Suffering and Forgiveness

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Parker Palmer writes, “We arrive in this world with birthright gifts – then we spend the first half our lives abandoning them or letting others disabuse us of them” (Palmer, Let Your Life Speak, 2000, p. 12). The first half of my life was filled with people who were not kind to my spirit. Honestly, they really were not kind to their own spirit, so I suspect they really did not know what I needed to grow and thrive. I have spent the second half of my life reclaiming my inner power which was built in the fires of suffering that forced an inner connection to God, faith in the Universe, and forgiveness of myself and others.

I grew up in a mentally and emotionally abusive family. My father has an undetermined mental illness that swings from depression to fits of paranoia and anger. If I guess at a diagnosis, I believe he is bipolar. He was hospitalized twice for mental breakdowns before I was ever born. My mother is codependent to his madness sacrificing her own well-being to help him. My memories of childhood involve a lot of hiding and strategically getting away from my father as dishes were thrown or holes were punched in the walls. As I grew into adulthood, my parents really did not encourage me to go to college or even to dream. Every time I would talk to my mom about my dreams, she would tell me all the scary things that could happen if I lived them.

I was the youngest of seven kids; as everyone else left the house and moved onto their lives, I became the caretaker of my parent’s dysfunction as the last remaining child. I married young, barely finished my bachelor’s degree, and had two kids right away. I was married for twenty years to a man that was incredibly critical of me every day. When I would talk to my mom about leaving and look for support, she would tell me how leaving him would be too detrimental to my kids and how I could not support myself if I did.

I tried leaving my ex-husband for the first time in 2004, but I did not have enough faith in myself or God to finish going through with it. I was living in North Idaho because of my husband’s employment – a place that was too small for my liberal and spiritual beliefs – and just across from Spokane where I could make weekly trips in to be the caretaker of my parents. When I could not muster the courage to leave my ex-husband, I shrank my own life once again and sunk into a depression of a life unlived, which later led to health problems. Victor Frankl writes,

Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man – his courage and hope, or lack of them – and the state of immunity of his body will understand that the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect. (Frankl, 2006, p. 75)

From 2007 until 2012, I went undiagnosed with a thyroid condition called Wilson’s Temperature Syndrome where my body was making an excess of Reverse T3 instead of T3 which has energy. All that I knew at the time was that I just did not have the energy for things anymore. The colder and more exhausted I became, the less I tolerated people and commitments that drained me.

In the midst of my illness in 2010, I finally began to see the level of my parent’s unhealthiness for me and my kids. My son stopped wanting to go to their house because when he did, the extended family often treated him like he was not worth talking to by dismissing his needs. Basically, he would get ignored. Then I began to notice how they dismissed me unless they wanted something from me. That same year, I invited my parents out to Idaho for my son’s first play; when the play was over, my dad was yelling at my ex-husband in the parking lot and my mom was angry with me in the building over really silly things and completely unrelated like why we did not buy pork from my dad.

What should have been a wonderful time watching my son perform turned into yet another toxic experience of the pressures of my dad’s mental illness and abuse. Ferch calls the behaviors of my family below-the-line thinking.

Fear and anger, unhappiness, chaos, and stress and effort define the lower levels of consciousness. If there is a line between immature and mature thought, between intellectual unconsciousness and the thoughtful life, between unthinking reaction and conscious purposeful action, then fear, anger, chaos, stress and effort are below this line. (Ferch, 2012, p. 125)

Shortly after my son’s play, I stopped answering the phone when my mom called. It was not that I was angry; hurt maybe, but not angry. I was too tired to be angry. I felt like my mind, body, heart and soul was just done. Completely done. I had no energy to fight or do more than the bare minimums. I walked away from five of my seven siblings simply because I had no energy for them anymore either.

The fatigued deepened as it began to affect my adrenals. I barely had enough energy to get through the day. In 2012 at the height of my sickness, I managed to push my ex-husband out of living in Idaho; he had grown unhappy with his job, so I had finally found a reason for us to move away. By the time I was diagnosed in Portland, Oregon, I was in full-blown adrenal fatigue, which took until 2014 to fully heal. I was sick for a total of seven years. For nearly three years of it, I often could not finish my sentences as I would lose my train of thought midway through. I was shivering on a hot summer days unable to get my body temperature about 97.3 degrees. My eyebrows and hair were falling out. My skin dry and scaly. When I ran errands, I took my kids with me because I could not remember a series of directions, so they would read the directions to me as we went. If I asked my ex-husband to drive me, he usually refused. If I went out for a few hours, I came home exhausted unable to move for hours. I rarely slept more than a few hours at night because of adrenal surges.

For seven years, my ex-husband did not notice that there was something wrong with me. When I was properly diagnosed, he did not even once try to help me get better; he never even looked up my condition. He just stayed critical, especially of my inability to do things the way he thought they should be done. In the moments that I would get less foggy as I began to heal, I would do hours of research trying to figure out how to get well. The fatigue would set in again, and the next day, I often forgot half of what I learned the day before and had to read it all over again.

I lived for years in the deepest of suffering losing both my mind and my body’s capacity for living an external life. Victor Frankl writes,

But there is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of high moral behavior: namely, in a man’s attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. (Frankl, 2006, p. 67)

One of the greatest gifts to the evolution of my own soul was years of suffering because when I could no longer live an external life, I began to deepen my internal one.

