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reversing adversity 

HEARING THE CRY



by Carolyn Spring

For fifteen years – the most fulfilling and joyous, yet painful of times – I was a foster carer, looking after 22 children in total. I miss it, but I don't miss the washing, the nappies, or the endless retrieval of half-chewed grapes from the floor.

I looked after one baby for nearly two years: I'll call her Amber. She was four months old when she arrived, bald as a potato, tiny as a turnip, scrunched up like sweetcorn in her car seat. It was summer, and it was a heatwave, and her infant body stank of sweat and cigarettes and sour milk. But she gazed up at me, stirring from sleep, with Simpson-esque eyes, shooting me a *love me, love me, don't dare not to love me* kind of a smile. There was something so desperate about it that I felt compelled not to leave her. And indeed, she wouldn't let me. She sat in

her seat while I folded laundry. But there was no question of me taking it upstairs, not even for a moment. Not without her. 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' she would scream even as I moved towards the door. 'Don't leave me!' she seemed to be saying. And so she came with me. Every single time.

We were out for the day one weekend, a big road trip of a day, to see turrets and towers at Warwick Castle. The older children had loved it: a mock joust, riding the ramparts, hide-and-seek through the arrow slits. A long day, a good day, a day of juggling primary age with toddlers, and Amber always in a sling by my chest, always skin-tight, always a moment away from 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' This was her survival strategy for life: scream so loudly that no-one would ever forget her, abandon her,

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or leave her – even for a moment. It was stupendously successful. It was exactly what she needed to do, to feel even just a little bit safe.

Then on the car journey home, disaster on the M6. There was an accident up ahead. The traffic slowed and crawled and eventually shuffled to a halt. For hours in melt-heat we sat, engine-off, in the middle lane, hot children, hot adults, and an Amber who mercifully had slept. Until now. ‘Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!’ she cried, for milk, as was her wont immediately upon waking. And right at that moment, the traffic started moving.

But oh so slowly. It moved oh so slowly. So terribly, enragingly, unacceptably slowly. We needed to pull over at the next services, the next turn-off, the next lay-by. ‘Does feeding a baby count as a hard shoulder emergency?’ we debated, hearts pounding, to the ear-splitting backdrop of ‘Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!’, ‘Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!’, ‘Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!’

‘It’s coming,’ we all tried in turn to say, to console her. Try a dummy, try an empty bottle, try every manner of distraction technique known to man. But we needed fresh baby milk from the boot, and for that we needed to be stationary, and to be stationary we needed to get off this damned-turgid, why-does-it-hate-me

motorway. But we were crawling in slow motion forwards, with a thousand hot and angry drivers swarming like bees up our backside. Everyone else wanted to get off the motorway too.

Maybe it was only a minute, maybe two. It felt like forever. And by the time we were able, safely, to pull over, ‘Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!’ had become heart-rending sobs bereft of all hope. I could see it in every pore of her body: ‘*The milk’s not coming. Nobody cares. I am hunger, and hunger is all that I am. There is no end to my hunger. The world is a too-dangerous place.*’

And all the trauma of her early weeks came tumbling out, all the pain and all the distress erupting in that moment – from four months of neglect, and chaos, and abuse at the hands of the oh-so-helpful sex offender who was supporting her mother by babysitting. It was the most soul-searing pain I have ever seen in infant, child or adult.

There was no doubt about what to do. Park up, pick her up, soothe her, hold her, speak kindly to her, tell her it’s all going to be okay, and then ten seconds later the milk is ready and *here it is now, here it is, it’s okay, you see, it’s coming, you’ve got it, I’ve got you, you’re safe now, you’re okay, it’s okay, everything’s going to be okay ...* And she’s too distressed at first to suckle, but



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eventually, close in to my chest, and with a soothing sway and a soft, gentle voice, and the gazing, deep-deep gazing, of eyes into eyes, the gulps of distress slowly ebb into the world's most delicious sound, of *suck-suck-suck* on the bottle, and the raspy, choking breaths begin to settle, even through hiccups, into the growly sighs of relief.

This was a baby, who even at four months had been traumatised beyond what most of us can imagine. She didn't trust the world. She didn't trust that beneficence would reign and milk would appear, unless she screamed for it. She didn't trust that I would stay close, unless she screamed for it. She didn't know any other way of handling any other feeling, other than to scream for it.

Even now, 18 years later, my heart hurts when I think of her.

And what I did to soothe her was so natural, so automatic – I didn't need to read a book or go on a training course or study for a qualification to know it. It was instinct. It was normal. She was in distress, and what she needed was for me to stay calm, for me to resolve the source of her distress, and for me to provide a template for her nervous system to copy. The slow breathing, the gentle look, the melodic voice, the rhythmic rock, the skin to skin,

the nonsense words said with meaning and truth.

Of course. Of course that's what we do when a baby is distressed. We hold them, we talk to them, and we resolve the cause of their suffering. We promise them that everything is going to be okay, and they're safe now, and we're with them, and we're not going to leave them, and we stroke their hair or we wipe their cheek or we clasp their fingers and we snuggle and we impart to them with every inch of our being everything we can of safety and love and soft, soothing presence.

