

Westside Notes



A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

Brainspotting and Grief

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It is 6am. The sun is not yet out. I am bracing myself for the long journey from Los Angeles to Costa Mesa for my first introduction to Brainspotting with Dr. Pie Frey. Exactly one month ago, we discovered that my mother had cancer; cancer that had spread undetected throughout her body. I have just arrived home from days in the hospital in New York. Within three weeks she will be gone, but I do not know this yet. I only know that I am terrified and bone tired and that I have to be at the training by 8:30.

I do not feel like a “therapist” today; I feel very, very human. I consider the idea of being an expert at grief, at loss. They say it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert. I have been practicing the art of losing those I love most for a decade now. I have tried to out run grief and found that it is faster than me, and I have said to grief, “okay you are in charge, take me through this,” and grief brought me to the other side. There is a hypothesis in Physical Cosmology termed The Big Rip, in which the universe is blown apart, atom by atom, galaxy by galaxy, star by star, exploding in order to serve the expansion of the universe. The Big Rip; I have found no better words to illustrate the process of loss.

Pie enters the room. She is warm and funny, intelligent and passionate. I am beginning to wake up.

There are three things that I always share with my clients. I tell them that when animals in the wild endure a traumatic experience, they isolate from the herd and physically shake out the trauma. I ask them what they are attempting to do in their lives to shake it out, and we begin to explore if that is an effective solution for them, for their growth. I discuss the benefits of mindfulness meditation, and the ways that it can effectively begin to break apart our sensations and the stories we have attached to them, creating more space within ourselves to create a new narrative. And I talk to them about the brain. I love the brain. Every brain contains one quadrillion possible connections. To me, the brain is pure possibility.

Mid way through the morning presentation, I begin to feel as if someone has taken everything I love about psychology and created an effective formula for healing like none I’ve yet to experience. I keep thinking this is what it must have been like when scientists discovered antibiotics.

I volunteer for the first demonstration with Pie. I am nervous. We find a brainspot that heightens my sense of feeling, and within minutes it feels like a door in my brain has opened, a door where I hadn't realized that there was a door. Possibilities. I feel as if I am watching a slideshow of my life. I do not feel scared, but curious. I am noting the sensations in my body. I am crying, and I am watching. I am amazed at where my mind is taking me; it feels like a treasure hunt – thoughts, feelings and sensations unfolding before me. Afterward I feel exhausted, but I also feel as if a giant weight has been removed from deep within.

Over the next three days, I will witness and experience this process over and over again. I will be in awe of the healing, in awe of our body's ability to shake out the trauma if we only get out of our own way; if we have the feeling instead of the latte, the tv show, fill in the blank.

I am able to go back to New York and be fully present with my mother. I am holding her hand as the final tear streams down her face and she takes her final breath here on earth.

In Daniel Siegel's book *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, he writes, "Loss of someone we love cannot be adequately expressed with words. Grappling with loss, struggling with disconnection and despair, fills us with a sense of anguish and actual pain. Indeed, the parts of our brain that process physical pain overlap with the neural centers that record social ruptures and rejection. Loss rips us apart." The Big Rip.

The process of grieving is subcortical, it is primal. The DSM used to call it Uncomplicated Bereavement. It is my experience that there is nothing uncomplicated about bereavement. Many times a day I am struck by my inability to answer the question, How are you? As Siegel suggests, I cannot find the words, my language feels suddenly lost to me. With brainspotting, I have found a place of deep healing where words are not necessary.