Feelings

MJ Barker

Introduction

Welcome to my free book on feelings. These free books are collections of the pieces and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

Several of my zines, and my free book on trauma, cover various feelings, and feeling practices, in more depth.

Note that some of these pieces were written over a decade ago now, and before many of the most profound shifts that the world - and I - have recently been through. I hope that it is of interest to see how my ideas have evolved over this period. But please do be mindful of the context in which they were written as they may not always represent either my own, or culturally current, thinking/practice on these topics.

If you enjoy the book, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

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Being with Feelings

Inside Out: Getting in Touch with Our Emotions

July 2017

This weekend I saw the new Disney Pixar movie *Inside Out*. I'm a big fan of Pixar already, particularly because their previous films have explored huge existential themes like death and the meaning of life, and because they often celebrate friendship and chosen families rather than the romantic relationships and biological families that so much mainstream media focuses on. That's a big deal in a set of films that are also massively accessible and entertaining for children and adults alike.

When I saw that the main characters in *Inside Out* were a person's emotions I knew that I absolutely had to go see it. I wasn't disappointed. In fact several times I was moved to tears by how familiar the experiences were, and by this hugely important, complex, and rarely-expressed message being communicated so simply and profoundly in a 'kid's film'.

If you'd rather not be spoilered for the movie then please do go see it before reading the rest of this post. Also do be aware that it may well tap into lots of different emotions as you're watching it – if you're anything like me – not just the joyful ones. As we'll go on to see that may not be a bad thing!

The rest of this post is divided into three sections:

- Experiencing all of our emotions
- Shutting down our emotions
- How to sit with our emotions: A practical guide

Experiencing all of our emotions

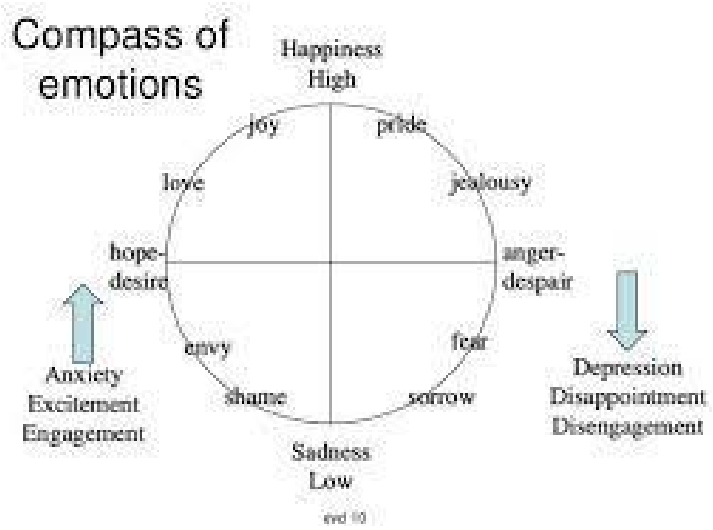
Inside Out follows an eleven-year-old, Riley, and her emotions – Joy, Sadness, Disgust, Anger and Fear – as her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco. Previously her inner world has been dominated by Joy. Joy has made it her business to ensure that Riley remains as happy as possible, building up a store of mostly joyful memories which have, in turn, shaped her personality. However, following the house-move, many of these memories become tainted by Sadness – who can't seem to stop herself from touching them and turning them blue.

In her attempts to prevent Sadness from causing any more damage, Joy manages to get both of them ejected from the control room to the outer reaches of Riley's inner world. This leaves Anger, Fear and Disgust in charge while Joy and Sadness try everything they can to get back before Riley runs away from her new home.

The message of the movie is that we require *all* of our emotions: not just the so-called positive ones. We soon realise that Joy's tendency to ignore and suppress Sadness is actually getting in the way of them finding their way home. It seems like things work pretty badly when just one of the emotions takes charge, and much better when they all work together through being equally valued.

One of the most poignant moments in the movie is when Riley's old imaginary friend is devastated to realise he's lost his last chance ever to be with Riley. Joy's attempts to cheer him up or force him to keep going fail. However, when Sadness sits with him and shows that she understands how hard it is for him, he's able to experience his own sadness, to cry, and eventually he's ready to move again.

The theory that kept coming back to me as I watched the movie was Emmy Van Deurzen's compass of emotions. In this, Van Deurzen imagines the emotions on a wheel which we travel round all of the time, moving from 'high' feelings like joy and pride, through anger and fear to low feelings like sadness, and then up the other side through envy and hope, to joy again.



Critically, Van Deurzen argues that we need to be able to experience *all* of the emotions to go around the compass like this. If there are emotions which we shut down or avoid then we're likely to get stuck in certain places. Paradoxically, as in *Inside Out*, if we disallow one emotion – like sadness – we're likely to become stuck and find that we stop experiencing joy much too. If we lose the capacity to experience some of the emotions entirely – as when Sadness and Joy are lost in the film – we risk falling into depression and all of our emotions becoming shut off. This is rightly depicted as the darkest moment in *Inside Out*.

It may not be that we always move in the same direction on the compass, or that certain emotions always follow others. Indeed, as *Inside Out* shows, we can often experience seemingly opposing emotions at the same time (e.g. joy and sadness, anger and hope, fear and determination). Indeed, when the first memory comes in that reflects these kinds of mixed feelings we see that it is perhaps even more beautiful and valuable than some of the ones which reflected only one of the basic emotions on its own.

Shutting down our emotions

The problem is that, through our lives, most of us learn that certain emotions are not acceptable: either to express or – often – even to experience.

This is what moved me to tears several times during the film as I remembered moments in my own childhood and adolescence when – like Riley – I learnt that certain feelings were unacceptable. It made it even more powerful that – for me like Riley – a critical time was the sudden experience of starting a new school with strange and different rules. However, of course, these moments are different things for different people, they happen at different points in life, and they can be gradual, or sudden, or both.

The film underlines what a terrible impact such messages can have as elements of Riley's personality – that we've previously enjoyed watching – turn grey and gradually disintegrate entirely when her emotions are lost. Most devastating for me was the moment when Goofball Island disappeared. Now that it wasn't safe for Riley to experience all of her feelings there was no way that she could goof about in the way she used to as a child.

Where does this shutting down come from? We can see it on multiple levels like those I wrote about in the recent zine that I posted about here.

On the outer level our wider culture gives us strong messages about which emotions it's okay to feel and which it isn't. Generally in western cultures we're encouraged to have happiness and 'positive' emotions and not 'negative' ones. The British 'stiff upper lip' also discourages expressions of fear. And messages also differ depending on our individual identities, with certain emotions being seen as more or less acceptable for people of certain genders, classes, ages, or nationalities, for example.

On the next level in, our communities and institutions also reinforce many of these messages. In the movie we see how, in her new school, it isn't acceptable either for Riley either to show too much enthusiasm for the things she's passionate about, or to show sadness about what she's lost. The cool girls will judge her for it. It's easy to find ourselves joining in this kind of tone-policing in our communities – of whatever kind – whereby certain emotions are deemed unacceptable to admit to or express – for certain people or across the board. It's worth being mindful of this whenever we find ourselves judging how somebody 'should' or 'shouldn't' feel about something.

At the interpersonal level we learn a great deal about acceptable and unacceptable feelings from our close relationships, particularly from the family and friends who are around us growing up. In *Inside Out* Riley's parents inadvertently give her the strong sense that they appreciate her being happy and strong during the house move. She takes this as a message that it isn't okay to be struggling in any way about it. Riley is even described as their 'happy girl': fixing her in this way. We then see how Riley's – and Joy's – attempts to keep her joyful tragically have the opposite effect. By trying to sustain her joyful persona in the face of great pain she actually becomes angry, anxious and cut-off, and risks losing the love of her parents as they don't recognise her any more. In another key moment Riley's old friend doesn't seem to realise how envious Riley will be of her new friendship. When envy doesn't feel acceptable, Riley goes straight to anger, and ends the friendship.

How to sit with our emotions: A practical guide

Fortunately for Riley, Sadness and Joy are able to make it back to the control room – once Joy recognises the value of Sadness. Then Riley is able to take the risk and show her parents how sad and frightened she is. Even more fortunately, perhaps, her parents are able to accept her emotions, to share some of their own, and to let her see that they love her as much when she's sad as they do when she's happy.

Most of us are not so lucky. Our parents – and the other close people in our lives – live in the same wider culture as we do with all of its crappy messages about unacceptable feelings. They're also part of institutions and communities that have done a number on them. And they're in their own family systems wherein certain emotions have been deemed too dangerous or threatening. So they may well have responded to moments like Riley's by giving us a clear message that our fear, sadness, anger, joy, disgust, or other feelings, were not something that they could be around, or even that they couldn't love us if we expressed them.

We will have internalised this. Either we'll have managed to find a way of shutting down those emotions entirely, or – perhaps – in trying to shut them down we'll have managed to make them shout even more loudly so we've become defined by them. Or a bit of both. There are so many ways that this can go.

The urgent question is what we can do now. Here we are, as adults, with all these imbalances, exaggerations, and silences in our emotional states. What can we do about it?

The answer that many different therapies, meditation practices, and belief systems have come up with is the idea of 'sitting with' our emotions. I'll briefly describe one of these practices – a person-centred therapy technique called focusing – here, but there are several similar practices in other therapeutic and spiritual approaches if this one doesn't work for you.

Focusing reveals perhaps the main flaw which I found in *Inside Out* which is the fact that the emotions are located in Riley's brain and not in her body. It's good that *Inside Out* doesn't

buy into the popular idea that emotions and rationality are separate things. Instead it expresses the existential view that we're *always* in emotion: propelled towards things or away from things by our feeling states. However, the film does buy into another 'dualistic' split: that of separating the mind and the body, and seeing the mind as the most important bit. Actually, this kind of focus on the mind can be part of how we lose touch with our emotions: We stop being able to tune into our bodily sensations and the important things we can learn from these about our feelings, and instead try to figure things out, or fix things, on a purely intellectual level.

In focusing practice the attention is right on these bodily states. It's most basic form goes like this:

- Sit comfortably and quietly and bring your attention slowly to your body and how it's feeling.
- Ask what wants your attention. Focus in on any sensation that you notice in your body (a tightness of the throat, a clenched stomach, or a sense of emptiness, for example).
- Say 'hello' to that sensation: welcome it warmly, like Sadness sitting down with Riley's imaginary friend.
- Really listen to the sensation, try to find the best way to describe it (e.g. it's like a dense ball stuck in my throat).
- Check back in with the sensation to see whether that description fits well enough, or whether you need to change it or add to it (e.g. it's not just stuck, it's like it's rammed in there, like a cork in a bottle).
- Sit with the feeling, with interested curiosity, not trying to change it, or to force it to communicate: just being with it gently and curiously. Try to understand it from *it's* point of view. Notice any words, images, or metaphors that come to mind. In focusing books and websites you can read about different questions that you could ask it at this point, if it feels okay to do so.
- When it feels ready to finish you can express gratitude to the feeling, and to your body, and reassure it that you'll keep coming back to listen to it – and other feelings – in this friendly way.

Going back to *Inside Out* this is a lot like Riley actually giving kind attention to each of the emotions inside her whenever any of them want her attention, instead of putting one of them in charge, or trying to get rid of others. However, when we do this practice what we often find is that the feelings we become aware of are the ones that are preventing us from feeling other feelings (like Joy in the movie). You might start feeling a sensation of fear or sadness, for example, and then a strong feeling of anger or disgust at yourself for having that feeling. When we have these feelings-about-feelings the thing to do is to sit with *them* just as gently and curiously as with the original feeling. It can help to remind ourselves that – like Joy in *Inside Out* – these feelings are trying to keep us safe, even if what they are actually doing is the opposite.

Of course, given how many years most of us have spent suppressing and avoiding certain emotions, it can take a while to open up this kind of line of communication. Practices like

focusing can feel very unfamiliar at first and can take a while to get the hang of. There are ways of doing them with a friend, or with a therapist, if that feels easier and more supported than doing them alone.

However I am convinced of the power of these kinds of practices. Elsewhere I wrote about what happened last year when I sat and noticed a couple of feelings that usually felt too overwhelming, or too insignificant, to sit with.

Earlier this year I went to a focusing workshop. In the first practice I found it fascinating to see how my own throat tightness shifted and opened up when I finally gave it some gentle attention. In the second practice I used focusing to go back to a specific memory when I hadn't treated myself very kindly. sitting with the memory I suddenly became aware of a side of myself that I hadn't seen there before: A playful side of myself that wanted to do something silly and outrageous to cut through the situation. I got a strong image of Mr. Tickle from the Mr. Men books. So much so that I went out a bought myself a Mr. Tickle mug the following week. Perhaps my own Goofball Island hasn't been completely destroyed after all!

Find out more

- The ideas in the post are also presented in my Staying with Feelings zine.
- You can find out more about the compass of emotions in this book and video by Emmy Van Deurzen.
- A great book about the messages we receive about emotions is Transforming Emotion by Glenda Fredman.
- If you want to find out more about focusing practising, The Power of Focusing by Ann Weiser Cornell is an excellent introduction to it (and nowhere near as wacky as it looks from the cover!) There are also lots of resources on The Focusing Institute and British Focusing Association websites.

Dealing with the tough stuff: The value of noticing

December 2014

This blog post has been bubbling away for a while. I want to write about the process that I've found helpful when struggling with difficult feelings. This week it's been so useful that I almost wanted to give this post a ridiculously bold title like 'Noticing: The answer to everything!' but I restrained myself because I'm aware that different things work for different people at different times and it might not be for everyone. I'm putting this out there now in the hope that it could be useful to some readers as something to weave into your life, or as a way of thinking through what you're already doing.

I've come across different versions of this process in a number of places. It forms the basis of several therapeutic approaches (particularly many existential, humanistic and psychodynamic forms of therapy) and it's also fundamental to the Buddhist mindful approach which I find so helpful, and to various other kinds of meditation. But I've also noticed that many friends and clients have developed something along these lines more spontaneously, without necessarily following a particular approach.

I would summarise the process something like this:

Noticing -> Understanding -> Engaging

The core idea is that before going on to attempt to understand a situation, or to engage with it, it is important to fully notice it. Another way of putting it is that any time you find yourself struggling, you just go back to noticing.

Why is noticing so important? One of my favourite authors, Pema Chödrön, uses the metaphor of a glass of dirty water. This one particularly connects with me because I often start my days watching the Thames, which is, as we know from The Kinks, a 'dirty old river'! I imagine a glass of Thames water in front of me. It is murky and unclear because it's all churned up with mud and silt and rubbish. We can't see anything clearly when it's like that, so what we have to do is to let it be still for a period of time. That allows the dirt to settle at the bottom of the glass and the water on top to become clear.

Pema suggests that part of why we often don't want to allow this to happen is the fear that we have of what we might see once it all settles. I imagine that the bottom of the Thames is a pretty scary place with all the junk and slime and probably even skeletons that have accumulated there over the years. What might loom at you out of the murky gloom if you gave it the chance? But the point is that any kind of understanding of our own accumulated mess – and the things we've tried to bury in there – is only possible if we allow the water to settle.

Rushing past noticing

Generally when I'm struggling with something I don't give things time to settle – quite the opposite. My habitual response is generally to rush to either the engaging or the understanding parts of the process.

I think that rushing to engage is probably the most common one for me. I start my day with something bothering me from the previous day, or just a general sense of anxiety, unease or irritation. Instead of giving that any time I get straight into my work. Or perhaps I'm at the end of the day and something that's happened is troubling me but I just launch into watching TV or socialising. When I do that, often there is a sense of something under the surface which is getting bigger and more frightening the more I try to push it down under all the busy-ness and distractions. When I finally stop work or turn of the TV it can feel much more fearsome than it did at the start, and I often realise that I haven't really been present to whatever I was working on, or enjoying what I was watching, because it is nagging away in the background.

Rushing to engage also often takes the form of trying to stop the feeling before it gets a hold by reacting immediately. This is what happens when I respond straight away to a difficult email, or I lash out at somebody who has upset me, or I make a snap decision about a tough situation. Often when that happens I'm aware that I haven't dealt with the situation as well as I might have: I've passed the difficult feeling on to someone else in a crappy kind of domino effect, or I've exacerbated a problem rather than helping with it. The idea of *refraining* from acting until I've spent some time noticing is helpful to me in these situations.

The other alternative to rushing to engage is rushing to understand. This is something I often do when my emotions are particularly painful: feeling really low, panicky, or angry, for example. I'm very troubled by how tough it feels. It doesn't seem to make any sense to feel this bad. I'm desperate to understand it because I think that will stop the feeling. What often happens is that I end up going round and round and round analysing it and trying to find an answer. It's easy then to layer more and more difficult feelings on top of the original feeling. I'm worried about feeling down; and then I'm angry at myself for being worried about feeling down; and then I'm depressed at the fact I'm angry at myself for being worried about feeling down – and on and on and on.

The struggle to understand can easily land me in a place where I decide there must be something wrong with me for having this out-of-proportion reaction, or there must be something wrong with the external circumstances in my life (this job is bad, this relationship

is wrong, it's this other person's fault). So I can tip into either depression or conflict with another person or situation.

What is noticing?

An alternative to rushing to either engage or to understand is to slow down and stay with the original feeling or situation, and just to focus on noticing it. Each time I feel drawn to trying to understand it, or to get up and *do* something, I can try to bring myself back to the original experience and just really notice what it is like.

When I have managed to do this there is a real sense of things beginning to clear like the water in the glass. A kind of understanding begins to emerge naturally from the process of noticing, in a very different way than when I'm attempting to force myself to understand what is going on. By the end of the process I can have a much clearer sense of how to engage, often becoming aware that there are many options and that nothing has to happen immediately.

It's important to emphasise though that it is often extremely hard to stay with difficult emotions and experiences like this. There's a reason why we rush to distract ourselves or try to force the feeling to go away. This noticing is such a radically different approach that it takes time to cultivate.