At what point, I wonder, did we as adults 'grow up' out of that humanness? At what point did we think that we could soothe the distress of a traumatised adult – whose world has suddenly constricted, in flashbacks and memory glitches, back into the danger zone of milk-less-ness, or abandonment, or pain – with mere words, or worst still silence, or a threat to 'behave'?

With that first explosion of 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' from Amber, I didn't conduct an assessment. I didn't whip out my clipboard. I didn't check that I was operating within my competency, that I was adequately insured. I didn't glance at the clock, or put out for someone to refer onto. I didn't say, 'I don't deal with this expression of distress.' I didn't ask her to

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calm herself and that I couldn't work with her until she did so.

'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' she was screaming, because in the way that her brain had interpreted the world up to that point, she needed to. The sense she had made of what had happened to her was that she was reliant on adults, but they were dangerously unreliable. Sometimes they left you all alone, even for hours at a time. Sometimes they hurt you. Very often they forgot to feed you. They didn't notice you, or hold you, or comfort you. So you had to be loud. You had to be insistent, to maximise your chances of staying alive. Hungry? 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!'. Tired? 'Yiiiiiaahhhrrrr!'. Lonely? 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!'. Wet? 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' And better at least than the option of inaction: at four months of age, Baby Amber's strategy was working. Because at least she was alive.

But it had its limitations. It was a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach. It had one prototype for 'people' and they were deemed to be as cruel and neglectful as the first people who populated her primary weeks. It allowed no possibility of change. So there I was, new in her life, with every inch of my vagus nerve wanting to meet her needs, and show her that I cared, and regulate her body with mine. I wanted to feed her when she was hungry, comfort her when she was distressed. I wanted to share her

gaze and match to her breath. I wanted to call forth curiosity and playfulness and joy. I wanted all these good things for her. But nonetheless, 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!'

'It's okay,' I wanted to plead with her, 'I'm coming. I'm here.' *Just a few more moments to warm the milk, just let me get sat in a chair, just let me get you straight ...* but no. She had no patience. She had no tolerance for distress. 'I'm dying!' said her cry, and she believed it. 'I need milk, and if I don't scream for it now, it won't come. It won't ever come. And I will die.' That was the primitive survival urgency behind every cry. She had learned to trust only in her own volume, and never in the goodness of her caregiver.

So it took a long time, to build that trust. Amber's birth mum struggled when she saw her. 'She's a devil child,' she used to say to me, exasperated at the senseless screaming froth in front of her. Very often, in the midst of a 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' she would turn away and go on her phone, lose herself in a daze of distraction just to shut it out. She felt helpless to respond to what this screaming-banshee-child wanted from her. I tried - gently - to show her. She couldn't see it. She couldn't reflect. 'She just hates me,' she lamented, time after time. And sometimes there was such sadness in that statement that my heart broke for her too. But other



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times rage poured out of her towards her daughter. 'Shut up!' she would shout at her, sometimes inches from her face. 'Shut up!'

She couldn't mentalise and step out from her own reactions, her own emotions, her own desperate, tragic hurt and lostness, and see that Amber was just trying to survive. It wasn't personal. I could see what Amber was doing, what she needed, how scared she felt at this uprush of hunger that she had felt so many times previously, that had never been abated. It was, to her as a newborn, a survival crisis. The imprint of that trauma, of hunger, of the absolute lack of milk now and forever more, triggered in her every time her stomach now emptied. Of course she reacted the way she did. She was right to. It was instinctual smarts.

But her mum couldn't see that. She could see only that her baby hated her, and she pushed away all consciousness of her, too hurt in her own hurt to be able to attend to the hurt of her baby. On one occasion she left Amber, four months and two weeks old, sat upright on a wooden chair, while she went to answer her phone. Not once did she look back. I froze for a moment, not knowing what to do, then sprang forwards to catch the little flopsicle as she toppled into my arms, catching her before she hit hard on the floor. Her mum was

oblivious. It wasn't malicious and it wasn't intentional. She just couldn't predict that that would happen. For good reason – though painful reasons, and reasons steeped deep not in blaming or judging but child protection at its best – her next four children were removed at birth.

The baby that was Amber is an adult now. She was adopted at the age of nearly two. I loved her with all my might and we formed a fierce bond as she learned to know me and trust me and believe me when I said, 'I'm here.' Adoption, although well-meaning, was another trauma for her to endure: so closely attached to me and then, seven days later, gone forever, never to be held again. Maybe it had to happen. Maybe it was best that it happened. There are no easy answers in the complex world of fostering and adoption.

Amber taught me that trauma is not just an event that we can remember. For certain, she will have no memory of those first four months of life, the sexual abuse, the abandonment, the neglect. It broke me daily to imagine what she had endured. And when she arrived, she didn't look at me and say, 'I am an abuse victim. This is what happened to me.' Of course she didn't. She had no words, no memories of the explicit kind. But she had implicit memories and beliefs and a strategy for life that was forged in that

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trauma. 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' as a baby, but 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' as a toddler tantrumming too. I imagine adolescence was another form of 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!', perhaps just involving clothes and music and phones.

