Help is on the Way. Dealing with Critical Incident Stress from a Spiritual Perspective

I.) As a pastor and a chaplain for the Topeka Police Department, I have spent a significant part of over twenty-one years trying to be with people in some of the most challenging, stressful, and potentially dangerous moments of their lives. I have responded, for example, with Topeka Police officers to homes, in which a loved one has died unexpectedly – as the result of illness, suicide, or even the violent action of another. Together with law enforcement officers, I have knocked on doors late at night to break the horrible and shocking news to parents that their child was killed in an automobile accident, shot and killed in a local bar, or had taken his or her own life.

Most of you, who are participating in these presentations, are first responders or frontline healthcare workers of one sort or another and that means that you professionally respond to

crisis, to the critical and traumatic moments in people's lives. You are trained to know what to do in those moments and you have considerable experience doing what you have been trained to do. You have honed your professional competence and effectiveness in the crucible of your daily exposure to the myriad challenges you are called upon to confront.

Why do you do what you do? Of course, only you know the precise answer to that. But most healthcare professionals and first responders have chosen their professions because they genuinely care about people. I am guessing that is true for you, as well. But, more than that, you are especially good at caring for people in critical situations. That means that you are up to dealing with situations that would shock the average person, because most people are squeamish in the face of blood, for example, or become paralyzed when confronted with life-and-death situations that require the ability to respond professionally and rapidly.

Personally, I suspect that most of you do what you do because you grew up reading a lot of comics or watching cartoons that featured superheroes. You decided, in other words, that you wanted to be one, too.

There is, however, a serious difference between you and your superhero role models. Superheroes are only needed now and again. Clark Kent, after all, spent his days working as a reporter for the Daily Planet; he only enters a phonebooth to don his cape and become Superman on certain occasions.

You, by contrast, are professional superheroes; you don't just respond when you happen to encounter someone in crisis, you work in settings in which the crises, wherever and whenever they happen, are all constantly being referred to you. Dealing with people in crisis is your full-time job. And that, at times, can be overwhelming, especially if you do not have adequate opportunities to regenerate, to relieve the stress that doing your job necessarily entails.

Many first responders and healthcare professionals I know could do a better job with self-care under normal circumstances, so the current pandemic is pushing them to their limits, and beyond. They don't like admitting that, at times, they struggle, too. "My co-workers and the people we serve rely on me," a totally stressed-out police-officer-friend told me once. I told him what a mentor once told me: "Tobias, cemeteries are full of indispensable people."

When you're in the habit of seeing yourself as the one who always comes to the rescue of others, it is difficult to admit that there are times when it just might be necessary for someone to come to yours.

This training is being offered to you as an acknowledgment of your enormous importance to our community. It also acknowledges that what is true for most of us, in one way or another, may be especially true for you: This pandemic is

challenging all of us in ways we could not have imagined beforehand.

This training is an opportunity for you to consider that it might be you who needs some attention for a change. Self-care is not something most of us think we need, and it is especially difficult to arrange for in the current pandemic when most of you are working in settings with reduced staff and have therefore been working more or less non-stop for over a year now!

Does it ever get on your nerves when people say to you, “Be sure to take care of you!”? A female nurse I know said to me recently, “I appreciate the sentiment. But how am I supposed to do that? When I get off work, the kids need my attention. By the time I’ve finished helping them with their homework, getting dinner on the table, and putting them to bed, there’s barely enough time for a glass of wine. I need to sleep, because the little I get isn’t all that great; my dreams are full of patients

that keep dying on me. No matter what I do, they just keep dying." This nurse gave me a concrete example: "The other day, an elderly woman, admitted with COVID a few days earlier, said, 'I need to touch someone; my kids all live far away. Would you hold my hand?' I didn't have a lot of time, but I held her hand, maybe for a minute. When I withdrew it, I could see the disappointment in her face, so I told her I'd come back later. I had other patients to attend to. She died later that night, before I could see her again. I feel guilty. Sometimes I just want to sit and have a good cry. But I don't have the time."

If you can identify with this nurse's situation, chances are your superpower is being challenged by the kryptonite that is this pandemic. It is important to safeguard your superpower; it is important not to lose you.