Pema suggests that noticing involves regarding difficult feelings as friendly and supportive rather than as fearsome and threatening. That is one of the hardest parts for me. In the last week I've tried to approach two of my least favourite emotions in this way: one I call 'the plummet' which feels like falling into a deep dark pit of despair and self-loathing with no warning and no time to catch hold of the sides. The other is a kind of gritty grainy feeling of being slightly bored and pissed off and bothered by everything. Neither of those states feels friendly to me. I do not want to look at them closely. I just want to find a way never to experience the plummet ever again, and to shake off the grainyness when it comes on.

But this week I tried to just be with the feelings and notice them, trying to describe their texture, temperature and colour; really experiencing the sensations that arose in my body; widening out to notice how they unfold in time (What happens immediately beforehand? What is the overall situation I'm in when they happen? How do they tend to play out?) I tried to assume that the feelings *were* sensible, helpful things to have happened, it was just that I didn't know yet *why* they were sensible, and I needed to listen more carefully and kindly to them until they did make sense: however long that took.

I found that after some time of staying with them, and curiously noticing them in this way, lots of things started to occur to me that hadn't before. It was like a process of joining the dots as all sorts of connections started to come to me. There was a feeling of weight lifting and being able to see things much more clearly and calmly for a while.

How could we build this into our lives?

I think there are two major challenges to building such noticing practices into our lives. The emotional challenge is that it is generally the very last thing that we actually feel like doing when we feel bad. The practical challenge is about when and how we actually do it.

Pema suggests that it can be good to start with emotions that are not *too* difficult rather than launching in with the really tough stuff. You can even start when you're not actually in that emotional state, but rather when you're feeling okay. Just remembering the last time you felt a bit bad and trying to notice what it was like. You can just do it for a few minutes at first, and then do the same thing for a positive emotion to balance it out a bit. In this way the process of noticing can be gradually built in in ways that don't feel too threatening.

Another important thing is giving ourselves time for these processes. Often when a tough thing hits we're not in a position to go off for an hour and sit with it. We might not even get that opportunity for several days. So what I've started to do is to ask other people in my life for time, and to give time to myself. So, for example, if a difficult issue comes up, I ask the other people concerned to let me slow down and think about it for a while, and I also schedule in some time for myself to do that. And if that isn't enough I ask for more or give myself longer. I've got a list of decisions that I want to consider and conversations that I want to have with people and a rough idea of when I'm going to get to them (some this week, some next month, some next year!)

As for the question of when we do these practices, obviously it is tough to build noticing into busy lives, and I know that I'm extremely privileged to have a job which is more flexible than most and which actually involves thinking and writing about this kind of stuff regularly. Different things definitely work for different people, but I find it helpful to have some check-in time for noticing at the start of the day. I take a cup of coffee outside wherever I am and sit for however long I have available. I often find it helpful to read or listen to a helpful book for a while beforehand, often on the journey to wherever I'm going that day, to get me in the right state of mind.

Something that I'm sure would be helpful, but which I struggle to do, is to take a few minutes out for noticing whenever something difficult bubbles up during the day. People sometimes use such moments to go to the bathroom and have a couple of minutes breathing space alone. Similarly the end of the working day can be a good point to take ten minutes before embarking on the evening, and/or it can be good to take some time just before going to sleep. I should emphasise that I do none of these things regularly myself – it is not easy! Also I've avoided using the word 'meditation' here. That can be offputting because it sounds like a 'special' kind of practice and can come with a lot of baggage. Whilst I have found formal meditation to be a good place for noticing, the most helpful noticing I've had recently happened while I was sitting on a train looking out of the window and listening to music on my phone. Other people find that they do noticing on long walks, or while they're cycling or driving, for example.

Noticing doesn't have to be a completely internal thing. I've always found that writing helps me a lot with it. So I take an hour in a café once a week to write in a journal about all the things that are going on, trying to focus on describing them rather than attempting to figure them out. A combination of just sitting and reflecting for a while and then writing can help. Drawing or other forms of expression work better for other folks. And, of course, some people use therapy as a place to do this kind of noticing with another person to guide them through the process (finding the right person, who you have a good rapport with, and who helps you to create such a space, is the key here). Or you can set up times with friends where you'll each take turns to help the other person to talk through what's going on for them, with a focus on noticing rather than trying to explain or solve the problem.

Sometimes what you notice when you are noticing is that the thoughts and feelings you're having just shift and change by themselves; other times the noticing leads to more of a sense of the water settling and seeing things more clearly; sometimes all you notice is just how hard noticing is, and how you spend the whole time drifting off, or trying to analyse it, or wanting to stop. And if those things happen then they, in themselves, become something to notice.

Find out more

There's more about how to do these practices in my zines on Staying With Feelings and Plural Selves.

Happiness

The H-word

May 2012

On May 22nd the magazine DIVA and the mental health charity PACE held an evening event called *The H-word*. The H-word in question is happiness, and the plan was to have a discussion about happiness, health and well-being and about how people can support each other towards 'happier, more meaningful lives', with a particular focus on lesbian, bisexual and queer women.

The focus on lesbian, bisexual and queer women is appropriate because both women, and lesbian, bisexual and queer people, are particularly highly diagnosed with mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (when compared with men, on the one hand, and heterosexual people on the other). They also self-report higher levels of distress and lower levels of happiness and well-being than other groups.

My brief presentation at the event focused on the social aspects of such suffering. Women's experiences of depression have been linked, for example, to the ways in which women are socially expected to demonstrate distress (sadness and fear, rather than anger), and to aspects of conventional femininity such as having identities which are strongly bound up with other people's well-being and feeling a lack of agency over their own lives. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people have higher rates of such problems because of the challenges of living within a heteronormative world and related experiences of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Recent research has found that rates of depression, self-harm and suicide are particularly high amongst bisexual and queer people, which is likely linked to their lack of visibility in wider culture. It is difficult indeed to have one's identity questioned, ridiculed, and/or disregarded by heterosexual and lesbian and gay communities alike.

Suffering is often exacerbated when distress which has such a strong social component is regarded as being something which is internal to the individual themselves. Currently there is a powerful cultural tendency to see all distress as being internally caused. Many people believe that when they are depressed or anxious there are only two possible ways of understanding this: Either they are ill, and they need help, but at least this means that it is not their fault. Or they are not ill, and therefore don't need help, but this means that they are to blame for their own suffering (the 'pull your socks up' attitude). Both of these understandings are internal: either there is something physically wrong, or there is some kind of personal deficiency on the part of the individual. Such understandings can prevent us from seeing – and addressing – any social element to our suffering. They also catch us in a double bind whereby we have to accept that there is something wrong with us or that we are blameworthy, neither of which is a great outcome. Also, either understanding continues to haunt the other even if we dismiss it. If we accept that we are ill we often worry that somebody will discover that we are not really ill and will be 'found out' for faking in some

way. If we accept that it is up to us to deal with our problems we often fear that there might really be something wrong with us and that that will be exposed.

An alternative to this internal perspective is to see all forms of human distress as complexly biopsychosocial. Of course there are some physical vulnerabilities which we have to experience distress in certain ways, and social experiences like being the victim of prejudice write themselves on our psychology and biology in various ways (affecting brain chemistry, thought patterns, and the way neurons wire up, for example). However, our biology is intrinsically interwoven with the ways in which we experience the world, and the ways in which it treats us. The statistics on mental health problems in women and LGBT people alert us to just how important these social aspects can be, and may leave us asking whether 'depression' or 'oppression' is the more useful word to apply. Opening up the possible role of social forces also opens up potential for other ways of addressing struggles than the common individual modes of drugs or therapy. Both community involvement and activism because important possibilities to consider.

This finally leads us to the H-word and why I find it somewhat troubling. We hear a lot at the moment about the importance of individuals achieving happiness through positive psychology. However, there is a real danger that this throws us back into an internal understanding of such things: 'Everyone should be happy and here are some techniques you can use to achieve it. If you can't achieve it then there is something wrong with you'.

In her book, *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed talks about the ways in which happiness may be more available to some rather than others (often those who can more easily conform to the 'norm'). She suggests that we require 'feminist killjoys' and 'unhappy queers' if we are to reach a more equal society where pleasure isn't always found at the expense of others or by conforming to problematic power hierarchies.

There is a related idea in the mindfulness approach which I find useful. Buddhists believe that it is actually the craving for happiness which is the cause of suffering. Our consumer culture constantly tells us what we need to be happy (more money, fame and success, the perfect partner, the ideal body, the product they are selling etc.). As Sara Ahmed points out, such things are more accessible to some than others, but even for those who can get them they are never enough. Mindfulness advocates an alternative approach of bringing our attention to the here-and-now, rather than constantly striving after whatever we think we need to be happy. It also advocates being with whatever emotions we're experiencing rather than privileging one (happiness) over all others.

I was interested that the H-word event description talked about finding 'happier, more meaningful lives' as if these two things necessarily go together. From another perspective we might regard constantly grasping after happiness as the very thing which will prevent us from achieving it. It might be that in order to have a meaningful life we need to let go of the quest for happiness. If we turn our focus to welcoming all emotional states and what they have to tell us, and to compassionately seeking to improve society through mutual support, perhaps we may find that happiness sneaks up on us after all.

What is happiness and is it something useful to strive for?

March 2011

Bo Jacobsen's paper What is happiness? The concept of happiness in existential psychology and therapy, was published in the journal *Existential Analysis* in 2007. Here I will present a brief overview of the paper and then summarise a discussion that I had with colleagues at the Northern Existential Group about the nature of happiness and what an existential perspective might have to offer on the subject.

Perspectives on happiness

Mainstream psychology and sociology

Jacobsen highlights the recent trend within psychology and sociology to focus on happiness, something which has increased further since the publication of his article with the development of the positive psychology movement and the proposal of a happiness index as a measure of a society's success by politicians.

According to Jacobsen, sociologists have been concerned with surveying how happiness varies across cultures finding, for example, that Northern Europeans are happier than Southern Europeans. Noting that such divisions rarely reflect everyday observations of the levels of joy in such areas, Jacobsen cites social psychologist, Michael Argyle, who suggests that the statistics are more to do with whether it is acceptable to express unhappiness. For example, in Northern Europe, cultural expectations are that we should be happy because we have nothing to complain about.

Psychologists turned to happiness because they noticed a tendency in their discipline to focus on the negative (antisocial behaviour, emotional difficulties, etc.). They measure happiness on rating scales and equate it with certain physiological states (such as endorphin release, or activity in certain areas of the brain). A focus has been on basic activities which can improve happiness. Jacobsen lists things like 'smiling at people', 'having coffee' and 'being told I am loved', whilst positive psychologist Martin Seligman has since proposed happiness exercises such as remembering three positive experiences at the end of every day, writing a gratitude letter and delivering it personally, and finding a main strength that you have and applying it in a different arena (to cite three that have been found to be particularly effective).

Jacobson criticises such psychological and sociological approaches for taking a mechanistic view of humans (as capable of being programmed to be happy), which leaves no room for free choice of conscious decisions, he then turns to humanistic psychology.

Humanistic psychology

In the 1950s, German psychologist Charlotte Bühler studied happiness over the lifespan and applied Husserl's concept of intentionality to the topic. She understood this as people's attempt to find meaning in life, and located unhappiness in neglecting, or being unable to realise, important life-goals.

Bühler suggested that we develop identity and ability to choose in childhood, which enables us to make preliminary choices about life-goals in our early adulthood. These become more specific between 25 and 40 and are reviewed after this point to determine how we spend our remaining adulthood. The end of life is a period of reflecting on how successful we have been in relation to these goals. Therefore our happiness is strongly related to how we interpret our lives in relation to our intentions and values.

Jacobsen critiques the humanistic perspective for viewing the individual as separate and driven by internal forces, rather than rooted in their sociocultural and material context. This limits which of our many possible goals we are able to achieve.

Existentialism

Turning to existential perspectives on happiness, Jacobsen relates this strongly to death anxiety, which writers such as Rollo May have linked to the degree to which life is felt to have been fulfilled or not. Unhappiness can be rooted in the existential guilt of not having lived life fully, whereas those who are happy – according to Jacobsen – would accept their death serenely. Our group was somewhat sceptical of this idea, feeling that all choices involve saying 'yes' to something and 'no' to something else, so we would always have existential guilt no matter how well our life was lived.

Drawing on Medard Boss, Jacobsen defines happiness as 'composed joyous serenity', meaning that we are (1) free from conventions to follow our calling, (2) lively and vital, and (3) serene enough to 'let the other person be'. So we could consider happiness as requiring freedom, capacity for joy, and capacity to accept others as they are.

Jacobsen finishes by exploring whether therapists – or people in general – could help others to become happier. He concludes that we cannot *make* someone else happy, but we can – in Boss's terms – help them to *meet the world freely and openly* (which would fit with his definition of happiness). This can be done by caring about the other person whilst also being willing to let them be themselves (rather than what we want them to be).

The combination of loving interest and the ability to let the other person be is Jacobsen's formula for happiness.

Discussion

We began our discussion by reflecting that, although Jacobsen criticises positive psychology for being quite causal (tick these boxes and be happy), what he suggests is also quite prescriptive. Reflecting on our own subjective experiences of happiness it seemed that it was often something which bubbled up as a kind of emergent property of everyday experience. Authors such as Sara Ahmed and Gay Watson alert us to the origins of the word happiness in 'hap' meaning chance or fortune.

Definitions of happiness

Clearly there is a difficulty that the word 'happiness' covers many different experiences. Whilst Jacobsen distinguishes 'brief' and 'durable' forms at the beginning of his paper, and focuses on the latter, we also considered a distinction between finite forms of happiness which could be fulfilled (e.g. by getting the cup of coffee) and infinite ones. We felt that a better distinction than either of these might be between everyday pleasure and a form of happiness that was bound to meaning (although these might be more temporary and constant, or finite and infinite, respectively, that is not necessarily the case).

Much of our discussion centred around whether these two forms of happiness were compatible or contradictory. It seemed possible that the ability to take simple pleasure in everyday activities might be blocked by understanding, or wisdom, about how the world works. Similarly, a focus on finding everyday pleasure might get in the way of finding meaning. For example, we imagined a woman gaining pleasure from a pole-dancing class who may find this difficult if she interrogated the gendered cultural pressure to find pleasure in the desiring gaze of men. On the other hand, if we are too concerned with the pleasure of the next cup of coffee, slice of cake, or pat on the back, we may not reach the meaning-full kind of happiness of sensing that we are meeting our life goals or relating openly with other people.

However, we weren't sure that these forms of happiness were necessarily incompatible. It could also be that a sense of living meaningfully opened up the possibility to enjoy everyday moments, or that such an openness to everyday experience could enable us to find life-goals which were more conducive to happiness (such as connecting with other people, or contributing to wider understanding, rather than being a 'success' or getting approval from others).

Who gets to be happy?

Another important consideration, in terms of helping others to be happy, was the situation they are in. We were all critical of a kind of craving for happiness (which may well, as the Buddhists believe, lead to quite the opposite of what it desires). However, we wondered whether the simple happiness exercises of Seligman and co may have their place. For example, when somebody is very low and depressed it can be unproductive to get immediately into discussions of meaning and purpose (they are often feeling that life is

meaningless). However, encouragement to do very simple 'daily kindnesses' often enables them to gradually reverse the downward spiral such that they are in a place where wider reflections on life are possible.

Research has shown that making ourselves smile does increase our sense of happiness, and whilst this is rather mechanistic, many of us had found that forcing an expression of happiness, like this, has opened us up more to the world. We need to be wary about hiearchising different forms of happiness, or pronouncing on whose happiness counts. For example, even the ecstasy following taking a drug – whilst leading some into a problematic form of constant craving – can shift perspectives in meaningful and important ways, for others.

Another thing that is not addressed fully in Jacobsen's paper is the relationship between happiness and normativity. As in our pole-dancing example, it is often those who conform to sociocultural norms who can access a certain form of happiness because it is available to them in a way that it isn't to others (the very act of conforming to a norm that we have been repeatedly told is pleasurable often gives pleasure). Sara Ahmed reflects on the stereotype of the 'feminist killjoy'. Perhaps it is necessary to kill (normative) joy if we are to reach a more equal society where pleasure isn't always found at the expense of others, or by conforming to problematic power hierarchies? For example the joy some of us might have found in Jacobsen's article was diminished by his continued use of the generic 'man' for humans. Does ethics trump happiness in a kind of duty to help people to circumvent undesirable forms of happiness which exclude, oppress, or alienate others?

Then again, we wondered – at least in some circumstances – whether a truly happy person might be one who had reached some kind of peace with the inevitable contradictions and complexities of (post)modern life, able to take pleasure in the normative at the same time as critiquing it and working towards change.

We also had some debate about whether a certain level of material well-being is necessary for happiness to even be possible (freedom from pain and threat of violence, a home, and enough to eat, for example), or whether it is problematic to assume that happiness is not possible under deprived circumstances. Whether or not one was stuck in such a situation seemed to be one key aspect of this.

Conclusions

Relating happiness to other emotions, some of us felt that happiness was about being able to experience a full palette of emotional colours rather than finding these muddied together to create a generic kind of brown. This is an idea that resonates with some ofEmmy Van Deurzen's thoughts on the importance of openness towards different emotions, as well as the common idea that we need to feel sadness in order to notice when we are happy. However, we disputed Jacobsen's idea that it wasn't possible to feel anxiety and love at the same time. If love involves accepting the freedom of ourselves and others (and thus inevitably responsibility) then some degree of existential anxiety is perhaps an inevitable part of love. Indeed many colours can be combined on the emotional palette, or put alongside

each other to create a stimulating effect. A nice idea, akin to Boss's loving interest in the context of letting be, was the metaphor of being able to be in whatever 'colour/s' we were in at the time as well as holding on to the existence of the full palette.

