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DIVING INTO THE FIRE OF TRAUMA: A Nondual Approach to Healing and Awakening

Written by Gary Nixon, Ph.D. – *Paradoxica: Journal of Nondual Psychology*, Vol. 5: Spring 2013

Summary

The author explores his own attempts at healing from trauma, which led to an embracement of a nondual psychotherapy approach. He explains how catharsis therapy, psychodrama, and somatic experiencing, while initially helpful, did not facilitate a full healing. By moving to incorporate a choiceless awareness perspective, the author found he was able to drop his judgments about the trauma experience, facilitating dissolution of the trauma experience. This discussion is then extended to letting go of the grasping at survival and the separate self, accepting death, and then even psychic hell. Three case studies are shared to show how a nondual therapy approach can be used to work with some dark traumas.

Gary Nixon heard the call of Osho's awakening discourses from India in 1980 and never was the same. He was just completing law school at the time, and instead of becoming a lawyer dove into the eastern awakening path using insights of first Osho, and then other nondual teachers like Trungpa, Krishnamurti, Papaji and Nisargadatta. He devoted himself to years of intense meditation and seeking, reading and trying everything under the sun. Finally, in a place of absolute hopelessness and total failurehood many years later, he was able to see through the illusion of seeking and the separate self, and and come to rest naturally in what is.

Gary knew he needed to live his nondual passion in everyday life, and thus completed his Masters and Doctorate in transpersonal-nondual approaches to psychology and psychotherapy in which he integrated the transpersonal work of Ken Wilber and A.H. Almaas with eastern contemplative traditions. After working in addictions and mental health fields, he joined the Addictions Counselling Program at the University of Lethbridge in 1998 as a professor. Since then, he also has maintained a private practice in nondual psychotherapy, working with both individuals and groups. He also is editor of *Paradoxica: Journal of Nondual Psychology*, and an author of a book on addictions recovery and nonduality, *The Sun Rises in the Evening*. Gary is back this year with his blown-wide-open presence, and more pointers and invitations for abiding in nondual being. Website: www.nondualbeing.com

DIVING INTO THE FIRE OF TRAUMA: A Nondual Approach to Healing and Awakening

With an impressive fury, I yelled over at the empty chair, “I hate you Dad, I hate you” I screamed. Unlocking long-held pent up energy, my rage was a storm that vibrated the whole room. I let out a deep gut wrenching primal scream “Fuck you dad.” And then, I stopped exhausted. After a few moments, I peered out and looked around at the group. People seemed to be unaffected. I looked over at Paul, the gestalt-bioenergetics group therapist. He commented, “Gary, this seems to be getting to be an old hat for you.” I wanted to disagree, but the comment rang true. I was becoming habituated to catharsis. I enjoyed the release of energy, but the whole routine was becoming very stale.

Beyond Catharsis

Beginning my graduate school training in psychology, it became clear to me that I had been shut down by childhood trauma. First on my mind was the physical abuse I had endured from my father. I attended gestalt-bioenergetics workshops to dissolve the pain stored in my mind-body and was encouraged to undergo intense catharsis release sessions. This followed with my own form of primal therapy by going for runs in the woods and unleashing primal screams. But at some point, this catharsis started to become routine and predictable. I could not deny that I was caught in a cycle of catharsis and release but my understanding was not deepening, nor was I moving to a place of clarity and wholeness. In short, it seemed like no real movement in to healing was taking place.

Experiencing gestalt-bioenergetics (Lowen, 1994), and even psychodrama (Dayton, 2000; Westwood & Wilensky, 2004), I was still left in the same place of a healing catharsis with no lasting healing effects. I was pushing it further. I embarked on Somatic Experiencing, based on the work of Peter Levine (1997, 2010), to reclaim my physical self and release the pent up arousal energy of trauma by allowing the thwarted defensive responses to complete themselves. I remember letting my body shake with energy as I broke out of the “deer in the headlights” paralysis by waving my arms wildly and bolting for the door, escaping the re-experienced traumatic physical abuse from my father. This discharge of energy assisted my mind-body to return to its normal state. However, I was still mystified. There seemed to be something missing. The return to joyous functioning was still not totally available.

