THRIVING AFTER TRAUMA: 
THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTS 
OF MURDERED CHILDREN

JOSE PARAPULLY is now director of Bosco Psychological Services in New Delhi, India. The focus of his work is on the integration of psychological practices and spiritual traditions in the healing and transformation of individuals, groups, and organizations.

ROBERT ROSENBAUM is now a psychologist at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, Oakland, CA, and assistant clinical professor, University of California, San Francisco. He was earlier head of the Department of Clinical Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

LELAND VAN DEN DAELE is dean of the School of Professional Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA.

ESTHER NZEWI is professor of clinical psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

Summary

Psychological literature on trauma usually focuses on pathology that results from trauma and pays little attention to positive outcomes. This article presents a phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of a profoundly traumatized group of people—parents whose son or daughter has been murdered—to assess if they were

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able to experience a positive outcome resulting from their trauma and to identify associated processes and resources. Of 65 parents who volunteered, 16 were selected to complete a questionnaire and were given in-depth, semistructured interviews. The interview data, analyzed qualitatively, affirm positive outcomes for these parents. Four processes—acceptance, finding meaning, personal decision making, and reaching out to others in compassion—and six resources—personal qualities, spirituality, continuing bond with the victim, social support, previous coping experience, and self-care—facilitate a positive outcome.

Trauma is at times a “horrendous experience” (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996, p. xviii) that debilitates and even fragments a person irreparably (Ulman & Brothers, 1988). However, horrendous as trauma is, it can become the initiatory gate and pathway to wholeness (Decker, 1993a, 1993b; Harvey & Weber, 1998; Jaffe, 1985; Janoff-Bulman & Berger, 2000; Levington & Gruba-McCallister, 1993; Lukoff, 1985; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000). Life stories of highly generative individuals show that decidedly bad events are reworked to result in good outcomes (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997). As Shabad and Dietrich (1989) observed, “Out of the ashes, at times literal ashes of loss and death,...a phoenix-like process of internal restructuring may be set in motion which can have a liberating, regenerative effect upon the survivor” (p. 467).

When people undertake the journey into what van der Kolk and McFarlane (1996; see also Pitman & Orr, 1990) described as “The Black Hole of Trauma,” what enables some of them to rise phoenixlike from the ashes of their tragic experience? The present study provides some answers to this important question.

Previous research has shown that victims of trauma cope with tragedy through social support (Pearlin, 1982; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978); reliance on God and religious faith (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996; McCrae & Costa, 1986; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993; Pargament, 1996; Pargament et al., 1988; M. P. Thompson & Vardaman, 1997); cognitive reframing by downward comparison (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983; S. C. Thompson, 1985; Wills, 1987); positive illusions (Taylor & Armor, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994); self-blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1979); belief systems and principles they live by (Bettelheim, 1979; Cohen & Lazarus, 1979; Gibbs, 1989; Moos & Billings, 1982); reconstruction of shattered assumptions through a reappraisal of fundamental schemas about the self and the world (Cohen & Lazarus, 1983;

Victims of trauma are able sometimes not only to cope but also to grow and thrive (Ickovics & Park, 1998; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). Adversity can sometimes yield benefits to the person who experiences it. Recent research increasingly supports the claim that traumatic experiences can lead to growth. The person who experiences adversity may not only return to the previous level of functioning but also surpass it (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Carver, 1998; Decker, 1993b; Egendorf, 1982; Fahlberg, Wolfer, & Fahlberg, 1992; Higgins, 1994; Janoff-Bulman & Berg, 1998; Janoff-Bulman & Berger, 2000; Lyons, 1991; O’Leary, 1998; Park, 1998; Quarantelli, 1985; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000; Volk & Zintl, 1993; Wilson, 1989). Thriving “represents something more than a return to equilibrium” following tragedy; the notion of thriving suggests “growth and greater well-being” (Ickovics & Park, 1998, pp. 237-238). Carver (1998) described thriving as “the better-off-afterward experience” (p. 247). One who experiences thriving comes to function at a continuing higher level than was the case before the adverse event.

Recent research has shown that there are certain resources and processes that promote such thriving. Among these are certain personal qualities (Carver, 1998; Park, 1998), cognitive reframing (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Janoff-Bulman & Berg, 1998; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000; O’Leary, 1998; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000), finding a positive benefit in the traumatic experience (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Nolen-Hoeksema

One of the severest forms of psychological trauma is that suffered by parents whose son or daughter has been murdered (Burgess, 1975; Deegan, 1982; Knapp, 1986; Liebermann, 1989; Sanders, 1980, 1988; M. P. Thompson & Vardaman, 1997; Weiss, 1988). Some authors (Bard & Sangrey, 1979; Danto, 1982b; Frederick, 1987; Frieze, Hymer, & Greenberg, 1987; Kahn, 1985; Siegel, 1987; Task Force, 1985; M. P. Thompson & Vardaman, 1997) have pointed out that there is relatively little research on the trauma of these parents. Most of the available psychological literature on homicide focuses on the character profile and motives of the murderer and on the situational determinants of criminal activity (Benedek, 1982; Blum & Fisher, 1978; Danto, 1982a; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1982; Harris, 1978; Revitch & Schlesinger, 1978; Sadoff, 1982; Wertham, 1978). The few studies on surviving relatives of homicide victims (Bard & Sangrey, 1979; Burgess, 1975; Danto, 1982b; Klass, 1988; Masters, Friedman, & Gretzel, 1988; Rinear, 1988; Rynerson, 1984) do not specifically inquire whether these survivors, particularly the parents, had been able to find a positive outcome from the trauma. For these reasons, the present study focused on the transformative experience of parents whose son or daughter had been murdered. It sought to find out by listening to their stories, first, if some of these parents had been able to experience thriving in response to their traumatic experience, and second, if they had, to discover the process and resources that facilitated this thriving.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the present study were 16 parents whose son or daughter had been murdered and who, based on their self-report, had found a positive outcome from their traumatic experience.
Procedures