We finished our discussion by reflecting on experiences many of us shared of times when we expected to be happy and this expectation was the very thing that made happiness impossible. Like Barry Magid we felt that the pressure to be constantly happy was high in current western culture. For example, every product, artistic creation, or experience has to be 'best ever', our 'favourite' or one to 'do before you die'. Whilst holidays as children could be remembered happily even when it rained every day and lots of things went wrong, pressure now is on to create some perfect experience. One person reflected that wakes or funerals could often be happier experiences than weddings because nobody expects them to be so. In our goal-directed world we wondered if the best recipe for happiness might be the cultivation of an appreciation of things for what they are.

Find Our More…

The full reference for Bo Jacobsen's paper is:

Jacobsen, B. (2007) What is happiness? The concept of happiness in existential psychology and therapy. *Existential Analysis, 18* (1), 39-50.

You can find it online here: http://test.bostonrinkrats.com/solidxsnake/happiness2.pdf

Three fascinating recent books which all critique the idea of striving for happiness, from different perspectives, are:

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Magid, B. (2008). *Ending the pursuit of happiness.* Boston, MA: Wisdom publications.

Van Deurzen, E. (2008). *Psychotherapy and the quest for happiness.* London: Sage.

Ahmed takes a sociocultural approach and writes about who is excluded from normative understandings and expectations of happiness (particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, race, and class). Magid brings together Buddhist and psychoanalytic perspectives to critique the current western pursuit of happiness, arguing that it leads to greater suffering. Van Deurzen critiques the recent positive psychology movement and offers an alternative existential approach which – as we have seen – questions whether happiness is what people should be striving for.

Measuring happiness

July 2012

On 24th July the results were announced of the first Integrated Household Survey. This survey was conducted by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) between April 2011 and March 2012 on 200,000 people in the UK. Importantly it included ratings of happiness, satisfaction, and anxiety, in order to give an idea of which groups in the country were happier and more satisfied with their lives, and which were struggling.

In this post I will summarise a few of the key reported findings of the survey and then mention three potential problems which we need to be aware of when considering its implications.

The findings

The average rating of life satisfaction overall was 7.4 out of 10, but one in five people rated their anxiety yesterday as greater than 5 out of 10. Women reported being more satisfied than men, and 16-19 and 65-79 year olds seemed to be the happiest age groups. Black British, African and Caribbean groups scored quite a bit lower than any other ethnic groups.

People in rural areas seemed to be happier than those living in in industrial and built up places, and owning property also seemed to be related to higher satisfaction. Married and cohabiting people reported more satisfaction than single people (including widowed and divorced people). Good health seemed to be related to satisfaction, without guaranteeing it, and unemployed people were less satisfied than those in employment.

Problem 1: Correlation does not equal causation!

The first vital issue with the findings is the old chestnut familiar to anybody who has studied psychology or statistics: correlation does not equal causation. It would be easy to look at the results and say ‘people in couples are better off than singles, we should encourage everyone into relationships and make sure that they stay together’ or ‘people in rural areas are happier so being around nature must make people feel better’.

However, just because there is a relationship between two things does not mean that one causes the other. It could equally be that there is a causal relationship in the opposite direction. For example, it could be that happier people are more likely to get into romantic relationships (because they are overly optimistic about how easy they will be perhaps!), or that people who are more satisfied with life tend to move to the country (maybe because they feel less need to prove themselves in high-power city jobs).

Also it could very well be that some other factor is responsible both for people being happier and for the other aspect. For example, it could be that wealthier people are more likely to get

married, to live in the country and to be happy: so in that case being better off is the causal factor, not anything to do with relationships or where people live. A good way to remember this possibility is to consider the correlation between ice-cream sales and drowning deaths. As one goes up, so does the other, but obviously eating more ice-cream doesn't cause drowning. The reason they are related is that both go up in hot weather.

Problem 2: Happiness or normativity?

Continuing on from this point about correlation, it seems to me that, for quite a few of the reported statistics, another factor which could be of relevance is what is regarded as culturally ideal or normal. In the UK, it is generally seen as normal, or ideal, that a person should get a job, get married, and own a house. Therefore perhaps it is unsurprising that people who do so report more satisfaction. They have more of a sense of 'belonging' to the culture and of having ticked the boxes which are expected of them by themselves and others.

However, those things may not be intrinsically related to satisfaction. Perhaps in a culture where it is considered more normal to rent property (as it is in many other European countries) home-ownership would not be so related to happiness, because all the problematic aspects of having your own house (mortgages, keeping it in good repair, being responsible, etc.) would not be balanced out by the plus side of fitting in, meeting expectations and the perceived security of owning property in a culture which generally believes that it is the safest thing to do.

The gender findings are also interesting from the perspective of normativity. In the current economic climate it may be harder to meet up to norms and ideals of masculine roles (which have traditionally been based on being a provider and having an identity linked to what you 'do for living'), than norms ideals of feminine roles (which have traditionally been about looking after others, and being approved of by others).

A further point about normativity is whether the overall findings (the 7.4 out of 10 statistic) reflect people responding in a culturally normative way ('mustn't grumble'). It is important to remember that people are doing something whenever they speak or write (for example, when they complete a survey) rather than simply expressing their inner state. For example, psychologists find with opinion polls around election time that people often don't respond truthfully about who they plan to vote for, but rather strategically, hoping to give the message that parties should improve otherwise they won't get their vote.

It is very possible that cultural differences in happiness ratings or satisfaction indices could say more about how people in that culture think they are supposed to feel than how they actually feel.

Problem 3: Striving for happiness?

A final point about the whole endeavour of eliciting happiness or satisfaction ratings is the big assumption implicit in it all that it is good to be happy, and that people who express less satisfaction should be made more happy.

Unfortunately this message may have the opposite impact to its intention as many philosophies suggest that striving after happiness, believing that one is entitled to be happy, or expecting some kind of constant happiness in life, actually make us suffer more. Recognising the inevitable struggles that life involves, expecting our moods to fluctuate, and learning to accept difficult feelings rather than trying to avoid them, may well be better approaches.

It is also important to challenge norms about the kind of life one needs to lead in order to be happy because these reinforce the marginalisation of those who don't fit these norms. We need to recognise the diverse things that can bring satisfaction to life if we let them. Perhaps then people might be able to be equally satisfied on a busy street as in the country, with friends or alone as with partners, or in diverse forms of accommodation or daily life.

Joy

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megjohnandjustin.com/you/being-with-joy/

In wider culture there's often a sense that it's only okay to experience and express 'positive' emotions like happiness and joy (although we don't spend a lot of time thinking critically about these feelings). That's why when people ask how we are, the default response is often something like 'good', 'fine' or 'mustn't grumble'.

In communities which question wider culture we can swing the other way, focusing on the more difficult feelings we're experiencing - especially when we've been marginalised and/or traumatised due to our being outside the mainstream. If somebody asks how we are, we might focus on the difficult stuff that's going on.

The idea of 'thinking positive' or pretending to be happy (or any other emotional state) when that's not actually where we're at is a problematic approach. The self-help industry, business, media, and elsewhere is responsible for people treating themselves non-consensually, seeing themselves as flawed if they can't be continuously happy, and doing often damaging emotional labour.

However, the approach of staying with feelings (our own and other people's) requires the capacity to stay with joy as much as sadness, anger, fear, and other emotions. As the movie *Inside Out* demonstrates - casing out or denying any of our emotional states isn't good for us: it can mean that the other emotions take over, or eventually that all the emotions become less available to us, and that our inner world can be damaged.

Perhaps we have a responsibility to ourselves and to others to acknowledge joy when it is happening. Certainly in a conversation where one person is feeling joy or delight at the moment it would be problematic if they were not able to share that as much as the people who are feeling sadness, fear, anger, et.

We can often struggle with joy in ourselves because we feel we don't deserve it, because of guilt around all the people who don't - or can't - experience it due to social injustice for example, and because of 'cherophobia' (the belief that when you are happy, something bad will happen soon). We can struggle with joy in others because of comparison and competition: it can feed that capitalist feeling that we're doing something wrong if we don't feel joyful like that.

Politically and collectively though we could see joy as an important emotion in invigorating us and prompting us to action to share joy and to work to increase others' capacity for joy. Spiritually Buddhist and other philosophies emphasise the importance of joy and humour for lightening up, finding perspective, not getting too stuck in our own individual experience and making such a big deal out of things.

How can we shift to a position of allowing, inviting, and embracing joy in ourselves and others? We might think about permission to notice the micro moments of joy in life, which are actually often more vivid during times when we're struggling or mostly feeling quite

tough. It's worth noticing what gives you a flicker of joy or delight day to day: sharing a smile with a stranger, a song you love playing on the radio, a flower growing through the cracks in the pavement, spotting a fox on your way home at night, receiving a kind comment. Can you allow a moment to feel that joy when it's there? Similarly can you invite a friend to say more about how they're feeling when they acknowledge happiness, joy, excitement, or delight. We might tune in to how we - or they - feel in their body. How they know what that feeling is. What other times in their life it reminds them of. What other things give them that feeling.

Sharing those kinds of moments in the form of words or pictures on social media can be a good way to connect through joy, again so long as we're not curating an image where it looks like that's all we experience for others to compare against. Keeping memories of joy in the form of words, pictures, or objects can also be good to return to.

Queer Joy

Summer 2022

When JKP asked me to write a piece on queer joy for Pride season my immediate response was ‘you’ve got to be kidding.’ After these past two years, how can a focus on joy – or pride for that matter – be anything but a deluded kind of ‘back to normal’ dream: a dangerous denial of what we’ve been through, what we’re still going through? On reflection though I began to wonder about receiving the phrase ‘queer joy’ as an invitation. What might it mean to queer joy?

Queer umbrellas

If we take queer as a noun – an umbrella term for our LGBTQIA+ community – then it’s hard to find much joy. At a cultural level, the pandemic disproportionately impacted queer people’s mental health and queerphobic hate crime soared. The recent government U-turns on banning conversion therapy, and subsequent decision to do so only for sexual orientation, reflects the ongoing moral panic against trans folks, and how intersex and a-spectrum people are rarely included under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella in more than name, given that erasing practices for these groups are some of the most extreme and commonplace.

The impact of living through this time has been even greater for those – many of us – whose queerness intersects with other marginalisations: disabled folks who’ve seen COVID policies and practices centre abled people and treat them as disposable; those who the current economic crisis is pushing into ever-deeper levels of poverty; and people of colour – also disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, rises in hate crime, and endless cultural gaslighting of their experiences past and present.

At a community level, this has all taken a massive toll. In the last year alone, my close communities have seen six deaths, all related to mental health struggles rather than COVID itself.

While we might want to tell joyful stories of queer communities drawn closer during a time of crisis, the truth – for many of us – is the opposite. Understandably, given our experiences of both cultural trauma, and frequently the developmental trauma of not being fully accepted by our close people growing up, many of us have fallen back on our unconscious survival strategies: attacking outwards – blaming and ostracising those who seem to be hurting, abandoning or endangering us; attacking inwards against ourselves, or crossing our own – or others’ – boundaries in attempts to get our needs met; withdrawing into smaller and smaller zones of safety; and/or avoiding pain by distracting ourselves, distancing from those who’re struggling, and rushing ‘back to normal.’

These reactions have bumped up against each other painfully, often resulting in irreparable rifts and ruptures, which only exacerbate our levels of isolation and distress. It’s been hard

indeed to face other's limited capacities to hold us through this crisis, perhaps harder still to face our own tendencies to default back to habits which hurt ourselves and others.

So where is the potential for queer joy in all of this?

Queer seeing

Queer activists generally use the word queer as a verb: a doing word. The doing is a radical questioning of normative understandings of gender and sexuality, but also way more than that. Queering challenges all the interwoven axes of oppression that position one group as more valid and valuable than another, and all the culturally accepted ways in which we relate to others and ourselves.

Under this definition, we could find queer joy in a refusal to go 'back to normal,' recognising that normal has never worked for marginalised people like us. We could find it in insisting on being radically honest about what's going on in the world and in our communities right now: understanding the links between our own individual trauma patterns and the traumatised and traumatising forms of relating we're embedded in, including social and climate injustice.

We could find queer joy – and solidarity – in this kind of clear-seeing (or queer-seeing) of what we're all up against, and in our determination to find better ways, knowing that our experiences actually make us some of the best-placed people and communities to do so.

Queer feeling

Another meaning of the verb queer is troubling the binary understandings that so much normativity is founded upon. In addition to the heteronormative binaries of straight/gay and man/woman, we could extend this to include all those binaries that render one group of people centred and another marginalised, one intelligible and another invisible, one valuable and another disposable.

From this perspective we might also question the valuing of certain emotional states over others. I read the request to write this piece as an invitation to focus on the light for a moment, because haven't we all had enough darkness? But what if we can only have light by also embracing the darkness? Pride by acknowledging our (cultural, community, individual) shame? Joy by making room for all the feelings that are not-joy too?

There've been many attempts to identify the fundamental emotions. For our purposes, I'm going to say there are seven (mostly because it fits the nice queer metaphor that I'm planning to shoehorn into this section). These are joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise, and some kind of category for loving/peaceful/powerful feelings (opinions vary on this one).

Emotion wheels illustrate these seven feelings, and all the other feelings under each category, in rainbow colours (see where I'm going with this?) As with rainbows (the actual

kind and our LGBTQIA+ kind), emotion experts from ancient Buddhists to present-day psychologists emphasise that we need *all* of the emotions/colours. Instead of our common cultural binary that renders some emotions 'good' and others 'bad', and tries to maximise the one and avoid the other, such approaches invite us to become intimate with all seven, and all shades within and between them, embracing them as we would dear friends. Indeed, many would argue that it's only to the degree that we're able to flow through all of these feelings that we can fully experience any of them. In trying to eradicate sadness, for example, we would also lose joy, as in the movie *Inside Out*.

Queer kindness

So bring on your queer rage, your queer terror and grief and shame. All are welcome here. It's only through learning how to feel the full rainbow of feelings that we'll be able to experience queer joy, and to see how we hurt ourselves – and others – when we repress these feelings, or react from them in order to get out of them as quickly as possible. Only with the full rainbow of feelings can we really understand what we – and others – are up against, and find some understanding and kindness for that.

To me that's the message of the wonderful recent queer film *Everything Everywhere All At Once,* which is all about how we might stop passing trauma on from generation to generation as we're currently doing. The tortured – and torturing – character, Jobu Tupaki, who has (queerly) seen it all, says that she *was just looking for someone who could see what I see, feel what I feel*. While admitting their human smallness and stupidity, the other characters find their way to give her that, if only for fleeting moments. I'll leave it here with another quote from that movie:

"The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please, be kind. Especially when we don't know what's going on."

Other Specific Feelings

Anger

This was originally published on the megjohnandjustin.com podcast/blog, 2017-2020
megjohnandjustin.com/you/anger/

How can we be with anger and use it to help us to hold our boundaries and mobilize us towards justice? *And* how can we avoid reacting out of it in ways that manifest as aggression, violence, or hatred (whether turned inwards towards ourselves or outwards towards other people)?

Anger and reactivity
Non-reactive anger refers to being with the energy of the angry feeling but not acting out of it in ways that hurt us (repressing) or others (reacting). Reactive anger is when we react directly - often quickly - out of the angry feeling. Paradoxically, such a reaction is often an attempt to avoid really feeling the anger (or other tough emotions). If we can learn to feel safe-enough to stay with the anger, and allow the experience, we may well be less likely to engage in reactive anger responses.

Pretty much all conflict advice suggests taking time out in the first rush of anger, or when angry feelings are intense or overwhelming. We're likely to be reactive at such times and it is best to refrain from doing anything out of it for 20-60 minutes at least, like pressing 'send' on that email! This gives an opportunity to return from our sympathetic nervous system to the parasympathetic one, if we can manage not to escalate or stoke the anger by rehearsing stories about the situation.

Staying with anger
The feeling of anger - like all feelings - is valid and vital. If we try to avoid feeling anger - or attempt to eradicate our capacity for anger - then we'll damage ourselves and our capacity to feel other emotions as well. This is well depicted in the film *Inside Out*. When we can feel all emotions then we're able to flow through them more easily. When we only allow some we can become stuck in certain states, or cut off entirely.

The risk of avoiding or eradicating anger is that it becomes cast out of us and ends up being turned back in on ourselves like some external voice who is angry at us. This is one way of understanding what's been called the inner critic.

Without the capacity to be angry outwards we may well struggle to hold our boundaries, either letting people walk over us, or hiding behind brittle barriers, or swinging between the two extremes. We may also struggle so much with shame, inner criticism, and self-hatred that other people's anger with us becomes unbearable, because it feels like it confirms those harsh and toxic beliefs we have about ourselves. This is part of why it's important to embrace our inner critic and do the work of learning how to stay with feelings of anger-in and anger-out without reacting to avoid or eradicate them. Not that this is easy of course.

Anger and trauma
Reactive anger-in and anger-out can map onto the common trauma responses of fawn and flight, which can be seen as two ends of a spectrum. Those whose childhood survival strategy was fawn, or people-pleasing, often do whatever they can to ensure that people around them will not be angry with them (either in hot raging or cold withdrawing ways). Those whose childhood survival strategy was fight, tend to blame, override, and belittle others. Both are strategies which attempt to control others' behaviours whether by objectifying yourself or objectifying them.

It can be useful to develop whichever of these strategies comes less habitually to you in order to get more intentional and bring them into more of a balance. Again becoming able to tolerate anger, shame, and other feelings can make it less likely that we'll act out of our trauma responses.

Being with anger
So the aim with anger, as with all tough feelings, is to learn how to notice it and be with it, rather than repressing it or instantly acting out of it in a reactive way. It can be good to make it our business to really get to know it, and to practise giving it space and warm attention at the 'flicker' stage, before it becomes a flame or fire. The aim here is not to get rid of anger - or any other feeling - but rather to be with it as part of the whole of our experience, and to act from it - if and when we do - in ways that are compassionate and respectful both towards ourselves and others (not overriding one for the other).

