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Exploring the Locker

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This article is an effort to foster grace and to create genuine, humble community. A new sense of community, that is not conditional on our abilities to censor ourselves to be more palatable to those around us. Instead, the birth of a new way of relating that considers our deep inner selves that feel shame, remember traumas, and cower in fear of these experiences. Perhaps most of all, this article is an invitation to explore our deepest inner selves, and the cost of censoring this self. This exploration is not a leisurely dive into the corners of ourselves that lie in the shallows. It is an adventure that will require a full set of SCUBA gear, and a courageous spirit. A courageous spirit that is not only willing to dig through the shame, fear, and anger that covers our raw selves, but a spirit that will then sit with these wounded and forgotten parts, and begin to build a new sense of balance.

KEYWORDS: Unseen caregiver, Coronavirus, censorship, trauma, relationships, shame, authentic self, ambiguous loss

The Whiplash of Change

In the past few months, we have all been attempting to live in a foreign reality that none of us could have known how to prepare for. Corona Virus rocked our world, and Mother Nature put us all in a firm time-out. This virus yanked us out of our comfortable rhythms, shoved us into our homes, and immobilized so many of our comfortable outlets for coping with stress. It's almost a feeling of motion sickness, as we struggle to find our footing and adjust to this new pace of life. The whiplash of this change has brought about a myriad of new emotions, and dug up some ancient ones, some that maybe haven't seen the light of day in many years.

All of these emotions and ambiguous loss can manifest in physical sensations in our aching backs, lack of motivation, foggy thinking and so many others (Boss, 2000). What we are all experiencing as a society is trauma. Bessell Van Der Kolk, one of the leading clinicians and researchers in the field of trauma, wrote at length about how trauma manifests physically in our bodies, and the importance of learning how to regulate ourselves in order to become better in touch with the underlying sensations (2015). This process of getting in touch with the deepest parts of our experience right now is not only indisputably important, but also extremely valuable (Mucci et al., 2020). However, that doesn't mean it is enjoyable work to do. This process of digging in so deeply into our authentic selves and experience also requires change, which is rarely comfortable or easy. This deep digging is especially difficult when we are in this present-day pandemic and many of us have been, or are still, quarantined. Social isolation adds another layer to the fear surrounding what lies within, and increases our likelihood of turning to substances rather than trying to connect socially and share our experiences (Barger, 2013).

This authentic self that we work to introduce to our present-day self has the potential to turn our worlds upside down. This authentic self is full of all the parts of us that we might not like so much. The parts of ourselves that need too much. Feel too much. Hurt too much. The self that we shut up by drowning in a substance of choice, or running around in circles filling life with

trivial appointments and obligations. We run, so ragged and inebriated that we can hardly focus on what's in front of us, much less what lies within (Gage & Sunnall, 2019). We work so hard to not see the parts of ourselves that need the most love. I think we run from loving these parts because we know that if we were to work to heal these parts they would require us to change into something new. This change is scary, and would require us to leap head first into the unknown. But humans are not meant to be stagnant beings. We are inherently wired to connect to others in times of extreme stress and transition, even though shame of our inner experience often keeps us from doing so (Venniro et al., 2018).

The Cost of Censorship

In my own personal world, shame is alive and well. When considering the idea of tapping into my personal experience during this pandemic, the idea of getting in touch with underlying sensations has been especially terrifying. A couple of weeks ago I found out one of my siblings, who was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder type one 4 years ago, had been running with a questionable crowd and getting into hard drugs. One evening when I was picking up my partner from his shift at the hospital, my mother called me in absolute hysterics. The kind of sobbing that is so visceral, so primal, and so gut wrenching it makes your stomach flip just listening. I took a deep breath, and began utilizing grounding techniques I have learned through my yoga teacher training and my training as a therapist. I was completely outside of myself as I attempted to comfort my mother to the point where she could tell me what was happening. There simply wasn't enough room for my emotions and hers at the same time.

After about 20 minutes I was able to finally decipher through breaks in her sobbing what was happening with my sibling. I continued to function outside of myself as I helped my mother breathe and eventually crawl to the kitchen to find a peanut butter sandwich. My partner got into the car just as my mother dissolved into a new barrage of tears while questioning desperately, 'how did my life get here...what do I do...what do I do'. He squeezed my hand and sat calmly with me as I gave my mother detailed, simple steps of what she would do as she got off the phone with me. As soon as I hung up with my mother, I collapsed into my partners arms.

