

**A Personal Journey from Disruption Due to Trauma to Transition,
Post-Traumatic Growth, and Meaning**

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In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning.

Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning.

Narrative identity is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose. In recent studies on narrative identity, researchers have paid a great deal of attention to psychological adaptation. Research into the relation between life stories and adaptation shows that narrators who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration, tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity.

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You think you know who you are until you aren't that person anymore.

A recent comment by my patient.

When Chet Mirman, the conference chair, asked me if I would be interested in speaking at the IFPE conference, I was so honored, but I also was intimidated. I'm a psychologist, and although I am psychoanalytically informed, I am not a psychoanalyst. Then when Chet told me

the theme this year would be “Disruptions and Transformations,” I knew my personal experience would fit the topic well, and I accepted his offer to speak today. At the time, I told Chet that one of my best friends in the world, Marisa, is a psychoanalyst in New York City, and she would love this conference. I told Chet I would love to invite her and, still feeling somewhat intimidated, I added, “Perhaps she can use her vast knowledge of psychoanalytic theory to help me with my presentation.”

I called Marisa and told her about the conference, and she said she would love to come. She loved the conference topic and noted that we had both experienced major disruptions and transformations in our lives.

A few weeks later, Marisa had the most permanent disruption of them all — suddenly and unexpectedly, Marisa died. I was shocked and devastated. Although Marisa is no longer able to accompany me to this conference, something coincidental and magical happened. Over the summer, when I received the first email with the brochure for the conference, I clicked on the link and the first thing I saw was this photograph. (Show the photo on the cover of the IFPE brochure.) I thought this painting was magnificent, and I scrolled down to see the name of the artist and painting. It is “Sea of Light and Dark” by April Gornik.

I was flabbergasted. April Gornik was Marisa’s mother’s best friend. Marisa’s mother, Freya Hansell, also was a painter. I met April and her husband, Eric Fischl, who also is an artist, years ago when they hosted Marisa’s mother’s memorial service at their home. Of all the paintings in the world, April’s painting was chosen for this conference. April and Eric were the only friends of Freya’s with whom Marisa remained close.

Is this just a small world coincidence? Is it a message from the universe? Because I believe in the healing power of narrative, in my mind, the choice of April Gornik’s painting to represent this conference is a sign that Marisa is here with me today after all.

I told this story to another dear friend, also a psychologist, who responded, “This means you have to talk about Marisa in your presentation.” “No,” I said, “If I talk about Marisa, I’ll be too sad. It’s too soon and too raw. Plus, I have a different topic to present.” Upon reflection, however, I realized that Marisa and I had parallel experiences in our lives; we both experienced trauma that shattered our sense of identity. We discovered deep reservoirs of resilience and strength within ourselves, changed our careers in midlife and became therapists who used our respective traumas to inform our work. In the process, we found purpose and meaning in careers we love. There is nothing sad about that. So, I changed my presentation to discuss our stories of resilience and triumph — another example of the healing power of narrative.

I met Marisa in New York City when I was 22 and she was 21. I was an actress, she was a director, and we bonded immediately. We were incredibly passionate about our dreams — they defined our worlds and our identities. I was one of those people who knew I wanted to be an actress from the time I was five years old. Around that time, I saw “West Side Story” and it slayed me. I used to stand in my parents’ bedroom in front of the only full-length mirror in the house and pretend to be Natalie Wood. I would dance and sing “I Feel Pretty,” and then I would get very serious. I would look in the mirror with tears streaming down my face and recite from the film, “Make it not be true, Chino. Make *me* die, only make it not be true!”

My parents knew they had a performer on their hands. They gave me a nickname inspired by the famous late 19th-century dramatic theatre actress Sarah Bernhardt. They called me Sarah *Heartburn*.

I grew up doing plays and musicals. I graduated from high school six months early and started working as an actress and model. I studied acting at the Goodman Theatre and improvisation at Second City. I spent the summer of my 18th year living in New York City and trying to break into the business in the Big Apple. Then I left New York to attend Northwestern University as a theatre major. During my freshman year, I was a counter girl in some McDonald's commercials. These commercials ran frequently and for a long time, so at Northwestern, I was given a new nickname: McMarge.

Around the same time, Marisa went to college at the University of California at Berkeley. She developed pain in her knee following an aerobics class. The pain didn't go away, and eventually Marisa was diagnosed with bone cancer. She flew back to New York City where she lived with her mother and went through chemotherapy and radiation. The cancer nearly killed her. Marisa lived, but she lost her left leg. Rather than amputate, her doctor performed a series of cutting-edge surgeries to remove her femur along with part of her knee and her shin, then replaced them with metal rods that connected to her hip, what was left of her knee, her ankle, and her foot. Then he stitched up the skin along her leg. This enabled Marisa to avoid amputation and keep her leg. She eventually could walk using crutches; later, she graduated to a cane that gave her even more freedom of movement. For the rest of her life, however, Marisa had difficulty walking, working, and getting around New York City, and she spent many years of her life having more surgeries to save her leg after infections developed. When Marisa healed from her

cancer, she transferred to NYU and graduated as a film major. She directed some short films, wrote some scripts, and dreamed of being a film director.

