

SHIFTING 'TRAGEDY CONSCIOUSNESS' and Opening to the Wisdom of Adversity

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There is no doubt in my mind that humanity is transiting into a new paradigm of consciousness. (My definition of 'paradigm' is: *a particular way of thinking, seeing, valuing, and experiencing our reality; a tint on the metaphoric glasses through which we perceive and frame our world.*) We are witnessing a global tide of change as holistic thinking and the quest for inner wisdom continue to expand from the fringe into mainstream. However, even among the most committed wisdom seekers, there are aspects of the 'old' paradigm that stubbornly cling on. Certain behaviours have been deeply embedded in our psyche and consequently remain in the collective unconscious by which we are all affected. Of course we all have our unique blockages to bring to freedom, but there is one particular way of being that seems to present a common challenge and perhaps deprives us of some of our greatest blessings. What is this in a nutshell? It is the chase for constant happiness and our desire to avoid struggle, pain, and discomfort at all costs.

This subject is very close to my heart. In February 1992 my five-year-old my son, Benjaya, who was one of the first babies to be born in water in England in 1986, slipped down a riverbank and drowned, shattering my world in an instant. I was pregnant at the time and three months later I miscarried, followed by a second miscarriage later that year.

I had been immersed in the personal transformation movement for 15 years at that point and yet these meetings with loss were certainly my greatest teachers. I was shocked to the core by these deaths, but I was also shocked to find myself so painfully alone in my accepting attitude. Together with the awful agony, as if it resided in the same space, I felt an awe-filled wonder at the great mystery of death, and deep gratitude for these life-changing events that were causing me to feel more alive, more compassionate, and more fully human. I experienced my searing pain as an initiation - an opportunity for a spurt in spiritual growth. Lao Tsu said, "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls the butterfly." I craved to talk butterfly-speak and to become masterful in the face of anguish.

The communication of spiritual seekers is rife with sayings such as: 'Nothing happens by chance,' 'Life is a school,' 'You are never given anything you can't deal with,' 'Thought is creative', and yet I was disappointed to discover how quickly these beliefs were overwhelmed by fear, avoidance (yes, people crossed the street) and what I call 'tragedy consciousness' - "oh, how terrible", "what a waste of life", "you must be feeling dreadful..." etc. with no inkling of a possibility that Benjaya's death could have been a well lived life with a perfect finale - dying in water just as he had been born. Yes, it hurt like hell, but it hurt even more when it was acknowledged only as a tragic, horrific accident with the 'Nothing happens by chance' belief flying out of the window.

Over the years I channelled my passion into writing two books and running workshops on how to open to the wisdom in adversity and to use it as fuel for personal transformation. One of the questions I often ask workshop participants is: What do you see as the most common ways our society responds to emotional pain, loss and death? The answers are usually the same:

Pain and death is not OK.
Denial (this can't be happening)
Close down/resist/tighten
Anger because this *shouldn't* happen
I *should* pull myself together and get over it (tears are a sign of weakness)
Swallow the emotion (causes physical illness)
Escape it/numb it by:
Becoming workaholic
Eating/sleeping/alcohol/drugs/sex/retail therapy
 Helping others (maybe at expense of self)
 Avoiding reminders of the pain

Let me stress here that *none of the above are wrong*. However, it could prove useful to ask sooner rather than later if the way we are dealing with our pain is life-affirming or causing us and others further distress. We may discover that our programmed reaction to difficulty is distancing us from the present reality and sending our pain underground where it will fester. When the chaos of crisis hits we will understandably become lost for a while and can seem 'out of our minds' on the roller coaster of emotion and shock but, as Anais Nin once wrote, *And then the day came when the risk to remain tight as a bud was more painful than the risk to blossom*. Maybe if we were all prepared with a healthy way of approaching adversity and loss we would not take so long to blossom when it enters our lives, as it surely will one day.

Soon after writing my first book *Benjaya's Gifts* (with my mother, M'haletta) about our family's extraordinary healing journey, I began a quest to find others who had broken through rather than broken down after experiencing similar levels of trauma. I sought to discover and document the common keys to positive transformation through adversity and to confirm my theory that those who suffer the most deeply have the greatest opportunity to wake up from automatic pilot and discover their innate resilience. I collected stories from those who I perceived as role-modelling the new paradigm in relation to life's more intense challenges. This became a book called *MOURNING HAS BROKEN Learning From the Wisdom of Adversity* offering a blueprint for healing from adversity. Included are stories of facing cancer and aids, the death of children, suicide of a loved one, a car crash, a house fire, surviving the horrors of war, and the assassination of parents.

