

“Tractio Divina” - A Particular Christian Spiritual Discipline: Exploring how it may Assist Embodiment and the Transformation of Trauma

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Nadia Pavich is a Clinical Pastoral Care Practitioner/Chaplain and theologian who recently completed a MA (Specialisation in Chaplaincy) which included a research project exploring Tractio Divina (TD) – a particular Christian spiritual discipline – and its usefulness to transform trauma. She is the author of two spiritual handbooks for survivors of child sexual abuse: “Child, Arise!” (Awarded the 2016 Australian Christian Book of the Year), and “Come Forward!” (both using the pseudonym of Jane N. Dowling). She is a survivor of clergy child sexual abuse, and an advocate for other survivors.

Abstract

Although there is increasing research to demonstrate the beneficial effects of the classical contemplative practices to transform trauma, there is a gap in the research exploring the efficaciousness of the Christian Spiritual Disciplines (CSD) and how they may facilitate embodiment and the transformation of trauma. Some research recommends that further studies are needed to understand the role of spirituality in healing trauma. This article examines how Tractio Divina (TD) – a particular Christian spiritual discipline, practiced in combination with two other CSD – Lectio Divina (LD) and Visio Divina (VD), may facilitate embodiment and transform trauma from Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). It highlights the case study of a survivor of childhood sexual trauma who engages daily with these three CSD. It seeks to gain insight that may inform ministry and improve outcomes for trauma survivors – particularly, survivors of childhood sexual trauma.

Keywords: Tractio Divina, Christian spiritual disciplines, child sexual abuse, trauma, drawing, embodiment, transformation.

Introduction

One of the most destructive forms of trauma that severely impacts individuals is childhood sexual abuse (CSA) (Frans et al., 2005; Vilenica et al., 2013). Although there is considerable research investigating the physical and psychological impacts of CSA, there is less research that explores its spiritual impacts (Pargament et al., 2008; Awara et al., 2013). Research suggests further inquiry is needed to examine how spirituality contributes to healing trauma (van der Kolk, McFarlane et al., 1996; van der Kolk, Roth et al., 2005). While there is growing research to demonstrate how the classical contemplative practices contribute to transforming trauma (Farb et al., 2015; Payne et al., 2015; Levine, 2008),¹² there is less research that examines the efficaciousness of the various Christian Spiritual Disciplines (CSD) and how they may contribute to transform trauma from CSA (Larrivee et al., 2018). However, there are some studies suggesting that trauma may form a catalyst for further religious and spiritual growth (Castella et al., 2013; Peres et al, 2007; Shaw et al., 2005; Weaver et al., 2003), Mindful of this gap in the research, this article explores how a particular Christian spiritual discipline, namely “Tractio Divina” (TD), may assist embodiment and facilitate the transformation of trauma in survivors of CSA.¹³ It examines my own practice of TD combined with Lectio Divina (LD)¹⁴ and Visio Divina (VD)¹⁵ as a case study and intends to contribute to the research suggesting that studies are needed “describing” the “subjective views” of the healing processes involved to transform trauma from CSA (Arias et al., 2013).

¹² Farb et al refer to “classical contemplative practices” as “traditions of first person reflection upon cultivation of specific modes of experience, and focus on those practices that explicitly involve interoceptive awareness, including types of medication and mindfulness-based approaches that allocate attention to body awareness (e.g., breath), or to specific areas of the body (e.g., abdomen), and yoga, tai chi, and other mind-body practices that may be performed in or outside of an explicit spiritual context.”

¹³ “Tractio Divina” (TD) is a method of praying through embodied drawing. It was created by Nadia Pavich during a Masters Research Project in 2022.

¹⁴ Lectio divina (LD) is a method of praying the Scriptures that was introduced to the West by the Eastern desert father John Cassian early in the fifth century and has been practiced for centuries by Cistercian monks. The four elements it consists of are: *Lectio (reading)*, *Meditatio (meditation)*, *Oratio (prayer)*, and *Contemplatio (contemplation)* (Boa, 2001, p. 96-97).

¹⁵ *Visio divina (VD)* which means in Latin “divine seeing,” is a method for praying with images or other media. VD invites us to “see at a contemplative pace” all that there is to see - “seeing beyond first and second impressions, below initial ideas, judgments, or understanding” - exploring the entirety of the image. (Catholic Diocese of Biloxi, *Visio Divina Workshop*. <https://biloxidiocese.org/visio-divina>). In the context of my practice, of TD, it provides me with rich insight and assists meaning making, and thus, facilitates the transformation of my trauma.

Methodology

Autoethnography

The research used a primarily autoethnographic methodological approach (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, pp. 197-208). Autoethnography is a “unique” qualitative methodology that draws upon several qualitative traditions including narrative research, autobiography, ethnography, and arts-based research (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). It permits the social issue of trauma to be explored while drawing upon the empirical source of my life’s contexts – firstly, as a Christian lay person who engages daily with the CSD of TD combined with LD and VD; and secondly, as a survivor of CSA and the somatic expressions of it in my female traumatised body (see Cooper & Lilyea, 2022 for more detail). Autoethnography allowed me as researcher to respond to the need for more studies describing “the subjective views of survivors’ healing processes in recovery from CSA” (Arias et al., 2013). My intention of bringing my narrative into the space of the academic realm is that it might assist to understand the healing processes involved in embodiment, and the transformation and integration of trauma from CSA, particularly through the lens of the CSD.

Body-Spirit Based Methods

The research also engaged a combination of body-spirit focused methods – TD, LD, and VD – to demonstrate how they enable me to access the somatic expressions of my sexual trauma and to engage rigorously with my bodily memory of it.¹⁶

Data Source

The data was sourced from my daily spiritual practice of TD in combination with LD and VD. A total of sixty-two drawings created during the time frame of this research were collected, along with the journal records of VD that corresponded to these drawings. These were then individually and collectively analysed.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

General qualitative coding methods that are applicable and beneficial for autoethnography, including “initial coding,” “descriptive coding,” “emotion coding,”

¹⁶ “Somatic expressions” refers to expressions arising in the body, rather than the mind.

and “in vivo coding” which uses the participants own words were adopted to analyse and synthesise the data gathered (see Saldana, as cited in Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 201 for more detail). Analysing and synthesising my arts-based practice of TD allowed me as researcher to use non-textual techniques to make meaning of data that may not have been accessible through text-based methods (see McNiff, as cited in Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 203 for more detail).

