

Restoration or Inflammation?

Musings on the Interface of Adventist Culture and the Realm of Trauma Studies

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Culture encompasses a group's total way of life—how its members relate to one another and to the world around them. Biologically speaking, it is the environment that sustains and encourages growth. Church culture is formed by all of us; it grows top down, bottom up, and side to side. Culture does not develop through a once-a-week event—it is the air we breathe and the water in which we swim. While a church service can shape culture, culture itself reaches far beyond the sanctuary.

This paper offers an overview of trauma-healing theories grounded in contemporary research and explores parallels between Adventist theology and current trauma-therapeutic modalities. As a case study, it examines church leadership efforts to foster healing in post-genocide Rwanda, highlighting the work of Carl Wilkens—whose vocational direction was forever changed by his immersion in the trauma of that event. The paper invites readers to consider how Adventist culture, at its best and its worst, intersects with the broader culture of trauma healing.

While the church cannot replace professional therapy, it can be a deeply supportive community that promotes healing. The process of healing from trauma shares much with the path of discipleship—both are embodied, narrative, relational, and moral. Both are spiritual and, in many ways, miraculous processes that unfold unpredictably over time. Emotional trauma, first formally described decades after the publication of the Adventist classic *Ministry of Healing*, is notably absent from the Loma Linda University Adventist Health Study. Yet Adventism, with its emphasis on holistic well-being, is uniquely positioned to engage the work of trauma recovery. A

culture that nurtures healing from trauma is also one where discipleship thrives. Both healing and discipleship flourish in the same soil—safe, sacred, and soul-restoring. Healing from trauma, like discipleship, requires the courage to rewrite one’s story.

With the rise of developmental psychopathology, interpersonal neurobiology, and neuroimaging, trauma studies have advanced dramatically in the last 50 years. Peter Levine asserts that trauma causes a loss of connection—to oneself, to one’s body, to others, and to the world. Bessel van der Kolk observes that “the body keeps the score,” carrying the record of trauma across generations. Judith Herman envisions ultimate healing as the moment when survivors reclaim agency and reengage society, strengthened by the scars of their past.

Trauma occurs when an individual experiences threat combined with powerlessness or loss of agency. It distorts the body’s stress response, fragments the nervous system, and often disrupts relationships precisely when human connection is most needed. For decades, neurology taught that the adult nervous system was static. Today, abundant research on neuroplasticity affirms the nervous system’s capacity to adapt and rewire. This discovery offers profound hope for trauma recovery—it suggests that body and mind can be reconnected, validating the ancient Christian virtue of hope: the hope of healing and renewal.

To be fully human is to experience integration—body and brain, reason and emotion working in harmony. A “shut down” nervous system after trauma cannot access the full wisdom of the brain. Functional neuroimaging vividly reveals how trauma deactivates key right-brain circuits. The cerebral cortex—responsible for higher cognition—relies on communication between its left hemisphere (language, logic) and right hemisphere (emotion, imagery, perception) via the corpus callosum. Trauma disrupts this coordination. Integration involves restoring harmony among sensations, emotions, and thoughts.

I have experienced this personally. While working with a life coach, I was initially puzzled by her slow pace and repeated invitations to “notice” my body. “Carmen, pause a moment—how do your feet feel in your shoes?” or “When you speak about peacemaking, what sensations do you feel in your body?” At first, I dismissed these questions as unnecessary. But over time, I realized she was helping me reconnect right-brain processes of sensation and perception with left-brain functions of language and reasoning. She was guiding me toward wholeness—toward growth through embodied awareness.

Bessel van der Kolk and Peter Levine

Bessel van der Kolk and Peter Levine, both contemporary pioneers in the field of trauma therapy, approach trauma from distinct yet complementary angles. Van der Kolk, a psychiatrist and author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, emphasizes the profound impact trauma has on the brain, body, and nervous system. His work demonstrates that traumatic experiences are embedded in the body, leading to physical symptoms and emotional dysregulation. He advocates body-based therapies—such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), yoga, and neurofeedback—as essential tools for trauma recovery. While he respects the power of storytelling and talk therapy, van der Kolk emphasizes that these methods must be practiced by skillful therapists and integrated with somatic awareness.

