

My Own Madonna

I sometimes hurt. I experience pain over physical injury, such as bruises and cuts, and emotions, like love and hate or envy and indignation. I can feel pain from relationships and heartaches. Occasional hurt is inevitable, but I refuse to give in to the adolescent seduction of sadness and senselessness. I refuse to go about my life floating in a cloud of not caring, with a cape of whatever and a crown of cafarad. All hail the queen of passivity, the part of me which bargains and tempts me into dull darkness, but the world is too glorious for that. It would be rude to ignore the splendor our universe offers me, so I absorb every centimeter of detail and I thank it--each ripple on the water, the design on a bee's wing, the sound of snow falling, the delicate veins of a leaf, the smell of the desert after rain. My appreciation for the glories of life is part of the quintessence of me. I am an open broken-hearted wanderer of wonderland. The explorer of my own internal landscape.

This painting explores my relationship to healing. I have experienced many forms of pain in my life, but here I focus on a few of the most relevant ones, such as: mental illness, conformity to social constructs, and sexual harassment and abuse. A few years ago, I experienced a moment of healing--a moment that forced me to confront and transcend my past sufferings. After confronting my pain, I was left with a new sense of self-confidence, strength, and curiosity about my outer and inner worlds. This reverberation of healing is what inspired my oil painting.

The figure in the painting is a self-portrait in which I present myself with total vulnerability. To represent the cleansing of past negative experiences, I use highlights to direct the eye towards the face, which has a glowing quality, embodying purity. I represent healing with medicinal herbs in my painting: each herb has symbolic meaning connected to healing, protection, and strength in the mythology and folklore of various cultures around the world. I hope that, after viewing this painting, you leave with an appreciation for the nuances of our world and a desire to celebrate it. I want the work to open your eyes to how lovely the world can be, to open your heart to innocence and vulnerability, and to encourage continued learning from life.

Quinn J.
New Mexico

Healing: A Transformational Space

Quinn J.



In this essay I am exploring different classifications of both hurt and healing, what defines a healer, and the history of a few different forms of healing along with my own relationship to healing. I have experienced many forms of pain in my life, but am focusing on a few of the most relevant ones, such as, mental illness, conformity to social constructs, and sexual harassment and abuse. In addition, I am looking at what forms of healing I used, and forms which have helped others heal.

I. tree leaf shadows danced around my skin like spirits
and I fell in love with my world all over again

I sometimes hurt. I experience pain over physical injury, such as bruises and cuts, and emotions, like love and hate or envy and indignation. I can feel pain from relationships and heartaches. Occasional hurt is inevitable, but I refuse to give in to the adolescent seduction of sadness and senselessness. I refuse to go about my life floating in a cloud of not caring, with a cape of whatever and a crown of cafarad. All hail the queen of passivity, the part of me which bargains and tempts me into dull darkness, but the world is too glorious for that. It would be rude to ignore the splendor our universe offers me, so I absorb every centimeter of detail and I thank it--each ripple on the water, the design on a bee's wing, the sound of snow falling, the delicate veins of a leaf, the smell of the desert after rain. My appreciation for the glories of life is part of the quintessence of me. I am an open broken-hearted wanderer of wonderland. The explorer of my own internal landscape. I am a sweet as honey girl. The queen of the bees. I am a tree hugger and cloud lover. I climb up rainbows and sing lullabies to the moon. I grow and I grow and I grow and I burst and I grow. Curiosity is my middle name and I aim to maintain that name. I eat up knowledge for all meals of the day. I teach and I learn. I might be a healer¹. I want to be a healer, but what does it mean to heal, and what is it about me that needs to be healed? What is it that I suffer from?

My mother told me I suffer from an open broken heart, meaning that, at some point in the past, my heart was so open that I got overwhelmed and petrified by how grand life is and how small I am. My father refers to it as the blues. My former therapist called it dysthymia: a type of continuous, moderate to low grade depression. Personally, I don't know what to call it, but I can describe it. It feels as if someone placed a thin glass wall in between me and the rest of the world that removes a little bit of color and a little bit of noise. This emotional sinkhole in which I constantly live sometimes torments my brain, causing the first form of suffering, *dukkha-dukkha*². It also acts as a reminder of how colorful and inclusive life was before something happened that made me separate myself: the second form of suffering. The third form embodies the general dreariness and lethargy that comes along with my diagnosis of depression. This mental illness is one of the many forms of hurt that I have had a relationship to in my life. It is also one that I have learned to heal from. At one point in life I did not how to confront and heal from my suffering.

