

## GHANA, WEST AFRICA:

# Trafficked Children, Healing Hearts

by Tracy Artson, Ph.D

In 2014, I taught a two-day trauma workshop at the Don Bosco Rehabilitation Center in Ghana, Africa that included Resource Tapping™. My journey to Ghana began eight years earlier inspired by an Oprah Winfrey show. In this show, I heard about a young boy trafficked in the fishing villages of the Upper Lake Volta region in Ghana. Oprah's mission was to find this boy and rescue him from slavery. At Oprah's behest, Lisa Ling, travelled to Ghana to accomplish these goals. While in Ghana, Ms. Ling met Eric Peasah, a social worker who worked for the International Office of Migration and who dedicates his life to rescuing trafficked children. He introduced her to Never; another trafficked child Mr. Peasah rescued years ago. Together, all three set out on a rescue mission to free twenty-one children from slavery, including the boy featured in *The New York Times*. Both Eric and Never were present on that Oprah Winfrey show which launched my journey. This moment of kismet propelled me and my family on a trajectory that has enriched our lives, broadened our "Family" connections, and has illuminated my understanding of the human capacity for resilience and healing— even from the most abject of circumstances.

Three months after that show aired in 2007, Eric Peasah, founder of *Right To Be Free* ([rightobefree.org](http://rightobefree.org)), sat at our dinner table in California. He educated us about child trafficking in Ghana and his dream of building human connections one step at a time through individual sponsorships so that these children might one day go to school, learn to trust, and to develop resources to sustain themselves. Eric has rescued over 800 children. He introduced

us to a ten-year-old rescued boy, Kofi, who we have sponsored, for 9 years, and have grown to love.

In June of 2014, my family and I planned an 8-day trip to meet Kofi, to learn more about child trafficking on Lake Volta and to help identify and feed both the children and the fisherman on the lake and in their village island (Gasokope). Eric took us on an extensive tour of Ghana. We began our education by visiting Elmina Castle. Built by the Portuguese then taken over by the Dutch and eventually by the British, this ominous structure that held unspeakable suffering, was the beginning point of captivity and departure of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. We then went on to visit the lake where children are enslaved in the present.



Eric Peasah, Founder of [rightobefree.org](http://rightobefree.org), speaking with currently trafficked children

### The Cycle of Slavery

Without pictures and without previous travel to developing nations, it is virtually impossible to comprehend the level of poverty, the daily struggle to survive, the governmental corruption and complete breakdown of all infrastructures that the majority of Ghanaians face. Despite the hardship, there is an abundance of resiliency, kindness, affection and generosity that we encountered

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wherever we visited. Neither the adults nor the children we met seemed hardened despite the trauma and widespread losses due to the poverty, inadequate employment opportunities, and scant medical services.

When it comes to child trafficking on the lake, there is no intentional “evil”; no single person or group to point a finger at in blame since the fishermen themselves were once enslaved boys, victims in turn. Once these children mature, they assume the active position of master. In order for Eric Peasah to free the new generation of children, he learned he must develop the trust of the fishermen as well as the trafficked children, the villagers and, if present, the village chiefs. Eric promises the fishermen alternative ways to make a living through micro-loans in exchange for their signature on a contract never to traffic children again. It is an arduous, time consuming and sometimes dangerous process.

Upon release, Eric and his team bring the children to a rehabilitation center for three months where their medical, nutritional, educational, and social work needs are managed. In the meantime, reunification with family members is assessed. If there is a perpetrator in the cycle of slavery, it is the absolute poverty that begets hopelessness. Poverty is the engine driving families to sell their children. At times, parents are falsely promised that their children will receive an education, an otherwise unfeasible goal. These trafficked children, ranging in age from 5 to 16, work in the freezing waters trying to unhook the nets that are caught on the trees growing from the lake floor some 15 to 20 feet below the surface. Often they emerge from the waters shivering, an ear bleeding from their deep dives, an eye lost from a branch, a back broken from a fall on the narrow boats. Or worse; they are caught in the netting and never emerge. Physical abuse is common as

is the punishment of restricting meals. Girls are also trafficked to smoke the fish and to repair the nets. Sexual abuse occurs. Additionally, a patriarchal structure and culture adds to the difficulty faced by the girls and women in Ghana.

