



## PODCAST #10 – THIS IS MY NEW LIFE



by Carolyn Spring

*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](http://carolynspring.com).*

Welcome to this edition of my podcast. I'm calling this one 'This is my new life' and that is a throwback to the final chapter of my first book, '**Recovery is my best revenge**' – and in fact I'm going to read that chapter in a moment as part of this podcast.

Because my idea for this episode came from listening to another podcast in which

the author basically read some excerpts from his books and then added a kind of commentary onto it. And it was really interesting how he did it, and I thought it was a cool idea. So that's sort of what I'm going to try in this episode. We'll see how it goes and then maybe I'll do it again.

And the idea of the subject matter was sparked by my recent trip to Scotland. As many of you will know, I have a bit of a love affair thing going on with Scotland, and specifically the far north Highlands. I spend as much time up there as possible, and I wrote this chapter, 'This is my new life' after my very first visit to that area in 2012.

Because that visit had such an impact on me – such a life-changing, heart-expanding, gut-transforming impact. I was so struck by the wild beauty and the vastness of the landscape, the sense of reverence, of awe I felt being out in that,



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and really just the sheer *goodness*. It was something, in a geographical space, a locality, that summed up for me the biggest possible contrast with everything I'd grown up with in terms of abuse. It was so clean and pure and *good*. And in ways that words can never convey it opened my eyes to the possibility of a life beyond abuse, and outside of abuse, and where abuse doesn't reign. It was like an 'aaaah' moment of seeing the world differently for the very first time and it profoundly, profoundly impacted me.

Have you ever had an experience like that? Have you had something that seems to intrude from the outside of your consciousness, and it penetrates deep into your soul – something that says, 'There is more to life than abuse; there is more to life than this suffering I'm suffering; there is more to life than this pain?' That's what happened for me in 2012.

I didn't know it was about to happen – I didn't know it *could* happen – so I hadn't sought it out. But I offer it to you with the hope really, with the desire for you that you too experience something like that, which lifts your eyes to the horizon even maybe in the midst of despair. Because in our moments of greatest hopelessness, we need to know that hope is out there, somewhere.

So I'll read the chapter – it's only quite short – and then I'll expand a bit on it

with some more thoughts. And hopefully it'll be a bit of a ray of goodness in your day as you listen to this.

... so chapter 20 of '**Recovery is my best revenge**' is called 'This is my new life' and it goes like this:



The sand stretches away into the blue fuzz of the horizon. It's white and pure and perfect and still, with whirls of wind painted in it. The water is icy and clear. Along the beach we walk, along and along, walking and walking in this sumptuous, beautiful place. The dog is barking for seaweed. There is no one else anywhere around. The sand is so fine, and the water so clear, and I've never seen anything like it before. *Bark, bark, bark* to throw the ball. *Bark, bark, bark* to fetch it. Little bobbles of cloud in a deep blue sky. Foamy waves licking at my soles. It's all so clean. It's all so fresh. It's all so new. I can't quite believe I'm here. There is no abuse here. Nothing bad, nothing unclean. There is no pain here. There is just goodness and cleanness and fullness of joy. I've never seen anything quite like it. *Bark, bark, bark* at some flotsam. The sun is warm and the air is cold and everything makes me shiver with wonder. This is a new kind of place, a new kind of experience. I can't quite believe it.



*I don't mind*, I want to say, but for the first time I think I do. From instinct I begin to shrug my shoulders, but deep down somewhere on the inside there's a stirring and I know that really I want to say yes. *Is it allowed?* I want to ask, because this would be two good things in one day, and all of me is unsure. I'd love an ice cream, but I'm an adult now, and I don't know if this is ok. We've walked along the beach and we've picnicked on the headland. We've breathed in goodness, and everything is fizzing with happiness on the inside, and I don't know if I'm allowed to have that feeling, don't know if I'm allowed to keep it. *Do I want an ice cream?* Yes I do. I know I do. Too many good things? What will happen if I have it? What will happen if I want it? Bad things, horrible things, painful things, unspeakable things? No, this is a new life where those things don't happen. I can have an ice cream now, and I won't be hurt later. It's just an ice cream, just a good thing, and it's ok for me to have it. There's a shudder inside, like the burp of some dread, but I just nod at myself quietly. *It's ok*, I say, and I mean it. *It's ok to have good things*, and I know that's true. It's taken a lot of shifting, to believe that, and instinct still pulls me to shake my head. But this is my new life, this is a good life, and we eat ice creams as we drive near cliffs rimmed by rainbows. I do mind, and it's good.