Peter Levine, psychologist and creator of Somatic Experiencing (SE), also focuses on the body’s role in processing trauma but draws heavily from physiology and animal behavior. His seminal work, *Waking the Tiger* (1997), explains how trauma results from the body’s inability to complete instinctual survival responses like fight, flight, or freeze. Levine proposes that trauma is less about the event itself and more about the nervous system’s stuck response to it. The body

remembers how to respond—pulling in when faced with threat, clamming up, shutting down. A traumatic experience can encode these responses so that they become habitual ways of being.

Levine guides clients to release “trapped” energy and restore self-regulation through slow, mindful attention to bodily sensations. Both theorists advocate attention to the body as a necessary means to move beyond anxious, repetitive thought patterns. Body awareness may come through focus on an object, slow breathing, or cold-water immersion. Van der Kolk uses guided imagery and imagination to help clients envision alternate outcomes to traumatic events, thereby rewiring the nervous system.

Both emphasize the reintegration of mind and body, which can be nurtured through awareness of surroundings, appreciation of beauty, massage, singing, and communal activities like drumming or group worship. Slow, deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, countering the hyperarousal of trauma. Even simple actions—such as toe wiggles accompanied by awareness of one’s feet—can enhance neural integration. Group activities and time in nature promote resilience and reconnection. Healing from trauma, aiming toward integration of mind, body, and community, aligns closely with core Adventist values of wholeness and embodied spirituality.

Judith Herman

Judith Herman, in her groundbreaking book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992/2015), emphasizes the integration of body and story as essential to trauma healing. A person has two tracks of self-awareness: one that maintains continuity in the present and another that carries the memory of the past. Healing requires integrating both—the public narrative and the body’s internal story.

Herman's studies began with traumatized veterans in the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study. Most soldiers recovered over time, but those who did so were distinguished by strong social support, maturity, and education. Early life adversity, by contrast, increased vulnerability to PTSD. Trauma responses are highly individual—what devastates one person may not traumatize another, depending on personal history or even epigenetic factors (Yehuda et al., 2014).

Since 2011, Herman has expanded her work to institutional trauma, particularly sexual assault in the military. In the 2015 edition of her book, she draws parallels between the military and the church, both of which may perpetuate harm through silence or retaliation. She writes, “Institutional betrayal has increasingly become the focus of awareness among survivors... when those in positions of authority, by their acts of omission and commission, effectively take the side of the perpetrators in their midst” (Herman, 2015, p. 255).

Applied to the church, this insight demands that faith communities name traumatic events.

Denial causes further harm. Herman's framework outlines three stages of recovery:

1. **Safety and stabilization**—regaining control over one's body and environment.
2. **Remembrance and mourning**—exploring traumatic memories.
3. **Reconnection**—living better in the future.

In *Truth and Repair* (2023), Herman adds a fourth stage: **justice**, emphasizing that healing also requires public acknowledgment of harm and collective responsibility.

Herman's third step echoes Henri Nouwen's (1972) concept of the “wounded healer.” When wounds cease to be sources of shame and become sources of compassion, the survivor becomes a conduit of healing for others. Anthony Hinton, wrongly imprisoned on death row for 30 years, exemplifies this transformation. Upon exoneration, he chose forgiveness, becoming a community advocate and reclaiming his identity as more than a victim.

Forgiveness: Fred Luskin

Forgiveness cannot be coerced or scheduled. Freely given, it restores agency to the traumatized. Fred Luskin, founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, defines forgiveness as a state of peace and understanding that lessens blame toward those who have caused harm. It is not forgetting or excusing; rather, it is reclaiming agency and rewriting one's story from victimhood to empowerment.

