

ther by joining existing organizations that advocate for human rights around the world or by developing new directions at the macro level that will contribute to moving us toward a higher level of community and humanity.

Yael Fischman, Ph.D.

*Institute for the Study of Psycho-Social Trauma
Palo Alto, Calif.*

The Spiritual Challenge of Violent Trauma

TO THE EDITOR:

Reading the article by Kozaric-Kovacic et al. on "Rape, Torture, and Traumatization of Bosnian and Croatian Women" took me back to the horror of the many war zones I have visited over the last ten years—among them Mozambique, Cambodia, Kuwait, Nicaragua, and Croatia. While most of my work has focused on children and youth (*Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow, 1991*), I have listened to many adults tell their stories as well. The special horror experienced by multiply raped women resonated with an emerging hypothesis that is central to my thinking about violent trauma.

Most interventions directed at trauma focus on some combination of its physiological and its psychological effects. And yet, trauma has broader consequences, consequences that are best described as metaphysical and spiritual, relating as they do to the very meaning of life.

Trauma has two principal components: overwhelming arousal and overwhelming negative cognitions. This latter facet is captured in Herman's (1992) formulation that to experience trauma is "to come face to face with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature." This is the human core of the term "overwhelming negative cognitions." Where do we go with this in practice?

While not dismissing or underestimating the importance of the physiological and psychological, I believe the place to start is with the metaphysical and spiritual nature of these overwhelming cognitions. Religious experience is about enlightenment, coming to know "the light of the world." Trauma is thus a *reverse* religious experience, the experience of darkness rather than enlightenment, a plunging into the shadows of life (coming face to face with human vulnerability and evil).

Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk asks incom-

Errata

Due to a typographical error, page numbers that accompany article titles are misaligned throughout the cumulative Contents of Volume 65, which appeared in the October 1995 issue on the four pages following page 592. In every case, page numbers appear several lines below their designated article titles. Readers are advised to consult the original contents pages at the front of each of the four issues in Volume 65.

In the Author Index to Volume 65 (October 1995, p. 592) the last names of Angela Browne and Ursula M. Brown were spelled incorrectly. The Editors regret these errors.

ing patients, "Have you given up all hope of meaning in your life?" Among those who experienced major trauma prior to age five, 74% answer "yes." Among those who experienced major trauma after age 20, the figure is "only" 10%. I have put that question informally to thousands of professionals, students, and other adults in public settings, but without asking that they identify themselves, and find an overall incidence of about 1%.

What do we make of this? Trauma represents an enormous metaphysical and spiritual challenge. If the crisis of meaning cannot be mastered, the psychological and physiological symptoms can be debilitating (and can lead to one becoming a psychiatric patient). The enormity of this challenge is greatest for the youngest victims; those with the most metaphysical momentum have the best chance of meeting it successfully, but even adults are vulnerable.

It is for this reason that I was particularly struck by the report of "Mrs. C," one of the rape victims in the Kozaric-Kovacic et al. article, who says "she could no longer make any sense of her life." The authors go on to report that "although she was religious, prayer no longer consoled her" (p. 431).

"Treating" the metaphysical and spiritual challenges of violent trauma must become a high priority for interventionists. In my own case, I am pursuing this issue through the creation of a nonprofit organization to search for metaphysical and spiritual solutions with respect to children and youth who have suffered