But how do you avoid it, when you find it almost impossible to take time for yourself? Another mentor of mine once said, "Have you ever noticed that people who are constantly saying

they don't have any time are the very people who never seem to get much done? On the other hand, the people who are productive and hard at work most of the time always seem to be able to make more time for others. If they can do it for others, they can certainly do it for themselves." She was right. In what I am about to say, I am going to assume that you may be near, at, or past the point of recognizing that it is exhausting being a non-stop superhero. I am going to assume that you will heed the advice flight attendants drill into passengers on every takeoff: "In the unlikely event of a loss of cabin pressure…oxygen masks will drop down from an overhead compartment…If you are traveling with children, fasten your own mask securely before assisting your children with theirs." In other words, if parents don't attend to their own oxygen supply, they may not have an opportunity to help their children with theirs. I am going to assume, metaphorically speaking, that you need an oxygen mask. Because, if you don't put it on

in a proper and timely manner, you may not be in a position to provide the help you've trained for, that others need, and that supports you and your family.

Metaphorically speaking, I want to explore some ways that help you to get you in touch with an oxygen supply, or – at the very least – show you some ways to get that "oxygen," should you need it. I want to help you to begin dealing with critical stress levels if you haven't begun to do so already, or if what you have been doing hasn't worked as well as you had hoped it would.

You may have looked at the title of this presentation, rolled your eyes and thought to yourself, "What on earth is 'Dealing with Critical Stress *from a Spiritual Perspective*' supposed to mean?" I am so glad you asked.

Our word spirit comes from the Latin language and, at its most basic level, simply means "breath." In time, it also came to refer to the force that gives and sustains our lives. It makes

sense, since you can't live long, if you can't breathe. Dealing with critical stress from a spiritual perspective, then, means to learn how to catch your breath – even when that seems nearly impossible to do. I'll come back to what I mean by "a spiritual perspective" toward the end of this presentation. But for now, let me just say this much: spirituality, in the way I understand it, is not a compartment, like "the physical," "the psychological," or "the social;" it is the frame for your life's big picture. It is the frame that supplies meaning and integrity to the various aspects of your life and does so in ways that are healthy and healing, that make you whole. This frame includes the physical, psychological, and social aspects of our lives. Spirituality is about the whole of our lives, about making sure that we are whole, or that we are restored to wholeness, when we are injured. Critical stress is a form of injury.

So let's turn now to a discussion of critical stress. Let's discuss 1.) What is it, 2.) What some of the indications are that a

person might be experiencing critical stress, and 3.) What a person affected by critical stress can do to get through it and recover.

1.) What is critical stress?

First of all, critical stress is a form of stress, an extreme form of stress. Stress is anything that causes physical, emotional, cognitive, or behavior strain. Stress, contrary to what you might think, is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. If you are alive, you are stressed. There's stress that's good for you, like physical exercise, for example, AND there's stress that is not good for you, like repetitive physical movements that, over time, can damage your joints. Healthy stress is often referred to as *eu*-stress, while unhealthy stress, by contrast, is referred to as *dys*-stress. *Eu* (spelled e-u) is a Greek prefix, which means 'good,' while the prefix *dys* (spelled d-y-s) is a Greek prefix that means 'bad.' Critical stress is what we call *dys*-stress that is so

intense or prolonged that it impairs resiliency, our ability to bounce back.

Think of a piece of flexible material, like elastic, for example. When you stretch it, you stress it. When you let go, it almost immediately contracts to its previous, unstressed condition. It can do that because it is a highly resilient material. Elastic is a material with many uses. Right now, let's use it as a metaphor for us.

When we become physically or psychologically overextended, or both, we risk a tear to our ability to be resilient; we risk becoming unable to return to our previous, normal state.

Critical stress can result from exposure to a single trauma-inducing event, like the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, OR to a prolonged series of trauma-inducing events, like an ongoing pandemic with a high and ongoing death toll. In either case, experts call events that can induce trauma critical incidents.

Critical stress is our response to critical incidents. It is not something to be afraid of. Critical stress is “a normal response to abnormal circumstances.” Critical stress is a normal response to physical and psychological overextension. That said, when our stress reaches critical levels, it must be dealt with. Not doing so can lead to a temporary or, in rare cases, permanent inability to recover normal resiliency, an inability to bounce back.

The current pandemic has lasted for over a year now – that’s quite a stretch! But there’s good news. It may take the elastic that represents us a bit longer to assume its previous, normal state, but in the vast majority of cases, we do bounce back and recover our usual resilience. For some people afflicted with critical stress it may take longer to get back to normal resilience, but most can, and do.