Instruments

A questionnaire entitled “Human Tragedy and Parental Suffering” was devised. It had two parts. Part 1 consisted of 11 statements indicating signs of positive change in thinking, feeling, and behavior and 11 statements indicating signs of persisting trauma suggested by previous research (Antonovsky, 1979; Beiser, 1976; Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Hann, 1982; McFarlane & van der Kolk, 1996b; McFarlane & Yehuda, 1996; M. S. Miles, 1985; Osterweis, Solomon, & Green, 1984; Parkes, 1972; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Ursano, 1987; Vachon et al., 1982; Zizook & DeVaul, 1985). Part 2 of the questionnaire required respondents to describe major changes in their lives following the murder of their son or daughter under three headings: (a) thoughts, (b) feelings, and (c) behavior.

Signs of transformation that served as criteria for selection related to thinking, feeling, and behavior. Signs of transformation in thinking included finding a new meaning/purpose in life; reappraisal and reconstruction of fundamental assumptions about self, others, and the world; profound changes in ideologies, beliefs, attitudes, and values; increased openness to new ideas and to people; stronger religious faith, increased self-awareness, and positive self-regard; increased sense of coherence; and valuable lessons learned (Antonovsky, 1979; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; McFarlane & Yehuda, 1996; M. S. Miles & Crandall, 1983; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Worden, 1982; Wortman, 1983).

Signs of transformation in feeling included increased feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment, increased ability to experience pleasure and gratification, increased capacity for joy, increased optimism and hopefulness about the future, feeling more compassionate, and feeling called to a mission (Knapp, 1986; Osterweis et al., 1984; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weiss, 1988; Zizook & DeVaul, 1985).

Signs of transformation in behavior included more active involvement in the family and world outside, increased ability to deal effectively with the problems and challenges of life, more healthy interpersonal relationships, deepening of existing attachments and/or forming new emotionally satisfying attachments, becoming more caring toward others, striving to accomplish new
goals, increased capacity for artistic and productive work, and having a quality of life exceeding the pretrauma period (Brown & Stoudemeir, 1983; Glick et al., 1974; Hann, 1982; Higgins, 1994; Jahoda, 1953; Kast, 1988; Klein, 1940; Lindemann, 1944; McFarlane & van der Kolk, 1996b; Pollock, 1978; Rubin, 1984; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Wills & Langner, 1980; Zizook & DeVaul, 1985).

Selection of Participants

Names and addresses of potential participants for the study were found through organizations associated with crime and victims of crime, as well as through newspaper reports of the proposed study. In all, 124 surveys were distributed to parents whose son or daughter had been murdered—all whose names and addresses were available by a previously fixed date. Of these, 65 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 52.42%. Of the 65 respondents, 21 showed signs of transformation and were considered potential candidates for the study. Of these, 16 parents who showed most signs of transformation were selected for in-depth interviews. The original intent of the study was to choose 8 participants for the interviews. However, because 63 of the 65 parents who completed the questionnaire expressed willingness to participate in the interviews, the number of participants was doubled to 16.

Of the 16 participants, 13 were women and 3 men. Only 3 of the 13 men who completed the questionnaire showed indications of a positive outcome. Twelve participants were of Caucasian ethnic origin, 2 Hispanic, 1 Afro-American, and 1 Russian. The youngest participant was 35 and the oldest 75. Ten had a high school education, 5 an undergraduate education, and 1 a graduate education. Ten participants had an annual income greater than $50,000. Five earned between $20,000 and $50,000 and 1 earned less than $15,000. Twelve had their residences in the suburbs, 3 in the city, and 1 in the countryside. Of the participants, 10 lived with their spouse or partner, 4 lived alone, and 2 lived with their spouse and children.

Among the victims were 3 young girls, 5 teens (3 girls and 2 boys), 4 men, and 4 women. Two of the young girls were siblings and were murdered together. There was also a 23-month-old baby boy who was killed along with his mother. The age of the victims, excluding that of the 23-month-old grandson, ranged from 7 to 41
years, with a median age of 21. The time elapsed since the murder ranged from 15 months to 23 years with the median of 6 years.

The Interview

All 16 subjects were interviewed by the principal author. Interviews were semistructured and explored three main areas: (a) the participant's current life and background information; (b) the murder and the way it affected the participant, especially the emotional impact; and (c) the way the participant coped with the murder, its consequences, and what helped him or her transform the tragedy.

At the beginning of the interview participants were told the following:

I want to interview you because the questionnaire you completed indicate that you are coping with the murder of your son/daughter much better than many parents in similar circumstances. I like to learn how you are able to do that.

There are three areas I like to cover in this interview. First, I want to know something about your current life. Second, about the murder and its impact on you. Third, I want to learn what has helped you to cope with the murder and its consequences.

I have an interview guide with me here. However, I prefer to listen to you narrating your story around these three areas. I believe many of the questions in the guide will be answered as you narrate your story. If some question is not covered, I will ask you about it. I will also ask you for clarification and elaboration.

You can begin any way you like.

The questions in the interview guide related to the following areas: current life, others' impressions, relationship with victim, the murder and its immediate impact, current impact of the murder, resources that helped to cope, previous trauma and coping, childhood experiences, and experiences with the criminal justice system. The interview guide was individualized for each participant by incorporating his or her responses to the questionnaire.

