

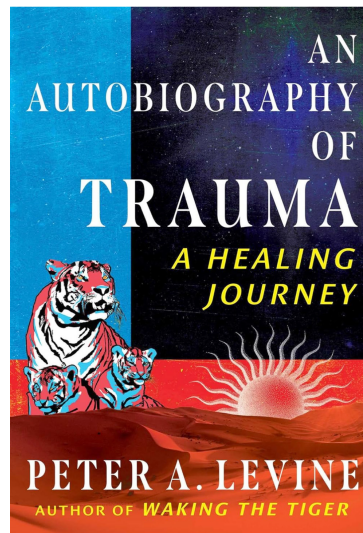
BOOK REVIEW

An Autobiography of Trauma

A Healing Journey

by Peter Levine

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In his latest book, *An Autobiography of Trauma: A Healing Journey*, Peter A. Levine, the pioneering developer of Somatic Experiencing® (SE), offers an intimate and profound exploration of his personal journey to heal his severe childhood trauma. Levine, who has significantly influenced the understanding and treatment of trauma through his innovative Somatic Experiencing method, provides readers with a compelling narrative that intertwines his life story with the evolution of his therapeutic approach. This review aims to critically assess the autobiography, highlighting its strengths and offering nuanced reflections on its content, all within an acknowledgement of Levine's stature as a leading figure in the field of somatic trauma healing.

An intertwined personal and professional journey

Levine's autobiography is not merely a recounting of his life events. The lived experiences, including those related to trauma, are used in the narrative as an experiential guide that invites readers to engage deeply with their own somatic experiences. From the outset, Levine addresses his severe trauma with a directness that is both disarming and instructive. His approach to writing is sensorily sensitive, aligning with the principles of

SE. I found this particularly appropriate for the narration of highly traumatic events, which Levine already includes in the introduction. He provides readers with experiential instructions on how to navigate potentially triggering material using sensory awareness, thus modeling the very techniques of SE. Readers who are not familiar with SE or somatic psychology might be stirred by this approach, but it feels like a conducive and necessary experiential pedagogy. After all, an autobiography about a central pioneer in the field that addresses trauma in a surface-level way would have been disappointing. Levine casts himself as a modern-day Chiron, the wounded healer of Greek mythology, a motif that permeates the narrative. He juxtaposes the descriptions of childhood trauma and loss with moments of vivid joy and exuberance, illustrating the complexity of his emotional landscape. This duality serves as a foundation for his later work, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of the human spirit. Throughout the book, Levine's personal anecdotes are interspersed with insights into the development of SE, creating a tapestry that is both informative and deeply moving.

Development of Somatic Experiencing

One of the most compelling aspects of the autobiography is Levine's detailed account of how he discovered and developed SE. Drawing from his studies of wild animals, neurobiology, and over fifty years of clinical observations, Levine elucidates the principles underlying SE as an integrative, dynamic, and expansive approach. Through the developmental story of SE, it becomes clear how and why his method of helping individuals release traumatic energy stored in the body has revolutionized trauma therapy. Levine's historical contextualization of his life work emphasizes the radical shifts in our understanding of trauma that has occurred both within and beyond the professional fields during his lifetime. This explanation of SE is accessible yet profound, making complex concepts understandable to a broad audience.

Initially, Levine recognized the necessity of conforming to the scientific positivistic paradigm to ensure that his innovative approach gained the recognition and respect it deserved. By framing SE within this rigorous scientific context, he safeguarded its legitimacy, and facilitated its acceptance within the broader therapeutic community. Over time, however, Levine skillfully integrated more spiritual and transdisciplinary elements into his work, enriching his method and demonstrating the profound interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit. His reflections on this evolution are particularly touching to read. They underscore Levine's commitment to a holistic understanding of trauma and healing, blending empirical rigor with a deep appreciation for the complexities of human experience. His acknowledgment of the need to protect his discoveries by aligning them with scientific paradigms also speaks to continued challenges in the field.

Levine also portrays the rich tapestry of relationships and influences that shaped the development of SE. He shares intimate stories of mentors, colleagues, and friends who played pivotal roles in his journey, each contributing unique insights and perspectives. These relational experiences highlight Levine's connection to a distinctive cohort of transformational pioneers, individuals who collectively pushed the boundaries of traditional therapeutic practices. Through these interactions, readers gain a profound sense of Levine not as a solitary innovator, but as an integral part of a dynamic and collaborative movement driven by a shared vision of holistic healing and the transformation of trauma treatment. This network of influences underscores the collaborative spirit and collective wisdom that have been instrumental in the evolution of SE. Levine includes both esteemed professionals and colleagues alongside personal and intimate friends and partners in these relational reflections, offering the reader an experience of vulnerability and honesty.

