



TRAUMATIC ALONENESS



by Carolyn Spring

Traumatic *aleness*. It's not loneliness. It's an aleness. And not just any kind of aleness. It's *traumatic* aleness.

People often think the word 'trauma' means 'bad'. We use it as a modifier – if something *really* bad, *really* distressing happens, we say it was traumatising.

But that's not actually what it means. In psychological terms, trauma is something that exceeds our coping capacities. It floods us, overwhelms us. And it changes us too. Trauma impacts our neurobiology – it changes the way we perceive and respond to threat so that we'll be better equipped to handle it the next time it comes along. So we're geared towards sensing danger in our environment and being ready to respond to it – with instant, blink-of-an-eye fight, flight or freeze. The problem is, we can get *too* good at it, and start shooting off all kinds of false positives.

So far, so obvious. Trauma changes us at a fundamental, cells-and-organs, neurons-and-noradrenaline kind of a way.

But what about traumatic *aleness*?

My contention is that at the moment of trauma – in the case of something like child sexual abuse, for example – one of the most traumatising, life-shattering parts of it is that we are entirely alone. We call out in the universe for someone to be there for us, and our call returns to us empty. We're on our own. The proximity we have to our abuser (invading us, flannelling all over us in rancid, stinking malice) just makes things worse. We want a person, a human being, to be with us in the midst of this suffering, and all we get is this putrid, human-being-gone-wrong.

Our brain is not imprinted forever with the deliciousness of rescue, the sweetness of a savour. Instead it is imprinted with



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malevolence. We are alone in the universe apart from this evil.

That's a tough gig.

It would be hard enough for an adult, but for a child ...? Alone, alone, traumatically alone. It's too much to bear. No wonder then that we dissociate and our mind holds aloft, out of reach of consciousness, this murdering of our soul.

And so forever we live with traumatic aloneness. It's a deep impression, like steel into melting wax, a conviction thereafter that when we're up against it, when we need another kindly human being, no one will be there for us.

It's hard to live with that fear. The trauma is bad enough, but the aloneness of the trauma is even worse.

This is why some people don't ever want to be left alone, why they step blithely into abusive relationships – because someone is better than no one. The perpetrator is better than aloneness. Annihilation is better than aloneness.

But not every kind of aloneness is toxic. Last year I found another sort. It's a

stretch of sand to the blue dab of horizon, the waves lap-lapping, just sky and wind and rocks and this supreme, delectable emptiness of the most beautiful place on earth. I can be alone there but it doesn't hurt. There's a wonder about it. There's no *glug-glug-glug* of terror. It's okay to be alone there. It's safe.

That's when I realised, on that strip of beach last year, that you can be alone but not feel alone, and you can be alone but not fear to be alone. There's traumatic aloneness, and nourishing aloneness, and the trauma from my past doesn't have to infect everything now with its furious terror. When we neutralise the trauma, we can experience life afresh: it really is okay to walk the shoreline alone. I'm not twisting inside with the agony of loneliness, because this isn't a bad moment: I've chosen to be here, I want to be alone, and the vista and the salt air are surging inside me with this joy of being alive.

Can you imagine *good* aloneness? Can you imagine *nourishing* aloneness? What might that be like? What do you need to do to create it? •