In all cases, the participants' spontaneous narratives touched on the major areas of investigation covered in the semistructured interview. At the end of the interview, participants were given an opportunity to sum up what helped to bring out a positive outcome by asking them the following: "If you were to list the factors that were most helpful/instrumental in transforming the trauma of
this murder, what would those be? What would be at the top of the list?"

The interviews were audiotaped. The recorded-tape time for the interviews ranged from 2 to 6.5 hours. Immediately after each interview, the interviewer wrote down impressionistic comments about the participants and the content and process of the interview.

Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed qualitatively from a phenomenological perspective (Fischer & Wertz, 1979; Giorgi, 1979, 1983, 1985a, 1985b) using techniques suggested by M. B. Miles and Huberman (1994), namely, “data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 10).

Data analysis from a phenomenological perspective (Giorgi, 1985b) has four essential steps: (a) reading the transcript to get a general sense of the whole experience, (b) discriminating meaning units within a psychological perspective and with the focus on the phenomenon studied, (c) expressing the psychological insight contained in the meaning units, and (d) synthesizing all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the participants’ experience.

Following the methods described by M. B. Miles and Huberman (1994), data analysis in this study used the following steps:

1. Underline key phrases in the text.
2. Pick and combine similar key phrases and create clusters of emerging themes.
3. Cluster across participants and label the clusters.
4. Reduce the clusters under more inclusive labels.
5. Note relationships among and between labeled clusters and across and between participants.
6. Provide a logical chain of evidence through illustrated narrative of themes.
7. Create propositions about the transformative experience.
8. Check for rival explanations.

Accordingly, the transcribed data from each of the interviews were carefully reviewed. As they were reviewed, phrases (ideas/themes) relevant to the research question were underlined and copied onto cards. A total of 1,922 theme references ranging from
83 to 170 per interview were found. The theme references from each of the interviews were then clustered together across participants for similarity. This process resulted in 504 themes. In a process of successive clustering under more inclusive labels, eventually 13 common themes emerged. These themes are presented in Table 1.

Each transcript was then carefully reexamined a number of times to discover the subjective experiences of transformation and common patterns of transformative experience. The summary comments recorded after each of the interviews were also consulted to discover further clues to the subjective experiences of transformation. The results of this analysis are presented with illustrative excerpts from the interviews in the sections below, entitled “Thriving After Trauma,” “Processes Involved in the Transformation of Trauma,” and “Resources That Facilitated Transformation.”

**THRIVING AFTER TRAUMA**

The basic premise of the present study is that some parents whose son or daughter was murdered become transformed in positive ways through their struggle to recover from their horrendous experience. The question arises: Do the data support this premise?
Trauma

In the days, months and, in some cases, years following the murder of their son or daughter, the surviving parents who participated in the present study manifested several of the themes of traumatic sequelae frequently cited in clinical literature, such as intense fear, helplessness, anxiety, rage at the source of the trauma, sadness over loss, marked loss of interest in significant activities, psychic numbness, intrusive thoughts and affects, discomfort over aggressive impulses, hyper-vigilance, disintegration of beliefs, loss of meaning, disruption of personal relationships, feelings of isolation, guilt over presumed responsibility, and psychosomatic disturbances (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Krupnick & Horowitz, 1981; Krystal, 1968; Lifton & Olson, 1976; Lindemann, 1944; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; McFarlane & van der Kolk, 1996a; Niederland, 1968; Rinear, 1988; Rynearson, 1984; Scurfield, 1985; Stolorow, 1999; van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996; Yorke, 1986). Trauma refers to these and other negative consequences of murder experienced by these parents.

Thriving

Participants in the present study identified numerous positive outcomes that followed the tragedy, both for themselves and for society as a whole. Thriving, in the present study, refers to this “better-off-afterward experience” (Carver, 1998, p. 247), particularly “growth and greater well-being” (Ickovics & Park, 1998, p. 238) experienced by the participants and the wider community.

Positive Impact on Society

It is incredible, the goodness that has come out of this. And you cannot deny that. You cannot deny it. . . . Unfortunately, I have to say yes to that. If I say no, I am lying. I don’t want to say yes. But I have to. My head would like to say no. And my heart says, Darlene, you have to be an honest person. So many wonderful things have happened to heal people, and deep inside themselves at a soul level, because of Mat’s murder. I cannot deny it. (Darlene)

It wasn’t a mindless tragedy. If it were a mindless tragedy, it wouldn’t have made a difference. You know what I am saying? It wouldn’t have made a difference. . . . But it did. It touched so many
people... I feel that their death has helped people. I feel fortunate enough to be put in places to help others that have lost kids. (Julia)

The consequences of these murders, tragic as they were, appear to have had a positive impact on society in many ways. The survivor parents have made and continue to make a difference in the communities in which the murders occurred. Many survivor parents have become vocal and proactive on social issues. Survivors have dedicated their lives to working with young delinquents and prisoners to turn their lives around. Support groups established by survivors are helping other victims move toward healing and transformation. Action taken following these murders have helped to solve other crimes and prevented further loss of lives.

