

Healing the Spirit: survival through transmutation

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Abstract

Liberation is the act of setting free from internal and social oppression (Afuape, 2011), in 2019 it was the Liberation Trail fire that raged through our place, turning the living essence of our livelihood, and belongings to dust. The dust had barely settled when the torrential rains drenched the remains, weeping over the ashes. These ashes were not just of things, houses, and furniture, but also of trees, ferns, and animals of all sizes. Next, it was isolation and fear that arose from the ashes in the form of Coronavirus (COVID-19 virus). Isolating people from the natural environment and from each other. Through these transmutations, we relied upon the resilient nature of the human spirit to survive. This autoethnographic story explores human resilience in the face of personal and global loss. The power of storytelling is an ancient tradition, stemming from a human need to make meaning of the lived experience. Each person who tells a story speaks from their 'biographical position' and is unique as the storyteller (Denzin, 2014). Stories, or narratives, assisted in the survival of cultures by retelling warnings of potential threats. They are intrinsic to all cultures, whether they are written or verbal. The act of storytelling can impart a metaphysical presence that can provide a sense of spirituality in the communication process (Snyder & Lindquist, 2006; Uys, 2014). Storytelling has been described as an expression of human consciousness and as such, can guide the person towards healing the spirit, and liberating from trauma (Carter, 2019).

Key words

Transmutation, storytelling, personal intelligence, healing, biophilia, resilience, trauma.

Introduction

The Liberation fire raged through the north coast of Australia. Nothing stood in its way. It sounded like a freight train exploding trees as it raged with terror through the bush burning everything in its path. The home that we built 30 years ago, by hand, became cinders in a few moments. While this is a community story, our place was one of the first to go. We felt lost, and neglected, as the teams of firefighters moved on as they chased the fire. The news continued to stream on all media channels of more and more loss as it left a trail of destruction in its wake. We understood the gravity of the situation, as many parts of Australia were now devastated, but we wanted to scream out, don't forget us. The story's irony was that our neighbour's house stood alone on the hill, slightly scorched, but standing, nonetheless. It had survived while ours was nothing but a pile of ashes and twisted metal. We felt like the experience could not be understood by others who had not experienced this personally. So now, in our older age, we had to first overcome the trauma before we could begin to rebuild. COVID-19 brought the silence and separation from family that made this healing and rebuilding more difficult than it might have otherwise been.

There was a 'schism' created, we had no choice but to endure this fracture to try and cross from trauma to healing and recovery. This fractured state of being or rupture signalled an epiphany. Denzin suggests four rituals associated with an epiphany: the breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration. Bourdieu (1996) describes this event as the breaking of 'habitus', where there is a separation from a self-constructed internalised view of the self within the social world. This view is one that each of us creates for ourselves when a traumatic event disrupts our personal self is abruptly destroyed. This epiphany, this significant event, creates a crisis, a rupture of a known internalised worldview, which has altered the fundamental meaning of life. Every notion that we had regarding our belongings was now gone. Left with no dwelling and no belongings, we were numb, frozen in time. This paper explores our experiences of a mother and daughter as we navigated the personal disaster from a relational perspective. Although we experienced a shared event, we reacted to the trauma in different ways. We write in two voices as a duo-ethnography, yet our close relationship often means that our voices are intertwined as we are in life. A mother's experience deeply impacts on that of the child no matter how old they may be, the relational notion of being in time is deeply anchored by our connectedness to our parents. Likewise, the ripple effect transfers into the next generation, as we gather ourselves to heal and transmute through trauma.

A Mothers Pain and the Passing of Time

Very little time had passed since the destruction when a very well-meaning friend asked me if I could find anything good because of the fire. I could not honestly answer her, I was thrown into melancholy still crippled by sadness. I quietly shook my head and thought to myself please do not ask me to look for the good. That night I found myself writing a poem in my journal, I was still wracked with pain and a deep sense of loss.

Please don't ask me how I felt.

I feel nothing was the answer.

Please don't say at least you survived.

Perhaps I didn't want to.

