Wild Geese, Emotional Flashbacks And Mnemosyne

You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft body of your animal love what it loves. Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on. Meanwhile, the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, the deep prairies and the trees, the mountains and the rivers. Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again. Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -- over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

~Mary Oliver

(This piece was originally written in Fall of 2015 at crazyherbalist.com I've such a greater appreciation between the interplay of emotional flashbacks and allostasis now.)

I mentioned in a previous post that I have CPTSD.

Emotional flashbacks are one of the pain-in-the-ass ways that unintegrated traumatic experiences emerge in current time. We are more familiar with the flashbacks most common to PTSD, where the person is suddenly reliving their traumatic event and re-sees/hears/experiences past events in present time. These are common to singular or periodic traumatic events which often the person experiencing them will know they have experienced, or have some clear understanding that it was indeed traumatic.

By their nature, all types of flashbacks are intrusive and terrifying. They are the re-living of an event which has not been fully integrated or processed and thus transformed into something coherent. They are different than ‘having a memory’ because when we remember something, we can distinguish that is a recalled event that happened in the past.
Memory has a clarity to its place in time: it is recalled from an earlier time and place. Flashbacks are re-lived. Our physiology doesn’t distinguish our experience of the recalled event as clearly happening in the past. It is literally re-occurring. Re-felt. Re-heard. Re-known. And therefore, re-traumatizing. They pretty much suck. And they are scary. And make us feel vulnerable to ourselves, broken, unable to fully feel free at any point because the flashbacks can pop up and take over us.

Memory itself is a funny beast. There is no one place that memory is stored, instead, like a kaleidoscope, sensory input, meaning and emotional context for each of our experiences get stored throughout our physiology. Memory is stored in multiple sections of our minds, stored in the tissues of our hearts and guts, our muscles and movements. We are constantly processing information with multiple systems working together to make meaning and create context.

In traumatic experiences, the sensory, emotional, physiological processes are so overwhelmed that the information, the data, is stored scattered throughout our systems, unprocessed and not recorded with time and place integrated. And, unlike processed and assimilated memories, which slowly evolve over time (because as we add on new layers of ourselves, we are able to recall and extract new layers of meaning and detail), traumatic memory gets stuck, fixed like a fossil imprint onto our psyche, our bodies, our brains....these trauma-based memories are difficult to update with new information. In many ways, this is some of the rigidness of spirit and body we experience....traumatic memory arises like shards, fragments that insist they are real and reinsert themselves into the current time and space experiences were are having.

**tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine......**

So...emotional flashbacks, which can also be called somatic or relational flashbacks. These flashbacks often happen in the context of relationships, with self, friends, lovers, co-workers,
as well as in environments and situations which evoke something about the context of the
original wounding. I first learned about emotional flashbacks from a therapist who was
noticing that every time I had a need or was not being completely 100% self sufficient, I
would cycle into an apologetic spiral of shame and despair.

Emotional flashbacks are damn scary and damn confusing. Pete Walker, a published
therapist and also person with CPTSD, explains emotional flashbacks as, "sudden and often
prolonged regressions to the frightening and abandoned feeling states of childhood."

Literally, instead of your auditory or visual processes being hijacked and a scene being
re-lived, we get pulled into a familiar FEELING state that is confusing and terrifying. The
emotional state often does not match the external circumstances and provokes outbursts,
shame and/or despair. AND THEY FEEL VERY, VERY REAL. And sometimes they do not
seem to be linked to recognizable events, so we then ascribe the overwhelming feeling state
to whatever may make sense of our current surroundings: somebody will betray us,
abandon us, somebody needs to be pushed away, we are awful/ugly/horrid/bad, my needs
or boundaries are the problem....the brain will work really hard to make sense of the sudden
emotional overwhelm.

These emotional states arise seemingly out of context, are extremely confusing, feel very
real and replay false narratives, narratives that were survival mechanisms in abusive and
power-over relationships, especially childhood. Our self esteem is suddenly demolished: we
no longer can think (or feel) complexity, everything moves to good or bad, safe or unsafe
and specifically, we turn in on ourselves as wholly bad, lacking anything redeeming. Or the
other (lover/friend/boss/etc..) becomes all bad and you must shield yourself from them,
abandon them, save yourself from them, etc.

