Tales of Trauma and Transformation

Inspiring Stories, Helpful Methods

Nothing Is Wasted

If you use your difficulties to create art, says RUTH OZEKI, it will give them meaning.

WHEN YOU'RE A writer or an artist, nothing is wasted. Even the most painful and difficult situations in life can be recycled into material for a project, and it's the artist's job to be awake, aware, and opportunistic. This attitude might sound a bit cold and calculating, but it's not. Quite the opposite. Art, when it comes from dark and difficult places, gives us a means to fully feel our most powerful human emotions and transform our suffering into something meaningful.

The death of my grandmother was a painful and difficult situation. My mother didn't want to go to Japan for the funeral, so I went instead. I arrived too late for the cremation, but in time for the interment of my grandmother's remains in our family plot at the temple cemetery. On the morning of the ceremony, my aunt took me into the living room where my grandmother's urn was waiting. Using a pair of disposable wooden chopsticks, she picked out three or four of my grandmother's white bones and put them into a small Tupperware container. This she sealed and then handed to me, instructing me to take the bones home to my mother.

This tradition, called *honewake*—"dividing the bones"—is pretty common in Japan but not in America, and fulfilling my aunt's wish was not easy. My mother, while ethnically Japanese, had spent most of her life in the United States. She had no use for these old Japanese customs, and in addition, my relationship with her was strained and difficult at the time. When I called to tell her that I had brought her mother's bones back from Japan and wanted to take them to her, she did not sound happy. So I dropped the subject, and the little Tupperware container ended up on a shelf at the back of my closet. Years passed, and my grandmother's bones, this skeleton in my closet, began to haunt me. Finally, I decided the only way to deal with the situation was to turn it into an art project.

PHOTO BY MYLES WICKHAM / MILLENNIUM IMAGES, UK

PHOTO BY ABIGAIL SIMON

I made a film called *Halving the Bones*. I bought a camera and filmed myself and my mother as I finally delivered the bones to her. We talked about our family, our history, my grandmother, and death. During the editing, I continued to interview her and ask her questions, and when I finished, we watched the film together.

This process brought us closer, so much so that later on, when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, she agreed to move in with me and my husband and allowed us to take care of her, and then to be with her when she died. I don't think any of this would have been possible if we hadn't made the film together. I realize this was a ridiculously complicated way of dealing with what ought to have been a fairly simple problem. I could have just gone and talked to my mother. We could have gone into family counseling. But that solution never occurred to me.

Later, I started writing novels about the difficult situations in my life. When I was confused about workplace ethics, or sad about the deaths of my parents, or angry about corporate malfeasance, or anxious about the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, I used the long process of writing stories or novels to sit with my discomfort and investigate it deeply. I'd ask myself questions: *What does this feeling feel like? What kinds of stories am I telling myself? What would that person think or do? What would it feel like to be inside his mind? Her skin?* Writing is not unlike meditation in this way. In meditation, you become intimate with your stories in order to see through them and let them go. In writing, you become intimate with your stories in order to let them go, too. But first you must capture them and make them concrete.

There's no need to be a professional artist or writer to transform difficult situations into creative work. Poems, or journal writing, or quilts, or collages, or songs need never be made public. They can be utterly private, because in privacy is where the work is done, even for the so-called professional artists. Humans, all of us, are boundlessly creative beings, and as long as we recognize this and give ourselves permission to respond to our difficulties artistically and intuitively, not just medically or practically or rationally, then we can access this way of transforming suffering into something meaningful, which may benefit us all.

RUTH OZEKI is a bestselling novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest. Her new novel, A Tale for the Time Being, *will be published in March by Viking.*

Every Day a Reprieve

JOSH KORDA knows he is not cured—he never will be—but through honesty and diligence he enjoys a daily reprieve from depression and addiction.

I WOKE UP SWEATING, gulping for air. I was in the grips of a panic attack, my stomach cement hard yet churning. In my mind, movie screens played horror films in a loop; the images in this multiplex were darker than Dostoevsky.

I'd been sober for six years, but it didn't matter. My new marriage was surely destined to fail, the small house we'd purchased in Brooklyn destined to crumble. My skills were worthless and would, without doubt, leave me unemployable. Everything about me, an inner verdict announced, was phony and shallow. Friends and family would turn away once my true nature was exposed. I had the feeling that countless eyes were piercing through me and locating something pitiable.

