

Once Upon a Campus:



Trauma-Informed Pathways to Community Renewal in Higher Education

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The Mist-Shrouded Campus: A Story

Once upon a time, in a land not so far from here, a mysterious mist descended upon a vibrant campus community.

The mist was subtle at first, barely noticeable—a faint haze in the morning light. But as the days passed, it thickened, seeping into lecture halls, dorm rooms, and offices. It wrapped itself around students as they scribbled notes, clung to professors as they stood at the podium, and settled heavily on staff as they wove the threads that kept the campus running.

The mist settled differently on each person. Some felt its weight as exhaustion, struggling to find joy in the work they once loved. Others grew anxious, jumping at shadows and second-guessing themselves. Some grew distant, retreating into silos to protect what little energy they had left.

The campus, once alive with curiosity and collaboration, now felt fragmented and tense.

This mist is trauma.

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As we step into a new year, we do so carrying the weight of profound collective disruptions. There is no 'return to normal'—the world we once knew no longer exists. The aftershocks of a global pandemic still ripple through our institutions, reshaping how we work, learn, and connect. Political unrest and social divisions carve new fault lines in our communities, creating an undercurrent of uncertainty. Climate disasters, economic instability, and global conflicts remind us that crisis is not an anomaly—it has become the background noise of daily life.

These are not just abstract headlines; they are lived realities, imprinted on our nervous systems, shaping the way we show up in classrooms, offices, and meetings. The exhaustion, anxiety, and disengagement felt on campuses are not signs of individual failure but reflections of a larger, collective wound. And yet, in many institutions, these struggles remain invisible—dismissed as "burnout" or "resilience gaps" rather than recognized as the deep, unresolved trauma they truly are.

So, the question is: How do we make the invisible visible?

- How do we acknowledge and presence trauma in a way that fosters healing rather than deepening division?
- How do we transform a campus from a fragmented collection of categories—students, faculty, staff—into a true community?

The answer lies in the oldest, most human way of making sense of the world: storytelling.

Stories have the power to illuminate what is hidden, to bring coherence to chaos, and to help us reimagine what is possible. Through story, we can name the mist, trace its origins, and begin to clear a path forward—not by erasing what has happened, but by learning how to hold it with care.

If we are to step forward into a new, transformative era in higher education, we must first understand the terrain we are walking on—and that begins with seeing the mist for what it truly is.

In this paper, we will explore how trauma functions on campus, and how embracing a storytelling/trauma-informed approach can help us move from mere survival to healing and renewal.

This paper emerges from my recent talk at UCSF, where I had the opportunity to reflect deeply on how we can operationalize these ideas—not just as individuals, but at the institutional level. I am deeply grateful to [Lina R. Mendez, Ph.D](#) for the invitation and for curating a space where these important conversations can unfold.

Making the Invisible Visible: Presencing Collective Trauma on College Campuses

“The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate.” – Carl Jung (This idea is often paraphrased as: “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”)

At the personal level, Jung’s insight reminds us that unexamined wounds do not simply disappear—they shape our choices, behaviors, and relationships in ways we often fail to recognize. Old patterns replay themselves, resurfacing in our responses to stress, conflict, and uncertainty. We may find ourselves repeating cycles of self-

sabotage, burnout, or emotional withdrawal, unaware that these behaviors stem from deeper, unresolved experiences.

But what happens when this dynamic moves beyond the personal and takes root in institutions?

At the collective level, trauma operates in much the same way. Unacknowledged historical and systemic wounds—whether from racism, gender-based violence, or global crises—become embedded in the very structures of our organizations. These unresolved traumas shape policies, shape power dynamics, and influence institutional culture in ways that often go unnoticed until the consequences become impossible to ignore.

Collective trauma is not just the accumulation of individual suffering—it is a shared psychological injury that impacts all members of a group, whether directly or indirectly affected. It is what happens when a traumatic event, or series of events, leaves an indelible mark on a community, institution, or society, altering its collective consciousness and shaping the ways people relate to one another, to authority, and to the structures meant to support them.

