

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Once upon a time there was a little girl who knew nothing. For years and years and years she felt lonely, excluded, unhugged and unheard, dis-connected from her true self. Until one day ... she “woke up” and realized it was all due to her being a survivor of early childhood trauma, not only from her own rubbish childhood but also from her father, and grandfather’s own early experiences.

And so I slowly began to connect the dots.

This little girl was conceived into a very passionate relationship by a woman who had escaped a boring life in Baltimore and a man who had been abandoned over and over as a child and now knew only one way to numb the pain. They met at the Greenbank in 1946, mummy married to another man with two young daughters.

I don’t remember much of those early years, but now I do know how connected that time is with my state of ill health, or mental well being as we now call it. Then I just thought I was a failure.

What I still feel so sad about is that no-one joined up the dots for me. Through the heady late 60’s of not being able to say No, to my 20’s in those 70’s California years of post-Pill and pre-Aids and “Make Love Not War”, to later being a pretty clueless mum at 34, not knowing how to love a kind husband, or support a blue dreadlocked theatrical teenager, or keep jobs because I didn’t feel perfect enough. No-one asked about my childhood, not even our marriage guidance counsellors.

Because, you see I had been born into an alcoholic family and later sent away to boarding school at 5, as had my father and grandfather. All of us abandoned, separated from everything and everyone we knew and loved. Totally dis-connected. Both men had served in the two World Wars “gassed” and “invalided out”. What unspoken trauma, what loss. I, at boarding school, had to do what I was told, or be wacked or worse and never allowed to think for myself. I grew up with a mother who spoke of her affairs. Join the dots! Connect the events of childhood and generations past with my body that still keeps the score, as Bessel Van Der Kolk says.

And then there is Robin Norwood’s 1980’s book: *Women Who Love Too Much*. Women, like me, going into caring professions, always searching for that thank you and love we never had.

I can now join the dots and can make the connections. For some of you who saw Gabor Mate’s film last week, *The Wisdom of Trauma*, you will know what I am talking about. Those ACE’s or Adverse Childhood Experiences that mould and affect us and those around us each and every day of our lives.

I didn’t connect those dots until I was 63. I was at an Arts Weekend and painted a Black Box for boarding school. Only then did I begin the journey of my heart: my disrupted childhood, growing up in London bed-sits with no real home or room of my own, my father’s drinking, his abandonment, connecting those generational traumas that run through my veins daily.

There’s also another connection and it’s a wonderful one! And that is that once we “come out” with the truth and find our voice, we meet others on similar journeys. I’ve been involved with boarding school survivors for over 10 years now, and written and drawn it out in my book of poems. 5 years ago at age 68 I woke up again and began attending ACA meetings for Adult Children of Alcoholics. I’m dancing it through, facing and releasing the trauma, connecting one dot at a time.

Because it does still go on:

I know now that when my daughter leaves for Scotland and I get that awful “don’t leave me, don’t leave here alone again” feeling, it is my little girl who feels abandoned.

When I hear shouting and my stomach knots, I now know it is an unconscious memory response to what was happening to me in the womb 74 long years ago, and as a little girl when my father would go off for a packet of cigarettes and return several days later.

And I now know why I have to work on relationships, and trust, and being okay with myself as I am, now, today in this moment.

I lost my home at 5. No wonder I am upset when others do too. Today we here stories of wars and refugees. But we can connect and feel that loss, write, draw, hide, sleep, dance, and slowly heal. Because we are all in this together.

And so here I am now connecting the dots as others are, in my search for happiness and peace, finding alternatives to anti-depressants, and as Gabor Mate talks about, feeling normal, and that it’s okay not to be okay because of why. No wonder I loved working in Psychiatry so much!!

As I was writing this my first boyfriend telephoned. I was 14 when we met 60 years ago! He was sent away at 7 to boarding school. Isn’t it funny how we still connect. He’s divorced, like me, his son a psychotherapist, one daughter an artist. He believes in friends not therapy for himself. He is a kind man.

“Old friends are the best” he says, and I smile with the connection.

* * * * *