

# We Are So Much More Than Our ACEs Scores

## The Extraordinary Creative Capacities of Traumatized Children

by Holly Elissa Bruno

*If you want to know where to find your contribution to the world, look at your wounds.  
 When you learn how to heal them, teach others.*

—Emily Maroutian

Early abuse carves hidden wounds. Without healing intervention, children's identities can be formed more by what was done to them, than by their promise.

Humpty Dumpty's curse persists: *All the king's horses and all the king's men could not put Humpty together again.*

Does early traumatization exact an irreversible life sentence?

### ACEs Predict

Since its release in 1998, the Adverse Childhood Experiences study predicts without early intervention:

- our lives will be shortened;
- we will battle rapacious illnesses like heart and lung disease;
- anxiety will exhaust our autoimmune systems;
- addictions will plague us;
- self-confidence and trust will ever be fragile; and,

- we will fail at intimate relationships.

Fulfilling the prophecy, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," even our teeth drop out.

### Extraordinary Creative Capacities

If trauma maims our brains, how do survivors unfurl into poets or playwrights, visionaries or comedians, heroes, healers, and early childhood professionals who enrich our world? Does traumatization summon inner resources?

Dr. Judith Herman's assertion, "The pathological environment of childhood abuse forces the

#### Reflect with Me?

- Recall a person who endured a tragic childhood, yet lived a meaningful life.
- Does early trauma mark us for life, render us more creative, or both?
- Suspended in a destructive pandemic, are you wiser or more wounded?



Holly Elissa Bruno  
 Exchange Leadership Initiative  
[ExchangePress.com/leadership](http://ExchangePress.com/leadership)



Holly Elissa Bruno, best-selling and award-winning author, international keynote speaker, and Active Childhood UK live streamer served as Maine assistant attorney general, dean, and associate professor, University of Maine-Augusta. An alumna of Harvard's Institute for Educational Management, Bruno taught early childhood leadership courses nationwide and in Singapore for Wheelock College (now Boston University). Her sixth book, "Happiness is Running Through the Streets to Find You: Translating Trauma's Harsh Legacy into Healing," released by Exchange Press (March 2020) sparks international conversation on choosing hope in unbearable times.



Tune in every Monday (3 p.m. EST U.S.; 8 p.m. London) to listen to/participate in Holly Elissa's live streamed Active Childhood UK program on trauma and recovery by signing up at: [Facebook.com/groups/5456633409](https://www.facebook.com/groups/5456633409)

development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive,” illuminates traumatized children’s healing potential.

Recent studies show:

- Maltreated children’s immune systems mature early. Although puberty is the usual prompt for secretion of the protective antibody immunoglobulin A which fights infection, traumatized children’s bodies produce this antibody as early as age 7.

([neurosciencenews.com](http://neurosciencenews.com))

- Hypersensitivity (now called “heightened sensitivity”) viewed, like hypervigilance, as a weakness, is a strength. Children and adults with heightened sensitivity have increased capacity for reflective thinking, learning and awareness.

([neurosciencenews.com](http://neurosciencenews.com))

In his research on emotional intelligence vs alexithymia (the inability to notice or experience feelings or read cues,) Dr. Daniel Goleman notes that abused children are exquisite at reading unspoken behavior.

When I asked trauma expert Dr. Bessel van der Kolk how young children’s brains develop productively despite abuse, he lobbed my question back: “What about you?” (Trauma Research Foundations Book Club panel, 2/24/22)

“In a humorless family, playfulness saved me,” I replied. I did not lie. By myself, I discovered light floods a room when children giggle and adults belly laugh. The awe I felt trying to comprehend mysteries of meadows and creeks, lightning bugs and migrating geese, lifted me above my family’s violent narcissism and isolating psychosis. I set about discovering the roots of joy.

In tattered photos of my not-yet-3-year-old self, I achingly stretch my right hand out to a photographer while my dark eyes plead: “Take me home with you!” The gentle photographer, pantomiming with floppy stuffed bunnies to win my smile, was the first to notice and play with me.



If babies learn who we are by seeing their reflection in an adult’s caring eyes, I glimpsed my identity in his playful laughter. Did I exercise extraordinary creative capacity to read and value deeper connection? Or perhaps sense the timeless value of joyfully playing with another being?

## Poets, Explorers, Toddler Teachers

Children are wounded by abandonment and beatings, spiritual shaming and sexual defiling; however, what developmental dynamics inside children counter ACEs predictions? If scientists have more to discover about wounded children’s creative capacities, individual lives offer clues.

For Emily Dickinson, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without words, and never stops at all.”

Maya Angelou, raped at age 8, named her perpetrator, resulting in his death. Silencing herself for five years, Dr. Angelou emerged, golden throated songstress for the ages.

How many world leaders abandoned by alcoholic parents leave legacies of

compassionate innovations like the Affordable Care Act?

“Take your broken heart and turn it into art,” urged Carrie Fisher.

What frees traumatized children to do astounding things as adults? How do teachers with high ACEs scores become toddler-whisperers?

## If Fear is Our Default, Hope is Our Birthright

Let’s challenge more assumptions. Neuroscientist Matthew Abramson disputes Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Abrahamson argues our essential need is to belong. What good are food, shelter, clothing if we are rejected? “Failure to thrive” babies are fed, clothed and housed; however, only when the child feels connected can she thrive.

