



WHERE'S YOUR SAFE PLACE?



by Carolyn Spring

I was travelling into London last week. By contrast, I live in a fenland market town. By contrast, therefore, London is Big. Too Big (for me). It's noise and bustle and cars and grime and horns and grey and shiny, and it's busy, busy, busy.

As we came out of our hotel, I realised that you couldn't see the sky unless you tilted your neck exactly vertical. It's not what I'm used to.

Even coming into London, I veer towards the edge of my window of tolerance. I just want everyone to quieten down and slow down. It's part of me being a grade A introvert. And it makes me realise what my coping strategies are based around and what I need to feel safe.

I need openness and sky. I need countryside and earth and breeze. I need crunchy twigs underfoot and birds all around. I need quiet. *What do you need?*

Years ago, when I first started therapy, I was invited to imagine a safe place. I didn't understand the concept at all.

First off, I didn't understand how powerful positive visualisations can be. Secondly, I didn't know how to feel safe. And thirdly, I didn't have anywhere that I could summon to mind and feel positive about. Bummer.

To hide my feeling of inadequacy, I dismissed it as therapy-geekery. But it had piqued my curiosity.

What would it be like to feel safe, and what it would be like to have a place that was so nourishing and additive that even just thinking about it could slow your heart rate and soothe your agitation? It was a cool idea even if it felt at that time impossible.

Fast forward to today.



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I have a dozen places now that I can call to mind and they ooze inside me with sticky toffee goodness.

There's one place at the foot of a mountain. The air is so clean and the only sounds are of stags baying. Trickling, pure-clear water ripples downstream over a million combinations of rock and stone and pebble. Everything is so still. Everything is so sweet.

It's glorious emptiness for miles around, the mountain on one side, the hill on the other, the river in between, and the air sings as with middle C.

And there it is, in my mind's eye, and I well up inside with the goodness of it, and it's safe, and it feels safe, and at last, after all these years, I've found a safe place visualisation that actually works.

But I had to go there first. I had to experience it. My imagination wasn't enough, because it was hedged in by the not-knowing.

I've been alive over 40 years, but trauma hijacks your eyes and your ears and your nose and your feet and all you can focus on is danger and threat and malice and pain. And you can't feel the turf below you, you can't hear the goldfinch tibble, you can't smell the trees and the moss and the bracken and the sea air.

You forget how to be alive. You just focus, always, on danger, and it's all you can do to get through the next day.

So it's taken a long time for me to have safe places. I've had to seek them out. And then I've had to practice, mindfully, *being there* and noticing.

I've had to inhabit my body and my senses and actually learn what it's like to suck in all the goodness around me. I'd had to switch off my radar and zoom into the reality of safety around me.

I've had to break the habit of looking, always looking to the periphery for threat, and focus on the immanent: the 'what is' around me, rather than the 'what might be'.

Some people call that being present, or being mindful. Whatever you call it, it doesn't work unless you actually do it.

You have to start training your brain to focus on what's safe and good and pure, rather than what's not. It's a tough habit to crack. But it changes everything. Because you can begin to actually enjoy life, rather than feeling so afraid all the time.

Recovery from trauma is so much about learning to feel safe. It took me years to find it, and even longer to learn how to do it, but at least I know now what a safe place is, and at last I know how to feel safe too.

Where's your safe place? If you haven't got one, what plans can you put in place to begin to find one? ●

