



BLOWING THE LID OFF GUILT AND SHAME

KELLIE COMANS

Falling in love was the catalyst for me to try and confront the thorny and complex relationships I hold with guilt and shame, to attempt to face up to the fear of the secrets my parts hold of our shared traumas. It was finding that some of the deep-seated beliefs and stories I hold about myself and try to keep buried and hidden were surfacing and incongruent with the life I was living and the life I wanted. I believed and was perpetuating the old myths and stories, *you're not good enough, you don't deserve anything, you are dirty damaged and broken, no one could love you, and you are filthy.*

I had been so disconnected to this part of me, that when I finally began to listen, the content was frightening, deafening and demeaning. It felt like my journey so far had been a farce, a joke. You see this year has been the most difficult year I have had since I set out on this mind stretching, soul searching and incredibly difficult discovery journey. I experienced many significant losses, challenges; disappointments and life-changing learnings that brought up in me feelings, emotions and fears I thought I had been ok with, that I had believed I had begun to deal with.

What I have learnt though, was that I was holding on so tightly to fear of the past, so decidedly ashamed of the abuse and so wholly guilty of my responses that I could not even begin to connect or even begin to integrate and heal. And that is what I want more than anything - to live the full, authentic, genuine and loving existence some integral part of me believes we so desperately and innately deserve.

I felt intrinsically within myself that the road was going to be jarring, extended with possibly no end. I would have to be committed and brave and ultimately be ok with not being ok. This is a concept that I took time to feel comfortable with as I can still find it hard to ask for help. I'm still my harshest critic, quick to fall on the low road of behaviour and judging when it comes to me. So, I started out making myself vulnerable and approaching with genuine curiosity, whilst acknowledging my fear, and I began to listen to long buried memories. I began to seek out others' ideas and beliefs around guilt and shame. Along this vein, I further explored Transactional Analysis, and tried to truly integrate what I knew and was learning about it, into every interaction I was having with my parts around our trauma. I delved back into old notebooks and I began to gradually become aware of the pain.

I was thrown straight back into sensory overload. Sounds, smells, sensations and memories driving every part of my being. My different parts began expressing themselves in ways of the old; all our progress and learning felt like it was up the proverbial, so to speak. The dread and alarm built slowly, steadily and eventually heavily. Whispered secrets, flashes of scenes so seemingly familiar yet so alarmingly foreign, glimpses of a little girl with her eyes squeezed so tightly shut and little fists clenched so hard, trying to shut out the terrible, unspeakable things happening to and around her.

The awe I feel in the capacity of my parts of self to hold such dark memories that enable me to live my life, are incomprehensible. I don't believe words can give my gratitude the depth it deserves. This has been a vile time for my parts and I and it expressed itself in a variety of ways. The bodily reactions I

was experiencing were inconceivable to me. I became more and more physically unwell, my immune system reacting to each and every revelation and milestone in distinctive ways. Thank goodness for the wise words of a beautiful friend - this doesn't have to be a break down but a break through. Still the storm was rough.

Many times, it felt more than I could bear and many times I thought I would crumble. These recollections felt like fresh open wounds and the fear began to increase and limit any small advancement I felt. What I was seemingly forgetting was the horrendous parts of our shared history that I had already borne witness to. The challenges and adversities I had already overcome. Sleuthing through my old notebooks provided me many examples of these and also ways I had coped and developed. I rediscovered quotes, poems and my own mad scramblings that had nursed me through the darkest of nights.

I was reminded by Kahlil Gibran, *"Many of us spend our whole lives running from feeling with the mistaken belief that you can not bear the pain. But you have already borne the pain. What you have not done is feel all you are beyond that pain."* I had nothing to fear. I was safe. I was no longer a little girl with no control over the things happening to her. I was also not to blame for those atrocities. I had not asked for them, but the feelings of dire shame and oppressive guilt these evoked still had the ability to seemingly shut me down. I still felt unable to speak of what has always been the unspeakable. Horrified by the thought of baring that deeply damaged part of myself to anyone else.

It began to affect my work and, as I now have the privilege to walk alongside people on their journeys on a daily basis, I began to question my sense of self and my ability to even do the work. Even knowing the things that helped and hindered me in my recovery being an asset to building meaningful, genuine and authentic relationships, all known things seeped with doubt. I was questioning my very capacity. I know from my own experience how important that relationship and rapport can be to one's journey. So, suddenly it felt so incongruent to be doing the work I'm doing - supporting others on their own expeditions - when I'm constantly trying to suppress and ignore my own triggers. I began to find it harder to connect with those I work with and this affected my ability to truly relate and substantiate their experiences. This became a struggle of wills and values, which was exhausting. What broke that struggle was trying to break the silence.

