

Learning from the Wisdom of Adversity

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Has adversity not always been a fact of life that cannot be escaped? And yet still, we forget. Many of us unconsciously chase the impossible dream of a sorrow-proof existence, but pleasure and pain make a pair just as surely as night follows day. It is how we respond to the challenges at hand that could make or break our lives. My life did break, temporarily, shattering my reality in an instant and calling me to re-member myself and to reconsider my life's direction.

In 1992 my five-year-old son, Benjaya, fell down a riverbank while playing with friends. He drowned. There one minute, gone the next. I was faced with the most awesome task of my life. Initially the task was survival -- simply living through the nightmare without losing my sanity. Then, the task matured with the question, "How can I thrive now that I have survived?"

There is prolific, useful literature on how to survive and cope with adversity and trauma. I have read much of it. It told me how resilience could be fostered by: stable positive relationships; finding someone to listen to my story; using my intellectual capacity to analyse my situation and to avoid self-defeating behaviour; responding actively instead of passively as a victim; using the support of the wider community; taking the pain and using it to help others.

However, little was said about the level beyond the practical and emotional, about the world I found myself inhabiting in my quest for wholeness. 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 this life-changing event that was causing me to feel more alive, more compassionate and more fully human. I experienced my pain as an initiation -- an opportunity for a spurt in spiritual growth. It was a somewhat solitary place to live. I found that the language I wished to speak was one that few could understand because the deeply conditioned response of our society to pain, trauma and death is that it is "bad" and to be avoided at all costs. 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.

This craving became a quest. For five years I conducted a research and writing project to discover and document the common keys to positive transformation through trauma. I found others from all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds and religious/spiritual persuasions, who had not just survived but had raised a phoenix from the ashes of their pain. I interviewed them in-depth, secretly hoping 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. My book, *MOURNING HAS BROKEN: Learning from the Wisdom of Adversity*, (Crucible Publishers, Bath, 2002) was the outcome.

I discovered that each person I interviewed had taken most of the practical steps advised by the "experts" on healing trauma. However, those who had truly broken through and now felt stronger and wiser had also either experienced a paradigm shift in thinking because of their challenge, or had already been living in that same paradigm before their immersion in pain. A paradigm is a specific way of thinking, seeing and experiencing our reality; a lens through which we perceive and frame our world. The paradigm I discovered to be common to almost all my storytellers was one that I had spent 15 years discovering and attempting to live by before my son's death.

Let me be more specific about some of the common threads that make the tapestry of this way of thinking and being. In my book I have called these threads the “eight keys to handling adversity” and have used them as chapter headings. They are named: Find the Bigger Picture, Trust and Surrender Control, Share Your Pain and Choose Life, Reassess Relationships, Identify and Release Life-long Patterns, Cultivate Compassion: Silence the Judge, Reclaim Your Heart and Spirit, and Find the Hidden Gifts.

As a taster of this paradigm, the holding of which eases the experience of grief, let me take the first and last key and expand on them. The first is the ability to see the bigger picture.

When the chaos of crisis hits, our first need is self-preservation. We become lost for a while on the roller coaster of emotion and the effects of shock, and we need to make sure our physical and practical needs are met. It is appropriate to be “out of our minds”, experiencing the impact of the events at hand.

“The eyes experience less stress when they look upon a wider horizon,” said Philosopher, R.D. Chin. And so it is that when we are ready and able to at last lift our heavy eyes to a wider horizon we begin to see sense, even wisdom, in the adversity that had initially been missed in the fog of intense emotion. However, if we are used to a scientific worldview, the wider picture may be limited. Individual events and synchronicities (defined as meaningful coincidence) do seem unconnected and senseless if we are using the medical model – diagnosing only the meaning of the symptoms of the parts. When we shift our perspective to more of an overview and question how the parts might fit within the context of our whole life pattern, then our relationship with those parts, especially the painful parts, has the opportunity to transform.

