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Choosing Hope When Faced with Unbearable Sadness:

Upon Seeing Traumatized Children in Cages

by Holly Elissa Bruno

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Holly Elissa Bruno, M.A., J.D., is a best-selling author, international keynote speaker, ground-breaking radio host and seasoned team builder. She served as assistant attorney general for the state of Maine and assistant dean at the University of Maine School of Law. An alumna of Harvard University's Institute for Educational Management, she teaches classes for Wheelock College and previously taught courses at the McCormick Center. Bruno's books include the best-selling, *What You Need to Lead an Early Childhood Program: Emotional Intelligence in Practice* (NAEYC, 2012), *Managing Legal Risks in Early Childhood Programs* (Columbia University's Teachers College Press, November 2012), and *Learning from the Bumps in the Road* (Redleaf Press, 2013). Her first book, *Leading on Purpose,* was published by McGraw-Hill in 2008 and her recent award-winning book, *Comfort of Little Things: An Educator's Guide to Second Chances,* was released by Redleaf Press in 2015. Bruno's sixth book, *Transforming Trauma into Practical Wisdom,* is about spinning our own childhood trauma into golden moments of healing for children and ourselves. To "recovering attorney" Bruno, life is too short to anything but enjoy it daily.

I lost my mother at birth. I was never allowed to talk about that rupture.

I'm breaking that rule now to tell you.

Why? When I saw the photograph of that one-year-old child standing alone and undefended before an American immigration court officer, I threw the "do not talk" rule in the trash. For the sake of every traumatized baby, I will tell you my story, along with the story of motherless children. I will explain:

- what our survival traits are,
- what a difference hope makes,
- and what adults can do to help.

In the process, I invite us all, when we face unbearable loss, to choose hope.

Luis Hernandez, our colleague who never quits, reminds us, "You always have to have hope. What else is there?"

Traits of Motherless Children

A child severed from her family and deposited in a detention facility feels her heart choked, her soul abandoned and her body traumatized. She learns to shut down immediately to survive alone. Whom else can she count on?

She arms herself against further violence to the spirit with the traits of a warrior survivor. Hypervigilance muffles her playful spirit. She is a long, long way from home.

I never knew the soothing sound of a lullaby sung just for me. I never knew the soft comfort of being held through the dark terrifying night. I never knew what being special in a mother's eyes felt like.

I knew not to cry. I knew to quietly get dressed, make and eat breakfast and clear the table. I knew to grow up before I was out of diapers. I learned when feelings (of terror, rage or loneliness) flashed unbearably, to pack up and leave them behind; dissociating gives survivors an escape hatch for wrenching pain. And I quickly learned how to master adult tasks like helping my raging father not explode. I could keep the house spotless because no one lived there.

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Regardless of the developmental stage he or she is in, an abandoned child learns these traits and practices:

- Keep secrets; do not tell anyone your business.
- Put on armor; suit up as an "I do not need anyone or anything" little adult.
- Become perfect; give no one cause to see your vulnerabilities.
- Leave when you need to—dissociation allows you to leave your body when terror or pain intensify.
- Become a people-pleaser to avoid being questioned about your sad eyes.
- Fear, distrust, hate and/or bond—in a Stockholm Syndrome enmeshed way—with authority figures.
- Blame yourself for everything; self-shaming offers a rationale for and the illusion of control over unbearable pain of abandonment. (Adapted from Tony A's "Original Laundry List", p. xxviii, 1991).

That frightened solo one-year-old standing bravely, virtually emotionless, in front of the immigration court? He is in danger of becoming a needless and want-less automaton, cut off from others and worse, severed from himself. Life-long struggles with intimacy and trust are born of these traumatizing moments. Post-traumatic stress disorder becomes his life path.

Even without detention centers, we see otherwise traumatized children displaying these traits in our programs. When a child's elemental need for safety is unmet, that child finds an escape route out of the unbearable.

In my case, having been born to a mentally ill mother, I escaped by becoming my mother's mother. My job was to prevent her from sliding into her next psychotic state. The foundations of that house and everyone in it fractured like dry bones each time my mother fell into howling bouts of insanity. My work hours were 24/7.

A child born to an addicted parent will also cloak his vulnerability in these traits. Abandonment is a child's Hades, a virtual detention center. We intuitively know we must escape that soulless cage.

Pathways Toward Hope

All motherless children, traumatized by abandonment, begin a life-long journey toward addiction, low self-esteem, chronic illness and broken relationships unless hope lightens the death sentence (ACEs Study). Hope most often shows up in the caring concern and attention of an adult in the child's life.

