

I Just Can't Count the Change

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I was reminded of my strong willed and independent nature one evening when a person in a group process broke into emotion and described an experience that was more painful than it had to be. By choice, she had faced every aspect of a major event alone.

I do not know where she learned that behavior, but I know where I learned mine. Neither my mother nor father learned to deal with their anger. They practiced on their children. As they dealt with anger in different ways, we got a wide-ranging education.



For much of life, I surrounded myself with defiance, determined to shut out sources of pain. I did not allow anyone to see how much I hurt. It had not yet dawned on me that I was becoming one of my own sources of pain. The strange twist was that I became one of my abusers.

What's more absurd is that I was too young and injured to see what I was doing then, or even after I went out into the larger world beyond home. Because of my defiance, others were not sure I was getting their message, so they increased the pain. The more defiant I got, the more pain they inflicted.

I carried this programming into adult life and acted it out with authority figures at work. In a confrontation, the more fearful I became, the more I withdrew inside. I was so hypersensitive to impending rage that I would freeze physically and verbally. I instantly prepared to cut my losses by denial or rationalization. I could even lie. I would hold my breath and look for an exit. Sometimes I could only listen and leave accepting blame that was not mine. It was difficult for me to hang onto self esteem.

I survived many business encounters by living on an emotional roller coaster. I'd take risks to achieve and please. Because I took risks, I'd make mistakes. When I made mistakes, I got into trouble. When I got into trouble, I was punished. When I was punished, I got defiant. When I got defiant, I received more pain. It was just like being at home. It was almost impossible not to put my father's face on every male authority figure.

I had a great anger repertoire. I learned early to be frustrated and depressed, resentful and demanding, defiant and stubborn. I would isolate in my frustration, project in my resentment and deny in my defiance. I shut others out with my defiance, stirred things up with my resentment and turned on myself in frustration.

I know the domain of anger. I wish that I'd had today's conscious awareness earlier in life. My path could have been easier. But, there I go again, wishing. I sometimes burst out laughing when I'm told that children don't remember, will get over it, or grow out of it. Most with my history painfully become others' amusements.

On the other hand, without going through what I have, I might not be who I am today. I am now quite helpful to myself and more able to assist other people in their search for the wisdom I finally grasped before gasping my last breath.

When the person mentioned earlier chose to disclose, her emotions were transparent to me. I recognized her extraordinarily painful day amidst trying months in a difficult relationship. I chose aloneness many times, determined to handle things myself. I was with her as she unfolded her self-resolved dilemma.

She had been keeping a secret from her friends and her lover. She had conceived a child. She was determined to tell no one. She dealt with all the choices facing her in the privacy of her own mind. She had chosen to have an abortion. She had arranged it by herself. She went by herself. Afterwards, she remained with herself, until she couldn't do it by herself anymore.

She was standing at a counter in a convenience store. She had bought something. She reached in her pocket for change. She pulled her hand out of her pocket and extended her hand. Then, the dam broke. Tears flowed. She was speechless for a moment. Then she looked at the clerk saying, "I can't count the change. I just can't count the change. Will you help me count the change?"

Then she came to our group and began to release the unbearable price of dysfunctional self reliance. Finally, letting in the right people had started her on the way to processing what was happening with the benefit of some outside perspective.

I remembered episodes of mine when I would be totally determined that I could work it out. When I finally got to the point of admitting to myself that I needed help, I had usually borne much more than would have been necessary.

One time in college, I was so angry with my father and so totally disappointed in my mother, that I lived in a friend's room that was temporarily not rented. I had little money at the time and I warmed cans of tomato soup under the hot water faucet. I could have had a meal by going home or asking someone, but I wouldn't do that. I'd tough it out and find a way to get by. There were many of these in my life. Then there were the big ones, like my friend's experience above.

After leaving my first marriage from fear of abusing my children, I put tight wraps on my feelings. I was going to get through this with sheer will. I was in immense grief over separating

from my daughters. At the same time, my job was stressful. My money was limited. I was paying for two households. I had no release except crying alone as adult children do so often. Sexual acting out had begun, but the quality of the sexual relating just added more fuel to the fire.