Choiceless Awareness

As I submerged myself into eastern contemplative traditions and awakening teaching, an answer became apparent to me. It harkened back to the point Levine (1997) makes, that it is not so much the trauma itself, but how it is interpreted that creates the lasting impact of trauma. The words of Sosan, the third patriarch of Zen, pointed to a new way of orienting myself, one of letting go of the mind’s stance, and its judgments:

The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.... If you wish to see the truth then hold no opinion for or against. The struggle of what one likes and what one dislikes is the disease of the mind. (cited in Osho, 1994, p. 2)

With this understanding, there was greater clarity that the most painful aspect of my trauma was my stance against the experience. It was not the actual experience that was the painful problem, but my stance that “this is terrible.” It was my judgment, my opinion about the event that kept me locked in it. If I let go of my judgments, and my commentary and opinions, I would just be with the acceptance of the experience itself.

Understanding that I needed to drop the judging, comparing voice was a tremendous realization. The complaining “me” voice could be dropped. Balsekar (1992) in describing the non-dual perspective, referred to this dropping as the letting go of the “split-mind.” There can be experiencing without the complaining experiencer.

This emphasis on no judgment is also very similar to what Krishnamurti (1995) spent his whole life talking about, and that is choiceless awareness. In the experience of total attention, without judgment, there is no fear, no trauma:

Fear is never an actuality; it is either before or after the active present. When there is fear in the active present, is it fear? It is there and there is no escape from it, no evasion possible. There, at that actual moment, there is total attention at the moment of danger, physical or psychological. When there is complete attention there is no fear. But the actual fact of inattention breeds fear; fear arises when there is an avoidance of the fact, a flight; then the very escape itself is fear. (p. i)

Through escaping into our judgments, we create fear. One day when asked what his total secret was, Krishnamurti said, “I don’t care what happens.” His answer is the epitome of choiceless awareness.

Re-visiting Old Traumas

With this newfound focus on choiceless awareness, I re-explored the significant traumas I had gone through in my life, the physical abuse from my dad, the brain cancer death of my mother, and being fired from two career positions. I was shocked to discover that by just internally re-witnessing these experiences with no judgment, no separate-self comment, I experienced something shifted. It was like I could watch these experiences and, for the first time, experience them without a deep conflict, and with this let them go. In this way, I now experienced the actual feelings of the situations, which I had never done before, as I was so busy escaping them. I discovered that avoidance was far worse than the actual emotions. Terror, fear, abandonment, horror can all be experienced with no judgment. The beauty I discovered, is that all of these feelings are just energy, and when experienced without judgment just turn into spacious energy, and disperse naturally without effort. I did not have to hang onto these experiences by telling myself how horrible they were. I could let go. This focus on no judgment and choiceless awareness would become a central aspect of my emerging nondual psychotherapy approach to trauma but needed a deepening of the no-self aspect as we see in the following section.

Lusting for Survival

As I worked through these traumas, I came to realize that I also needed to bring no judgment, acceptance, and choiceless awareness to one of the greatest fears itself: physical and psychological death of the self. Put in another way, this fear is the lust for survival. In our guts, we face a primal rudimentary need to survive as we face no self, and nonexistence (Adyashanti, 2008). Becoming aware of the primal grasping at survival, we can experience desperate panic attacks, in which the fear of no-self can be overwhelming. With an instinctual arm thrusting out from our bellies, we grasp at surviving at all costs. This is directly related to experiences of trauma. In trauma, we become overwhelmed with the fear of not existing and desperately grab onto some sense of self in the knot of our belly, as we defend against the oceanic abyss of potential self-annihilation. Deep in trauma is the fear of death and no-self. It is our gut instinct to preserve survival no matter what.

McKenna (2002) cut through layers of dogma relating to this process by clearly stating that the central issue is learning to abide in the abyss of no-self. In my own journey, I could see that I would always be in a state of trauma if I did not surrender to the threat of death. If I were always trying to survive at all costs, I would always be in fear of *what is*, as the threat of death to the self is always present.