This was when I met Marisa. I thought she was the most interesting person I had ever met. I came from the tranquil, homogenous suburbs, and she was wild, artsy, New York City downtown chic. Despite her traumatic experience with cancer and the disability it caused, she had an enormous zest for life.

When we met, I was living in NYC and working professionally as an actress and model. Every year, I was getting closer to my dreams and getting more jobs in theatre, television, film, and commercials. My first major life disruption occurred when I was 26 — I was diagnosed with a rare metastatic uterine cancer that had spread to my lungs and kidneys. The bad news was that it was a rapidly reproducing and spreading cancer. The good news is that it hadn't spread to my brain yet, it responded well to chemotherapy, and eventually I was cured.

During chemotherapy treatment, I continued to go to auditions whenever I could. I sometimes got sick in studio bathrooms, and I have a specific memory of pulling my car to the side of the road to vomit out the window before proceeding to my audition. Nothing was going to keep me from pursuing my dreams. I was not going to turn down auditions if I could help it, despite cancer and chemotherapy. I mistakenly thought that made me strong and resilient.

I now understand that was a defense mechanism. I was engaged in a manic defense — the tendency, when presented with uncomfortable thoughts or feelings, to distract the conscious mind either with a flurry of activity or with the opposite thoughts or feelings. By not allowing myself to come to terms with my condition and limitations, refusing to take a break from work

during treatment, and doing too much instead of giving my body rest, I was attempting to exclude my unpleasant reality from consciousness and deny the terror associated with my illness.

I eventually recovered from my cancer, but two years later I had a second major and more lasting trauma. I had a terrible accident on a film set. It was my first lead in a big-budget and very unique movie. It was an action film in the spirit of “Indiana Jones” that was special effects driven and utilized new technology to enable the audience to interact with the film and become part of the action. The director, Douglas Trumbull, was the leading special effects expert in the industry and was known for doing the special effects for the films “*2001: A Space Odyssey*,” “*Blade Runner*,” and “*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*,” among others. I would be on location shooting for five months, which is a lot of steady work for an actor. My character was an archaeologist named Carina, who discovers an obelisk in the Temple of Luxor that bad guys are also trying to get ahold of because the obelisk can be used to travel into the future. I had scenes fighting the villains, and I was thrilled that I would be working with a stunt coordinator and doing my own stunts. At the time, I was athletic and strong. When I wasn’t filming, I was constantly training hard with the stunt coordinator to prepare for the fight scenes. The crew nicknamed me “Kick Ass Carina.” (I know, I’ve had a lot of nicknames.) One of my stunts was for a scene in which I fight the bad guy and he pushes me off the top of a building. I had to stand on a high ledge, do a flip in the air and land on an airbag. I rehearsed this scene with the stunt coordinator and his wife on a day I was not on the set shooting. We did some practice jumps and then took a break. At some point, the air source became disconnected from the bag. The stunt coordinator failed to secure the equipment or check it when we returned from the break. So, the bag had lost its air, and when I did my first jump, I went through the bag and hit the ground. I’ll

never forget the sound of my back hitting the floor. My first words were, “I can’t move. I think I broke my back.” My next thought was, “Oh, God, I hope I can finish this movie.” My body was in shock, and I had an initial endorphin rush that anesthetized the pain for a little while. The stunt coordinator did not alert anyone that I was injured. In fact, he initially covered up the accident by separating me from the cast and crew and failing to alert anybody for hours that I had been hurt. I was in shock and in pain. He downplayed the severity of my injuries and dissuaded me from going to the hospital. I told him I thought I should go to the emergency room for X-rays. He convinced me nothing was broken, and he told me I had to keep moving and stretching to keep the blood flowing or the swelling and bruising would get worse. He knew I’d recently recovered from cancer, and when I reiterated that I thought I should go to the hospital for X-rays, he told me that if I ever wanted to have children, the last thing I needed was more radiation to my pelvis. Eventually, he drove me back to the hotel where I was living and told me he would let the director and producers know where I was and what had happened. He lied. They didn’t know until the next morning when I showed up to the set and could barely walk. I was taken to the hospital where I finally got X-rays.

I broke the bones in my lumbar spine, my sacrum and my coccyx. I also damaged my scapula. There’s a lot more to this story, but the short version is that after the accident and a three-week break over the holidays, I returned to work on the film. Although I was on various types of pain medications to help me through, I know now with the certainty of hindsight that I should have quit and let my body heal. Again, my manic defenses kicked in. My body didn’t have a chance to heal, which ultimately caused more damage and led to what is now 30 years of daily chronic pain.

