

**The Interplay of Trauma, Memory and Healing in Brent Runyon's
*The Burn Journals***

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Abstract

There is a complex psychological, emotional, and neurological interaction between trauma and memory. It is not only an experience on a physical or emotional level, but also an experience of our cognitive power. When one undergoes a traumatic experience, the recall and forgetting of memories are part of the process. Bessel van der Kolk and Sigmund Freud's theories discuss the use of sensory memory and the fragmented nature of remembering, where forgetting the traumatic experience serves as a safeguard for the brain, which, in survival mode, releases stress hormones that can alter normal memory processing. The following relation between trauma and remembering, crisis and memory, as presented in *The Burn Journals* by Brent Runyon, will serve as a case study for the paper and introduce the interrelationship of trauma, memory, and healing.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Remembering, Forgetting, Healing.

Introduction:

There is a complex interaction between psychological, emotional, and neurological aspects of trauma and memory. They are closely related and occupy an important niche in the literature on psychology, exploring how an individual stores, processes, and recollects some unpleasant experience. Deeply embedded in society, they affect individuals and groups. Trauma can be described as a heavy feeling that creates an imprint on a person that has lasting effects on their behavior, relations, and perception, where memory is both a storehouse of past experiences and pain in the present. Collective memory is a common issue in society, where everyone has to choose between accepting the painful thing and repressing it. The healing process is, however, a process that takes time, and it requires deliberate efforts to instill trust,

develop resilience, and confront the source of the trauma. From society's end, it needs justice, reconciliation, and open discussion to make the conversation about suicide and recovery normal. Bessel van der Kolk, as one of the key themes of his masterpiece, *The Body Keeps the Score*, argues that studying trauma, memory, and healing as interaction helps a community to address its history and ought to strive to make its future kinder and fairer. This interaction is more apparent through the prism of a personal experience. In his account of *The Burn Journals*, American author Brent Runyon discusses his own traumatic experience and provides an in-depth presentation of these processes. Runyon has written a journey that narrates how he impulsively set himself on fire and recovered. It was a case study of disrupted memory and the process of healing as a fragmented and transformative process as a result of trauma. It reveals the manner in which discontinuous memory is an adaptation mechanism to his emotional trauma of the incident, as well as a significant role in his healing process. Recalling and forgetting are processes that involve a person's experience of a traumatic event. This inquiry will assist us in comprehending the connection between trauma and memory and how (altered and fragmented) memory is a constituent element of the healing process.

Trauma refers to an emotional or psychological reaction to an unpleasant experience. It alters the memory retrieval process, and this blockage of memory in trauma is a conscious or unconscious coping mechanism. Various psychologists and clinical scholars have proposed several theories to substantiate the statement. The work of Kolk mentioned above, contributes to our knowledge of trauma as it focuses on the neurological and physiological aspects of traumatic experience. He proposes that survivors are incapable of remembering things linearly and that, as a result, partial, sensory-grounded memory occurs. This framework indicates the brain's inability to cohere the memories and recollections of traumatic events into a coherent whole. This idea is covered in the 11th chapter, "Uncovering Secrets: The Problem of Traumatic Memory," where Kolk remarks that once a person is in a traumatic condition, excessive adrenaline discharge closes off the rational mode and, therefore, "the imprints of traumatic experience are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces" (178). As an illustration, throughout, Runyon recalls that upsetting experience in flashbacks and scattered parts. This resonates with the intrinsic memory and trauma. On the same note, the early psychoanalytic theories by Sigmund Freud provided the basis of memory and trauma. His theories highlight the effect of trauma on memory through the prism of repression,

