

Out of Africa - Mother Love

I was an unruly and wild seven year old. My mother loves to tell me that the antics I got up to as a child turned her prematurely grey. I was at a birthday party. The mothers of the children were inside drinking tea together while us kids were playing a riotous game of tag in the backyard. I was being chased. In a split second I realized, too late, that I was running so fast towards a tall , thick and ancient hawthorn hedge that I was not going to be able to stop in time. I put my hands out in front of me to protect myself from slamming into the hedge.

Searing pain shot through my left hand. The branches of Hawthorn are profusely covered with viscous, very strong thorns. Hawthorn hedges were often planted as a protective barrier around suburban homes in Rhodesia, the central African country in which I was raised. I was sure a thorn had gone into my hand although there was nothing visible except a small puncture wound on the inside of my palm that wasn't even bleeding. I ran inside to my mother - she looked and could see nothing. I no longer wanted to play though, and sat pale and tearful inside with my mother for the rest of the afternoon. My mother always told me that I was a courageous little girl as well as a tomboy who terrified her with my fearlessness and competitive nature with boys. My behavior was definitely out of character and finally when I didn't want to go back to playing my mother took me to the emergency room of the local hospital to check that there was nothing in my hand.

The doctor on duty prodded and poked my hand. I was crying and whimpering with the pain (something else I prided myself in not doing). Clearly irritated, he pronounced there was nothing there and that I needed to stop making such "a fuss," - I had just been pricked. My mother bristled. "She is not the kind of child to make a fuss about nothing," she retorted

angrily. He never even answered and peremptorily ordered a nurse to give me a tetanus shot as he walked out. I stopped crying out of shame and said nothing more.

Weeks later, I noticed a festering, puss filled sore on the back of my hand. I also noticed a small black point emerging. I was absolutely horrified and terrified. I realized that the thorn that had gone into my palm was emerging through the back of my hand. I was shocked into paralysis and walked around concentrating on staying aware of my terror so that I would remember to not move my hand and have the thorn emerge any further.

It had hurt terribly when it went in and it was going to hurt terribly coming out. I just knew it!

Strangely, even though it actually didn't hurt, it still frightened me to see it and I remained convinced that it needed to be hidden from any adult that would want to pull it out. By keeping my hand still the wound slowly healed over. However, a few weeks later the inflammation started up again. Once more I dedicated myself to keeping my hand still and letting it heal over again. I didn't know then that, of course, the body, is insistent on getting rid of foreign matter and a few weeks later the festering began once more.

It was Easter weekend and we had driven from Salisbury, where we lived, up to the town of Umtali nestled in the Eastern Highlands of Rhodesia to visit my uncle Fred. I was proud of my uncle Fred. He was a skinny wiry, tough Yorkshireman. His skin was leathery and deeply lined from years in the African sun. He had a broad Yorkshire accent and taught me every swear word I know. My mother said he, "was rough around the edges." I didn't really know what that meant but I wanted to be just like him because he egged me on in my tomboyish ways by taking me fishing and allowing me to bring home snakes and turtles, bugs and tadpoles. He told me stories of how he kept ferrets as a child to hunt with, how to "tickle"

trout under their bellies and then flip them out of the water. He taught me about the 7 stages of ascension in the spiritualist tradition and could see a “light around my mothers head.” He adored my mother. My mother disapproved of him and told him off all the time. The more she disapproved the more he adored her as a “feisty woman.” This particular day Uncle Fred and my father had awoken before dawn and taken off for the mountains surrounding Umtali to go trout fishing leaving me behind with my mother and sister much to my chagrin.

It was a still warm, fall day in Africa. The only sound was the monotonous drone of cicadas. Uncle Fred’s garden was a treasure trove of insects, chameleons, lizards and birds where I spent many happy hours on my belly, investigating the miniature wild life of Africa.

At lunch time, lulled by the quiet of the day and the happy morning of investigations in the garden I came in to lunch and forgot about hiding my hand. I can still recall the panic that arose in me as my mother, glancing at my hand said, “Let me see that.” Her tone was firm. Instinctively I put my hand behind my back. “Let me see that,” she repeated insistently. There was no arguing with that tone. Reluctantly, I held out my hand. She took it gently reassuring me that she would not touch it. She examined the wound, “just by looking.” I knew then that she was understanding how precious my terror was because in very expensive shops she always said, “No touching, just looking.”

Then she explained to me that she was going to put some shavings of ‘Sunlight’ soap on the pus filled opening and bandage it. ‘Sunlight’ soap was a brand of cheap, pure, green soap used ubiquitously in Africa for every conceivable cleaning need - from laundry to, miraculously now in my mind, healing wounds!

Sunlight soap, she explained, acted as a poultice that would draw the thorn out very gently and in this way no-one would have to pull it out and it would not hurt me. She said this

with absolute certainty and authority and I capitulated, trusting her guardedly. She grated some soap on the cheese grater and then very gently, barely touching my hand at all she put some shaved off pieces of 'Sunlight' soap on to the back of my hand covering the festering spot and gently bandaged my hand and told me to keep it in the warm sun outside. It felt better already to not be able to see it and to not have to worry about it until the evening. Then she hugged me and said, "That stupid doctor was wrong, you must have been in so much pain. I'm so sorry my sweetheart." I felt relieved that she knew and I didn't have to keep this secret anymore and I felt more secure now that there was a plan. I went back to searching for lizards in the granite rocks behind the house.