Initially, sixty-two drawings from my TD practice were individually analysed using descriptive coding, in vivo coding, and emotion coding methods. Attention was paid to the following categories: themes that were emerging, representations within the images, the use of colour, lines, and movement. The same coding methods were used to individually analyse texts from my prayer journal that recorded my experiences with VD and what happened within my-self post TD. Significant words relevant to the research question issue of embodying and transforming trauma were highlighted, e.g., “calmed,” “playful,” “transformed,” “soothed,” and “grounded.” A single table of analysis with this information was created.

This data was synthesised by taking up Cooper and Lilyea’s suggestion of layering the themes arising from the “thematic analysis over the autobiographical timeline” (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 203). Three categories were created from the analysed data: emerging themes, representations in TD images, and happenings/changes noticed within my-self after completing TD images. The data for each category was synthesised and tabled. This article will discuss these outcomes to assess how TD combined with LD and VD may assist embodiment and the transformation of trauma from CSA.

Literature

The Role of CSD

The CSD are the main tools for transformation within spiritual formation which refers to “the process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others” (Mulholland, 2016, p. 19). Calhoun defines the CSD as intentional practices to “open space in our lives for the worship of God” (Calhoun, 2015, p. 22). Foster defines them as the vehicle that places a person before God – the one who transforms – and through them the person is drawn gently along a path of “disciplined grace” (Foster, 2008, p.

9). While the most addressed CSD include prayer, scripture reading, journaling, fasting, worship and service (Foster, 20018), Mulholland recognises that there other “more personal disciplines” that God can draw a person to which uniquely suit us and facilitate growth (Mulholland, 2016, p. 140). The CSD imply a “regular and routine” practise or “rhythm” that can be daily, weekly, monthly, or annually (Barton, 2006, p. 147). Coe acknowledges that through the practice of the disciplines, a spiritual process unfolds which can be deeply painful as the inner layers of one’s heart are “peeled” back to reveal unconscious deeply held beliefs, values, and thoughts that are contrary to our understanding of God (see Coe, 2004, p. 2 for more detail). Benner describes the spiritual process as traveling through one’s brokenness, woundedness and shame, parts of oneself that can tend to be uncomfortable, unwelcome, and unknown (Benner, 2015). During this process, and as the person enters more profoundly into an intimate, experiential, and loving relationship with the Trinity, God’s grace works within them and they are slowly transformed into “the image of Christ for the sake of others” (Ashbrook, 2019, p. 32; Mulholland, 2016, p.19; Foster, 2008, p. 9).

Introducing “*Tractio Divina*” (TD) - a New CSD

“*Tractio Divina*,” is what I have come to name the method of praying through embodied drawing that aims to gently draw out on paper what is in my traumatised body. *Tractio* is a Latin word that means “a drawing,” and it is the noun of action from the past-participle stem *trahere*, meaning “to pull, or draw,” usually along a tract. “*Tractio Divina*” utilises various tracts in the process of *drawing*: a divine source beyond my-self, my body’s narrative, and the blank piece of paper in front of me.¹⁷ As these tracts interact with one another – my body, God, and the blank piece of paper – there is a gentle pulling up or *drawing out* on paper what is within me while simultaneously being *drawn* to God/self/others.

“*Tractio divina*,” is a “more personal” CSD that uniquely suits me and facilitates growth (Mulholland, 2016, p. 140). It aligns with Calhoun’s definition of CSD since it is an intentional daily practice that creates a space/spiritual tract for God’s grace to pass from within the hidden and unknown depths of my soul to without in the form of a drawing – visual art (Calhoun, 2015, p. 22). However, like most CSD, TD cannot be

¹⁷ The meaning of “tract” can refer to either a large area of land or a system of tubes or organs in the body that are connected and serve a purpose. I am using “tract” here in a spiritual sense of “large spaces” that are “connected” to one another and “serve a purpose” in the process of TD. These tracts allow for God’s grace to slowly uncover and draw out what has been covered deep within one’s soul.

forced or pushed, nor can one make it happen (Willard, personal communications, accessed 2022). It depends on rhythms of grace to gently pull up and draw-out on paper what has been covered within. In this sense, TD affirms human agency and consent – needs that are vital for survivors of CSA – a reason why it may be a suitable CSD for survivors of CSA.

LD, TD, and VD: Drawing Out the Relationship between these Body-Spirit Based Methods

