



PODCAST #14 – FALLING DOWN, GETTING BACK UP AGAIN: MY JOURNEY OVER THE LAST YEAR



by Carolyn Spring

Trigger-warning: Please note that this podcast directly references acts of sexual violence, although no details are given.

Hi there! I'm Carolyn Spring and welcome to my podcast where I talk about all things trauma. I dig into the nuts and bolts of trauma, how we can recover, what blocks us, and all things neuroscience-y – what actually goes on in the body and brain during and after trauma, especially from the perspective of evolutionary neurobiology. This podcast is for anyone who's experienced trauma, or knows someone who has, which is pretty much everyone. For more podcasts, blogposts, books and training check out my website at carolynspring.com.

Now, it's been a while since my last episode and that's because there's been a lot going on for me. This podcast episode explains what exactly that is, and it's really just an introductory episode for getting

back in the saddle. So, in it I'm just going to read out the blog post I wrote on this matter entitled 'Falling down, getting back up again: my journey over the last year' so that people who prefer to listen rather than read can do so. So it's not a typical podcast episode, but I hope it'll be helpful to many of you.

So that's the heads up, that's what this is all about ... let's dive in.

Not long before the pandemic started, suddenly, shockingly, undeservedly and unexpectedly, I was violently attacked and raped by a total stranger.

I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. I could not have anticipated it. I could not have avoided it. I could not have known that it was about to happen. I was both severely hurt, and severely traumatised. As my only viable option



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for survival, I immediately dissociated it and stuffed it into a box marked 'not happening now'. This is the gift and the curse of a brain that has suffered extreme childhood trauma: reverting to type, to habits learned long ago. Dissociation is an entirely appropriate response to overwhelming trauma, and my brain knew it. It's what I needed to do at that moment. It enabled me to survive.

Then after the rape, pandemic. As for so many people, lockdown reignited trauma in me, but then also blocked the resolution of that trauma, with the removal of human contact, the suspension of face-to-face therapy and so many other adjustments that are so detrimental to healing trauma. It was enough, to start with, just to survive lockdown. My brain preferred to keep the trauma box closed to my consciousness and let me deal simply with what was going on in the world – isolation was trauma enough.

I hadn't been in therapy since 2016. After working through the pain and disruption, the upside-downing of my life following my divorce in 2015, life had actually been on a steady, upward trajectory. Having developed a comfortable relationship with my past and with no overt dissociativity – living mostly joined-up rather than internally segregated – I instead through those years switched my resources to developing a life worth living. I focused on building joy into my

moment-by-moment experience: the joy of nature, of hobbies, of creativity and productivity and generativity, of making a difference to people's lives through my work, of nurturing rich and mutual relationships, of improving my physical health, and of course white beach walks with my dog. Life still had its challenges – everyone's life has challenges – but compared to ten or twenty years previously, through 2017 to 2019 I was enjoying life like never before. *Recovery is my best revenge.* Therapy works. The journey is worth it. Nothing was perfect, but on the whole I felt *safe* and my need for dissociation as a survival strategy was reduced to mere, occasional hints – traces from the past, a strategy that whispered 'I'm here if you need me' but not a daily imperative, because the vast majority of the time I didn't need it.

And then the rape.

Hello, said dissociation. I'm here to help.

Thank you, I replied – silently, so that my brain wouldn't hear. Please help.

I continued with my work for a while, unconsciously pushing the trauma, in the absence of a safe space in which to face it, into amnesia. It was truly as if nothing had happened, which is the entire purpose of dissociation. It is magical, and wonderful, and almost unbelievable. But of course over time my physical health cried out instead in protest that



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something was terribly, terribly wrong. I persevered for a while. And then pandemic, and multiple broken camels' backs.

Suddenly the isolation of living alone during lockdown, the loss of routines and rituals and comfortable normality, a bereavement, the constant threat to life from the virus, the feeling that we were all extras in a slow-motion disaster movie – all of it allowed the dissociated trauma to start pressing on the inside of my skull, on the underside of my skin, against the lining of my bowels. Out it started seeping in my sleep, in pain, and in the unexpected and unwelcome return – absent for so many years – of seemingly random panic attacks.

I need to get back in therapy, I thought. For some reason, I'm not coping with lockdown.

And, with the rape safely tucked out of consciousness, I couldn't quite figure why I was coping so 'badly'. Because at one level – my head stashed full of psychoeducation, daily strategies to promote my mental wellbeing, and a fierce determination towards self-compassion that avoided the worst of any mental down-spiralling – I was coping just fine. And at the same time, watching myself peel away from myself like the skin of a banana, I knew I wasn't.

