

# Trauma and the Way the World Works

*Matt Burton*



An essay contribution to  
*Conversation 2015*



**Matt Burton**

Chairman & CEO, Helping Men Heal

Matt has been a pioneer and entrepreneur since the age of 19 when he launched a multimedia entertainment company that quickly rose to become the largest of its kind in the state of Oregon by his 21st birthday. He continued his media presence as an on-air personality for Z100 Radio in Portland and KZMG, Magic 93.1 in Boise, Idaho.

Several years later, tired from the demands of the media and entertainment industry, Matt was ready to make a change. He began a new career in the Insurance and Healthcare Industry while acquiring a Bachelors of Science in Business Management from Concordia University.

Despite much early life success, Matt didn't find that anything he had done to date fulfilled his more central passion; serving those who were hurting and overlooked. In a step of courage and faith, he walked away from financial security and, instead, Matt took a job in a group home for teenage boys. From there, he began to work with men that were in prison. Men who had only known trauma, loss, addiction and pain. Men that were paying for the consequences of their actions. What became apparent to him is that most of the criminal behavior he was seeing seemed to stem from unresolved trauma and loss. With that knowledge, he became an advocate for men wishing to understand and heal from their wounds and the resulting addictions and acting out behavior.

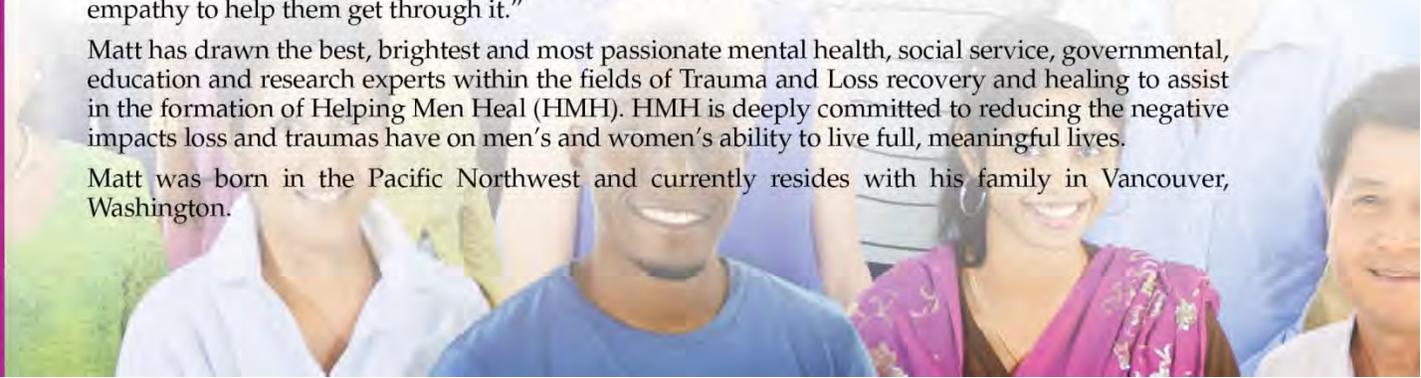
Matt's next project became a 10-year commitment to the Native American community. He founded Extraordinary Young People (EXYP); a non-profit focused on serving traumatized and hurting Native American young people and their families on Indian Reservations. As President and CEO, Matt grew EXYP into a multi-state organization that provided critical services in the areas of physical, emotional and spiritual health and recovery to thousands of Native American youth and their families. Because of this work, Matt was recognized by Concordia Universities Board of Regence and Board of Directors as an Alumni Ambassador exemplifying organizational & non-profit leadership success.

In 2011, Matt was drawn back into his true passion; helping the hurting and overlooked. He began Helping Men Heal, the work that would fulfil a lifelong vision of creating an innovative, evidence based Trauma and Loss recovery and healing model that would link the healing of the symptoms of trauma and loss.

Matt's greatest accomplishment- his strongest credential- is that of surviving a childhood of horrific trauma and loss. He always begins his public speaking engagements by saying "I've spent the last 22 years of my life recovering from the first 24." Matt combines his personal experiences and healing with his depth of business acumen within the behavioral health industry. He says regularly "This is the hardest, toughest, deepest work anyone will ever face. It's not enough to have the clinical tools to help folks heal. People need someone to walk beside them that has both the education and the empathy to help them get through it."

Matt has drawn the best, brightest and most passionate mental health, social service, governmental, education and research experts within the fields of Trauma and Loss recovery and healing to assist in the formation of Helping Men Heal (HMH). HMH is deeply committed to reducing the negative impacts loss and traumas have on men's and women's ability to live full, meaningful lives.

Matt was born in the Pacific Northwest and currently resides with his family in Vancouver, Washington.



