



A LIFE WORTH LIVING



by Carolyn Spring

A couple of years ago, when I was going through an extremely difficult time, I came across a concept from Marsha Linehan (Dialectical Behaviour Therapy) which she referred to as 'A Life Worth Living'. Many of my alters at this time were in a constant life-and-death struggle; everything seemed hopeless and pointless; and the grim reality of living everyday with overwhelming flashbacks and pain was getting too much. It was through spending time working out this issue - of what would make life worth living, and how that would actually look in practice - that I began to move through this particularly difficult suicidal phase.

I asked some pretty fundamental questions: what kind of relationships did I want to have? What kind of job or work did I want to do? What kinds of things would I like to do for leisure or as hobbies?

What did I want out of life? They are easy questions to ask in your head, but harder questions to actually write the answers down to. I realised through doing this that I wasn't giving myself time or permission to enjoy life - I had become so focussed on therapy and abuse and managing DID and dealing with atrocities that I wasn't spending any time actually enjoying myself. In fact, I didn't really even know how to enjoy myself!

I knew a lot about pain, but I didn't know very much at all about pleasure.

I asked myself: what do I like doing? For weeks I couldn't answer that question, not with anything tangible or concrete. Then eventually I remembered that when I was younger, I was interested in birds and birdwatching. It had been a bit of an escape at the time, and it had been 'safe'.

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After all, birds were just birds, and they had never hurt me. So just from that one thing I made a 'plan' as to how I could enjoy myself again. Over time I got a couple of books on birds, and we put some bird feeders up in the garden. Then for Christmas last year I got some binoculars, and I started taking walks in the country park nearby to look for birds. As I learnt more about them I became better able to spot different ones and both I and many of my alters would get very excited when we saw something new – a green woodpecker, a treecreeper, a fieldfare. I learned what foods to put out for them in the garden and gradually I built it up so that we now get up to 20 goldfinches at a time! And lots of other birds too such as greenfinches, blue tits, great tits, dunnocks, blackbirds, jays – a continual stream of them.

This was new. This was me realising that I could look out of the window and see the blue tits feeding on the nuts and it made me smile. There was this feeling – I eventually named it as 'pleasure' – and nothing bad happened as a result of it. I had done it; I had made it happen. Because I had decided, and I had got some bird feeders, I could now look out of the window and enjoy myself.

So it wasn't something that I 'fixed' overnight, but it was something that I made a plan towards so that I could allow myself to enjoy things. Nowadays I get such pleasure each day just from seeing the birds outside, and it genuinely lifts my spirits. They are so different: so varied in their personalities, so colourful, so

fussy or territorial or twitchy or vigilant. The significant thing for me is that firstly I've stopped long enough to notice, and secondly I've allowed myself to enjoy it. And I've got plans for the future too – not necessarily things that I can do right now, but things that I'm looking at ways of making possible, like going to some RSPB nature reserves, and one day going to Scotland to see eagles. This has also given me a sense of future – previously, I never had a future. Past and present got mixed up on a daily basis, but I had never had a future. I couldn't plan for the future because wasn't I going to be dead by tomorrow? I couldn't delay on anything – it all had to be done right now if it needed doing – and I couldn't plan for what I wanted to do in 2 or 3 years' time either.

What I've found is that when I got stuck in a gloomy mindset where everything just continually revolved around abuse, loneliness, pain and sorrow, it was no wonder that alters wanted to take overdoses! So I began to try to show my alters that I understood that they were hurting and upset, traumatised and despairing – but then I asked them what they would really like in life instead. It sounds obvious, but I had forgotten or not realised that life is for enjoying. Trauma and DID are very real and a huge part of my life, but they are there because of bad stuff that happened – bad stuff that shouldn't have happened – and I have got a life that is meant to be enjoyed too!

As I've got lots of different alters that are all quite different from one another, they want a range of things. For some of my



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'boy' parts, they are really into football. So I make sure now that I let them watch it on TV, and we put the matches in the calendar to make sure that we don't double-book anything at the same time – because it's really important to them to have something nice to do. And it also gives them something to look forward to. Over time we've been able to learn that bad feelings, although immensely powerful and overwhelming, do in fact pass and that if we've got something to look forward to, it helps them pass much more easily. There's nothing quite like doing something nice to stop feeling so bad!

None of this was rocket science, but I found that until I actually spent some time thinking about and writing down what I wanted, and step-by-step planning for ways to make it happen, I was just caught up in the helplessness of misery. I've got a lot to be miserable and

unhappy about – that's true. But there's a lot out there that I can enjoy too.

The key for me was realising that good stuff doesn't just come along. First of all I had to decide what I wanted. I had to decide that I actually wanted good stuff in my life: this felt alien at first. And then I had to plan – actively, thoughtfully and deliberately – to make it happen. It didn't 'just happen'; I had to make it happen. And to do that I had to figure out that I could make it happen, that I had power over my life that included the power to make good things happen.

This whole process – of getting better, and developing a life that really is worth living – is hard work. I don't want to pretend for one moment that it's easy, because it's not. The way really is narrow. But it's not impossible, and we do have the power to choose to enjoy some – if not yet all – aspects of life. •

