

Darkness vs Light by Lisa Browning

There is a sign outside one of the factories close to my house, displaying a quote by Helen Keller.

“Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadows.”

I drive by that factory a lot, and the sign always jumps out at me. At first, I thought that was because it resonated so well with me ... with my belief that we should always turn away from our darkness. After all, even Wayne Dyer said it: “What we focus on expands.”

Recently, however, I’ve started to question that belief. Especially because it has landed me in a period of what Thomas Moore so aptly refers to as a Dark Night of the Soul, on many occasions.

I write in my journal at least once a day, so it was a fascinating exercise to look back and see that each and every one of those Dark Night of the Soul experiences was preceded by a moment when I felt really good about myself. “Life is turning out exactly as I hoped it would!” “Everything is working out!!”

So what happened?

One of my favourite quotes of all time is by Marianne Williamson. It starts out this way:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness
That most frightens us.*

*We ask ourselves
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?*

In the context of this quote, my relapses into dark nights of the soul started to make sense. Indeed, who was I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Toxic shame is a concept I first came to understand many years ago, after reading John’s Bradshaw’s book, *Healing the Shame That Binds Us*. Bradshaw states that toxic shame creates beliefs that one’s true self is defective and flawed, creating a false sense that one is defective as a human being.

And of course, if one is defective, one must hide ... and certainly not be out in the spotlight, being praised.

When I was a baby, I cried a lot. I was born in 1960, and the concept of scheduled feeding had just been introduced as preferable to feeding on demand. My mother's decision to follow her doctor's advice and incorporate this method into her care of me resulted in my frequently being hungry. And because I cried as a result of that hunger, my mother was often frustrated. More often than not, when my eleven-year-old sister returned home from school each day, my mother would thrust me into her arms, saying "Take her. I can't stand it anymore." So, through no real fault of my mother's, I was deprived of two of the fundamental needs of a newborn—the safety and security of being loved and held, and the safety and security of being fed when hungry. Instead, I was inadvertently treated as a nuisance and a burden. And I learned toxic shame.

Growing up in a family of five, with an eleven-year age difference between me and my sister, and fifteen years between me and my brother, I was often the "forgotten" one. When I was very little, my family would gather for Sunday dinner around our large formal dining room table. Because I was so small, in size and in voice, I was often unheard at that table of adults and teenagers. When dinner was finished, but conversation still continued, I would usually crawl under the dining room table, hoping against all hope that someone would notice that I was missing. No one ever did. And I learned that I was not important.

We all have core messages and beliefs. Sometimes, we are aware of them, but sometimes we are not. My core belief, as stated, was that I was not important. Not worthy of love or attention.

In addition to that, I inherited the following four beliefs from my mother:

1. You are not on this earth to be happy.
2. Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.
3. You're going to cry before you go to sleep. (This was said if I was playing or laughing "too much.")
4. Don't expect anything; then you won't be disappointed.

And it went on from there ...

In Kindergarten, we were asked to do a painting of a tree. I remember my painting to this day. I remember the thick blue line at the top of the page, which was the sky, and an equally thick green line at the bottom, which was the ground. In the white space in the middle of the paper was my tree ... with its brown trunk, and a green circle on top, which of course was supposed to be the leaves.

"No, no," my teacher exclaimed, in front of the entire class. "That's NOT how you draw a tree!"

In Grade 1, I was chastised by my teacher for holding the scissors the wrong way, and sucking on my hair. In Grade 3, I was recruited to lunchtime detention because I was talking in line, waiting for the entry bell to ring. I didn't show up for that detention, and I

went through the remainder of the school year in terror, wondering when Mrs. Freeman would track me down and punish me further for failing to serve my time.

By Grade 4, my deep-seated sense of shame was fully a part of my psyche, and yet I still displayed sporadic attempts at bravery, however short-lived. The day I proudly wore fluorescent blue nail polish, like all the other girls were doing, but scratched it off each nail when I was teased by a couple of classmates intent on embarrassing me, was the day I surrendered my own sense of self to the “more worthy” opinions of my peers.

I continued through public school with the subconscious belief that my only worth lay in my accomplishments. I was an A student, always the first to turn in assignments, and never coming to school without all homework being completed, neatly and with headings underlined with ruler-straight coloured lines a double line for the title, a single line for the date.

High school was more of the same. I was an honour student, and a perfectionist, because I still believed that my only worth lay in my accomplishments, not in who I was as a person.

In first-year university, I met the first in a series of abusive partners. He was athletic, popular, and incredibly good-looking. I never understood why he chose to be with me. The longer we stayed together, the more emotionally distant he became. He made it abundantly clear that he didn't want me around and, the more he showed me how little I meant to him, the more desperately I tried to prove my worth.

After that relationship ended, I had several other unhealthy and unfulfilling relationships, culminating in an incredibly abusive relationship which landed me in the hospital under “suicide watch”, and suffering from PTSD.

It took a long time ... almost ten years, in fact ... to recover from that trauma. There was one problem, however. I put all of the blame on the relationship, and neglected to look at the underlying cause of my being in that relationship in the first place.

Little did I know, then anyway, that all of these incidents, dating back to my infancy, were reinforcing my belief that I was “Not Good Enough.” We get what we think we deserve, whether we are aware of what we're thinking or not.

In her book entitled *Living in the Light*, Shakti Gawain talks a lot about shadow work, which refers to the task of becoming aware of the parts of ourselves that we have denied or repressed because we feel they are unacceptable.

Because I inherently believed that I was flawed and unimportant, and had for all of my life, I became uncomfortable when my life was going well. “Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.” In order to stay true to this deep-seated belief, I found ways to self-destruct in the midst of any success ... even if I didn't realize, consciously, that I was doing so.