At first they were just specks in the sky, three specks circling, up high on

the wind drift, up high above the world. We stopped the car and got out. Binoculars. *It might be ...* It's probably not ... *It is, you know, it is.* I look for the markings, for the wingspan, for the flight. The tail splays out like a fan. It's soaring and gliding, holding its wings in a shallow 'V'. It's drawing a circle in the sky. Next to it, on its inside, are two smaller ones, its young. At the end of its wings, huge and broad and majestic and golden, it reaches out its fingers. I can just make out the inner feathers, white like snow. *It is, you know, it is.* Excitement rises like a gulp in my throat. *You might be right.* And I am. A golden eagle, with two of its young, fainting against the sky on this most beautiful of days. All my life I had wanted to see one. I used to dream about it, write about it, talk to anyone who would listen. *A golden eagle.* I can't quite believe it. And not one but three. *Is it allowed?* Yes, it's allowed. This is our new life, where good things are allowed.

It's a funny little boat, a bit like the Lego one I had as a child, but all around us the deep smoky blue of the Kyle is flowing out into the North Sea and it is wonderful and desolate and I'm humming on the inside with the sheer pleasure of being here. We bounce off the tops of the waves, spray shimmering up behind us. I've never been out on a boat quite like this before. I've never fished. We sit in the lapping silence, the beauty of the sky and the sunlight jagged on the water, and for the first time I feel at home within



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myself. *Is it allowed?* I wonder, almost out loud. *Yes, yes, it's allowed,* I reassure myself and I am nearly breathless with the joy that it is. We poke our rods out the back of the boat, waiting, barely daring to hope, but one little mackerel after another tugs at the line and then squirms around in our bucket, our evening meal. The wind is mild and invigorating. There's no badness here, no evil, no pain. This is a world away from what I thought was normal. I can't quite believe that it's real. The joy on the inside of me sits on a deep layer of sadness that I feel on every wave roll. I realise how wrong the badness was. I realise how much goodness there can be, and I'm sad and angry that I didn't know it until now. And then I breathe again, let my eyes wander around the cliffs of the island we are now picnicking by, and the joy swells harder. *This is what life can be like now,* I say to myself, and I want to cry because I know it's true.

For part of the morning we wander around the beach, clamber up into rock pools, *bark bark* goes the dog to chase a stone, and I'm fascinated by the stripes of ochre and grey in the cliffstones around us. We drive out onto the headland, and scramble onto dunes. We drive into the wilderness, and Ben This and Ben Something Else crowd the sky around us. *This is my new life, where good things are allowed,* I say to myself, to try to make myself believe it. The landscape is so expansive, like it's opening wide its arms and filling deep its lungs, and all

this crisp, earthy goodness makes me want to sing. *Good things are allowed,* I say again, and I'm aware of them for the first time. I want to sow them. I want to cultivate them. I want to grow them like seedlings. It's not enough to dredge away the bad stuff. I've got to grow the good stuff too. I've got to learn how to live. And here, in this place, like no place I've ever been before, it feels right to have good things. It feels right to be alive. It feels like something has shifted. It's no longer just about surviving the bad stuff. It's about living the good stuff too. And I want to, and that feels ok, and new life shivers deliciously up my spine and I want to shout to my abusers, tell them that they haven't won, that I'm here and it's wonderful, and they can't stop me coming back. I feel strong and tall and powerful and alive. *This is my new life,* I say again, and everyone on the inside agrees, *where good things are allowed.*



Oh that's so good – it makes me want to get in the car and drive north to those beaches again!

So first of all then let me explain the context for this chapter. It was four or five days' worth of outings with friends that we were staying with up in the far north of Scotland. We went out one day to this gorgeous hideaway beach that hardly anyone seems to know about, just absolutely stunning white sand



and no litter. And on the way my friend who was driving suddenly pulled over into a passing place and got out, and said, 'Quick! Look!' So we all piled out of the car to see what he'd seen. And up there in the sky were these three golden eagles – probably a mother and its two young. So we're swapping binoculars and trying to figure out if they really are golden eagles, and sure enough they are. We've got the bird book out to make sure and everything.

And oh I was so excited! Because as I said there, I'd always wanted to see golden eagles right from being a very young child. A kind of bucket-list thing. And looking back on my life now, I'm curious that I had those little dreams, tucked away on the inside of me. It's like I stored them away deep within, privately, away from the abusers, away from the abuse. And I cherished them. It's just that for a long time I forgot they were there.