I need to get back in therapy. Aah, but starting therapy during lockdown is

no easy task. In the meantime, by late spring, my body was protesting and threatening to divulge the trauma through overpowering, unliveable-with symptoms: exploding guts, chronic pain, unfeasible weight gain, unhealing skin infections, and lethargy. Oh the lethargy. Like if all I had to do was sleep, all might be well. It felt like I constantly needed to numb myself into not feeling, not thinking, not knowing.

Alarmed enough to overcome my natural reticence to having gloved hands poke in personal places, I had a phone call with my long-suffering, generous, kind GP. Two minutes into my orderly listing of symptoms, with an unnerving forthright urgency, she interjected: 'I need to see you in person. You need to come to the surgery straightaway.' I obeyed. She swooped on me, fully clad in PPE, and in a way that murmured to the inside of me, 'Danger, Carolyn, danger'. Tests, pokings, more tests, more pokings. She spent her afternoon off with me, to try to find an answer to this alarming array of symptoms. 'I think you might have ovarian cancer,' she said, because in 12 years she had never withheld her thought processes from me. 'Or if not that, then bowel cancer. I can't see any other explanation for your symptoms.' *I can*, I thought, but I didn't know why or what or how to put it in words like that.

I was referred urgently but the results of scans and tests was: no ovarian



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cancer. I balked at the further tests she wanted to perform to rule out bowel cancer. No, I thought, *it's not that. It's trauma.* It was like there was something, in that consultation, that I wanted to say to her, but I didn't know what. It reminded me of sitting with people in the past, not knowing how to say what I knew I didn't know: teachers, lecturers, friends, therapists. It's like the knowledge presses itself up against my eyelids but I can't quite bring it into focus.

I need to get back in therapy.

And so I did. As the first lockdown acceded to a summer of naive, optimistic reconnection, I started therapy anew. First session, assessing, the 'why are you here?' question. And 'what do you hope to achieve?' And 'to what extent will parts be present?' None of that, I confidently asserted. I don't quite know what the matter is with me, why I've not handled pandemic as well as I'd like – a vague, queasy sense that it's pushing on an old wound, but I'm not sure what – why my confidence seems to have taken a hit, how I'm not quite able to commit to the pivot in my work necessitated by pandemic. Parts, I declared, definitely won't be an issue because I've not experienced parts for several years: I learned to live in an open-plan way, hearing them, feeling them, integrating them into one overall sense of 'me-ness', rather than being

stuck behind closed doors. The DID side of things isn't really a problem, I figured. It's more this sense of having taken a hit somehow and I want to move forwards and not be so stuck. Oh and the physical stuff. Because it really wouldn't be great to have cancer and I'm sure I don't, but why is there so much flippin' diarrhoea?

So the scene was set. I made a deal with myself: we're back in therapy, here are its parameters, the boundaries are clear, the sense of safety (or 'safety-enough') is emerging from that still place in the centre between the therapist and me. *Let's do this.* Self-confidence – we're coming for you. We will track you down; we will find you; and my life will go back to normal.

And then, impulsively and yet also as the culmination of a long-term desire, I decided to move house. Evidently I felt my existing stress was insufficient. I'd lived in Cambridgeshire since the age of nine. Much of the abuse had happened there. It was the setting for both marriage and divorce. I didn't know why, but I had an urgent, surging need to start again, to move into a next phase, to leave some demons behind, to establish myself in a new, lockdown-supportive, for-me tribe. Therapy: let's move forwards. A new start. The next level. The future: it starts right here.

Bang.



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Within a handful of sessions parts had reappeared. I was a million times more surprised than the therapist. What was that all about? I hadn't lived structurally dissociated for years. Why this? Why now? Something about disorganised attachment being provoked by another therapeutic relationship? Was it that? Was it *just* that?

And then out came the narrative from parts – disjointed, unremembered, re-remembered, dissociated, unintegrated, scalding-hot in its raw painfulness. The rape from the previous year that had been so overwhelming, so shocking, so impossible to process and integrate and deal with, that my brain had immediately pushed into the realms of not-knowing. Until now. Until, once again – my brain having done this in my major breakdown in 2005 – it felt the right time to begin to heal. Out it came. Agonising, disorienting, humbling: crudely for a while it deconstructed me again. It had all the shock of newness and utter surprise whilst also feeling as familiar as last night's dream.

