

This post is the result of my musings and thoughts jotted down on scraps of paper this summer afternoon while sipping a cup of tea and watching my two kittens, which have transformed into two almost one year old male cats (one actually resembles a puppy in attitude and behaviour). Meanwhile, their mother who has of lately been visiting more often is walking towards the food bowl, her three scruffy new kittens tagging along behind her, hissing at every direction. I definitely don't desire more pet cats and yet I can't turn these little guys or girls away, so I suppose I will provide food and drink, no pats or smiles, hoping they will seek a new home in the near future. Back to my thoughts, as I have mentioned elsewhere, this site is in some sense a project or a kind of on-going qualitative research reflecting a journey of survival, stumbling, new learning and meaning making, knowing, shedding, letting go and being. When I first embarked on this journey to explore trauma and my less than optimal early experiences and losses I had this notion that I would be able to go about this difficult process in a relatively neat and clean way. I entered the process with trepidation but also enthusiasm and a will to work really hard and to do it as thoroughly and quickly as possible. However, nothing had prepared me for how much work and courage it takes to uncover trauma and strip away layers and layers of experience, especially, without the right books, guidance and support from the right people and with an increasing hostility and resistance to what I was doing from people in the various contexts I found myself in. The first lesson I learnt, though it took a long time to sink in, was that others did not necessarily take for granted what I thought was my inherent right - the right to explore truths, heal, learn, talk about it and make changes. Also, initially, I thought that healing trauma more or less concerned working on material that surfaced or was salient, mostly through talk, art and writing and reading (psychoeducation), which I did intensively and in a dedicated way. I believed that I would hopefully move on and out of the labyrinth and pick up my life where I had pretty much left it once I had confronted what I needed to face. However, things do not work that way, as I discovered in a painful way. Yes, unfortunately I am one of those people that literally had to almost die first before *deeper* clarity and unlocking of the self started to occur, because when wounds are left unattended for too long they start festering and things get more complicated. As I said this journey requires guidance from people who are invested in helping the world and the planet heal from trauma and injustice, but trauma survivors often find themselves surrounded by toxic people,

who keep on pressing their 'buttons' and reinforcing debilitating beliefs created in childhood or through conditioning, while they themselves, unknowingly, keep perpetuating the same unhelpful behaviours that keep or proliferate these unhealthy dynamics. I will provide one personal example of how others or events can trigger and reinforce our childhood beliefs, fears or sense of being threatened or unsafe. A few days ago I received an e-mail from *Emerging Women* about a certain workshop and fire-walking event, which triggered my interest so I read on: *'Do you have a fire of truth burning so brightly in you that you cannot but follow its light? Are you ready to let go, to burn what no longer serves so that a new you may rise from the ashes? One of the first things we are taught as children is that fire is dangerous - and it burns. When you first see someone walk on fire, or you walk yourself, this fundamental law shatters. Suddenly the world is new and full of possibilities'*. This process of understanding and connecting the dots may be a bit like fire-walking. It is not easy, but it allows one to delete or break this type of 'fundamental laws' often learnt in childhood. So, to get back to my story about reinforcing childhood fears and outdated beliefs; it was back in 1989 or 1990 and my husband, me, our baby and pet dog and brother-in-law were sharing a rambling old house on the island. I was sitting on the living room floor happily playing with my baby, supervised closely by our collie, oblivious to what was going on in the kitchen when I realised that it smelt as if the house was on fire. As I ran to the door to see what was going on thick smoking was coming from the kitchen. My fear blew out of proportion. I grabbed my baby and called the dog to follow me as I started running down the stairs barefoot. The baby started crying and the dog started barking, my amygdala was blaring and my heart was thumping. While this drama was going on and I was anticipating the worst, remembering every film I had watched of house fires and wondering how on earth I would repair the damage of our rented house, my brother-in-law, who had been frying potato chips and had left the frying pan unattended, had put out the fire, which had left the kitchen in such a state that I, in deep irritation, and my husband had spent a whole weekend cleaning and painting, but that's another story. The event left a lasting impression on me and it was only last summer when numerous small fires broke out on the island, very close to inhabited areas and our house, fortunately burning only shrubs and low bushes, that I was able to connect the final dots, speeding all the way back to the first time in very early childhood when the fear of fire was born or put in place. It was a kind of aha.... moment.

I have also been thinking about the term ‘trauma survivor’, I think that in some contexts the word victim could replace it, although the term trauma survivor highlights the surviving, which is also important because for many survivors the experience may resemble surviving an ongoing warzone. Also, every human being has suffered some sort of trauma, even if it is the small *t* traumas of life, and every human being suffers or will suffer loss and some type of bereavement at some point in their life. Everyone knows pain to some extent or other, that’s part of being human. Therefore, the term victim of certain types of trauma or injustice sounds more accurate because many types of traumas are violations of rights. It also points to accountability, morality and integrity. In any case, which ever word one uses or does not use, *one* reason for dealing with violations and trauma is to heal, empower oneself and move beyond identifying with either term. As we move along this path we gradually realise that we are more than our wounds, and that we all have many identities and roles in life, which change over time as we age and our circumstances change. At time it may feel as if they are shed like a snake’s old skin as part of this process of increasing clarity and we realise that the self is far more expansive than we previously thought. Gradually, a more expansive or less contracted self emerges and we regain access to our ability to connect with nature, the universe or a source of energy and wisdom bigger than us and to recognise our common humanity underneath all the segregation, separation, aggression and strife. It is a kind of homecoming. As we shed barriers and walls and unlock doors and clarity increases, a new way of seeing takes place and our deepest core values become more salient.