You are or can be the caring adult who makes all the difference. You may not get to soothe a child in a detention center, but you can comfort the child in your center who feels like a motherless child. Never doubt the impact one loving person can have on a child's heart.

Here is the way Ingrid Schatz, dance educator, choreographer, and performer, herself a trauma survivor, describes introducing hope into a burdened child's consciousness:

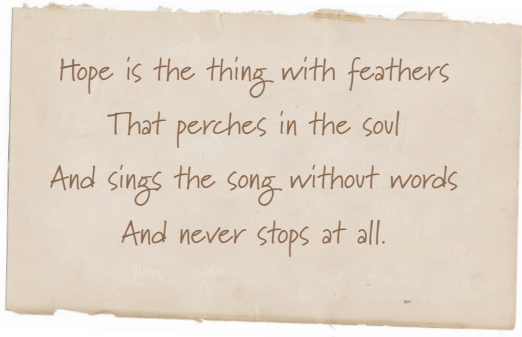
"Dance has been a lifeline for me since I was three years old. It was a balm when I needed it. Dance calmed my soul and inspired me to dream. Dance helped free me from a childhood of emotional abuse.

"This year I witnessed a scared four-year-old unable to leave her mother's arms blossom into a student who skips to me in the dance studio, hugs me and exclaims 'I can't wait to dance!' I helped her find freedom by listening to her fears, hugging her, holding her hand, dancing with her, not abandoning her and letting her know 'You are not alone.'

"I have danced with a sixteen-year-old recovering addict and demonstrated she is not alone either. As she moved in slow motion, tears flooding her face, I mirrored her movements to show her how beautiful they were. She described that moment 10 years later as 'one of the most important moments of my life.'"

Hope is the Thing with Feathers

Emily Dickinson, herself a survivor, penned this anthem for caged abandoned children:



When faced with wrenching, unconscionable and unimaginable trauma, we can:

- accept we are powerless over the situation, but can choose to reclaim power by making a decision to hope;
- take one action, even the smallest of baby steps to ameliorate the hurt; or,
- quit, give up, surrender to depression or worse, self-harm or harming others.

When we picture children in cages in detention camps in America, we can evoke courageous actions of those who have gone before us. The choices made by adults like Friedl Dicker-Brandeis can serve as models for the action we take.

Hope for Children in Concentration Camps

When Jewish children were interned with a death sentence in Nazi concentration camps, their childhood hope was restored by being invited to create art.

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Friedl Dicker-Brandeis taught children in a transit camp, Theresienstadt, "artistic techniques, and encouraged them to express their inner emotions through artistic means" (Stargardt, Children's Art, 193-4).

Children were allowed to reclaim the beauty in their imaginations as they drew fanciful pictures of butterflies, green villages, and of themselves lying on a bed of flowers. Children's drawings and paintings from this unspeakable displacement that led to annihilation exist still as a testament to the power of self-expression.

Hope can be captured in moments of self-expression, of recalling beauty, and feeling connection through art to loving people and once beautiful times. Dicker-Brandeis was martyred in Auschwitz-Birkenau for her courageous choice to offer children hope through painting and drawing.

Children who are allowed to sing and perform, write poetry, act in plays or play instruments also experience hope and the freedom of living in the moment.

Hope is the thing with feathers that lives in our souls and comes for us unbidden in our darkest times. Sometimes all we need do is ask half-heartedly for help; hope responds whole-heartedly.

Acting on Hope for Interned Children Today

When I invited colleagues to share what they would do if they could work with displaced children detained in the Land of the Free, they instantly responded:

- sing them lullabies
- teach them songs
- hug them and rock them
- let them cry and wipe their tears
- listen deeply to their stories
- allow them to express themselves
- read them stories of hope

Jackie Taylor advises: "Above all, children need to know and feel they are safe and they are loved. Let a child know she is safe by saying: 'You are safe now.' You can never hug a traumatized child too much."

Joanna Labow, a therapist in Austin, requested we: "Sing, sing…singing in unison reminds us that we are many like-minded and like-souled people. Music leads a pathway through seemingly impossible gunk to hope."

The Magic of Connection

May I tell you who saved my severed life? Michael Gonta, William E. Servern Elementary School teacher in South Corning, New York, appeared at first to be another placeholder in the 1950s

boring classrooms of memorization. I was skilled at hiding out, covering up and pretending all was well. Mr. Gonta, noticing I had a sense of humor—another survivor's trait—began to post my hand-drawn cartoons around the classroom. He asked me to help other children who were having difficulty learning. I sat with my classmates until we figured things out together.