And then the Lemony Snicket-style 'series of unfortunate events'. The house move was complex, involving renovations. Those renovations in turn hit delay after delay: supply chain, shortage of labour, and even the main contractor himself having a near-breakdown after the suicide of his sister. The temporary accommodation I had moved into was surrounded by

blue flashies one night after someone tried to break in, or start a fight, or vandalise some cars ... I wasn't quite sure what, because I was unable to stay present to find out. Parts were freaked and I couldn't go back. I moved into budget hotels and then eventually, inconveniently, decamped to my regular retreat in the Highlands, nearly six hundred miles away.

And then, suffering dizziness perhaps as a body memory of the attack itself, or my body just collapsing in protest at the level of stress I was experiencing, I had a series of falls. The first resulted in bruising as I scrambled on rocks. The second, the next day, down the stairs, resulted in incapacitating broken ribs and being stuck, completely alone, two hours from the nearest hospital, and unable for several weeks to properly walk let alone drive. As if life were not tough enough already. *Ouch*.

In pain, alone, immobile, I was tormented each night by nightmares, by flashbacks from the rape rolling over me like storm waves; pain so bad I passed out from it; and parts feeling the full force of this life-changing event, this trauma-that-can't-be-real, this shift of worldview away from 'largely safe' back to 'we knew it, we knew it – life isn't safe, never has been safe, never will be safe again'. The battle then for my adult, daily-life mode front-brain to take charge over my traumatised, developmentally regressive, danger mode-based back-



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brain. A battle which many days, many weeks, it resoundingly lost.

What did it all mean? Had I lost the gains from my previous therapy, from all the trauma that I'd processed and integrated? Was I back to square one? Stuff surfaced from my childhood – of course it did – stuff that I thought was resolved and might have remained so if one evil man hadn't acted his evil upon me. A new therapeutic relationship provoked unresolved attachment needs, unresolved prior relationships, losses, griefs, suspicions, paranoidias. Everything in me craved a return to the steady, happy generativity of the years before pandemic. Oh, and yes, of course – pandemic. That was steadily in the background, a loud, annoying buzz, making everything a hundred times harder. Sometimes all you want, after a deep, wound-opening therapy is to sit in the quiet backdraft of another human being. The aloneness of it all was searingly painful, and my neurobiology cried out in desperation for the reassurance and soothing *physical* presence of a human being, the warmth of *withness*. I wanted someone to say, 'You're home now; you're safe; I've got you; you're not alone'.

In recovery from trauma, we need to be in the green zone of social engagement. We need the touch and feel and smell and immanence of *people* to tell our brain that the danger is over. Pandemic made that as hard as it possibly

could. The trauma of aloneness from childhood, the trauma of aloneness during and following the attack, the trauma of aloneness from the first lockdown, all culminated then in the trauma of aloneness of being stuck in the Highlands with broken ribs, miles from anyone, miles from medical care, miles from rescue. For a little while, all of it felt too much.

Would I lose forever the progress I'd made previously, in therapy and in life? I found eventually that the opposite began to be true. This was a terrible time – shitty, unfair, retraumatizing, horrific – but it was also very different. Last time around – entering therapy to the out-of-control explosion of my childhood trauma into consciousness through flashbacks and switching and body memories and inexplicable pain – I didn't understand what was going on and saw myself as both mad and bad: I hated myself for my reactions and responses. This time, it was an entirely different soundtrack. Even in the midst of a flashback – that overwhelm of unremembered emotion washing up against me suddenly, unexpectedly, whilst simply putting another log onto the burner – I knew what was happening. My trauma reactions made sense to me. And I was able to calm and soothe myself, in moments of intense distress, with the reassuring knowledge that I was simply suffering the impacts of trauma, and that I was in a process, a sequence, and that if I went through it,



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all would again be well: I would heal from this too. I knew – knew with a red-hot determination to know it and practice and be it – that self-compassion was key. That if I loaded onto myself frustration and irritation and condemnation and pressure then I would slow the process down. But self-compassion and trauma are not easy bed-fellows. They squabbled frequently, stared each other out, at times with impetuous ferocity, but on the whole they made their peace. I needed it. It was hard enough without in-fighting.

So I took some time off from work and gave myself permission to take it slow. To heal at whatever pace it was right to heal at. To give myself what I needed. To draw back. To lick my wounds. To follow through the process. To prioritise my therapy, my healing, my recovery. To say no to everything that I could reasonably say no to, not least because I'd had no chance to say no to being raped.