I'd awoken into what was eventually diagnosed as "a major depressive episode." What was the root of it? A childhood spent in a household where rage was routine, violence not unknown. I recall the terror of being awakened from a deep sleep at 4 a.m. and dragged by my ankles into a bathroom for a cold shower—the drunken voice of my alcoholic father berating me for being "unclean." I also remember the sounds of my mother pleading to be freed from a room into which she'd been locked as punishment.

Then there were the feelings of low self-esteem brought on by my own drug and alcohol addictions and the years I'd spent in society's margins—living in squats, waking up late for job interviews, receiving dire head shakes from doctors and concerned friends.

My six years of sobriety were thanks to meditation practice and numerous twelve-step meetings, but my sanity was a patchwork affair held together by diversions: work, relationships, family dramas, and creative projects. I raced from one preoccupation to the next, never acknowledging the hollowness in my chest, the tightness of my stomach, and the sense of meaninglessness that pursued me. This denial had finally caught up to me. That's why my wife found me shaking in bed in a fetal position.

Kathy patiently guided me to our primary care physician, followed by an appointment with an Upper East Side psychopharmacologist, who was as polished as a TV weatherman. He had an immaculate suit—down to the breast-pocket hankie—and his broad smile conveyed the impression of a life spent entirely free of doubt, much less depression. I emerged from his office with a stack of prescriptions: sleeping meds, antidepressants, mild benzos for panic attacks, and mood stabilizers. I spent the following months alternating between medicated numbness and self-hatred. There was a great deal of healing that needed to be done.

My self-care during this period consisted of weekly visits to a variety of Buddhist centers, daily twelve-step meetings, and morning meditation. Perhaps this routine would be more than enough for most people. Unfortunately, it wasn't for me.

The morning sits were grinds. Instead of observing them, I was intent on resisting my obsessive thoughts. Instead of listening to the entombed fear, I wanted to numb myself. I was falling into the trap of using meditation as a form of avoidance instead of acknowledgement and healing. I cannot conceive of a less skillful strategy for a meditation practice.

What did the twelve-step groups have to offer? Unending variations of "Pray, go to meetings, read the literature, do service," proffered smugly by true believers who—armed with quotes from the "big book"—dutifully insisted that clinical depression was repayment for lack of effort.

Fortunately, my desperation finally motivated me to seek my own solutions. I located a Buddhist therapist and found our sessions a safe space in which to share my thoughts and feelings. Session after session, I practiced locating my fears as they arose not only in my mind, but in my stomach, chest, and shoulders. I contacted the long-buried feelings of a terrified five-year-old boy and learned to console him and provide him with a new sense of security. I rekindled my studies in the Pali Canon and sought out retreats with monks who seemed to embody the kindness and balance I so desperately needed. I stumbled across the Buddhist teacher Noah Levine, then starting the New York chapter of Dharma Punx, and I attended every class, barraging him with questions and objections, while he remained unruffled and accommodating. Slowly, I stopped seeking the shelter of external distractions and turned toward the despairing, self-loathing thoughts.

Eventually I could sit and ask myself, "What does it feel like to be rejected? To feel unloved?" I'd watch an array of sensations and memories arise and, though the trembling in my stomach felt like it might take over my entire being, I found that my mind was always a little larger than the feeling. I wasn't as vulnerable as I feared. I practiced an unconditional form of compassion that could greet any inner demon that arose, no matter how ugly and intrusive.

With Kathy and a couple of friends, I started a meeting group that focused on real-life challenges and solutions, rather than stifling evangelism. I sought out new, wise friends who could listen to suffering without trying to dismissively solve it. Meetings are still very much a part of my recovery, even after more than seventeen years of continuous sobriety, but I consider my Buddhist practice and community to be the foundation of what sanity I can claim for myself today.

I never think of myself as "cured" or "entirely free" of depression or the possibility of panic attacks and disabling anxiety. Rather than avoid these experiences in my dharma talks, I discuss them whenever appropriate, as the fear of remission diminishes when it's addressed in a supportive environment. And, similarly to my alcoholism and addiction, I view depression and anxiety as the inevitable results of a consciousness that doesn't take time to turn inward and listen to what needs acceptance. My sanity, like my sobriety, is a daily reprieve born of effort and diligence, rather than a birthright. And, quite frankly, I wouldn't have it any other way.