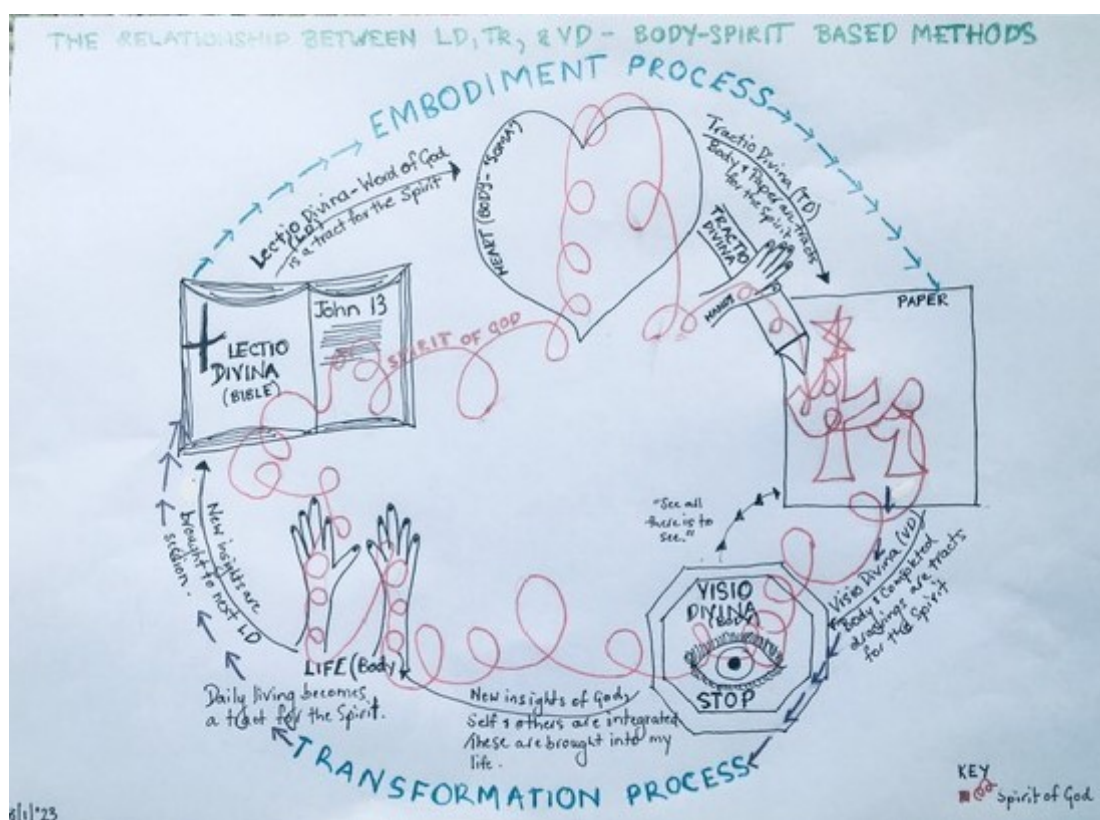


Image 1

The Relationship between Lectio Divina (LD), “Tractio Divina” (TD), and Visio Divina (VD) - Body-Spirit Based Methods, 28 January 2023, (Coloured pens on paper, 21 x 29.5 cm).

Defining Trauma

Trauma has many different definitions resulting from the diversity of perspectives that have considered it. The word “trauma” etymologically derives from the Greek word meaning “wound.” Hence, some authors like Jennifer Baldwin refer to “trauma” as “traumatic wounding” (Baldwin, 2018, p. 24). For the purpose of exploring how TD

may assist embodiment and the transformation of trauma, the following definitions of trauma were considered. Jennifer Baldwin defines trauma as “the response to an experience/s not the event experienced” (Baldwin, 2018, p. 25). She concurs with Gabor Maté who similarly defines trauma as “not what happens to you, but what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you” (Maté, personal communication, 2021). For Bessel van der Kolk, trauma is “an inability to inhabit one’s body without being possessed by its defences” (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 100). Finally, for Peter Levine trauma is “a highly activated incomplete biological response to threat, *frozen in time*” (Payne et al., 2015, p. 14). It is important to note that in these definitions of trauma there is consensus that trauma occurs in the body.

Trauma and the Body

Trauma is primarily a “bodily” process – its roots lie in our instinctual physiologies (Levine, 1997, p. 34). Trauma is a “response” to an experience that mimics the original traumatic event (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 66)). The immediate symptoms of a trauma response may include: hyperarousal, constriction, dissociation, denial, feelings of helplessness, immobility, or freezing (Levine, 2008, pp. 15-16). Other symptoms, that are either affective or psychosomatic consequences of trauma, may include: hypervigilance, intrusive imagery/flashbacks, extreme sensitivity to light and sound, hyperactivity, exaggerated startle responses, night terrors, abrupt mood swings, shame, low self-worth, being easily stressed, and difficulty with sleeping (Levine, 2008, pp. 17-18; Ferrara, 2002; Saywitz et al, 2000). These complex bodily symptoms of trauma can cause survivors to feel “chronically unsafe inside their bodies” (van der Kolk, 2015, pp. 96-97).

The Challenge of Embodiment and Dissociation

Dissociation is a result of trauma survivors feeling chronically unsafe inside their body. In the literature, “dissociation” is the term that refers to “leaving one’s body” (Goodwin, 1985; Herman et al., 1986; van der Kolk, 1987). In the cases of survivors who have experienced severe CSA,¹⁸ the dilemma of embodiment might be expressed in this way: “How do I live with (but not in) a dangerous, damaged, or dead body?”

¹⁸ CSA stands for “severe child sexual abuse” – Russell (1986) in a large-scale study found that the three most important factors relating to severity of traumatisation were (1) the severity of sexual abuse in terms of the intrusiveness of specific sex acts, (2) whether or not the perpetrator was a father or step-father, and (3) the degree of physical force or violence used in the abuse (Young, 1992).

(Young, 1992) For survivors who dissociate, on the one hand, they may define “me” and “mine” as events that go on “inside my head” rather than as events that go on “inside my body” (Young 1992). On the other hand, in terms of events that go on “inside my body” which are essentially physical and tied to embodiment, such as “sexual, sensuous, affective or proprioceptive experiences,” they no longer have anything to do “with me, they are not me” (Young, 1992). While dissociation may make life tolerable, it comes with the high cost of losing awareness of what is going on inside the body, including the daily pleasure and comforts of human embodiment (van der Kolk, 2014).

The Challenge of Interoception¹⁹ and Alexithymia

Being connected with one’s body is vital for knowing what is going on inside oneself (Damasio, 1999). The technical term for not being able to identify what is going on inside oneself is alexithymia (Taylor and Bagby, 2004). People suffering from alexithymia are unable to articulate what they feel about any given situation or how they themselves feel (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 273). Alexithymia is the result of “numbing” which prevents a person from “anticipating and responding to the ordinary demands of their body” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 273). Sensory awareness is critical for survivors to learn that they can “tolerate their sensations, befriend their inner experiences, and cultivate new action patterns” (van der Kolk, p. 273). This learning is also important in terms of learning to regulate the Central Nervous System (CNS).