## Trauma and the Way the World Works

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*The question: What are the prevailing assumptions about the way the world works? As we watch the social sector address big, tough social challenges, what seems to be the sector's predominant "theory in use" about concerted action?*

The scope and implication of this question, which in essence is a series of segmented but connected questions could lead down many avenues and channels of thought. I am taking a bit of a different approach. The perspective that I hope I'm able to bring to both *Conversation 2015* and to this essay is very narrow in focus. My focus, my filter, my life experience, my passion is dedicated on the impacts and solutions within the topic, subject, issue of trauma and loss. Those words can mean many things, so I will clarify. When I speak of trauma and loss, it is solely focused on what I more commonly refer to as "Invisible Wounds". Right or wrong, I will address and provide thought and commentary within the context of viewing the world through the filter of the impact of trauma and loss.

Let me break this larger question into two questions and start with "What are the prevailing assumptions about the way the world works?"

The organization I founded and lead, *Helping Men Heal* (HMH) recently conducted what we refer to as a *Market and Metrics Survey* around trauma and loss, both generically from a gender standpoint as well as specifically focused on men. We surveyed five different sectors: mental health, healthcare, government agencies/payers, corrections and the military. The goal of the survey was to identify the greatest perceived needs of both the survivors of trauma and loss and those that serve them. Also to understand what success in addressing trauma and loss would look like both qualitatively and quantitatively, and to clearly understand what type of economic engine needs to be built or modified to provide the resources to address it.

So when I hear or read the question about what the prevailing assumptions are around how the world works, I believe that one of the central roots that have created the assumptions or "norms" are based upon a trauma response. Let me list and explain a few:

Power in this context is social status and prestige, control or dominance over people or resources as values and a basic universal belief that "people should respect me." There is a basic assumption that if you, your family, your company, your country wants to advance something, own something, or push its culture and influence onto others, the way to do

that is through control, pressure, and oversight of others. There isn't a culture of trust, so where there is no trust, there is usually control. Power, from my perspective and many mental health clinicians I work with, is that this is many times a reaction from traumatic experiences like abuse, where the survivor was dominated or violated. So survivor's understandable reaction and felt need to control and dominate others, is a way to ensure their own safety.

Perhaps not globally, but certainly western culture is obsessed and places incredibly high value on achievement. In the article, it mentions that achievements is personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards. That begs the question to be asked; "how are the social standards determined?" There is a prevailing assumption that value is connected to performance. From a trauma reaction point of view, especially survivors of physical, emotional and sexual abuse have taken on the belief that their only value is in what they do or are/were made to do or endure. Our world praises, values and focuses on doing, not being.

Stigma is another powerful and incredibly destructive way of thinking, accepting, believing that is central to access and options for many. In our survey, this was one of the top three issues connected to male trauma and loss. Because there is a strong social stigma both in the USA and abroad that "men aren't victims." That men are supposed to "suck it up and move on." This greatly effects the way men operate, view themselves and restricts the options that they have to seek help as a survivor of trauma or loss. To seek help is viewed as weak. The result is a lot of hurting men. This strengthens the saying "hurting people hurt people." We have heard it and shared it many times in our work that much of the hurt women have experienced is due to men who haven't healed from their traumatic experiences and are replaying them or acting/reacting to them, at her expense.

Self-fulfillment, pleasure and/or gratification for oneself is also central to "the way the world works." That in combination with the high value and belief that we individually and collectively we need more money, and that money will make me happy, is a widespread belief and value that the world operates on. But it isn't only money. One example, AWARE programs "Illusions" notes that over 50% of those that use the internet in the United States use it regularly to view pornography. The rates of sexual addiction have skyrocketed since pornography has become so readily available on the internet. In most, if not all countries around the world, "sex sells." From cars, to food commercials, the most commonly used tactic to sell a product or service is to connect it sexually or sensually to draw attention to it. Add to that stimulation, excitement, novelty and challenge in life. The prevailing assumption here is one that has no geographic borders. The drive for more, new, and better has created a world that is leadership-driven and unsatisfied. This is not specific to trauma, more to the innate tendency for human beings to focus on and be most concerned about themselves and those around them. This is not "bad" in moderation, but is very destructive

when extreme, whether it be a person, group of people, sector or nation. Addictions and excess are often trauma reactions, where a survivor of trauma or loss is unable to cope with what they are experiencing and turn to substances or experiences that distract or numb out their present pain. At *Helping Men Heal*, we commonly refer to addictions as symptoms of trauma and/or loss.