which implies that the repression of the memory of the traumatic event can be regarded as one of the methods of defense mechanisms to overcome the trauma. It forces the traumatic thought into the unconscious mind to evade mental harm. These concepts were also addressed by Freud's daughter, Anna, in her article "The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence," which examined the various mechanisms of defense used to cope with traumatic situations. According to theories of Kolk and Freud, the survivors of the trauma cannot recall the whole event and forget the bits unconsciously. Sensory memory is essential in this situation, as the person can recall his experiences through his senses, such as smell and sound. Runyon describes his physical and emotional pain using sensory inputs such as the odor of the burning flesh to the odor of the antiseptic smell of the hospital. "The unbearable heaviness of Remembering", Chapter 12, is about these sensory memories, which, according to Kolk, survivors keep in their memories, and to which they continue to give flashbacks and somatic symptoms, years after. The fact that Runyon can describe this sensory memory gives readers a physical sense of his trauma, which creates the connection between individual empathy and societal empathy.

The forgetting of the traumatic experience is a protective mechanism for the brain, which enters the stress mode, releasing stress hormones that alter the normal processing of memory. In this scenario, it is the survival of the brain, not the preservation of the fractured memory. The role of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline influences the memory of traumatic survivors. They may cause hypermnnesia (recalling the most insignificant and particular facts) or amnesia (memory lapses). That is why one can meet a person who recalls the slightest and the least detailed details of their traumatic and painful experience, whereas another one does not remember it fully, but in bits. Neuroscientific research demonstrates that brain regions such as the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex influence how the brain processes traumatic memories. People also tend to tell disjointed, broken stories, as Brent Runyon's memoir presents his life in a nonlinear fashion. Brent began to lose his senses and confuse himself when he set himself on fire. Indicatively, upon waking up in the hospital after the incident, he is in a state of confusion, and he is not in touch with what he has done. There are aspects which he recalls so clearly, such as when he lit the match, "I lit the match. Nothing happens. I bring it closer to my wrist, and then it goes up, all over me, eating through my everywhere. I can't breathe. I'm screaming, "Craig! Craig!" (20). On the contrary, difficulty in recalling other items, "I do not

remember. That's true. I don't remember. I do not remember anything about myself back then"(159).

The shattered memory of Runyon is in agreement with Janet's theory of "traumatic dissociation", which elaborates on the compartmentalization of memory to evade the emotional load of the traumatic event. When he commences his therapy, Runyon swings between his clear state and the one of confusion, where he is, at the same time, capable of telling a particular event that occurred, and at the same time, declares, "I do not know", or "I do not remember" (159). It passes the message of the memory experience of trauma survivors. The reason why it should be avoided is the emotional agony of reexperiencing the trauma, as well as the social stigma attached to suicide. The fear of being judged and stigmatized, and the inner conflict of the survivor, is expressed through the unwillingness of Runyon to acknowledge the cause of his suicidal attempt, which postpones the recovery. Such fragmented narrating is indicative of the way the brain is concerned with survival by crippling memory integration. It also illuminates on how our society approaches suicide, whether as a societal health issue, or as a stigma or taboo. One of the instances from the text is when healthcare workers were taking Runyon in the ambulance, the first thought in his head was, "I wonder if anybody in the neighbourhood is watching. I don't want them to know", and it demonstrates that the societal aspect cannot be neglected (22). The role of society is crucial in the lives of trauma survivors. It tends to suppress a traumatized person. The stigma increases the guilt and shame of the survivor, which influences the capability to comprehend and process the experience. The effect of the stigma on Runyon, leading to shame and guilt, is seen through how he responds to the questions with the psychologist, as he does not answer the questions directly. It was due to fear of being judged and branded as insane. The trend reflects the larger outlook of the society in which the trauma experienced by a person is either overlooked or kept under wraps, meaning that the society cannot address its painful histories. It brings out the message that suicide or trauma survivors must be made to feel supported so that they can recover.