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PHOTO BY GIANNA LEO FALCON

PHOTO BY SANDRA E. CHOW

The Gift of Connection

It was just a pitiful privet hedge in the front yard of a house in the suburbs. But it saved MARGARET ROACH from darkness.

"BE UP, BE DOING" was how my mother began each morning, calling us from our twin beds. It was apparently an adaptation of a line from Longfellow, one not so different from her own mother's daily invocation that I still hear echoing in my mind's ear, too, even now: "Busy hands are happy hands," Grandma Marion used to say.

I was in my mid-twenties when my mother stopped reciting her version of matins, or doing much of anything unsupervised. Early onset Alzheimer's was the fate of the young widow, barely fifty years old, and so began a period of great difficulty for our tiny family.

"Come home, something's wrong with Mommy," my sister said in a call to California, where I was living. I packed up and resettled in the East, in my childhood home, precisely, to puzzle out what we—my sister and I, for there were no other relatives left, no "grown-ups" to rely upon—should do.

Nothing could change the facts, nor the outcome, and so our efforts were mostly aimed at compassion and understanding. But such situations often take more victims than merely the identified patient, and that was one place where we could maybe, just maybe, beat the odds.

Tethered more days than not close to home, I craved distraction or some personal occupational therapy, and took to reading books on gardening, a subject I knew nothing about. If not for the pitiful privet hedge that ringed the suburban house's front yard, I suspect I would have fallen all the way into darkness, too. Instead, spurred onward by the same locomotive mantra as my female forebears and suddenly

armed with a pair of loppers—a word, and a tool, unknown to me previously—out I went to set to work.

In one of those books, there had been a drawing of a hedge like ours: leggy and overgrown, offering more see-through than privacy. The next illustration, labeled "figure 2," showed it all cut down (that's where the loppers first revealed themselves to me), and in figure 3, a new, thick if somewhat lower version arose from where the sorry one had been. Drastic circumstances and drastic measures, yes, but—hallelujah!—a chance at transformation.

The strangely seductive chapter "How to Rejuvenate an Aging Shrub or Hedge" drew me in; I didn't hesitate or think it through. If I'd given any thought to the cycle of commitment I was engaging in, I would never have made a single pruning cut as the book detailed.

I followed the instructions, which cleverly left out the part about what in the world you do with the remains of more than a hundred lineal feet of seven-foot-tall shrubs, once they have been cut down to maybe a foot high. No matter; I learned to bundle them with twine and set them out for the trash, a few each garbage day, and this became my mission, and my meditation: lop, gather, bind, drag, discard, repeat.

From a moment in my life that seemed to offer only lasting despair—things that could not be cleaned up, nor brought back to a state of vigor and growth—I got what has become a lifelong connection to the natural world. In it has been the chance to bear witness to many births, declines, and deaths over the decades—the greatest of privileges and a daily window into my own ephemeral existence.

When meteorological and nuclear havoc rocked Japan in March, 2011, I had trouble making sense of things and felt especially tentative and raw. When I confessed that "out loud" online, a reader—a compassionate, commiserating stranger—quickly reminded me of the Shaker wisdom "hands to work, hearts to God," and I was grateful. That day, another late snow had just melted, so I grabbed a rake and went outside to have at it, while grappling with all the impossible thoughts.

This is how it begins: modest and uncertain. But from a check of the deer fence to the first cutbacks, each expedition outside is a little more ambitious and farther ranging, creating widening circles of clean. Sometimes making sense of things just comes down to doing something, anything, outdoors. In the view out the window, there is always some bit of hope—or at least the chance to get in life's rhythm, to get busy.

MARGARET ROACH is the author of The Backyard Parables *(reviewed on page 88), as well as* And I Shall Have Some Peace There.

PHOTO BY ERICA BERGER

You Don't Have to Know

JOHN TARRANT discovered that not knowing is the best—and maybe the only possible—response to suffering.

Into this wild Abyss
The womb of Nature, and perhaps her grave—
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless the Almighty Maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds.