Luskin suggests that forgiveness begins with acknowledging feelings and identifying the wrongful act. Survivors should share their experiences with trusted individuals but must avoid remaining stuck in grievance narratives that perpetuate suffering. Unforgiveness allows the perpetrator to continue exerting control. Reframing the situation and choosing peace opens the path to healing.

Luskin advises examining both personal and universal aspects of trauma—understanding that suffering is part of the shared human experience. Retelling the story with the survivor as hero restores dignity and fosters transformation. As Joan Didion (2006) observed, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” The church's task is not to rush forgiveness but to create safe soil where the story can be told and retold until healing emerges.

Adventist Gifts for Healing

Adventist culture, at its best, has unique resources for the work of trauma healing.

1. **Wholism.** From its beginnings, Adventism has emphasized the integration of body, mind, and spirit. And we have learned that trauma is not merely psychological; it is embodied. A wholistic lens legitimizes that truth.
2. **Sabbath.** When Sabbath becomes more than a checklist of meetings—when it becomes a *temple in time*—it offers sacred refuge. For the traumatized, Sabbath can be a sanctuary where one's nervous system finally exhales and stabilizes.

3. Community. At its best, church is not an institution but a network of belonging—story-sharing, embodied worship, mutual care. It is where one hears, “You are safe. You are seen. You are loved.” Community singing and experiences of awe bring people together in a phenomenon called ---collective effervescence --which has healing effects.

4. Beauty and gratitude. The sensory richness of a Sabbath nature walk or a shared meal—merges body and spirit to make a soil where both healing and discipleship flourish. It is a miracle!!

5. Sanctuary. Like Sabbath for Adventists, an integrated vision of God’s goal of sanctuary provision gives a healing metaphor.

Post-Rwandan Genocide: An Example of Healing

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide stands as one of the most horrifying episodes of the 20th century—particularly for Christians, since it was an atrocity in which Christians killed Christians. In a country where faith was deeply woven into daily life, the church itself fractured along political lines. The Adventist Church, like others, was not spared. Some members and leaders participated in violence; others were victims. This tragedy forced Adventists, both in Rwanda and globally, to confront a spiritual and moral crisis: How could a church dedicated to peace and compassion respond to its own internal wounds?

Immediate Response

As violence engulfed the nation, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) provided critical humanitarian aid. It coordinated with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, offering logistics, medical assistance, and clean water. Despite chaos, five ADRA clinics remained operational. A medical team treated cholera among orphans in Goma, and two trucks distributed water to 10,000 people daily.

The church also recognized the psychological toll among missionaries and staff. In April 1994, evacuated missionaries attended a retreat titled *A Time for Renewal* at Camp Blue Ridge in

the United States, which offered trauma counseling and ceremonies of grief and remembrance. This event represented an early step toward emotional restoration within the global Adventist community.

Institutional Healing and Moral Reckoning

By late 1994, world church leadership confronted the institutional consequences of genocide. Representatives from the General Conference and the Africa–Indian Ocean Division traveled to Rwanda to listen, preach, and assist with reorganization.

The Adventist News Network (ANN) reported with “tactful transparency,” acknowledging painful truths while emphasizing compassion and renewal. ANN’s document *Rwanda: Lessons to Consider* invited global reflection on Christian identity and nonviolence, helping members process collective trauma.

Voices of the Wounded

Rwandan Adventists themselves were central to healing. Archival letters show survivors demanding accountability. One letter, dated June 1995, written by Rwandan students in Michiana, U.S., detailed complicity in killings and appealed for moral leadership. Healing required not silence but truth-telling and listening.

Folkenberg’s Visit: A Symbol of Reconciliation

In 1995, Robert Folkenberg, then president of the General Conference, visited Rwanda in a symbolic act of repentance and solidarity. Through preaching and dialogue, he embodied the church’s willingness to acknowledge failure and seek restoration.

