

To Really Reclaim the Heart of Our Humanity, Let Us Also Claim the Heart of Our Divinity

*Speech by **Saniel Bonder** for the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions, as part of the "Healing Hearts at Wounded Knee" presentation panel, October 16. Slightly edited here for print publication.*

Greetings! I'm honored to address you.

Let me offer an invocation of the Divine in our Heart, from India's ancient *Chandogya Upanishad*:

"There is a Light
that shines beyond all things on Earth,
beyond us all,
beyond the heaven,
beyond the highest, the very highest heavens.
This is the light
that shines in our Heart." (3.13.7)

Reclaiming the heart of our humanity may require us to embody that divine Light and Love through a religious hero's journey. One that includes encountering, understanding, and outgrowing our darkness, hatred, and fear.

Years ago, I wrote in an essay:

Wounded Knee is ... the most unforgettable shrine to the systematic genocide of the Native American peoples – a process that European settlers and despoilers carried on without rest and with no significant remorse for more than four centuries. ...

Until something heals in the American heart that was slashed open at Wounded Knee, my sense is that the democratic spiritual promise of America can never be realized to any substantial degree. People have to be willing to own responsibility for these atrocities.
Something must be done.¹

I felt called to make a pilgrimage to Wounded Knee. Twenty years later, this June, I stood on a knoll – the "Knee" – with Lakota Sioux Grandmother Jean Fleury and her sister Stephanie Pratt. Right there, on December 29, 1890, firing early machine guns, U.S. soldiers slaughtered about 300 Lakota Sioux men,

women, and children as they fled in terror down the hill and through an open field. Many bodies froze where they fell.

We were there on a bright, breezy, hot day. The place has an air of solemnity and peace. But when we turned toward the cemetery, Jean began shaking. Overwhelmed, she said she'd been to Wounded Knee twice before but couldn't enter the graveyard. At its center is a mass grave of many massacre victims. *Since childhood, Jean was told that one of her ancestors – she didn't know who – was among them.*

Stephanie held one of Jean's arms and I the other as we walked in. Jean began reading the obelisk marking the mass grave. Suddenly she let out an anguished cry.

The top name on the obelisk was "Chief Bigfoot," whose murder by the army had started the massacre. Near the bottom was "Swift Bird."

Jean knew that name. Swift Bird was her several-times great-uncle or grandfather. While Stephanie and I held her, she wept.

"Trauma" is any event that causes intense terror, hopelessness, horror, or dread. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the resulting dysregulation that becomes a body's default condition. People so afflicted can go ballistic or violently implode with almost no obvious provocation.

When our post-traumatic buttons get pushed, the amygdala, which registers threats and calls up memory-based feelings, goes haywire. Extreme physical and emotional symptoms of stress, including fight and flight reactions, get triggered. Brain and hormonal chemistry goes into emergency mode, often resulting in systemic over-inflammation, which can lead to chronic and degenerative diseases and hasten aging. Unrelieved, this super-stress continually re-traumatizes the brain and nervous system.²

Psychological professionals work with the "child-of-survivors" syndrome. Severe trauma survivors wreak havoc on offspring by what they do and don't say or do, and just by the immensity of the horror, terror, and shock they carry. Recounting his Jewish father's Holocaust experience, Art Spiegelman subtitled *Maus*, his graphic memoir, *My Father Bleeds History*. Psychoanalysts treating children of survivors say their suffering shatters boundaries of space and time with its immediate here-and-now-ness: "We do not believe in ghosts, but our patients clutter up our offices with them."³

A new science, epigenetics, takes understanding of trauma beyond family

psychology. It studies how our genes' expression (not the underlying DNA code) is affected by environmental factors. In "The Science of Suffering," Judith Shulevitz wrote:

[R]esearchers are increasingly painting a picture of a psychopathology so fundamental, so, well, *biological*, that ... the children of survivors ... may be born ... more susceptible to PTSD, a vulnerability expressed in their molecules, neurons, cells, and genes.⁴

In the 1980s Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, a Lakota social worker, catalogued pervasive human devastation at the Pine Ridge Reservation near Wounded Knee. She documented cumulative, multi-generational and multi-lineal "historical trauma," "soul wounds," "unmourned loss," and horrifying dreams of long-past atrocities, possible instances of collective memory.⁵

Each culture has a legacy of war, adversity, and trauma. Through what science calls the "open loop" of "interpersonal limbic regulation,"⁶ we all share this kind of inheritance. We share the legacies of greatness, genius, heroism too. But as neuroscientist Rick Hanson writes in *Hardwiring Happiness*, positive memories are like Teflon – they slide right by – while negative ones are like Velcro. They stick.⁷

None of my ancestors died in the Holocaust. Yet my mother, born in New York to Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe, was freaked out for years by anything German. She couldn't even get into a Volkswagen. It's not just survivors' children who suffer these effects. Whole peoples do.

