inside edge and just outside the *Window of Tolerance* where we are still able to self-soothe and stay present with the stimulation of irritation, agitation, anxiety, uncertainty, and other feelings that bring discomfort.

It is the edges between self-*self-regulation* and *dysregulation* where growth and change can happen.

toxic theology and spiritual abuse

theologies that exclude and assert universal certainty instead of include and assert universal connection and community; spiritual practices that “bypass” pain and suffering instead of connecting, nurturing, and transforming.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

trauma

“Trauma” defies a single definition; these sutras (threads) that hold the fabric of my experience and concept:

- a chronic state of disconnection ([Porges](#));
- an experience that overwhelms our ability to cope and pushes us outside our *Window of Tolerance* ([Dan Siegel](#));

- [Peter Levine](#) emphasizes the “perception” of an event(s) as critical; he suggests that trauma lives more in the nervous system and the body than the event itself.
- One of my favorite [Bessel van der Kolk](#) quotes is “the issue is in the tissue.” He means that trauma lives in our bodies.
- Whatever else trauma may be, it is a spiritual wound.

trauma sensitive

see *trauma-informed*.

trauma-informed

grounded in trauma studies and neuroscience, as an adjective, it indicates a dedication to (re)establish safety and connection.

The term “trauma sensitive” is also used in some settings (and I will let them define their term). Intending absolutely no disrespect, “sensitive” did not communicate the “strength of term” that I wanted to create. I intentionally describe my method of spiritual direction (TISD) as trauma-informed to indicate the architecture within the contemplative method.

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

Trauma-Informed Spiritual Direction (TISD)

see also *felt sense, salaam, samadhi, Self, shalom, shanti, Spirit, spiritual direction, trauma-informed spiritual practices, and Wisdom Traditions.*

a specialized method of *spiritual direction* that seeks to establish, cultivate, and/or restore safety and connection to the strained or severed *felt sense* within the *Self* and our relationships with others, *Spirit*, and the planet through *trauma-informed spiritual practices*. Drawing from the deep wells of the *Wisdom Traditions* and modern neuroscience, it is a supported journey toward *samadhi, shanti, shalom, and salaam.*

trauma-informed spiritual practices

spiritual practices intentionally designed from a *trauma-informed* perspective, blending ancient techniques from the *Wisdom Traditions* (meditation, prayer, breathing, ritual, readings, poetry, etc.) and the neurobiology of modern trauma studies.

They are often micro-practices that utilize *contemplative curiosity* of the *felt sense* using the *four perceptions* and are designed to increase a sense of safety and connection to *Self, others, Spirit, and the natural world.*

italicized words have their own entry;
Underscored indicates a clickable link.

Window of Tolerance

see also *Threshold of Transformation*.

Here is a link to a longer paper I wrote: [Window of Tolerance](#)

introduced and developed by Dr. [Dan Siegel](#), it is the range of our ability to adapt and cope to stimulus and stress before a defense mechanism is activated (turn on and turned up). If we are pushed outside our WOT by others or circumstances, or if we ourselves “jump” outside our WOT, we become increasingly dysregulated.

Spiritual growth and change often happens at the *Threshold of Transformation*.

Wisdom Traditions

the deep sources of perennial wisdom. Wisdom is the discernment of using knowledge and experience skillfully for the wellbeing of oneself, others, and the planet.

The Wisdom Traditions are often located in sacred texts, mystical experiences, the seasons and cycles of the planet, and suffering.