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reversing adversity 

DIVORCING OLD HABITS



by Carolyn Spring

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PATHWAY TO RECOVERY

It's coming up a year since my husband and I separated. The divorce came through in March. Twelve months ago I didn't imagine for one moment that life would look so different now. And I had no idea that I could not only survive, but actually thrive, through this process. I've surprised myself.

Rob and I met at the beginning of 2000. We became friends; we became best friends; we fell in love. We got married in 2001. The first few years were good, and we started fostering together in 2003. Then in 2005 I had a total, life-falling-apart breakdown, and out erupted all my dissociative symptoms and my traumatic past. Night after night, Rob was introduced to one after another of the

dissociative parts of my personality, most of them incoherent with the unbearability of trauma that, for so long unremembered, now refused to be forgotten. It was a difficult time. Rob, by his own admission, didn't respond very well. After a few months he threatened to leave me unless I 'sorted myself out'. He just didn't know how to cope with his once-so-competent wife now manifesting in a range of distressed and needy personalities.

I understood where he was coming from. And, after all, I wanted nothing more than to 'sort myself out' too. The only problem was that I had absolutely no idea how. I didn't have a name for what was 'wrong' with me. I didn't know why I was so distressed. I thought I was making up these 'memories' and 'flashbacks'. I didn't understand at all what was going on.



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Eventually I stumbled into a trainee counsellor's office and she quite simply said, 'I can help you.' I don't suppose she imagined at that point that she was going to spend the best part of the next decade helping me. Nor could she have anticipated just how much help I would need. But there I was, now in 'counselling' or 'psychotherapy' - this strange, unfamiliar land where two people sit in a room together and normal life is suspended and it is all very odd. But it was like a bright light at the end of a very dark tunnel - someone was saying that there was hope, and I grabbed a hold of it with both hands. I was willing to live off her faith while mine deserted me. I'm so glad I didn't know then just how difficult the next few years would be.

After a few months, seeing perhaps how much my distress was both contributing to and being caused by the difficulties in my marriage, she offered to see me and Rob together. We had perhaps two or three joint sessions. It had a massive impact: Rob felt understood and that he was no longer alone in dealing with me, and I had someone else explain for me that I wasn't doing any of this on purpose, and that there really was some big stuff in my past that was causing me to behave as I was. She gave us a book to read, and it spoke directly into our situation, with a metaphor about fighting the dragon together, side by side, rather than fighting each other. We resolved to move forwards, shoulder to shoulder, and over the next couple of years our marriage was transformed.

Then in 2010 we set up PODS. I wanted to train, to inform, to write the stuff that I so wished had been available for me to read 5 years previously, when I'd never even heard of dissociation. And Rob wanted to help partners who were in the same situation as he'd been in - lacking understanding and support, and therefore demonstrating a lack of understanding and support towards their dissociative partners themselves. So I began writing and speaking, and Rob set up the helpline and trained to be a counsellor. To start with PODS stood for 'Partners of Dissociative Survivors' but we soon realised that we were being contacted by far more survivors and professionals than partners, and so we widened our scope and renamed ourselves 'Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors'. The new name also reflected our nascent, passionate belief that recovery was possible and that life really could get better - with the right information and support.

And it grew. Beyond anything we'd ever anticipated, it grew. We started training together - a first, flagship course, called 'Living with Dissociation' aimed primarily at survivors and their partners, and then renamed to 'Living and Working with Dissociation' as we began to cater for the majority of our audience who were professionals. More courses followed, more resources, publications; the helpline was booked out every week, the training over-subscribed. Rob completed his counselling training and began to see clients. We took on new offices, new



staff, put lots of infrastructure in place, made plans for the future. It was hard work, but rewarding work. Everything was going well.

And then.

And then in September 2015 I found out that for the previous year Rob had been having an affair. I won't go into it – I want to honour him for the fifteen years of marriage we had, the love we shared, the work we established together. But that is not to excuse his duplicity, his selfishness, and his betrayal. It wasn't even that things were bad between us – not at all. It certainly wasn't anything to do with my trauma, or DID, or anything as easy to blame as that; it wasn't actually anything to do with me at all. It was just something in Rob that made some poor choices, then some more, and they snowballed until it was an avalanche.