Several of the stories in *Mourning Has Broken* show the profound level of educative information available to all of us in the welter of life’s everyday activities. The pieces connect together to create a picture far larger than we are used to seeing and the premonitions, which are often present before major life challenges, call into question the nature of accidents. For example, a woman whose daughter, Linnaea, was “accidentally” shot and killed by a young boy playing with a gun told me, “As a child I read a story by a man who had accidentally shot his best friend. His tragedy touched me so deeply that I knew I never wanted to have guns in my life or in my house. So we didn’t. It’s like Sleeping Beauty where you isolate all of the spinning wheels and yet somehow that spinning wheel needs to be found.” Linnaea bought her Christmas presents the month she died -- in July, and after her death a video was found of her pantomiming being shot and falling to the ground as if dead. Coincidence or part of a bigger picture?

When gathering the surrounding details to numerous different traumas, including my own, it became increasingly impossible for me to deny that there is a mystery intelligence, also described by some interviewees as a plan or purpose, behind these “tragic” happenings. Is that so for all such events? And, if we knew this to be so, would we grieve differently for that which we have “lost”? Those I interviewed did.

The last key -- Find the Hidden Gifts – holds an approach that is central to the process of healing. The French word for wounded is *blessé*, which is from the same root as blessing. And, as many of us know, in Chinese, 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 through every story. And its discovery results from asking the simple, down-to-earth questions – What can I learn from this? What is the gift?

This is hardly a new concept, and yet, how often are we caught in the common mindset about sorrow that diminishes our ability to see any silver lining to our cloud? How many of us try to wriggle free from the discomfort of pain and yearn for the joy we believe we don’t have, as if joy is an illusive quality outside of ourselves, far away from the sorrow

we feel? The two qualities usually remain separated in our minds, perceived as mutually exclusive. In the paradigm held by those in *Mourning Has Broken*, nothing could be further from the truth. I, for one, found big, fat pearls of joy and wisdom at the same source as my anguish and became convinced that the further we fall, the higher we can climb.

When we finally recognize and accept the hidden gifts presented by our particular challenge (or root them out if they are playing hard to get) the light then joins the shadow, like the Taoist yin yang symbol, and frees us from the see-saw of polarity so that 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 accept the cloud of pain while opening our eyes to the silver lining that *already exists*. To hold the pain and joy, the bitter and the sweet, side-by-side is the aim – the two halves making a whole and providing us with a feeling of our own fullness.

Karen Proctor, a self-confessed “control-freak”, found herself in a horrific car crash. Rendered helpless in hospital she said, “my lesson was to let go of control and soften my heart. The car crash – which wasn't my fault, it just *was* – told me I can't always be in control. 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 proud and 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.

Hafsat Abiola was still in her twenties when her mother was assassinated in the streets of Nigeria for supporting democracy. Her father, Moshood Abiola, who had won the presidential election in 1993 and had been incarcerated by the ruling military, had also died (thought to have been murdered) in prison. Hafsat told me, “we all as human beings come with baggage of shadows and light, and the gifts lie in both those aspects of ourselves... I feel my parents' spirits with me very much -- more powerful now than they have ever been. I go and sit at their graves and say thank you. I am stronger now too because of the difficult but wonderful journey that their deaths took me on. I am taking the best of who they were and bringing it through myself in the best way I know how so that I am a walking testimony of the gifts that they gave in life. If I were devastated by their deaths then no one would see their continuation by looking at me.”

“Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms, you would never see the beauty of their carvings,” said Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. This is the message that emerges through the stories in *Mourning Has Broken*. But do we each need shocking personal trauma to etch and sculpt its lessons into our being before we become mature in our beauty? Despite the remarkable transformation of those whose stories I have gathered, I think not. Although all of us will inevitably encounter some adversity in our lives, perhaps there are other ways of stepping into the fullness of who we are. I have come to use the term “Osmotic Learning” to describe the conscious process of absorbing useful messages from the stories of others, thereby accelerating our own rate of personal transformation. I firmly believe that it is possible to imprint ourselves so deeply with an understanding of certain life lessons that we will no longer need to encounter such events face to face to teach us those lessons. And, if trauma does perchance come our way, having consciously absorbed the positive learning from the life challenges of others, it will have less destructive impact, and we will be more prepared to be opened, moved and deepened by the grief so that its inherent wisdom has the freedom to emerge.