– John Milton

WHEN MY FATHER was dying I flew home to see him. The streets were bright with autumn sunlight; in the hospice his room was small and windowless (as soon as someone else died he would get a better room—information that made me consider the other patients with an appraising glance). His body, overwhelmed by inward forces of chaos and unregulated cell growth, gave off animal smells. He seemed to be struggling up to the surface of a pool, in pain and at the same time overmedicated. He gazed at me and pretended not to know who I was. I pretended not to know who I was either, we laughed, and that opened a gate to our last time together.

PHOTO BY PENNY KLEPUSZEWSKA / GALLERY STOCK

I think of moments of pressure and difficulty as like that—as gateways, the beginning of a journey. Everyone around my father was anxious and sad, and I started to feel that way too. It seemed obligatory, even courteous. As I got to know him in his dying self that week, he was often in pain, sometimes afraid, and I could feel helplessness rising in me.

It's easy to forget to be curious, and to grab an off-the-shelf knowledge, something like "This is awful." Not reaching for off-the-shelf understandings, though, is an important skill.

Visitors were often cheerful. My father, though, didn't want to be told he was looking fine (it all depends on what "fine" means) or treated with anxious kindness. He would play the role of the dying man if he thought that was requested, but when the visitor left he would shrug and go back to his conversations—about when he swam horses across the river, and how he kept trying to make his marriage make sense but didn't ever find a pattern to it, and sometimes about how discouraged he got in the long night hours. Small details and large meanings. He was just dying, and wanted to live it as far as he could, with whoever showed up. He didn't like to have a lot of painkillers on board because he wanted to be there for his life.

The whole of the ancient, master teachings on suffering come down to this: Suffering is the notion "This isn't it," and its variants, such as "I can't bear this, it shouldn't be happening," and "I have to know how this will turn out," and "What if it gets worse?"

Freedom, waking up, and fearlessness come down to the simplicity of "Wait a minute, what if this *is* it?" and its variants "No need to bear it" and "I don't know."

The thing to do at the beginning of a journey is to take a step. Any step will do. I have another hospice story: A friend was dying, a family doc in his thirties with a young wife and a young child. I flew in to see him too, and as I walked down the halls of that hospice, I heard voices announcing my arrival. I began to feel grief and a terrible, jittery obligation to make things better. I couldn't imagine what I could say to help. It became hard to breathe. And as I walked down that hall full of good people, all of us wanting suffering to be relieved and feeling at a loss to bring that about, it was clear that I didn't even know if my friend would be coherent, or what I would say to him if he were, or if there was any way to help.

This not knowing was a good thing, because it was possible and true and the only door out of the building of pain. Anything else wasn't possible or real. I burst happily into the hospice room, and my friend asked me to listen to music with him (Richard Strauss's "Four Last Songs"). He delivered a rhapsody on oxygen, he offered me a swig, and I agreed: Oxygen is a fine, fine thing.

PHOTO BY ROGER JORDAN

And now, the famous story of Bodhidharma—the red-haired, blue-eyed, pierced and tattooed barbarian from India—and Emperor Wu of China:

"What's the first principle of the holy teaching?" asks the Emperor.

"Vast emptiness, nothing holy," says Bodhidharma.

"Well, who are you then?"

"I don't know," says Bodhidharma.

There's a layered quality to suffering and intense emotion. As you become interested, a tiny, elf light appears in the darkest dungeon. That's the gate of emptiness. As you become more interested, you walk deeper into the forest and everything looks different. Sometimes it becomes joyful right away, but it doesn't need to. It's become a path and that is enough.

So, no first principles, but a few rules of thumb can be fun:

1. You don't have to know.

2. If you take a step, any step, and feel about, you'll find ground.

3. Whatever happens *is* your journey; what to do is given.

4. It's for your benefit, honorable reader. It's for you. No one was ever given another now.

5. Curiosity saves the cat.

6. The question "What is this?" is a koan and always reveals a gateway.

7. No need to bear it.

8. When we want something to be over, we lose compassion for ourselves, now.

9. What if there's nothing wrong?

10. Not having a first principle.

My father and I still talk sometimes, in dreams and in the spaces opened by a koan. We talk about the weather, what I have in my garden, how my daughter's doing.

We're all hurtling through our lives, and the planet is hurtling through space without a seat belt. We have to discover successively more freedom inside the terrible things that have happened and the terrible things that certainly will happen, and the whole of it is also a mysterious splendor, full of kindness, welcome, and cups of tea. ♦

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