And in many respects it's a silly thing to hope for in life, isn't it? To see golden eagles? But of course also it's not. It's about the wonder of nature, it's about goodness, it's about majesty. And it was such a huge contrast to my life after my breakdown. Because after a year or so in the therapy process, when I was daily vomiting out all the bad stuff and everything was just so tough – you know, daily wanting to kill myself, daily panic attacks, flashbacks, dissociation,

self-harm, hating – absolutely hating – life ... after a while of that, it kind of becomes your life. It's like you've got to focus on that awful stuff in order to process and metabolise it – there's no way around it. But at the same time, it was ALL I was focusing on. I'd completely lost sight of childhood dreams of seeing golden eagles. I mean, I was dealing with flashbacks of major abuse. What did golden eagles have to do with that?

But that's one of the tricks that trauma plays on our brain. For very sensible, evolutionarily-adaptive reasons, it gets us focused on threat and risk and danger. And we forget to ever look up into the sky to see if our dreams are wheeling in circles up there. Our focus is on the bad stuff. Of course it is. What else can we do? Our back brain is in charge, trying to keep us alive, and it doesn't have much time for golden eagles or dreams or any of it.

But that doesn't mean to say that none of that stuff exists. It does. We just can't see it right now.

And after we stood and watched those eagles with binoculars for a while – I was buzzing, absolutely buzzing. And my friends that I was with – they were chuffed, but they weren't quite buzzing to the same degree. They were like, 'That was good, that was nice' but not, 'Oh my goodness, that was flippin' amazing' and we talked about it later



and they said that ... well, they'd seen eagles a number of times before.

That blew my mind – I mean, oh my goodness, I'd waited nearly 40 years to see them, and they'd seen them *multiple times*? But then, thinking about it, of course they had. They lived in the Highlands. Golden eagles live in the Highlands. Spend enough time up there, with your eyes open, looking up, and chances are you're going to see them.

So all my life, hidden away on the inside, was this dream to see golden eagles, but I'd never actually put myself in the situation where it was possible. After all, I live in the flatlands of Cambridgeshire! There are no eagles here! And then pretty much the first time I did put myself where eagles dare – my first trip to Scotland – I saw them. Kind of makes sense now in retrospect, but at the time it seemed magical, like so so so unlikely. But actually it was all about positioning myself where what I hoped for could happen.

And so since then I've been a lot more intentional about recognising that I do have these little dreams tucked away on the inside of me, and so I need to put myself in a position where those dreams can become true. And some of those dreams were minuscule, and they had no substance or depth to them, they were barely existing, like on life support, because I'd never believed that they could come true. I'd never believed

that I was 'allowed' good things. Even in that chapter, on the way home later on that day, we stopped at this tiny little general stores place that looked like it had come right out of the 1970s. Half-day closing on a Wednesday, cash only, buy a notepad with your milk – that kind of place. You almost expected it to have gas lamps and be run by a 104-year-old stern spinster called Miss Smith. And what I remember was so incongruous was the oldness and mustiness and old-fashionedness of it, and yet it had right in the middle of the shop a bang up-to-date Mr Whippy ice cream machine.

But I didn't dare to hope for an ice cream. Ice cream is one of those things, isn't it, that seems to touch the inner child in all of us? And as for a Mr Whippy by the seaside, I mean what's not to like about that! So we all got ice creams and oh my word it was a good ice cream, the best I've ever had! And so there I was, as I wrote about, having two good things in one day and up rises all this angst and fear and dread and perturbation about whether this is okay. Is it allowed? Will something bad happen because I've had something good – TWO good things?

That's the train of thought that abuse often sets in motion in us and it becomes our mainline. We've made connections in our head, especially with grooming, that good stuff is always followed by bad stuff. And so we dread it, as if by experiencing anything good we are intentionally and



deliberately inviting the bad. And if we've done that – if we have recklessly, unashamedly *wanted* something good and then *accepted* something good, then be it on our head when the bad stuff happens. Somehow, in our magical thinking, we end up believing then that we invited and caused and deserved the abuse.

And that was still a default thought pattern in my life when I saw eagles and ate ice cream in Scotland that day. But there was something so *good* about the whole trip – this wholesomeness of the landscape and a world that was so far removed from the ugliness and badness and corruptness of abuse – that caused a major shift on the inside of me. It was like that eagle and that ice cream, and then the later boat trip and everything that happened that week – it just all reached down onto the inside of me and flicked a switch, and I saw life differently as a result. It's no exaggeration to say that it changed my life.