Under these circumstances anger has vital functions in helping us to clearly discern when we are being harmed, to hold our boundaries to protect ourselves, and to prevent that from continuing. It also helps us to see injustice on a wider scale, from feeling our own experiences. The energy of the anger can then be channelled into non-violent movements towards change.

Anger as a resource for fighting injustice
Audre Lorde's essay on the uses of anger is a helpful resource to help us to use anger precisely, as a form of energy that we can tap into for empowerment and fighting injustice. She also speaks about how guilt and fear can block us from experiencing and expressing our anger, and how important it is to address this so we can fight injustice alongside each other as a symphony rather than a cacophony 'We have to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart'.

Anger is vital in all contexts where marginalised people are required to take on the burden of the shame of their oppressors. When people speak out about oppression or abuse, the culturally normative response is: denial that it even happened, minimisation of its impact, victim blame, and defending oneself against any culpability. Now the marginalised person - or survivor - bears the weight of both what they went through, and this reaction. In a gaslighting move, they now have to carry the shame of the oppressor or perpetrator, as well as the pain of the initial experience. Seeing how the most marginalised are scapegoated and shamed in this way can ignite our anger in ways that can drive movements for justice as we've seen with #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.

Intersectionality and anger

An intersectional understanding is important here also, because race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, survivor status, etc. all influence who is and is not comfortable around their own - and others' - anger, and who has access to different modes of expressing anger. For example, #BlackLivesMatter highlights the huge dangers black men face if they express any anger towards authority, and how they may be assumed to be threatening - and killed for it - even if they don't.

Members of most marginalised groups are easily dismissed as 'the angry black person, trans person, lesbian, working class person, etc.' if they speak out about oppression. People frequently respond with anger back towards those who have named oppression, rather than towards the oppression itself, for example being more angry at being labelled racist than at racism itself.

Survivors of all kinds of abuse, and disabled people, may have very real reasons to be highly fearful of anger in others, given what this has meant for them in the past, or how dependent they may be on that person for their survival.

Men are frequently socialised to express no emotions except anger, while women are frequently socialised to be pleasing to others and to hide any anger. However, such socialisation can manifest in different ways from person to person. For example, a boy who was encouraged - but always failed - to be 'tough' may struggle to be angry or assertive. A girl who survived by joining the 'mean girls' may default to anger and bullying. Class, culture - and other intersections - also have a part to play with anger being a more-or-less accepted part of masculinity or femininity in different places and different communities.

A discussion of your intersections and early survival strategies in relation to anger could be a great relationship conversation to have, to help guide who you develop relationships with and what containers you create for those relationships.

Anger, shame, and kindness

Getting in touch with our anger can be an antidote to the shame we've been burdened with, helping us to focus anger outwards towards unjust systems, rather than inwards towards ourselves. It can also help us to find compassion for all of us who are caught up in these oppressive systems and dynamics, which can help when these things play out in our interpersonal relationships. While people often see anger and kindness as polar opposites, we'd suggest that it's possible - even vital - to find our way towards angry kindness and kind anger.

Resources

In addition to the Audre Lorde essay, we'd recommend:

- Pema Chodron on how to stay with anger with patience, refraining from reacting.
- Judith Butler on rage and non-violence.

Sadness

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megjohnandjustin.com/you/sadness/

Sadness, sorrow, grief, mourning and melancholia: How can we be with sadness and use it to help us to connect with ourselves and others, and mobilize us towards justice? *And* how can we avoid shutting down on sadness, or giving up in the face of overwhelming grief?

What are sadness, sorrow, grief, etc.?
We're talking here about sadness as a feeling we often get around loss or other kinds of suffering. It often feels tender, vulnerable, and soft, perhaps also low, heavy, and raw. Grief, grieving or mourning are ways we express sadness - alone or with others.

Depression and/or melancholia could be seen as when sadness becomes stuck, or takes us to a place where we need to give up or retreat from the world for some time. It can feel more heavy, fatigued, hopeless, and foggy than sadness. In mediaeval times there was a belief that mourning is brought on by a specific incidence of loss while melancholia was seen as an illness and to be "melancholic" was a temperament where you were more prone to melancholy.

Mourning a sad event and feeling sad, sorrowful and tearful is important, otherwise we may become stuck in melancholia. Melancholia was seen by Freud as "A loss of a more ideal kind [than mourning]. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love." (S. Freud). Or, as George Michael put it following a great loss: "And every single memory / has become a part of me / you will always be / my love". Perhaps we go into melancholia or depression when it's about losing things we've project onto others: the hope of a saviour or perfect One, the kinds of care and protection we lost young and now yearn for.

Winnicott's 'Value of Depression' speaks about the ability to feel sadness as part of maturation. Sadness can help us to differentiate between our inside and outside, as we learn to feel sad about external situations and separation from others. Sadness is likened to a fog descending over a city and then lifting. Where sadness is allowed to work it's way through without hindrance we can come out stronger as a result.

Trauma theorists talk of sobbing, sorrow and grief as important ways of releasing trauma. If we are discouraged from releasing it in this way when we are young it may become locked in the body, and we may need to return to grieve as an adult in order to release it in various ways.

Shame theorists suggest that having our emotions 'regulated' by those around us - who reassure us that it legitimate to feel them, and hold us through them in various ways - is vital. If we are not regulated in that way we may well feel shame about our feelings - and ourselves - and need to do that work of regulation when we're older - through therapeutic support, with ourselves, and with our supportive people.

Staying with sadness
The feeling of sadness - like all feelings - is valid and vital. If we try to avoid feeling sadness - or attempt to eradicate our capacity for sadness - then we'll damage ourselves and our capacity to feel other emotions as well. This is well depicted in the film *Inside Out*. When we can feel all emotions then we're able to flow through them more easily. When we only allow some we can become stuck in certain states, or cut off entirely.

The risk of avoiding or eradicating sadness is that we may not feel the grief necessary to process loss or trauma, so it becomes locked within us, making it hard to be present, or to look to the future. We may feel haunted by the sad times of our life and struggle to move forward. As in *Inside Out*, being unable to access sadness also means other feelings will become less available to us, and vital parts of our psyche may become cut off.

Grief is good: Sadness, connection, and compassion
Sadness is highly related to vulnerability and our capacity to connect with ourselves and others - and to feel compassion for them. Being able to express vulnerability, and be with others in their vulnerability, is a key component to intimate relationships, and showing when we're sad is a key component of vulnerability.

Sadness and grief are often feelings we may finally get to when we manage to get underneath the emotions which are more related to reactivity, such as anger, fear, and shame. Generally we cover over our sadness and vulnerability by lashing out or controlling (fight), distracting (freeze), escaping (flight), and trying to appease others (fawn). When we can realise those strategies, and manage to refrain from falling into them unconsciously, we may end up feeling the sadness, vulnerability, and loss which resulted in us needing to employ those strategies in the first place.

When we can feel sad - and are helped to feel it - we often find it easier to feel compassion for ourselves and for others. It can crack us open to connect with others in this way. It's useful to notice what blocks us from feeling sad - for example feeling overwhelmed by distress (of ourselves and/or others), or not wanting to recognise how we're implicated in such distress.

Buddhist practices encourage feeling that 'broken-heart' feeling in the places where it comes easily, and then expanding out to people and situations where it is more challenging, both to notice where we become blocked, and to practice feeling sadness and compassion for all of us. It's important to be gentle with ourselves, as it's hard to undo patterns of not allowing sadness, and open to it. It's also important to challenge ideas about what are, and are not, legitimate reasons to feel sad or legitimate ways of expressing sadness.

Sadness as a resource for fighting injustice
Anger can help motivate us to fight injustice, but what about sadness? Here we reached the conclusion that both are vital. Anger helps us to create the boundaries in which it is safe enough to feel vulnerable and to express sadness.

Anger and sadness together give us the combination of protection and connection so that we can be motivated to protect ourselves and others, while also connecting to the ways in which we're all caught up in systems of oppression, intergenerational trauma, and attempts to

avoid painful feelings. Sadness without the protection of anger can become overwhelming and inward focused. But anger without the connection of sadness can mean we act in reactive ways before releasing our feelings, and fail to connect with our own capacity to be both victims/survivors and perpetrators/oppressors - to feel the deep grief of that and to connect with others in ways that might result in change.

Sadness also gives us valuable information about the material conditions that are making us and others sad. It can be useful if sadness gives us the opportunity to be slow and introspective rather than reacting quickly: to consider what is making us sad but also being accurate about that information.

The difference between sadness and melancholia is also relevant here. Are we melancholic for a different kind of politics in the past that we can't recreate, and is this stopping us from imagining a future? This would be a kind of left melancholia. The potentially destructive and conservative nature of holding on to and loving past ideologies rather than being here-and-now is neoliberal melancholia. This is why it is so important to mourn and to allow each other to mourn collectively and personally.

Intersectionality and sadness

Who gets to feel and express sadness? This is impacted by the messages we receive in wider culture, our place on the intersectional axes of oppression/privilege, our family/community norms, and intergenerational trauma and our responses to it - what felt safe, or even possible, for us to experience and express growing up.

As Iesha Small points out in her blog post on exposure to racism as trauma: *'For a Black person in a predominantly white country the effects of racism are probably best compared to a form of PTSD. Which is why the Angry Black Person narrative is so reductive. Anger is some people's response to trauma. Maybe they want to cry but vulnerability requires trust. And how are you going to trust if you don't feel safe? Or if the things you know are very real aren't even acknowledged as happening? The closest parallel here may be domestic violence or domestic abuse... Maybe it's anger (which is entirely valid in the face of repeated dehumanisation) maybe it's a safer way of expressing despair, fear, sadness, shame, disappointment or overwhelm.'*

The concept of white woman tears highlights how sadness can be performative, distracting us away from other legitimate feelings that may be present, for example when a black person raises the presence of racism, and the focus becomes on the pain of the shire person being seen as racist, rather than pain of the person of colour being treated in a racist way.

The answer is not to avoid feeling sadness, but rather to allow ourselves to feel the sadness of having hurt another, leading us to a desire to be accountable and do better, rather than falling into defences of blame or shame which distances us from others. This can be easier said than done of course when experiences tap into old shame about not being good enough. Ring theory is a helpful concept whereby it is appropriate to go to those who are less impacted by whatever-has-happened than us for support, but not to expect support from those who are more impacted. For example, white people might go to other white people to

grieve the impact of white privilege, or times they have acted in racist ways, rather than to people of colour.

Sadness is also highly gendered. Men crying is so rarely seen and it only ever seems to be okay in extremely limited circumstances coded by what it is that is okay to upset men such as sports or losses related to fatherhood. Justin has written more about the risks to everyone of men being socialised only to express anger - and not sadness - here.

Takeaways
The question is how can we stay with our fragility, vulnerability and sadness and connect with others' pain and suffering - however this is expressed - through this, rather than shutting down on ourselves or focusing on our sadness and pain in ways that exclude others or disconnect us from them. We would suggest.

- Practice encouraging sad feelings when they arise and staying with them
- Talk with close people about how you might share sad feelings with each other, and what your needs are when sad (e.g. solitude and/or support).
- Consider therapy - or other - support to learn how to grieve and to grieve the past so it doesn't overwhelm the present.
- Consider sharing circles or similar formats where each person has chance to share and express their sadness.
- Explore what safe-enough spaces would be - for you - to experience and express your sadness around what's going on in the world. Who are the safe-enough people to go to for support? How might you nurture possibilities for more collective grief and mutual mourning?

Failure

August 2019

Long read ahoy, all about failure. For the takeaways feel free to skip to the end.

This summer I left employment – and education – after over two decades, to focus on writing full time. It's a curious way to celebrate it: writing about being a failure. But it's been such a major theme of the past year that it feels like the best way to do so.

Over the last year I've failed repeatedly. My favourite author and teacher, Pema Chödrön, wrote a book called *Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better* which I've been reading a lot of late. I'm not sure that I'm failing better yet, but I'm certainly becoming very well acquainted with failure and what it has to offer us. If that sounds like a strange idea – surely failure is something to be avoided – then keep reading.

My great mate and co-author Justin Hancock says that we can generally handle it if one of three areas of our lives – work, home and relationships – is shaky, so long as the other two hold relatively steady. If two of those aren't good then things start to feel pretty precarious. And when all three go at once…

That's what happened for me last Summer. I was starting the process of leaving academia so work was shaky, I was moving city and it took a good while to figure out where I'd be living, plus things were rocky in my relationships. This was all against the backdrop of it finally really hitting me what it means to be a trans person at this cultural moment of moral panic; a survivor during #metoo and all the conversations that have followed, and recognising how intertwined those things are with my life and my work.

Still, I landed, I found a sense of relative safety, and I managed to keep going, albeit at a much slower pace and with a lot more emphasis on self-care than before.

But now I actually *have* left my employed job after a whole life spent studying or working in education. Having thought I had a handle on it, I've fallen back into my old relationship patterns more than once in the last year (like a hamster on a freaking wheel!) and I've had to painfully confront the impact that's had on myself and others, with a whole lot of regret and loss in the process. And, just when things were at their worst, I found out that I couldn't stay living in the place that had become home for me.

Approaching Failure

I've been through these kinds of failures before. I've lost several jobs, homes, relationships, friendship groups, and communities along the way, often under painful circumstances that have left me feeling shame at having let others – and myself – down. The shift this time – I

hope – isn't that I'm not failing, it's that I'm trying to approach failure in a radically different way.

Authors like Pema, and Brené Brown, who write about failure point out that failure is inevitable in life. This is particularly the case if you are 'in the arena' – as Brene calls it. Doing what feels valuable in work, love, and community is inevitably also going to be vulnerable. And we're inevitably going to fuck it up at times.

Because of the stigma around failure, most of us endeavour to avoid it at all costs. If it happens we respond by blaming ourselves and hiding away so we never risk failing again, or by blaming everybody else and not taking any responsibility for what we've done because it's too hard to face our shortcomings and limitations – and their impact. When I failed in the past I often burned my bridges pretty fast, moved on, and worked even harder to avoid such failure in the future, without looking too carefully at what'd just happened.

What I'm doing this time is different. I'm trying to embrace the fact that these failures have happened – and that they certainly won't be the last ones I experience (well so long as I stay alive of course). Instead of adding them to a long list of past experiences that have felt similar – and using them as proof of the story that something about me is wrong and unacceptable, or that there's something wrong with the work, people or communities I've surrounded myself with – I'm trying to look at them clearly, with honesty and kindness.

When I do that I realise that there's much to be learnt here – probably far more than we learn from experiences of 'success'. Also, the closer I look, the more the success/failure binary is called into question. I see that these two elements are closely woven together – inseparable in fact. As Brené points out: learning, creativity and innovation aren't possible without failure. But I think it's more than that: failing at work *is* a kind of work (perhaps this kind of work that I'm doing right now!) Also, failing at love and home have both brought me as much love and home as they have lost me.

Let's delve deeper into these three areas so you can see what I mean…

Work

I'm a failed academic. Clearly. I'm 45 and I haven't made professor: the pinnacle of the academic ladder. This is because – despite publishing twenty books and over a hundred articles – I have never been REF-able: The Research Excellence Framework which is the way academic success is measured in the UK.

I'm not excellent. Far from it. I haven't brought in research funding because I didn't want to spend my time on funding bids or administrating big research projects. Also, every time I thought I'd finally written something that 'counted' as the right kind of academic work, I was told that it still wasn't right: too 'polemic', too far out of my discipline (undisciplined), a chapter when only journal articles counted, a theory paper when only research papers

counted, a co-authored paper when single author is the gold standard, single author but not in the right kind of journal, in the right kind of journal but not the right kind of research.

I tried to carve out a different path as a public engagement academic, but it's not enough to do that alone – you do need to bring in the money and publish the papers also. When you point out that it may well not be possible to do all of those things, teach, and practise self-care – and care for the others in your life – that doesn't tend to go down particularly well.

I could say a lot about which kinds of people academic systems and structures do – and do not – serve; about the kinds of labour, knowledge and bodies that are – and are not – valued there; and about the impact this has: the shame, imposter syndrome, and anxiety that so many academics are plagued by. I probably will say more about these things at some point. And I should also acknowledge the massive privileges I've been afforded by being within academia (and being privileged enough to get there in the first place): the money I've been able to save, the things I've learned, the projects it's supported, and the ways it's been (mostly) a safe-enough place to be my particular brand of non-normative weirdo. For now let's agree that I'm a failed academic, by academic standards.

It's okay though, I never actually wanted to be an academic. I only did a PhD in the first place because I was too young to do the thing I really wanted to do which was to be a therapist. And I only took an academic job post-PhD to fund my therapy training. I stayed in academia because I got passionate about teaching, and about studying the things I care about as an activist (gender, sexuality, relationships, mental health). But really I always wanted to be a therapist.

Here's the thing: I've failed at that too. I worked as a therapist for over a decade – mostly in voluntary contexts because I had the academic job to pay the bills. Last year I left the voluntary therapy behind with the plan that I'd take on more private clients, so that I could afford to live once I quit the academic job to focus on writing. I didn't take on any more clients. I realised that not being a therapist felt like a relief. My reservations about therapy in general – and about my particular capacities as a therapist – surfaced, and I realised that I needed to stop. So I did, with no idea about what I was going to do for money if I wasn't going to do that.

It's a good thing too because I would not have been able to hold therapy clients through the last year, given the crises I was facing in my own life. But it's not just that. Being a therapist isn't for me, I realise. I'm not the kind of therapist I would want to be: the kind that I've been lucky enough to experience a few times in my life. I don't have that skill set: the capacity to contain people, or to work with them relationally in the ways I'd want to. I can do great one-to-one work with people, but in much more of a peer-to-peer mentorship type way. Not therapy.

But this is *all* okay because the whole point was that I was giving it all up to be a writer, right? So that's what I'll be: a writer. D'you want to know how much I wrote – for publication – between last summer and this? Zero. Nothing. Not a word! The stuff I have coming out this year was all written before then. I have written thousands and thousands of words in my

journal. I have written the third book in the four-book erotic fiction project I have going on, which may never see the light of day (the prospect of putting something *that* vulnerable out there and failing remains too scary, but who knows?) I managed the odd blog post, but even those were few and far between.

