

“Bearing witness and bringing healing to organizational trauma goes beyond supporting individuals by recognizing that entire systems can be both wounded and made whole. It is vital that the helper or consultant coming alongside these systems understands the context, practices good self-care, and regularly accesses their deeper purposes for helping.”

Healing Traumatized Organizations

Reflections from Practitioners

By Pat Vivian, Kristin Cox, Shana Hormann, and Sarah Murphy-Kangas

Kristin Cox works for the United States Coast Guard. Over a period of 18 months she was deployed to a fatal mudslide where 43 people died and a community was left devastated; to catastrophic wildfires in which three fire fighters died; and to emergency personnel at a tour bus accident that left five dead, dozens injured, and a college community stunned. She also organized responses to four suicide deaths in the Coast Guard. After this particularly intense string of events, Cox saw the effects of traumatic stress in her own life and in the lives of the units she supported. Cox reported, “I experienced hyper-vigilance and a low tolerance for others’ BS. People in my outer circles probably found me irritable and dismissive. I was emotionally distant. I knew there was going to be a cost for this.”

In her work role Cox coordinates responses to traumatic stress for Coast Guard members, their units, and their families. She is frequently called upon to coordinate large-scale responses to regional tragedies and natural disasters. Her work brings her into tragedies that are sudden and devastating as well as situations built up over time. Though she is not a first responder to victims in the traditional sense, she is a first responder to the human organizing efforts in these disasters. And, as she noted in her reflections, there are costs to this work.

This paper addresses the question, “What is that cost?” As interveners in trauma and traumatized systems, how are we affected? And what can we do to mitigate those effects? In Cox’s case, she’s developed strategies and coping

mechanisms that helped her answer the call in her life to bear witness so that “others’ suffering is not in vain.” Bearing witness and bringing healing to organizational trauma goes beyond supporting individuals by recognizing that entire systems can be both wounded and made whole. It is vital that the helper or consultant coming alongside these systems understands the context, practices good self-care, and regularly accesses their deeper purposes for helping.

Through our efforts to help traumatized systems and individuals, we four professional colleagues have realized that this work of intervening and helping organizations heal is not for everyone. Day after day, week after week, it takes its toll on practitioners. The work demands a focused and compassionate centeredness as well as a set of skills and abilities.

Consultants who work with traumatized systems are affected in similar ways to therapists (Pearlman, 1999; Stamm, 1999), emergency personnel (Figley, 1995; Violanti & Gehrke, 2004), caregivers (Remer, & Elliot, 1988), and leaders (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Vivian & Hormann, 2015) who respond to trauma and help individuals and groups heal. However, we consultants hold a responsibility to be compassionate advocates for systems as a whole (Stein, 1987). In order to be advocates we must stay focused on the entirety of an organization or group. Our empathy needs to extend beyond encounters with individuals to understand, connect with, and heal the whole system as a living organism.

As we have worked and consulted with each other, we have discovered what helps us stay in this work and how to deal with the challenges we face. Since its inception in 2013, our consulting group has provided a creative and supportive forum for asking difficult questions and facing tough circumstances. Participation in this group has been central to our consultation efforts and our individual growth as practitioners. This paper offers our learning so far. We hope it will be helpful for others who find themselves in this helping role. Using stories from our own practices we describe our conceptual foundation about trauma and traumatization, kinds of situations we have faced, particular experiences working with leaders in traumatized circumstances, and what we have learned about the impact on ourselves and its relevance to other practitioners.

Our Conceptual Foundation

Mission-Driven Entities

Our experience and research are grounded in highly mission driven entities, for example, emergency and rescue response groups, hospitals, social service agencies, social and environmental justice organizations, and spiritual communities. Highly mission driven organizations have compelling visions and missions. These missions are directly related to compassionate work, which relies on the ability of helpers to open themselves to the feelings and experiences of others to communicate empathy and caring (Figley 1995), or redemptive work, which seeks to redress wrongs in society done to individuals or groups through changing society's systemic responses, norms, and values (Couto, 1989). An organization's mission entices individuals to make wholehearted commitments to help those suffering or in need of rescue, or to achieve important changes in society.

Here are examples:

- » The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.