"When fear is the dominant emotion in an emotional flashback, the individual feels
overwhelmed, panicky or even suicidal. When despair predominates, it creates a sense of
profound numbness, paralysis and an urgent need to hide. Feeling small, young, fragile,
powerless and helpless is common in emotional flashbacks." ~Pete Walker
Emotional Flashbacks:

- Are a sudden arising of feelings/emotional states which overwhelm the present moment and hijack the amygdala
- Are literally a replaying of internal felt experiences and the accompanying stories (I am bad, unsafe, ugly, unworthy, etc.) previously experienced in abusive and neglectful relationships
- Possess us and take over, allowing the feeling state to dominate and shut down critical reasoning and the ability to access other perspectives/nuanced information (I'll explain below), a sort of dissociation from the present
- Involve a highly evolved inner critic who is the primary defense system, allowing us to hate ourselves before others have the chance to and demanding nothing less than perfection from ourselves in the context of relationships and performance or else we will be in utter despair/on the streets/alone/dying/fired, etc.
- Often go unrecognized as flashbacks because emotions are not understood to present as flashbacks the way single event traumas replay themselves
- Can cause havoc in our lives and relationships when these are not understood to be flashbacks or related to previous trauma because no one has any idea why we respond so intensely and suddenly at times, often seeming out of character to those who love us
- Often occur when things are going well, too good, we are too happy, too calm, too trusting or at peace <------ that's super sucky and totally confusing and cost me many opportunities, memories and relationships in my life

Meanwhile, the world goes on.....
These takeovers of our internal safety and connection to the external world, including those we love and know, are terrifying and often result in self-loathing, shame, hatred and immense confusion. We don’t trust our own inner worlds. What really begins to damage is when we see ourselves have these emotional flashbacks, push people away from us, then look in the mirror, standing alone in the bathroom and resolutely decide that no matter how we were treated by others, OBVIOUSLY WE MUST BE THE COMMON THREAD. Because we must be bad/unlovable/unworthy/out-of-control/too-emotional/needy/juvenile/whatever toxic beliefs were forced upon us during traumatic experiences of emotional abuse and neglect (whether or not that was also coupled with physical or sexual abuse). I mean, if we are feeling these things in the present moment, they must then be true, right? We think: Everyone else is getting on with their lives and thinks I should too. Everyone says I am over-reacting, I am over-dramatic, I am....hysterical. Emotional flashbacks are isolating. It is part of their charm and ultimately, what they excel at. Because deep down, at their root, is an experience which forced us to locate ourselves, or our desire for intimacy as the root of the problem. We learned via experience that someone we love or care about will shame us, hurt us, destroy us. That ultimately, we are truly only worthy of being alone and unloved. And for those of us with CPTSD, that is a real experience. Someone who was supposed be good enough to not hurt us and hold our best interests in mind was instead very fucked up. We learned that reaching out for that person makes things worse. Sometimes life-threateningly worse for our minds, bodies and/or spirits.

And what really sucks about emotional flashbacks, is that they often occur when things are going well, when someone or something is bringing us joy. When everything on the outside says we should be riding high, happy, healthy and embracing the rewards of companionship or success. But that is exactly what can trigger the
regression. Because if people and emotional comfort can’t actually be trusted, then getting happy is like pulling an emotional Thelma & Louise in the amygdala.

Think of it like this: Thelma and Louise represent the conscious + unconscious parts of ourself, and the internal dialogue that is happening when a threat arises. Note that within the threat (like the movie) are both real assholes and someone who wants to help. But the only solution that seems to offer some solace is escape completely, take all the fall and the consequences on ourselves...this is the pathway of an emotional flashback that devolves into a shame spiral: our state of being gets hijacked by overwhelming internal circumstances and off the cliff we go.....

Suddenly, someone we know to be a non-threatening person who genuinely (to the best of their skills) wants to be our companion gets demonized because they were late/forgot something/put us in a position of needing to trust them or forgive their humanness and we respond as if it is the fatal sign that they are destined to destroy us. Or, we panic at our inability to provide such trust and see them as all good, all giving and we are the bad one, unable to be loved. Also, it is entirely likely that we can be in a relationship that is not healthy and these flashback states are an indication that you have been here before, but they are so shame-inducing that we see ourselves as the root of the problem and prop the other up as the one who deserves praise for tolerating us/loving us/not abandoning us.

