

# Broken into Wholeness

## Transforming Trauma into Practical Wisdom

by Holly Elissa Bruno

All the King's Horses and All the King's Men? Listen Up. Early Childhood Educators Have News for You

Look up! What's going on? Why is Humpty Dumpty teetering atop that fence? Auditioning for "Good Egg Bachelor?" Practicing extreme sports? Escaping cookie batter?

Imagine a child's response to hearing Humpty Dumpty's tale for the first time.

Tales, myths, and fables can make zero sense to children, until the very rhythm of the story or the power of its message prevails. Children hearing Humpty Dumpty for the first or 31st time learn: When you break, you stay broken. "Cracked" becomes your life sentence. Not even the king of the land, his minions, or their beasts can save you.

What if, instead of inflicting an either/or death sentence on Humpty Dumpty, we ask children: How would you like Humpty Dumpty's story to go?

- Let's make Humpty a parachute!
- Move the slide over to him!
- Can he grow into a chick instead?

- Use Grilla (Gorilla) Glue! Paint him blue!

What if something broken becomes a thing of great value? Henri Nouwen advises: "In our brokenness, we can become a source of life for others" (*The Wounded Healer*, 1972):

- Torn fabric re sewn is stronger.
- Hearts broken become wiser.
- Breaking out of our shell reveals our truer self.
- A demeaned profession accepts its noble purpose.

Thanks to his fall, Humpty Dumpty might transform into a 21st century hero. Rather than discarding the wounded among us, we may discover our vulnerability is our strength. Rather than accepting the judgment that early childhood is on the bottom of the heap, we might acknowledge we are the foundation of all learning. Our world has much to learn from early childhood education's noble purpose: helping each child, including the wounded on her way to wholeness.

Ready to bring this home? How would you work with this child?

### I'm Nobody

"Hello, who are you?" A teacher, squatting at the child's level, inquires gently of the new preschooler.

"I'm nobody," responds the soulful child.

"You have a name at least," the teacher offers. "What would you like me to call you?"

"I'm nobody," the child proclaims yet again. "Nobody."



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

## Unseen Heroes, Children, and Adults

Our programs and classrooms pulse with children who throw tantrums, kick, bite, stomp, wail, run, or hide. Children who act out cry out for help. Children who kick have been kicked. Children who act invisible are dying to stop holding their breath. The child who says, "I'm nobody," has been silenced. I know this. Throughout my childhood, I survived incest and blackout beatings. Yet, here I am, a testament to the teachers who helped, and more whole because I was broken. I am not alone.

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*This is my letter to the world that  
never wrote to me.*

*The simple truth that nature told with  
tender majesty,*

*Her message is committed to hands  
I cannot see.*

*For love of her sweet countrymen,  
Judge tenderly of me.*

Emily Dickinson

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We empathize with traumatized children, in part because the majority of us survived abuse or neglect. One (unpublished) study by colleague Jackie Taylor reveals that 58 percent of early childhood teachers experienced childhood trauma (Master's thesis, 2006). When I ask ECE professionals across the country: "Did you experience a nurturing childhood," no less than 75 percent of us describe our early years as outright dysfunctional. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study (2010) enumerates the knee-capping effects childhood trauma has on our adult lives. (TED Talk, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris)

Although dispiriting, these realities can be liberating. How? In the most simply elegant of relational ways, we can be

the first in a child's life to see, hear, and affirm the child. We can help the child find and express her voice. We can co-create safe sanctuaries where children can breathe and play. We can comfort and soothe children so they can learn to find safety within. We could wait for credentialed therapists to appear, magically funded, on our staff. Or we could ask: What is within our power, capacity, and skill set to help each child feel whole, indeed holy?

We cannot wait for king's horses and men to knight us. We are it. Let's claim our strengths and address our restrictions. The next generation cannot wait. They tug at our sleeves today.

## Heroic Work

Heroic is: "Fulfilling a high purpose or attaining a noble end" (Merriam Webster). Can "glorified babysitters" be heroic? Using our own recovery from brokenness to help broken children is heroic. In homage to that, let's first give our field credit for heroism by placing our work in the context of heroic poets (Dickinson, Angelou), mythological heroes (Prometheus), and children's tales (Humpty Dumpty). Let's consider not just what past heroes can teach us, but what our world can learn from every day early childhood heroes, children, and adults.

Our "I'm nobody" child is not alone. A long line of once-broken heroes who have changed our world for the better were once condemned as "nobody!"

## Using Our Words: The Simple Truth

Emily Dickinson nailed it: "I'm nobody. Are you nobody, too?" During her lifetime in Amherst, Massachusetts, self-defining poet Dickinson lived an unseen and unheard exile. Unread poem after unread poem flowed from her pen. At

her death, Dickinson's family discovered 40 hand-sewn volumes. The "nobody" had forever been writing, in her own words, "A letter to the world who never wrote to me."