Since this day, I have been hesitant to engage with the darkness that I have felt swirling around inside myself and have ended up feeling angry as a result. At least I've been feeling what presents as anger on the surface. In wake of this anger, I have become less connected to myself, and less connected to those around me. This feeling of disconnection has increased my levels of anxiety and insecurity. The very real fear and anxiety that I have been experiencing has had a domino effect, explained in Barger's research looking at the importance of social support (2013). Barger's work illustrates how perceived poor quality of social support in relationships creates feelings of fear and anxiety. These feelings trigger one another, which then increases a person's distress in a response to perceived loneliness.

When I finally did reluctantly take the time to slow down and sit with my own anger and loneliness, I found that underneath all of it there was part of myself that I had been neglecting and not supporting in the slightest. For as long as I can remember, the role that I have played in my family, and the one that is most accepted, is that of the golden child. Characteristics of the golden child that I have embodied my whole life Reiter describes in his work as, extremely high achieving, responsible, and generally in control (2015). However, as it turns out, underneath this obligatory role I play as the golden child, is this completely separate role of the unseen caregiver. This unseen caregiver sacrifices endlessly, and never asks for anything in return. This unseen caregiver will

morph and blend in any way that is needed to support loved ones, and dismiss personal needs and desires in an effort to care for, and meet expectations of others. This unseen caregiver within me has been almost completely unsupported by myself, let alone others in my life. As Barger spoke about in his work, this lack of social support I have been feeling for my whole self is the ticket to loneliness, fear, and anxiety (Barger, 2013). The level of brain power it takes to balance the authentic thoughts and experiences, while still protecting others as an unseen caregiver is immense (Jowsey et al., 2016). Upon further reflection, I have found this balancing act often leads to me censoring my experiences, thoughts, and emotions. This censorship then creates a bigger divide between my authentic self that I keep locked away, and my accepted self that presents to the world.

I realized when writing this piece that I had a choice to make. I was initially very worried about disclosing my personal experience with my family. I worried that my mother would someday read my work and be hurt by my words. I worried about upsetting the homeostasis of my family system by speaking out about my experience. My instinct was to censor myself, my experience, and my emotions in order to protect my family. Now however, I see that in the end this censorship of my true experience isn't really protecting my mother, or anyone else for that matter. It is simply digging a deeper chasm between my authentic self, and my accepted self, creating a warped reality. I realized I have an opportunity here to narrow that gap, and breathe life into a new reality. A reality in which everyone in my world can be given a chance to let their true self act, in response to mine.

Loss and a Locker

In creating this new reality however, I would be saying goodbye to an old one. However dysfunctional it was, I understood it, and was just barely able to function within it. The loss of this old reality and way of life was very hard to put my finger on. Paulene Boss describes a loss like that of my old reality as an *ambiguous loss* (2000). Boss goes on to describe that an ambiguous loss is so debilitating because there is no closure (Boss, 2000). And as humans we struggle to wrap our minds around having this free-floating event with no ending, no clear meaning, and no neat and tidy bow on top. I have been experiencing this unique type of loss in lieu of working through my own family events, but also as I try to sort through the repercussions of this virus. In my personal life I am experiencing this ambiguous loss surrounding my brother, his safety, the loss of my relationship with my mother, the loss of space for myself and my old reality. On a global level, I have experienced the loss of a feeling of safety, normalcy and potentially the loss of the life I had before the Corona Virus.

Boss speaks about the key to navigating this ambiguous loss lying in our ability to make new meaning and ritual from these events, and grow our tolerance for ambiguity (2000). How we build our tolerance and understanding of ambiguity is very personal for each individual. However, I believe a good place to start would be in examining the inner workings of our experiences and meeting them with curiosity and gentleness. The words of Stephen Cope (2007) ring loud in my ears in this moment as I think about this inner journey, and how he compared it to a '*Night Sea Journey*':

The 'night sea journey' is the journey into the parts of ourselves that are split off, disavowed, unknown, unwanted, cast out, and exiled to the various subterranean worlds of consciousness... The goal of this journey is to reunite us with ourselves. Such a

homecoming can be surprisingly painful, even brutal. In order to undertake it, we must first agree to exile nothing. (168)

The unknown and ambiguous nature of what lies beneath the surface for all of us can feel terrifying, but somewhere underneath all of the noisy distractions lies something new. A version of ourselves that is uncensored, raw, true, and full of meaning, even in the midst of seemingly impossible situations. As I have tried desperately to keep trudging through my own exploratory journey of myself, I have done quite a bit of writing. The following is a piece of writing that has grown with me through the years as I grapple with all of the layers of myself:

Staring into the dirty mirror I said, “I don’t want to live like this anymore”
Where the constant state of being is burned out, overworked, hunched over and gaunt.
Where life is lived in ten-minute increments cycled through in rapid succession. But what else is there? I’m a bit afraid to look. I’m good at this.
“So here is my theory...” I muttered to no one in particular.