The Missing Ingredient: Dying to Self, the Great Death

In my own journey, grasping at the self was very related to seeking nondual awakening. While I had been on a long quest into contemplative and nondual traditions, there was still a separate self seeking awakening who had not died, ironically, the same self that was trying to survive in trauma experiences.

After a number of years, my seeking lost its luster and had become more an experience of feeling intense misery, suffering, and absolute hopelessness. I had become exhausted with my seeking. Turning to rot, in absolute hopelessness, my seeking had been a total failure. Reflecting back on my situation, it is obvious that there was still a subtle self looking for a way to go beyond the self, and embrace existence. The me was trying to go beyond the me.

In my quest for awakening, on one day, a total out of control experience of exhaustion swept over me and a hopeless feeling that I would not be able to do one more thing overtook me. I just accepted the invitation to relaxedly drop into utter effortlessness and drowning. So, I surrendered. I went down quietly, without splashing around, and just allowed myself to be drowned totally into existence. This was the death of my total mindbody project, "the Gary awakening project." Things were over for me, and I sat calmly in this place where I was no more. I relished in the painless joy of no effort. Almost immediately I looked around and laughed, eternal existence itself...lit up in translucent clear light and actually very bedazzling, the eternal interconnectedness, the suchness of existence, and there was nobody here, no I or you. This was very strange though because it was not something I did. All of my efforts, frantic seeking, and the

whole me had nothing to do with this. It was only when this dropped that existence revealed itself. Nowhere to go and nothing to do, it was all right here in a glorious splendor.

On Knowing the Eternal Law

Now, with greater clarity, I understood that I could work through trauma to a deeper level, as I was not desperately grasping onto my separate self. Related to this letting go of the separate self is Osho's (2003) discourse on Lao Tzu pointing to the eternal law, that death is destiny. Knowing and accepting this, frees up this moment and changes the gestalt:

Once you accept death many things are immediately accepted. In fact if you accept death as part of life, then all other enemies are also accepted as part of friendship because the basic duality dissolves, the duality of life and death, being and non-being. If the basic duality is resolved, then all other dualities are just superficial, they dissolve. Suddenly you are at home – eyes are clear, no smoke is in them, and perception is absolutely clear, no darkness is around. (p. 6)

With death accepted, trauma is no longer the enemy. I could accept these traumatic events, as I was no longer desperate to survive. I was already free. There was no person, just the vastness of existence. I did not need to go anywhere or grab onto anything for support. I could now just relax into awareness of this...and enjoy the play of existence in this moment. I was free.

Now, I could see the paradox. The separate self was always an illusion, the great death had already happened, never born, never died. Seeing this is instantaneous... it occurs in an instant. This realization can be astounding. Pivotal is to see, in the absolute intensity of this moment, that there is no self. There is no person here and there never has been. There is not a self to be traumatized or to die. Nobody here to be traumatized. This full emptiness becomes all of existence. Only the whole is, and if the reality of death is accepted in the moment, there is a movement beyond death. In choiceless awareness it is seen there is no self to hang onto.

The Art of Dying: Being Ready to Die in Each Moment

The key link back to trauma is the understanding that I need to always touch and let go, not grab my separate self in the moment, and be willing to embrace death in each moment. As Osho (1999) in *The Art of Dying* says:

Never possess anything- and then you are ready to die. Possessiveness is the problem, not life itself. The more you possess, the more you are afraid to lose. If you don't possess anything, if your purity, if your spirit is uncontaminated by anything, if you are simply there alone, you can disappear any moment; whenever death knocks on the door it will find you ready...By going with death you are not a loser. You may be moving into a new experience. (p.30)

The problem is, if we lose our nondual awareness, we start grabbing back onto the separate self and the props that maintain it such as relationships, jobs, wealth, spiritual experiences, all the things the ego grabs onto, and with that accumulation comes fear. If we don't accumulate, we can be in the vast empty sky of existence and stay in choiceless awareness and be trauma free.

The key is accepting the reality of death in each moment. This intense understanding let the appearance known as Gary be released from the vice grip of trauma.

New and Very Old Traumas

With this awareness, I found that new experiences that used to be potentially traumatizing no longer traumatized me. Nothing terrorized me, for I had let go of my need to survive. Meeting a bear on my run in the woods, being forced by another vehicle over a cliff while driving, were all met with the recognition that this could be the moment of death. With this acceptance, there was just serene stillness in the moment.