What then can I tell you of an alternative to society's 'tragedy consciousness' and escapist reaction to adversity? Elisabeth Kubler Ross, death and dying worker extraordinaire, said: *Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms you would never see the beauty of their carvings*. This sums up the attitude of those in my book – an acceptance of the difficulties in life as part of the weather of being human that will season us into wisdom. The French word for wounded is *blessé*, which is from the same root as blessing. And in Chinese, as some of us will know, the symbol for crisis depicts both danger and opportunity. The discovery and constructive use of the blessing/opportunity inherent in a dark night of the soul is the key that runs most consistently through this book. This discovery results from asking the simple down-to-earth question: What can I learn from this?

When we finally recognize and accept the hidden gifts presented by our particular challenge the light then joins the shadow, like the Taoist yin yang symbol, and we can sit in a place of balance. The idea is not to escape or suppress the pain by looking for positives to take its place; it is to fully feel and accept the pain while opening our eyes to the silver lining that also exists. Every cloud has a silver lining, and when we hold the pain and joy, the bitter and the sweet, side-by-side the two halves make a whole and provide us with a feeling of our own fullness. This reminds me of the words of Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet*:

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater." But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

To support what I am saying above I want to share with you a little wisdom from three of the storytellers in *Mourning Has Broken*.

In 1992 Mirsad Jacevic from Bosnia was flung into a nightmare. In his words: *"I was living a wonderful life of a crazy teenager, partying 'til 5 am, going to school, travelling around the world. Suddenly I was reduced from that worldly person into a young person in Sarajevo who had lost everything and was watching my friends die. I had little food and water, and was delighted to have had one apple in a month. I lost 40 pounds in 3 months and grew to cherish a glass of water a day as the biggest treat I could dream of..."*

"I feel anger on a daily basis and I have learned that the only way to deal with it is to recognize it, shed a light to it and find ways of transforming it into creative action... Ecstasy really means the state in which you are fully endorsing suffering and joy, in which you are seeing all faces of God. I believe we become so much more what we are meant to be by our Creator if we can freely express our suffering. I believe that the pace of your healing will be in direct proportion to the depth of your endorsement of your suffering and pain as something that can affirm life and bring you joy. Encountering evil has been the greatest learning experience for me. Who I am now [an award winning peace leader in the youth movement] came from seeing the full-blown face of suffering."

Karen Proctor, a self-confessed 'control-freak' working for the National Basket Ball Association, found herself in a horrific car crash that nearly took her life, but it did not take long before she was able to find the hidden gifts. Rendered helpless in hospital she said, *"my lesson was to let go of control and soften my heart. I hated dependency because my mother was dependent, but I found myself in a situation where I was totally dependent on others, including degrading things for someone so haughty. I am so grateful that life gave me the opportunity to break down my pride and become more humble. I could have died at 34. Now I see the beauty in people and my eyes are wide open. Life is such a gift. Why we forget that is astounding to me."*

Arn Chorn Pond was subjected as a child to the most atrocious acts of inhumanity when the Khmer Rouge entered his city in Cambodia. He was forced to work in a labour camp and then to fight on the front line of the war where he witnessed his friends being butchered. Eventually he escaped and lived alone in the jungle for months watching the monkeys to learn survival tricks. Arn was rescued by an American aid worker who became his adopted father. Many years later he told me, *"I didn't want to talk about it because I thought nobody cares a shit about my life. First I learned from my heart a few words, 'my name is Arn. I'm from Cambodia. I live in the camp. My family die.' People listened and cried too. For the first time I felt cared for... I think I am alive today after all these years, not just because I wasn't butchered by the Khmer Rouge genocide, but because I had the courage to speak out my story and I learned how to love again and how to feel the pain of others as well as my own. Recently they found that SIDS – Sudden Infant Death Syndrome – that happens with babies, occurs in men. It's related to Post Traumatic Stress. Men keep stress inside them more than women. Three Cambodian men I knew very close, went to sleep and died. Cambodians are like anybody else – they don't want to touch that painful spot. I think that's a weak point because if you don't you might die from holding in all the pain. I'm lucky I know that."*

Arn went on to become an inspiration to American gang members who were shooting each other on the streets then he began rebuilding Cambodia with a following of 40,000 people, clearing up the bones from the war, planting trees, and teaching computer skills.

And so my storytellers show that the potential after experiencing hell on earth is perhaps far greater than we imagine but it doesn't materialise without effort and without consciously applying the tenets of the alternative paradigm to our lives:

- *Joy and sorrow are part of life on earth and make a whole*
- *Asking 'What can I learn from this?' feeds growth and wisdom*
- *Feeling the pain (of self and others) allows it to pass through*
- *Sharing your story prevents dis-ease - what is not ex-pressed is de-pressed*
- *Strong emotion can be channelled into creative action*

In releasing 'tragedy consciousness' we may have to give up the 'happy ever after' fantasy but it is a small price to pay to claim the wisdom that lies hidden in our broken places and the healing and compassion that occurs when we are truly authentic and present with the pain of life.

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Mourning Has Broken and ***Benjaya's Gifts*** are available through Carmella's website.