What did I achieve – workwise – in these months of failure? A lifelong workaholic I finally learned how to underfunction instead of overfunctioning. I learnt to prioritise self-care: always putting The Work before the work. I largely undid my previous patterns of working to soothe or distract myself, or getting through the to-do list before I allow any self-care. I learnt to relate to work consensually: to feel into my body when I get a request, and to only say 'yes' to things that feel good immediately and still feel good 48 hours later. It's been hard and it's been messy, like all change. I've let people down. I've felt like the flaky colleague just when I wanted to end on a high note. I've taken time off sick when previously I'd have worked on through. I've had to go back to people when I'd said 'yes' to change it to a 'no' when I realised I'd overridden my self-consent.

It's still a work in progress, but it is The Work: changing the habits of a lifetime of remaining in sometimes toxic and bullying work environments, forcing myself to produce the kinds of things I thought would count rather than what I valued, working through crises, sickness and struggle instead of allowing rest, recovery, recuperation. Writing is coming back now (as evidenced by the sudden explosion of blog posts and tweets about my new graphic guide). What I've been through is helping me to keep remembering to engage with writing more kindly, openly, mindfully, and flexibly. I'm pretty convinced that when we write in such ways it's better quality – and connects more with others – too.

Home

To relate very differently to work – prioritising the work I find most fulfilling and feel most skilled at – requires rethinking home too. How to live in order to be a full-time writer, because sadly writing alone will never provide a liveable income for most of us? Twenty books in and only one of them brings me in more than a few hundred quid a year – and that may only be for a short time.

The main answer is, again, privilege. My whiteness, financially comfortable background, being largely non-disabled within our current society, location in the UK with English as my first language, and more, meant that I had enough privilege to access higher education. Also, remaining in higher education meant that I had the kind of job where it's possible to be pretty crazy and pretty weird and still keep a paying job (except for that one faily, faily time when I nearly got fired after *The Sun* called me a bisexual boffin). So – despite a relationship pattern where I've given a lot of the money earned through this work to other people in order to secure love (top tip fellow people pleasers: it doesn't work) – I managed to save up enough to live on for a while, now that I've downsized considerably

While I was searching for somewhere cheap to live an opportunity came up to live in the co-op my friend lived in. I've loved the idea of communal living since I came across *Tales of the City* at a formative age. I did have some assumptions and fears about what it might be

like in practice, most of which were wholly inaccurate. It seemed like a financially sustainable option outside of the problematic systems of renting and buying property. I also loved the possibilities it opened up around access intimacy, care, and consent.

Living there I learnt lots about how much more possible self-care becomes when we have systems and structures which support it. I also learnt how much more possible caring for each other through physical and mental health struggles is when there are many people around and available, all of whom get it. I saw how conflict – openly addressed and held within family and community – can play out differently. I also learned some hard lessons about group dynamics. I'm sure I'll be reflecting on this experience for many years to come.

But when the house considered whether to make me a permanent member after eight months they decided not to. Partly this was because I had been going back and forth a lot about what my ongoing living situation would be. But more than that – and this was bloody hard to hear – it was because I felt to them more like extended family than immediate family.

It would've been so easy to experience this as rejection, as me failing. The day it happened I was awash with memories of previous experiences that felt like this: when my university housemates threw eggs at my door because they were so sick of me having my depressed partner round at our flat all the time; when I lost most of my group of friends following one of those painful periods of ricocheting break-ups that can happen in queer community.

Partly thanks to the work the house has done in holding people through conflict and crisis – and perhaps also thanks to The Work that I've done over the years – this played out very differently. I was able to feel the feels and to express them – quite vividly – to everyone, and to feel heard and seen and understood. And I was able to hear them too. They were right that I felt more like extended family: I felt that too. And while it was terrifying to have this final rug pulled out from under me at this exquisitely vulnerable time, there was a sense of possibility in it too: things that might open up as well as close down.

Interestingly, since that time and in the conversations we've continued to have, I've actually felt closer to my friends from the house – not further away. There's been a lot more openness. And I've been able to put more time and energy into nurturing other friendships where I have deep connections, including sharing my new home space with them in ways I never did before. I'm able to hold the possibility that, in losing a home and family, I may paradoxically have gained one.

Feeling Failure

I realise at this point that I've been talking about failure in quite a prettied up way: the way it can look in the fuzzy glow of hindsight. You could go away with the impression that it's this okay thing – not that bad – quite beautiful in fact if looked at from the right perspective. Let's talk about what failure actually looks like. Let's talk about what it feels like.

Brené likens it to stepping out into the arena and falling on your face, eating dirt in front of everyone. It is like that. Except imagine that you're naked. Not noble Cersei Lannister kind of naked but crying, begging, and scrabbling at the door you've just been pushed through to get the hell out of there kind of naked. There are tears and snot, there is rage and terror. It's not a pretty sight. And scrutinising your every move are all your closest friends and family, plus everyone who has ever bullied you or criticised your work, definitely all your exes and your scariest school teachers. And every single one of their faces is filled with disgust. And they are just about to release the terrible monster that you have to fight. And when they do there is every fucking chance that you will crap yourself from fear in front of everyone. That, my friends, is what failure feels like.

That's how it felt when those eggs hit my door, when I saw that headline in *The Sun* and had to face my managers afterwards, when I felt rejected from my community and slunk away, when I tried to bring my soft consent-y activism into my workplace and everybody looked at me like I was completely crazy, when the house gave me my notice. And that is precisely how it's felt every time I've tried and failed at love, especially during the period where I'm desperately flinging everything that I have at it, trying to pretend that I'm not doing the same old thing again like the aforementioned hamster.

Relationships

I've already said most of what I need to say about my relationship patterns in the second edition of *Rewriting the Rules*, and in these blogposts. Sadly that hasn't stopped me from finding thrilling new ways of acting out the same old patterns: struggling to be honest with myself and others, striving to meet others' expectations, or assuming they will be on the same page as me. This was a big part of the dynamics that brought three of the relationships – with individuals and groups – that were most important to me to breaking point in the last year.

Understandably, failure cuts deepest for me when I'm failing in this particular arena. Being somebody who has written several self-help style books on relationships really doesn't help with that. At least I make it very clear in my writing that this stuff is bloody hard for all of us – so-called relationship 'experts' included. Perhaps I should insist on being billed as a relationship failure from now on.

However, I've noticed that, as with work and home, there is a lot of love to be found in failing at love. These days my go-to response to a life crisis is to book in time with close people each day until I'm steadier – online calls or in-person walks and talks – in addition to ongoing message exchanges. During these conversations it's been reaffirmed for me that intimacy deepens with vulnerability. I've shown my feelings, my insecurities, more openly than ever before and I've felt how much closer that's brought me to my people. Also most people have shared their struggles right back.

I feel more able to be real with my people – instead of monitoring myself and keeping up a facade – and I feel more able to connect with them too. How paradoxical and wonderful that

mulling over the potential impossibility of love has resulted in such strong feelings – and actions – of love.

The other thing that I've made into a daily practice of late is explicit internal conversations. Anyone familiar with my work knows that I'm big into the idea of plural selves, and I often experience myself as more of a team – or a system – than an individual. So most days start and end with a check-in between the members of this team – written in my journal – with the explicit intention that the parts of me who are struggling will support the parts that aren't so much on that particular day.

In *Rewriting the Rules* I suggested that experiencing ourselves as plural could make it easier to love ourself than it is when we imagine that we're this singular, static individual who can be judged as good or bad. That's certainly been my experience of late. There's a lot of love within for the vulnerable parts, the parts who fought so damned hard and still managed to fail, the parts who took the risk and now find themselves exposed in the arena.

Embracing and Learning from Failure

This blog post is already over 3000 words long: another failure. I rarely manage the SEO-pleasing 500 word shorties that experts recommend. WordPress will doubtless give me a bunch of angry red emoticons for this latest opus and for my continued use of the passive voice.

So what are my quick take-aways about failure then, other than what doesn't kill you makes you stranger?

- Failure is an inevitable part of being human, get used to it, and go gently because our whole culture tells us that it's not okay, that we're to blame for it, and that we should punish ourselves for it.
- A sense of failure may be more about you not fitting the particular system or situation you've tried to succeed in. Moving into a different system or situation – perhaps one with values more aligned with your own – might be something to explore.
- Feeling you've failed at something can give you an opportunity to stop doing that thing. The space that opens up may bring something different that you end up finding more fulfilling and feeling more competent at (like me replacing therapy with writing mentorship).
- Failure shows us where we're stuck, where we're hooked, where we're messy. Learning these things is super helpful because then we can work to shift our patterns (again, gently please).
- Failing in different arenas can actually bring us the very things we thought we were losing from failing. Failing at work can become a big part of our work (emotional, creative, and otherwise – like all the people who make their work out of helping people who are struggling in the same ways that they have). Failing at home or family can bring us other forms of community and kinship. Failing at relationships – and sharing our experiences around this openly – can bring us love and connection.

- If you can stay with the fact that you've failed – and the impact of this on you and others – it can make you a lot more humble and compassionate for others caught in the same kinds of situations and dynamics.
- As Brené Brown points out, remaining in the arena even when we know the risks of failure – and what it feels like to fail – is pretty badass. Think Captain Marvel standing up again each time she gets knocked down in the movie.
- As Pema Chödrön suggests, having the rug pulled out from under us completely can be just what we need in order to stop looking for babysitters to look after us, and to start opening up to what life has to teach us.
- As queer theorist like Jack Halberstam and Sara Ahmed point out, what is considered successful in our culture is often determined by those with the most power. The more non-normative we are, the more likely we are to fail according to the normative standards of what counts as success. So failing can be seen as a radical part of resisting these norms. And we can rightly get pretty pissed off at how we're set up to fail by norms which require us to pass exams, make lots of money, own property, ascend various professional ladders, stay in particular kinds of relationships, look attractive according to western beauty ideals, have kids who also meet these criteria for success, etc. etc. etc.

Okay that wasn't so quick. Let's try again. What can you do if you're struggling with failing and failing again. I'd say the important things are to:

- Practice self-care around it. If it feels overwhelming then first focus on getting yourself back to a safe-enough state to look at it. Refrain from doing anything till you're in a good-enough place to deal. There's no rush.
- Stay with the feelings.
- Try to see the failure clearly, honestly – and above all – kindly.
- Consider what it would be like if we could see the faily parts of us as the most precious, tender, and loveable parts of us. Wow right?
- Focus on addressing your part in what happened – it's up to others whether or not they want to address their's. *Also* recognise the wider dynamics, systems, and structures that are in play which mean it's not *all* on you. Try not to be drawn into blame and shame, and go easy on yourself when you're inevitably drawn into blame and shame.
- Question the success/failure binary and who this serves.
- Recognise that habits take time to shift and require repeated failure in order to do so – check out this poem by Portia Nelson to help with this. It's okay that you fell into that hole again.
- Don't listen to criticism from people in the cheap seats. They aren't in the arena, as Brené says. But do welcome generous feedback and support from people who have your back and are up for facing their own failure. This is not something we can do alone.
- Let failure crack you open, soften you up, connect you with others who're going through similar stuff, and fuel your creativity.
- Try not to be part of cultures which shame people for failing, making it even more difficult for all of us to accept our inevitable failures, to take responsibility for their impact, and to fail better.

I'll leave the last word to Thor's mum, Frigga, in *Avengers Endgame* because I liked this thought on failure: 'Everyone fails at who they're supposed to be. The measure of a person, of a hero, is how well they succeed at being who they are.'

Regret

July 2019

This week Moya Sarner wrote an interesting article about regret and the toll that it can take on mental health. I recently came across a Buddhist ritual around regret which I've been adapting in my own life. This is part of my project on how meditative and contemplative practices can be adapted to include a sense of how our experiences are embedded in wider cultural messages and social structures. I thought I'd write a post on why regretting might be helpful in this way, and the practice I've been using to structure my regret.

Why regret?

Intersectional feminism and other social justice movements remind us that we simply can't help feeling and acting in racist, misogynist, classist, homo/bi/transphobic, ableist, etc. ways because we live in a society that is *structurally* racist, misogynist, and so on. Relatedly we're never going to behave in a perfectly consensual way in a culture which is steeped in non-consent, based as it is on some lives, bodies, and forms of labour being valued far more highly than others: a system we're all implicated in and can't escape. Also – as Sarner's article highlights with the example of a man who experienced extreme poverty going on to impoverish his own kids in a different way – we all operate under intergenerational trauma. The trauma of unjust and non-consensual culture – and the ways of treating people that engenders – has been unwittingly passed on to us and shapes our own ways of doing things, in ways that become habitual for us.

This is why the ideal of having no regrets isn't going to work. Individualistic culture gives us the message that we – *as* individuals – could and should be able to choose to be good, nice, safe people who never do any harm and therefore need have no regrets, but this would be impossible. Indeed, the idea that we – as individuals – are good, nice, and safe, and are only capable of helping – never hurting – others, is one of the most dangerous ideas around. It prevents us from seeing these systems and structures of injustice and how they operate through all of us all the time. It leads to us denying and minimising the harm that we do in ways that hurt those we've already hurt all the more.

So it's vital to regret on a political level: to notice where we've been implicated in harm, to take responsibility for the impact of our actions – however unintentional – and to keep asking the question of how we can collectively work to do things differently.

An Alternative to Blame and Shame

As Sarner suggests, regret is also vital on a personal level. Embracing the inevitability of regret – and finding ways to practise regret – offers an alternative to blame or shame, which are our go-to responses. When our actions have harmed others we either focus all our energy on blaming someone or something else for it and defending ourselves because we must be seen as a good person (by ourselves and by others). Or we go the other way and

focus on shaming ourselves: holding ourselves entirely responsible, assuming this means that we're utterly flawed as an individual, and continuing to beat ourselves up – often for years or decades. Frequently we oscillate between the false binary of blame and shame: it must be all your fault, or all my fault. Both blame and shame operate from that individualising perspective, failing to recognise the inevitability of hurting and being hurt by each other within the toxic cultures we operate in. Neither generally results in us acting any less harmfully in future.

Shame can be just as much a defence against responsibility as blame. We can give off the message to others that they must never let us know that we've hurt them because we can't cope with seeing our capacity to cause harm. This kind of fragility can mean that those who are marginalised, oppressed, or harmed continually have to do the emotional labour of protecting those who have done the harm from this knowledge, shoring up their belief that they are really good people.

The culture of individualising – and of binary blame and shame – exacerbates the tendency to operate in this way. When people recognise a bad situation, the answer is often to search for one individual to hold responsible and to publicly blame, shame, and exclude, rather than to looking for the problems in the wider system and culture that enabled these dynamics. Fear of being identified and rejected in this way results in other people feeling even less able to be honest with themselves and others about their harmful actions. But as authors like Brené Brown have pointed out, we're all going to mess up, we're all going to get it wrong, and we're all going to fail. Trying to avoid doing so limits our creativity, our potential, and our relationships with others. These things are inevitable and we need to cultivate a culture where it's possible to bear this truth, and to be open about our mess, mistakes and failures.

Regret practice

Given the powerful forces pulling us to deny our harmful actions and/or to disappear into shame, how might we find another way with regret? I'm increasingly thinking that – given that these problems are always systemic, structural, and cultural – if we are to shift them then we need systems of support, structures, and micro-cultures in order to we do things differently. We can't just rely on some kind of willpower or changing ourselves as an individual, as some forms of self-help, therapy, and mindfulness suggest.

I was re-reading Pema Chödrön's book *Start Where You Are* and was struck by a ceremony she describes which is done in some Buddhist monasteries on the days of the new and full moons. I like the idea of rituals that mark specific times, like the changing seasons, or the phases of the moon. It seems like a way of connecting back to the world around us, as well as being a helpful reminder to reflect on certain things regularly: providing a structure. While I haven't done this practice with others yet, it certainly has scope as a collective activity, and it's possible to feel connected to others who may be doing the same – or similar practices – at the same time.

Regret ritual

The four stages of the ritual are:

- Regret – noticing what we do and putting it down
- Refraining – not doing your usual habit
- Remedial action – doing some practice to support us to do things differently
- Resolution – gently and openly committing to doing things differently

I imagine that I'll adapt these stages differently each time I do the practice, but these are the kinds of things I've been playing with so far. Generally I'm taking an hour or so on the evening of the new and full moons to do this. First I set myself up with everything I need, creating a space for the ritual, maybe lighting a candle and taking a few breaths to ground myself. Then I do something like the following.

Regret

I've found it helpful to start by journaling about the things I regret – either everything that occurs to me or focusing on a particular theme. If you did the practice with other people you could start by telling each other these things. In between rituals you could keep a note on your phone of things that occur to you to reflect on, so you already have a list. It's all about gently noticing the habits of thinking or behaving that we fall into which hurt ourselves, others, and the wider world. The first time I did this practice, I noticed that writing things down didn't connect me enough with the feelings, so I also sat quietly for a while, remembered the events I regretted, and let myself feel my response in my body.

Refraining

Instead of launching into acting, we start by refraining. It's a bit like the idea in medicine 'first do no harm'. Often when we feel bad about something we've done we immediately rush to rectify it, or to get forgiveness from the person we've harmed, often regardless of whether that would be the best thing for them. This can end up requiring others to do even more emotional labour, or even retraumatising them. When harm has happened perhaps instead we can slow right down and refrain from acting until we can see the situation clearly, and know that we're acting out of care for the others involved rather than trying to make ourself feel better. It can also be useful to reflect on *why* you did whatever you did: was there something you wanted from acting that way which you could notice if it came up again and refrain from? In the practice this phase might involve slowing down to really notice where we're at with what happened and what we feel capable of for now.