I embraced the art of dying but decided to take this process even further to address a long held vague darkness inside of me, a black hole in which it seemed bad memories were tied up. I decided to investigate this through past life regression work. In the past life session, I found myself in a prison that had a feeling of pervasive evilness. At some point in this time period, I was recognized as a troublemaker by the jailers, led away, and executed. Before this session, I had never really understood this black doom feeling but now going back and re-experiencing the prison, being called out, and led away, I recalled the doomed feeling but saw that I had clearly seized upon myself, saying "I do not want to die" and felt forsaken by existence. I had carried this feeling of doom forward into many lifetimes, but now was the time to re-experience this whole situation, this time with choiceless awareness. Without judgment, I witnessed myself being led away to be executed. I was blindfolded; then there was silence. I witnessed this with silence, no judgment, acceptance of death, and all of a sudden the terror transformed into a beautiful sublime silence. As I was about to be shot, I could see that I had already left my body, hovering above, watching. The shot was received in silence, the body dropped to the ground. From terror to peaceful sublime silence, strangely there was a pervasive feeling of love. All of this opened up through choiceless awareness and acceptance of death. It had been a tumultuous death, but now with no judgment and accepting the moment, as the moment of my death, it was now okay, even a beautiful transformation into light. The total darkness in the valley of death had turned into a translucent light. I had not lost the essence of who I was. What a beautiful gift, accepting death in the moment, even an apparent cold hearted execution was okay; it was in the end a gift to let go into vastness, the eternal absolute, all with no judgment.

Fates Worse than Death

Working through past life trauma, one would think all the ground had been covered. However, a whole other terrain of trauma was uncovered.

“How did I get here?” I wondered...in this horrible dark wasteland of black hell realm energy in which nothing was really alive. People were just shuffling around like zombies, almost like the realm of the stone people. Everything reeked of disgusting, grotesque dark energy. With horror, I realized I could be here forever. I might never make it back. I wandered around desperately, feeling myself turning into a zombie, turning into a stone.

This was my own actual experience a number of years ago when I became totally exhausted after a conference in a foreign city, and suddenly had fallen like a zombie into a psychic hell realm. People who take hardcore drugs sometimes have similar experiences, a bad drug trip into the hell realm.

To me, this experience pointed to a psychic fate that felt more terrifying than actual physical death. As Adi Da (1991) articulated:

At the level of the psyche, it is not so much a fear of dying, because there is a presumption of continuousness that is not so strongly present at the physical level. The fear at the level of the psyche is fear of certain conditions, fear of madness, fear of being confronted by terrifying phenomena. At the physical level you fear termination of physical life. At the psychic level you fear madness and confinement by unchanging terribleness. ...In the psyche, you fear being confronted not by pain and mortality, which are features of fear at the physical level, but by torment, dissociation, horrors of all kinds, bewilderment, and loss of relations. (p. 87)

Adi Da summed up the situation well for me, unchanging terribleness in the confines of hell.

Acceptance of No Escape

So, at the psychic level of hell, the ardent desire is not so much to survive but to escape the predicament. I wanted to get the hell out of hell! Renz (2005) wrote about his predicament in dealing with the prospects of eternal hell as he was gripped by the unfolding story of Yuddhistra and Krishna. Theriault (2010) summarized that the essential piece of the story centres upon the aftermath of a bloody battle and the death of Yuddhistra. Upon his death, Yuddhistra saw his loved ones burning in hellfire and suffering eternally. At this moment, Yuddhistra fell into total despair and the poignant question was asked by Krishna as to whether or not Yuddhistra could remain in that condition forever. Renz (2005) recalled:

By this time I was so deeply involved in the play and so completely identified with Yuddhistra that I felt the question was actually addressed to me. He, or I,

answered, “I have no desire to change anything or to avoid pain or suffering. If I must remain in this condition for the remainder of my existence, so be it.”... at this moment an explosion-like experience tore through the back of my head, filling my perception with pure light. At this moment, there was an absolute acceptance of being. Time stopped ... and the world disappeared, and a kind of pure *Is-ness* in a glaring light appeared. It was a pulsating silence, and absolute aliveness that was perfect in itself---and I was that. (p. xxi)