The theory is this. That we all need to spin. We all need so desperately to spin because when we do, it all blends together, and becomes easier to manage. When we spin we can’t see the dusty, neglected and bare corners of ourselves. We can’t see the small spaces full of bones, husks of ideas passed, and dust on old promises. We can’t see just how dark some corners of our souls actually are. If we stop, we would be able to focus. We could then see the grime, the masks, the regrets. They are stacked up in boxes, shoved in corners, and covered with stained sheets. If we stop spinning, then we would see all the spaces inside ourselves that we have been missing, avoiding, omitting.

“There is a fair amount of myself that I have done a good job of blocking,” I whispered quietly.

There is a little locker, each of us has one. Deep down in the labyrinth of our souls. We shove all our worst inside this locker. The door squeaks every time that we dare to open it. Almost like a little whine. A sound capable of catapulting us back to whatever hellscape we have been desperately avoiding. Rejection from a lover. An apartment that doubled as a torturous isolation chamber. Abuse from someone who at first came off so trustworthy. The vivid memory of a location where news was delivered that altered the entire course of life. Final words to a dear friend that didn’t come out quite right, and can never be reeled back in. All of these things are carefully packed in boxes or shoved in drawers, barricaded behind strong walls. But these walls aren’t really protecting anything. As it turns out, these walls aren’t just keeping things out, they are keeping our true selves in. Our true, raw selves that have shed so many tears. Jars and jars of tears line the walls of this terrible locker. All labeled with a worn piece of tape, the name of a memory too painful to recall, scribbled on with a pen that is reluctant to write. Memories of sobbing with such abandon that the decaying walls of defense shook, but never fell. It’s hard to say what shook harder. The walls around our fragile hearts, or the voice that pushed out the words “I’m fine” time and time again through the spaces between clenched teeth.

“I wonder what I look like from the outside...” I wondered to no one in particular.

With these true, raw parts of ourselves buried so deeply in that cage, what kind of zombie must we resemble? Maybe the kind that just wanders around. Or maybe the kind that stares off into space, only to be brought out of the stupor with violent fits. Or maybe the kind that hurt the ones they loved.

“That version of me is the one I keep in my locker”

I’m not proud of her. Which is why I keep her here, with all the other dark and twisty parts of my soul. I don’t feed into her much anymore. But she loves to remind me that she is there. She rattles the door of the locker sometimes at night, and I am reminded that she is still there. She is a part of my being that still exists. Hardly, but she does.

“I should take care of her”

I should. She lives there tormented by horrors passed. The problem is I don’t want to take care of her. The truth is that I am terrified. I’m terrified that I let her out, she will cling to me, and I won’t be able to spin anymore. All I will be able to do is stare into her eyes and see all the loss. What if she becomes a part of me? What if I can’t get her back in the locker? I’d be stuck with her.

“I preach it all the time”

Let your demons out, I say. Stare them in the face, and become their friend. Yet here I am, cowering before my own locker, peeking through the slits at my own demon. Sometimes she whispers to me.

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

I guess maybe she has a point. What if we cared for our inner demons? What if we helped them heal from the darkness we cast them into. Would they change? I’d like to think yes. But at what cost? What part of myself would I have to give to change my demons? I would have to give into the darkness.

“Weakness”

Is that a bad thing? Or is it willingness? Willingness to learn. If we learn about the darkness maybe we can survive. If we learn to navigate the darkness maybe it would become still. Instead of swirling around my heart, it would become still as I swirled with it. Still present. But it would be still because I would know how to move with it.

Hesitantly, under my breath I whisper, “maybe I should try.”

To this day, this piece still feels very raw to read for me, but I share it here in hopes of creating a sense of community around this shared journey inward. You are not alone; adventure on, brave souls.

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