And eventually I did. When I spoke those words out loud and I uttered them for the first time I wasn't met with disgust or judgment. I was met with compassion, warmth and understanding. Hearing me voice those dormant words, long suppressed and concealed away, held equal parts terror, shame, guilt and pride. Reflected back to me was empathy not horror and I repeated my abuser's name and crimes again and again. I felt incensed and I began to recount some of the specifics that seemed to be on repeat in my head. Some of my parts reacted violently and their individual content became extreme. I was hearing *you wanted it, you liked it, didn't stop you, you could have stopped it and you didn't, they could tell you wanted it that's why it happened again and again.* This was the root of it all. This is what was feeding my guilt and my shame. This core belief that because my body responded to what was happening to it, that made me terribly damaged and undeserving.

They were mine though to nurture and treat with compassion. The guilt and shame needed what I had needed. They needed to be heard and they essentially needed to be understood and validated. I wasn't a sum of my bodily responses, or reactions or even my experiences. I didn't have to relive every foul and depraved trauma as I feared. I didn't have to try and remember every explicit detail or name times and places. It was crucial to learn how to process using my body, emotions and feelings. Ascertain how I could be aware of them and how to deal with triggers as they came up and manage them then and there.

Some I'm still figuring out and there is much trial and error, and for the first time ever I truly feel at peace with that idea. This isn't some course or guide I can follow. This is my discovery - to learn from what I can. A natural process of writing and destroying words. Naming feelings, secrets and emotions both past and present gave me a sense of composure and control. Having someone who bore witness to me stating my silent and untold truths, was liberating beyond belief and again I wasn't met with disgust or despair but with hope and understanding. An overall feeling that it all just was what it was and it was all going to be ok.

I choose to try and reclaim certain experiences and places that had been tainted by the past. I blundered my way through and found, for me, it was ultimately about creating safety, constantly grounding and naming the emotions as they came up. Having someone who knew what I was trying to accomplish and bluntly knew what wouldn't be helpful and willing to be there without judgment, enabled truth and trust in a way like never before. It became a very self-centred process. I had to be frequently frank to get my needs met and was sometimes so overwhelmed I struggled to communicate in a way I wanted to, which, even though it made me feel bad, it was necessary for me feeling control in those situations. Hard as they were and are to face up to, I finally have a sense of being in control of my body, a sense of choosing my responses and a freedom to express these.

I know now that I have made a life-long commitment to truly try and own, integrate and experience the emotions and responses I need to have. I no longer feel held down by a sense of dread and terror in having to remember everything. I feel empowered and strong enough to learn to process as I need to. I feel if I have stayed as well as I have, mostly supported by parts of self in this incredibly mind-boggling well of despair, then I'm open enough to truly learn what I need to learn to live the kind of existence that I want.

The strategies, skills and support I have built up have enabled me to continue to do what I do and do it reasonably well. I have had to constantly remind myself of the four agreements, especially, *always do your best and know your best varies*. This has been a conundrum for me as I adamantly always want to do my best and give 110%. Clearly, though, sometimes health and life circumstance have something else in mind and I learnt to just keep plodding along, albeit blindly, but at least determinedly.

The very word Recovery has become a stale concept to me. A word that seems now to be like so many ideas taken by Services from the survivor movement and has lost meaning. It feels like something Services are now trying to give to people, a tokenistic idea.

I never had any intention of recovering the person I was before. I wanted much more than that. That person had no idea how to connect to her values, communicate or express herself in ways that weren't harmful. That person didn't believe in herself, didn't think she was good enough. Reclaiming a word and an idea for myself, to attempt to define my unique experience, seemed important to me and my recovery journey has naturally developed into what I believe to be a discovery. An opportunity for me to build and create endless possibilities. A chance for me to truly understand my values, my parts and what drives us.

A decision to embrace the learning and obstacles life was throwing my way and to truly recognise I would never be recovered and nor would I want to. This was a life long journey. This was going to be amazing, testing, demanding and gruelling, but I'm determined to feel the incredible reward of living by my values and constantly trying to learn from all I encounter and experience.

We need to talk about Guilt and Shame. Demystifying the stigma and myths surrounding it. We need to make it ok for people to not be ok. We need to be able to talk about trauma, grief, loss and the responses just as they are. Not shrouded in guilt, shame and taboo, but seen for what they are - valid human responses to experiences. How do we do this?