The same was required of me in my psychic hell experience. What was called for in me was a total surrender, in which I was willing to accept no escape. At first, I had struggled and had tried to find a way out of hell. The struggle was awful. Trying to run out of hell, which seemed to go on forever, was awful. Then, I realized it was not the situation *per se* that was so awful; it was intense struggle to escape. I realized the only thing to do was to accept hell, give up my struggle, and accept there is no way out. So, like Renz, the question was “Was I willing to be in hell forever?” The answer was yes. And with that deep acceptance, my so-called hell realm instantly transformed into brilliant light.

Reflecting later, I made sense of what happened. The transformation came through my deep acceptance that there was no way out. Then, I had a startling realization: this is just the ordinariness of existence, absolute presence, and eternal aloneness forever. It had just been magnified in my hell experience. We all fear eternal banishment, loss of relations, and eternal aloneness but this is just an aspect of existence. Through acceptance of no escape, the eternal misery turns to an eternal mystery. When the dark side of the moon experience is accepted, a total bedazzlement can open up. As Almaas (2011) pointed out, as we open up to absolute absence we have moved beyond consciousness itself:

Consciousness can be aware of absence as the absence of consciousness, but if the clouds are completely gone and there is only empty sky, then there is absolute absence. Since no consciousness of it exists, the sky is not knowable. Now, it happens that absolute absence is the ultimate reality, the final condition of existence. It is the beginning and the end of all there is, of humanity, of the world, of creation, of consciousness, of everything. If a person moves toward absolute absence, everything will go right because they will be free in their life, and if a person doesn't go toward it, everything will go wrong because they will be living in the prison of illusion. It's that simple. (p. 137)

Here, in accepting absence, one has accepted the absolute frontiers of existence, absence, and are resting in this place, prior to existence. In truth, what could go wrong now? I am in the absence of existence, prior to existence, and prior to consciousness. How wondrous! I am the mystery of existence itself! All of these profound realizations have shaped my work as a nondual psychotherapist.

A Nondual Approach to Psychotherapy

After my transformational journey and coupled with graduate school training in psychotherapy followed by five years of clinical positions in mental health and addictions as a psychologist, I was able to set up a transpersonal nondual psychotherapy private practice to coincide with my academic appointment. Over the last twelve years, I have been able to bring this focus on choiceless awareness and letting go and seeing through the separate self contraction in my work with clients. I am part of a new generation of nondual clinicians, as Prendergast (2003) explained, that simply rest in presence:

They realize, at least to some degree, that they are not limited to being a “therapist” (although they may function in that role), or even a “person.” Their locus of identity is either resting in or moving toward unconditioned awareness, or Presence. The result is the emergence of a natural simplicity, transparency, clarity, and warm acceptance of whatever arises within themselves and their clients. Since they increasingly do not take themselves as some “thing,” they also do not take their clients as objects separate from themselves. They understand that there is no separate mirror and someone mirrored; there is only mirroring. (p. 3)

This relaxed presence can be contagious, as “we can sense an unpretentiousness, lucidity, transparency, joy, and ease of being” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 5).

This ease of being and presence is brought into working with clients on their trauma issues. Blackstone (2006) described how nondual realization helps the therapist’s ability for empathy, as self and other appear as transparent forms, and “within this transparency, the fluidity of a person’s responses, and the qualities of their being, can be seen and felt” (p.35.) Prendergast adds that as problems are unpacked, and clients discover a profound sense of emptiness, which has been fiercely defended against, “They discover that their problems were all outcomes from and compensatory expressions of this defense against what at first appears to be annihilation and in time reveals itself as unconditional love” (p.7). The separate self contraction at the heart of trauma is touched and let go of as clients learn to rest in choiceless awareness and drop their stories about their experiences and their separate self identity.