The murder rechanneled my energies into working with victims' issues and into crime and punishment, into working with victims and trying to help them understand the system... Through these organizations it is my goal that change can and will happen and hopefully not everyone will have to endure what my family and myself has felt. (Anne)

The metaphor of a streetlight, which one participant used, is an apt illustration of the positive outcome that can result from a tragic event. She said:

Something good did happen... Unfortunately, it is like the street light. We need a street light at the corner. But until someone dies... they are not going to do anything. That is what I meant by saying it is like the street light... Something good did come from his death... Unfortunately, from a real tragedy some good did come. (Agnes)

Transformation of Self

We have grown tremendously from it. We are not done growing yet. In that sense good has come from it, you know. (John)

I think I became stronger, really stronger. (Maria)

Something good has come from it. I became involved in trying to help other people, those who went through what I went through... I have now a lot of feeling for other people. (Diane)

I started reading things, and so I started looking at myself in a different way and I think my spiritual awakening grew. (Jay)
My first reaction was anger at God. . . . It wasn’t until months later, months later . . . we did go to Church. . . . I think this whole affair, the whole experience from start to now, has in the end, strengthened my faith. . . . It brought me close to God. (Nora)

Each parent’s struggle to recover from the horrendous effects of the murder of their son or daughter served as a catalyst for emotional growth. It began a process that made the parents more self-confident and self-reliant. The tragedy in their lives brought out strengths in them that these survivors never imagined they had. It helped them reframe their previous traumatic experiences and find meaning and value in them. It led to a greater awareness of the preciousness and precariousness of life and to a greater appreciation for it.

Their struggle led to a deeper awareness of the importance of relationships, and deepened and strengthened relationships, particularly marital relationships. In some cases, the impact of the murder severely strained the marital relationship in the beginning. However, the couples were able eventually to come out stronger and more committed to each other.

Initially, the tragedy severely tested the religious faith of some participants, but ultimately it deepened and strengthened it. Their suffering made them more compassionate and caring. It changed their beliefs and attitudes in a positive direction.

One way to kind of put it all under one heading . . . is that his death provided an opportunity to each of us that paid attention to his death, to grow suddenly and dramatically toward a positive direction as a human being, to become more spiritual, to become more love oriented. (Darlene)

It is important to point out here that all these parents observed that they would gladly trade all the growth and transformation they had experienced if they could have their murdered son or daughter still with them. But, they could not deny that they had experienced a positive transformation because of the tragedy in their lives.

What is it that helped the participants in this study to experience this transformation? The next sections seek to provide some clues.
The transformation these parents experienced was mediated primarily through cognitive-emotional processes. Every one of the participants (100%) engaged in some form of cognitive-emotional processing to cope with and transform his or her trauma. The processes can be subsumed under three main categories: (a) accepting of the tragedy as a reality that could not be undone, (b) finding a meaning in the tragedy, and (c) making a personal decision not to allow the tragedy to ruin the survivors’ lives. These three processes influenced one another.

Acceptance

A cognitive-emotional acceptance was the starting point of healing and transformation. Survivors accepted that their son or daughter was really murdered and that no matter what they felt, or thought, or did, that was a reality they could not undo. Murder was an event of the past, over which they had no control. Such acceptance helped to alleviate the pain of loss, overcome feelings of rage and vindictiveness, and bring a sense of peace, which allowed the survivors to put back together the fragmented pieces of their shattered lives and move on with their lives with some serenity. Acceptance was not easy and took time and effort. Of the participants, 12 (75%) explicitly acknowledged the need for such acceptance.

Accepting it. And then, going forward and not necessarily looking back. I don’t want to say that I don’t look back. I don’t mean it that way. Maybe what I am trying to say is, not dwelling on what might have been, or what could have been, but just going forward and not letting what has been behind me entangle me. (Anne)

Finding Meaning

Acceptance was facilitated by finding a meaning in the tragedy, that is, making some sense of it. Of the participants, 15 (93.75%)
reported they found a meaning in their tragedy. Finding meaning was facilitated by their spirituality and religious beliefs, by seeing tragedy as part of the human condition, by their belief that every event has a purpose, and by reaching out in compassion (Greening, 1997). Hypothesizing worse things that might have happened (Taylor, 1983; Taylor et al., 1983), making downward comparisons (Wills, 1987), and making excuses for the murderer (Snyder & Higgins, 1988) also helped in meaning making.

I realized there are a lot of things in life that we can’t fix. This being one of them. . . . I guess, you just have to go with it. Whatever is going to happen, is going to happen. I don’t have powers to stop it. (Maggie)

There was a reason for him to go. And the reason might have been, maybe I would be suffering far more to know that this boy got a divorce, or hurt somebody else, or did something terrible. Maybe that is the reason that God took him, because his future was not what was going to be happy or fulfilling for anybody. . . . So maybe this is God’s way of sparing me things that I wouldn’t have to go through. (Maria)

Personal Decision

Acceptance and finding a meaning in the tragedy helped in the decision not to allow the tragedy to ruin their lives. These parents decided to leave behind the trauma and its negative consequences and to move on with their lives. Such a personal decision was a decisive moment in the transformation of the survivors. The murder led to positive results to a great extent because the survivors made a personal decision to rise up phoenixlike from the ashes. That decision was facilitated also by other aspects of cognitive-emotional processing, particularly focusing on the destructiveness of hatred and vindictiveness they had seen in some survivors. Their belief systems and the principles they lived by also contributed to the decision.

An important aspect of this personal decision was turning away from hatred. Most (75%) of the participants indicated an awareness that if they let themselves dwell on their hatred toward the perpetrator, they would be overcome by it. They talked of their struggle to get past these feelings.