Pastor Amon Rugelinyange, elected last week

as president of the Rwanda Union Mission, and his family

lived in Gitwe, site of the first mission station in French speaking Central Africa, where he served

as president of the Central Rwanda Mission. On Friday, April 22, he left to visit some remote churches in his field. The next day the militias began killing people in Gitwe and the village to which he had gone. Though he tried desperately, due to the roadblocks he was not able to return to his family. He stayed in the home of a Hutu church elder who would have paid with his life if the pastor had been found. When he heard the mob was coming the elder moved the pastor and successfully hid him from the marauding militias.

Meanwhile, a large number of Tutsis came to our Gitwe campus seeking refuge, as they had done many times in the past when uprisings were threatened. On Friday May 20, Gitwe was attacked. The local militia had been unwilling, up to that point, to kill pastors and their families. So, the Burgermeister (mayor) sought those outside the village who were willing to do the killing.

On the 20th the mayor and the other soldiers came to our campus, found the Mission Church Ministries director and killed him on the spot. They took 68 Adventists from the campus, including Mrs. Rugelinyange, three of his eight children, and nine grandchildren, to a place about

5 kilometers (3 miles) away and killed them all. When I asked him how he could handle that level of pain and grief, he simply said, Romans 8:28 is now my favorite verse ("And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose"). This soft spoken man of God is truly an example of Christian grace.

Folkenberg's itinerary further demonstrated commitment to reconciliation:

On Thursday I visited with Prime Minister, Pierre C, lestin Rwigema and next we drove to our university campus (now closed) in Mudende where I met with about 3,000 believers. In the afternoon we visited the Catholic Church in Ntarama where about 5,000 of those who sought refuge there were slaughtered on April 15, 1994. The remains of hundreds of the victims still lie on the sanctuary floor where they were killed, a graphic reminder of the excesses of which mankind is capable. On returning to Kigali I had a productive visit with Vice President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame.

Sabbath was an exciting day. Over 20,000 came to the national stadium to worship, including the Vice President/Minister of Defense of the nation. During my message, broadcast live to the nation, I had an opportunity to confess to the failures of nominal Christianity and appeal to the clergy of the nation to call for living the life of Christ rather than just claiming the name and forms of Christianity. I called for submission to the transforming power of the gospel, as manifested in the new birth experience, rather than superficial adherence to the rites and rituals of Christianity.

On Sabbath afternoon we drove to a community near Gitwe where over 40,000 came (some walking more than 20 kilometers--12 miles) to worship--all day! For the morning service they connected a radio to the public address system and listened to the service broadcast from Kigali. What an inspiring day this was!

On Sunday, November 16, ¹Folkenberg traveled over 100 km across the border to Mugenga, Zaire (now Goma) and visited a refugee camp where more than 10,000 Adventists lived. I was touched by the complex story expressed by Rwandans in a document that records a speech delivered to **Folkenberg** in Mugenga. Written and signed by Rwandan Union Mission (RUM) Refugee workers in Mugunga, it presented their perception of factors that led to the genocide and described their reluctance to return home to Rwanda.

Full of gratitude, the speech tells of missionary activities underway in the camp where they were staying. It listed the numbers of workers displaced, tallies of marriages and baptisms, and names co-workers who are known to be deceased. It addressed practical issues such as salaries. How would Adventist workers receive pay while displaced? Names of known exiled university students were listed along with last known place of residence and an appeal for financial help. To me, this speech shows a community character with deep resources to begin to heal.

From the perspective of trauma theory, people are healthier when they use their voices to tell their stories and when they act in ways to promote self-care and care for one another. Church communities are healthier when leaders listen and apologize for pain caused. Folkenberg's trip to Africa provides a powerful symbol of a leader taking time to apologize, to travel in difficult circumstances and to listen to people who had been deeply hurt. Such gestures serve to nurture healing in a community reeling from violence. Lowell Cooper, an apparent liaison between world headquarters and Rwanda, also visited; numerous communiques show that he followed the complex situation closely.