- » The United States Coast Guard provides maritime law enforcement, search and rescue, environmental and disaster response.
- » Providence Health and Services commits to revealing God's love for all, especially the poor and vulnerable, through their compassionate service.
- » The Innocence Project is a national litigation and public policy organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted individuals through DNA testing and reforming the criminal justice system to prevent future injustice.

Though other types of organizations may not have missions directly related to compassionate or redemptive work, their focus frequently puts them at risk for exposure to trauma and traumatized individuals. For example, the mission of many Native tribal nations is to protect, preserve, and enhance the spiritual, cultural, and physical values and resources of their people. Schools and daycare centers are dedicated to the wellbeing, education, and safety of children. We have discovered in our work that even a lower level of exposure takes a toll on organizations and the individuals working in them.

Description of Trauma

Trauma at any level is "an experience for which a person-family-group is emotionally (not only cognitively) unprepared" (Howard F. Stein communication, September 28, 2004). The organization is vulnerable, temporarily helpless, and awash in emotions. There is a collective inability to think clearly, and usual structures collapse or function poorly. The organization's culture is deeply impacted. Organizational trauma may result from a single devastating event, from the effects of many deleterious events over time, or from the impact of cumulative trauma that comes from the compassionate or redemptive nature of the work.

Whether the source is death of colleagues, devastation of a community, or response to cases of suicides, organizations are wounded. Going back to Cox's experiences, the mudslide devastated a small community as its members, including first responders, sought to save their friends

and family members. The death of three fire fighters left remaining emergency responders bereaved as they continued to fight the fires. Coping with four suicides in one Coast Guard District left the organization shaken to its core. These situations left little room for stepping back to make sense of the tragedies; those involved had to soldier on amid their own pain and suffering.

Trauma and traumatization can overpower the organization's cultural structure and processes and weaken the organization's ability to respond to external and internal challenges (Kahn, 2008). These experiences leave the organization feeling vulnerable and helpless and create lasting impact on the organizational psyche and culture (Stein, 1991). While any organization might have dysfunctional patterns, trauma-genic organizational cultures are different. These cultures reproduce traumatizing dynamics and circumstances so the entity never completely heals from traumatic events, exacerbating that dysfunction. These cultures harbor effects of unhealed sudden traumatic events as well as insidious cumulative traumatization (Vivian & Hormann, 2015).

Types and Sources of Trauma

We have encountered a wide array of traumas and traumatized groups and organizations. Practitioners can expect to face traumatic circumstances from a variety of sources. Their own ability to cope with what they discover rests on their knowledge of trauma concepts as well as confidence in their ability to act in situations fraught with intense emotion and anxiety.

For example, Vivian was asked to help Safe Homes Rape Crisis Coalition in South Carolina. Tragedy struck the agency when a client was murdered by her estranged husband outside the agency's shelter. Lynn Hawkins, executive director, moved quickly to provide staff with critical incident debriefing in the aftermath, but she realized her staff needed more. Through her colleagues she found Vivian, who came to the agency near the one-month anniversary of the murder. Vivian and Hawkins had never met before, but they had the opportunity to talk by phone ahead of time. Hawkins shared her feelings

of nervousness and acknowledged that she was investing her trust in Vivian because of her reputation. Vivian was able in that phone call to listen closely to Hawkins's concerns and offer her heartfelt appreciation for her actions so far. Still Vivian arrived on the day of her visit without having met any of the 35 staff, and she was acutely aware she was walking into a situation with many unknowns. She had to be ready to contain and support the depth and breadth of responses present among the staff, to design in the moment, and to facilitate productive sharing with people she did not know. She prepared by remaining in touch with her grounded approach and warm disposition.

Murphy-Kangas was asked to work with a group of chaplains at a large hospital. Immediately, Murphy-Kangas noticed that the group hardly mentioned the kind of work they did. Though they were attending daily to dying and terminally ill patients, comforting families, and sensitively delivering bad news, their meetings focused on administrative details and showed little trust in each other. Murphy-Kangas initially found it difficult not to be drawn into the group's dynamics.

After interviews, Murphy-Kangas thought the group was experiencing organizational trauma due to the empathic nature of their work. They knew how to function at a high level in crisis, but when it came to their interactions with one another, they did not display the same level of skill or thoughtfulness. They had nothing left for each other. Murphy-Kangas helped them be appreciative of one another.