"Spinster" was Emily's label. She was whispered of as an "eccentric." While others were missing out on or misunderstanding her genius, Emily quietly and persistently wrote poetry to declare, "I'm somebody" to a 19th century world that assessed a woman's worth by whom she married, or whose mother she became.

What fueled Emily Dickinson to express her genius when no one was listening or seeing her as a person of worth? She reached out of traumatizing rejection using heartfelt words to share "The simple truth" of how she alone experienced everyday life. When we speak from our heart, we touch hearts (Johnson, 2000).

In so doing Emily Dickinson, judged a broken outcast, came to believe her words could sing. As she shared her poetry, her words illuminate our world.

## Claiming Our Story: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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*The caged bird sings:  
of things unknown  
and longed for still*

*And his tune is heard on the distant hill  
for The caged bird sings of freedom.*

Maya Angelou

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Just as our small child's "I'm nobody" is echoed by Emily Dickinson, Maya Angelou's elegant voice was silenced. Angelou, traumatized by sexual abuse at age eight and by the murder of her abuser when she named him, stopped talking for years. Without her voice, Angelou, golden-throated prophet-to-

be, silently communicated: "I'm nobody. My voice cannot survive this dangerous world."

Angelou's voice, when it returned, translated her experience of being silenced both personally and culturally. Trauma cages us; we stand on a "grave of dreams" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1980). Claiming we have a story to tell liberates us.

What helped Dr. Angelou reclaim her voice and create a marvelously lush and creative life? "Nothing so frightens me as writing," she explains, "but nothing so satisfies me. It's like a swimmer in the (English) Channel: you face the stingrays and the waves and cold and grease, and finally you reach the other shore, and you put your foot on the ground — Aaaaahhhh!" (1989).

She writes her human truth, not the prettied-up tale we are taught to tell. "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." She encourages us, "Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time."

Maya Angelou stares down her trauma by revealing the skinless truth of her story. Emily Dickinson shared raw words, her original take on the world that did not see her. Dickinson channeled the power of the word; Angelou claimed the power of telling a true story.

Clay, paper, scissors, words, movements, colors: all of these are magical to young children because their power to express themselves lies within, especially when skillfully guided by an early childhood educator. Our superpower is to help a traumatized child find her voice.

## Asking for Help: The Healing Balm of Fellow Travelers

Mythological Titan Prometheus was sentenced to a life of brokenness. Prometheus's purpose was to bring light, only allowed to the gods, to everyday people. He did his job: Dawn outshone darkness; fire enlightened and warmed dark chilly nights. People became accustomed to light and there was no turning back.

Zeus, super-god, however, was seething because he felt tricked by Prometheus into squandering light on humble humans.

Outraged, Zeus commanded Prometheus be forever chained to a pillar high in the Caucasus Mountains by day with his liver exposed. Zeus dispatched a hungry razor-beaked eagle to voraciously slice into and devour Prometheus's liver. Only in the dark night would Prometheus be allowed to heal, free of the devouring eagle. What good was healing at night, liver restored, if every next day the eagle ate Prometheus alive? Zeus was cruel: Light meant pain for Prometheus.

Prometheus, like Humpty Dumpty, climbed too high and fell into brokenness. Must that brokenness define them?

## Helpful Heracles in the 'hood

The Greeks leave us with hope, born out of a hopelessly painful cycle. Listen for possibilities for our annihilated child in Prometheus's story.

After 30 (or, by some account, 30,000) years of Prometheus's suffering, Zeus's son, Heracles, journeyed on his quest for the golden apples of Hesperides. Heracles would soon face his own 100-headed serpent; don't we all? But along his path, Heracles spotted

Prometheus in agony. To free his fellow traveler, Heracles struck down the ravenous eagle.

What saved Prometheus? What saves any of us? Reaching out for help. Revealing, not hiding (or hiding from) trauma. Was it an accident that Heracles was in the 'hood? Doubtful. Help is always available if we ask. The asking is, in itself, the breaking of silence.

Suffering stopped. Prometheus was unbound. Ravenous eagle, pain inflictor removed, its own hunger annihilated. Enlightenment evolved.

## Sanctuaries for Healing

The lessons? Emily used an everyday tool — words — to express simple truths. Maya told her story. Prometheus asked for help from a fellow traveler. Ask children. They will spontaneously create ways to help Humpty Dumpty and Prometheus from annihilation.

Obstacles, traps, falls, and agonies can guide us, rather than destroy us, if we let them and if we are willing to get help. Our choice, to open our hearts to healing, predicts: do we become the hero in our own life or continue as an unpaid extra in someone else's movie? Dickinson persisted despite a lifetime of exclusion. Angelou reclaimed her voice because her story demanded to be told.

