

## OUT OF AFRICA ~ Processing Feeling



I was recently on safari in Africa. The bush veld is a wild, primeval place where you are either the hunter or the hunted. There is a savage, harsh beauty to the land and yet there is no place on earth that I feel a greater sense of tranquility. Death and violence erupts suddenly and is quickly over and then peace reigns again as if nothing really happened.

Lions are notoriously poor hunters and miss their prey quite often. Like all cats they are rather lazy and in the heat of an African drought food is plentiful and they are fat and sleek. If they miss they give up quickly, slump back down in the shade of an acacia tree, panting languidly and wait for something a little easier to come their way.

I was struck by one large bull giraffe who had a flap of his hide hanging from his hindquarters. The wound where four large claws had ripped him open was healing and he was stripping the tender new leaves off the topmost branches of a large umbrella thorn tree with his long black tongue, apparently unconcerned and non anxious. There was no neurotic paranoia evident. He stopped a moment to peer down at us curiously and then went back to the earnest work of eating. This lack of fear is something I have witnessed often and yet never asked myself why animals do not live in a state of nervous terror at the prospect of suddenly and unexpectedly becoming dinner to a large, ferocious killer. Why do they not have post traumatic stress disorder like humans? Clearly they have a memory and know that lions are out to get them.

When watching a hunt and kill it is easy to get caught up in the drama of paying attention to the lion. However, if one watches the impala or zebra (the lions most common prey) when the lion has chased it but missed and given up, the animal keeps running, pronging and kicking up dust. Then finally it will stand shaking and quivering all over. It will snort and toss it's head. Saliva will run from its mouth and nose. It's hide will quiver, tremble and jerk spasmodically. It will stamp it's feet and nervously move around. The nose twitches, the tail flicks. Gradually, however, the movements decrease and finally cease and then within a little while, the animal will start grazing again, apparently unconcerned, even with lion still in the vicinity.

I wonder if the reason for this is because it is allowed to complete the cycle of arousal and terror. There is no mother or father zebra or impala stopping it from processing the bodies natural response to fright. Human parents, it seems are as much frightened by their offspring's feelings and physiological arousal to fright and pain as they are of a lion and will immediately attempt to stop the full expression and range of feeling and arousal that a child experiences when hurt or frightened. Parents will in any number of ways give their children the message that they must control their feelings. Controlling feelings means constricting, tensing up and holding it all in. Often it means repressing it so deeply that there is no connection between the feeling and the original event causing it. A sort of emotional potty training happens. Of course, just like any other bodily function, if it is all held in for too long, it becomes intensely uncomfortable, the tension and pressure become too big and eventually will result in a big mess happening, often inappropriately and in response to any stimulus that bears a resemblance to the original but forgotten cause of the feeling. The tension and pressure of repressed emotion results in stress with all it's accompanying psychological and physical manifestations.

The work of identifying and actually feeling old feelings, linking them to beliefs, thoughts and images that belong to the past, feeling the tension held in the body, recognizing the defenses that one learnt in order to control the feeling becomes the work of becoming aware and completing processes that were not allowed satisfactory completion in childhood - a long and arduous task.

Understanding the origin of these pent up emotions is the first step to becoming free. Actually feeling the feelings buried beneath anger, addictions and compulsions, destructive behaviors, avoidant behaviors, tension and stress as related to the past is the second step.

People that sustain hideous violence and abuse in adulthood that have very few unresolved issues from childhood and have fully processed old feelings recover quickly, process the event well without long term effects. Adults who experience abuse in adulthood that have not resolved old traumas tend to take a much longer time to recover because it is so easy to concentrate on the current situation with no awareness of what old feelings have been activated and compounded by the current situation. We will be caught in a never ending cycles of repetitious suffering if we falsely assume that big feelings are always the result of a current situation only, with no reflection or awareness of what might be being triggered and belongs to the past.

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