The process of healing, however, begins when a person begins facing the trauma. Here, the role of memory is significant, as it causes pain and serves as a means of recovery. The healing process for Runyon begins as he faces his painful experience and slowly recovers his memories. He was, at first, resorting to avoidance and repression as defense mechanisms to escape the feelings of shame and guilt in

society. The emotion of shame prevents him from expressing his feelings and shows how emotional load corrupts memory. However, as time passes, when he begins his therapy and treatment, he can face his broken memory and come to terms with the reality that led him into the path of healing. Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPR) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) are two trauma-related therapies that help patients heal. In the case of Judith Herman, as discussed in his book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence, Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, the reexperience of the trauma under a controlled setting enabled the brain to process the trauma over time, which lessened the intensity of emotions by facing it. Such a therapeutic approach is exemplified by Runyon's gradual encounter with his experience. His journey reveals the conflict between the healing power of remembering and the brain's method of forgetting, which safeguards the memory from emotional charge. This duality is observed when Runyon remembers some selective memories, such as his stay in the hospital, the smell, and the nurses. On the contrary, he does not give the motivation behind his attempted suicide. However, it is demonstrated that it is difficult and painful to forget and confront the trauma to recover. This gradual treatment assists the person and the brain in processing, reframing the memory, and reawakening the identity. It has been discovered that the memory of an experience is better recalled and reexperienced in a controlled setting, and that, through gradual therapy, the brain can retrieve the memory in a more integrated form rather than fragmented. This once again reiterates the theory by Bessel van der Kolk that an individual must take ownership of his body and memories to heal, indeed.

The act of writing, as mentioned by James Pennebaker in his famous work, *Writing About Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process*, is, in itself, therapeutic. It would be beneficial to write their version of the story, as it would help the survivor remember the events and address them, moving them down the road to recovery. It offers survivors agency over their narratives, taking control back of their experiences. Evidence underlines the treatment outcome of expressive writing. He explains that by writing down the traumatic experience, the individual can process it. The personal trauma is written where the disjointed memory is transformed into a narrative. The process of organized writing allows a survivor to face his/her trauma and shed the emotional baggage that s/he has been carrying. In the example of a research conducted by James Pennebaker in his another book, *Opening Up by Writing it Down*, one of the participants remarks, "To have to write emotions and feelings

helped me understand how I felt and why” (10). The practice may foster a sense of strength and reconciliation regarding their traumatic experience in life. What was once a painful, traumatizing story becomes acceptance, growth, resilience, and healing. This therapeutic effect is emphasized by the fact that Runyon did not write his story until ten years later, as Stressing puts it, because “he waited so long to tell his story, and yet he made it feel so immediate” (Miller). By waiting to accept the situation and then returning to it, this way of healing is much more viable than retraumatization. In creating a distance between the efforts to re-create the trauma, Runyon makes the duality of memory emerge as the source of pain and healing. According to his work, the writing is not only a way to relive the trauma but an active process of experiencing the trauma and a therapeutic way to create acceptance of the latter. This would enable the survivor and therapist to be more effective in the recovery process.

The contribution of friends and family is a significant component of the recovery process of a trauma survivor. One of the motifs in the memoir is the relationship that Runyon has with his family. His parents' apparent distress also contributes to the feelings of guilt and shame, and this display of family dynamics contributes to the situation of recovery. This demonstrates that family reactions can be either detrimental or beneficial to healing. Based on the theory of attachment formulated by John Bowlby, a safe relationship with the family supports trauma processing, and emotional support helps recovery. In his work, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*, he had mentioned that, "All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures"(11). Likewise, the relentless support of his parents enabled Runyon to unleash the emotional mess he had gone through, such as the time when Runyon was skeptical about anyone who could love him once more due to his disfigured body, his mother's word of love and assurance made him “feel better to hear her say that” (51). Runyon recalls the kind nurse who took care of him and made him feel like a human being once again. It also highlights the importance of society in alleviating the emotional trauma load. The work portrays how family and emotional support from peers and the community are among the factors that allow the patient to heal. This makes it easier for the survivor to find his way back into society as a normal human being, without feeling alienated. Emotional resilience should be supported by a secure family and society that can help them process trauma.