### **Preparation: Two-Day Trauma Training and Treatment**

Two months prior to our departure, I re-immersed myself in the trauma research and treatments of Bessel Van Der Kolk, Christine Courtois, Allen Schore, Babette Rothschild, Daniel Siegel, Diana Fosha, Rachel Yehuda, Stephen Porges, Peter Levine, among many others. I also revisited the child development literature, including attachment theorists such as John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Mary Main and Alicia Lieberman. I stitched together various videos, photographs for visual aids and developed an array of body movement, meditation, resourcing and drawing exercises so the staff could somatically comprehend the experience of attunement/misattunement, and the importance of mirror neurons and flight/flight/freeze responses in humans and animals. I wanted the staff to “get” that the healing process of the traumatized individual must occur in an integrated, safe and client-centered way that engages the soma/body, brain/mind and psyche/spirit. I used exercises from yoga, mindfulness techniques, psychodynamic, somatic and movement therapies as well as Resource Tapping™ (Parnell, 2008). Laurel Parnell, Ph.D. and Julie Probus-Schad, LCSW were particularly helpful resources for me with their experience working in distant lands and unfamiliar cultures.

### **Day One-Staff Training: Theory and Techniques**

The importance of immersing oneself in the country, its citizens and customs prior to offering any training is indispensable. For five days, we travelled throughout Ghana with Eric Peasah, three Gha-

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naians who assist in the rescuing efforts, as well as Kofi and his twelve-year old sister. Whatever preconceived notions about the country, the culture, the language, and the mental and visual images that I developed based on years of interaction with Eric, Eric's sister and Kofi were quickly dispelled by reality. Just days after my arrival, I found I had to integrate the stark reality of what my eyes witnessed. I was constantly editing and adapting the material I had brought to reflect what I was absorbing.

The first day of my workshop focused on the fourteen adult attendees of the training who ranged widely in age and experience. There were three high school graduates teaching English and math at the Don Bosco Rehabilitation Center, a government head of human trafficking, several staff from government owned orphanages, one from a girl's juvenile detention facility, and several staff administrators who assisted in the care for the rescued children at the center, including Never, the young man that Oprah interviewed.

The day began with introductions. My intention from day one was that the training experience would be one of mutual learning. Our geographical, historical, and cultural differences demanded that some of the exercises would need to be adapted for cultural/religious sensitivity. I invited the group members to characterize their experience of trauma, be it in their work or personal life. Throughout the day, many questions arose concerning specific situations they had encountered in their work with the trafficked or homeless children. The idea that there were tested treatments for trauma with hands-on exercises provided containment and support for them.

I shared the relevant research on child development, stress, trauma and Posttraumatic Stress (PTS) accompanied by photographs and videos as well as experiential exercises. For example, I showed a

mosaic of facial images of children depicting three experiences: depression, parental misattunement and trauma. The facial expressions seen in the photographs are eerily identical. I then showed pictures that reflect parent-child attunement. With each piece, I asked the participants to slowly register the feelings in their bodies as they looked at the pictures and then to write down their feelings; to locate those feelings in their bodies, and if they felt comfortable, to share it. Their words, raw and heartfelt:

*"At first I felt tremendous sadness in my heart.  
Then I felt love and peace."*

As the day progressed, deep and unprocessed feelings surfaced. I realized that the attendees had never named, claimed, nor acknowledged the trauma in their very own lives. I knew how vital it was to first validate these previously unthought, unknown, unformulated feelings while, at the same time, to use their experiences to illuminate the topic. Several people approached me during breaks to share their trauma privately.

