

recovery is my best revenge

Introduction

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AN INTRODUCTION

Recovery from what?

The sunshine is leaking through the blinds. I stand up to tilt them further, to erase the shaft of light from the top of my computer screen. And that's when I see it. It is raining leaves. The great, grand horse chestnut trees that block out the sky from my office window are shedding their skin and, in the haze of an autumn morning, the air is raining leaves. It is sad, and beautiful, and sore. It is death. A part of this tree is dying. In the summer it was vivid with the glare of green, those splayed-out fingers of leaves swaying and shimmering and rustling in the wind. Now they are dying, and the ground below is ankle deep with gnarled, brown fingernails.

It happens every year and yet I have never been caught up in it as I am for this one moment. Because suddenly I see it. The great tree is breaking down. Its summer beauty is gone. It is a ragged, pathetic stump. Much like I was, when I broke down too.

I carried, unknowing within me, compacted layers of unremembered trauma. My life worked to a level. I was 'normal,' even successful. But unremitting bouts of pain and chronic fatigue were ever with me, and belied my normality. I couldn't fathom the cause of my illnesses. I couldn't comprehend the source of my dread, a terror that gnawed at my guts deep within me and yet seemed to have neither beginning nor end. In shame, I hid my defects as best I could and smiled defiantly at a world that I was determined, and yet unable, to conquer.

And then in 2005 I started to shed my leaves. I had a ‘breakdown’ and was stripped of all pretence of strength or competence or sanity. And that unremembered trauma returned—as it felt at the time—to devour me.

I was overwhelmed, and dysfunctioning, for a good many years. I didn’t understand it. I couldn’t control it. It was shameful. It was costly. Several times, I nearly killed myself. Many more times I self-harmed. The painful unrememberings began to flood back through my bones, seeping into my joints with unexplained pain and unremitting distress. They worked up through my muscles and entered my mind. I began to remember. Viscous memories suffocated me. It was for good reason that I had put them out of mind for so long.

That morning, watching the leaves rain through the sky, I suddenly realised that the tree was not dying. And I was not dying either. The tree must shed its leaves, to protect itself from winter. It sheds them in order to prepare for new growth. The dying leaves are a ritual of death to prepare for the ritual of life. And the same was happening with me. I was dying in order to bloom.

In the midst of flashbacks and nightmares, it didn’t feel much like new life. The dying was painful. Many times I was tempted to hack the useless tree to a stump. I couldn’t see ahead to the next spring. I couldn’t imagine new life. I was the leaves tossed away by the branches, decaying and rotting and swirling around with litter on the ground. I felt dead. And so I felt that I deserved only to die.

It took a long time to figure out what was ‘wrong’ with me. I eventually learned that there is nothing wrong with a tree for shedding its leaves, and there was nothing wrong with me for what I was experiencing. I had survived trauma by blocking it out. The technical term was ‘dissociation.’ This shedding, now, this breakdown, was the trauma trying to heal. I was 32, and for perhaps the first time my mind knew that it was safe to begin this recovery slog. The mind always knows when the right time is.

It didn’t seem the right time to me. But never would have seemed the right time to me. I had survived by dissociating, and would have continued to do so, if my mind had not been determined to heal. Something deep within me wanted a life that was abundant, not

simply to survive. I wanted to know truth in my innermost parts, not hide in the shadows within myself. A primal instinct for life won out over the survival tactics of avoidance and denial.

Eventually I landed with the diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder. It explained so much but it was hard to accept. It was a strange new identity. For a year I had been switching uncontrollably, unpredictably, into other parts of my personality. My shame ran so deep that my mind chose not to remember. So I was amnesic not just for my past trauma, but for the past five minutes, the past five hours—any time when other parts of me were ‘out.’ My husband witnessed me ‘going mad’ but at last with the label we both began to understand that there was nothing insane in the way I was reacting. It was supremely logical in the light of my childhood. Parts of me were stuck back there, in the rapes, in the torture, so when they crawled under the table and whispered, ‘We don’t want the nasty men to come,’ there was nothing crazy about it. It was a very real memory, being relived in the here-and-now.

Nine years on, I’ve remembered ‘the nasty men,’ and the ‘nasty women’ too. I’ve remembered a lot. Much of it is sketchy, more the surge and fall of emotion than the steadiness of thought. And I have been recovering. Much of that recovery has been facilitated through therapy. Much of it has been contained and knit together by my then husband. And much of it has been gained through reading and understanding. I began to learn about DID and to see it as a creative survival mechanism for surviving otherwise unendurable trauma. I began to see that the traumatised ‘child’ parts of myself were in conflict with the apparently normal ‘adult’ parts of me. The former were stuck in the trauma, reliving it as if it were still ongoing and therefore unable to process and metabolise it, whereas the latter were convinced that avoidance would win the day.

The work of recovery has been to resolve those conflicts and start to live as an integrated person who can both operate successfully as an adult whilst accepting and soothing the traumas of childhood. I believe in hope for recovery. And I have grave doubts about the medical model that attempts to heal me with drugs to ‘rebalance’ chemicals in my brain. I have learned that there is nothing wrong

with my brain. It has adapted to cope with uncopeable circumstances, and it's adapting now to a new life that is safe and free from trauma. My brain, my mind, my body, my mindbody—all of these integrated aspects of myself are prewired for survival. They know how to live. They know how to recover. I've just had to get out of the way and stop preventing it from happening.

Recovery is possible, because after the winter there is always the spring.

These essays are part of a wider collection of writing that I have been engaged in over the last few years. In forging my own pathway towards recovery, I have also been trying to make straight some paths for others. In 2009 I set up PODS—Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors. It is now a leading organisation in the field of trauma, abuse and dissociation in the UK. Of the many things it does, producing a magazine/journal, *Multiple Parts*, has perhaps been closest to my heart. DID, and the trauma that causes it, can make you feel terribly, unbearably alone. It has been revolutionary for me to read about the experiences of other people with DID, and realise that I am not alone, and I am not unique. Through *Multiple Parts* I've also been able to share my story, and I have tried to educate and equip not just DID survivors themselves but the extensive band of everyday counsellors who come across us in clinical practice.

Those of us with DID don't tend to present ourselves in therapy with a label. Few of us understand that we even have DID. We present with a polysymptomatic salad bowl of all kinds of issues and difficulties, and only when we're safe enough do we tend to reveal the hidden parts of ourselves. The toughest battle is not in admitting these parts to the therapist, but to ourselves, and so much of the work of therapy is to build bridges between these dissociated and alienated islands of experience within ourselves. We recover when we accept and embrace who we are, and we discover what it is to be safe. We recover when we recognise that the powerlessness of trauma is just a feeling, just a memory from the there-and-then, and that we are no longer powerless in the here-and-now.

But there is little or no training about dissociative disorders in the syllabi of most counselling, psychology or psychiatry courses. So

most mental health professionals haven't heard of it, and even fewer are equipped to diagnose and treat it effectively. PODS, along with a number of other pioneering organisations in this field, are working to raise awareness and make treatment for DID more readily available. For more information both about DID and the work of PODS, please go to www.pods-online.org.uk.

In the meantime, my story is beginning to be told. There is no orderly narrative in this volume of my collected essays, because life with DID isn't like that. Each chapter brings its own focus and its own particular insights. Each comes with the subtle under-voice of a different part of my personality, of the multitudes that make up the whole that is me. You can read the chapters in any order. But please do read them all.