In accepting death and choiceless awareness, the key emphasis in my work became on acceptance. I could see that trauma was not limited to experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, or physical injury or death. It also included experiences of psychic engulfment with no escape, and could even entail witnessing experiences of the absence of existence itself. These were all very intense experiences, and I did not want clients to be re-traumatized in therapy working these experiences through. I had to be mindful of the clinical notion of safety for the client (Najavitz, 2002), which needed to be embraced but eventually transcended. The key was for me to work within the client’s window of tolerance for optimal processing in which the client was not in a state of hyperarousal with a flood of sensations, hypervigilance, intrusive imagery, extreme emotional reactivity, and disorganized processing, nor was in a state of hypoarousal with

an absence of sensation, numbing of emotions, disabled cognitive processing, and reduced physical movement (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006). We needed the middle zone.

To work in the optimal window of tolerance zone for trauma, preliminary work would be done in sessions before exploring trauma. This could stretch to a number of sessions depending on the client's background in nondual awareness. We would work on the basics of nondual awareness, such as total awareness in the moment, inquiring into the self-contraction, processing dark emotions with no judgment, dropping from the head into the belly through understanding that the mind does not have the answer, letting go of our stories, and resting in presence. This preliminary work prepared the ground for nondual trauma work and got them in the window of tolerance zone.

When working with a client in session, the emphasis is to go back to fully and non-judgmentally embrace the traumatic experience, letting the energy, emotions and physical body have its free reign and expression. This work goes beyond the somatic experiencing work of Levine (1996, 2010) in that the non-judgment stance takes us straight to ego death, and letting go of the separate self contraction so the client can drop the split-mind, the grasping at surviving, and rest in being and essence. Ironically, our worst experiences can be hugely transformational as working through the agonies of trauma can be an awakening experience into no-self awareness and nondual being.

We will now turn to three actual case studies to show this nondual psychotherapy approach to trauma.

Watching the Blood Going Down the Drain

It all came tumbling out, Myrna explained how when she was seven, she was caught with her friend in the bathroom with her friend's dad. Time seemed to slow down to an eternity. For hours she watched her seven-year-old friend be sexually abused by her father, and now in horror she watched the blood go down the bathtub drain. She was hyperventilating and wanting to escape. As she recalled the experience, she looked over at me and said, "This is too awful, I can't face this." I said to her "You have described what has happened. Now view the situation without judgment, let go of all your opinions as to what is happening, just be with it." She looked back at me frightened, but said "Okay." I looked across at her and could see her whole body just shaking in intensity, and I said to her "No judgment, just accept whatever arises." I knew that in her previous trauma work, she had gone only to a certain level of sharing the experience, and now needed to go deeper inside of her experience for true healing, and a return to essence. Here was her chance.

Peter Levine (2010) recognizes that the trapped and heightened energy of traumatic experience needs to be discharged from the body. He instructs, "Resolve arousal states by promoting discharge of the vast survival energy mobilized for life preserving action." (p.91). Here, Myrna was literally just shaking in the moment, and I asked her to do nothing about the shaking, have no judgment, and just let it run its course. Her energy and shaking seemed to really intensify over the next couple of minutes, and I

reminded her to stay with it with no judgment. After a few minutes her shaking and intensity seemed to crest like a wave and then fall, all of a sudden she sat there very still and calm like. It was evident that her previous trauma work had stretched her window of tolerance (Ogden, Minto, & Pain, 2006) as she was able to go deeply into this experience without dissociation or re-traumatization.

I asked her “What is happening.” She said, “I felt the terror very intensely, but I stayed in no judgment, and it just broke, now I just feel calm and serene. Everything is okay.” There seemed to be something more than a restoration of what Levine (2010) called “self-regulation and dynamic equilibrium” in which “you have a secure home base within your organism” (p.94). I asked her what it was, and she said, “I feel the underlying essence.” I smiled back at her and said, “You thought you lost who you were, but you just re-discovered it was with you all the way along. Beautiful.” So, now in healing her trauma, Myrna miraculously found a deeper experience of who she was. She re-acquainted herself with her underlying essence. Her psychic content of trauma had made her feel heavy and dark, but now with choiceless awareness she felt her underlying being as essence as Almaas (2001) had described, “a luminous night sky, transparent and pure, light and happy” (p. 337).