Moreover, when one decides to simultaneously explore or address rights violations then it can get ugly and scary. One does not move on and out of this process swiftly and without stumbling and breaking a rib or two, and as it turns out this process resembles an earthquake; it shakes everything, dismantling lies, shedding light in many unlit corners, drawing the curtains and allowing the sun to come in, and unravelling many unhealthy narratives during its course. So the more we are willing to persevere and continue the journey and climb out of the numerous rabbit holes we may find ourselves in, the greater the possibility of clarity and knowing, of discovering buried pearls of truths and one’s true self. It’s an arduous process and it seems a bit like ascending the steps of a tall pyramid or steep mountain while carrying a heavy bulging rucksack, but actually, it is more like descending, leaving the high altitudes behind and firmly touching the ground, viewing and experiencing reality with more clarity. It also involves restoring wounded spirituality, for often the easiest and most effective way to break a person’s sense of power and agency is to install fear of any sense of God or a benign universe at a very early age. The child has nowhere to turn to and the sense of isolation or powerlessness and helplessness is deeper and becomes more entrenched. So this journey requires one to heal many aspects and areas of life experience and to see and evaluate belief systems

and patterns of behaviour through the adult's eyes and brain and through the lens of new acquired knowledge. If one perseveres enough either out of desire or necessity, patiently peeling off layer after layer and revisiting experiences, memories, narratives, symbolism arising from the unconscious, during meditation or dreams, and the metaphors created by our minds in order to help us contain an experience, transform and heal it or simply to express it with economy in art or dialogue, eventually, that experience will be stripped of embellishments and defenses, others' and our own past meaning making, and the truth will often stare back at us almost naked. This knowing in and of itself brings about some sense of empowerment. Acceptance enhances this feeling and then sometimes one experiences a sense of peaceful emptiness and spaciousness.

In addition, this journey is inherently a learning experience, whether one decides, like me, to formally embark on psychology studies along the way or not. Trauma survivors who decide to confront their trauma inevitably get acquainted with other survivors' books, films, documentaries, art, poetry, books and articles written by therapists and neuroscientists, online courses, etc, etc. Actually, I need to say here that I am immensely grateful for all the material and resources that has reached my email inbox and for the many people that are speaking their truth through their work or are working in the field of trauma and are invested in healing, creating social change and disseminating useful knowledge. Personally, this journey has opened the door to knowledge concerning not only psychology - new tools, theories and methods – but also material on meditation, spirituality, articles, books and documentaries on health and the link between trauma and auto immune conditions, human rights and health, healthy nutrition and the toll gluten is taking on our health (a really bad combination with increased cortisol levels due to stress and a busy sympathetic system), and I have even caught a glimpse of quantum physics! Lately I have been pondering more on the many common health complaints survivors of trauma have, the auto-immune conditions and alternating symptoms they suffer from, and have realised that even though I have always been aware that ***body, mind and environment are tightly linked*** it has only been more recently that I have fully understood the depth of this connection. Tragically, part of this knowledge lies within us, within our bodies and our unconscious mind. It is cellular knowledge, throbbing in our bodies waiting for us to wake up. Personally, I think that if I had consistently used the body as a compass it might have been a faster and less winding route to uncovering trauma and healing. By exploring particular areas where symptoms manifested, for instance, or the vital organs of my body, using all sorts of tools from Gestalt techniques, free association to journaling, art, meditation, etc, etc, etc, over and over, patiently stripping layers of material and unhealthy disorienting narratives, would have been a more effective and direct way to reach the root cause of the health issue or the initial trauma that either caused a particular inflammation, for instance, or is there to distract and

send us on a wild goose chase. Often the roots of our health issues are kept below our awareness for several reasons, but it is always there in some form or other. Knowing the root cause would have allowed me to understand *why* I may have experienced the flaring up of childhood allergic asthma, bronchitis and increased food sensitivities in my fifties, and would have allowed me to take a different course of action, like working on making dietary changes and eliminating the food instead of throwing my body out of balance. If one is lucky to have the support of a holistic – functional health practitioner, with the aid of the right tests and knowledge, one could get started on resolving physical issues and then from a new place of better health and increased insight they could explore trauma and memories and connect the dots between their health issues, sensitivities, trauma and the toxicity in the environment, including food. I think that being able to put the health pieces of the puzzle in the right place early on leaves room for more choice and agency and can potentially facilitate and accelerate the whole process. Our body is a huge source of knowledge if we listen to it and it may be an important key to setting us free. I will end this rambling note saying that life is complex, more than ever perhaps, human bodies are very complex machines and human beings are highly complex interconnected creatures, so it is only natural and reasonable to assume that a more integrated and holistic approach to healing our bodies, minds and world is required.