My sister, labeled failure-to-thrive, was returned to hospital to gain weight. She became a child psychiatrist helping children discover where they belong.

Lieberman argues brains default to fear and worry. Can a terrified child discover her voice?

We become what we love. An untrusting child rests when she finds her heart’s home. Her sanctuary may be a rushing brook’s song, a dragonfly on her nose, or breezes lifting her hair. When a child wants to become a teacher, chances are she wants to become the very teacher who helped her feel special, precious, worthy.

I invite 1,200 early childhood professionals: name one good thing a painful childhood produces. They respond: We chose teaching to make childhood a happier time than our early years were.

*You are not the darkness you  
endured. You are the light  
that refused to surrender.*

—John Mark Green

Consider these everyday pioneers, none of whom knew what the future held. Each took her next step, trusting her “extraordinary creative capacity.” Taking that step regardless of traumatization is our way home in darkness. Paths clear when we choose hope over fear.

On her final day of chemo treatments, Heather yanks that victory bell so fiercely, it clangs to the floor.

When Crystal refuses to be silenced about being sexually violated as a child, Crystal proclaims her identity.

Muthoni, ascending Mount Kenya, sleeted on, gasping and asthmatic, counters her critical parent’s poisonous: “You’ll never make it” by taking one step.

Jayanti, beleaguered by racial discrimination at “prestigious” universities calls upon her glowing childhood memory of a wrinkled nun in Mumbai soothing a dying child.

Sara, scaffolding refugees tossed up on Greek shores, feels inarticulate with terrorized children whose language she knows nothing of, plays the fool, and in every language, brings smiles to hearts.

Standing in a ballroom of two thousand, fearing my executive function will fail me so I’ll lose it like my mother and institutionalized grandmothers, I ask for help.

Paulo Coelho reminds us, “I learned long ago that in order to heal my wounds I must have the courage to face up to them.” Heather chooses to face

chemotherapy. Crystal’s faith affirms: the truth sets us free. Muthoni chooses hope over fear’s paralysis. I trust I am no longer alone. We each have A+ ACEs scores.

To witness these stories in full, visit [hollyelissabruno.com/find-our-way-home/](http://hollyelissabruno.com/find-our-way-home/)

## Bless the Thing That Broke you Down

Viktor Frankl advises: “The last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” In Auschwitz, Frankl and a surgeon friend whispered each evening helpful lessons learned in crushing circumstances. Together, the weary men laughed. Their choice of humor over hopelessness worked. Humor restores hope.

Hope is not as mundane as magically thinking the perfect parking place will appear or a distant relative will leave her estate to us. “Hope is a choiceful orientation of the spirit,” observes Vaclav Havel. Frankl’s orientation was an attitude of possibility. Hope is born when we acknowledge fear, while trusting something brighter may well appear.

Hope is “an innate quality of being, an open, active trust in life that refuses to quit: the flip side of fear,” hospice expert Frank Ostaseski concludes, having witnessed dying folk make peace with their life’s ending.

*Bless the thing that broke  
you down and cracked you  
open, because the world  
needs you open.*

—Rebecca Campbell

Hope is not an illusion. Hope is choosing to face “No” while trusting in “Yes.” Even as we die, we have choices. When darkness outside threatens to flood inside, we can choose to trust that the best in us will survive.

Hope asks us to open to possibility. Perhaps that is it. We are more than our ACEs scores because we choose to outlive the life sentence of fear. We choose the promise of hope, that active trust in life that refuses to quit. To choose hope, we need to feel we belong. We belong with every person who stands up to fear.

How else would:

- Maya Angelou survive childhood rape?
- John Lewis rise up, despite having been clubbed down on the Edmund Pettus Bridge?
- Heather endure chemotherapy sickness?
- Muthoni, blinded by needles of sleet, ascend the narrow path up the rock-faced mountaintop?
- Crystal overcome the shaming “don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel” command that rules traumatized children?

Choosing hope releases our extraordinary creative capacities to thrive.

Has living through the pandemic added you with fear and lifted you with hope? That is another gift of high ACEs scores: accepting life as a both/and rather than either/or. We are paradoxically complex, not perfect or broken. Vulnerability becomes our strength. As we tell (and believe) our stories, we marvel we still breathe. We held our breath for so long, we value each breath.

What does not kill us makes us stronger; but, strength without hope is shallow. Toughing out life toughens our spirits. “Harden not thy heart” is a worthy invitation. Hope is that flame within that never goes out, no matter how low its intensity.

*Children that have been abused do not have behavior problems that need to be addressed. They have extreme survival skills that need to be understood.*

—Paula Goodwin

My ACEs score of eight predicts I should be dead. Unlike my oldest sister, whom I outlive each day, I am not addled by autoimmune disease. My broken heart, first identified in elementary school, has been set right. Cataracts have been removed from my eyes. Choosing to see, rather than deny or dissociate from harsh reality, enables hope. How could survivors endure atrocities if we did not believe something powerful could emerge from injustice?

These things matter:

- Choosing hope
- Accepting our vulnerability as strength
- Translating trauma’s harsh legacy into healing
- Trusting we have extraordinary creative capacities born of adversity.

The higher our ACEs score, the deeper our capacity to live meaningfully. Nelson Mandela, unjustly imprisoned for twenty-seven years urged:

*May your choices reflect your hope, not your fear.*

We are so much more because of our ACEs scores.

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