I didn’t know that I was capable of . . . such emotion, of such anger, all the ugliness, you know. . . . I was being rendered impotent in a sense . . . and I knew that it would do me in, if I didn’t do something about it. (Victoria)
I think, first of all, we have to look at our lives, and say, am I going to let the murderer take me down too? He took two of the most valuable things in the world—my daughter and grandson. And we had a choice. And the choice was: Were we going to be bitter and angry and hateful and let that bitterness eat us, which it will? But if we did, he takes us too. Because, then we are not able to be there for our other family. They still need us. They are here. They need us. . . . It happened, and now we have to move on. (Nora)

Reaching out in Compassion

The murder of their son or daughter created a void in the lives of these parents. They lost interest in many things they had found meaningful earlier. Many negative thoughts and emotions also bombarded them. One of the things that helped them find balance and sanity in the circumstances was finding something on which to focus their attention and energy, something that would give them a meaning and a purpose for living. These parents found such focus in reaching out in a proactive way to attend to the exigencies thrown up by the tragedy, in taking care of the surviving members of the family, in reaching out to others who were suffering, in promoting peace and nonviolence in the community, in the groups and organizations they formed, and in the foundations they set up in memory of their loved ones. This reaching out to others took up their time and energy and in that way helped them not to focus on the negative emotions engendered by the tragedy. It helped these parents to leave their personal pain behind and be a source of comfort and strength to others.

The most common way survivors found a focus for their energies was through compassionate reaching out to others. All the participants engaged in some form of compassionate reaching out. The experience of the pain and anguish resulting from the murder of their son or daughter produced deep sensitivity to the suffering of others and evoked compassion. They reached out to comfort and help others in pain, and in that reaching out, these parents experienced further healing and transformation.

Several participants considered this reaching out in compassion as the best means to transform the trauma following the murder of one’s son or daughter.

I am more willing to go down where it is dirty now, with the people who are really suffering horrible problems. If they are suffering inside, in their hearts, if a loved one was murdered, if something
awful is happening to them, I am in there with them as a human being now. (Darlene)

My advice to them would be to reach out to other kids, reach out to other parents, reach out to anyone who needs help. Because when you are giving yourself to someone else, you are getting something back, you are healing. . . . You really need to reach out to whoever, and whatever. (Katherina)

In some cases, compassion eventually reached out even to the presumed murderer. One participant described how one day, while speaking over the phone with someone who used to call her anonymously and taunt her, claiming to be the murderer of her daughter,

feeling began to arise in me, to my own surprise really . . . feelings of genuine concern and compassion for this man, and he wasn’t expecting it. And he was really taken aback by it. I was surprised myself . . . but I desperately wanted to reach this man. . . . At one point I said to him, “What can I do to help you?” And he broke down and he wept and he wept. . . . I got a chance to meet . . . the mother of this young man. . . . I know how she has suffered. I know her headaches and her pain. (Andrea)

RESOURCES THAT FACILITATED TRANSFORMATION

Accepting, finding meaning, personal decision making, and reaching out to others were helped by six major resources: personal qualities, spirituality, continuing affective bond with the victim, social support, previous coping experience, and self-care.

Personal Qualities

The ability to cope with tragedy and, especially, to create something positive and constructive out of it appeared to be influenced by personal qualities and skills the parents possessed. All 16 participants mentioned personal qualities that were influential. These personal qualities fell into three main categories. First, there was strength of character, which was manifested in independence, determination, self-confidence, self-reliance, and optimism. Second, there was a goodness, a largeness of heart, which evoked deep compassion in them and which enabled them to reach
out to others. Third, there was a group of personal qualities, which can be collectively described as their spirituality. Because of its significant contribution to the transformative process, it will be considered as a separate resource.

Determination

Of the participants, 10 (62.5%) possessed personal qualities that can be subsumed under determination and related to the extensive literature on resiliency (Carver, 1998; Flach, 1988; Higgins, 1994; Hobfoll, Ennis, & Kay, 2000; Kaplan, 1999; Kumpfer, 1999; Lewis, 2000; O’Leary, 1998; Rutter, 1987; Sampson, 2001; Spencer, 2001; Werner, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1982). These parents were very independent and very strong-willed. They showed great determination not to allow obstacles to prevent them from achieving goals they set for themselves. They did not want their lives to be controlled by other people. These personal qualities helped them cope successfully with tragedy and transform it.

Like the mythical bird, the phoenix, we will rise again, you know. And that is the way I feel, that’s my philosophy. I feel, no matter how down you get, inside of you, you have the fortitude to lift yourself and come up again. (Maria)

Leadership

The qualities described above, as well as other qualities such as capacity for initiative, self-reliance, and responsibility, can be seen as part of leadership. Of the participants, 11 (68.75%) demonstrated such leadership qualities. Of these parents, 5 founded organizations or groups to help other survivors. Others took initiative in other ways to make a difference in their communities after the murder of their son or daughter. They had displayed leadership qualities even before the tragedy in their lives.

Friends around me . . . the degree to which they look to me for some guidance in their lives, is extraordinary. . . . I organized a group called Concerned Relatives. I went around and met everybody that had anything to do with anything, organized meetings and got people together. . . . Most people realize that I am reliable, I can be counted on, pretty much. (Richard)
Positive Outlook

Several participants (62.5%) had a very positive outlook on life. Such outlook manifested in their optimism, humor, and self-confidence. Their positive outlook helped them to see light in the midst of the darkness that engulfed them. It gave these parents confidence that they could successfully negotiate the challenges forced upon them by the murder.

I always see the glass as half-full, under all circumstances. (Anne)
I have lost half of my heart. But that does not mean I can’t function with the other half. (Maria)

Compassion

A quality that really stood out in these survivors was one that can be characterized as largeness of heart. These were genuinely caring and compassionate people who, in the midst of their own pain and loss, were sensitive to the pain of others and reached out to do something to lessen it. Of the participants, 12 (75%) described themselves as compassionate. Compassion was implicit in the attitudes and behavior of the remaining 4 (25%).