Remedial action

This might be a practice that supports you now in doing things differently, like a compassion meditation, or putting yourself in the shoes of the other person or people involved. It could be

planning what you might do to support you doing things differently in future: for example planning to explain the situation to trusted friends and get support in what you do next; or committing to learn more about an area where you've messed up because you didn't know enough about it; or planning to do something you know to be helpful in a different area. Something that I've found supportive at this phase is to remember times in the past when I've felt similar confusion, guilt, shame, or whatever, and to imagine sending support back to those versions of me, as well as to other people who I know – or don't know – who may be caught up in similarly complex situations.

Resolution

I found journaling helpful at this stage again to write down some resolutions, and to try to synthesise it into a couple of key points that I wanted to remember until the next ritual. You could also make something visual to symbolise what you want to refrain from and what you want to resolve to do differently. It could be creating drawings, or choosing objects like stones, buttons, or tarot cards that symbolise those things, which you leave somewhere you can see them every day. You could move your body in some way to represent what you want to refrain from and resolve: maybe some particular music or song to represent each one. Whatever works for you.

At the end you could take some more breaths, blow out the candle, or do some other grounding practice to mark the end of the ritual, perhaps inviting yourself to feel gratitude for the people, practices, and ideas that support you.

Cultivating the practice

I'm thinking that it might be useful, each time, to check out my notes from the previous time/s, in order to remind myself of my habits and resolutions. The ways we cause harm can be extremely hard to face so – as well as going gently and kindly with ourselves and remembering the wider situation we're all operating within which makes this so difficult – it might be helpful to do this practice regularly in a way that builds over time: maybe not looking at everything all at once in a way that would just overwhelm us and prevent us from wanting to look at it again. Teachers, therapists, or supportive groups could be helpful if we get into territory that feels too hard to bear alone.

Find out more

I've written elsewhere about how it's useful to sit with our role on all sides of the drama triangle (victim, persecutor, and rescuer) personally and politically, as well as how it can be helpful to connect with both our privilege and oppression. My social mindfulness zine also covers this in detail, and staying with feelings includes practices for how to stay with the emotions it brings up.

Gratitude

October 2014

This post explores the importance of gratitude for mental health and well-being, and the limitations of taking an individualistic approach towards saying 'thank-you'. The original article was written as part of an Open University campaign about gratitude.

Gratitude for mental health and well-being?

We probably assume that gratitude will be a positive thing for the person being thanked, but recent research in 'positive psychology' has found that it also has a very positive impact on the person doing the thanking.

The pioneer of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, studied all kinds of techniques for making people happier. The three he found to be the most effective were: remembering three positive experiences at the end of every day, finding a main strength that you have and applying it in a different arena, and writing a letter of gratitude to somebody and delivering it personally.

We might also consider the fact that most common mental health problems include a major component of criticism. In depression people frequently struggle with self-critical thoughts, in anxiety fear of failure is often bound up with self-criticism, and self-criticism often also has a key role in body image issues, self-harm, psychotic experiences, and addictions. For this reason, therapies and practices involving kindness and compassion have become increasingly popular in recent years. The tendency to evaluate, judge and criticise ourselves harshly is often related to a similar approach to other people. Therefore expressing gratitude and appreciation might be a useful counter to this tendency. Perhaps we can cultivate self-compassion to counter self-criticism, and appreciation to counter our criticism of others?

Finally, Open University research on relationships – the 'Enduring Love?' project – has found that 'saying thank you' was the most highly valued way in which people in couples showed their appreciation for each other. It is common, in long term relationships like those studied, for people to start to take each other for granted. Also it is very easy for people who live alongside each other for long periods of time, and who have high expectations of love relationships, to become judgemental of each other in ways that they probably wouldn't be of other people in their lives, leading to conflict.

The act of saying thank you for small –and big –things that we do for each other, is a good way to demonstrate that you still appreciate somebody rather than assuming that helping you is their duty or obligation, for example. It is also a good counter to the kinds of criticisms that happen in conflict situations. Researchers at the Gottman institute found that unhappy couples engaged in a great deal of criticism, whereas happy couples had five times as many positive interactions to negative ones, and expressions of gratitude and appreciation are a good example of such 'positive interactions'.

Individual or social?

However, there are some limitations to this approach to gratitude which focuses on the potential impact on individual mental health and well-being, or on satisfaction in individual couple relationships.

As I've discussed elsewhere, the criticism that so many of us struggle with is not just an individual thing that we happen to do (because of faulty brains, for example). Rather we are embedded in a culture which encourages high levels of criticism and comparison. Products are advertised on the basis that we are lacking and need to improve ourselves in some way, or that having such things could make us better than other people. Make-over TV shows, the red-rings round 'problem' body parts in women's magazines, and self-help books also often encourage ourselves to compare ourselves to others, to self-monitor, and to criticise ourselves and other people.

From this perspective, expressing gratitude towards other individual people would be a starting point for a wider project of countering this culture of criticism, rather than an end-point that is reached once it has resulted in improved individual happiness or decreased relationship conflict.

With a more cultural understanding we might try not to stop with gratitude visits to those close friends and inspirational teachers who have helped with our individual journeys. We might expand out to also consider the strangers who have a positive impact on us every day: the people whose work keeps our streets clean, for example, or all the many people whose collective work goes into our morning cup of coffee.

Such an approach might lead us to more social considerations of how to ensure that all people are valued – particularly those whose contribution is often undervalued in the current national and international situation. This points us towards a recognition of our interconnectedness and interdependence. It may not stop with human beings but rather it could enable us also to appreciate the other species who enable us to live the lives of comfort that we currently enjoy.

Thus expressions of gratitude in such situations may come with a call for further action. They might also help us to be more present to our lives: to appreciate things as they occur instead of only in reflection afterwards. In this way such gratitude is a component of engaging more mindfully with the world.

Gratitude or appreciation?

Another more social issue here is around the power dynamics of thanking people. I once offered a workshop at a community event to encourage people to express gratitude to those who'd helped them in their lives. A disability activist pointed out to me that 'gratitude' wasn't a great word as it implies a power imbalance between the people involved. She said that disabled people are often expected to express gratitude and seldom expected to be the

people who others are grateful to. For these reasons we re-titled the workshop ‘appreciation’ rather than ‘gratitude’.

I thought that this might be a useful reframing for other situations as well. For example, when it comes to mental health issues the focus could easily be on those who have struggled to thank those who helped them, but it is often so much more complicated than that. We get a lot from being the ‘helper’ as well as the ‘helped’, and situations of gratitude can set up an unrealistic ‘us and them’ distinction between mentally healthy and unhealthy. It is important to demonstrate that all people are valued and appreciated, and that can be particularly powerful in the case of those who are rarely thanked.

Bringing this back to the Open University campaign we explored the possibility of all OU people expressing their appreciation, not just the students. For example, as a lecturer I am so often struck by how much I have learnt from students: at least as much, over the years, as they have learnt from me, I am certain. A similar thing is true for the clients I have seen as a therapist. It is hard to put into words what a huge deal it is to have somebody open up their vulnerability to another person like that, and how much I have learnt – personally and professionally – from their courage. I like the idea of appreciation as a mutual endeavour rather than a one way street across the power dynamic.

Doing appreciation: Why, what, when, where and how

To end on a practical note I want to consider some of the pragmatics involved in ensuring that a thank you is ethical and consensual.

Encouragement to make grand gestures of thanks can, ironically, miss the other person entirely and become all about us, the thanker. So we need to think about the why, what, when, where and how of appreciation.

First we need to consider why we’re doing it. Personally I don’t believe that improving our own happiness is a great motivation for saying thank you! Similarly it is easy to say thank you because we feel it is expected of us, because it’s just what people do in the situation we’re in, or because we hope to get something in return (their thanks, or sense of obligation to us, for example). So we might reflect on whether we are genuinely appreciative of somebody and what they have done, as well as whether our thank you is freely given rather than in expectation of a certain response.

Secondly it’s worth considering the what, where and when of appreciation. There are many different ways of expressing appreciation and thanks. Do we make a grand gesture or just a simple message? Should we provide a detailed explanation of the impact somebody has had on us, or just say that we appreciate them and leave it at that? Is it important to meet in person or can it be better communicated over phone, email or message? Should it include some kind of gift or not?

This all relates to the question of how our appreciation will be received. We need to consider what we know about the person. For some people a public declaration would mean the world, for others it would be excruciatingly embarrassing. Receiving a thank you letter might be so moving that a person would want to be alone, and with enough time to process it, rather than feeling that an immediate reaction was required. If the person we're expressing appreciation for is somebody we have drifted away from, or had problems with, they might resent our intrusion into their lives.

There are similar issues, of course, with other kinds of declaration such as the 'making amends' encouraged by twelve step addiction programmes, or expressing our congratulations to somebody when we don't really know whether the thing that's happened (birthday, promotion, pregnancy) is really a cause for celebration for them.

A couple of recent examples spring to mind for me. I've read several books lately where the writer has thanked their partner in the acknowledgements section to the point of saying that the book would never have been written without them, and that they actually did much of the work of writing or researching it. Sometimes I wonder whether that public thank you might feel somewhat undermining to someone who – from the sound of it – might more appropriately have been listed as a co-author.

On the other hand, I recently experienced something that meant a great deal to me: somebody thanking me for my writing which had connected with them. The respectful way in which they did that, acknowledging the potential overwhelmingness of the situation for me, and allowing me time to take it in, was really appreciated.

In closing I'd like express my own appreciation to the OU campaign people for getting me thinking so much about this topic and to you for staying with me to the end of another long blog post: Thank you!

If you like, you can read the pdf of the original article here: MetroThankYou

Vulnerability (turning forty)

June 2014

I always planned to write a blog post here about turning forty, especially after sharing a wonderful 80s vs 90s themed party last month with my decade sibling who bravely posted her own reflections on turning thirty for all to see.

I imagined that I would post something terribly wise about how I held this 'big birthday' thing lightly: Questioning the arbitrary cultural meaning given to decades whilst finding my own way to mark the passing of time.

Reflecting back on how difficult I'd found my thirtieth birthday, I knew that this one would be different. Look at how much I've learnt since then. I sensibly spread out the celebrations so that I wouldn't feel the weight of expectations on one day. I met up with different people, and spent time alone, instead of putting pressure on one person to be responsible for making it perfect for me. I reminded myself that any specific age is pretty meaningless given the impossibility of knowing what percentage it is of the whole of your life.

…

If I knew one thing clearly at one o'clock in the morning, as I entered the second hour of a two hour crying jag that took me from my birthday into the first day of my forties proper, it was this: I couldn't write that blog post.

So I wrote this one instead.

You can't step outside of culture

The thing is that all the while that I was challenging those cultural rules about birthdays and decades and everything on the surface, another hidden part of me was buying into them all. For the past year a part of my mind has been scrutinising myself and my life, trying to determine whether I've done the things I should do with my thirties, and whether I am well placed to head into my forties. For all my questioning of checkpoint approaches to life, I secretly nurtured my own set of ideals through which to judge my success.

I had some idea that I could come up with the perfect rituals for life and have them all in place by my birthday. I wrote lists. The same old suspects: eating healthily, exercising more, meditating daily. Also writing more, seeing more friends, doing more activism. In fact so many things that it would be impossible to do them all without suddenly needing no sleep. There's an idea: add 'getting up earlier' to the list. It felt like going backwards, suddenly caring about things like how I look and what my job title is, despite everything I know about how unimportant such things are.

Any time I felt depressed (which I tend to do for a few days every month or two) I'd become convinced that some more radical change must be needed and would flail around, turning the tremor into an earthquake.

Despite everything that I know about projects of 'self-improvement' fuelling, rather than alleviating, the self-criticism that plagues us, part of me convinced myself that that wasn't really what I was doing. Because underneath it all was that seductive possibility: maybe this time I could really get there: to the point at which you are only the 'good' parts of yourself and none of the 'bad'.

My friend Ros says something very wise: You can't step outside of culture. And however much I want to exempt myself from this stuff I can't. I'm in a culture that says that I should scrutinise and compare and evaluate myself and then work constantly to try to fix the lacks and flaws and imperfections. Resisting that is hard, probably impossible. It's going to sneak back in.

What we can do

But perhaps what we can do when it sneaks back is to notice it. Just as we notice on birthdays that the more we attempt to engineer a perfect day the further it gets from perfection, so we can notice that the more we try to perfect ourselves the worse we tend to feel and the further away we drift from what we were aiming for in the first place.

Another thing we can do is to refuse to be yet another point of comparison against which others can evaluate themselves. That's a big reason why I wanted to write this post rather than any number of others I could've written about my birthday, editing out the crying jag and the messiness and the desperation.

Like most people, I suspect, I learnt early on that (1) there were parts of me that really weren't acceptable, and (2) the thing to do was to hide them from everybody. And, eventually, I became pretty good at presenting the face to the world that I thought people wanted to see, and withdrawing into myself whenever things got so tough that the unacceptable parts threatened to spill over.

But that strategy means that you constantly give yourself the message that the 'bad' bits really *are* bad (so bad that you need to hide them). And it means that other people assume that you don't struggle and therefore feel worse about themselves. And it means that anyone you *can't* hide from (the people you live with, for example, or the people who you land on when you eventually do crash) are put under a lot of pressure. They are the only people you're letting in, so you desperately want them to help you whilst also resenting the fact that they're seeing you this way. And probably they're quite isolated too if they are aware that you don't want anybody else to know that you get like this.

Opening up

So what is the alternative? The alternative is to be open about this vulnerable, exposing, raw, painful stuff. Because that means that you give yourself the message that you have this stuff and that you are still okay. And it means that other people can see that you struggle too and it's not just them. And it means that the weight of it all isn't just on you, or the one person who you let in.

Instead of embarking on constant projects to eradicate the 'bad' stuff, you can put the same time and energy into accepting that it's part of you and that's okay. In fact opening up about this stuff means that you are more able to connect with other people than when you're busy putting up the shutters, and pulling on the armour, and ensuring that you remain in a safe place where nobody will see you struggle.

When we withdraw and erect all these barriers we end up in more pain ourselves. We're also more likely to hurt other people as we bump against them in all that armour, bruising them and encouraging them put up their own defences to avoid getting hurt.

The alternative is gradually softening instead of hardening: opening up instead of closing down.

And at the same time that I've been secretly engaged in this project of 'maybe I can have it all fixed by the time I'm forty', on another level I've been learning this stuff about opening up. When I've felt hurt I've been experimenting with responding differently. Instead of crumpling or lashing out, I've been trying to reflect (often for several days because it doesn't come easy) and then to open up with people about where I'm at.

Sounds great in theory: utterly terrifying in practice. The old habits kick in all the time. For every time I manage to stay with the tough stuff and open up about it, there's a hundred more where I take the old escape routes (withdrawing, blaming someone else, distracting myself). I've had forty years of practice at that.

So I won't be writing a post in a decade's time, or a decade after that, where I've reached some point of complete openness and self-acceptance (if indeed I'm fortunate enough to make it to those future birthdays). If I post honestly at those times then I suspect it will be about being just as messy and confused and struggling as I am now. Accepting that instead of trying to be something different by then is kindof the point.

Uncertainty

April 2013

An important idea that I've come across in various contexts is that of embracing uncertainty. I liked it so much that I ended each chapter of *Rewriting the Rules* with it, asking myself and the reader what it would look like if – instead of clinging to old rules or developing our own new ones – we embraced the fact that relationships are uncertain and that no one set of rules could ever cover them completely?

I was therefore troubled recently to hear somebody use the idea of embracing uncertainty in a way that was hurtful to their partner. I realised that I've been guilty of doing the same thing myself. We hear a frightened partner seeking reassurance and a sense of safety and, feeling limited and trapped by their demands, we point out that life is uncertain and use that as a way out of making any kind of commitment to them. 'How can we know what's coming down the road? You need to embrace uncertainty baby.'

Such an exchange can leave us with a comforting feeling that we are by far the more evolved, rational and philosophically sophisticated, person in the argument, as well as absolving us of any sense of responsibility and enabling us to avoid facing up to the pain that somebody we love is feeling. No wonder it is an attractive position.

The last few weeks I've been returning to my favourite source on uncertainty, Pema Chödrön, as well as thinking a lot about how it applies to my own life. I want to share some of my ideas about what embracing uncertainty means beyond this kind of basic understanding of life being uncertain (which, of course, it is).

If we subscribe to this more nuanced understanding of embracing uncertainty then we could see it as coming from a place of deep commitment rather than from an attempt to escape commitment. Also, instead of being about a liberation from pain and difficulty, embracing uncertainty becomes about facing up to these things in a way which is both hard and courageous. This is why Chödrön calls it a warrior path.

Going slowly

The first thing about embracing uncertainty is that it takes time. When faced with uncertainty in life we often find it incredibly painful and rush to resolve it as quickly as possible. In the example I gave before, of telling a partner to embrace uncertainty, we are not really embracing uncertainty ourselves. Rather we are rushing to resolve the situation by writing our partner off and denying what they are feeling. To embrace the uncertainty of such a tough situation of relationship conflict we would take the time to really listen: to both our partner and to our own panicky, trapped feelings which are driving our impulse for a quick resolution.

In times of profound uncertainty in life it is tempting to act quickly. We're having a difficult time at work: quit. Our relationship is in difficulty: break-up. Somebody is out of line: reprimand them. Whether our action involves lashing out or running away, it is a quick response that gets us out of painful uncertainty because we either insist on the rightness of our way of seeing the situation, or escape the situation entirely.

Embracing uncertainty involves being prepared to sit with the situation in all its uncertainty for as long as it takes for us to be sure that we've seen it from all angles, and until we know that the response that we have come up with is that which is the most compassionate and ethical possible under the circumstances and for all involved (including ourselves and others).

During the time of uncertainty we need to refrain from acting however tempting it may be to do so. This may also involve asking others to give us the time that we need rather than giving in to their demands to come up with an answer. Thus it can also be quite a socially radical thing to do in a cultural context of quick fixes and immediate responses: being prepared to say 'I don't know what I think about this yet' or 'I'm not sure how best to respond, let me get back to you'.