One night I went to bed not feeling well. I had a headache. It was beginning to get quite painful. I decided that I'd see how it was in the morning. I didn't want to bother anyone. I had immense self-contempt at the time and did not believe I was worth receiving attention. I tossed and turned before I fell to sleep. When I awoke, I couldn't move. Pain and fever had paralyzed me.

I stared at the phone, not able to reach it. I had finally brought my system to a complete stop. I had held in a lifetime of struggling and how I struggled to get out. My mind could still think, but the body was a prison. I concentrated with all the focus I could muster. I was able to knock the phone off the hook.

Then it seemed like forever before I could hook one hand in the dial and rotate it to the operator. When the operator answered, I had lost my ability to move again and couldn't talk clearly enough to be understood. I was really in a fix. Since I was hallucinating, I can't know how long I lay there. I was in a real predicament, one that I couldn't take care of myself. Neither could I ask for help.

I missed a meeting and my phone was off the hook. My only hope was that someone would show up looking for me. But, I had cut off most people. My one male friend at the time lived a few miles away. He was a former policeman and a fishing buddy. He and his wife saved chicken parts for me to supplement my budget. Somehow he became worried about me and came to the house. When I didn't answer and he saw my car, he came into the house and found me.

He carried me to his van and headed to a hospital. I was taken into emergency and put on an examination table. My fever at that time was already 106 degrees F. Pain was raging and I was not coherent. Two doctors looked at me, debated my condition and walked away over the protest of a nurse.

The doctors said I was in critical condition, they didn't know me, had no files on me, and would not admit me. I was taken off of the table and put back in a wheelchair. All I could do was fall out of the chair. They sent me back to the van. I know my truth when I watch film documentaries on such hospital abuse.

My resourceful friend got a doctor's name out of me and called him. This doctor authorized my admittance to another hospital. I had been put back in his van to wait while the process of finding a hospital continued. Not only was I feeling angry and abandoned because two doctors refused to treat me, but I had never been in such extended pain and unable to talk on my own behalf.

When I got to the hospital, they quarantined me. One of the first things they did was bend me into a fetal position to get a spinal tap. On top of everything else, it took the doctor several tries

before he could hit the mark with the needle. I was already in enough pain. Their first suspicion was spinal meningitis. The spinal fluid ended that hypothesis.

It turned out to be an encephalitic virus. There was little they could do but cool my body and hope I outlasted the virus. I vividly remember asking God to end the pain. I've never been so exhausted, so totally wasted and out of control. The fever did break. The nerve damage from my high temperature was minimal. I've written elsewhere about how my fever ended and the healing occurred in a story entitled Forgiveness.

After I was out of danger, my friend told me how close he came to losing control with the doctors in the first hospital. It was the same hospital he took his first wife to when he woke up one morning and found her unconscious. They left her in the van in his arms for hours before they told him she was dead. In their refusal to treat me, he relived what had happened to his wife.

I not only couldn't count the change, I was fully incapacitated. Had that one friend not sensed I had a problem, I would have no problems to worry about. I would have certainly died that day.

My life and the lives of my two friends had all been visited by tragic personal experiences. We were very independently minded. We each, unexpectedly, became dependent upon other people. Proving one's independence is largely a maladaptive outgrowth of a society that idealizes self reliance and rugged individualism. This same society disregards the true foundations for individual self reliance and resilience.

In fact, it is interdependence that permits our very lives to exist. Healthy psychological individuation prepares people to accept and participate in interdependence. The rub is that a very large portion of our population did not have healthy individuation. In addition, many have no spiritual container for their perspective in life. Many are starved for spirituality.

There is another container to consider. We have very vivid pictures that graphically display the case for interdependence, photos of Earthrise. Can you look at our home planet, floating in space, and not see the need to cooperate and pursue peaceful co-existence with all parts of this closed system?

There is yet another container to consider. Until we begin with a child's life contained inside its mother's womb, and thereafter never miss an opportunity to foster emotional health, we will not see a day in which a fellow sentient being doesn't get to the point that they just can't count the change.

I do not believe that it has to be that way. I believe that there are far less destructive ways to learn the lessons of physical and spiritual life. I do my best to walk this talk. Will you?