

Perceptual Shift

“I am thankful for my past because it has pushed me to reach a higher level of consciousness and a deeper awareness of who I am.”

–Coral Anika Theill, author of *Bonshea: Making Light of the Dark*

It wasn't until the phone rang that he realized it was well past three o'clock. School was out and he was late for picking up his daughter – it was her cell number on the call display.

“Sorry, kiddo. I'm on my way – I lost track of time.”

“Don't worry about it, Dad. I'm halfway home already.”

“Where are you now? Can I meet you somewhere?”

“I'm down by the river, on the walking path near the bridge. It's really warm –”

What sounded like a stifled scream was followed by silence. Confused, he hit redial. The phone rang four times and went to voicemail. He tried again with the same result. The third time the call went through and the response sent cold waves of fear through his body.

“Daddy!” a voice shrieked and the phone fell silent.

Nothing is more terrifying to a parent than knowing that his or her child is in trouble and being helpless to do anything about it. He was now profoundly, overwhelmingly terrified. He tried the redial again and then again, pleading for his daughter to answer the phone. Then his phone rang. It was her. She was hyperventilating and sobbing uncontrollably.

When he learned that she was on the bridge he bolted from the house and piled into his car – frantically dialing 911 as he drove. Later at the police station, he heard how an unidentified male had come out of the bushes and grabbed his daughter from behind, knocking the phone from her hand. His intentions were obvious as he unzipped his pants. Realizing the hopelessness of overpowering her aggressor, she bit him – hard. The grip loosened and she bit him again – this time on the neck. Startled, his pants fell to his ankles and he tripped. Seizing the opportunity, she snatched up her cellphone and ran. She had enough time to scream into the phone when it rang before stumbling and severing the connection. When she reached the safety of the bridge, she called her father. Despite an exhaustive search by RCMP officers with dogs, an artist's rendering and support from the local media, the perpetrator was never caught.

I share this traumatic story for two reasons: first, it's true and second, it demonstrates the unpredictability of life. By definition, trauma is an intense physical, emotional or psychological injury, usually resulting from an extremely stressful or life-threatening situation. Though traumas may take only seconds to unfold, the emotions generated can take years to overcome.

I'm not going to suggest that healthy self-esteem will guarantee a quick, full and painless recovering from trauma – that would be irresponsible and untrue. In fact, trauma can damage our self-esteem and make us question our beliefs and values – derailing our personal growth.

There is evidence, however, that suggests people with poor self-esteem and a distorted self-image find overcoming trauma more difficult due to overwhelming feelings of guilt and pre-existing notions of deservability and self-worth. Such individuals may feel that they “deserved” the experience because they are inherently bad or flawed. Anger turns inward as self-loathing prompts nagging questions. Did I make this happen? What could or should I have done to prevent it from happening? Why didn't I fight back? Was it my fault? Did I deserve it? As a result of the incessant doubt, such individuals tend to be less willing to seek out or accept help when offered.

Yes, sometimes our actions and choices place us in traumatic situations. Other times, we are simply a random participant in a frightening and regretful event. Either way, it's important to remember that although we may have had little or no control over the event, we are in complete control of our response to it and therefore can affect the eventual outcome.

We've all gone through traumas, and I know from experience that without a perceptual shift we can easily become mired in a world of fear, guilt and anguish. By perceptual shift, I mean we must reach a point where we integrate the event into our lives – that is, accept the reality of it and use the event as a building block rather than a battering ram. That's not easy – it takes time, courage and ongoing support and the acknowledgement that we're not in this alone.

The late Austrian medical doctor and psychologist Alfred Adler once wrote, “No experience is a cause of success or failure. We do not suffer from the shock of our experiences, so-called trauma, but we make out of them just what suits our purposes.”

Recovering from trauma – even with good self-esteem – is truly a journey from a place of darkness and fear back to a place of light and love. The better your self-esteem, the more able

you are to navigate through all of the challenging and sometimes traumatic events life presents you with. If you're suffering from the post-traumatic stress of a frightening event, recent or in the distant past, please seek help. The RCMP has an excellent program that provides counselling and assistance following a traumatic event and is available to you at no charge. Canadian Mental Health has a variety of exceptional programs as well. Call your local RCMP detachment for details or contact Canadian Mental Health through the website at www.cmh.ca for the office nearest you. Can we truly be thankful for our past – every aspect of it? My daughter is working to reach that place and so am I.