Vitally though, embracing uncertainty is not about failing to act at all. Another misuse of embracing uncertainty would be to use it as an excuse for apathy or avoiding doing anything. Instead it is about a commitment to act in the most thoughtful and kind way possible having given ourselves enough time to look closely at the situation.

Leaning into pain

An idea which is frequently mentioned alongside embracing uncertainty is that of leaning into pain. When we take time to embrace uncertainty we are deliberately avoiding our usual instincts to avoid fear and suffering and, instead, determining to turn towards them, to lean into them, to really understand them.

This might sound fine in the abstract but we are actually talking about incredibly hard, messy, difficult work where we will be called upon to look directly at the things about ourselves that we feel most vulnerable and ashamed about. The situation wouldn't be so uncertain and difficult if it wasn't touching something deep and painful in us.

Therefore leaning into pain also involves knowing when we need to look at the situation and when we need a break from it to build up our strength . We simply cannot look at the situation constantly. If we do we risk getting so caught up in the tangle of different ways of understanding it that we can't see it at all. We need to retreat, to look after ourselves, to treat ourselves kindly as somebody in a tough situation, as well as time – when we're feeling stronger – to lean into the pain.

Leaning into pain involves taking a good hard look at what the situation means for us, what our habitual reactions are telling us to do (Fight! Prove them wrong! Run! Hide!), and why

that might be the case. The partners in the example before might usefully ask themselves what they are bringing to bear on the situation. Have there been other times (in their past, in other relationships) when they've felt insecure (on the one hand) or trapped (on the other)? What vulnerabilities do they carry from such times? Are they convinced that, on some level, they are really unloveable? Do they believe that they are destined to hurt the ones they love? In what ways do we fear that we are 'not really okay' and how is this influencing the current situation?

Whilst leaning into pain can be incredibly hard, the clearer picture that we gain when we face these things that we are so used to running from can bring a massive sense of relief, once we've taken the time to really look at them. When we do then have conversations with those involved there is often a similar sense of relief that – however painful those conversations are – they are coming from a place of honesty where nothing is being hidden from view.

Getting off the hamster wheel

The real value – for us – of embracing uncertainty is that it offers us a chance to get off the hamster wheels which we all seem to create for ourselves. Perhaps we are all about gaining approval, or becoming a success, or avoiding danger, or a combination of these and other things.

The ways in which we respond to the stuff of life becomes driven by these motivations such that we find ourselves going round and round in the same patterns. Perhaps we find ourselves taking on a new project every time we get to a much longed-for endpoint. Maybe we burn our bridges every time we get bored. We might realise that we always shy away from opportunities when they appear. Or we might recognise a pattern of pushing relationships to breaking point.

Whatever our (many) hamster wheels, embracing uncertainty gives us the possibility of stepping off temporarily – perhaps even permanently. Slowing down means that we can see the patterns that we're embroiled in. Leaning into pain means that we can understand better why we do it: what is so fearful that we are avoiding it by running faster and faster, and still getting nowhere.

When we embrace uncertainty we can start to see our hamster wheels and the ways in which they are hurting both ourselves and others. As well as engaging with the current situation in a more thoughtful, compassionate, and ethical way, we have a real possibility of stepping off the hamster wheel and beginning to forge a different path.

How to embrace uncertainty

So how do we actually do this in practice? The answer to this question will be different for each of us. Some find meditation a good way to slow down and lean into pain, others prefer journal-writing or talking things through with a trusted friend or mentor. It's important to remember that balance of retreat and engagement: we need to build in time away from the

situation to see it more clearly. I like to go for a walk in a wide open space where the big sky seems to relieve me from the pressure of the tangle, but retreating too will look different to everyone.

It is certainly worth – in calmer times – thinking through what works for us. How will we notice when we have become embroiled in the tangle? And how will we ensure that we take time to embrace uncertainty and lean into the pain instead of reacting quickly to close it down according to our usual habits?

Grief and Loss

In memory of Trevor Butt

April 2015

Last week I found out that my dear friend, colleague and mentor, Trevor Butt, had died. It's still very hard to believe that he is gone. I feel terribly sad that he didn't have the time – freed up from work by his retirement – to explore the projects he was passionate about, and to get more of his wonderful writing out into the world outside of the constraints of academic frameworks.

Inspiration

Trevor had a huge impact on my life. It's not exaggerating to say that I wouldn't be where I am here, now, if it wasn't for him.

Back in the early 2000s I had given up on being a researcher or a writer. I had done a PhD straight after my degree, mostly because I wasn't sure what else to do, being too young to go straight into counselling. But a critical response in my viva, and on submission of my first publication, convinced me that I was no academic. I got a job teaching psychology and decided to stick with that.

Wandering around the second hand shops in Malvern one day I picked up a book called *Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology*, by Trevor and his close friend and co-author Viv Burr. I read it and re-read it. I still have the copious notes that I made on it filling much of my first ever journal (which now line the whole back of my wardrobe).

That book shaped everything that I've done since. It showed me that it was possible for academics to study what they're passionate about. It introduced me to the constructionist/constructivist study of marginalised sexualities, genders and relationships, and gave me a kind of permission to explore those areas myself. It broke down the false boundaries I'd grown used to between psychology, sociology, philosophy, and psychotherapy. It demonstrated how our own personal experiences can be woven into our writing in ways which bring it to life. And it convinced me that academic theories can be deeply *useful* and relevant to the questions that I care most about, such as how to live our lives, and how to relate to ourselves and other people.

On a personal level, the questions that Trev and Viv raised about why we distinguish – in hierarchical ways- between lovers and friends has impacted hugely on the ways in which I navigate my own relationships, as well as making their way into much of my writing. Two of the most important people in my life – who I've had the longest relationships with – have been people I met through the connection with Trev: Alex Iantaffi and Darren Langdridge (who researched and wrote with Trev long before he and I researched and wrote together).

Those relationships have also complicated all of the clear distinctions between friends, colleagues, partners and other kinds of relationship, which seems fitting really given where they began.

As I often told Trev, the only thing that saddened me about *Invitation to Personal Construct Psychology* was that this book that had helped me so much wasn't in the self-help section of the bookshop, but the academic psychology section, where I found it. This meant that far too few people were likely to pick it up. That realisation was the first flicker of my own ongoing project to get these kinds of ideas out there more widely.

Mentor

A few years after I read that book, Trev and others at the University of Huddersfield put on a conference on personal construct psychology. I went along and presented a paper, and met Trev in person for the first time.

I'll never forget that moment. So many times in my life I've finally had chance to talk to a hero of mine, or even work with them, and it's been a painful experience. Often I just haven't felt met by them: it's seemed like a one-way encounter. And there's frequently been a sense of somebody who talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk of what they write about which so inspired me.

Of course it's important to remember that our heroes are also human beings. It's a kind of objectification to put them on a pedestal and to expect them to be perfect, or to assume that they will be able to be something for us simply because we admire their work. *We* can easily hurt *them* if we set them up to fail with all our expectations on them. Also life is a lot messier than writing. None of us can walk the walk all the time, or step outside of culture and completely live in the ways that we might advocate.

However, with Trevor I felt properly met. He was so warm and open and welcoming: so fascinated to hear what I thought about things rather than just telling me his opinions. As a junior academic it felt amazing to be instantly embraced and invited to join the conversations with Trev and his colleagues. That was the conference where I also met the wonderful Alex Iantaffi for the first time, and I have a strong memory the three of us sitting around in a halls of residence kitchen with Trev asking us enthusiastically all about our research and activism.

So another way that Trev has inspired me is in how to be as a person, particularly as I now reach a phase of my life where some people respond to my own writing, and perhaps see me as a mentor figure. I certainly don't always get it right but I try hard to have time for people and to commit to listening to them even (perhaps especially) when they are making criticisms: to recognise that they will always have areas of expertise to offer which I can learn from if I can stop and listen.

Trev is one of the – relatively few – people in my life who I've always felt able to be whoever I am with, rather than getting any sense that he wants me to be something for him. He also always showed total confidence in me, encouraging me to do what I cared about rather than suggesting that I should focus on this or that. I think that's an incredibly rare skill and one I that I really hope to cultivate myself.

Understanding people

One of Trev's more recent books is called *Understanding People*. You can read my review of it here. In it he explains some of his own research about people's sense of self. He found that we experience ourselves in very different ways in different relationships, and yet we can feel that we are authentically 'being ourselves' in all of them.

I think this is such an important piece of research because it demonstrates clearly that our self, or identity, is not fixed and static, but rather fluid and ever-changing. That can be a huge relief in a world where we're constantly encourage to scrutinise and monitor our self and find it flawed and lacking: where self-criticism is a – perhaps *the* – major component of so many mental health problems. You can read a blog post that I wrote about some of Trev's further ideas on this here.

I drew heavily on these ideas and findings in the first chapter of *Rewriting the Rules*. Indeed they were probably a big part of the reason that I began that book with people's relationships with themselves. I reflected there that it is often at funerals where we finally get to see all of the different selves that a person was: as we hear stories from the person who knew them as a parent, a sibling, a colleague, a friend, a mentor, a critic, a superior, a junior, and all of the other ways in which you can know someone. I look forward greatly to hearing about

some of Trev's other selves at his funeral next week and putting together a fuller, and more complex, picture of this person who I love.

The other way in which our selves are fluid is in how they change over time. Personal construct psychologists – and others – have written that we are like a flowing river, or a journey, rather than a static individual or identity which is fixed throughout time.

In this way, there is also a sense that we are not just a person who exists and then – at the moment of death – ceases to exist. Rather life is a series of births and deaths, as parts of us come into being and parts of us are lost. For example, certain versions of Trev came into being when he collaborated with Viv, or Darren, or me. And certain versions of him ended when he stopped clinical work, published his last book, or retired, for example. All of this starts before we are born, perhaps as our grandparents begin to imagine their kids having kids, or even when an ancestor imagines their impact on future generations. And it finishes long after we are dead, because we continue on in the memory of others and our impact upon their lives, and the lives that they touch.

That way of seeing things gives me something to hold on to through the waves of sadness that I'm feeling about the suddenness of Trev's death, and the sense of an ending that came before he – or anyone else – was prepared for it. I know that I can have a role in keeping the memory of Trev alive, both in what I write and in how I – myself – live and relate to others.

Addendum: I also intend to start saying 'nosebags' whenever it's time to eat in memory of Trev 🙂

Memorial for Gran: Does everything happen for a reason?

May 2019

One of the many, many big changes that's happened for me in the past year is that I lost my last living Grandparent. My Gran, Leslie Duffield, died shortly before what would've been her 100th birthday: today 26th May. Here's an excellent picture of us both taken at my sister's wedding a few years back.

You can read about Gran's very interesting life in this article from her county newspaper. Her death has got me thinking about so many things. I've been writing in a few books and chapters about coming from a mixed class background (another way of being non-binary), and how curious it felt going from regular weekends in a bungalow with my Dad's parents to yearly summer trips to a mansion house with my Mum's. Gran Leslie's death – nearly thirty years after I lost my first Gran – Audrey – feels like an important reminder of social injustice and the way it plays out on our bodies and lives. I don't think there was any long obituary for Granny Audrey in her county's newspaper despite her equally interesting life.

I'm living in Sussex now, where Audrey grew up and where there is a balance for me between nature and community like Leslie had in her life. I feel very connected with both Grans and aware of the ways in which their lives – and the lives that preceded them – impacted my own.

In the rest of this post I'll share some reflections that I also shared for Gran Leslie's memorial service, about a few of the ways in which her life and values impacted my own. Another time I'll return to Granny Audrey who remains one of the most important presences in my life to this day.

Nature

My earliest memories of Leslie were of visiting this magical person in this magical place – so different to the worlds I inhabited in the rest of my life. I remember exploring her huge house from basement to attic which still shows up regularly in my dreams: all vast staircases and hidden rooms. I remember playing with all the old toys my uncles and mother had played with as children, and Gran reading to me from beautiful ancient copies of Winnie-the-Pooh and Beatrix Potter – doing all the voices. I remember discovering a love of nature – like my Gran's – in the surrounding gardens, fields, and woodlands – seeing birds of prey, bluebells, hares. One time as a small child I sat still and silent in a copse for an hour while a rabbit came close by and observed me.

Family/Community

In her house I remember Gran primarily in the kitchen, ever calm, steady and available to everyone. She taught me to cook with love and I'm so grateful for that. One of my favourite things is still to show my love for people through preparing meals for them. It seemed like most of the day with my Gran involved cooking the next meal or eating the last one: breakfast, elevensies, lunch, tea, supper. But wherever we were in the process Gran had time to talk and to listen. And I remember a big kitchen table, heaving with people all chatting and teasing each other and passing around the food. As well as many of her family remaining nearby, Gran often had friends to stay and to visit, and she housed local students in her house for many years and became a surrogate parent to them. Like the natural world around us there was a sense of rightness about that family and community where all were welcome which I'd love to emulate in my own life.

Philosophy

Finally I think a lot about Gran's philosophy on life, which is one that I both share and don't share. She would always say 'everything happens for a reason'. I think this view is what enabled her to embrace all that occurred in her life – joyful and painful – with gratitude and a capacity to cope which many of us would find hard to emulate.

However much I see what that philosophy enabled for Gran, as I said to her I don't find it possible to agree that 'everything happens for a reason'.

First, this is because I'm agnostic, and 'everything happens for a reason' seems to require a belief in an external force (god or 'the universe' or something) which presents situations to us in some kind of conscious way. I don't feel able to say with certainty whether such a force does or does not exist. I relate to Stephen Batchelor's deep agnosticism which is about more than just saying 'I don't know' but rather embracing not-knowing and uncertainty, recognising the limits of what we (puny humans!) can know; our tendency to grasp for answers instead of remaining open to mystery. It seems to me that such agnosticism requires us to develop an ethics, and a way of living, that isn't there because we hope for some reward in the future

but is more focused on alleviating the suffering of ourselves and others right now, whatever happens next or whatever some higher power might or might not think of us.

The other reason I'm cautious about 'everything happens for a reason' is that it seems an easy slip from that into the belief that those who tough things happen to – who are in poverty or abused for example – have done something to deserve it. This is the comforting Just World Hypothesis bias which many of us slide into to make us feel better about our privilege and/or more in control of our lives. But it means that we're often hyper critical of ourselves and others, individualise what are really structural and systemic problems, and risk falling into victim blame. Telling somebody who is suffering that everything happens for a reason seems unhelpful – and potentially unkind – to me (unless what you mean by 'reason' is patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, et al. in which case you do have a point).

The related view that works better for me is the idea – which I get from Pema Chödrön – of seeing all obstacles in our lives as our path: to embrace them and learn from them, to stay with the feelings that they bring up, and to invite them to open us up rather than close us down. For me that doesn't require any definite belief about why these obstacles happen, and it still requires me to fight the injustices which place so many more obstacles in some people's ways than others.

A dream

A couple of weeks after she died I dreamt that I was at Gran's memorial and that she was there too – as a ghost – wandering around and chatting with everyone. She seemed to take this in her stride as with everything in her life, whereas I was desperate to talk with her and find out what was going on. When I got to her I asked what was next for her – after this final chance to connect with all her people. She said she didn't know, just as she hadn't known that she'd get this opportunity, and she seemed to be just fine with that. Whatever my agreements and disagreements with her philosophy, it somehow enabled my Gran to be this open to whatever came her way, even when that was death.

I expect I'll keep returning to this dialogue between her worldview and my own for the rest of my life – even now she's no longer here to talk about it with in person – and I'm very grateful for that.

Remembering Audrey: Another memorial

August 2019

Tonight is the full moon so another regret ritual for me. The more I do them the more each one seems to find the right shape for that particular time. Last time a celebration of my first day self-employed: A regretting of the heavy self-criticism that marked my time as an academic, a reflection on the impact it had on myself and others, a resolution to treat myself differently now that I'm my own boss.

This time a plan took shape as I took a train past the Long Man of Wilmington last weekend. That place reminds me of my Gran – Audrey. It reminds me of the stories she used to tell of wandering the downs above Eastbourne. Last time I was there I felt strongly connected to her.

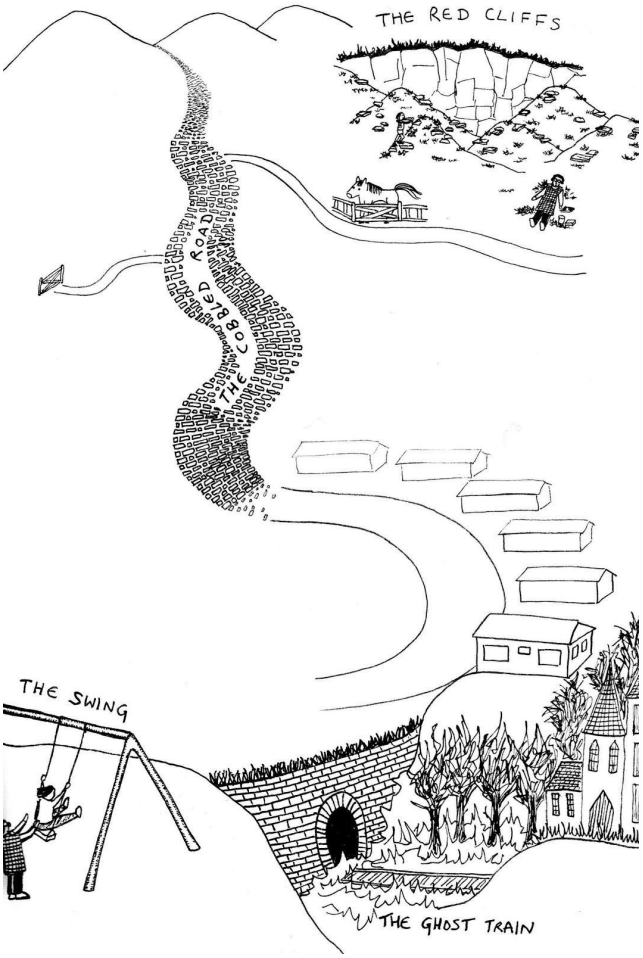
When I wrote a memorial for my other Grandmother, Leslie, I promised I would do one for Audrey too – having not had the chance to do so when she died in my teens. It's a more complicated story to tell. But I decided to do my regret ritual today around her, and to write this story as I sit here, now, above the Long Man.