2.) Critical stress is “a normal response to abnormal circumstances,” but how do we know when we are suffering

from it? You may be experiencing critical stress if you have one or several of the following symptoms, which are divided into four categories: physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.

a.) Physical symptoms include exhaustion; nausea and vomiting; fatigue; difficulty breathing; chest pains; rapid heart rate; headaches; dry mouth/abnormal thirst; elevated blood pressure; dizziness and fainting; heightened sensitivity to allergens, and symptoms of shock.

b.) Cognitive reactions include a blaming attitude; confusion; a reduced attention span; flashbacks; poor concentration; negative self-talk; loss of confidence; decreased awareness; troubled thoughts; nightmares; being easily distracted; short-term memory loss, and distortions with regard to time, place, and people.

c.) Emotional reactions include frustration; strong need for recognition of what has been experienced during a critical incident; anxiety; guilt resulting from a strong identification

with victims; a sense of loss; anger; denial; fear of losing control; irritability and agitation; depression; feeling overwhelmed; feeling isolated, and loss of emotional control.

d.) Behavioral reactions include emotional outbursts; change in activity levels; sleep disturbances; increased smoking; hyper-vigilance and becoming easily startled; antisocial behavior; social withdrawal; changes in eating habits; difficulty relaxing; being fidgety or restless; self-medication with alcohol or drugs, and changes in one's sex drive. *(These symptoms are taken from the website of British Columbia Emergency Health Services, BCEMH)*

3.) Now that we have mentioned some of the great array of symptoms that manifest in people experiencing critical stress, let's talk about some of the ways we can deal with it.

As first responders and healthcare professionals, you regularly deal with higher amounts of stress than the average person.

This means that you are constitutionally gifted with a higher tolerance for stress than most people, OR that you have discovered ways to deal with it. Hopefully, those ways are healthy ways. If they are, then you have been proactive in finding ways to bolster your overall resilience.

I am undoubtedly stating the obvious, considering who I am talking to, when I say that the most basic ways to ensure resilience proactively are to eat right and exercise.

If comfort food is your way of dealing with stress, and you are stressed, try replacing it with food that is good for you. If you've got enough time to order and pick up fast food, you've got enough time to cook a healthy meal. If cooking is not you, consider making it you. Buy a cookbook, like Mediterranean Diet Cookbook: 550 Quick, Easy and Healthy Mediterranean Diet Recipes for Everyday Cooking. Sure, it'll set you back about $13, but it will save you thousands in healthcare costs over the

long run. In the short-term, eating right will help fuel you in ways that support resilience.

Going for a bike ride, jogging, or just walking briskly for twenty minutes to a half hour three times a week is another easy way to increase overall resilience. If you are a healthcare professional with a Fitbit or a similar app, chances are you're easily getting ten to twenty thousand steps or more in each day. But going for a walk in varied terrain, like the kind we find here in Topeka on the trails around the Governor's Mansion in Kanza State Park, for example, is not only good for your body, it's good for your mind. It's a healthy way to relieve physical and emotional stress, as well as to spend time with your family and friends.

Okay, so that was obvious. But it should be equally obvious that, if we know that, it doesn't matter unless we put it into practice. To be honest, I've spent years ignoring my own advice. But for several years now, I have been following it

religiously – and it has made a huge difference in my ability not only to manage stress but to be more positive about my life generally! Plus, I am more confident when going to see my doctor for my annual physical. Eating right and exercise are not only beneficial in cultivating resilience proactively but also important in maintaining and recovering resilience in the midst of stressful circumstances.

Another thing you can do is learn some basic meditation techniques. These days, this is increasingly being referred to as Mindfulness Training. I have been practicing a variant of this for decades now, and it works. Neurological studies have also verified the benefits of meditation, especially with regard to managing stress. This isn't the time or place to teach you how it is done, but if you need some instruction in the basics, feel free to give me a call. I am happy to get you started at no cost. But there are also a number of apps available that can help you get started. One I have looked into is called Headspace (spelled as

one word). It's introductory training program is free. After that it costs a nominal monthly fee. You can also find Headspace on YouTube, where you can also easily pick up the basics at no cost.

A resource I have also found useful over the years is Jack Kornfield's Meditation for Beginners. If you order it for your e-reader, it costs less than $2. Jack is a Ph.D. psychologist who has spent years distilling the techniques and experience of Buddhist meditation practices into something useful for non-Buddhists, as well. I have found his work very helpful, especially in understanding how meditation or mindfulness training works and what it can accomplish.