One day, as Mr. Gonta sent me off to an English class for exceptional students, I froze in fear, but I went anyway. At the end of the semester, when Mrs. Kier read the best paper she had received, I shuddered: "I'm so dumb, everyone wrote about the same topic I did. She can't be reading my paper." But she was. Mr. Gonta knew that.

When I returned to his classroom, he asked what opened my heart. I could not look at him from embarrassment. I had no idea how to hear praise. I only knew how to hear abuse. Then the timeless

Supporting Traumatized Children

by Jackie Taylor

Children who have experienced traumatic events in their young lives have different coping mechanisms depending on the type of trauma they experienced and their age. Despite these factors, all children who have experienced trauma can benefit from the following techniques to help in their healing process.

Above all, young children need to know and feel that they are safe and loved. This can be accomplished by simply being close, holding children and providing lots of love and affection. Caregivers need to remain calm and soothing, as young children can pick up on the stress in the adults around them. Children need to know, and feel, that those adults in their lives are in control and have their best interests at heart. Let children know they are safe by saying often, "You are safe now." You can never hug a traumatized child too much.

Providing a structure and a predictable schedule helps children who have been traumatized feel safe, by giving them a routine that they can count on. Children need structure and when their daily routines are disrupted, this can cause undue stress on top of the trauma they've experienced. Letting children know what the day entails and providing prompts of what is coming up next helps them feel calm and secure about their environment.

Provide an environment where children can make choices. Children need to begin to know that they are capable of having some control over their lives. Let them decide if they want to play or read a book, take a nap or assemble a puzzle. Within the confines of a structured routine and caring adults around them, providing choices help children feel that their lives are not controlled by the events that caused the trauma.

It is all right to talk about the event with older children if they have questions. Hiding the events, or saying things like, "We do not need to talk about that," only heightens stress. Take the child's lead, and if they ask, or have questions, do provide answers in a way they will understand at their age.

Jackie Taylor, M.S., is the senior early childhood education specialist with ICF. Her work includes training, technical assistance and program evaluation with the US Coast Guard Child Development Centers, and FAA Centers among other state and local clients. She is the former program director for the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children and the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood TEXAS® project and an independent trainer and consultant. Taylor has worked in the early childhood education field for over 24 years. She is a master trainer in the Texas Trainer Registry, a child care health consultant and holds a Master of Science in Family and Child Studies from Texas State University.

Children exposed to traumatic events have different ways of coping. Some will act out, show anger or distress, while others become withdrawn and quiet. Knowing each child's personality traits and temperament will guide you on how to best provide the support that will make him or her feel safe and loved, as this is the ultimate goal for working with children who have experienced trauma.

If you begin to feel overwhelmed, take a break and find ways to de-stress. Talk to the children at their age level, and let them know you feel sad. Getting hugs from the children can help ease your pain. Reach out to a professional and get the help you need. You can only help children cope if you take care of yourself.

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moment happened. That moment would carry me through trauma after trauma. Mr. Gonta said, "Holly Elissa, you're a very special little girl and someday you will make a difference." One month after that moment, Mr. Gonta left to become a principal elsewhere. My heart was broken. Although I felt abandoned again, I had been given the gift of hope and the memory of being loved.

Forty years later, I sought out and wrote to Mr. Gonta on All Saints' Day to thank him for helping free me from my cage. I told him that his seeing me and offering ways to express myself had changed my life. Mr. Gonta's response? "Who could forget you!" Now 88 years old, Dr. Michael Gonta remains my mentor. I am welcomed as a member of his family. The motherless child in me is forever loved. My heart smiles. All this bliss because of a timeless moment in a classroom ages ago.

I gratefully share that love with children and educators and people I pass on the street. Timeless moments of caring and sharing hope, as I learned from Michael Gonta that day, can uplift and carry a wounded heart through a lifetime of discovery.

Be Kind to You, Caregiver

Taylor, whose research tells us 58 percent of early childhood professionals experienced trauma as children, shares this truth:

"Don't be afraid as a caregiver to ask for help. Dealing with traumatized children can lead to compassion fatigue in adults who care for young children, especially if your own traumatic memories are triggered by witnessing a child's sadness and distress. You can only help children cope if you take care of yourself."

Seeing caged children breaks our hearts. A newscaster, choking back tears, could not continue reading when the script in front of her said babies were being detained and cut off from their families.

We have choices. We can help a child reclaim her voice. Then we can listen with our hearts as she tells her truth.

Photo by Zachary Thompson

Our hearts break and our minds burn when we hear and face unconscionable news, especially when children are harmed, most likely for the rest of their lives.

We have choices. We can help a child reclaim her voice. Then we can listen with our hearts as she tells her truth. My hope—my belief—is that you will do just that. In your own way, you will continue to make a sacred difference.

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