I kind of always had this soft heart (laughs). I feel bad for the underdog, and a lot of times that got me into trouble because the underdog is not always very nice. . . . Like in school, you know, all my life, from kindergarten all the way through school, there was somebody that everybody was picking on, or something. I will go over, you know, try to be nice or whatever, and then in turn, I would get picked on. (Julia)

Spirituality

Spirituality, “deep feelings about soul and eternity” (Farley, 1996, p. 776), was a very powerful resource, which helped all the participants transform their trauma and experience growth. Most of the participants had a spirituality that was shaped by the religious traditions they follow. However, they took care to point out that spirituality was different from and went beyond an institutional allegiance to any particular religious tradition. They understood spirituality more as an attitude of mind and heart that nourished their spirit and emotions and influenced their behavior. Faith in God, belief in a life after death, being thankful, and engag-
ing in prayers and rituals were important components of this spirituality.

Faith in God and Religious Belief

All the participants professed faith in God. They believed that a loving and benign God was in control of their lives and would be there to see them through their tragedies. Faith in God and religious beliefs were powerful resources that helped survivors to make sense of the tragedy, to accept it, to find strength and comfort, and to transform it.

I was absolutely devastated... It was a horrible, horrible night. And I can remember... I had gone to bed and all I did was to cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and then... there weren't simply any more tears to cry. I had reached a depth of pain within me that... there weren't any tears left. And I got out of bed, and it was in the middle of the night... and I was standing in front of my closet and on the closet was hanging a religious calendar, with a Bible quote for each day. And I looked up at the date for that day, and the Bible quote was: “Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.” And I just felt it was... a word from God to say, you know, if you hang on, I will get you through this and then we will bring a gift of life from this terrible, terrible death. And it was the beacon of hope that I needed to grab onto, and... which is not to say that all the pain was gone. It wasn't. But it was a point at which I knew I could live through this. And my life would go on. (Andrea)

Belief in Life After Death

Belief in life after death was an important component of the spirituality of these survivors, although a skeptic might label such belief as “denial.” Thirteen (81.25%) participants specifically mentioned it as a significant factor. That belief provided the survivors comfort and hope. The hope of reunion with their loved one helped them accept the tragedy and sustained them as they sought to rebuild their lives.

I know we will see our son again. I know that for a fact... Knowing that we have something to look forward to, that is the main thing—seeing our son again... Just knowing, believing what is going to happen when we die, and it is a better place for Tommy, that he is happy there, with family and friends that have died. (Maggie)
Thankfulness

Of the survivors, 10 (62.5%) specifically mentioned the importance of thankfulness. These survivors, despite the tragedy in their lives, were grateful people. They were appreciative of the gifts and blessings in their lives. Thankfulness enabled these survivors to move away from bitterness and self-pity toward growth and personal transformation. What they were most grateful for were the years they had with their son or daughter. Julia, whose two daughters were murdered together, stated

I am so fortunate that... that it just amazes me, you know... I am lucky. I am so fortunate... I could not have had them. What they brought into my life is so wonderful and precious, that I really am blessed. And lucky to have had them in my life. And I am lucky to have those memories now. They are still in my life. Those bullets didn't take those away... And I have tons of gifts in my life. You know, in the balance of my life, yeah, there is a lot of tragedy, but look at the happiness I've got, look at the neat things that there are in my life.

Prayer and Rituals

Prayer and religious rituals were valuable support in moments of grief and anguish. They provided solace, support, strength, inspiration, and guidance. Survivors filled the void left by the murder with prayers, rituals, and scripture readings. Eleven participants (68.75%) specifically mentioned that prayers and rituals were powerful resources.

I spent a lot of time in prayer. I spent a lot of time just asking God to hold me, and to heal me... I really believe that there is... there is... —I don't know what is the word I want to use—existential or spiritual, there is a reality to the power of prayer. And... I benefited from the prayers of other people... There were a lot of people praying for me. Loving me and praying me through that... I am sure that I am standing today strong and straight because lots of people prayed me through that. (Andrea)

Several survivors wondered how one could cope with a tragedy like murder without spirituality. In response to the question, “What is the advice you have for survivors who are still struggling to come to terms with their trauma?” some participants emphasized the importance of spirituality and suggested that these survivors give spirituality a try.
Of course, the first thing I would tell them—and it is terribly hard, when they are so angry—is to orient themselves in some kind of belief. I don’t care what it is. . . . It’s . . . it is the thing that will save your sanity, that will give you strength, it will guide you through your daily work. If . . . if it’s the Tao, or if it’s Jesus, or it’s Buddha, I don’t care. But find a home for yourself and be cradled in someone’s arms. It will help you along and take care of you, until this terrible, terrible, terrible hurt begins to heal a little bit. Then you are a lot better able to cope. It is a kind of place within yourself where you can crawl and hide if you want to. . . . Give it a chance, give it a chance. If you tried everything else, give it a chance. (Victoria)

Whereas for some participants their spirituality acted as a buffer providing solace and support from the beginning, for most participants the support came only after they had gone through the “dark-night of the soul,” (St. John of the Cross, 1959) part of which was the experience of the total absence of the God who had seen them through many difficult moments earlier in their lives and rage and anger against a God who could permit such a tragedy. However, beneath such disillusionment, rage, and horror, there was in these survivors a bedrock of faith that the tragedy shook but could not destroy.