I thought I would be able to focus on healing three months later when the movie wrapped and I would have a complete recovery at that time. I spent the next nine years in physical therapy three times a week, among many other treatments. Three years after the accident, I was still in terrible pain and didn't understand why I wasn't healing. I went through the secondary traumatization of a lawsuit and trial, in which the insurance company for the production attempted to make me look like a liar and malingerer. Fortunately, the jury did not believe them and they lost. After the trial, my agents dropped me because, in their words, I "had lost my momentum, and once you lose momentum, it's almost impossible to get it back." After what seemed like forever, I eventually found new agents, and I was determined that nothing was going to keep me from persevering. I tried and tried and tried. Although I booked some jobs, I didn't have the kind of success I had before my accident. I was in constant pain, and I became very depressed.

Marisa and I had our identities shattered by trauma. Our injuries destroyed our physical and emotional health, and along with it, our self-concept of being strong, athletic, unstoppable women. Eventually, we both began therapy with amazing, attuned, and highly skilled psychoanalysts. While in therapy, we learned to dig deep and mourn the loss of our career dreams, physical health, and identity. We became aware of our instinctual impulses, learned to recognize our unconscious processes, and shed our natural defense mechanisms.

My biggest "Aha!" moment in therapy may seem obvious and simple, but it shocked me. I believed a person willing to work hard who has talent, chutzpah, and self-discipline can achieve anything. I thought my superpower was the clarity of my dreams and my determination to achieve them, my focus, my drive, and my passion. I was determined to pursue my career with

100 percent commitment, no matter what. What I learned in therapy is that what I thought was my greatest strength was actually self-defeating. If all your eggs are in one basket, what happens when they shatter? I was beaten down physically and emotionally, and I'd been denying it to myself. I was demoralized; my single-mindedness was no longer serving me. When I had this revelation, I knew that I needed to change my life and do something that was self-esteem affirming and not soul-crushing. I wanted to find parts of myself that my injuries didn't annihilate and lean into them. I was 28 when I had my accident and 32 when my trial ended. After the trial, I focused on rebuilding my career. When I was 38 and had the revelation about how beaten down and demoralized I had become, I applied to go back to college. It had been 18 years since I left Northwestern after my sophomore year. I got a scholarship to Columbia University, moved from Los Angeles to New York City, and immersed myself in academics. A lot had changed during those years. When I went to college, one person on my floor had an electric typewriter, and when I returned years later, everyone had a computer, and everything was done online. I took every class that interested me. At Northwestern I was constantly being pulled in two different directions; I was in academia while auditioning for professional acting jobs. At Columbia I put everything else in my life on hold and fully embraced being a student again. I loved it.

I was now back living in New York City and renting Marisa's mother's apartment, which was a huge artist's loft downtown. Marisa wanted to know about all my classes and what I was learning. She often expressed how much she wished she could go back to school. "You can," I insisted, "I never expected to be a college student nearing 40." We examined her options from every angle. Ultimately, she applied to NYU, got her Master's in Social Work, continued her

education with years of psychoanalytic institute training followed by even more specific institute training in trauma work, and later became certified in EMDR. We continued to inspire each other.

During this time, I graduated from Columbia, got married, and had two children. I considered applying to graduate school to get a doctorate in clinical psychology. When I was having second thoughts about whether to apply, Marisa asked me what the pros and cons were. At the time, my kids were three and five years old, and we were struggling financially. My answer to Marisa's question was, "I will have to spend a lot of time away from my kids. I will have student loans for the rest of my life. And when I graduate, I'll be 52!!!" Marisa said, "You'll be 52 anyway. Why not be a 52-year-old doctor?"

During graduate school, I got cancer again. It was a different cancer this time, one that also was advanced and had spread to my lymph nodes. I had 16 inches of my colon removed, had nine months of chemotherapy, and survived. Then I completed my doctorate. My cancer experience influenced my specific course of study; my concentration was health-psychology, and I had a lot of training in psycho-oncology. For my therapy practicum, I worked at a cancer support center. For my advanced therapy practicum, I worked at Loyola Hospital on the bone marrow transplant floor and with cancer patients in the outpatient center. For my dissertation, I created a theoretically based 12-week program for couples going through cancer that aimed to help them increase emotional, physical, and sexual intimacy. My life experiences with cancer and chronic pain inform my work in profound ways. In my practice, I work with cancer patients and their families. I work with chronic pain patients. I work with grief and loss, and I love my work. My patients do not need to know my personal history to have the felt sense that I deeply

understand them (the “unknown known”). In *her* practice, Marisa specialized in working with patients with a history of trauma. She, too, loved her work.

There is a centuries-old Japanese art known as *Kintsugi*. It is an art of fixing cracked pottery. The technique involves rejoining the broken pieces with lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Rather than hide the cracks, when put back together, the whole piece of pottery looks as beautiful as ever, even while owning its broken history.

For Marisa and me, our respective traumas shattered the foundational structure of the self like cracked pottery. What I have learned is that it is precisely when this structure is broken that we are in the best position to make sense of unfathomable events and intolerable feelings in order to pursue new opportunities in our lives. The therapy process taught us to tolerate the pain of loss, to peel away defenses, to actively confront and tear down old belief systems, and to create new structures of identity, purpose, and meaning. In short, we found the message in the mess and experienced life-affirming post-traumatic growth as we journeyed from *disruption* to *transformation*.

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