*Just Perhaps I would instead,
have left my family heirlooms,
stupid little things,
that I had been saving for them rather than standing here with nothing.
Such was the enormous black hole that I fell into.
Please do not tell me to be grateful,
do not ask if any good has come out of this horror.
Please leave me alone,
can't you see I am breaking and changing.
Carter, J. (2019) Diary Entry*

Transmutation; Repairing the Schism

In the transmutation process, withdrawal is a crucial step, the butterfly cocoons, before an extreme change occurs. The fire burns fiercely in the cauldron before the ingredients solidify. Oils and fats heat to an extreme level, calm and rest and then harden the alchemy of transmutation. At first, we wandered aimlessly not knowing what to do first. We were broken down into our elements, like our belongings in the fire, a piece of crockery, a piano key, a melted spoon, and books of frozen dust. What happens when you suddenly become homeless? There were calls to make, insurance, phone, mail redirections, relocating and setting up accommodation. Suddenly you have a new address, no planning, and no mental preparation for change. After a while, over the next few months, we desperately wanted to tell OUR story, it was the only thing we could say when we met anyone and everyone. *I am sorry if you were one of the shopkeepers to whom I just had to blurt out the story—it too did pass.* Sharing stories is a transformative process through reflective practice that makes a temporal life progression from the chaos of trauma and illness (Denzin, 2014; Frank, 2013; Illeris, 2014). We were able to achieve a sense of resolution through the ability to reflect and write the story. The reflexive storytelling practice enabled the embodiment of the experience giving voice to the trauma. The power of storytelling is an ancient tradition, stemming from a human need to make meaning of experience and to make new connections.

Storytelling as Healing

Each person who tells a story speaks from their 'biographical position' and is unique as the storyteller (Denzin, 2014, p. 55). Stories were passed from generation to generation before the written word. Stories, or narratives, assisted in the survival of cultures by retelling warnings of potential threats. They are intrinsic to all cultures, whether they are written or verbal. The act of storytelling can impart a metaphysical presence that can provide a sense of spirituality in the communication process (Snyder & Lindquist, 2006; Uys, 2014). Storytelling, in any form, was an intrinsic method of making sense of the internal dialogue in participants' personal lives.

Storytelling has been described as an expression of human consciousness and as such, can guide the person towards healing the spirit. In telling a story, people create links between

themselves and the world of others. It is a means of creating order and temporal sequences for life events (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). The physical act of journaling, as in writing a blog, is therapeutic, as it involves every aspect of the person. It requires the physical mechanics of the body, through writing and the concentration of the mind to recall events (Snyder, 2006). Journaling or writing blogs is, by its nature, cathartic for the writer, allowing emotions to be released (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Snyder, & Lindquist, 2006; Uys, 2014). Encouraging journaling or writing as a form of interpreting emotions, witnessing thoughts, and recording them will foster increased Personal Intelligence (PI). Aristotle (1992) and Freud (1928-1961) both believed that the arts held a purging effect, which leads to resolved personal crises. The cathartic ability of the arts has been found on many occasions to improve mood through PI and thereby increase resilience (De Petrillo & Winner, 2012; Uys, 2014).

A Daughters View

Looking on it was difficult to watch the trauma unfolding, the way that it was taking a toll on my parents, was deeply distressing. I was not prepared for this experience; I did not have the skills to manage the different ways that they were responding and reacting. I had to bury my own grief to step into caretaker mode. My mother a prolific artist, and a lover of dance and music, was silent and reserved. My father was disorientated and unable to think through how to manage the situation and was deeply disrupted by the loss of his sense of self. Myself having spent my childhood in the bushland, I used to recognise every fallen log and every dip in the ground, the familiarity of home. The fire was so devastating that it removed the recognisable face of the landscape, the place was no longer the same. The bush was silent, not a single sound, only the remaining crackling of the fire. The once vibrant bushland full of native birds, bees, ants, beetles, snakes, lizards and so much more, was void of life.

A Mother's Journey to Healing -Fine Arts

During the initial self-reflective withdrawal period after the fire, I found that art became a powerful visual voice for deep-felt emotions. Being the matriarch (eldest surviving female) I knew that I was leading my family through the horror. At first, like storytelling, the images that I created were as black as the forest that surrounded us. I made no apologies for the darkness, insisting that all my family visit and witness the devastating space. A space that was filled with ash and silence, there was honour in the silence and respect for the natural environment that had to be felt to be witnessed to be appreciated. The canvases that I created became the vehicle for a deep unspoken trauma.

However, slowly over the coming months, the images gradually changed to colours and budding trees as I came to terms with the losses in my life and the forest sprang to life. The world was shut down due to the pandemic that immediately followed the fires. We were forced to remain quiet and alone without immediate family who lived interstate. Our eldest daughter (the second author) stayed with us for a few months while we struggled to find our space before she had to leave. Together we found small comfort in digging through the ashes of my things, (our family things) searching for something whole. Nothing was. It was difficult to replace our lost documents and, in the chaos, to even remember passwords. My husband kept digging and building, raking through the ashes [Image 1]. Our sheep burnt her hooves and her coat in the fire which left her smelling of pure lanolin. A very kind local vet came out and checked her

out. He kindly euthanised her as her throat was swelling and she was limping. In retrospect, this time of inner reflection and soul searching, quiet withdrawal, and being with our lost articles and the ashes were the first step towards the healing process, a time of withdrawal and self-reflection.