Continuing Bond With the Victim

One important resource that played a significant role in the transformation of the tragedy was a continuing affective bond (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) parents had with their son or daughter. This continuing bond was experienced in many ways: through the awareness of the victim’s continued presence, by focusing attention on the love for the victim rather than on the murderer, by filling the void in their lives with happy memories, through an awareness of what the victim would want for the survivor, and through mementos and linking objects (Volkan, 1981) such as journals, photo albums, and things that belonged to the victim. Dreams and paranormal experiences also served to maintain the continuing bond. All the participants reported some form of continuing bond with the victim that brought them joy and satisfaction and motivated them to transform their trauma into a gift.

Jennifer is a part of me now. She walks with me. . . . I keep a part of her alive within me. And now I can go on. (Terri)

I don’t look at Jim’s death that it is an end in some way. . . . The spiritual side of our relationship is ongoing and gaining momentum all
the time. . . . I have an ongoing connection with him. I still talk with him, I ask him questions, I ask for his advice. (Katherina)

The awareness of the victim’s presence was enhanced through the efforts of the survivors to keep alive the memory of their murdered son or daughter. The organizations, foundations, and groups they founded were part of this effort. These provided them with a continuing link with their memories of their son or daughter. The good accomplished by these groups and organizations strengthened their belief that in this sense their son or daughter continued to be alive and active in the world.

Social Support

All the participants were helped to cope with the tragedy in their lives and to transform it through the support they received from those around them. Such support came from friends, members of the family, the clergy, professional helpers like psychotherapists and grief counselors, the groups of which they were members, and their community. Almost all the participants had one particular individual who was there for him or her whenever needed.

Friends

Survivors received much support from their friends, and that support was crucial in their coping and transformation. All the participants reported that they had friends, or one very close friend, whose support was very important. These friends did not press them to get over with it or move on with their lives. They listened to their stories again and again and did not tell them that they had heard enough. They helped them with the demands of the situation, taking care of material needs and social obligations, taking care of their children’s needs, and so on. Survivors wondered what their lives would have been without such friends.

I have my friends. I have the most fantastic friends. I mean, when I went to trial, everybody came, they were with me. . . . There is one lady, her name is Anna. She was with me every day. She had a family of her own to take care of. She had to drive every morning, very early, 9:30, here. She would come and sit down next to me and she would be there every day. (Maria)
Spouse

For some survivors, the individual who was most helpful was their spouse or partner. Spouses were constantly available to each other and provided reliable and understanding support. They sought to ease the other’s pain by kind of hiding their own hurt and offering support and nurturing, and being strong for the sake of the other. Although the murder and its consequences severely tested their marriages, none of the participants divorced or separated from the spouse they had at the time of the tragedy. Of the participants, 11 (68.75%) had a spouse or partner at the time of the tragedy, and 9 of these 11 (81.82%) reported that the support of spouse or partner was very important. Of the participants, 5 (31.2%) were divorced at the time of the murder. One of these had found a partner since the tragedy, and that partner had been extremely helpful in her coping and transformation.

We went through a real trying period. . . . Thank heaven, he was willing to hang on, because I think that if we had broken up, I would probably have lost it. I might have lost my mind. I really think so. Fortunately, he is a very patient human being and he is willing to put up with my inability, complete inability to handle it. . . . Just having each other helped. . . . The support group has helped, but I think most of all we relied on each other. (Nora)

Family

Survivors found support from family members very helpful. Close relationships among family members provided solace and strength. The love, acceptance, and attention they received from caring family members served as balm for their wounded psyche. Fourteen participants (87.5%) reported that they had a close relationship with various family members and that such closeness helped.

I feel just having a family . . . being a close knit family helped . . . Everyone just kind of came around. . . . My sisters gave a lot of strength. My nieces, nephews, everybody has been so good. (Maggie)

Community

Survivors were sustained by the support of the community. The warmth and caring from the community helped to heal wounds
and re-establish faith in the goodness of people. Support came from hospital staff, church communities and clergy, and members of the media, justice, and law enforcement agencies. Twelve participants (75%) experienced helpful support from the community in one respect or another.

I found constant strength and reassurance and support. . . . Constant. They were always there. . . . There was always someone around, or someone calling . . . it was [a] kind of subtle way of giving me support. . . . just being there. (Victoria)

Support Group

Survivors were helped particularly by groups that were formed specifically to provide support to survivors. Among these groups were Citizens Against Homicide, Compassionate Friends, Families of Murder Victims for Reconciliation, Friends and Family of Murder Victims, Justice for Murder Victims, and Parents of Murdered Children. Of the participants, 11 (68.75%) reported that they were members of one or more of these groups at one time or other after their tragedy. Five of the participants (31.2%) had helped to found one of these groups or to establish a local chapter of an existing organization and/or were current leaders of a group. Survivors found these groups helpful in different ways.

Support groups provided a sense of connection. Shared grief provided a strong bond at a time when survivors felt alone and not understood. There they could be with people who were experiencing the same kind of emotions that they were experiencing, who understood them, and who gave them freedom and opportunity to vent their feelings without inhibition, embarrassment, or pretense. They provided opportunity to repeatedly retell their stories. Survivors found guidance and insights for themselves from the coping experiences of others.

Just being able to be there, not having to think about consequences, what everybody else thought. We were able to let the floodgate of emotions just flow. . . . You can cry, you can scream, you can rage, you can do whatever, and that is a release. (John)

Psychotherapy/Grief Counseling

Of the participants, 9 (56.25%) had psychotherapy or grief counseling after the tragedy. Of them, 8 found it helpful, 1 did not.
Psychotherapy and grief counseling helped in ways similar to the support groups. What was most helpful was finding in the therapist/counselor someone who understood them; who allowed them to express whatever they needed to express in a safe, accepting, and caring environment; and to whom they felt connected. The therapist/counselor also helped to process the tragic experience and to put it in perspective.

