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The catastrophic transformation of self

by Paulina Borsook

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I never saw much point to the literature of spiritual journeys, or of confession. Either what people are going through is so personal that it doesn't translate out to anything anyone else can understand -- it's ineffable -- or the stories of redemption and transformation are hackneyed, full of TMI, and really of interest only to one's therapist or the object of one's affection. Or worse, to psycho-voyeurs, such as those who watch Oprah, or read blogs, or enjoy the output of webcams.



Clearly things happen to folks -- but no one, it seems to me, has ever really evoked the quiddity of such an experience in a way that wasn't bathetic, banal, or incomplete: *how* did the change come? *what* did it feel like? Why why why, why this *now*? Which is not to say there isn't beauty in the language of prayer or sacred song -- who could argue that -- but the narratives of an individual on the road have always been to me, well, icky. Memoirists inevitably make the mistake of including too many details of "then this happened and then this happened," but leave out the salient incident or image you need to know in order to really understand what really went on when, and why. We so seldom have that auteur eye on our own life that knows what you leave out is as important as what you leave in, that understands Williams' "no ideas but in things." Dammit, if you can't be concrete, specific, and evocative, we just don't care.



Or at least, I don't care, and have made a career of saying so.

Still, I have been wondering for a long time now why it always has to be so damned painful, the hell of exchanging an Old Self for a New One. It's like getting thrown off a truck accelerating through a busy city intersection, tossed off so your back gets snapped on impact, just so. Or having a leg get broken, without anesthesia, so it can be reset properly.

It's like there is something so lacking in my imagination, so wrongheaded and unable to live in the present, that the catastrophic transformation of self can only come about through absolute abjection. Application of great psychic pain seems integral to the process. The 12-step folks talk about bottoming out; I suppose there is something to this notion -- only if it's not the case that you've been living your life badly, but simply that the way you've been living it at some deep level doesn't work any more, why does the lurch to the next phase have to be so mired in agony? It never feels like what's ahead is progress -- it just feels like amputation in the days before the introduction of chloroform. Though, when and if you make it through the durance vile, and you look back on the psychic oubliette where you were undergoing torture, it always seems that yes, you really have moved on to One Place from That Other, Former One...



Zen masters have been said to whack their students into enlightenment; maybe in less enlightened times, Christian heretics were beaten to knock the bad beliefs out of them and the good stuff into them. But why does the transformation of self have to be, well catastrophic? excruciating?



This time around, what came along with the catastrophic transformation of self, was the appearance of supernal light.



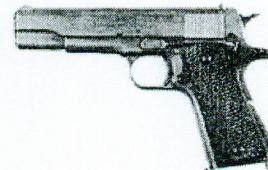
Strangely, I'd never been one to meditate: not that I don't like staring into the middle distance for hours or can't lose myself in swimming or swooning through Dvorak's requiem in the right acoustic surroundings -- it's simply all conscious attempts at meditation were reminiscent of -all- the bad acid trips I took (and they were all bad, except the first). Interrogating Self without a sitter was a ramble through a spooky haunted house -- there be monsters -- and even though I am morbidly introspective, sliding into that place where there is deliberate, and not casual, access to the unconscious has never been a good idea. Something about not forcing things, and trusting that what needs to burble up from the unconscious will do so when it's ready: interrupted gestations breed strange monsters.

Until this February past. It was a suicidal time never-before equalled, appearing with all the force that middle-aged gravitas can bring to bear. The professional and creative selves that had been struggled after for decades -- just of no damned use any more. The prospect of the body failing ever more. Still more sense of how love just can't last. Survival seemed neither adviseable nor possible.



In the middle of this very dark wood in the middle of my life, feeling snakes were thrashing around in my chest like a garden hose turned on full blast without a restraining nozzle -- started coming the experiences of supernal light. One day when all I had done was weep, and intellectually be -sort- of glad there wasn't a gun in the house -- glad, at least, I guess, for my friends who worried over me -- because I didn't know what else to do, I put myself into the light trance state that I had been taught years ago by a woowoo Marin County psychic healer lady (long story, too silly, very 70s, but suffice it to say amazing things happened there, clocks stopping, areas of warmth felt around shoulders, telepathic images transmitted...).

And so it came, silvery gleaming protective light, pouring down from above, crown energy, coating head down to below the solar plexus. Puzzling. Felt better afterwards. What did it mean.



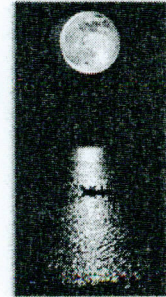
As I don't believe in quick fixes, being Born Again, weekend workshops -- or really, anything other than the tragic view of life, with a bit of pied and dappled sparkly bits thrown in from time to time just to entertain/delude us -- I just sheepishly accepted the experience. Just as I was admiring the tender green of the Northern California landscape after three months of winter rains, while thinking "it just doesn't matter. Beauty mocks despair -- and fat lot of good it does."



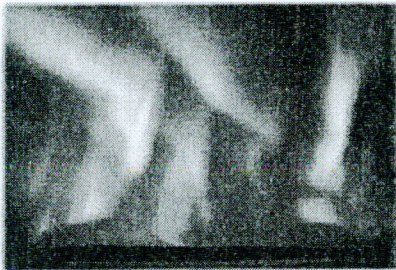
A few weeks after all this, rather like the messenger in "Three Penny Opera" who rescues Macheath from the gibbet with a pardon, a pension, and a title from the Queen, something came along to at least remedy the extreme financial duress I was under. Odd. Still shaken, still little more than a zombie/revenant (I didn't know why I was walking around. I didn't know why I was still here. I didn't know why exactly I was supposed to get up every morning, or what I was supposed to hope for), I remained far more on the side of death than life.



Then, in that Pynchonesque conspiratorial universe way that things tend to operate in my life, it turned out I had to get a wisdom tooth pulled. This is a terrible predicament for someone like me: can't tolerate anesthesia or painkillers or antibiotics or... Anyway, in the search to find ways around the Huge Problem of how to stand having the tooth pulled, I was led to a medical hypnotist, figuring that suggestions of painlessness and lack of convulsive dry heaves would be useful. So she put me into a light hypnotic trance. Strange to tell, images started coming almost immediately of light from above.



Every night when I would practice the techniques she gave me for putting myself into the calming state meant to minimize the side-effects of medication and potentiate the effects of analgesia -- came unbidden images of rays of light coming through stained glass windows onto stone cathedral floors, the luminous white of sea foam under a full moon when there is a red tide, light peeking under a closed wooden door late at night, sun rising just above the horizon. It got to the point where in the formal meditation that for the first time in my life I had been forced to undertake, I almost hurried past the messages-to-self about diminishing pain and lessening nausea, in order to skip to the part where I could bask in whatever images of light came up that night.



What this has to do with the self being forcibly peeled away six months ago, I don't know. But there is a link, I know, between the huge shift away from the self I used to be (for attitude-on-demand, call 976....) where I am moving to now -- and the greedy seeking of that light.

Paulina Borsook was a contributing writer at Wired during the magazine's glory years and her fiction, essays, humor pieces, and journalism on technology and culture have appeared in print and online at publications including Newsweek, New York Times, MSNBC, Mother Jones, Salon, Suck, and FEED. Borsook's book, *Cyberselfish*, is an ethnography on the religion of silicon valley -- if religion is understood as being a set of mostly unconscious, commonly held beliefs. E-mail paulina at loris@well.com.

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