**Basically, someone becomes the good one and someone becomes the bad one. More often than not, our inner critics remind us that we are the ultimate in unlovableness, that we are all bad and destined to be discovered as such by anyone who tries to care for us.**

In these moments, in the actual moment this emotional flashback is arising, the ability to access complex thinking and context cues disappear. Because these feeling states are actually based on historical experiences. So being able to discern something like, "it is ok if I
am running late because I am usually on time" is impossible. Or "I don't really think of myself as completely unloveable/untouchable/ugly/worthless...." The overwhelming feeling state that takes over us dissociates us from complex thinking, current beliefs and the ability to examine these arising feelings: we are no longer accessing the present or all of our capacities and inner self. We are consumed by the experience of these overwhelming, familiar and terrifying feelings with the same skill levels/emotional ages we first encountered them.

Instead, what is present is a profound sense of shame in our ineptitude and a deep belief that the other person will hate/abuse/shame/abandon us. Or, strong feelings of being unable to talk to or get our needs met by other people because they are all good and we are all bad. So when we are wronged, even slightly by another, or they were unable to telepathically know one of our needs, we demonize them as all bad and push them away or shame them to protect ourselves. Or we shame ourselves for having needs before even allowing another to possibly meet or not meet them.

you do not need to walk a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.....

One of the primary factors in developing these emotional flashbacks was being in a prolonged relationship containing emotional neglect and power over dynamics. These kinds of relationships turn normal needs into triggers for shame and self-hate. To need something from someone who refuses to provide it and often shames us for needing it creates an internal world fraught with self-blame and self-hate and chaos. I will not play that down. I will not downplay the utter destruction of a parent/lover/caregiver that smiles at you one day and refuses to engage your humanity and validity on another.

Here's what happens: long-term neglect from a primary relationship, particularly through childhood and development years forces us to do one of two things with this caregiver:
either we have the advanced ability to see that the person we have needs from is incapable of meeting those needs and so we develop a web of other healthy relationships capable of meeting our needs, which is impossible under power dynamics and developmental ages where we can't identify that as a resource

OR we begin to merge pieces of our inner self with the inner critic who demands we be perfect and meet all of our own needs or else not have any needs by driving us into a state of rigid perfectionism, service and pleasing for survival

The second response ensures that we constantly play out the real feelings of anger and hatred or betrayal appropriate for the caregiver on ourselves every time we are less than perfect and then cycles us down into states of panic that we are going to be abandoned because of our less-than-perfectness or our 'neediness.'

Just having needs can trigger a damn emotional flashback, even when no one else is present. In fact what many of us do is learn to put on a mask and take care of everyone else's needs, even smiling and convincing ourselves that that is what we want to be doing, and then falling apart privately and having overwhelming periods of shame, self-hatred and despair for our own feelings, having needs, or not being a super-person. Like, you know, I was on the floor just three weeks ago doing that very thing....

Honestly, CPTSD is essentially an attachment...I won't use the word disorder....it is a profound struggle to create and understand healthy attachments and relationships, including the one within us.

Often in this process, we don't even know that we have needs other than the ones we tell ourselves we have. We operate partially emotionally shut down and disconnected from ourselves in the external world, fall apart privately and then when we are brave enough to let
someone in, cycle between periods of generous giving and openness and everything is ok to extreme shame, self-hate, and disconnection.

Meanwhile, if we have folks who love us witnessing, we usually have to also manage their: "WTF?" while we don’t even have the language or frameworks to help explain or make sense of it. Isolation x2.

**Cycling between perfectionism/hypervigilance and emotional flashbacks are key characteristics CPTSD, made worse by layers of systemic oppression which can instill similar patterns via very real dangers, aggressions and reduced access to resources.**

meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again....