But there is one more tool, to which I would like to introduce you. It may prove especially helpful for those of you who just don't seem to be good at asking for help, or at least not immediately. Well, you can try helping yourself first. Am I experiencing critical stress? What are the signs? What can I do

to deal with critical stress? These questions are addressed in a program called The Road to Mental Readiness. Incorporating the results of research into dealing with critical stress as experienced by combat soldiers, including U.S. Navy Seals and U.S. Marines, this program is a mental health resilience and education program developed by the Canadian Armed Forces. You can download their app, the R2MR (spelled R, the number 2, M, R). It is designed to help you self-diagnose your stress level, and it offers recommendations and resources for improving short term performance and long-term mental health outcomes tailored to your personal situation.

I don't mean to imply that you shouldn't take full advantage of the resources available to you in your work setting. Employee Assistance Programs, for example, offer valuable professional support, especially if you are suffering mentally from crisis levels of stress. But, like everything else I have suggested, the available tools for dealing with critical stress, or for maintaining

and recovering resilience, are only useful if, in fact, they are utilized and utilized consistently.

Over the years, I have learned that first responders and healthcare professionals are more likely to take advice from their peers, who have been where they are now, than from anyone else. It's one thing to talk about critical incident stress and recovery, quite another to learn how to do it from someone you know, trust, and respect, someone who's been there and done that successfully. For this reason, one of the most helpful ways that organizations dedicated to frontline response and critical healthcare can assist employees with managing critical incident stress is to develop peer-led critical incident stress management teams. If your organization does not yet have such a critical incident management team, The International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) can help. The ICISF-website and the ICISF YouTube-page offers

guidance on how to set up and train peer support critical incident stress management teams.

4.) In conclusion, let me come back to what I said about spirituality earlier. I am aware that not everyone is part of a faith tradition and community. While I am a Christian myself, a member of First Congregational Church here in Topeka, I have purposefully refrained from making any assumptions about whether you are a person of faith or not. Either way, I don't judge. So, I have defined spirituality in a way that, whoever you are and whatever your background, it is something to which I hope you can relate.

Let me repeat what I said earlier: Spirituality is not a compartment, rather it is the frame for the big picture of your life. That frame helps to organize the various aspects of your life in ways that are meaningful. Spirituality is what I call that frame in which we find recovery from our vulnerabilities and also the strength to help others to do the same. Spirituality is

about wholeness and, where life becomes fractured, about healing. Spirituality helps us to be resilient in the face of stress, but also to become resilient again, when stress has exceeded normal levels in a way that leaves us paralyzed in the face of our normal personal and professional activities. Spirituality, as I said, is about catching our breath.

Spirituality is an abstract concept. Like music, it doesn't exist until it is somehow created, practiced, and performed. Spirituality, however it is understood, must be mediated or embodied in some way. Some people experience spirituality through the beliefs and practices of a particular faith community. Others experience it as the result of being out in nature. Still others experience it by reading or writing, by making or listening to music, or by engaging with art. There are many ways of discovering or rediscovering yourself and your relation to the world in ways that can help to heal and make you whole.

But none of these ways can be effective without faith. By faith I mean simply ‘trust,’ trust that there is a path forward and that you get on it. Trust is THE precondition for getting where you want to go, in this case to becoming resilient, overcoming stress, and getting back to being a healthy, whole you. This is not just important for your sake, but also for the sake of your loved ones.

In times of exposure to critical stress, getting in touch, or back in touch, with your spiritual resources is important and can make a big difference in maintaining or recovering resilience. But even when you don’t feel like you have the time or energy to follow advice and do the things you know you should be doing but somehow just can’t, or at least not yet, that is when trust matters most. In times like these, when everything is being demanded of you, and more, trusting that help is on the way, just that matters – even where and when you don’t have the slightest clue from what quarter to expect it.

Think of a lighthouse, ceaselessly panning the vast expanse of the sea. Why do lighthouses exist? They exist because it is hard to navigate in the dark, especially near a rocky and dangerous coastline. Lighthouses warn ships of danger and help them to navigate around it. If you feel like a tiny boat out in the seemingly endlessness storm of this pandemic, the first thing that you need to do is trust - trust that there are lighthouses out there, that they have their lights on, and that their light is looking out for you. Even if the storm is keeping you from seeing them, keep watch! They are there. You will see them, and then you'll know where you are and be able to guide your vessel safely into port.