The same year that I left my family was the same year that I wrote my first book. I was meditating and had been reading Eckhart Tolle’s book called the New Earth. I realized as I was sitting on the couch that I had spent over ten years reading spirituality books trying to do everything they said I should do, but I did not feel any closer to God. I walked into my office and opened my closet of books, and I began to purge every book that told me how to be spiritual. I threw them away including Eckhart Tolle. I remember literally being on my knees praying to God that if He was there that I was listening. Two weeks after this prayer, I began to write about the energy dynamics of my family and began to listen to the voice of my own inner teacher for the first time. I finished the book in the midst of my deepest brain fog, so it is not the best of my writing. But writing that book became the anchor point to my connection with God as I was about to go through the hardest part of my suffering.

I know what it is like to be angry with God for allowing something bad to happen. One day, I felt betrayed by God as if God had created the illness within me. The next day, I would be back to praying to God for my healing. I swung from the deepest of despair wondering if I would spend the rest of my life in suffering to days filled with tenacity, hope, and courage of finding my way out of illness. I told God off on the same day that I also felt God’s love within me. As my mind settled into fatigue and brain fog, there was also a quietness within me. My monkey mind was quieter. I could feel and sense my own soul leading me. I discover an unwavering strength within me full of endurance, faith, and hope. Frankl writes, “In accepting this challenge to suffer bravely, life has a meaning up to the last moment, and it retains this meaning literally to the end” (Frankl, 2006, p. 114). If I was going to suffer, at least I knew that I was not truly alone in it because I had found God. With God, I could face my suffering bravely.

The move from Idaho to Portland saved my life. The very first doctor I saw in Portland properly diagnosed me, which I know is an answer to my prayers. Being properly diagnosed was almost worse because I began to have a few hours a day where the fog and fatigue would lift. Until that moment, I did not have the self-awareness to realized how ill I had become. As I became clear for a few hours, I could how devastated my own life was. I could finally see just how little support my ex-husband gave me. I slowly became deeply angry that he did not even notice that the essence of me was gone. I thank God for that anger because it became the metal for which I could finally galvanize a new life for myself. Without my mother’s negativity the second time around, the deep hurt that I had from my ex-husband gave me the courage to finally divorce him early in 2014. Once the divorce was complete, I spent much of the rest of last year learning to heal that anger and move into forgiveness.

We moved at my urging to Las Vegas in 2013, a year into my healing. Two months later, I began to rebuild my own life. Parker Palmer writes, “We grow toward true self in a space where our growth is not driven by external demands but drawn forward, by love, into our own best possibilities” (Palmer, 2004, p. 60). It is not an accident that once I began to live my own soul, I became fully well. I started seminary in September of 2014 and graduate school a month later. I opened my spiritual center in December, which was the same month I told my ex-husband I wanted a divorce. I began to volunteer for the Interfaith Council of Southern Nevada that same fall, which is now where I work as their Executive Director. I proudly completed seminary last month and am an ordained interfaith minister. Most importantly now, when I come home, I have peace because there is no one in my life bringing me down anymore.

Coretta Scott King writes how Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that there are three levels of completeness within a man’s life. The first is the development of a person’s inner powers; second is concern for our fellowman; third is an unwavering connection to God (King, 1993, p. 6). Through suffering, I found my connection to God. Through seminary, I found my service. It took a lot longer to find my inner power. I had to go through challenge and difficulty to find it. Last year, I closed my spiritual center, went through unpaid unemployment, and received food stamps for three months just so I could feed my kids. I pulled myself up from all of those setbacks after the divorce and found a power within me to get back on my feet again on my own. I look back to who I was a year ago, and I am a completely different person with a sense of adventure, faith, and authority.

Last week, I was talking to my teenage daughter about a friend that I recently met. As I had described the kind of person he is I mentioned a few times that he is a great dad and really involved in his daughter’s life. My daughter became really defensive about him, which was unlike her. I could see tears sitting behind the stubbornness in her eyes. I asked her what the tears were really about. They began to well as she talked about her dad no longer takes the time to see her. He stopped coming by to pick her up in January even though he only lives a few miles from us; he already remarried. As she cried, I cried. I looked her in the eyes, held her hand, and told her that I was so sorry that I was not healthy enough to bring healthy men in my life. I am so sorry that my choice in her dad was probably less than stellar. I said I am so sorry that you are hurt. Then I said with conviction how she deserves to have men in her life that are safe and loving. She deserves good and kind love. I repeated those two lines a few times. I promised her in that moment that I would make sure that I am discerning about who I bring in our lives. I told her that I finally knew what it was like to live free of anger and that I would not allow that in either of our worlds ever again. She cried with me holding her hand for a few more moments. She did not say much, but I think she understood that I am different now. I held her until her heart healed a little bit from the wound of me and her dad.

The hardest part of me not having my connection to my own inner power is seeing what the effects have been on my kids, which is requiring a great deal of self-forgiveness as well. When I knew better, I did better. Parker Palmer writes, “We are disabused of original giftedness in the first half of our lives. Then – if we are awake, aware, and able to admit our loss – we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed” (Palmer, Let Your Life Speak, 2000, p. 12). I spent the first half of my life suffering the loss of the expression of my soul. I am spending the rest of my life reclaiming and restoring it in myself, my kids, and the people I serve. My deepest hope is that my life now and moving forward will be an example for my kids and give them permission to only allow the kind and loving relationship in, the faith to persevere, and the courage to allow suffering to change them.

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