Murphy-Kangas often found herself frustrated by the lack of structure and follow through, mainly in her interactions with the leader. She realized that she needed to pay attention to this instead of being frustrated by it, by seeing what was happening in the moment and modeling boundary setting and helpful structures.

Murphy-Kangas's biggest learning was about her own feelings of failure as she worked with this team. She was anxious for a rate of change that probably wasn't possible. This work called on her to provide a consistent, stabilizing, and optimistic presence. Murphy-Kangas needed to stay

Table 1. *Types and Sources of Trauma*

Type	Source	Example
Single devastating event	External	Attack on a workplace, loss of funding
Single devastating event	Internal	Suicide of leader, abusive behavior, insider embezzlement
Ongoing wounding	External	Threats or overt hostility directed at organization from community
Ongoing wounding	Internal	Abusive or destructive management practices
Empathic nature of the work	Internal	Unclear boundaries, over-identification with clients
Redemptive nature of the work	Internal	Internalized judgment, guilt, depression, despair

stable and realistic so she could help her clients see the next right action rather than continuing to be overwhelmed by what was wrong.

Consultants and leaders working inside organizations may also be called on to intervene. Shana Hormann had an opportunity in her university setting. A department experienced ongoing cuts in faculty and staff, leaving the remaining personnel dispirited, angry, and questioning the university's commitment to the department. Faculty expressed a sense that they and the programs were "on the chopping block." Several made comments at all-faculty meetings about feeling let down by colleagues in other departments who had not "fought on their behalf" to prevent the cuts.

Hormann offered a workshop on organizational trauma, and faculty from this department attended. Realizing the need of this faculty to share their experiences, Hormann created a safe space and invited others to talk. At one point, she said, "I apologize to you. I did not know what to do and the decision seemed out of my hands. However, as a member of this faculty and your colleague I am sorry that I was not more supportive." Immediately the tenor of the room changed. Faculty members said that they felt heard for the first time by each other and the apology was gratefully acknowledged. The workshop became a session of healing for that faculty.

Hormann had facilitated many workshops on organizational trauma

and believed she was ready to contain responses and support participants. She was called not only to witness other's experiences and facilitate sharing, but also to share her own response as a member of the community. She prepared to do that by taking a deep breath and sitting down to physically join the circle of participants. Then she spoke directly to the members of the department.

The types and sources of organizational trauma are summarized in *Table 1* (Vivian & Hormann, 2013).

Single devastating events are the most noticeable sources of organizational trauma. Devastation may be external such as the bombing of a clinic or internal such as a leader embezzling agency funds. When the source is external, the organization's place in the community may be called into question (Stein, 2004). When an internal source is responsible, questions are raised about the organization's values and structures. Whether the source is external or internal, the organization's culture may be torn apart; individuals experience grief and survivor guilt, and the organization, or part of it, may die. Devastating events require a strong, effective, and timely response (Hudson, 1998; Noer, 1993; Stein, 2004, 1998). The South Carolina example showed the importance of paying attention to the tragedy in a way that avoided assumptions about a single experience of the devastating event and allowed for a range of responses among staff. Cox's experiences reinforced the importance of

recognizing the hurt from internal and external tragedies on the whole group or entity.

Ongoing wounding is collective emotional and psychological injury that builds over time and disables an organization with an accumulation of harm. External sources of ongoing wounding include repeated vandalizing of an agency building or place of worship (Stein, 2003). The organizational culture takes on a defensive stance to protect itself and hardens against outsiders; its functioning is constricted. Internal patterns of wounding include harassment of employees and workplace abuse. Eventually staff become isolated and distrustful of anyone in a leadership role. Fear and helplessness mar the organizational culture (Kahn, 2005, 2003; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). Murphy-Kangas's work with the chaplains demonstrated circumstances in which dysfunctional patterns take on a life of their own and continue to wound the group.

Many of our consulting experiences have been with agencies in which staff members use empathy and compassion to address needs of individuals who have been harmed or neglected. Over time the organization's culture becomes infused with a value of caring and the stories of trauma suffered by clients. The South Carolina example reminded Vivian that serving domestic violence and sexual assault victims put this agency at risk for traumatization because of the nature of its work. Similarly, the redemptive work of an organization can also be a cause for organizational trauma. For example, continuous internalized judgment that an organization is not doing enough to reach its mission can spiral downward into despair and loss of hope (Couto, 1989). The chaplain's story exemplified how empathic and redemptive work can wear a group down and set the stage for continued wounding.