Jungian vibes: Inner journey and mystical experiences

The book is characterized by the focus on Levine's inner experiences, particularly his dreams and visions. He describes how dream visitations from Albert Einstein, whom he considers his personal spirit guide, played a significant role in guiding his work. Levine's discovery of a profound real-life connection to Einstein through his mother adds a layer of depth to his narrative. These mystical experiences are presented with a sense of wonder and respect, underscoring the importance of intuition and spiritual guidance in Levine's journey, and lending a distinct Jungian vibe. While these accounts are fascinating, especially to Jungian-informed readers as me, they may also pose a challenge for readers who prefer a more empirically grounded narrative. Levine's willingness to share these deeply personal and sometimes mystical experiences is a testament to his vulnerability and authenticity.

His contributions to the field of trauma healing are undeniable. Through SE, he has helped thousands of individuals recover from trauma, offering them a path to reclaim their lives. Levine's emphasis on the importance of telling one's story as a means of healing is a powerful reminder of the therapeutic potential inherent in narrative and self-expression. It made me wonder about the potentials for expanding storytelling components in the many uses of SE. As someone who has trained in and studied SE for several years, I found myself experiencing a more integrated and embodied internalized sense of what SE encompasses after having read the personal narrative of its development. I was reminded of a similar and interesting experience that occurred when I completed the Intermediate III module. I had followed the same cohort of students and assistants for my Beginning and Intermediate year, and we ended the last module with an exercise of everyone sharing a personal experience. The assistants deeply shared details about their personal processes in having assisted the cohort, which revealed a more nuanced and vulnerable picture of them as full and real people. They were clearly less so perfectly healed and attuned super-humans who were masters of SE, which had admittedly been a common projection from me as an SE student, as I was deeply humbled by the training. Now I could see that an assistant who had seemed to me to have been the pinnacle of calmness and anchoring had also been struggling with shutdown and freeze tendencies. Realizing that our mentors and guides are full and fully humans can be challenging but can also offer a new level of collective integration, or in the Jungian sense, a transcendent function.

The book also addresses the integration of SE with a diverse array of therapeutic modalities and traditions, reflecting Levine's commitment to a comprehensive approach to trauma healing. He delves into the role of sexuality in trauma recovery, highlighting its importance in reclaiming one's body and sense of self. Levine is candid about the challenges associated with healing trauma through sexuality, acknowledging the deep-seated difficulties, while maintaining a focus on hope and the possibility of recovery. His exploration of psychedelics as a therapeutic tool is marked by a cautious and balanced perspective, countering the current hype in the field. Levine provides compelling evidence and anecdotes that underscore their capacity for deep healing, yet he continuously emphasizes the need for responsible and careful use. Additionally, he explores the integration of shamanic traditions with modern therapeutic practices, demonstrating how ancient wisdom can enhance contemporary approaches to trauma treatment. These discussions are not only thought-provoking, but also indicative of Levine's innovative mindset and dedication to exploring all avenues that may contribute to holistic healing. A recurrent focus on attachment and early relationships as central to trauma healing is woven throughout his reflections, linking his personal attachment history with broader therapeutic insights. Through these integrative discussions, Levine not only broadens

the scope of SE, but also invites practitioners and individuals alike to consider a more expansive and inclusive view of healing.

Conclusions

While *An Autobiography of Trauma* is a significant contribution to the literature on trauma and healing, it is important to approach it as Levine's deeply personal narrative, rather than a textbook on trauma or an introduction to SE. For those seeking a foundational understanding of SE or trauma, Levine's *In an Unspoken Voice* (2010) will be more appropriate. This autobiography focuses on Levine's personal journey and the experiences that shaped his groundbreaking work, rather than the empirical evidence that supports SE. Readers looking for detailed scientific studies and empirical validation will find that these are covered extensively in his other works and scholarly articles.

Levine's narrative is rich with personal and mystical experiences, which can offer a unique and engaging perspective but may be challenging for those seeking a straightforward, clinical exposition of SE. The intertwining of personal narrative with professional development reflects Levine's holistic philosophy, emphasizing the interconnectedness of his life and work. This approach, while profoundly insightful, may not resonate with all readers, particularly those looking for clear-cut, objective analysis. It's essential to appreciate this book for what it is – a deeply personal account of Levine's life and the development of SE, rather than a conventional clinical textbook.

In summary, *An Autobiography of Trauma* is highly recommended for its depth, authenticity, vulnerability, and the invaluable insights it provides into the life and work of one of the foremost figures in somatic trauma therapy. Levine's journey underscores the importance of perseverance, innovation, and compassion in the pursuit of healing, offering a beacon of hope for those navigating the challenging terrain of trauma recovery.



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