When I asked what she understood to be the key to her healing, she replied, “No judgment.” She also said she really appreciated how when she looked at me straight in the eyes as she described her trauma and the torment she went through, she saw calmness, openness and no judgment. This helped her feel support as the connection to another being in essence brought her courage in re-experiencing of the trauma. She could then face what she had desperately avoided for so long, the terror. And miraculously she found out that it was not the terror itself that was so hard it was all her judgments and attempts to avoiding facing it. Being one with it, the terror dispersed by itself.

When we had a wrap-up session later in a couple of weeks, Myrna reported that she had been remained in her essence for a number of days afterwards, and a new place of healing had emerged. My sense is that she had done a lot of preliminary work earlier around her trauma, but never had actually stood within her experience with no judgment, thus she never had found releasement and freedom. Now, with this no judgment work, she had gone through a major shift. This experience no longer defined her. Yet it was also evident that there was more to face. To extend her healing, she needed to work through her stance and resistance to death. She was always grasping at her need to survive in the moment. I left her with the challenge over the next few months to give up her grasping for survival and to accept death in each moment, and to relax into her nondual being. Our work together stopped here as we had gotten together to do some intense emergency work on her trauma, but she was planning on carrying on with working with her usual therapist that she had seen for the last three years.

The next case study looks at how choiceless awareness and acceptance of death can come together to facilitate a full healing from trauma.

Watching Her Father Die

Shirley came to see me for psychotherapy reporting, she was stuck in grief. We previously had worked together in a number of sessions focusing on surrender, choiceless awareness and no judgment, however her father had died of cancer about two years ago, before his 55th birthday, and she had never really come to terms with it. She was even at home with him when he died, but somehow she still felt very stuck. In the two years since, she had tried to let go, and accept his death, but around and around she went. She was mad at existence for taking her best friend away. Before reconnecting with me, she tried grief therapy, trauma therapy, mindfulness, existential therapy, but nothing seemed to work. We even had a couple of nondual sessions together a year earlier working on choiceless awareness and surrender, but she had been still caught on looking for a technique for all the pain to go away. Now, here she was, still caught missing her dad, and with the injustice of him dying even before his 55th birthday. She was unsure if I could do anything to help her. She was desperately hopeful that something would work.

As we sat down together, and Shirley recounted her pain and grief, she was looking at me with pleading eyes, looking for some hopeful strategy. Unfortunately, I could not provide any hopeful strategies other than assisting her to see that her father's death was an invitation for her to accept her own death.

With a sigh, I was about to lead her into the treacherous place of being out at sea with no life jacket, and no help for hundreds of miles around. I said to her, "You need to embrace the art of dying yourself, not for your dad but for you, you need to surrender to death. In short, you need to be without judgment or effort to escape, just allow yourself to die, just go down quietly." I stopped with that and just let that sink in.

Shirley seemed perplexed, She asked me "How am I suppose to do that?" I smiled to myself, and with a sly grin I replied, "Using a technique or working with me would not be surrender. I cannot do surrender for you, you have to do it all by yourself. You need to realize that there is nothing you can do to save yourself; you are fucked. And just accept that. Give up. "

Shirley sat there puzzled, waiting for the next thing from me. But there was not another thing. She was expecting a long drawn out session, but I did something that day I rarely do, I cut the session short and wound it up. I told her that was it for today as I could do nothing to help her surrender, any further help would be an avoidance. I just left her the invitation of surrender and giving up.

As we wound up the session, and she left, I could tell Shirley was confused. In her mind, it was like she was saying, "What type of counselling is this?" I did nothing, as I did not want to take her dilemma away. I let her leave. Shirley later told me she was in fact mad. But then she went home, and sat with things. It took a while, but in the silence of the wee hours of the morning, she got to that place of absolute aloneness and hopelessness, in which she realized there was nothing she could do, and she just gave up trying to save herself and her dad. She let go and went down quietly. She reported, at that

point, it actually was serene and only took a few minutes. “Strange,” she thought. She had avoided the helpless and hopelessness of surrendering into the blackness of death for two years, and here she had done it only in a fifteen minutes. And now as she sat there in the eternal stillness of two a.m. in the darkness of night, she felt the wonderful transcendent silence of existence as the blackness transformed all by itself into a radiant translucent aliveness. With accepting the reality of her own death, and feeling the vastness of existence, suddenly there was acceptance of her father’s death as well.