Lessons from Our Experiences

We four colleagues practice with a wide variety of mission driven organizations and conduct our work under varied circumstances and in different ways. Cox is called

upon to respond to the immediate needs of Coast Guard members as well as tragedies in the wider community. Murphy-Kangas works intensively with dedicated teams and leaders within hospital systems. Vivian consults across the country with leaders and whole organizations suffering from sudden or ongoing trauma. Hormann works with vulnerable student populations and consults with nonprofits, tribal communities, law enforcement, and armed services personnel.

Though we do not practice in the same way or with the same types of organizations, we have discovered and named common themes in our experiences. They are:

- » Our work is bound up in our identity and values in life.
- » Our work necessitates being continual learners.
- » Our work is done in community.
- » Deeply creative self-care makes our efforts possible.

Our work is bound up in our identity and values in life.

We have an abiding commitment to be witnesses and agents of healing, and we love groups and organizations for themselves. Our hearts point us to the big picture work, to help heal systems that have been harmed by traumas. Though not words often heard in organizational change work, we believe that love, forgiveness, and acceptance enable organizations to heal. We recognize a spiritual aspect of our efforts, and we use language that is consistent with that—notable because it's not really what you would find in a description of "what it takes to be a good practitioner." We tap deep into self-renewal by connecting with a universal energy we believe is necessary for this work. We also bring a sense of humanity—we're all in this together—as a mechanism for accessing hope and sharing it with others.

Our work takes us into the unknown. We do not enter safe, well-determined spaces; we go in accepting uncertainty and knowing at the essence we bring only ourselves. Our approach is grounded and present, while also being savvy, alert, and tuned in. We pay attention to what we see and hear and what we sense at a deeper level.

We show a profound respect for process (the myriad actions and reactions a group experiences) and the people involved in it by offering ourselves as containers to hold and support experiences of the group.

None of us believes we could last in our practices without this foundation. We recognize the importance of staying grounded, building our reserve capacity, and constantly paying attention to our ability to respond. We are intentional about nurturing sources of love, grace, spaciousness, and acceptance in our lives. For all of us nature and its healing power play an important part. Our ability to respect and nurture our own capacity leads directly to our ability to be healers in moments fraught with despair and fear.

To work at the necessary depth our boundaries need to be clear and strong. We do our best work when we can bring our full selves into situations fraught with pain and suffering. Unless we feel secure in being close to others in those circumstances, we risk being overwhelmed by their experiences or staying too distant to be effective. Our identities and values enable us to pay attention to our boundaries and use them wisely.

Our work necessitates being continual learners.

We are pragmatically aware of many aspects of our practice: Edges of our skills and knowledge, challenges of bringing our full selves to the situation, and stress of designing our interventions and having to change them on the fly. We are mindful of pushing the boundaries of our practice and needing to be humble enough to recognize our limits and lack of answers. We count on our reflective skills to learn from our experiences, to accept and embrace mistakes, and get help when we need it.

It takes ongoing individual reflection to remain whole and act with integrity. We each worry that in some cases we have failed. We want to bring relief to our clients, but it does not come quickly enough. We sometimes lack the perspective to say, "This has been going on for a while and it won't change immediately." Murphy-Kangas commented that, "If a leader is emotional, I find myself giving advice because

I want to make him or her feel better. My default is problem solving.” Other times we feel “in over our heads” and worry we are causing harm. These experiences are hard on our hearts and hamper our ability to contain and stabilize a situation. They also interfere with our ability to think clearly in challenging moments. It is difficult to remember that we bring energy and witness to others’ process and an opportunity for healing, not immediate relief.

We know we cannot help systems without being influenced in the process. As consultants, we are affected by the

intervention. Though we want to keep a whole organization perspective in mind, these leaders’ individual distress is real, and crisis intervention is sometimes necessary. Our charge in those moments is to stay rooted in our curiosity about the whole system so we can help the leader put his or her experience in the context of the organization. This takes cognitive skills to pay attention to multiple levels at one time, emotional maturity to accept information without judging anyone, and recognizing opportunities for compassionate meaning making.

not work so deeply with organizations and people if it were not for this group.” Murphy-Kangas calls our group a “touchpoint.” Keys to our group’s success are commitment, consistency, honesty, transparency, deep listening, care, appreciation, and witnessing. Not surprisingly, these qualities are what we have to give those we serve. As we need to bring our full selves to our work with clients so we bring our full selves to this group. For collective meaning making, for challenging each other’s thinking, and for furthering the work by contributing insight and skills to the field.