Fundamentally I wanted to work it through. I'd made a commitment to love him, for better or worse, and although he had shattered my trust and broken my heart, I wasn't going to just walk away. We separated to see if we could work it through – rather than just glossing it over, pretending nothing had happened, 'dissociating' it, and then waiting to be surprised weeks or months or years later that the issues were still there. We had to work it through. He moved out, so that there could be a chance that he would move back in. We were amicable; we didn't shout or scream at each other; we met up at least weekly to talk things

through. I wanted to see if there was a way forwards, but fidelity was non-negotiable for me and some very basic things had to change. I put the onus on him to deliver that change. He pleaded with me for another chance; I offered the chance if I saw the change. I said I'd give it six months and then see where we were at. He resigned from PODS and that gave us some space from the day-to-day turbulence of what we did together at work. He returned to teaching. He kept on pleading with me to give him another chance. You can have the chance, I would say, but I need to see the change.

And then, after two months, despite his protestations that he was a different man, that he loved me and that he'd never hurt me again, I found out that the affair was ongoing. I discovered him in his lie, and it was a big one. I took advice; I thought it through; I said it was over, and he didn't object. Still we didn't scream and shout at each other; six months later the decree absolute was issued without contest, just before our wedding anniversary.

How do I even begin to describe what that process has been like? No, we didn't scream and shout at each other, but I wanted to. The facts, laid out like a table cloth, are sterile and still: they don't reflect the turmoil, the scalding shock of emotions, the terror of abandonment, the all-encompassing bewilderment of your worldview being turned upside down and the person that you love most



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in the world betraying you in the most dramatic way that they can.

But I'm not writing this as some cathartic splurge. I'm writing this because a lot of people wonder where Rob is – having seen him speak, having talked to him on the helpline, having met with him in person – and because I've learned more about myself in the last year than I have in a lifetime previously. And everything I have learned has a bearing on trauma and dissociation, and my hope for recovery.

In March 2016 I published my first book, in paperback – *Recovery is my Best Revenge*. How apt, and yet how challenging. I had previously published the first half of it on Kindle, but this was the real, hold-in-your-hand, finished article. When I found out about Rob's affair, I had three chapters left to write. I was scheduled to finish it within weeks. But emotional mayhem is not conducive to orderly words on a page.

Looking back now, I realise that the decisions I made in the first few hours and days were key. There were a few things I said to myself. The first was a prayer: Give me grace to deal with this. I've seen enough abuse in my life, dehumanising behaviour, people venting their rage, eviscerating each other out of hurt and malice and revenge. I didn't want to be like that. I wanted to respond with grace. An attitude of grace is a decision, in the face of abuse, not to become an abuser

in return. It's not about letting them off the hook (I still demanded change, and in the end I still filed for divorce) but it is about rising above the nastiness and refusing to be changed. You can do little to prevent the way people treat you in life, but you can choose your response. In the first few minutes after finding out about Rob's affair, I set myself – a deliberate, conscious orientation of my attitude and heart – to be gracious. I wasn't being 'good'; I was actually protecting myself. I knew that, whatever happened, I didn't want to look back and be ashamed of how I'd responded. Rob was the one who ought to be ashamed; I didn't want to share that shame. I wanted a clear conscience. Recovery is my best revenge, I kept saying to myself. That's the kind of person I want to be.

There was something incredibly empowering about that decision, to choose who I was going to be in response to who Rob had been. It meant that I got to define myself, rather than being defined by the actions of another person. I will not be a victim. It would have been so easy to fall into habits from the past and to begin the long liturgy of, This has happened because I'm bad; because I don't deserve to be loved; because bad things always happen to me; because it's my fault; because I'm a failure. But I made a decision that I wasn't going to do that. And somehow I knew that the only way I could survive this latest world-upside-down trauma was by holding firm to my sense of self, and having a strong, internal locus of



control. I'm not going to be a victim in this, I kept saying to myself, even while everything in me was crying out at the injustice and the hurt. This has happened because of who Rob is, not because of who I am.

Previously in life I had dealt with difficult stuff – the really difficult stuff of abuse – by dissociating, by pushing out of conscious awareness unbearable feelings, distancing myself from myself through the unconscious processes of depersonalisation. It had become a default reaction over many years which I had spent nearly a decade trying to unlearn. And now here I was, with unbearable feelings again. But this time, with a choice. Many times I felt the lure and the pull of falling away within myself, to absent myself mentally and emotionally, but I resisted it. I put into practice everything I had learned about grounding, and breathing, and self-compassion, and I determined that I would feel the feelings and let them work through. I'm not going to dissociate this away, spoke my mantra, even as I walked through the woods with tears rolling down my cheeks. It would be so much easier to, but I had to fight it. I didn't want short-term relief merely to end up in therapy again months or years later to have to process what I had failed to process at the time. I'm going to feel it NOW. Short-term pain for long-term freedom.