Eventually my new home was ready to move into. I was still sore and disabled from broken ribs. Two days later, on a brief and first foray outdoors for weeks – simply to walk my dog – I had another fall. Later investigations confirmed I had broken another rib, on the other side. *Ouch again*. It felt a bit unending. And moving house is hard work. It's even harder on your own, in lockdown, with multiple broken ribs. Don't try this at home, people.

The first time around, therapy was a total unknown to me. I turned up, waiting for someone to fix me, utterly confused at this world that I had entered that I knew nothing about. Fifteen years later, my understanding had advanced somewhat. This time I threw myself into it whole-heartedly. Notes *before* each session, detailing my priorities for our time together, what I was trying to achieve. Write-ups *after* each session: journaling, diagrams, reflections, plans. Joining the dots. Figuring out what I hadn't said, what I hadn't felt, what I hadn't felt able to know. Constantly analysing and seeing where I was at in the process, asking myself 'What do I need to process this traumatic memory, to unpick this disorganised attachment, to associate my dissociated parts, to come back into the green zone, to heal?'

It's early days. Part of me wanted to wait until it was all sorted before I opened up about it. Part of me wanted to hide in shame. Part of me wanted to shrug it all off and just get on with my work anyway. Part of me wanted to quietly just 'go back to normal' and deny that anything had happened. And part of me – eventually with the consensus of all of me (I hope) – wanted to make sure that recovery is my best revenge: not just my recovery, but recovery for other people too. It's so important to me to be vulnerably, authentically, realistically me: not to present some image of what I should be, but simply to present the image of what I am; to speak up for those



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who cannot speak up for themselves; to put into words my experience, my journey (the good and the bad), in the hope that other survivors will be able to see their own experiences mirrored, that professionals working with them will have greater insight into those experiences and be better equipped to help them. To ensure that these things – these desperately awful things that we minimisingly refer to as ‘trauma’ – get spoken about and not glossed over into shameful oblivion. Because our suffering matters.

And so I don’t want to skip blithely over how awful it’s all been – ‘Hey, tough year, but it’s all fine now’: false-cheerful, toxic positivity. It was hard, and it’s still hard. But I’m here and once again, I’m surviving. My childhood equipped me to survive hard things. *I’m good at surviving trauma* – it’s normal life that sometimes feels confusing. There is still much healing work to be done – but emotionally I’m beginning to feel fresh, crisp air around me, a spaciousness again, a feeling that the snowdrops are dropping, even in the snow. My front brain is sufficiently and consistently engaged now to sit at my desk most days and push words onto a page. For me, one of the hardest impacts of trauma is my front brain going so far offline, and my inability to write and think and create and relate. It’s a relief to be back on the writing horse again. I love riding this horse. I needed to get back on it. I’m hoping I stay in the saddle, and I’ll

do everything I can to make sure I do. If I need to dismount again for a while though, I will, because I will give myself what I need. But I will keep getting back on. That’s the promise I’m making to myself, and to my parts.

I didn’t expect to be writing this. I didn’t, of course, expect to be raped. I’ve always been wary of the myth of specialness, that says that somehow, because I was abused in childhood, nothing bad will ever happen to me in adulthood. That of course is in direct contradiction to the reality: that those of us who have suffered adverse experiences in childhood are far more likely to suffer adverse experiences in adulthood. It is the sickening unfairness of the legacy of trauma in our lives. It’s shit.

All I can do is – once again – ensure that it doesn’t stop me dead in my tracks. All I can do is – once again – work to ensure that recovery is my best revenge. Because I know that I am far from alone in having suffered trauma this last year or so. I am far from alone in being raped. I am far from alone in feeling that life keeps tipping truckloads of tragedy on me. There is so much pain, so much suffering, so much unfairness – for me and for so many other people. As I’ve said in the past, I count myself to be one of the lucky unlucky ones. I wish that none of this trauma had ever happened to me, but one thing I am grateful for is the support and the resources I have at my disposal. And so my determination is



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to speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves, to advocate for the unlucky unlucky ones, who don't have the support and the resources that I do – to use my experiences, and to use my platform, to help raise awareness of the impact of trauma, the process of recovery from trauma, and the hidden evil of sexual violence in our society. Recovery is my best revenge – both mine and yours. **So let's do this.**

So that's all we have time for in this episode. Thank you for joining me. Links to everything I've referenced in this podcast can be found on my website and in the show notes. And you can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, on Spotify, or you can listen direct from my website at carolynspring.com/podcasts.

I hope that helps, even a little and speak soon!

If you would like further resources on coping with trauma please click around the website or join our mailing list to receive a free Trauma Survivors' Resource Guide: www.carolynspring.com/subscribe