Every now and then I would feel a twinge of apprehension about the bandage coming off. That night I had my bath being careful not to get the bandage wet and afterwards my mother unwrapped my hand and indeed the thorn was clearly further out of my hand. I flinched as my mother reached for a pair of tweezers. "It is virtually out," she said, "let me just take the last little bit out. It will not hurt." She had to grip my hand to stop me from pulling away but within a second she held in her tweezers a long, black thorn. She had not lied - it did not hurt. It just made my tummy turn squeamish. We both gazed at the offending piece of wood in amazement. She measured it - it was an inch and a quarter long and an eighth of an inch thick - as hard and thick as a nail. She ran a basin of warm water and put a capful of 'Dettol,' in the water, telling me to hold my hand in the water for a few minutes. Dettol is a brown antiseptic fluid that magically turns white in water and smells like heaven. I still buy myself a bottle of Dettol every time I go to England. It's powerful pine forest smell is associated with cleanliness, healing and my mother's love.

My mother carried the thorn in her purse for weeks, telling everyone the story of how it had gone right through my hand and what a brave child I was. I still bear the scar of the festering wound but now it is a reminder of how to love, not a memory of fear and pain.

Although, this is a normal, everyday story of childhood, it is a vivid and meaningful memory that taught me a great deal, although I did not know it at the time. Even as I wrote this story I chuckled as I realized that the soap was 'Sunlight' soap, only now recognizing the significance and symbolism of the name.

The moon is the symbol of "The Mother," the goddess, the feminine principle within us all. The moon represents the soul of humanity - that which reflects the light and radiance of the sun, the mythical representation of The Son or masculine principle within us all. Together the sun and the moon represent the combination of compassion and wisdom which are the essential nature of God in human form - the core of our being, but qualities that are all too often overshadowed by the fears and needs of everyday life.

My mother was in every way to me the embodiment of mother love in this story, right down to the most literal detail of using 'Sunlight' soap to draw out the thorn in my hand. She shone for me in the dark with a soft, gentle power and turned the tide of suffering in my young life and taught me how to love.

Reflecting on this memory I realize that as a child, once the thorn had penetrated my body with such force and pain, I had employed my intellect in the service of fear to keep the thorn inside of me because I believed that getting it out would hurt as much as when it went in. At the time I don't suppose this was a conscious thought - my knowing was just rooted in the painful experience. I had felt relief when the festering wound would heal over. For a while I

did not have to fear seeing the thorn emerging and could believe that the problem had gone away.

Emotional pain created in childhood is defended against in the same way. The intellect is employed to fulfil the task of denial, repression, disavowal, dissociation and suppression of the humiliations we experienced as children. We invest so much energy in keeping emotional pain inside us instead of letting it come out and releasing it, for fear that it will hurt as much coming out as it did going in. We become identified with psychic shame and pain not understanding that it is foreign to our true identity as the thorn was to my body and then we hold on to it as a precious part of ourselves while attempting to hide it from others.

Sharing our wounds with others raises the fear that our pain will not be honored with acceptance: that we will not be acknowledged for our bravery; we fear that people will not take our side and tell us that it was not our fault that we were hurt and shamed in the past. We fear that we will be forced and controlled, advised, fixed and bullied and told what to do and how to feel. We fear that we will not be trusted that we can and will heal ourselves, with a little sunlight to warm us and comfort us along the way. In our fear, we use our intellect to find every tactic possible to keep pain hidden and out of sight so that we do not have to see it.

It is hard to trust others because we do not even trust ourselves to bear witness to our old hurts and humiliations, our vulnerable and tender feelings and our distorted thoughts with anything but impatience and judgment. The intellect is quick to say, the minute it gets a glimpse of the little black point of some thorn emerging, that it shouldn't be there, we are wrong to have it in the first place, it's our fault it is there ... this is the carping voice of the harpy, not the still quiet acceptance of the moon goddess.

Ultimately, even if someone else models acceptance and patience, unless we learn from their modeling and find in the darkness the silvery light of our own soul to witness our pain with compassion and understanding, we will never have the courage to pull the thorns from our psyche.

Only when we can be as gentle and loving, attentive and present, to ourselves as my mother was to me, can we allow ourselves to surrender our intellect to the gentle, wise ministrations of the soul - she who notices and sees without judgment, is firm and yet so very gentle in drawing out the thorns, disinfecting and cleansing our wounds and wrapping us in hugs of love and reassurances by telling us that it wasn't our fault to start with. Then and only then will we be able to relax enough to face the procedure of exorcising old demons of fear and shame embedded in our psyches and lurking beneath the surface of full consciousness. Until the soul shines in the dark, these pesky thorns will emerge now and then in festering and inflamed bouts of depression, anxiety and anger that slowly poison our systems and lead us down a path of hopelessness and despair, dooming us to repeat a never ending cycle of catching glimpses of the thorns and then repressing them again.

When we both accept the wounded child without judgment, blame and recriminations and firmly and gently insist on the pain coming out, together with that inner child's permission and co-operation, then genuine and permanent growth can happen. We have to learn to have a mother's love for ourselves.

My mother was and is an ordinary woman. She, like myself, made many mistakes in parenting. And she, like me, was sometimes like the mythological harpy - the dark side of the feminine - irritable, tired, impatient, shaming, demanding, ripping at our children with dirty talons that infected them and made them sick. This is true. A much greater truth is that the

essence of my mother and myself and all mothers is a still, quiet, ever present, ever powerful, all knowing silver light that shines with the reflected light of the radiant sun, providing blessed rest and comfort, acceptance and peace, healing and wholeness. Perhaps we only experienced this occasionally, maybe only once, perhaps never. Perhaps we have to go on faith that this is true. If we do and we find Her within, she will save us from ourselves.

My father and Uncle Fred returned that night and were promptly told the exciting story of what had transpired. Their admiration knew no bounds. I had passed an initiation of some sort, obviously with flying colors - I was tough, I was a guy, I was courageous - they all but slapped me on the back - I was admitted to the men's club as well and was never left behind on a fishing trip again!

That night the sun and the moon shone just for me.