As **Nermin Soyalp's research on collective trauma narratives** highlights, trauma does not remain isolated in individual experiences; it embeds itself into political conflicts, cultural norms, and even in our institutions. It becomes part of the stories we tell about who belongs, who is valued, and what is possible within a given system.

When left unexamined, these narratives become self-perpetuating, reinforcing cycles of exclusion, alienation, and harm.

What does this collective trauma look like in higher education institutions? Many universities operate as if education exists in a vacuum, **disconnected from the broader socio-political and historical forces** shaping the lives of students, faculty, and staff. The prevailing institutional mindset often prioritizes academic rigor, productivity, and **prestige over well-being, implicitly treating trauma as an individual issue rather than a systemic one**. But trauma is not just something that happens to people—it is also something that happens within communities.

When left in the shadows, these wounds manifest in ways that impact the entire campus ecosystem:

- *Burnout*: Faculty and staff feel overwhelmed, disconnected, and exhausted by institutional demands that do not account for the emotional and psychological toll of teaching and service.
- *Disengagement*: Students struggle with focus, participation, and motivation, not due to laziness but because trauma narrows cognitive bandwidth and suppresses executive function.
- *Fragmentation*: Departments and offices function in silos, reinforcing isolation rather than collaboration. The institution operates as a set of disconnected categories rather than as a unified community.
- *Inequities*: Those from historically marginalized backgrounds bear the compounded weight of both personal and collective trauma, while universities often fail to provide adequate resources to address these disparities.

These forces shape the “**hidden curriculum**”—the unspoken lessons of power, belonging, and survival embedded in institutional structures. Without **acknowledging and addressing these underlying traumas**, universities risk perpetuating cycles of harm rather than fostering environments of healing and growth.

If we are to transform higher education into a space of true belonging, we must begin by making the invisible visible—in a way that does not retraumatize, but rather fosters awareness, agency, and action.

This requires asking critical questions:

- How do we acknowledge and presence trauma without becoming overwhelmed—without falling into patterns of freeze, collapse, or helplessness?
- How do we hold space for pain while also cultivating healing, resilience, and renewal?
- How do we move beyond simply recognizing trauma to actively transforming the systems that perpetuate it?

The answer lies in storytelling.

Through story, we bridge the gap between the seen and the unseen, the personal and the collective. Storytelling allows us to name what has been hidden, to make

sense of fragmented experiences, and to imagine new ways of being in community. It is through stories that we not only bear witness to trauma but also find pathways to healing, connection, and transformation.

Storytelling as a Pathway to Healing and Renewal

At our core, humans are wired for stories. Long before written language, our ancestors gathered around fires, passing down knowledge, wisdom, and warnings through myth and folklore. Stories are more than just entertainment—they are how we make sense of the world, how we connect, and how we heal. Neuroscience now confirms what ancient traditions have always known: stories have the power to transform us at both the biological and psychological levels.

The Neuroscience of Narrative: How Stories Shape the Brain

Neuroscientist Dr. Paul Zak has demonstrated that emotionally compelling stories activate the brain in profound ways. In one of his studies, participants watched narratives about children battling cancer. Their brains released oxytocin, often called the “love hormone,” which increased their empathy and even inspired them to donate to charity—without any direct solicitation.

Zak repeated the experiment using stories about divisive issues such as racism, gun control, and terrorism. Again, the results were striking: emotionally engaging narratives didn’t just spark feelings—they inspired action.

As Zak concluded, “These findings suggest that emotionally engaging narratives inspire post-narrative actions.” In other words, stories do not merely inform us; they move us. They bypass intellectual defenses and engage us at the level of emotion and identity, making them one of the most powerful tools for overcoming polarization and fostering real change.

The Psychology of Narrative Transportation

Researcher and Professor Melanie C. Green expands on this idea through her work on narrative transportation, which explores how deeply engaging stories shift people’s attitudes and beliefs. Her research shows that when individuals are fully immersed in a story, they are more open to new perspectives, even those that challenge their preconceived notions.

This has profound implications for higher education and trauma-informed work. When information is presented as raw data or abstract theory, it can be easily dismissed. But when that same information is embedded in a story, it becomes lived experience. We don't just hear it—we feel it.