Another significant factor is the theme of identity, whilst one is going through trauma. This is a common theme in the literature of traumas in which the survivors find it hard to identify themselves and define their own identity, and fail to strike a balance between their identity before the trauma and their identity after the trauma. The struggle that Runyon goes through is symbolic. Runyon never forgot that he was disfigured, and his physical scar constantly reminded him of his traumatic experience. He did not enjoy seeing it: "I hate the way it looks, and I cry," which highlights the fact that visible scars remind him of physical pain and strengthen his struggles to negotiate with the perception of self (39). This also extended to a perception of being alienated by his peers, too, and this contributes to his identity crisis. It emphasizes the connection between memory and self-perception. In this case, restoring identity that has been derailed is a major aspect of recovery. As posted by Kolk, the phenomenon of trauma is not only a mental process but also something present in the body. Trauma is stored in the body and expressed through memory; this is how the body recalls the trauma and the specific sensations. The survivor can interpret his scars, physical limitations, or emotional reactions as constant reminders of his awkward trauma, and it may be hard to have a complete picture of oneself as a whole and intact. Runyon is obsessed with his scar as it is his body restoring its health after the trauma, and it has turned into a witness and evidence of pain. It suggests that rebuilding identity and recovering agency over the body are significant to recovery. The fact that Runyon accepts his scar is a means of restoring his sense of self-identity, "I'm not going to cover anything up. This is me" (143).

Autobiographical works are relevant when it is time to address such issues as trauma and memory. *The Burn Journals* by Brett Runyon can be taken as a case study. Clinical research or reports only convey information on the surface, not going deep into one's mind. In this case, the autobiographical works analyze and describe, using personal experience, what enters a person's mind after the trauma. It reveals the ways the survivor perceives, remembers, and processes trauma. These writings are a crude and personal experience of a person and confirm the trauma of people who have experienced a similar condition, which creates a feeling of hope and truth. Since Clare Martin, the daughter of a suicidal parent, is in support of not glamorizing suicide but putting the issue of depression in adolescence in perspective, as she said, "I think this gives teens a clue about how to assess what, to them, is a hugely bleak situation and put it into perspective", which offers readers a glimpse of the indestructibility they will need to overcome the darkest moment in their lives (Miller). He includes, "read

this book, and you can see, one, that you are certainly not alone, and two, you will get the point that this is a bump, not a crisis, that it is something you could overcome" (Miller).

In conclusion, *The Burn Journals* by Brent Runyon provides a perspective on the issue of memory and trauma and their difficulties and opportunities, and serves as an effective tool to comprehend the connection of trauma, memory, and healing. His autobiographical story reveals the two-sidedness of memory, in which, on the one hand, the brain safeguards by repressing certain examples. Conversely, one must face pain to recover. The personal version of accounts given by the first-hand survivor gives the psychological terrain of a victim of the trauma. Guilt, shame, and fear of judgment recur throughout the work, conveying the message that it is not the event itself but its emotional consequences that matter. The work is based on the broken memories of the events that led to the process of setting oneself on fire, and it was not an emergency decision of Runyon, but rather the climax of emotional stress. Some of the most prominent theorists, such as Bessel Van der Kolk and Sigmund Freud, and trauma-related therapies, such as EMDR and CPT, discussed how structured memory retrieval and processing can result in eventual healing through gaining a sense of self and acceptance. The experience that Runyon goes through as a survivor of trauma is very delicate and reveals what psychological state a trauma victim experiences and what it takes to emerge out of the experience and recover. Runyon brings to the fore the complexity of memory and its protective mechanism by casting light on the obscurity of the trauma and the extremely emotional and psychological reactions to it. His journey is a confirmation that healing is not a simple process, it encounters fragmented memories, the recall and forgetting, facing and coming to terms with the trauma, and, someday, leads to healing. It is about how an individual copes with trauma by use of repression, disassociation, and fragmented memory, and confrontation results in healing. Finally, *The Burn Journals* serve as a heartrending testament to the human species' ability to cope with trauma and to memory's capacity to transform, emerge later, and be healed.

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