Metrics. From Wikipedia, estimated deaths in 46 major wars, massacres, and genocides of the last 2200 years⁸:

387,984,000

Multiple millions more have died in prisons, camps, and slavery; famines, floods, and landslides partially caused by humans; human sacrifice and "other deadly events."

That's just those *killed*. Those numbers don't count:

- the wounded
- those traumatized then
- or in the next generation, like my mother
- or those born later, like Jean.

Most studies focus on trauma victims. What about perpetrators? Is there an epigenetics of evil? Let me tell a story.

One Saturday in February 1993, several friends and I embarked on a shamanic journey. Our mentor, not attending, had blessed our plan.

That afternoon I casually read an *Esquire* article about a Russian serial killer on death row. (*Really dumb way to prepare for a journey.*) In the journey, off by myself, I saw a psychic black cloud enter the room. It was the spirit of the Russian sadist. He asked me to show him what it's like to feel hatred, violent lust, even murderous rage, and still stay sane. I agreed to try.

All was going well – until I took him into my heart. Instantly I was exploded into an absolute vacuum of utter darkness and cold – like outer space without even a pinprick of light from a single distant star. I knew this was his heart. No wonder he had gone so horrifyingly mad.

It took work to get him out of me. My friends thought I was crazy to have let him in. Our shaman praised me for daring to, and coming through it.

Ever since, I respect evil. I don't believe psychology by itself can heal it. Or that hard science will ever create drugs or mechanical treatments that alone can cure it. In its worst forms, it is near extinction of the soul. If redemption is possible, it takes great religious conversion and profound spiritual help.

Years later I learned that Hitler had prided himself on having an “ice-cold heart.”

With genocidal Hitlers, depraved serial killers, men who randomly massacre children and adults, national leaders who starve populations or nuke cities, blood feuds around the globe, significantly human-generated climate catastrophes – what will it take to reclaim the heart of our humanity?

No small task. Yet the most important thing we can do.

Realizing the Heart of our divinity will be crucial.

In the 20th century science and spirit met and fused in the heart. English anatomists in 1906 discovered where the heartbeat originates in mammals. In scientific language, “[c]ardiac muscle possesses an intrinsic rhythmicity that allows the heartbeat to originate in and be conducted through the heart without extrinsic stimulation.”⁹

They found that each heartbeat originates in the sinoatrial node or pacemaker, in the back wall of the right atrium or upper chamber. An electrical impulse spreads

from there over both atria. The resulting contraction squeezes blood into the ventricles and through the whole body.

The heart has its own fail-safe system, but that's the basic science. The spirituality came through master mystics, India's Ramana Maharshi, American-born Adi Da Samraj, and others. They discovered the ultimate bodily place where divine unity awakens is in the heart organ. It's in *the right side of the chest* – not the central heart chakra, nor the brain or heavens above. From medical anatomy, Adi Da identified the site. Guess where? The sinoatrial node, the source of every heartbeat.

These lines from another ancient Upanishad aren't mere metaphors:

The Heart, the perfect seat of meditation, resembles an inverted lotus bud. ...

It always hangs down from the arteries ...

In the middle of it there is a great fire ... It is the immutable and all-knowing. ...

It heats the body from head to foot. In the middle of it there is a tongue of fire ...

[d]azzling as a streak of lightning in the midst of a dark cloud and as thin as the awn at the tip of a grain of rice, golden bright and extremely minute.

In the middle of that tongue of flame the Supreme Self abides firmly. He is God.¹⁰

He – She – You – Me – US. To reclaim the heart of our humanity, let us awaken to that lightning-like, shared “I Am”-Self that is our divinity!

Rachel Yehuda is a pioneer epigeneticist and “the go-to authority on the molecular biology of intergenerational trauma.” She emphasizes:

Not all effects of trauma are negative. ... [R]epresented among children of Holocaust survivors is a preponderance of people ... in therapeutic professions. ... You can get stuck in the legacy of victimization, or you can say, “No, no, no, no, no. I'm going to be part of the solution.”¹¹

Dr. Yehuda and other biological and social scientists focus increasingly on “PTG,” “Post-Traumatic Growth” – how to cultivate greater resilience in traumatized individuals and groups.

Which is of course a primary virtue of ... faith! Faith and religious practice empower resilience and even change genes. This is a Parliament of the World's *Religions*. What brings us here is what is Ultimate, most sacred and meaningful to us. Yes, science is extremely important. But divine Mystery is *not* reducible to

what hard empirical science or even “soft” social sciences can prove to our thinking minds. And, our hearts and souls already know much. Multigenerational trauma? *Old Testament*, Ezekiel 2: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth have been set on edge.”