Mnemosyne. She's an ancient Greek goddess, a Titan really. Born of Gaia and Ouranos, Earth and Heaven, born along with the other Titans: Kronos (Time), Themis (Law), Rhea (the Flowing One/the Ground), she is Memory. Not the goddess of memory, which is a very important distinction. We are talking about more than reciting type memory here, we are talking about the active storehouse of all of creation from the time of its birth as a sacred source that can be accessed through dreams, through ecstasy, through imaginal realms and through gnosis.

Mnemosyne is the mother of the 9 muses: poetry, history, music, lyric poetry, tragedy, hymns, dance, comedy, and astronomy.

The memory we are referencing here is more complex than the way we would think of "having a memory", as a product of the mind, pulling individual experiences forward....or reciting information/words mechanically...we are talking about deep recall that moves through us forcing up and out from us great works of art, great poetry that illuminates our human conditions, the kind of memory that weaves into something epic and insightful.
Mnemosyne is the living cosmos and accessing her gives the seeker the ability to access the flowing memory of our metaphysical world, the truths which emerge through us in new shapes and sounds and forms but which all point back to something great and big and divine. It is she that moves through the reciter of the Orphic hymns, or later we can think of the living essence moving through Bards reciting stories or those who sing the songs of the plants and the stars and the peoples who have come before us. Like spoken word, like figuring out the stunning workings of the universe, like hymns that give us goosebumps, like works of art that leave us speechless....Mnemosyne is the divine structure and the feeling that restores something in us, literally re-membering something in our consciousness: that our very existence is divine and inspired and epic to itself.

Mnemosyne oversees one of the 5 rivers in Hades, one that allows the seeker/the initiate to remember the deeper quest the seeker is on. But, first, the seeker must drink from the river Lethe, one of forgetfulness in order to let go of and dis-member all that the seeker thinks they know. Only then can they drink from the river Mnemosyne presides over in order to re-member, put together again, what they are truly seeking. In our quests to become whole, there is a dance that happens between forgetting and remembering, and in the deep remembering that happens during an emotional flashback, we are possessed by the mythology of our own becoming, our own inner cosmology.

**What Mnemosyne would have us re-member are greater truths than the deeply unsustainable ones created by traumatic conditioning: we cannot be as bad/unlovable/dirty/shameful/disgusting/failure as these emotional disruptions would have us believe. It simply is not possible. In order to harbor these negative beliefs about ourselves, we have to keep drinking at the river of forgetfulness, because they are in direct contradiction to how absolutely worthy, wonderful and lovable we actually are.**
In the emotional flashback, we have been offered a drink from Mnemosyne’s spring as she moves through us, working to re-member, put together again, our inner cosmos by showing us one of the stories which grip us. She does not promise a painless visit.

Emotional flashbacks are an eruption in our own space-time continuum...they are the chance to see a pattern that does not fit and examine it. I suggest not trying to do it all alone. I suggest making an altar to your own Mnemosyne you can visit and start asking questions like why the poop am I still dealing with this? What is the fundamental story of these flashbacks? What am I trying to prevent or manage in them? What is the story(s) it is operating on?

The very, very first step in healing these eruptions is to know that they are happening. Step one in the re-membering of ourselves is to discover when we are being visited by somatic and emotional states that do not fit into our other daily patterns and often emerge suddenly and overwhelmingly. They can look like:

- sudden or overwhelming emotional states that arise coupled with shame, self-loathing, and/or fear
- emotional states that arise when you have needs from yourself or another which trigger fear, despair, retreat and/or fawning (fawning is abandoning yourself to align with the needs of the dominant or the abuser, living in their reality or needs instead of being able to independently have your own)
- feeling overcome, panicked or like you need to push someone close to you away
- preventing yourself from getting too close because a similar emotional pattern repeats itself and you feel like you can't control that pattern
• intense feelings of being worthless/unlovable (you are so lovable BTW)/BAD/gross/dirty/etc...that seem to come in and take over you and eventually cycle through you, leaving you with feelings of shame and relief
• being immobilized when you need something from someone so much so that you cannot think about how to get your need met and instead cycle into an emotional spiral of self-hate
• trying to be everything to your key relationships for as long as you can then suddenly switch gears and have needs, which when they go unmet cause you great emotional distress
• feeling like you are empowered when you don’t need anything from anyone and feel utterly panicked when you do need something
• experiencing a situation as dualistic and catastrophic when others are reflecting back that it ‘isn’t that big of a deal’
• having feelings about yourself that contradict your core beliefs about others, such as believing during an emotional flashback that you will be hated for being late or speaking too loudly or forgetting to call someone... when you would not hate another for doing the same thing
• having emotional episodes that make you feel like you are having a break from reality or that you are idealizing self-harm as a way to break the grip of the emotions
• periodic reactions and emotional episodes that others tell you are out of context (or that you feel are out of context) based on what you are reacting to, such as someone being late and you cycle through feelings of intense abandonment and betrayal (this is not to invalidate the very real feelings as they are experienced, but often real events that can be managed when the
trauma reaction is not present can set us off into trauma-based emotional reactions that seem "blown out of proportion" to others)