The Challenge of Regulating the CNS: Hyper/Hypo-arousal

Learning to regulate the CNS is key to avoid traumatisation. It requires “normalizing” oneself and developing “*the ability to return to equilibrium and balance*” (Levine, 2008, p. 28). Peter Levine recognises that the failure to “reset” the CNS leaves it “stuck in a dysregulated state” – either a hyperaroused or shut-down (dissociated) state – making it impossible to function normally (Payne et al., 2015, p. 14). Survivors of trauma may find it challenging to regulate their CNS. Levine’s research suggests that body-based methods may benefit regulation of the CNS (Payne et al, 2015).

¹⁹ “Interoception is the scientific name for a basic self-sensing ability. Brain-imaging studies of traumatised people have repeatedly shown problems in the area of the brain related to physical self-awareness, particularly in the area of the insula.” (van der Kolk, 2014 p. 414 for more detail).

Responding to the Challenges of Trauma from CSA through Body-Based Methods

The literature demonstrates that the most successful methods to achieve embodiment and transform trauma are body-based methods, those which establish a connection to the body (Levine, 2008, p. 27; Payne et al, 2015; Ogden, 2010; Ogden and Fisher, 2014). Body-based methods are concerned with “exploring physical sensations and discovering the location and the imprints of trauma on the body” (van der Kolk, 2014). They imply tapping into trauma energy to help process and integrate it, leading to a better regulated autonomic nervous system (Maté, personal communication, p. 7; van der Kolk, 2014, p. 245). Some of the body-based methods referred to in the literature include dance/movement therapy, art therapy, drama therapy, and poetry (Young, 1992). This article explores how the embodiment and transformation processes of two body-based methods – Somatic Experiencing™ (SE) and Art – are also relevant and comparable to the body-spirit focused method of TD.

Somatic Experiencing™ (SE™)

The body-based method of SE was established by Peter Levine. Somatic Experiencing guides the trauma survivor’s attention to “interoceptive, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive experience” (Payne et al., 2015; Farb et al., 2015; Delforge, 2002). It firstly establishes “bodily sensations associated with safety and comfort” (Payne et al., 2015, pp. 14-15). This involves identifying islands within the body – parts of the body, postures, or movements – that then “become a reservoir” of “embodied resource” which the individual can return to repeatedly for grounding whenever they feel stuck, terrified, or enraged as they “touch, bit by bit (titration) on the stress-associated sensations” of their trauma (Payne et al., 2015, pp. 14-15). This process of “biological completion” unfreezes the frozen energy of trauma as it allows for the discharge of the instinctive survival energy that one did not have at the time of a traumatic event (Levine, 2008, p. 31). Somatic Experiencing has been proven to transform trauma and leads to “the creation of new interoceptive experiences of agency and mastery” (Payne et al., 2015, pp. 14-15).

Creative Arts: Art, Imagination, Dance, and Movement

Other body-based methods such as the creative arts – art, imagination, theatre, dance and movement – have been effective in the transformation of trauma and the

symptoms of PTSD (Carey, 2006; van der Kolk, 2014, p. 242). As well, research has indicated that the creative arts can assist trauma sufferers to find language to articulate and write their experiences leading to overall positive health improvements (Pennebaker and Krantz, 2007).

More recent research studies specifically for military service members and veterans has demonstrated the benefits of art; these include assisting to understand and communicate internal processes, enabling to overcome avoidance patterns, creating new ways of seeing, interpreting and responding to daily situations, and using the images created as an active working document in multi-modal treatment (Lobban & Murphy, 2019; Kaimal et al, 2019; Jones et al, 2019). The benefits highlight Ashlee Whitaker's²⁰ claim that the visual arts are "an access point to the soul" which rather than using letters, words, rhyme, and symbolic meter, employs lines, colours, shade, and textures to express the "ineffable in a form of communication that can transcend language, geography, and cultures" (Anonymous, 2021, pp. 39-40). It is in this sense that an image can do so much that text and speaking cannot.

Likewise, there has been research that has focused on the healing effects of the imagination through DE-CRUTT, a theatre -based treatment program for traumatic stress in war veterans, and it has shown how the imagination opens up emotional and psychological space for the exploration of trauma, thereby constructing a path to transform trauma that draws up the "capacity for story-telling and meaning-making" (Ali et al, 2019).

The Findings

"Tractio Divina": A Body-Spirit Based CSD that may assist Embodiment and the Transformation of Trauma from CSA

This article aimed to explore how TD – a particular CSD – when combined with LD and VD may facilitate embodiment and the transformation of trauma. Image 2 below graphically encapsulates the overall findings. In total, 95.1% of the images gathered graphically represented trauma, revealing the trauma-sensitive lens through which TD, LD, and VD are practiced. It illustrates Baldwin's claim that trauma-sensitive

²⁰ Ashlee Whitaker is the Head Curator and the Roy and Carol Christensen Curator of Religious Arts at Brigham Young University Museum of Art (MOA) in Provo, Utah, USA.

hermeneutics “receives as subject or ‘text’ the embodied narratives of traumatic wounding as witnessed in our sacred texts...” (Baldwin, 2018, p. 79).



Image 2

Embodying and Transforming Trauma in Christ (John 20:27), 2 February 2022, Sydney, (oil crayon and chalk on paper, 21 x 29.5 cm).

