


POETRY'S SAVING GRACE

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One of the greatest ignored lessons of my own life was denying the violent behavior of my father during my childhood, as well as shutting out the implications embedded into my subconsciousness. Ultimately, this denial ended in a kind of deathly silence. I often joked and tried to laugh it off to myself, but the dark realities are that I'm a ruined individual because of the way he beat me into his own violent image. After graduation from high school, I took the monsters of my youth and threw them into the closet of my mind. I locked the door and screamed, "Be gone!" This done, I thought I walked away from all my childhood problems. Soon after high school, I joined the Army and forgot all the demons that my family refused to acknowledge.

After leaving home and taking my first swim into the cool waters of denial, I found I was consumed in total bliss, floating upon its deceiving surface, never paying attention to my gradual acceleration away from society. I had always been a bit of a loner, so it was easy to lose myself deep within my own interior of silence.

The more I slept inside myself, the more the thunder and rain storms seemed to explode outside myself as my quick temper often escalated to lightning fast fist fights. As a rain-filled cloud finally bursts, so did I, often crumpled alone in some dark corner, sobbing uncontrollably, wondering why I had punched the glass window panes for no apparent reason, or why did I attack that young man in such a savage manner.

To make matters worse, this was considered fairly acceptable behavior while I was a paratrooper in the infantry. But when I left the military, and was let out into the real world, the silence seemed to penetrate deeper inside me. There were more loud arguments and fist fights, and these only escalated. One day, during another confrontation I found myself pulling out an assault rifle—a birthday present from my father. I now realize I would have pulled the trigger if I had been pushed farther. I was being pulled farther out into my own sea of silence as I slept, floating in an unconscious state of denial. My reasoning for such behavior never went beyond: they started it, I was just finishing it. My soul was stunted. I had become just like my father. Yet I refused to believe it.

I thought my behavior was basically normal, until one day when I severely beat a boss, who supervised me as I delivered pizza for a local store. At the time I was a full-time student, trying to adjust to the transition from community college to the university and living in a terrible marriage. I was dealing with a supervisor at work who had, because of my smart mouth, threatened me repeatedly. Finally, when I made some stupid comments as he was writing me up for a minor infraction, he attacked me, grabbing me around my neck with both hands and choking

me while lifting me off my feet. Immediately, I flash-backed to my old man who would do the same thing to me. I completely went berserk, hitting my boss in the face with my fists. I wrapped my legs around him, bringing him in closer and beating him in the face until he passed out. I was not in full control of myself. It was as if the rage had completely transformed me into a rabid animal. I felt as if I existed outside my own body. I watched myself pick this man up by the hair and bludgeon him with my fist about forty successive times. I broke a few bones in my fist, but I did not feel anything.

About this time employees came running to the back of the store. I only then loosened my grip from his hair and dropped his unconscious body in a bloody heap. It then seemed as if my soul was sucked right back into my body. I pointed at his damaged body, screamed at the approaching employees, "He started it!" Such was my justification for stupidity. However, the only thing that kept me from going to jail this time was that I saved all his written death threats he had made towards me. I made it home and cried all night, knowing something was very wrong with me. But I still didn't know exactly what was wrong. I used to think all kids, except maybe the rich ones, were beaten physically and verbally by their fathers. I thought it was normal for me to have the bruises and wounds that healed. Yet the verbal assaults were the worse, these words stayed with me *forever*.

Eventually the courts started to see a pattern of behavior with Thomas Stuart Gardner. The system sent me to anger management counseling. This helped me realize I had a problem. However, I soon realized that one of my biggest mistakes was not continuing with counseling. I learned to look out for the danger signs and I continue with counseling.

Yet what probably saved me more than anything was poetry. Poetry has helped me face my darkest self, and write about it in the symbolism of metaphors, the language of the Gods, which feeds the soul. This was not easy by any means. It took me more than two years before I could do this without crying as a child, as I wrote.

Ironically it was my father who sowed the seedlings of poetry, often ripping open my heart and shoving the unwelcome seeds deep within. When the wounds became almost unbearable, some unseen Goddess would visit, speaking words of encouragement and warnings, soothing my hardening soul, while she sutured my hidden wounds. The scars prevented the maturation of what was to be, but I remember the Goddess's loving voice, "*Read the words, read the words.*" Here are some of the poets who spoke these words that healed and fed my soul; awakening the power of the Goddess to flow up the river of the mystical Kundalini, giving my heart permission to shine.

For me, first there was Shakespeare. His sonnets tilled the hardened soil of my sleeping heart, opening me up to poetry's sublime saving grace. Next I was introduced to William Blake, whose words gave me the courage to write, such as his famous quote, "Sooner strangle an infant in its cradle, than nurse unacted

desires." His visionary poetry brought down the rains that soaked the tilled fields of my heart. Ginsberg appropriately followed suit. I love Allen Ginsberg. His poem "Howl," set my soul on fire, it broke the confining chains of the Social Machine, elevating my social awareness to near enlightenment. T. S. Eliot taught me the value of critical self analysis, which probed deep within the bedrock of my heart. Sylvia Plath's dark poetry taught me the dangers of succumbing to the cold waters of my own inertia. Pablo Neruda's rich extended metaphors helped me learn to dance and love again; just embrace nature and life. Billy Collins' transcendental poetry seems to elevate my wandering soul. Finally, with John Donne I have come full circle, as I see his metaphysical influences in the words of many of these poets.

I realized I had worshiped my father as if he were a god, and then to have him break that trust completely destroyed my psyche. Now I've faced my problems and continue to deal with them on a daily basis. I now know I have to always watch out for the danger signs and *read the words, read the words.*