Ten thousand of us are here bursting with wisdom, ideas, practices, projects, many already underway, others sure to emerge from this astoundingly potent conclave, to help our species reclaim the heart of our humanity. Personally, I am honored to be part of the “Healing Hearts at Wounded Knee” team. In our workshop tomorrow, we’ll invite you to co-create with us unprecedented initiatives for healing, reconciliation, and, eventually, our species-wide outgrowing of the very possibility of wars, massacres, atrocities, and genocides. *“No more Wounded Knees!”*

Most of us here are aware of our own character faults and weaknesses. Each of us should keep humbly doing our shadow work, disarming our traumas, strengthening resilience, embodying love, staying accountable to others who deeply see us. We’re all called to this journey, from the greatest king, judge, or teacher to the meek, poor, and afflicted. The more we engage it, the more Anne Frank’s words will ring true: “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.” The few beyond redemption will become increasingly rare.

As we attend to our healing and developmental growth, cooperating, deepening, honoring tradition and bringing in the new, the more we will behold a miracle: that Divine Light “beyond the heavens” is already coming alive and awake in and as the one and only Heart of each of us and of all that Is. It is our nature and destiny, forever, to embody and to partner with that Mystery, that God/Goddess, the Divinity that includes all of our humanity. We are already both receiving and transmitting a Grace that none of us can ever really deserve, yet each of us can’t help but radiate.

To close, I’ll repeat that ancient gem of Indian scripture we started with.

“There is a Light
that shines beyond all things on Earth,
beyond us all,
beyond the heaven,
beyond the highest, the very highest heavens.
This is the light
that shines in our Heart.”

Thank you!

END

Afterword: “No soul left behind.” When I gave this speech at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Salt Lake City, Utah, on October 16, 2015, I had a quietly startling experience. As I spoke of my encounter with the spirit of the Russian serial killer during a shamanic journey (see p. 4 above), something took place in a split second that I was not able to identify till later. At the time, a bit flustered, I inadvertently moved aside the page I that I hadn’t yet finished reading aloud. But I managed to keep the speech going and soon recovered.

Later it dawned on me that in that instant I had contacted the same man’s spirit more directly than at any other time since the journey I was describing. Or, he had contacted me. And I felt a particular message from him, and possibly from other beings like him: “*Don’t leave me out!* Don’t assume that, evil as I was in my life on Earth, I don’t need and want redemption too.”

Obviously I can’t prove that any such contact occurred or such a message was given. Nonetheless, the experience convinced me as never before of something wonderfully hopeful: the ultimate conversion to divine salvation and liberation must and in time will include everyone. Even those who have been most heinous and vile in their lives here, most irredeemable. In a few words, *no soul left behind.* ~ Saniel Bonder

NOTES

¹ Wounded Knee as shrine to genocide: Sanie Bonder, *The White-Hot Yoga of the Heart: Divinely Human Self-Realization and Sacred Marriage – A Breakthrough Way for “Westerners”* (Petaluma, CA: Mt. Tam Empowerments, 2007 edition), pp. 102-03.

² Psycho-biological impact of trauma: preceding two paragraphs in part adapted from Judith Shulevitz, “The Science of Suffering,” *New Republic*, November 16, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/120144/trauma-genetic-scientists-say-parents-are-passing-ptsd-kids>.

³ Psychoanalysts on Holocaust survivor ghosts: Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudilliere, in conversation with Karen Peoples, Ph.D.

⁴ Epigenetic biology of trauma: Shulevitz, *ibid*.

⁵ Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart on historical trauma, soul wounds at Pine Ridge Reservation: Shulevitz, *ibid*.

⁶ Open loop, interpersonal limbic regulation: Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), pp. 6-7.

⁷ Velcro, Teflon, brain-mind negativity bias: Rick Handson, *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* (New York: Harmony Books, 2013), pp. 25-27ff.

⁸ Statistics on death tolls: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_by_death_toll.

⁹ Heartbeat originating in the heart organ: Kent M. Van de Graaf, *Human Anatomy* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Publishers, 1984), p. 452.

¹⁰ Quote from Upanishads on the Heart: *The Method of the Siddhas: Talks with Heart-Master Da Love-Ananda [Adi Da] on the Spiritual Technique of the Saviors of Mankind* (San Rafael, CA: The Dawn Horse Press, 1987), pp. xxiv-xxv. The following acknowledgement was included:

“The “Invocation” (*Narayana Sooktam*) was edited, revised, and its technical terms translated by Heart-Master Da Love-Ananda from an English translation of the Sanskrit original which appeared in *The Mountain Path*, volume 9, number 2, April, 1972, published by Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, South India. *Narayana Sooktam* forms a part of the *Mahanarayana Upanishad*, sections 1, 13, and 23.

¹¹ Not all effects of trauma are negative: “Do Jews Carry Trauma in Our Genes? A Conversation with Rachel Yehuda,” by David Samuels in *Tablet*, December 11, 2014. <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/187555/trauma-genes-q-a-rachel-yehuda>.