One of the challenges I faced, given the strict and hierarchical nature of the adult-child relationship in Ghana was how to encourage a non-judgmental, client-centered approach in order to foster a foundation of safety and earned trust with the children. I clarified the distinction between parental advice and psychotherapy. Despite several members claiming to have a new understanding about why they should refrain from disciplining the children through physical means or with verbal humiliation, (since corporal punishment is allowed in schools and used at home) this challenge continued to crop up, particularly during the facilitated work with the children.

I integrated Daniel Siegel's (1999) concept of "the window of tolerance," to titrate difficult, unfamiliar and hyper-arousing feelings of the participants

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with opportunities to restore inner harmony. For example, as we were about to take a break, I invited them to “close your eyes and go inside. Feel the weight of your body and the support of the chair on your backs. I then offered, ‘Loving-Kindness Meditation.’ When asked to describe what they felt, they stated, “relaxed,” “light,” “calm,” and “peaceful.”

In the afternoon, I demonstrated bilateral stimulation (BLS) or Resource Tapping™, using the butterfly hug and on the knees. Once they felt comfortable with BLS, I demonstrated to the group the resourcing of peaceful place, nurturing figures, protective figures and wise figures with a young man interning at the center. Participants chose a partner and took turns finding and tapping-in their resources. Since Ghana is a Christian country, Jesus, Mother Mary and church figured prominently in their resourcing. There was genuine surprise and excitement with the healing and peaceful feelings that emerged. One woman told me she had gone home that night and tapped in resources for her mother.

### **Day-Two: Trauma Recovery Work with Trafficked Children**

The purpose of this day was to help the twenty-seven children reconnect and integrate their minds, bodies and souls, and to begin to learn how to calm or revitalize their nervous systems. I intentionally planned to begin the day working with the nine girls (apart from the boys) while the staff participated in or witnessed the exercises. I went over to the corner where the girls sat; I introduced myself and asked their names. I wanted them to know that they truly had a choice in participating and could always opt out. We did many of the same exercises with them as we did with the boys (see below).

After a question and answer period with the staff, eighteen boys entered and divided into three groups while the staff (who were previously divided) worked with their assigned group, as I facilitated. I emphasized the importance of choice, of free will, and how to gently invite, without force, the children to participate. The children may, or **may not**, put words to their experiences.

I began by asking both staff and children to form a large circle. With African music in the background, I demonstrated exaggerated right/left marching (BLS) while a child chose the movements and accompanying sounds of an animal that we all followed while marching in the circle. Beyond what I hoped to be a joyful, bonding exercise, I wanted the children to experience what it feels like to make a self-determined and empowered choice while the adults listen and follow them without question.

Here are a few examples of the other types of exercises I introduced to the staff and children:

- ***The Elephant (Brain Gym Exercise):*** From the left ear and left shoulder extend the left arm out like a trunk of an elephant and slowly draw in the air an infinity sign. Switch arms after several rotations. This exercise helps to stimulate the mind/body connection and feels calming.
- ***Lazy 8s (Brain Gym Exercise):*** With the arm extended and the thumb pointing upward at eye level at the midline, slowly begin to move counterclockwise—up, over and around. The eyes should follow the finger while the head may move slightly and the neck should remain relaxed. This exercise improves eye mobility, visual attention and is calming, as well.
- ***Reaching for the Stars:*** While stretching with the right hand towards the sky and reaching to touch the stars, the left leg rises up towards the

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body alternating with the left hand stretching and the right leg moving upward. The children loved these movements and it helps to integrate right/left hemispheres (BLS) targeting listening skills, reading, writing and comprehension