The Power of Music

The ukulele which I had been learning to play before the fire, had travelled to me with Aotearoa, New Zealand, and had survived. In many ways it was a bridge to healing, through its own survival, it was something that I did not have to go out to repurchase, it was a living remnant of the old me. As I began to heal, I continued to get lost in learning how to play the ukulele. Music in many forms including singing has the ability to reduce anxiety and is beneficial for both psychological and social well-being, increasing positive emotions (Bradt, Dileo, Grocke & Magill, 2011; Clift et al., 2010). Positive emotions over time can reduce, in small increments, the effects of negative emotions on the cardiovascular system, thereby increasing the quality of life (QOL) (Fredrickson & Levenson, 2011). Music-making played an essential role in addressing my emotional trauma and it was a symbolic means to direct existential and spiritual needs during the process of illness and trauma (Magill and Luzzato, 2002).

Celebrations During Trauma: Graduating

Life goes on, even when we are traumatised, the fire happened during graduation time, the day I lost my home my grandson was graduating from High School and later I would be graduating with my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). My Ph.D. graduation ceremony was held in 2020 [Image 2], one of the last ceremonies before the complete pandemic lockdown. Not surprisingly I demonstrated the shock and withdrawal of the initial phase of healing. I wore the only pair of shoes and dress that I had remaining after the fire. I could not bring myself to buy myself any belongings such was the trauma that I had encountered. Our grandchildren played in the ashes unable to interpret the consequences of the catastrophe [Image 3]. I was very stoic at the graduation, numb would probably describe how I felt. I was going through the motions clinging to a few pieces of my remaining belongings. I found a burnt box of pastels [Image 4:] that I squirrelled away hoping that they would still be useable, however they crumbled on the first touch. All these reactions demonstrate the first initial shock and trauma and allow for withdrawal and transformation to take place.



Image 1: Rumbling through ashes

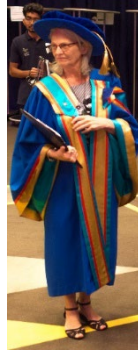


Image 2: Graduation 2020



Image 3: Playing in the ashes



Image 4: Box of burnt pastels



Image 5: J. Carter First drawing after the fire

Skills for Change and Growth: Personal Intelligence

It was essential for me to manage my own personal choices to identify others who had an agenda that was certain to increase my well-being. When asked at the beginning of the process what good had come from the catastrophic event I went into a hermit state of being. I realised that no one could understand just how it felt to be so lost. This is the first stage of Personal Intelligence recognising relevant personal information that is given by others and further identifying personalities and whom to avoid. There are four concepts [Image 6] that enable personal growth towards resilience, transformation, and Personal Intelligence (PI) these being: the ability to recognise personally relevant information, the ability to identify their own and other personalities to personally guide their own choices and to systemise those choices and goals for good outcomes (Mayer & Faber, 2010). I made choices about whom to speak to, whom to see and who to be wary of. Slowly I grew confident in a new way of being. I became careful to whom I told my story. As my emotions mixed in the fire of my mind and heart, I was able to move to a place where I could let them go. This state of being is moving from the withdrawal stage towards Personal Intelligence [see image 6]. Personal Intelligence follows from emotional intelligence, it is cultivated, nourished, and learnt. Personal intelligence

recognises and moves emotions into a manageable space through writing, walking in nature the arts and music. It was the most important next step towards transmutation, towards healing physically and emotionally. Personal Intelligence includes the aspects of biophilia an innate quality human beings have; they need to be surrounded by the natural world to heal. The importance of others listening to the stories told offering words of hope and encouragement rather than giving advice and lamenting on their own losses is vital. Listening is hard especially as it is not a story that we want for ourselves (Frank, 2013). However, listening in the modern world is a moral imperative. Personal intelligence addresses an individual's understanding of the emotions, feelings and passion and the understanding of her or his motives, self-concepts, dreams, and imaginings (Mayer & Faber, 2010, p. 100)