Though a worldwide leader's gestures are important, change and healing in Rwanda would not occur without acts of introspection and goodwill by people with close ties to the country. One example can be seen in Hesron Byilingiro's 2002 doctoral dissertation at Andrews University that sought to promote understanding of the crisis and look for ways of forgiveness and reconciliation. The paper was one effort in a strategy that would sensitize people to one another's common humanity to prepare the way for forgiveness and reconciliation. Also in the dissertation, Byilingiro, later to be President of Rwanda Union Mission, postulated that the church must focus on developing a robust understanding of church/state separation. Reconciliation and healing come from telling and listening to stories that involve a jumble of good and evil. Countless Rwandans chose forgiveness.

The Adventist Church's post-genocide experience offers enduring lessons for faith communities confronting collective trauma. Healing required a layered response—addressing physical needs, confronting moral failures, nurturing open communication, and empowering survivors to lead. At its best, the Rwandan Adventist story shows how faith can serve as a framework for psychological repair and moral renewal. By embracing truth-telling, fostering

forgiveness, and transforming service into an act of remembrance, the church contributed to Rwanda's broader culture of resilience and reconstruction.

Trauma theory says that moving to forgiveness allows people to live better in the future with a special vocation, or purpose, as wounded healers. People who have healed from trauma are able to serve in powerful ways.

Carl Wilkens

Carl Wilkens, former ADRA director in Rwanda, was the only American who remained in the country during the genocide. When his family evacuated, Wilkens chose to stay in Kigali to protect local colleagues. His memoir *I'm Not Leaving* (2011) recounts harrowing decisions and moments of grace.

In the years since, Wilkens and his wife, Teresa, founded *World Outside My Shoes*, dedicated to promoting healing through gratitude, empathy, and restorative practices. Drawing on Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation, their programs teach restorative thinking in schools, churches, and communities worldwide. Their story moves beyond survival to thriving—a testimony of transforming trauma into compassionate action.

From Trauma to Testimony

At its best, the Rwandan Adventist story shows how faith can serve as a framework for psychological repair and moral renewal. By embracing truth-telling, fostering forgiveness, and transforming service into remembrance, the church contributed to Rwanda's culture of resilience and reconstruction.

Today, Rwanda is often called the "Singapore of Africa," marked by stability and beauty.

Within that national rebirth, the Adventist Church stands as both witness and testimony to transformation. Out of deep wounds, grace and growth have emerged.

Conclusion: Church as Healing Community

Some argue that tension exists between evangelism and welfare work. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, the Adventist message itself can create the soil in which trauma healing takes root. The gospel calls us not only to proclaim but to embody good news. A community that nurtures healing must model safety, curiosity, and trust.

A culture that nurtures discipleship is also one that heals trauma—both require compassion, presence, and truth-telling. We cannot passively await the Second Coming while our communities ache. Tending to the culture of our churches—making them spaces of safety, dignity, and restoration—is sacred work.

A healing culture allows each person space to feel and express feelings; each person can be authentic. A healing culture makes time to be in nature. Leaders in a healing culture admit mistakes and apologize with an attempt to remediate; people are not placed under authoritative control, instead servant leaders preside. A healing culture nurtures an individual's agency to decide next steps; growth is valued and allowed to unfold naturally. A healing culture maintains an awareness of context; members in a healthy church can embrace unique vocations as pathways to serve. A healing culture values embodied, wholistic living.

Healing and discipleship flourish in the same soil—safe, sacred, and soul-restoring. To heal is to tell one's story anew, moving from victimhood to empowered service. When the church becomes a place of trustworthy companionship and respect for embodied human experience; it becomes the living body of Christ.

Healing, like sanctification, may involve discomfort and even inflammation—but through it comes restoration. As Adventists, may we embrace this sacred calling: to join in the *Ministry of Healing*, where compassion and discipleship meet, and where brokenness becomes a witness to God’s redeeming power.

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