Here are some additional non-trauma based prevailing assumptions and values:

Independent thought and action that of choosing, creating, and exploring independence of others is central within this is the world we live in. Those without it are striving for it, those with it are dogmatically protecting it. Because most want to operate independent from others, rather than interdependent it has caused on-going strife and conflict.

There is a presumption of tolerance. To be otherwise, is bigoted and narrow minded. This is a prevailing assumption, however. Tolerance is not always the healthiest path. There is also a presumption of benevolence in regards to the preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people. This is important, but is easily and frequently back-seated to the priorities and agendas of those in striving for power and influence. This is commonly cited, but executed much less frequently.

Tradition and constraint are also key pieces within the “how the world works” framework. Tradition speaks to traditional culture and/or religion. The world operates within a framework of either extreme tolerance or extreme sometimes radicalization. Most are in the middle, but the extremes rule the environment and behaviors on which society can operate. Constraint and restraint in order to not upset or harm others and not violate social expectations or “norms” is the construct in which cultures and sub-cultures operate. And certainly, security and safety, the necessity to live in a stable society, maintain stable relationships, and be self-stability are critical, foundational and necessary. The absence of security and safety is chaos.

So, it is my belief that the use of or focus on my individuals, groups and governments and “the way they work” is steeped in the areas of power, achievement, stigma, self-fulfillment, independent thought and action, tolerance, tradition, and constraint. These are also common values shared regardless of culture or geography.

### **As we watch the social sector address big, tough social challenges, what seems to be the sector’s predominant “theory in use” about concerted action?**

So let me rewrite this portion of the question to help my non-academic, more informal brain get it. What this question is asking from my understanding is “What is the social sector actually doing and how are different interest groups cooperating in specific action with a common goal in addressing big, tough social challenges?”

Again, there are a myriad of ways to go with this question, I will include the little bit of my understanding and experience I've received. Much of it depends on which segment within the "social sector" or what I would call the helping fields we are speaking of. It has been both my experience and the research and responses within our (HMH's) *Market and Metric Survey* that the mental health segment is HIGHLY SILOED. So much so that someone within the highest levels of leadership within mental health in the state of Oregon said, and I quote "the biggest secret about the mental health system is that there isn't one"!!!! These providers are constantly competing against each other for contracts and patients. In truth, the only reason we had so many (most of the large providers in the state of Oregon) providers participate in our *Market and Metrics Survey* and they even were candid enough to share this with me was because HMH is focused on "a provider to providers" structure, not as a provider that they would eventually be competing with. So I'd say that providers of mental health services, whether large agencies or clinicians hanging a shingle are very slowly understanding that they need each other to address the enormous mental health/behavioral health challenges facing our communities today. Healthcare also struggles with collaboration, but with Obamacare, healthcare providers and healthcare companies have had to stretch beyond themselves to operate in this new format, challenging payer structure. As healthcare patients, you are seeing this changing structure, regardless of whether it steamed through enlightenment or in this case being mandated.

I believe where it is strongest is not within similar interest groups, but to your question different interest groups. An amazing and truly outstanding example is happening here in Portland, Oregon, in a partnership that has been forged between Portland Public Schools, Faubian Elementary School, Concordia University (Private Christian University), and Trillium Family Services. The "3 to PHD" initiative is focused on the wraparound wellness supports of: Health, Nutrition, Mental Health, Recreation, Dental Health and Early Childhood education.

The Faubion School makes up the largest area geographically of any in the Portland School District. Of the 520 students, 80% qualify for free or reduced lunch and one in four live in low-income housing.

This \$40 million plus initiative includes tearing down the badly run down school and replacing it with a brand new facility that will have medical, dental and mental health services and facilities built into the school. Concordia, which is less than 100 steps (right across the street from Concordia) will have students from the College of Education as well as students from the College of Health and Human Services, Theology, Arts and Sciences and the School of Management all donating thousands of hours annually at the school and with the students, teachers and parents. It's being funded through a combination of a public bond, funds from education as well as Concordia University and private companies and individuals.

Let me quote directly from the document Concordia has created for “3 to PHD” as it masterfully articulates what success could look like and what they are actually doing to see it happen.

“Hand in Hand With Many Partners: from high education, public schools, nonprofits, businesses, and civic leaders, we will foster equity and success from 3 (the first 3 trimesters) to PhD (pursing ones highest dream).”

Another example is the “Black Male Achievement Initiative” that Portland and 10 other cities throughout the United States is participating in through the National League of Cities. I/HMH is a stakeholder in this initiative that is bringing different interest groups together to address the many challenges facing black men and boys in our country.

So it is possible.

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These *Conversations*—and our client work in planning, strategy, philanthropy, and coaching—are all designed to strengthen adaptive organizations for inevitable change and greater impact.



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