Shirley went on to explore many more things in her journey but she found this acceptance experience to be pivotal. She was abiding in no judgment and in the acceptance of her own death. She realized that death is already inside of us all of the time, life and death merged in the intensity of this moment, and her father’s death was a natural part of the ebb and flow of existence. He had returned to the formless.

We will turn to a case study that illustrates the trauma of encountering being caught forever in the conditional realms of the mind.

Mark’s Perpetual Madness

My own experience with seeking is that there comes a time when the mind starts to realize it has been seeking forever, always trying to find the answer. And even if it did find the answer, the feeling is that the mind would reject it anyways, and keep on seeking. Seeing this can be very dizzying and on the edge of madness. Literally, it can feel like total madness, and that the mind is having a total breakdown. The horrors of seeking forever! This is a variation of being stuck in hell forever; it is realizing that I could be lost in mind looking for the answer forever. And I might have been in this place looking for the answer already for many lifetimes. Such madness!

Now, if one lets in that the mind will keep on seeking forever, in this deep acceptance the mind stops by itself. Or put it in a different way, you no longer can believe the mind is going to save you, and you stop using the mind, you give up on the mind.

I always remember the subtle but relaxed smiles on client’s faces when they realize that the mind could seek forever, and never find the answer. With that acceptance, a transcendence of the mind naturally happens. It is like the old age adage, “Cutting the root.” The belief in the mind is cut.

In working with Mark, a seeker of awakening for over thirty years, the idea of letting go of his eternal seeking was tough. For him, this meant that he would have to face something that he had been avoiding for a long time, and that was his eternal aloneness. In our work together, he was able to see that in seeking he was always looking for an external answer, when the truth was already inside him. He just needed to give up, and be in that place of having nothing to hang onto, no techniques, and nothing to do. This of course put him right where he did not want to be, in aloneness.

As he sat in his aloneness, he could feel that he had a lot of judgments about it. He thought aloneness was terrible. To him it was like a tragic loss of relations. I encouraged him to just sit in his aloneness with no judgment. See if he could get to a place of acceptance.

As he sat in his aloneness, with no desire to escape, it was like existence flashed him, and in the moment he could see that in aloneness, the divine mystery of existence was revealed. How paradoxical, out of aloneness, total interconnection. This made him laugh.

Another pattern dropped away as well. Mark had felt judgmental about his exhaustion. He had no energy. I worked with him to go into this experience of exhaustion with no judgment, and choiceless awareness, to accept he had run out of gas, and now that was his fate, nothing could be done. As he stayed in his awareness of this, something shifted. It was like he could see that he had no personal energy left over, he was running on empty, but as he just stayed choicelessly open, it was like the energy of existence showed up. All of a sudden the absolute was pouring through him with no effort on his own. To him this was a miracle. By remaining open and passive, doing nothing, staying present, he was truly finding out that the “Grass Grows by Itself.” The absolute energy of existence rained through him. Now all of a sudden, he had an abundance of energy. In deep acceptance of eternal aloneness and exhaustion, existence showed up and Mark was transformed.

Conclusion

Looking back on my journey with trauma, full healing only happened to me when I was willing to dive into the fire of trauma and get an insider’s perspective. From the inside, I could see that it was my stance against the experience that made it so painful. It was not the actual feelings that froze me in time, but my judgments. When I extended choiceless awareness to the death of the separate self, this radically transformed my trauma into an awakening experience. Acceptance of death and as well no escape from psychic realms, allowed me to look fearlessly into the heart of trauma and relax into nondual awareness as I transformed trauma and dark emotions into the underlying essence.

My own journey of finding freedom in the heart of trauma has greatly invigorated working with clients and their trauma from a nondual perspective. I am free to work with clients on any experience. Whether it is judging abuse, not accepting the reality of the threat of death in the moment or rejecting the invitation to see there is no mind escape from existence, the invitation for surrender and acceptance is in the moment. With no judgment and choiceless awareness, our split minds are dropped. We are free to embrace the dazzling mystery of existence in each moment.

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