So then you could say, well bully for you – that's great, but I've not had that miracle moment. I've not had a golden eagles and ice cream, life-transforming shift. So how does what you're saying help me? Because that can be quite disempowering, can't it, to hear about someone else's breakthrough moment that 'just happened' for them, but how does that help you? It can leave you grasping for something that it seems you can't have.

But I don't think that breakthrough moment for me 'just happened'. I think it was a culmination of a lot of little breakthroughs. Our big breakthroughs are built on the back of the little breakthroughs, the tiny, insignificant choices that we make each day to choose life and recovery and kindness. Those little choices don't make a lot of difference on their own, but add them up and they lead to a tipping point. It was like a cistern of water that was being filled up with one drop after another, *drip drip drip*, until suddenly it tips over. So over it flows then in one big splash, but it only did that, that only happened for me, because of the *drip drip drip* day in, day out, week in, week out, that by that point had been going on for several years in my recovery journey.

Because I think it's so easy to look at other people, people who are maybe further down the recovery route than you are, and wonder how on earth they got there. Because you're not with them day in, day out. You're not seeing all the little *drip drip drips* that are happening in their life. This recovery business takes time – it takes a volume of liquid, and how much liquid is needed to reach a tipping point, that's going to be different for each individual. But however much it is, it's the same principle for everyone: *drip drip drip*. Day in, day out.

For me those drips were things like going to therapy each week. Preparing



for therapy each week by journaling, by planning what we were going to work on. Journaling afterwards, to try to squeeze as much insight and learning as I could from each session. Self-care: looking after myself. Keeping myself safe after a therapy session, planning how to be safe that night. Self-soothing, not self-harming. Learning HOW to self-soothe. Learning to breathe. Like seriously, learning to breathe. That was major for me: actually learning to calm my body through calming my breath, and breathing from my diaphragm, not from the top of my lungs. Learning to ground and centre myself and learning mindfulness. Going outdoors each day, into nature, seeing vista. Looking after myself in terms of sleep and diet.

So lots of really basic, boring stuff and none of it on its own sorts anything. I think that's what can feel so offensive, when you present to someone the entirety of your suffering, and you say, 'This is how big my pain is', and they respond by saying, 'Have you tried going for a walk? What about journaling?' And of course you want to punch them in the face, because it seems so disproportionate. It feels like they're saying, 'Oh your pain, your suffering, your trauma, it isn't all that big really, is it? It can be resolved, you know, just by going for a walk.' And of course it can't. *Of course* it can't!! But they're not wrong, actually, that a walk will help - walking outdoors, in the daylight,

preferably in nature, preferably daily. It won't *solve* anything, but it will help a little. It's a drip into the *drip drip drip* into the cistern that eventually will tip over.

I think for so long I was waiting for the magic bullet, the 'one thing' that would make everything better, the 'one thing' that would solve it. We're offered this with some therapies too - the 'latest', 'fastest', 'bestest' psychotherapeutic technique that will solve ALL our problems TODAY. Or we think that if we can just get a diagnosis, or if we can just get treatment, or if we can just see *this* therapist, or if we can have a longer session, or if we can talk about *this* topic, then *everything will be better*.

And all of those things can help. They're drips. They're not the *only* drips that can help - so if we can't get a diagnosis, it doesn't necessarily matter. because personally I think a diagnosis is a double-edged sword: it places us within the framework of the medical model, and I'd argue, along with many others, that that is not the best approach to relieving suffering and trauma. It's just it's the way that the system is currently set up, and sometimes we might feel it's better to play the system in order to get the help we need. Or we may not. But that's another story, maybe for another podcast.





But everything we're wanting, the help we're seeking – it's all a drip. But it's not the entire contents of the cistern all in one go.

I did not have a major breakthrough because I went to Scotland. Not on its own. If it had been because of Scotland, then I should be setting up Therapeutic Trips to Scotland now ('Healing in the Highlands with Carolyn Spring'), and promising that all your problems can be solved if you can just see golden eagles (preferably while eating ice cream). Of course that's not the case! (Although it does sound attractive!) The breakthrough I had was not because of the eagles. The eagles were the drips that tipped the cistern. But they only had that effect because of all the other drips that had already been dripping into the cistern every day for several years.

And I think another thing from that Scotland trip that shifted in me was the realisation that there were good things in life, and that they'd always been there. Those eagles didn't suddenly exist at the point at which I was ready to notice them. They'd always been there – my friends had seen them before. And I realised within that that we don't get to experience good things in life by resenting other people for the good things in their lives. If I'd gone on to my friends about unfair it is that they get to see golden eagles, how it's alright for them, probably I wouldn't have been

invited! We're more likely to experience good things when we rejoice that other people are also experiencing good things, rather than resenting them for it.