Similarly, in the past I had used alcohol and self-harm and overwork to numb

the pain. To counter this, I made decisions about not drinking, and I throttled back on work. I saw what I was going through as a bereavement, and I cut myself the slack to deal with it. I knew from everything I had studied that I would initially be super-charged and would find it hard to wind down; and then after a little while I would feel super-tired and would struggle to get out of bed. I anticipated my body's reaction and I made allowances and gave it what it needed. I used the super-charged phase to plan and clean and sort and do a dozen trips to the dump. And then in the super-tired phase I took it easy and went out in nature and remembered to just keep breathing.

I took care of myself, walking daily, eating as well as I could, having a good new routine for sleep. I attacked the problem rather than waiting to be attacked by it. I did everything I could to care for myself through it, rather than waiting for someone else to do that for me or falling into self-neglect and passive capitulation. For quite a while, most days, I cried at least once, sometimes a dozen times. The feelings would come out of nowhere – something would trigger them or nothing would trigger them. Sometimes they would elicit great heaving sobs of disbelief and a pain so deep I thought my guts were tearing open. When the feelings came, I allowed them to come, and I talked myself through it: These feelings are normal. You're grieving. It's okay to feel these feelings. Feelings are meant to be



felt. They feel like they'll go on forever, but they will pass. Don't believe what they're saying to you, because they will pass. Feel them, but don't act on them.

I would literally walk and talk myself through it. What do I need right now? I would ask myself and although the answers would feel like impossible demands (I need this not to be happening!), I did my best to nurture myself the best way I could. It occurred to me more than once that this was the real proof of the recovery I'd made – the way I was treating myself now compared to ten years, even five years, previously.

I refused to blame myself for the situation I was in, and I refused to feel sorry for myself either. Let's not go down the self-pity route, I kept saying to myself whenever the injustice and the wrongness and the cruelty of the circumstances overwhelmed me. I figured there was a big difference between self-pity and self-compassion. Self-pity destroys you from within; self-compassion builds you up, protects you, and soothes you. Self-pity brings death; self-compassion brings life. Self-pity has an ugly edge of bitterness about it, that it's not fair, that I'm going to protest and complain and moan and whine, whilst doing nothing to make the situation any better. Self-compassion has an empathic care, that sees this isn't fair, and feels deeply about it, but also refuses to be bowed by it, and seeks solutions and takes initiative. Self-pity says, There's nothing I can do to make

this better; self-compassion says, I'm with you, and we're going to get through this and make it all alright in the end. When feelings came up, I gave them space to be, but I also guarded against a narcissistic overwhelm of believing that I was the only person suffering in the world, and that my suffering was worse than anyone else's.

Very soon I realised that I had to both find myself, and define myself. For one thing, I had never lived alone. After University, I had always lived with friends or lodgers; then I got married, and we had lodgers and foster children. How would I fare on my own? I could see advantages and disadvantages. I still suffered post-traumatic nightmares at least weekly, and although Rob was rarely aware of them, his sleeping presence next to me was nevertheless comforting. What would I do now? How would I feel in terms of safety, living on my own? How would I manage with both working full-time, struggling still at times (especially now) with chronic fatigue and pain, and having both a house and a garden to manage? There were so many new habits to learn – I didn't come in from work, cook dinner, sit down to eat it with Rob and then (by default) spend the evening with him. What would I do instead?

So I set about redefining my life. I addressed issues of safety and privacy, improving lighting and security. I got a dog. As a puppy, she wasn't much of a bodyguard but she was a keen barker at



unexpected noise, she was there in the night when I woke disorientated from a nightmare, and she quickly became my closest friend and a great walking coach. I reached out to friends for support. I didn't like what was happening, but I knew it was important not to see myself as powerless in it all. It was important for me to make decisions and do something, to adapt, to face this head on, rather than sitting down in a puddle and just crying.

And I began to learn about what I liked. There is so much give-and-take, so much concession, in a relationship, and after fifteen years you don't notice most of it any more – you have deliberately moulded to much of what the other person wants, because you want them to be happy. And somewhere in that process you can lose a clear sense of who you are. Of course, this was ironic – I had never had a clear sense of who I was, although a lot of the work I had done in therapy was to answer just that question. But this was a new opportunity to say, What do I want? And so I focused even on the little things – I wanted a pair of wellies. Inconsequential, silly (albeit practical for dog-walking in winter), but just something that in a very mild way Rob had never wanted. Who am I? What do I like doing? I discovered I loved having a dog (something that Rob had been adamantly opposed to) and I loved being outdoors and I loved nature. Growing up I was a country girl; Rob had always been a townie. I had compromised willingly with him over

where we lived, where we holidayed – I'd wanted to please him, and he hadn't been coercive. But now I didn't need to. I could really search inside and say, What do I want to do? I wanted to be out in open spaces in nature with my dog – that's what I wanted to do. So that's what I began to do.