The Power of Fairy Tales: Confronting Trauma Through Stories

Long before neuroscience could explain why, fairy tales have functioned as psychological survival guides.

As psychoanalyst **Bruno Bettelheim wrote**, fairy tales do not shield us from hardship; instead, they teach us that struggle is an unavoidable and intrinsic part of human existence. The central lesson is not avoidance, but mastery:

The message that fairy tales get across . . . in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious.

Similarly, Marie-Louise von Franz, a Jungian scholar, described fairy tales as the purest and simplest expressions of collective unconscious psychic processes. They reflect deep, universal truths about suffering, resilience, and transformation. Fairy tales endure because they resonate across time and cultures, offering wisdom for addressing individual and collective trauma.

Why Stories Matter in Higher Education

When we think about trauma on college campuses, the impulse is often to look for policy solutions—better mental health resources, more inclusive curricula, improved faculty support. These are necessary, but they are not enough. Institutions do not change through policy alone. They change through the narratives they tell about themselves.

Stories create pathways for communication, collaboration, and healing. They allow us to overcome our defenses and perceived differences, helping us to reconnect not just as faculty, staff, and students—but as a community.

When we listen to a story, we do more than hear words—we enter someone else’s world. We feel their struggles, their triumphs, their humanity. And in doing so, we begin to see our own.

The Stolen Mother Moon: A Story of Collective Trauma and Healing

Stories are not only mirrors reflecting our experiences—they are also guides, illuminating the path toward healing, renewal, and reconnection. Few stories embody this truth as powerfully as *The Stolen Mother Moon*, a tale passed down by Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her work on deep storytelling and the collective psyche.

The story begins in a perfect village “where everyone loved each other, and all the children were terrific.” There was just *one* problem, and that was that this beautiful, harmonious village was surrounded by a moat of black murky bogs. “It was dark there always and it stank because everything was rotting.”

The villagers learned to live with the decomposition that lay at the edges of their visible world, and so long as they traveled when the Moon Mother was high in the sky—all was well. But on those nights when the Moon Mother did not shine, “the bogs were filled with treachery because there were evil things that lived there. Things that live in the darkest corners of humans’ minds would come out at night and lead the poor, struggling travelers with no light into the quagmires and drowned them.”

The Moon, a nurturing maternal figure, is filled with sorrow at the plight of the villagers. So, she comes to earth to see how she can help. Alas, she too is captured by the Evil Ones who “roll a great boulder over her grave and dance a crazy dance on top of it.” With the absence of the Moon Mother, the world falls into disorder—“so many people became lost, so many children became orphaned, so many people suffered.”

But the story does not end with loss. The people, recognizing their suffering, come together. They embark on a journey—to recover the Moon and reclaim their connection to what sustains them. In their quest, they must confront fear, navigate darkness, and find the courage to restore what was taken. Working together, and by the light of their torches, the villagers succeed.

When the Moon is finally returned to the sky, balance is restored, and on *most nights*, she shines her light for the safety of the villagers. But the people, through their struggle, have been transformed. They have learned an important lesson:

Now, on most nights, [the Moon Mother] travels across the sky with her hood turned down and her light radiant everywhere. And on those few, now predictable nights, when she veils herself in gray and does not shine, travelers have learned to stay by the hearth and wait until she shows the way again.

What The Stolen Mother Moon Teaches Us About Loss, Recovery, and Transformation

Like the world in *The Stolen Mother Moon*, many institutions today exist in a state of unacknowledged loss. The trauma of disconnection—whether from community, from meaning, or from a sense of shared purpose—has left universities fragmented and uncertain. Faculty, staff, and students operate within structures that often fail to nourish, instead prioritizing productivity over well-being, hierarchy over connection, and efficiency over transformation.

What wisdom does this story offer us?

