



September 2024

My PTSD. Part 1.

“I don’t remember struggling with anxiety before I lived in South Sudan,” I (Nancy) told my long-time, trusted counselor. It seems peculiar now, but I didn’t even recognize my symptoms while in war-torn South Sudan (2010-2016) or when working in the refugee camps (2017-2019). After moving to Oxford, England, in 2019, I put two and two together.

A journalist’s experience during the Bosnian War helped me. Sometimes, anxiety made her feel like she could not catch a deep breath. I knew that feeling, but I had never before associated it with stress. If my breathing became shallow in South Sudan, I just assumed my clothes were too tight... yet, my breathing became uncomfortable after armed vehicles drove past me in the streets of Juba and after learning of rebel groups near our home in Yei ... retrospectively, I recognize it as anxiety.

“Now, I understand I had anxiety in South Sudan,” I told Dr. Susan Rhema. “But, it made sense to be anxious. At any moment, we knew we might need to flee,” I explained. In our small bedroom in Yei, two Baby-ergos (for carrying kids on our backs) hung on the wall next to our grab bag (with our passports and things to survive in “the bush”), just in case we needed to escape on foot ...



Rev Khamis preparing adults to facilitate trauma healing for South Sudanese children living in the refugee camps.

I will never forget our next-door neighbor in our duplex telling us the way to the Ugandan border. To him, it seemed easy to climb the mountain and traverse many miles by foot. Perhaps it felt easy based on the many mountains he already climbed.

When Rev. John Khamis, our neighbor and colleague, was a young man, he attended seminary in Juba. His studies began during the Civil War, and while a student, Juba changed hands from the southern to northern army’s control. The invaders locked down the city, forbidding the seminary students to leave.

So, Rev. Khamis and his classmates escaped at night, climbing a mountain and walking for miles. The northern

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soldiers who caught them decided to take them back to Juba and make an example of them... but, during their transport back to Juba, the SPLA (the army in the south) attacked the caravan.

Taking advantage of the momentary chaos, Rev. Khamis and the other church leaders decided to run for it. They jumped off the back of the truck, intentionally running in different directions, so the soldiers could not shoot them all together. Rev Khamis survived, only to be captured later by SPLA soldiers who held him hostage, assuming he was a spy for the north.

On our shared front porch, Rev. Khamis told us many stories about his life. He became the most animated when telling hunting stories. "If a warthog charges you, stand still. When it gets close, jump straight up over its head," he advised. "If a boa constrictor starts wrapping around your legs, bite the end of its tail, then it will let you go."

Rev Khamis coordinated the psychosocial department at RECONCILE International for several years. His teaching helped many South Sudanese communities take steps in recovering from traumatic events. We were stateside when he passed away in 2021. Missing important funerals on both sides of the water makes healthy closure elusive for us; a significant heartache of international work.



Rev. Khamis training in the refugee camps in northern Uganda about healing from trauma.

"... in South Sudan, it made sense to be anxious," I continued with Dr. Rhema, "but now, I feel anxious about very small things. Things I know are not a big deal at all."

"Well," she responded, "you have just described PTSD."

While I had not considered it before she said it, her diagnosis made sense. And, it felt liberating to have an answer. Before my diagnosis, I just kept thinking to myself, "I really don't think I used to be like this..."

"You need to do regular therapy," Dr. Rhema compassionately concluded during our May 2024 Zoom call. "The symptoms of PTSD are normal responses to abnormal experiences," Susan told me. She felt confident in the potential of healing. After that conversation, we met weekly. Thank God for professional counselors.

It does not take living in a warzone to have PTSD or to experience the effects of trauma. A Kids Book about Trauma by Megan Bartlett explains it this way: "Trauma isn't only big, scary moments; trauma is our body's reaction to overwhelmingly stressful experiences, and those can look like a lot of different things."

Trauma triggers the part of our brain that responds with fight, flight, or freeze. Usually, this happens in urgent, temporary situations. Under exceptional circumstances, our brains can get stuck there for extended periods of time. The children's book uses the example of a child's first day at a new school. On the first day, new students may be anxious and on high alert. After a time, though, they make friends, settle into routines, and feel safe. With PTSD, it's like every day is the first day of school. It is exhausting.

Many of you have been with us through the ups and downs of our experiences in international ministry. Through these newsletters, we invite you into this part of our journey, too. Friends and companions are important for us as I take steps to heal from PTSD.

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Writing this letter feels like a small contribution to the ministry we have witnessed our South Sudanese colleagues shoulder for years: normalizing the conversation about mental health. Rev. Khamis facilitated trainings, again and again, describing the impact of trauma on our physical and mental health. He also believed that when we allow “wounds of the heart” to heal, we become stronger. To God be the glory. Amen.

Nancy Smith-Mather