As well, image 2 reflects the sacred space/tract that TD creates for God’s grace to work in my traumatised body through the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in 96.8% of the images that conveyed a theme of God’s active presence through the transmission of the Holy Spirit, confirming Calhoun’s assertion that by practicing the CSD “we open space in our lives for the worship of God” (Calhoun, 2015, p. 22). It is in this “open space” that I am empowered through God’s grace to “reach” and “feel into” the trauma wounds of the risen Jesus.²¹ Empowerment through God’s grace was a prominent theme that was evident in 88.7% of the completed drawings. This

²¹ Ref Jn.20:27-28 - “Then he [Jesus] said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

In this Scripture, the Risen Christ is himself the living text - “For the construction of a trauma-sensitive theology and practice, trauma sensitive hermeneutics receives as subject or “text” the embodied narratives of survivors of traumatic wounding as witnessed in our sacred texts and in the persons in our midst (Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma*, 79).

emphasises Barton's claim that CSD provide a "path of disciplined grace" (Barton, 2006, p. 147). While drawing image 2, my own traumatic wounding became activated through resonance with Christ and produced fragmented memories. This confirms Damasio's research that recalling a traumatic event from the past causes re-experiencing of the visceral sensations felt during the original event (Damasio et al., cited in van der Kolk, 2015, p. 95). This is confirmed in 80.6% of the drawing samples that conveyed the theme of a trauma activated response.

As these somatic expressions of trauma manifested in my body while drawing, the Holy Spirit invited me to "work out" my salvation with "fear and trembling"²² but on paper with crayons, chalks, and coloured pens in hand, and with the confidence that it is God working in me to transform me "into the image of Christ" – a genuine fruit of the CSD (Willard, 2002, p. 23). This was supported in 100% of the drawings that depicted themes of God's power at work in my traumatised body, and 90.3% that demonstrated themes of transformation.

In the transformation process, the visual and kinaesthetic hands-on process of TD assisted to slow me down and to remain focused and engaged with Christ in a "back and forth" dialogue. During this dialogue with Christ, I shared the somatic expressions of trauma I was experiencing in my body as I connected to his. Not only did TD lead me to a deeper sense of being the "Beloved of God," as was expressed in 72.5% of the drawings, but as Baldwin claims, because it involved movement, it elevated my "somatic awareness, mindfulness, and interoception," and allowed me "to attend to the inner wisdom that emerges from the [my] body" (Baldwin, 2018, p. 48).

Consequently, this led to embodiment and integration. This was confirmed in 100% of the drawings that identified the theme of embodiment, and 85.5% the theme of integration. Embodiment for me is a "deeply painful" process and as Coe acknowledges, it required me to "peel back" the layers of my "inner heart" and to "reveal unconscious deeply held beliefs, values and thoughts" that are impacts of my trauma but contrary to understanding God (Coe, 2004, p. 2). It confirms Benner's claims that as I travel through my brokenness, woundedness, shame, and the parts of my-self that are uncomfortable, unwelcome, and unknown, my trauma is transformed (Benner, 2004, p. 2).

²² Ref: Phil.2:12-13 – "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

The transformation was palpable through a deeper connection with my-self, with God, and with others.²³ This was confirmed in 79% of the images that depicted the theme of groundedness to suggest connection with my-self, and in 90.3% of images that illustrated the theme of an intimate loving encounter with Christ to suggest connection with God, and 70.9% of images that revealed the theme of ministry to imply connection with others. Transformation was further evidenced through the “repair”/“reactivation” of my self-sensing system²⁴ and regulation of my CNS that indicated “new interoceptive experiences of agency and mastery” were being created (Parvizi et al., cited in Payne et al., 2015, pp. 14-15). Additionally, the data revealed that 90.3% of drawings rendered the theme of transformation, while 88.7% portrayed the theme of empowerment, and 87.1% the theme of salvation/redemption both suggesting transformation. The fact that 79% of the drawings portrayed the theme of fruitfulness/flourishing also suggested post traumatic growth.

Discussion

Responding to the Challenges of Transforming Trauma from CSA through TD combined with LD and VD

Some of the previously named challenges to transforming trauma from CSA were as follows: dissociation, interoception and alexythmia, and dysregulation of the CNS that resulted in states of either hypoarousal or hyperarousal. This research uncovered how TD may respond to these challenges:

TD and Establishing a Safe Connection to Body that Benefits Interoception

Throughout the course of this study, my trauma has been activated by a multitude of triggers – even while engaging in my spiritual practices – which has meant experiencing the symptoms of trauma in my body on a daily basis.²⁵ Practicing TD combined with LD has empowered me to meet God in my traumatised body by placing

²³ Prayer journal record describing my practice of VD dated 16/2/2022 – As I connect to Christ’s wounds and embody my own, my trauma is transformed. This is demonstrated in my TD drawing as the dark effects of trauma in my heart are changed to a “golden” emission of the Holy Spirit that burst forth from my heart.

²⁴ In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Van der Kolk acknowledges the need for the “repair” of “the self-sensing system” that is damaged in trauma.

²⁵ “Symptoms” of trauma experienced during the timeframe of this research project have included those referred to on page 7 in the section headed “Trauma and the Body” – hypervigilance, intrusive memory, flashbacks, night-terrors, shame, difficulty sleeping, feeling overwhelmed, helplessness, fear, and freezing.

myself fully within a scripture story and living into it with my senses and imagination so that I am participating in the story. Images 3 and 4 (below) graphically demonstrate my prayer on two separate days while trauma was activated in my body. The images reveal how TD can open up emotional, psychological, and spiritual space for the exploration of trauma which is a similar outcome to research studies that explored how imagination in theatre benefits survivors of trauma (Ali et al, 2019). In both images, I am depicted in a state of hyperarousal and overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness. Not only does TD assist me to safely connect to my traumatised body but it guides my attention to “interoceptive, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive experience” – somatic experience which is key in transforming trauma (Farb et al., 2015, p. 14).

