

The kindest thing

As an adult who was adopted as a four month old baby and as a practicing somatic mindfulness based psychotherapist I constantly stop, take a breathe and ask myself and my client; what is the kindest thing I/you can do right now?

Right now what is the kindest thing you can do for yourself ?

This is not a trite question but one based in grounded present moment experience. It calls for the Self to drop projecting into the future or ruminating on the past and come into the wide compassionate space of now, attune into the deeper nervous system and listen to the wisdom of the heart.

Right now I am aware of the beating of my heart, faster than normal (*too much caffeine during the working day today*) and a fizz of energy rising from an impending deadline for completing this piece of writing. The kindest thing I can do right now is listen into my truth, to allow my words to dance across the page and let my lived experience speak to others.

In 2002 I landed in Brighton, UK to train as a social worker after some years teaching in prisons and working with people experiencing serious mental illness. I had unconsciously gravitated to working with people with severe trauma as I was extremely traumatised and felt both understood and understanding of those I worked with. A lot of my colleagues also seemed to have experienced traumatic childhoods but none of us spoke about this. At this point in time no one was talking about trauma and developmental trauma in mainstream mental health services in England - this was an area of learning and discussion growing in the United States.

It was the movement practices of 5 Rhythms (Gabrielle Roth) and Open Floor (Andrea Johan) that led me to train in Core process and sensorimotor psychotherapy, which first gave me a lived understanding of my own neurobiology and equipped me with practical ways of processing unresolved trauma through my eco-system(mind/body/heart).

I first started dancing 5 Rhythms in 2003 after my craniosacral therapist mentioned I may enjoy unstructured dance. She was a beautiful wise loving soul and something in me listened to her gentle suggestion. So off I went to dance. The balm of unstructured movement held within a safe container of a non-drinking/drug environment allowed my nervous system to calm. Quite quickly I noticed symptoms such as an inability to settle and an underlying restlessness and agitation were lessening and I felt clearer and happier. This was not about talking about my trauma history – but about moving – moving my cells, psyche, heart.

Paul Sunderland calls the experience of postnatal adoption a primal trauma as the baby has not developed any stable sense of self before she is plunged into the preverbal chaos of rupture from mother. No self has been formed before this trauma of separation. The baby cannot speak so everything is felt through the body. The little one's nervous system flooded with terror cannot run away or fight so ultimately collapses and goes into hypo arousal to survive – effectively plays dead. The baby can therefore appear as a 'quiet' or even 'happy' baby when the next caregivers arrive. The baby has to attach to what it feels is dangerous but cannot express its anger, distress or grief at this. The primary instinct is survival and attachment. Thus, a very confusing dynamic is established. The baby knows no safe place in itself of rest and has experienced the world as annihilating, as physically unsafe. However, she must adapt. The little one adapts to other to survive and in doing so has to override the

heady mixture of chemicals flooding her body (adrenalin, cortisol). This in turn is exhausting and leads to a type of override whereby a nervous energy can overlay a kind of flat line feeling that emerges as a lack of energy, a type of depression and inertia.

How do I know this? This is not a theory I have read from books or gathered from online webinars. I have examined my own neurobiology through my own movement, meditation and creative practices.

In 2011 I was extremely fortunate to attend a dance and dream workshop with Chris Price and Andrea Juhan at Essalen, California. During this workshop through breath, dance and movement I was brought into direct contact with preverbal womb experiences. The body forgets nothing. Linear time has no meaning for the deeper cellular self as Einstein noted. In a deep meditative state using breath to support my experience and working with a partner to provide a safe holding field I felt back into the experience of being in the womb. I felt drowned with alcohol flooding through the placenta from my birth mother, and felt into a terrible dilemma. I had no control over resisting the toxicity of alcohol entering my body and yet desperately wanted and needed connection with my mother to survive. Thus, a push pull dynamic towards relational contact was established. I have been working with processing that unhealthy dynamic since then and noticed how it has impacted my relationships and impaired my ability to take in the good.

Through awareness and moving intentionally with breath and movement over time I have gradually been able to transform my embodied experience and slowly begin to trust and take in goodness. I noticed how traditional talking therapies had not supported this deeper transformational growth in my own personal process of change.

I subsequently trained with William Emerson in pre and perinatal trauma at the Karuna Institute, UK and similarly, through a process of deep meditation and breathwork moved through layers of preverbal embodied trauma to free up my energetic self and move into greater personal eco wellbeing.

We are all interconnected. Thus my personal work impacts my clients and the world around me. I have a personal responsibility to treat myself with kindness and compassion – else how can I offer an attuned listening to my clients and help them listen into their own wisdom?

My colleague Saskia asked me to provide a list of embodied practices that have helped me in my own personal journey in this article. I don't really like lists, they seem prescriptive, as if there is a right way to do things. I was attracted to Core process psychotherapy as it is based in Buddhist psychology; the Buddha said examine your own process and do not believe what anyone else tells you. Learn from personal experience and awareness. Solid advice for an adoptee!

Through my own experience I have noticed conscious movement practices such as 5 Rhythms, Open floor, yoga, tai chi, chi qong continue to help ground my nervous system, bring it up from hypo arousal and back into the window of tolerance. I notice that good healthy organic food helps me settle. That writing and reading poetry support me to shift into the spacious beyond of creativity, music and singing can lift me up and make me smile. When feeling separate and disconnected relational resourcing such as talking to a friend, sharing a meal, cooking together helps me embody a sense of wellbeing and togetherness as does joining a community group or walking in nature or gardening and listening to birdsong. Having loving physical with my dog or another living creature generally settles my nervous system and brings me back into feeling.

Taking a bath, using aromatherapy oils and having a massage also can support my nervous system to come back into my window of tolerance and enable me to relax into my body. Creative practices such as painting and writing also help me reconnect with something more fulfilling and resourcing than my small separated world. Laughing and being silly energise. A conscious daily practice of giving thanks, of gratitude for little things helps connect me with what is good and creates more energy not less. Contact with spiritual community and meditation can help me move beyond reaction into deeper contact with my own process and increase my awareness and sense of belonging.

Creative compassionate kind acts and practices are medicine. There is a kaleidoscope of creative practices that can bring us alive. This is the adventure – to find what brings you alive, what makes you feel safe and grounded and more open to the world.

Consistently I have noticed it is through relational connection that the nervous system can recalibrate and come back into health. Interpersonal and somatic wounding happens in relationship and thus it is through relationship this wounding can potentially be resolved even though my first reaction is to withdraw and separate.

Personally, I have not found analysis transformational. When bogged down in hypo arousal states the preverbal, young parts of me need warmth, safety and contact - not cognitive analysis. And sinking into disconnection, isolation and withdrawal for any protracted time has led only to deeper frozen states and disconnection. My experience has been that hypo arousal states need warmth and connection to gently unfreeze **slowly**.

All the above practices are and have been traditionally embedded in indigenous communities. It is as if we have lost our way through the fragmentation of postmodern post-industrial atomised society.

I can only report back what I have learnt from my own adventures in my embodied underworld. Perhaps this is helpful to you or not. Take what you will. But what I can offer is encouragement to adventure and to listen deeply to your inner wisdom. As Ishwar Puri stated ; the mind talks while the heart listens. Bon voyage.

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