Children are wiser than many adults acknowledge. What wisdom is locked inside our little "Nobody?" This is where early childhood educators do their magic. Our holistic approach to each child is evidenced each time we help a child break free to grow.

What would you do or say to our wounded preschooler? How could you use your own painful experiences to foresee and/or learn strategies to help this child?

I asked John Medina, one of the ACEs study researchers, “What is the most important thing we need to offer traumatized children so that they can learn?” Without hesitation, he responded, “Safety! Help them feel safe with you.” (Healing from trauma podcast, BAMradionetwork.com). That advice aligns with NAEYC’s *Code of Ethical Responsibility* principle, “Do no harm.” To help a child feel safe with you, consider these early childhood professional practices:

- Establish and follow routines to help the child find predictability in her day.
- Welcome each child daily as the unique individual she is.
- Use soothing music that the child likes.
- Pay special attention to the child’s non-verbal messages.
- Invite the child into playful, non-judgmental activities that create healing laughter.
- Prevent loud noises or other threatening sounds/movements; replace fluorescent bulbs with gentler light.
- Soothe the child if a disruption happens by using practices the child indicates are helpful.
- Once trust is established, lovingly and appropriately touch the child offering hugs and warmth.
- Give that child the gift of your attention and tell her “I love you.”
- Invite the child to share with you as trust between you and in the classroom develops.

We need to ask the wounded child gently to use words to describe her

pain. Prove we are trustworthy, loving, accepting, and patient. Then we can ask and wait for the child to speak her story in her own time in her own way. Each traumatized child knows when she will be heard. Only then will she speak. As we help the child find her voice, so too will we strengthen our own.

“Happiness is not an individual matter. When you are able to bring relief, or bring back the smile to one person, not only that person profits, but you also profit” (Thich Nhat Hanh). Offering a silenced child a safe space to find her voice? This is changing the world.

You and I share this opportunity. We touch lives. We can uplift. We have also a scorching power: we can harm. When harm is done, especially to small children, a crime is inflicted on us all. When we listen wholeheartedly instead, that lifelong gift is bestowed. The “I’m nobody” child begins to believe, “Somebody sees me. I’m somebody.”

### Clearing Our Adult Spaces for Safe Connections

Traumatized children, children hammered by fist or molestation or disdain into believing “I’m nobody,” are legion. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk noted, “More than anything else, being able to feel safe with other people defines mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives.” (*The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*, 2014). Harmed children need not become adults who harm themselves or others. Wounded adults can learn to turn our brokenness into our strength if we open ourselves to lifelong learning and growth. “Our painful past can become our greatest asset,” the trauma-informed *Big Red Book* of adult children of alcoholics and dysfunctional families assures us (*ACA Big Red Book*, 2010).

How can once traumatized adults find the help we need to work effectively with traumatized children?

### Invitation to All the King’s Horses and All the King’s Men

Just as children need safe environments and support for healing their broken spirits, so too do adults who work with these children. How can we transform our woundedness into giftedness? These practices help:

- **Sanctuary:** Co-create safe places for adults, as well as children, to feel sheltered from gossip, whining, negativity, exclusion, and cruel judgments (“Gossip Free Zones,” NAEYC *Young Children*). Establish a quiet space or room for prayer and meditation or yoga.
- **Help yourself:** Ask for and accept professional help in dealing with your own trauma (e.g. Trauma Institute and Child Trauma Institute).
- **Help each other:** Request a professionally facilitated survivors’ support group for you and fellow employees to raise, discuss, and seek help recovering from trauma and how to help traumatized children.
- **Found and foster Twelve Step recovery groups** where the only requirement for membership is the desire to have healthy and happy relationships (Codependents Anonymous) or to heal from the effects of being raised in an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional home (ACA).
- **Share the truth with love:** Traumatized teachers, like traumatized children, are everywhere. Find people whom you can trust to share your own trauma and to discover you are not alone.

■ **Encourage self-expression:** Offer adults expressive therapies from writing to dancing to painting and singing. Improvisational theater can be especially freeing.

■ **Develop and institute ground rules** for respect and processes for healthy expression of differences like Head Start's Core Values and Bright Horizons Family Solutions Heart Values.

Truth, just as trauma, is everywhere; so is healing. Like Humpty Dumpty, we are all wounded in some ways. Those wounds need not be a life sentence as they almost were for Prometheus. In each moment we have a choice: Judge the child or love the child into wholeness. Belittle our spirits or affirm our growing strengths. Like Humpty Dumpty, in the company of children's innate wonder, we all can be broken into wholeness.

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