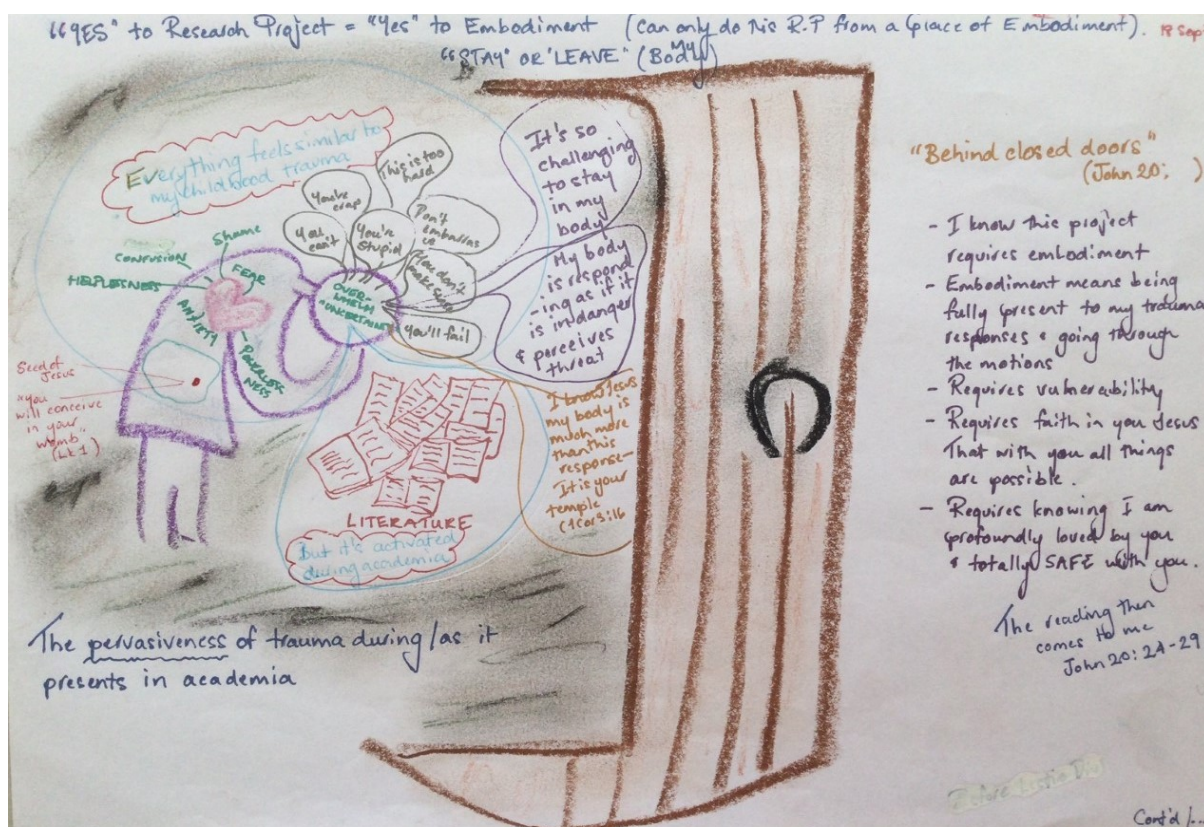


Image 3
Behind Closed Doors: My Yes to Safely Embodiment Trauma (Part 1 - John 20:19-23), 18 September 2021, oil crayon and chalk on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm, Sydney.

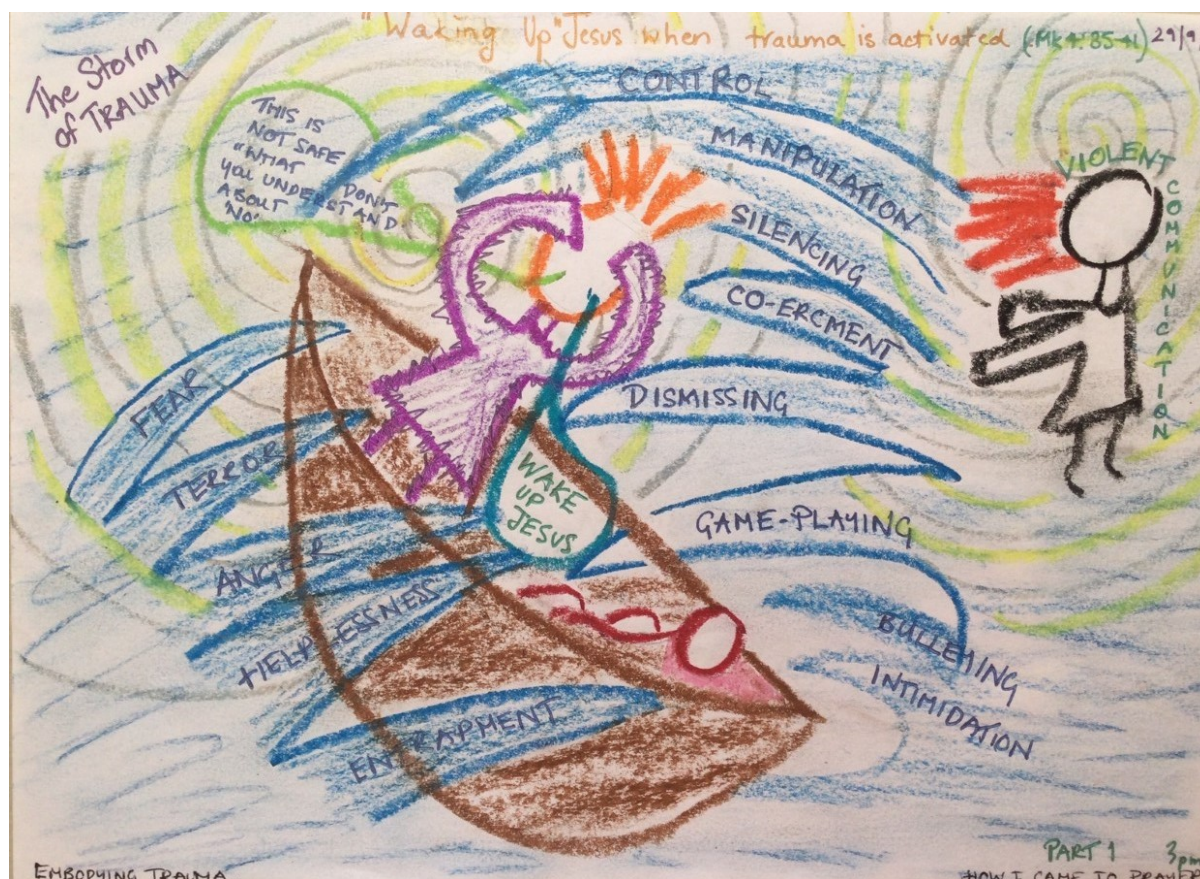


Image 4

The Storm of Trauma (Part 1 - Mark 4:35-41), 29 September 2021, oil crayon and chalk on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm, Sydney.