- **Yawning Exercise:** Begin by taking slow, deep breaths. Then massage the jaw muscles and when ready let out a yawn. Research on yawning demonstrates that it produces unique physiological changes associated with the act that differs from deep breathing. Its distinctiveness relates to nervous system arousal including increases in facial temperature, lung volume and heart rate variability. Peter Levine, Ph.D. in his book, *In An Unspoken Voice* (2010), addresses the importance of heart rate variability to the recovery of stress conditions.
- **Mindfulness Eating Exercise:** As one drives the roads of Accra, one witnesses people hawking their wares to drivers. I asked Eric to buy enough boxes of chocolates to provide each child with a piece of chocolate. While sitting in circles, I invited the children to close their eyes, and, when they felt ready, to place the chocolate in their mouth. They were to let the chocolate slowly melt in their mouth and to attend to the

taste and sensation of it melting, and to observe how their bodies felt in this process. These children sat with closed eyes for ten to fifteen minutes taking in this experience. I was awed and humbled to witness the openness and beauty of the changes occurring in their bodies. One boy exclaimed, “I feel a lightness in my heart.”

- **Drawing Peaceful Place:** I brought a pack of crayons for each child to keep. Their response, both heart-warming and heart breaking, was as if I were handing them a box of gold or love. I brought colored pencils and colored construction pads and white paper, which I left at the rehabilitation center for future use. I invited each child to close her/his eyes and to bring up an image, either real or imagined, which makes them feel peaceful. This moment was particularly difficult in terms of facilitation. A couple of the staff, who had either unresolved trauma or came from strict authoritarian backgrounds, found it challenging to maintain a non-judgmental stance when a child experienced difficulty thinking of a peaceful place. Several times, I had to carefully intervene to keep the child from feeling shamed or as if he had failed. I also did not want the staff to feel shamed. Understandably, many of the children chose the Don Bosco Rehabilitation Center as their peaceful place since this was the first time in their lives in which they had a bed to sleep, three meals a day to eat, clothing, and an education. After drawing their peaceful place, we tapped them in. Prior to my suggestion that the boys tap in their peaceful place, one staff member, Benjamin, led his group in the butterfly hug as they looked at their drawings.



Mindfulness/Somatic Exercise—Melting Chocolate

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Staff and the Boys, after drawing their Peaceful Place

Whatever education or healing grew out of my journey to Ghana, it paled in comparison to what I gained: the affection, appreciation, and sharing that was given so freely given to me. I am aware that the same undigested emotions that overwhelmed me upon my return to the United States, with all the materialistic wealth we enjoy, might intrude upon your consciousness as you read of my journey. As I write, a deep sadness re-emerges that cannot be assuaged with words. The unrelenting poverty, the half-built dilapidated shacks sprinkled across the landscapes, the children's unrequited need for love,

the Ghanaian's determination despite missing many of the very basics of life as we know it: food, shelter, education, electricity, infrastructure and medicine, is both shocking and humbling. And yet, I took home with me experiences that counterbalance the weightiness of the trip—a sense of gratitude, purpose, lasting friendships,

deep respect, and transformation. I will return to Ghana to teach a similar but lengthier program in 2017/2018 knowing full well that I will be forever altered by the experience.

It is my wish that this article conveys the incredible voyage, albeit condensed—of providing trauma training and treatment to the children and staff in Ghana, as well as a few exercises utilized in the hopes that others will be moved to create their own journey to help other traumatized people in whatever part of the world their passion and interest takes them.



Tracy Artson, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist with a private practice in San Francisco, California. She specializes in trauma work, including PTSD with accident survivors, soldiers and linguists, assault victims, grief and mourning, anxiety, depression, phobias, addiction and adults with childhood neglect and abuses. She works with individuals and couples. She is a Training Facilitator, Certified Therapist and an Approved Consultant for the Parnell Institute (PI). She is a Certified Therapist and an Approved Consultant for the Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing International Association (EMDRIA). Currently, she is in a 3-year training program for certification as a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner. In addition, Dr. Artson is co-establishing a national non-profit organization (TAP-IN) for the Parnell Institute that will bring trauma training and treatment to underserved communities. For more information, visit [www.tracyartsonpsychologist.com](http://www.tracyartsonpsychologist.com). Please feel free to contact her directly for any questions or comments at (415) 923-0866 or at [drtracyartson@gmail.com](mailto:drtracyartson@gmail.com).

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