As consultants, we are affected by the patterns we begin to discern: Suspicion and negativity; blaming others; distrust of leaders and distrust of consultants brought in by those leaders; fear, isolation, etc. We offer a gift to the system when we can feel the impact of these patterns without getting swept up in them. Hormann noted, “We can’t control others’ perceptions of us, but we can be open and continue to nurture avenues of connection. We can notice and wonder ‘what’s really going on here.’” Our ability to join with our clients in a nonjudgmental way fuels their trust in us, but as Cox described in the introductory story, it comes with a cost.

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Vivian commented, “We hear leaders’ stories of ‘hanging by their fingernails.’” We are drawn to support them in the moment, even doing some crisis

Our work is done in community.

It is obvious from the preceding paragraphs that we cannot do this work alone. The healing we accomplish in our practice is relational, and we develop our capacity to heal through being in relationship with colleagues. We count on others to help us stay based in our strengths and principles, to reflect and learn from our experiences, and to acknowledge our shortcomings without being shamed or hampered by them. We recognize that self-sufficiency can lead to isolation. Hormann reflected, “We cannot afford to be isolated in our practice because we work with systems that tend to become isolated from shame, fear, over self-reliance.” We need to practice what we preach by reaching out to each other.

Our practice group members frequently acknowledge our gratitude for one another. Cox has shared often, “I could

Being in community also helps us maintain a whole organization perspective as we bring our individual experiences and views to a problem. Also, by understanding our group dynamics might mirror or reflect those in our client systems, we deepen our ability to act insightfully with our clients.

We also use our group experiences as creative reminders of what we can do with our clients. For example, early on we came to see that self-healing from the effects of our practice went beyond individual self-care. We can say with assurance to clients that individual stress management, self-care techniques, and time off are not enough to heal from trauma. We assist our clients to harness the power of collective healing strategies, and we help them find ways to nurture the spirit and energy of their organizations.

Deep creative self-care makes our efforts possible.

We aim for deep and powerful work in our practices. That requires comparably deep and powerful nurturing. Our self-nurturing activities address physical, emotional, relational, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of our lives and work. These approaches are fully integrated into our professional practices because we know we cannot succeed without them. Each of us has her unique insights and ways, though we all think that regular routines are key, giving gratitude is essential, and loving relationships make our work possible.

Vivian experienced her own trauma from multiple surgeries, limited mobility, and the emotional impact of an extended time of stress. She realized how much

she depended on her loving family and community to support her through that time. That personal experience honed her thinking about what happens to leaders and organizations suffering for a prolonged period and deepened her capacity for empathy.

Hormann finds comfort and rejuvenation in daily prayer and meditation. These quiet activities bring her focus, guidance, and strength. As an introvert, she needs quiet alone time and time with others who like to play as well as encourage and challenge her.

As an intuitive extrovert, Murphy-Kangas notices that her “feelers are always out” in life and in work. So, her self-care includes time with friends and family in ways that do not tempt her to fix anything. Often food is part of those time. For Murphy-Kangas cooking is a creative act that allows her to get out of her head and into the flow of the moment.

Cox believes that reserving capacity comes from enforcing healthy emotional boundaries and creating space to play, rest, and recover. Restorative exercise outdoors with her dog, offering gratitude, and honoring Spirit in others each support her wellbeing.

Threaded throughout the previous paragraphs is the importance of integration: profound understanding that we need to be openhearted AND open-minded. We can then offer others hope and help them think at the edges of what is possible. Heart/mind/body—three centers of intelligence. Quiet the mind, open the heart, and be present in the body. Cherish our loving selves.

Recommendations for Other Practitioners

This section focuses on our recommendations for consultants who want to engage in organizational trauma work. Those recommendations are:

- » Know one’s personal motivation and capacity.
- » Develop the mindset and heart for the work.
- » Engage in continual reflection and learning.

- » Cultivate a community of practice.
- » Strengthen rejuvenating strategies.

Know one’s personal motivation and capacity.