TD and Staying in a Traumatized Body

As images 3 & 4 illustrate, embodiment of trauma through somatic experiencing can be terrifying for survivors and is the reason why they can feel “chronically unsafe inside their bodies” and experience “an inability to inhabit [their] body without being possessed by its defences and the emotional numbing that shuts down all experience...” (van der Kolk, 2015, pp. 96-100). However, the practice of TD has assisted me to “stay” in my traumatised body instead of dissociating which involves disconnection from parts of my body or being almost absent.²⁶ Staying in my traumatised body is evident firstly, in image 5 (below) - the transformed aftermath of my prayer with image 3; and secondly, in image 6 (below) - the transformed aftermath of my prayer with image 4. On both occasions, the method of praying through TD and slowly “drawing” out on paper what was bubbling from within me, calmed and

²⁶ “In trauma, dissociation seems to be a favoured means of enabling a person to endure experiences that are at the moment beyond endurance.” Levine, *Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body*, 16.

empowered me to stay in my body and prayerfully engage with and process my trauma.

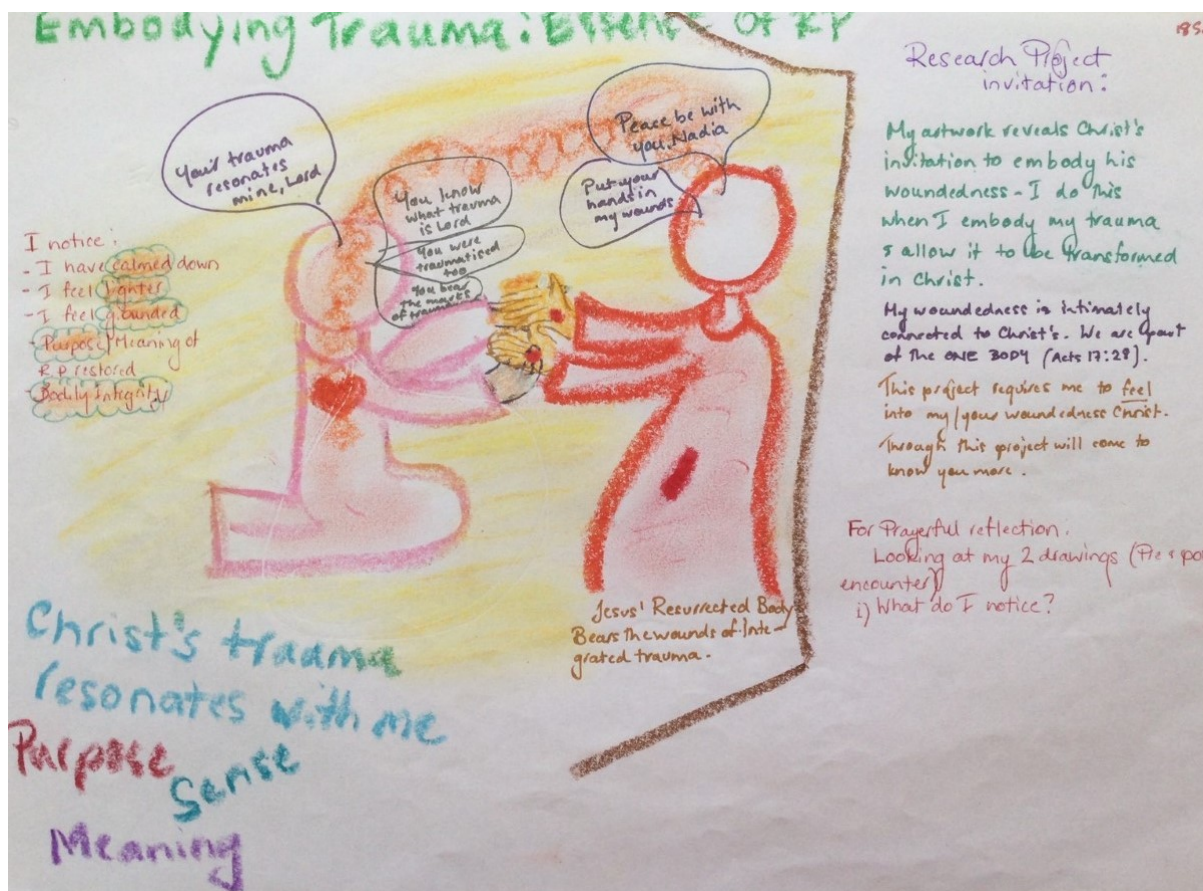


Image 5

Embodying Trauma: The Core of My Research Project (Part 2 - John 20:19-23), 18 September 2021, oil crayon and chalk on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm, Sydney.