And, secondly, I realised that we don't get to experience good things by depriving or punishing ourselves, and yet after abuse that so often is our default position.

I can't really do justice to the mixed feelings I had when we saw those eagles. Excitement, pleasure, awe ... all those good feelings. But also dread and shame. And afterwards, even a strange kind of rage. Like something in me that was so reactive that it wanted to smash down all the beauty – maybe because it just brought into sharp relief how painful the abuse had been. When you contrast the abuse you suffered to the daily torment of life with flashbacks and debilitating distress, there's not much difference. It's a continuation of the suffering. But when you contrast it to the beauty of the Highlands, to being out on a boat with mountains as a backdrop and picnicking by an island with twenty seals just metres away ... then the contrast is huge. So the more beautiful your experience here and now, the more painful your experience there and then. You realise just how much you've lost. The blacks become blacker in the brightness of a sunny day.

And so it poured out of me afterwards this kind of twisted, tormented, painful



desire for bitterness and revenge and hatred, like I was stuck still in the fight response. Like everything is so painful that I can't bear to see beauty and goodness *now*.

And I think we can live our lives a lot like that – not in such an intense reaction, but in a grey way, on a day-to-day basis. That we resent good things. We resent other people having good things. And in particular we resent ourselves and *prevent ourselves* from having good things. So we deprive ourselves, we self-sabotage, we make sure that we don't feel the goodness, because it highlights the badness. It's a horrifically painful place to be.

So it wasn't just that I had to put myself in a position where I could see golden eagles, but I had to put myself in a position where I could see golden eagles and find joy in that, rather than it just ripping me apart on the inside. I think it's part of the grieving process that's so integral to healing from trauma. We have to mourn what we have lost, in order to be able to receive new things, good things, beautiful things.

And I think what I realised was that I didn't have space on the inside of me, as it were, for both the old and the new. It was like they were incompatible, and I had to begin to choose. That wasn't an overnight process – it took time, as everything does – but I couldn't fixate on the badness of the past, there in the

Highlands, at the same time as revelling in awe and wonder at the goodness of the present. That's a split that is endemic to those of us who developed dissociative identity disorder right there. We have parts of us stuck in the past, in trauma time, operating out of the back brain, who are trying to keep us safe. And then we have the parts of us who are doing daily life, in the present, who are trying to operate in the front brain, and are trying to move forwards. It is such a fundamental conflict. And we don't resolve that conflict by just taking one side over the other. We have to see the value of both.

Some people are stuck just in their trauma, and refuse to look up and look for eagles. Some people are stuck in denial of their trauma, and won't look at any of the bad stuff, for fear of being swamped by it. But without pain there's no joy either: we can't pick and choose our emotions. If we deny our pain, we deny our joy. And joy is a strange, tender thing. It needs cultivating – it doesn't come naturally, whereas pain does. Pain is a signal of danger, so we're on it in a flash. But joy isn't about survival: it's a front brain, green zone, 'I'm safe so I can feel it' type of emotion. And that's why it always gets trumped by pain and distress and danger. It's why we have to actively cultivate it rather than just hoping that it will happen. It's why so many trauma survivors struggle to even imagine joy – because our lives have been dominated by pain. But that



doesn't mean to say that it's not there, and that it can't be found, if we look for it. It can! But it takes *drip drip drip*, every day, filling the cistern.

So that's a few thoughts on 'My new life now', the final chapter of '**Recovery is my best revenge**'. We *are* allowed good things. There is pain, but there is also joy. Pain dominates as an evolutionary survival response, but the joy is there – it just needs cultivating.

So how you can do that in your life? We're not pretending the pain isn't there, or saying that it doesn't matter. But we're wanting to transcend it. The eagles are out there – somewhere. And so what have you hidden in your heart as a hope and a dream, perhaps even from childhood, that hasn't been fulfilled yet? Even if you can't yet dare

to hope for it, can you at least identify it? And if you do know what it is, can you tell yourself that you *are* allowed it. Then what will it take for it to come to fruition? What's your equivalent of a trip to the Highlands? What setting, what context are you most likely to see that dream become a reality?

And finally, what are the *drip drip drips* that you can do today and tomorrow and every day to fill the cistern so that it tips?

So that's all we have time for in this episode. Thank you for joining me. You can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, on Spotify, or you can listen direct from my website at [carolynspring.com/podcasts](http://carolynspring.com/podcasts).

I hope that helps, at least a little and speak soon!