My therapist . . . has literally held my hand, so to speak, and has walked with me through this tragedy, as my friend, with no judgment, giving me wise counsel, letting me bare my soul, and cry . . . And her ability to directly connect with me in particular has caused her to be extremely helpful to me. (Darlene)

Successful Coping With Previous Difficulties and Crises

Successful coping with previous difficulties and challenges in their lives was a major factor in the survivors’ ability to cope with and grow from the trauma of their son’s or daughter’s murder. All the participants had faced challenges and difficulties earlier in their lives and negotiated them successfully. The awareness that they had coped successfully earlier gave them hope and confidence. They were able to call on the skills and processes they had employed in successfully negotiating past crises and challenges. Those crises and challenges shaped their attitudes and contributed to build up their resilience. The difficulties and challenges they had faced earlier in their lives included dysfunctional family situations; physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; divorce; accidents; serious illness; deaths and suicides in the family; financial reverses; or, as in the case of one participant, nervous breakdown and suicide attempt.

I have experienced the mind abuse, I’ve experienced the physical abuse, I’ve experienced molestation . . . I went through various stepfathers, they would beat me with whatever they got their hands on . . . I lost brothers to alcohol and drugs and growing up as a little girl I saw that happening and breaking the family up and going to jail, the whole dysfunctional mess that it was. (Terri)

Previous difficulties and crises not only provided these survivors with a resilience that helped them get through the trauma of the murder but also helped them be more sensitive to the pain of others and reach out to them in compassion.
Engaging in Pleasurable Activities

Even while survivors coped by being strong for others, taking care of exigencies, and reaching out to others in compassion, they also felt the need to take care of themselves. One way they did this was by taking time for themselves and engaging in pleasurable activities. All the survivors found something that gave them pleasure and allowed themselves the freedom to engage in it. Reading, listening to music, walking on the beach, taking trips, attending concerts and theater, going to the gym, engaging in hobbies, taking care of pets, and spending time with friends and relatives were some of these activities that helped survivors take their mind off the tragedy as well as allowed their minds and their bodies relax. Also, finding time to be alone helped them process their experience and be on the road to healing and transformation.

I learned when there is a tragedy, you must always take care of yourself. You must always have some humor, you must learn to continue to laugh. You must even learn how to play. You must learn how to do that. That relieves a lot of pressure that you are going through. (Agnes)

Venting Feelings

Another way survivors took care of themselves was allowing themselves to truly feel whatever they needed to feel and giving themselves freedom to vent those feelings. Eleven participants (68.75%) considered such venting of feelings not only beneficial but also necessary to leave the trauma behind and move on with their lives. Part of this venting of feelings was done through retelling the story of the tragedy again and again. Constructive expression of anger was also an important element of this venting of feelings.

I feel you have to face it. Somehow, some way, you have to face it. And only through facing it can you grow and overcome it. . . . You know, I allowed myself to totally and completely feel whatever it was that was coming. Wherever I was at the very moment, I allowed myself to feel. And I survived that, and I knew that it was okay. Finally knew it's okay to have fun. It's okay to be happy. And I think that was really the deciding point. (Julia)
Four other themes that emerged from the data, namely, special moments, special circumstances, impact of court trial, and forgiveness, although important in the cases of certain participants, were not part of the transformational experience of most of the participants. Hence, these are not considered as significant common resources or processes involved in the transformation of trauma of these parents of murdered children.

CONCLUSION

Data from this phenomenological study of 16 parents whose son or daughter had been murdered demonstrate that these parents were able to experience a positive transformation as they struggled to recover from the consequences of that horrendous event. Their efforts to come to terms with the murders have also had some positive impact on the society around them.

The general profile of the transformed survivor that emerged from this study is that of a resilient, competent, compassionate, and caring individual, characterized by a benevolent, benign, and thankful attitude toward life; shaped by belief systems; strengthened by successful coping with previous tragic experiences; supported by spirituality, friends, family, community, and a strong affective bond with the victim; and nourished through self-care.

The processes that facilitated the transformation were accepting the tragedy, finding meaning in it, making the personal decision to leave the tragedy behind and move on with their lives, and, in a very special way, reaching out in compassion to others. The resources that helped most in this transformation were personal qualities, spirituality, having a continuing bond with the victim, social support, previous coping experiences, and self-care.

The question arises whether there might be other explanations for the transformation participants in this study experienced. Although evidence has been provided to show that the processes and resources identified in this study are significant factors in transformation following trauma, it is possible that there may also be other factors involved. Some of these other possible factors include age and maturation, time elapsed since the murder, and financial status.

Erikson (1959/1980) described the final state of human maturity as ego-integrity, which he characterized as the capacity to
adapt oneself to the triumphs and disappointments of existence and the capacity to care for others. He described its opposite as despair, manifested in disgust and contemptuous displeasure with life. Although the traumatic experiences in their lives had the capacity to lead them to despair, data from the present study demonstrate that these parents of murdered sons and daughters had reached the stage of ego-integrity. They had experienced growth and transformation. They were thriving.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has observed, “There are three ascending levels of how one mourns: With tears—that is the lowest. With silence—that is higher. And with a song—that is the highest” (1993, p. ix). Parents who participated in the present study were mourning with a song.

It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair—it is then that we must recreate our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, recreate life. (Segal, 1952, p. 199)

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Reprint requests: Leland van den Daele, California Institute of Integral Studies, 1453 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103; e-mail: lelandv@ciis.edu.