- feelings that there is one and only absolute truth that can never be changed because they are totally true and you just have to face them and resign yourself to your awfulness

you do not have to walk a hundred miles in the desert, repenting. you only have to let the soft body of your animal love what it loves.....

If any of the above scenarios are ringing true for you, DAMN I AM SORRY, You too, huh?

Will you trust me if I said that there is hope? That, while there is power in discovering their motives, their insights, their origins.

Your very first resource is yourself. If you are still reading this, all the way down here, you probably resonate with some of the above and have something moving through you which stirs up some toxic feelings, allowing the inner critic to rain down on us. It is a process of remembering. IT IS NOT THE TRUTH. These feelings, though they feel like the absolute and only truth are simply the replaying of an old survival mechanism, and the intensity of them can help indicate how strongly you might have felt betrayed or abandoned when the original wounding occurred. The sheer emotional power of these flashbacks can be harnessed and placed into other fulfilling inner worlds and stories. But it takes work and support. And each of us has different things that can help support us based on what feels good, our economic means, cultural ways of healing, etc. And, as we are healing and working with Mnemosyne’s visits, what we need will shift and change. Even our relationship with her will change.

No matter how exhausted, how frustrated, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -- over and over announcing your place in the family of things, in the rivers that run through you.
Some Resources That Have Been Helpful In My Journey:

- **Online support for times of overwhelm:**
  - **RAINN, the Rape and Incest National Network**, has phone & online chat support which has been extremely helpful when I have cycled into panic/dissociation/emotional flashbacks
  - **TransLifeLine** has phone support and resources and does not contact police without consent

- **Healing Developmental Trauma**

- **When I first started tracking emotional flashbacks I carried a stone with me to pull out and focus on which I had deliberately decided was for that exact purpose: so even though I was in a flashback, I could look at this external symbol that reminded me they were real and that they would pass. A symbol can be a powerful tool for moving us out of ourselves. An amulet with herbs, specific scent or another special item can be an external reminder to us that the flashback is happening and will pass.**

- **Often free or low-cost counseling can be found through Universities and local centers...though be vigilant and ask good questions, ask if they have heard of emotional flashbacks, ask any relevant questions about their experience or beliefs that you need to know in order to feel comfortable like:**
  - Have you worked with CPTSD/Emotional Flashbacks before?
  - Have you worked with someone of my ancestry/gender identity/sexual orientation/neurological diversity/disability/political badassness before?
  - What does the therapeutic process entail?
  - I don’t trust you yet are you ok with that?
- What resources can you help me procure and create to manage my emotional flashbacks?
  - Here is a link to [Nationwide LGBTQ centers](#) which can help you locate your closest one
  - Here is the [Breathe Network](#), which links survivors of sexual assault with sliding scale healing services
  - Tell a trusted friend that you are discovering this process and create a keyword they can give you that you will recognize when they notice the emotional flashback pattern in you or that you can give them when you are in crisis
  - Work with a trusted herbalist to create some potions for you: there are plants which can help bring the panic down and plants which can help strengthen our systems and ability to release tension and feelings. These are different for each of us, there are not universal flashback remedies because our bodies are all unique and how memories and trauma show up in our bodies is also unique to each of us....but having plants as allies in this process can also be very powerful♥

Emotional flashbacks suck, but you don't. You're part of Mnemosyne’s kaleidoscope.