Remembering Audrey

Some of my best childhood memories involve being on a hill much like this with Audrey. She moved all the way from Sussex to Yorkshire to be close to me and my Dad – her son. She lived with my Granddad in a bungalow near the Keighley moor and I visited her there on the weekends. I thought of her as old then, but I guess she wasn't all that much older than I am now.

Friday nights she would make me my favourite meal: roast chicken and homemade chips. We listened to singles on her record player and danced to Shakin' Stevens. We read her grisly true crime books and gave ourselves the shivers.

Saturdays she packed a lunch and took me up the cobbled hill above the cul de sac where she lived and onto the moor. The hill seemed like a massive climb then but I guess it wouldn't feel so far now. We always made for our spot – the red cliffs: a magic place where heather covered hillocks hid a disused quarry. Gran sat at the bottom while I clambered up over the heather and rocks, adventuring. I remember the feeling: free and wild and at the same time safe and loved, returning to Gran when I was done. We sat there watching the Worth Valley steam trains make their way along the valley far beneath us, eating chicken sandwiches and the little purple bilberries growing around us. She'd tell me how she used to climb like me – up on the Sussex downs. She said those were her happiest times too.



Cartoon image of my Gran's place, the red cliffs, the playground we used to go to, and the disused railway tunnel next to her house where she told me a ghost train still passed during the night

Later, after she moved to Bradford, our days together became adventures where we'd get on the first bus that came along, sit upstairs in the best spot (monarch of the bus), and go wherever it took us – Keighley and Haworth generally being the only options but I didn't know that at the time. I remember her telling me stories about this family of kids she'd made up, and feeding me maltesers. She'd push me on the swings in the park, take me round the little shops, and get us fish and chips to eat at the bus stop before we headed home to bath and bed.

Love and Loss of Love

When I think of those times together, love is the word for it. The way Audrey delighted in me – my excitement at all that we saw and did and talked about – combined with the safety and kindness I felt from her, cuddled up in the evening watching TV after all the adventuring.

But it's a complex story because Audrey also taught me what it is to lose love. I remember it vividly. I guess it was around the time I started adolescence. I was being bullied at school: learning that I wasn't okay in all kinds of ways, that I'd have to hide my innocence and

difference and enthusiasms if I wanted to get on. Gran had moved into sheltered housing. I think she probably struggled as much with the other people there as I did with the kids at school but I didn't see that at the time.

I remember one evening I made a critical comment about someone on the TV who annoyed me. She became furious, saying I didn't know what that woman had been through, what a hard life she'd had. In retrospect I think it must've been someone she identified with. It struck some painful chord from her own life. I remember the disappointment, disapproval, even disgust on her face as she looked at me. I linked it to the way she'd looked when I told her I'd started my period. She called that the curse.

This felt like a curse. Suddenly everything about me was wrong. And the things I was doing to survive this situation I was in made me someone my Gran couldn't love any more. It happened a couple more times: her getting enraged like that, seemingly out of nowhere. It scared me and it confused me. I didn't tell anyone about Gran's anger just as I never told them about the school bullying, or my fears that there was something wrong with my body.

Gran and I became distant. She transferred her affection to my sister. Before I was out of my teens, she died. I felt guilty for betraying her, for seeing her less and less, for rarely visiting her in hospital. Her funeral was horrible: fake music and this person talking who didn't even seem to know her.

I feel so sorry that I could never know Audrey adult-to-adult: that I could never have these conversations with her directly and also that I couldn't find out more about her politics and activism. These were probably pretty similar to where I've now got to myself. She was heavily involved in the miner's strike, for example.

Stories and Patterns

You could tell a lot of stories through what happened between me and my Gran. I later found out that this was her pattern with family and friends – to love people fiercely and fully – looking on them as golden ones – and then eventually flipping and feeling betrayed by them – hating them and often casting them out of her life, or at least her heart.

You could say it was terrible that she did that to me – a little kid. Just at the time when I needed her love to be a constant to demonstrate to me that I wasn't all the bad things I was being told I was, instead she acted in a way which confirmed it. And she was the grown up. She should've known better; done better.

Or perhaps she saw what was happening to me: saw the delightful, playful kid she'd loved disappearing and this hard, unhappy, critical person taking their place; clumsily trying to be what other people wanted them to be and losing themself in the process. Maybe she couldn't bear that: losing me that way. Maybe it was also what had happened to her once upon a time.

Or perhaps this is just what it's like for everyone going from childhood to adolescence. Maybe I should just get over it.

But the point is I never really could get over it. My whole life I've longed to feel again that kind of love I felt from Gran. It's like she passed her pattern onto me because whenever I seemed to find that kind of love I would love fiercely and fully in return, but if the person ever looked at me the way Gran did those times – with disappointment, disapproval, or even disgust – I'd find it totally unbearable. I would do anything to avoid that happening: becoming hypervigilant, trying to be whatever they would find loveable, avoiding saying or doing anything they might not like.

That kind of pressure often meant that when I couldn't keep it up – all that work – I would become really hard to handle: desperate, flailing, unreachable, inconsolable, self-loathing. And of course that made it even more likely I'd get that look. As it happened more and more I wouldn't be able to bear it so eventually I'd leave. Often I'd wait until another person had come along who might give me the kind of love I craved. Somehow being without it at all once more felt too hard.

Of course there's more to my patterns than this: other stories that I have told – and will tell – in other places. There are stories about the cultural messages around love we all receive, stories about other early relationships I had and their impact, stories about capitalism and what that does to us, stories about how we all struggle to be with each other in our complexity – not grasp for the 'good' and hurl away the 'bad'. There are stories about the patterns of the other people involved – which are not mine to tell – but which were part of the picture too, of course.

And there *are* relationships where I've resisted this pattern: found other ways to be, or containers for the relationship which have enabled it survive moments where I felt like my old horror was being lived out again.

But this feels like a pivotal story for me. And it's not over yet: the pattern still happens.

Memorial

So today I decided to come here, where I imagine Gran used to come when she was a kid, maybe before all of her patterns got put in place: the ones she somehow passed on to me.

Despite being mostly veggie these days I allowed myself the happiest chicken I could find. I ate it with homemade chips last night and made sandwiches this morning. I got on the first bus that came along near my house: the Coaster that runs from Brighton to Eastbourne. I got off at Friston and walked through the forest. I saw a fawn with an adult deer in the woods: they seemed impossibly fragile to me. Lots of fragility on the walk.

I came to this spot by the Long Man, eating blackberries instead of bilberries along the way. And now I'm sitting to write this on my phone and popping maltesers. Later I'll have my

sandwiches looking down over Eastbourne, watching the trains make their way along the valley beneath me.

It strikes me that through my life I've taken the journey Gran took in the opposite direction: from Yorkshire to Sussex. I've moved down the country till I'm where she began – walking her chalk hills instead of my moors. I have to stop my progress south now. I've finally met the sea.

I've carried these patterns with me all this way, leaping from love to love with no break in the chain, trying to get back what I once had and leaving every time it looked like it was going the same way as before. I've tried everything to do it differently. I've reflected and written about it, I've warned people about it, I've shown them every part of me. But still I gave too much of myself away in an attempt to get that love and had to leave to get myself back. Still I couldn't seem to bear it when the love dropped into that other thing – the disappointment, disapproval, disgust.

So now I'm trying the one thing I haven't tried yet: not doing it. I'm staying with those old, old feelings of loneliness and longing for love, of yearning for somebody else to prove that I'm okay, and fearing that I'm really not. I'm trying not to push the feelings down, not to blame anyone else for them, and not to look to anybody else to make them go away. It's really fucking hard but I think it's the only way to change these patterns, and the pain and loss they cause to others and to me.

I'm doing rituals like this to try to find the love and kindness and safe-enough feeling that I long for within myself. I'm reaching out to all of my people, being vulnerable, and letting them into this so that I won't be tempted to put it on one person any more. And hopefully those people will feel able to let me know if they see that happening again.

Today I do this ritual of regret for my Gran and for myself. I'm so grateful to Audrey for showing me what love can be, and I'm grateful to myself for managing to do this now. I also forgive Audrey for passing on this pattern – this curse – which has lost me so much love, home, and family along the way. Goodness knows what she went through to make her that way, or what the people went through who did that to her, or the ones who did that to them. As I forgive her I try to also forgive myself and to forgive all of us who are caught up in our own patterns, passed down through the generations, hurting each other and hurting ourselves. May we all find some kindness in this sorrow, in this regret.

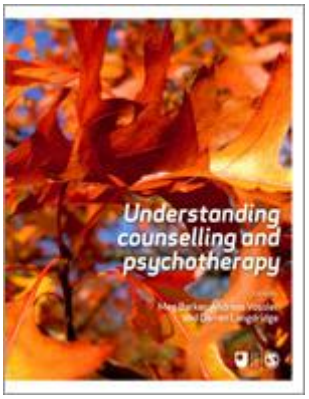
Image of a gate from my walk with the word ‘thankyou’ written on it

Therapy

Suggestions for Fear and Sadness

March 2011

In 2010 Darren Langdridge, Andreas Vossler and I published a textbook which brought together experts on all different types of counselling to say how their approaches would work with fear and sadness.



When we wrote the book I thought that it would be great to do another book covering the same areas, for people who are not interested in studying counselling themselves but who just want to know about what different kinds of counselling suggest. As Mick Cooper and John McLeod have recently pointed out: different things work for different people at different times, whereas most books on the market cover just one approach in detail. Maybe I'll write that book one day, but meanwhile here are what I personally think are the top suggestions from each chapter of the book we did write. If you find them useful of course you can always do the whole module (D240) through the OU.

1 – Introduction

Remember that everyone gets frightened or sad, and everyone also has times in their life when this becomes overwhelming. There is not really an 'us' (the professionals) and a 'them' (the clients or patients) because all people will find themselves both in the position of struggling and of helping others who are struggling.

2 – Diagnosis

We used the words 'fear and sadness' rather than 'anxiety and depression' for the module because there are pluses and minuses to the more diagnostic categories. It can be useful to think about what is gained, and what might be lost, from taking on such labels. For example, they can make it easier to find others who are in a similar situation, to access support, and to

feel legitimate in what you're experiencing. But they *can* also mean being stigmatised by others or feeling as if you are stuck this way for good. Diagnosis can also be more or less useful for different people at different times, and doesn't have to be the way you see yourself forever.

3 – Drug treatments and the biopsychosocial approach

People often link diagnosis and medication. It can feel like either you have an illness, you take drugs and therefore it is not your fault that you are struggling, *or* you don't have an illness, you don't take drugs and therefore it *is* your fault and you should 'pull your socks up'. That's a really unhelpful (but sadly common) way of looking at it. We become overwhelmed by fear and sadness for all kinds of complex reasons involving our bodies, our background, things going on in our lives, and the world we live in. Drugs can certainly help some people at some times, but taking them doesn't mean you can't do anything for yourself as well. And deciding that you don't want to take drugs doesn't mean you are struggling any less or don't need support.

Interestingly the one thing that everybody we interviewed for this module agreed on (including celebrities like Trisha Godard and Stephen Fry) was that some form of physical activity had helped them immensely. It can be really hard to do when you're feeling bad, but well worth keeping in mind just how beneficial it can be.

4 – Psychoanalysis

I'm not a great fan of psychoanalysis myself, but the chapter that Ian Parker wrote on this topic for the book was a real eye-opener about the starting points of the 'talking cure' of counselling. I loved Freud's metaphor that we are like those 'magic slate' toys which kids have.

When things happen to us it is like writing on the front layer of plastic. Then that gets wiped clean, but there are still traces of the writing on the wax behind that will have an impact on whatever we try to draw next (the lines will get a bit broken and distorted). Freud believed in

the value of exploring what there is back there on the wax layer which is affecting us now. And I think that is valuable as we often find ourselves responding to current events in ways that are hugely influenced by what has happened in the past. Making sense of that can help it to feel more manageable and understandable.

5 – Humanistic counselling

A key concept here is empathy. Can we cultivate empathy for ourselves and for other people? Carl Rogers proposed a challenge where each time you speak – in an argument or discussion – you first have to restate the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately and to their satisfaction, before you get to have your say. This might seem a long way from fear and sadness, but many authors are now seeing compassion as centrally important in these areas. If we can learn to be more understanding and kind in our interactions with others we end up feeling less alienated from them, and it also helps us to recognise that it makes sense when we struggle as well, and that we also deserve kindness. When people are feeling really distressed one of the best things they can do is just to make sure that they do one kind thing for themselves every day. It helps to remind them that they are as worthy of kindness as everyone else.

6 – Existential counselling

Existential counselling challenges our common idea that there are good emotions (joy, pride, happiness, etc.) and bad emotions (fear, sadness, anger, etc.) Rather it sees all emotions as important parts of human existence. When we have to make choices we often experience deep anxiety but that is part of embracing our freedom and really living. Similarly there are inevitably points when it all feels too much and we give up and retreat from the world. Existential therapist Emmy Van Deurzen suggests that emotions are on a kind of compass, from happiness (North) through anger (East), down to sadness (South), and back up through hope (West) to happiness again. We move endlessly around that circle – like it or not – so it is worth understanding all those states, and what we get from them as well as what is difficult about them, rather than trying hard to avoid some of them which means we might well get stuck in one place.

7 – Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)

When we find something frightening or depressing we tend to avoid it, but often that leads to it becoming more scary or saddening rather than less so, and we can then become quite paralysed. Our world narrows as more and more things seem difficult. A very basicCBT idea would be to gradually approach the things that scare us rather than avoiding them (starting small and working our way up). Another useful CBT technique is to pay attention to the little negative thoughts we have throughout the day – like an ongoing commentary – maybe noting them down as we are aware of them and challenging each of them. Is it really realistic? What alternative explanations are there? Is it useful? How might I think about this differently?

8 – Mindfulness

Make a little time every day just to sit somewhere peaceful and breathe. The idea is to be comfortable without distractions and just focus on the sensation of the breath going in and out of your body. You will find that you keep getting carried off on thought processes and distracted by sensations and that is absolutely fine. Just notice that it has happened and bring your attention gently back to the breath. Notice how the thoughts and feelings bubble up and then pass away again eventually if you don't get too stuck to them. The idea in mindfulness is that if we practice doing this regularly we will start to be able to bring the same accepting awareness to whatever is going on in the rest of our lives.

9 – Systemic counselling

The fear and sadness we experience feels like it is inside us and that there is something that we need to do individually to change it. Systemic counselling proposes that actually much fear and sadness is really in between people, in families, relationships, and groups of work colleagues. Think about your own dynamics with people you are close to: do you tend to bounce off each other sometimes in ways that leave one or more of you feeling bad? A nice exercise from systemic counselling is to take some different shaped stones or modelling clay and make a model of your family or group, representing each person as an object, and where they are in relation to each other, by the way you position them. Then you can move it around to show how you would rather it was. This can help you to be aware of how the dynamics in relationships can get stuck and also how they might shift.

10 – Sociocultural issues

Similar to systemic counselling, sociocultural approaches remind us that a great deal of our fear and sadness are about the culture surrounding us and how we are viewed within it. Being marginalised is strongly linked to experiences of distress, and we all occupy multiple sociocultural positions (in relation to race, gender, sexuality, age, class, (dis)ability and so on). It can be useful to reflect on which position you are in on all of these dimensions and what the assumptions are 'out there' about people like you. Do your experiences of fear and sadness relate to those assumptions at all? Are there ways of sharing these with other people who are in a similar position?

11- Context and setting

This chapter was all about counselling over the phone and online. One idea from it was to write about a time when you were feeling particularly sad or frightened – noting down what was going on and how you felt about it – without thinking about it too much. This was really an exercise to think about how people express their emotions online or over email, but actually researchers like Pennebaker have found strong evidence that writing regularly about our feelings is hugely beneficial. Private blogs and personal journals can be a helpful way of doing this.

12 – The therapeutic relationship

This chapter explored how different types of counselling involve different relationships between the client and the counsellor. Many people who decide to go for counselling don't realise how many different types of counselling there are, and how they will all involve very different kinds of relationship and quite different focuses. I wrote a bit about the different counselling approaches here. It is definitely worth thinking about what would work for you and asking counsellors about their qualifications and approaches before committing to it. You should always make sure that they are accredited with one of the major bodies (e.g. BACP, UKCP, BPS). If in doubt, ask.

13 – Outcome research

As well as finding out about what approach might suit you, it is also worth checking out the research that has been done into the kind of counselling you're thinking of going to. Mick Cooper's book on this topic is very accessible if you are interested, and even online searches can give you some idea of whether the kind of counselling you're considering has been found to be helpful for the kinds of issues you have. However…

14 – Process research

…perhaps the main research finding about counselling is that all of the main approaches (covered in this book) are generally about equally effective (with some exceptions like CBT being particularly good for simple phobias). According to the research, a good relationship between client and counsellor is one of the main things which predicts how useful counselling will be. So it is worth shopping around for someone you have a good rapport with. If you are accessing free counselling it is still okay to ask for a different counsellor if you don't feel a good relationship with the one you have.

15 – Conclusions

There is always a risk with going to a counsellor that this will reinforce the idea that many of us already have that there is something wrong with us that needs fixing. Our commercial culture is very good at giving us a sense of anxiety about the things that we lack, and selling us products to relieve this anxiety. In this culture it is all too easy to think that we are not good enough. Therefore it is important to remember that going to get some support or talk through what's happening doesn't mean there is anything inherently wrong with you, and also remembering that counselling is just one of many ways of thinking things through, looking after ourselves, and getting support.

Thank-you for reading

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