This work—its satisfactions and joys—comes with a cost. It is not for the faint of heart. It takes a willingness to step into very messy situations and do the best you can. It takes a willingness to acknowledge the edge of one’s competence and a dedication to ongoing learning. It takes a lot of love for humanity and for organizations. Honest reflection and conversation about who you are, who you want to be as a practitioner, and what you see as your life’s work will help you determine if working with traumatized organizations is a path for you. Since it is a new field, there is lots of opportunity and need for others to become involved and contribute.

Develop the mindset and heart for the work.

Consultants are often viewed as experts and expected to have the answers and offer a way out of turmoil and unhappiness. As we have shared, we each can get caught in the expectations that we can “fix the problem.” When working with traumatized systems, practitioners will frequently not know the answers and will need humility, ease with that lack, and comfort with ambiguity. Consultants can bring experience, skills, models, and knowledge of resources to offer as appropriate. They can enter systems in an open, curious, and non-judgmental way and thereby encourage those in the system to trust them. It is also important for practitioners to bring perseverance and hope to clients when they are disheartened and stuck.

Engage in continual reflection and learning.

It is essential for any practitioner to engage in ongoing reflection and learning. Each experience helps an individual to test her or his judgment and skills and learn from mistakes and successes. The field of organizational trauma and healing is in its infancy, and it will grow and deepen as we

surface our learning and intentionally put the results into practice.

Cultivate a community of practice.

Working without support in deeply traumatized systems is not sustainable. Because we know that traumatized systems are often isolated in their hurt and turmoil, it is particularly important that consultants start from a socially connected foundation. Otherwise those trying to help are susceptible to the pull of the organization’s isolating dynamics.

Building a community of practice is important for many reasons. Addressing organizational trauma requires a flexible approach that draws from a wide variety of disciplines. Through sharing and thinking with others practitioners can recognize when they have been swept up in the dynamics of a situation. Colleagues offer courage to consultants who are operating at the edge of their understanding and experience and help individuals move beyond feelings of guilt and incompetence. Appreciative caring relationships enable practitioners to risk making mistakes. A community of practice offers an arena for sharing and experimenting intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

Strengthen rejuvenation strategies.

Consultants may have favorite self-care activities, but additional resources may be needed because organizational trauma work often results in extended periods of stress. They might be helping several organizations cope with trauma and its aftermath simultaneously. They may have been drawn into a deeply wounded and dysfunctional system. Or they may find themselves over-identifying with a particular leader. Consultants need to practice a variety of renewal strategies to ensure stamina and health over the long haul. Intentional self-care should include activities that help one be positive and productive and allow for grief, feelings of inadequacy, and sadness. In the most basic way, rejuvenation needs to help us gain relief from the work’s intensity and return to a strong center. Rest, nutrition, exercise, support, creative outlets, and spiritual practice have

interacting physical and emotional health benefits. Finding and nurturing joy, hope, and love in our lives are essential.

Dedication to healing organizations guides our practice whether we directly see and name organizational trauma or not. Our inner identity and guiding principles impel us to continue to do these healing efforts. As we have said, it is not for everyone, but it is for some with strong minds and courageous hearts. We want to inspire you to develop skills and confidence to take on the challenges of working with traumatized systems. Whatever your areas of focus, we hope this paper has informed your thinking and practice.

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Kristin L. Cox, MA, manages resilience, crisis intervention and peer support programs for the U.S. Coast Guard. She has worked for over 25 years with leaders and first responder organizations healing from disasters, trauma, and difficult circumstances. She can be reached at kristing98117@comcast.net.

Shana Hormann, PhD, MSW, has over 30 years' experience providing coaching for leaders as well as training and consultation for non-profit organizations, tribal communities, and government agencies. She co-authored *Organizational Trauma and Healing* with Pat Vivian. She can be reached at shormann@antioch.edu.

Sarah Murphy-Kangas is an organizational development practitioner, providing coaching, mediation, team development, and group facilitation to clients, including workshops designed to enhance organizational health. She specializes in helping caregiving organizations find resilience and wholeness in the midst of difficult work. She can be reached at coach@sarahmurphykangas.com.

Pat Vivian, MA, has been a consultant to nonprofits for 35 years. Pat's practice, which takes her around the USA, focuses on helping nonprofits recover and heal from trauma. With Shana Hormann she published *Organizational Trauma and Healing* in 2013. She can be reached at patvivian71@gmail.com.