If our core beliefs are negative, and do not serve us well, we often blame our parents. And while usually these beliefs and feelings are first instilled in us by those who raised us, “blame” is not the right word. They too have their story.

As stated by Tara Brach in her book, *Radical Acceptance*, “Our imperfect parents had imperfect parents of their own.”

I never knew my mother’s mother, because she died before I was born. But I remember being told the story of my mother frequently coming home, as a child in public school, to find her mother in a darkened living room, with the curtains drawn, staring into nothingness. Not an environment conducive to positivity, that’s for sure!

Each of us is broken, in one way or another.

Woundology is concept derived by Caroline Myss, and she talks about it extensively in her book, *Why People Don’t Heal and How They Can*. The premise is that some people don’t heal because they’ve made an identity out of their woundedness. They like the attention it gets them, and they don’t want to give that up. But I believe that this concept has been misconstrued, and many mistakenly believe it to mean that we are NOT to look at our woundedness, or the trauma that caused it.

Another fear is that Imposter Syndrome, which refers to our internal experience of believing that we are not as competent as others perceive us to be. If they only knew who I really am ...

Ever since I first started One Thousand Trees in 2010, I have been on a mission to help empower others through telling their stories and speaking their truth. And I discovered something fascinating. When we follow our passion, everything miraculously falls into place. We meet the people we’re meant to meet, when we’re meant to meet them. Opportunities come our way, that are directly in line with that passion.

But telling our stories and speaking our truth includes the whole story, the whole truth ... not just the user-friendly, comfortable pieces. When we do this, we can change not only ourselves, but we can change the world.

As stated by Debbie Ford in her book, *The Secret of the Shadow*, “All of our pain has a purpose! It is here to teach us, guide us, and give us the wisdom we need to deliver our gifts to the world. Most of us use our traumas and our wounds to beat ourselves up, to stay stuck, and to keep ourselves small. But when our pain and disappointment are examined and used as learning tools, they impart sacred life lessons that can be taught to us only in this way.”

Sharing: our stories, our selves, our success is the name of a series of anthologies of empowerment stories. I published the first volume in 2013. It was an incredible experience! In that volume, 24 courageous women shared their stories ... of pain, struggle and courage; healing, hope, and vision ... whatever guided them on their

individual journey to healing and wholeness. Most of these women were from Ontario, but others were from Nova Scotia, British Columbia, California, Arizona, as well as England and Australia.

I received a lot of feedback from those women, all expressing gratitude for the opportunity to share their story, no matter how difficult. I'd like to read one particular testimonial that still speaks loudly to my heart and soul:

On January 19, 2013, you read a post I had made on Cheryl Richardson's FB page and felt a connection. Rather than ignore it, you reached out to me, you made a connection. You said that my words resonated with you and in that instant, by that simple action, I felt empowered and my story validated. At that particular moment in my life, having my thoughts and feelings validated was water in an Oasis...a life jacket in a turbulent sea.

Your invitation to participate in "Sharing" turned my tide. It gave me something to concentrate on, something positive in a negative world. It gave me hope.

I had no confidence in myself, but you did. You allowed me a forum to live a lifelong dream. You nurtured me to take the first step, to become a more authentic and better me. Most importantly, you allowed me to be able to live the dream at my ability, there were no demands, no rules, no criticisms, no judgment. Just give me your best work, and be your most authentic self, just be you...that's enough.

In a world where everyone has an angle, a scheme, an agenda, you did not. You reached out, to another soul, who was hurting. You extended a hand, and in one simple act...threw out a life line to a drowning soul. The book....that was just gravy....something additional to an already human experience.

Why is this so important to me?

Because, a stranger reached out to me, helped me look at myself, and reflect it back to the world. It wasn't the easiest thing I have ever done, but it was by far one of the best things I have ever done. It made me stop and take inventory of what I wanted, and what I didn't. It gave me strength and confidence in myself.

How do I see it?...this work you do?

Your work is important, but it isn't work as much as it is a calling. It's a calling to bring together the power, the strength and the healing of others, so that they can be all that they can be. You yourself struggle deeply with your own demons and issues, but gain strength by and through the helping of others, and in that struggle you find yourself and your purpose. That's pretty darn inspiring and damn powerful.

You do good things. Those things change the world.

Yours are not the actions of loud tumbling waves, that crash and recede with each surge. They are the quiet actions of a single stone thrown into a pond, that creates a soft ripple effect. Each ring travels outward, reaching further and further forever taking with it the energy of the stone.

In the words of Tara Brach, “Realizing the truth of belonging, that we are all suffering and awakening together on the path, is the most powerful antidote to personal feelings of unworthiness.” This concept is expanded on by Kristin Neff, co-founder of the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, when she says, “We can embrace both the joy and the sorrow of being human, and by doing so we can transform our lives.”

You can tell that I’m a writer and a publisher, just by the number of quotes I refer to!
Just one more ...

In her book entitled *How the Light Gets In*, about writing as a spiritual practice, Pat Schneider states, “Daring to be seen, daring to let the truth of the human condition be made visible by our telling, whether that telling be in words or in some other form of witness, splits open the world. Cracks it. And that’s how the light gets in.”

(Borrowing, I’m sure, from that wonderful poem by Leonard Cohen, which can’t be quoted enough, in my opinion!)

I do believe that we have to guard against the victim mentality, if it results in our staying stuck in our past trauma and pain. But I also believe that we have to face our darkness—every bit of it—in order to see our light. It is then that we will be able to let it all go, and turn to the light of a glorious new future.