She was late walking as an infant because she refused to try to move. She wouldn't crawl even. 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' she would scream, and various children in our multi-mix household would rush to her assistance, to pass her whatever toy was now out of reach. So she didn't need to walk. The 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' was all-powerful. Then suddenly one day it suited her to, and she did. Just like that. But then 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' at the stair-gate, or 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' in the bath. 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' whenever she was thwarted, whenever the dread of lack or loneliness surged up through her.

She didn't know - she couldn't remember, or verbalise or conceptualise - why decibels were her superpower. She couldn't say that she didn't want to be left in the cot because she was afraid you were never coming back. She could explain none of it. But her body knew and remembered everything.

This is how trauma plays out. Unless resolved, its imprint stays within us. Whilst it is acceptable for a baby to 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' with rage, it evokes

less sympathy the older we get. By the time we are adults, in therapy or needing to be in therapy, we may have no more words than Amber to explain why we're reacting the way we are. We are distressed, and the 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' flashes up like lightning through us, in a microsecond: this imprint of trauma because we too were left, or hurt, or unloved. The Baby Amber in each of us still reacts with terror.

There are two responses to the Baby Amber within us. There is the reaction of the foster carer, someone with some skill and understanding, who can mentalise and reflect, who understands trauma, who knows that our behaviours aren't a personal attack, that they are the echo of trauma, that they had survival value then, even if they are outdated now. This in many cases is the therapist, who in similar ways but different ways offers attunement and presence and the steady, gaze-to-gaze compassion to retrain our nervous systems from a different template.

And then there is the birth mother character, inadequate to meet our needs, perhaps intentionally malicious, but often just wrapped up in her own pain and unable to step beyond it. That is what many of us experienced from our literal birth mothers. But often, too, she is now gone, or at least distant in our life. Instead, we so often play



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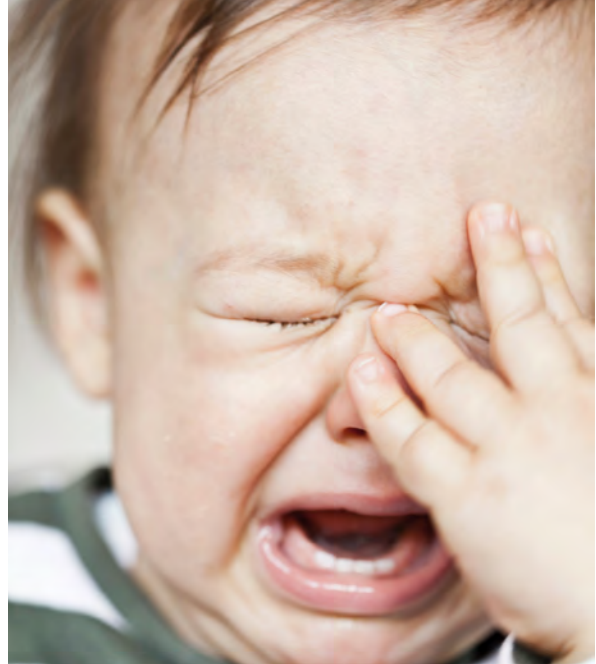


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her role ourselves. We look down at the screaming-banshee inner-child within us, our own traumatised equivalent of Baby Amber, and we call it a devil-child. We turn away from it to our phone, with literal or metaphorical numbing, with self-harm or self-abuse or dissociation or medication. We can't bear to look. We don't know what to do with it. We don't know what it wants. We don't know how to make it stop making that god-awful noise.

The sound of Amber crying would tear through me like a hailstorm of knives. It was, for me at that time, literally the worst sound I could ever imagine. My heart rate jumped and I was moved to action, with an absolute, immediate, frantic imperative. That is the power of attachment, of neurobiological circuits designed to ensure that a mother does not forget her baby. But when the cry is unleashed with such pain, it is beyond painful to hear it. I lived on edge for months, waiting for the next 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' Sometimes I would even wake in the night, from a dream, imagining that I had heard it.

And that itself is a picture of what living with our own inner child can be like: the terror of when it will cry next; what it will do; and like Amber's mum we can demonise it, leave it unprotected to topple to harm, and walk away. The neglect we would never tolerate to a real live human



being we readily accept towards ourselves. How painful. How tragic. How sad. There are no pat answers here. There is only an awareness of trauma where it is unresolved, every 'Yiiiiiaaaaaahhhrrrr!' that has gone unheard and unresponded to, and which deserves the driver of your life to pull over onto the hard shoulder if necessary to attend to its needs. Can you do that? Can you reach down, with compassion and care, and lift your traumatised self out of its car seat, out of its lack and unlovedness and pain, and speak kindly to it, feed it, tell it that you're here now, that everything is going to be okay? Because that perhaps, for some people, might be the first step towards healing.●