1. **Recognizing the Loss** - Before healing can begin, we must acknowledge what has been stolen. This might be a loss of trust, a loss of safety, or the loss of a sense of shared purpose within an institution. Like the people in the story, we must first name what is missing.
2. **The Journey of Collective Healing** - No single individual can retrieve the Moon alone. Healing is not a solitary act; it requires community. Universities must move beyond isolated wellness initiatives to structural changes that embed care and belonging into the very fabric of institutional life.
3. **Transformation Through Struggle** - Just as the people in the story are changed by their journey, we, too, must be willing to change. Becoming a truly trauma-informed institution means confronting the darkness—facing difficult histories, examining power dynamics, and being willing to reimagine how we educate, lead, and support one another.
4. **Reweaving Connection** - The Moon does not simply return; she is brought back through collective effort. In the same way, creating a culture of renewal requires actively restoring trust, fostering genuine relationships, and creating spaces where people feel seen, heard, and valued.

Bringing the Moon Back: The Role of Storytelling in Rebuilding Institutions

At its core, *The Stolen Mother Moon* is a story about the power of reclamation. It reminds us that healing is not about returning to what was, but about consciously shaping what comes next.

In the context of higher education, this means:

- **Naming and presencing trauma** rather than allowing it to remain hidden.
- **Shifting from transactional relationships to transformational ones**, where faculty, staff, and students are seen as whole people.
- **Centering collective wisdom**, recognizing that solutions do not come from the top down, but from communities working together.

To bring the Moon back is to restore not just light, but life. It is a call to create spaces where people can not only learn, but belong, heal, and thrive.

Transformation Begins with Naming the Invisible

Psychiatrist and narrative medicine scholar [Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona](#) concludes that when we hear narratives of transformation from people who seem like us, we become inspired to believe that our own healing is possible.

Yet, he offers an important distinction: it is not the stories themselves that heal. True healing comes from *transformation*—a fundamental reorganization of systems, whether at the level of the individual, the family, or the institution.

For colleges and universities, this means that storytelling cannot simply be a symbolic exercise. It must lead to action. If we can tell new stories about our institutions, we can shape their futures.

A trauma-informed campus is not just one that acknowledges trauma; it is one that actively redesigns its structures, policies, and culture to support resilience, connection, and renewal. This requires us to listen deeply, to make space for stories

that have been silenced, and to recognize that naming the mist is only the beginning—clearing it requires sustained, intentional change.

Conclusion: A Call to Embrace This Moment

Mis estimados queridos, do not lose heart. We were made for these times.

— Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Transformation is never easy. It requires courage, persistence, and a willingness to sit with discomfort as we navigate change. But if we commit to telling more truthful, expansive, and healing stories—stories that honor both pain and possibility—then we can begin to build campus communities that are not just sites of learning, but spaces of belonging and renewal.

The mist *will* clear. What comes next is up to us.

Reflective Questions for Readers

To move from awareness to action, consider the following:

- Where does “the mist” show up in your institution?
- How can we use storytelling to bridge gaps in our campus communities?
- What small steps can we take to presence trauma without re-traumatization?

About the Author

Marjorie Florestal, JD, MA, PhD(c), is the CEO and principal consultant of Blackbird Trauma Training Company. She brings a unique interdisciplinary perspective to her work, combining over 25 years of experience in legal education and practice with advanced degrees in psychology and human development, as well as specialized training in several trauma healing modalities.

Marjorie earned a JD from New York University School of Law, where she was a Root-Tilden-Snow Scholar, an International Law Fellow, and a staff editor for the *Journal of International Law and Politics*. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to France, where she studied comparative immigration law and policy.

Marjorie also holds an MA in Jungian Psychology from Sonoma State University, an MA in Human Development from Fielding Graduate University, and is completing a PhD in Human Development with a concentration in coaching at Fielding.

She is trained in several trauma-healing modalities, including: NeuroAffective Relational Model (NARM), a somatic-based approach to addressing developmental trauma; Healing the Wounds of History, a drama therapy process that catalyzes collective healing; and Pure Belonging, a somatic process aimed at restoring nervous system capacity.

A former tenured professor at the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, and a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, and UC Davis, Marjorie has taught courses in the fields of international trade and commercial law, as well as the first year contracts offering. She developed and taught the first course on trauma-informed lawyering at UC Davis Law School.

An award-winning writer, Marjorie is co-author of *The Trauma-Informed Lawyer* (ABA, 2023) and has published on cross-cultural pedagogy, race, and the transformative power of narrative, as well as on issues of international trade law.



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