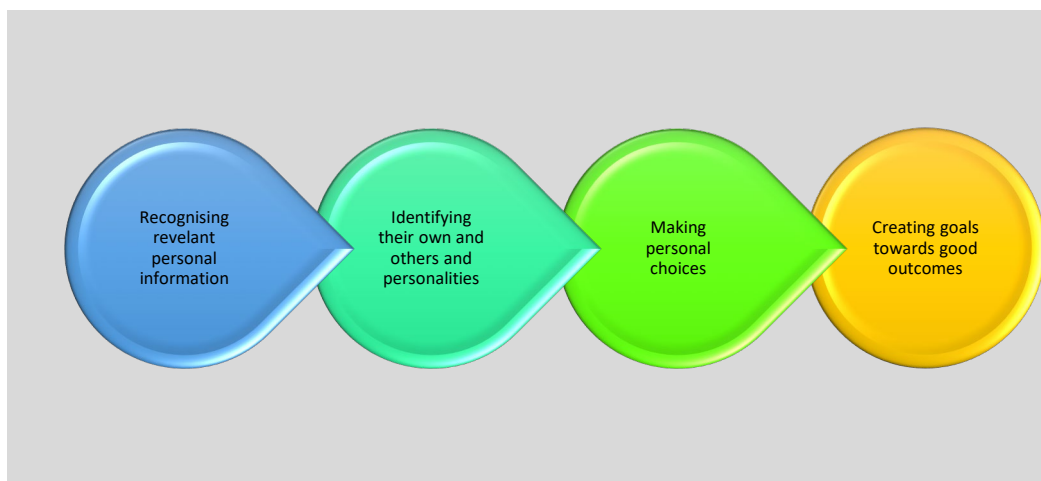


Image 6: The steps in achieving Personal Intelligence (Carter, J. 2019).

Health Realisation

Health Realisation theory closely aligns with the concepts of Personal Intelligence that is to focus on self-empowerment and self-help through positive thinking (Kelley, 2003). This strategy was evident when I was able to move forward and make strong personal choices, like withdrawing from public spaces and eventually making future goals. De Petrillo and Winner (2012) confirm that the goal of health realisation is moving to positive thoughts and images as either recalling past experiences or through writing or imagining an alternate life pathway. This concept can be explained through the Health Realisation Model (Kelley, 2003). Therefore, being able to tell my story and for others to listen was an important factor in the healing process.

The main principles of the health model assert that all human behaviour can be understood by the inter-relationship of three principles: mind, thought and consciousness. Thinking or thoughts are the continuous creation of life, therefore, thoughts are expressed through consciousness. Consciousness then transforms thought or mental activity into a subjective experience through the senses (Kelley, 2003, p.380). The mind in this instance is thought of as the Universal Mind, which is formless spiritual energy, our life force, and our human connection to the Divine (Pransky & Kelley, 2014). The ability to reshape time gives each

person a sense of 'telos', the term referred to by Aristotle as a purpose, the goals and wishes that each one of us strives towards in our lives (van Manen, 2014, p. 7566; Carter, 2019).

The trajectory of becoming resilient requires a consequence of actions by an individual. Following a traumatic event, a rupture occurs in the fabric of person's known identity. A disorientation is followed by a withdrawal from the wider society. Increasing personal intelligence, health realisation and connecting to the arts and nature can lead towards a new trajectory in life [see image 8].



Image 8: The trajectory of resilience (Carter, J. 2019).

Moving Forward

Reshaping time and forging new pathways were essential in the transmutation process. Letting go of years of childhood trauma through the massive collection of goods and priceless articles that have been cherished, was a hugely traumatic experience for the family to overcome. Especially as it had disappeared in minutes to ashes. My children's precious artworks, their baby photographs, all the little meaningless things to everyone but to me were gone. My mother's handwritten recipes, the gifts she had given me throughout my life. My paintings that hung on the walls. All gone. While I was consumed in the grief and loss of my personal belongings, my husband was consumed by the grief of his years of building the house for his family. We were left motionless and mute. With careful guidance from our immediate family and friends. By making space for the grieving process and telling our stories we were able to move forward, slowly. Taking baby steps, allowing ourselves to withdraw, to breathe, to feel the pain and to rest was extremely important, to counteract the disorientation that we felt. This first step required help from the family and for us to accept assistance. Gradually as we grew stronger, we threw ourselves physically into work, rebuilding, completing small goals that we set, not stopping until we had once again gained our identity and place. Art and music became important, as did beach walks and nature. Eventually, the story became less important as we rebuilt our internal selves again, making us whole. This is not to say that the trauma has gone, it will always be a part of us, a quiet moment recalling the loss through reflection it is, however, what continues to make us who we are. Resilience is a trait that can be learned and gained

through understanding and acceptance. It is possible to learn the steps of personal intelligence, to move through strong emotions and allow transmutation to occur in our minds and hearts.



Image 7: Bringing back the colour (Carter, J. 2021).

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