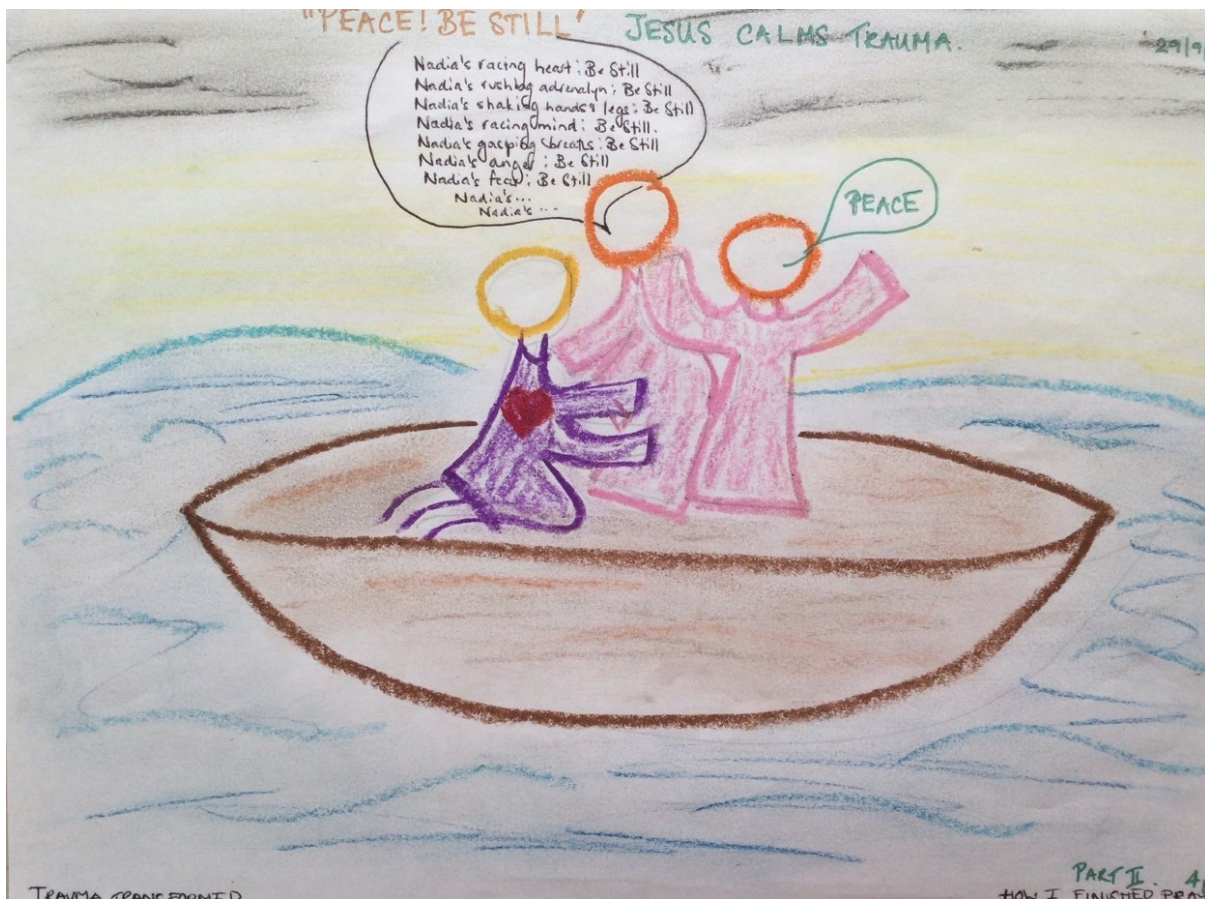


Image 6

Jesus Calms a Trauma Response (Part 2 - Mark 4:35-41), 29 September 2021, oil crayon and chalk on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm, Sydney.

TD and Releasing the Frozen Energy of Trauma which leads to Regulation of the CNS

Peter Levine’s research asserts that trauma is transformed and integrated when excess frozen trauma energy is released after a “freeze” or “immobility” response (Levine, 2008, p. 28). In Levine’s method of Somatic Experiencing (SE™), this happens through a process of “titration” meaning that the bodily sensations are used as a “reservoir of innate embodied structure to which the individual can return to repeatedly as they touch, bit by bit (titration), on the stress-associated sensations” (Payne et al., 2015, p. 15). It enables a process of “biological completion” and unfreezing or discharge of the instinctive survival energy that was not available at the time of the traumatic event and leads to transformation (Levine, 2008, p. 31).

Images 5 and 6 (above) provide evidence of the potential of TD to “unfreeze” the frozen energy of trauma through a dual process of physical and spiritual traction.

Physical traction is created by the adhesive connection of one's hand gripping the crayon and moving it on paper. As this physical traction occurs, I draw out "bit by bit" on paper what is in my traumatised body. Simultaneously, a spiritual traction occurs whereby God's grace – through the Holy Spirit – moves within me shifting what is "stuck," loosening what is bound, and lifting-up what is crushing/burdening me. Both traction processes that occur with movement during TD produce the "titration" that Levine speaks of and lead to the "unfreezing" of "frozen trauma energy" in my body so that "biological completion" may be achieved. The titration process is further enriched through the movement of a "backwards and forwards" dialogue with God that occurs throughout.²⁷

Consequently, both images 5 and 6 show evidence that relieving my pain in this manner is deeply calming, soothing, and transformative. Both images reflect the unfreezing of my frozen energy that led to the regulation of my CNS. My VD journal writing records captured this, "I have calmed down; I feel lighter; I feel grounded; purpose and meaning is restored; bodily integrity." Importantly, they reflect the "normalizing" and the "return to equilibrium and balance" of my CNS which Levine asserts is the "primary factor" to avoid "being traumatised" (Levine, 2008, p. 28). As well, my journal writing describes a stronger connection to my-self and a reactivation of my self-sensing system.²⁸ In this sense, TD can aid the challenge of alexithymia by providing language, and language empowers one to communicate their feelings and story. These outcomes support research that demonstrates how art therapy is assisting survivors of trauma to understand and communicate internal processes (Lobban & Murphy, 2019; Kaimal et al, 2019; Jones et al, 2019).

Recommendations for Further Research

While the findings of this research indicate that TD – a particular Christian spiritual discipline – combined with LD and VD may facilitate embodiment and the transformation of trauma in survivors of CSA, it is important to bear in mind that, as well as researcher and author, I have been the sole participant. In the future, further research needs to be done with a larger group of participants to confirm the findings demonstrated. Steps leading to such future research may involve the development of a program for Christian survivors of sexual abuse that incorporates the body-spirit

²⁷ "Backwards and forwards dialogue with God" – also implies titration and movement.

²⁸ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing*, 92. The self-sensing system in the traumatised person breaks down due to trauma.

based method of TD as articulated in this research. Afterwards, the program might be piloted with a small group so that improvements can be made. After making the improvements, the program may then be evaluated with a larger group of participants.

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