Three months after we separated, my therapy came to an end: therapist moving away, semi-retiring. I joked with her that after ten years she would have received a carriage clock, but she had worked with me for 9 ½ years, and I was grateful for all that she had given. At one level, the timing was awful, and I doubted whether I would cope with this double loss. But in another way, the timing was perfect. It was an opportunity to move on and enter a new phase of my life. I could view this as another setback, as traumatic, even as abandonment. Or I could take it as a challenge, something that, once worked through, would be another 'act of triumph', another source of resilience in my life. Again, attitude was everything.

I realised, in a deeper way than I had ever done before, that I alone was responsible for my life. Reiterating it to myself in this new situation – without family, without husband, without therapy – brought a new level of meaning to it. I really was on my own in this. Echoes of past traumatic aloneness tried to tell me that I couldn't deal with this, but I knew that I could – because things were different now. I



wasn't the child I was during the abuse. I had choices, and I had learned a great deal in the last decade, not just about my vulnerabilities but also about my strengths. But I alone was responsible for my life. No one else was going to come and sort it – there was a stark, bleached reality to that now. If I was unhappy, I would have to do something about it. I could sit down in a heap and shout and scream and hope that someone would hear me, feel sorry for me, and do something about it. But that route would mean a lot of effort, potentially for the rest of my life, to attract other people's attention and control their actions. It seemed more realistic to garner my own resources.

And I began to realise in a new way, too, how much this was actually the healing I needed – to be empowered to make my own choices, direct my own life, and be the adult that I undoubtedly was. So it wasn't a bad thing, to be in this place of naked aloneness: because if I could do life like this, on my own, with this hurt, then I could do life, full stop. Rather than intimidating me, the challenge inspired me. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do this – this had been the whole purpose of therapy, to equip me to conquer life. It felt like a final exam, a chance to show what I had been learning for nearly a decade.

So in many ways life became about problem-solving. If you really get it, that no one is going to fix the issues in your

life except you, you realise that the key is to get good at problem-solving. I feel alone – okay, so what can I do about it? I'm feeling unwell – okay, what can I do, whose opinion can I seek? The flashbacks aren't going away – okay, what do I need to know, what do I need to put in place? I'm struggling with feelings of self-harm and suicidality – okay, what works for other people, what might work for me, what are my options?

Dissociation, as an automatic, inbuilt survival mechanism, had helped me survive childhood trauma but had ill-prepared me for adult life. Its principal paradigm is avoid rather than approach; to be passive rather than active; to go still and do nothing, rather than leaping into action. It was a good strategy as a child, ensuring that I survived life-threatening trauma, but it was a poor one as an adult. The problem-solving approach was the opposite of dissociation – it required facing up to reality, rather than escaping from it; approaching the problem, rather than avoiding it; taking an active stance, rather than being passive. The thinking, clever front brain shuts down during dissociation; the problem-solving approach gets it back online. It is a reversal of deeply entrenched habits. It is so much of what therapy had been about.

And so over the last 12 months my life has been reformed. I didn't lose hope. I



didn't stop working. I didn't go back to old habits, of self-harm and switching and substance abuse. I set myself to work the problem. And as a result, nearly a year on, my life is transformed, but in such a positive way. I'm enjoying life at a new level; I have plans to enjoy it even more. I'm confident in myself – I can do life. I can cope on my own. I'm appreciative of friendship and support, but I can manage on my own. I'm happier than possibly I've ever been – because I know that I'm responsible for creating my own happiness, and that with faith and patience the plans I put in place towards that can come to fruition.

So what I have learned during this process? I have learned that I am resilient, and that resilience forms from the sediment of our habits, choices we make on a minute-by-minute basis to figure out ways to cope and solve the next problem in front us. I have learned that I alone am responsible for my life, but that that's a good thing because it

gives me freedom and autonomy, and the opportunity to determine my own destiny. I have learned that I can live according to my own view of myself, rather than as a victim of other people's actions against me, and that my stance towards myself can make the difference between being knocked down and staying down, or being knocked down and rising stronger. I have learned that feelings can be felt, and not just dissociated; however painful and overwhelming they may feel at the time, they do pass and the pain does lessen with time.

I wouldn't wish what happened to me on anyone else. It was intensely painful. But I survived it, and I'm less afraid of what the future might hold now than at any point in my life. I have no husband, no children, no family. But that's okay, because I know who I am now; I like who I am now; and I'm building the life I want for myself now. ●