¹ Psychologist Thomas R. Egnew defines healing as transcending suffering in his paper *The Meaning Of Healing: Transcending Suffering*. I interpret this as meaning that to heal, one must both fix any external injuries and become mentally whole. In the same paper, Egnew mentions Erik J. Cassel, a Professor of Public Health at Cornell University. In Cassel's essay *The Healer's Art*, he discusses the concept of wholeness. He says, "[to be whole] is to be in relationship to yourself, is to be in relationship to your body, to the culture and significant others." (Cassel, 1985). I am comfortable with this definition, but then what defines suffering? I find that the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, are among some of the most thought-out ways to describe suffering.

² In the Vedas, a group of writings conveying the teachings of Buddhism, the Buddha proposes that there are three types of suffering within the dharma, or the cosmic law: the first is *dukkha-dukkha*, the obvious mental and physical suffering, the second is *Vipariṇāma-dukkha*, longing from the past and holding on to the mutable and ever-changing, and the third is *Samkhāra-dukkha*, which is simply being unsatisfied. I experience all of these, as everyone does, but I will not give into them. For the most part, I suffer from a mixture of all of them which takes on one entity.

I used to be a dweller of dullness. I hated my body, which I believed was a slug of disgust. I pushed away my peers and my own destruction invigorated me. I believed that I was not worthy of love. I believed that if I let anyone close, I would hurt them. There was no single event which made me distrust the world so much. I was simply overwhelmed from not protecting myself enough. There is a thin line between being shut off to the world and being too open to the world. I was too open at one point and it ended up overwhelming me because I got hurt too easily and then I retreated into mistrust, where it was easy to protect myself. One morning, before the birds were awake, in July of 2016, my heart, which was closed then because it was too open before, cracked, and the seal that I had built around it disintegrated. I'm not quite sure what happened to let this seal dissipate. My body and mind may have just been fatigued by not existing enough. I had buried a knowledge of how wonderful the world can be deep down in my heart, in a box with a lock and key, and suddenly it got unlocked and danced to the surface of my skin. This was an opportunity to heal: the willing to heal. Every sense that I had buried for years started to buzz with color and hum with sunrise light until my body and mind were so filled with awe and overwhelm. This felt like how I imagine falling in love might feel. A rush of adrenaline and a honey buzz, a sugar high. I laid in my bed at seven a.m. with both hands on my heart, slowly opening it to the awesome beauty which surrounded me. I could hear a lawnmower roar in the distance and a bird song and people laughing near the church down the road I knew so well. Tree leaf shadows danced around my skin like spirits and warm morning breeze whispered poetry to me: I loved all of it. I fell in love with my world all over again. I cried that morning, and it was the first time I cried in years. I celebrated each tear. I told myself how beautiful the skin that I am in is, and believed it for the first time in a long time. I chanted that inside me. I am beautiful. I am beautiful, I am. I gave thanks to my eyes and my skin and my muscles and my organs and my hair and my mind. My body was holy, as everything around me was. How is it that this was the first time in my memory that I could both see the world around me, and me in it? If this moment exposed who I am, who was I before? I believe everyone has had moments of suffering which they have transcended, and these moments have most likely changed them. How have they changed me?

II. devotion to spirit and the unseen

To understand how healing plays a role in my identity, I must first understand my identity³. Who am I? Am I a healer? I am interested in healing, and want to heal. By a medical definition, I have healed others, yet, what does it really mean to be a healer? To figure this out, I interviewed two people I consider to be healers: Brian Yee, an energy healer, astrologist, and alchemist⁴, and

³ "Identity" has two parts, according to Michael Lewis, Psychiatrist. in his paper, *The self as a developmental concept*, he states: "The *sine qua non* of a constructivist view of development is the notion of self. While the organism is acted upon both by its biology and by the culture in which it lives, it is the active process of interpretation of behavior which is the psychological phenomenon." (Lewis, 1979) He then explains the first part of identity, the "categorical self," which can be fit into classifications such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. The second is "existential self," which is more related to self-concept, or 'what attitudes one holds towards themselves' (Baumeister, 1999), as Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist defines self-concept. I define this as what people like to call "sense of self."

⁴ Brian defines alchemy as the process of transforming one substance into another which enhances one's experience in life.

Jamie Figueroa, a massage therapist. Brian defines being a healer as: “Any person assisting another person (or a larger community) to become the best version of themselves.” He explains the tools by which one can heal: “A healer can use many methods or modalities to assist in this manner, from artistic expression to interior design, from hands on healing, to writing a book that inspires, from a chef making a beautiful meal to a sports coach inspiring an athlete to greater heights, from a landscape architect to a designer of apps to connect people. The list is endless as far as methods, but what is central is the intention of the person doing the work. “If their intention is to help others in some way, then I would consider it to have a healing effect in both small and large ways.” Jamie, on the other hand, has another definition. She reflects: “In short, I think a healer is someone who can bring their full presence (not everyone is able to do this, in fact, few truly are) to meet the disruption/distress in another being—be it plant being, animal being, human being... Presence can also be described as highly attuned— energetically—through ancestors' presence, mediation practices, a process of increasing one's receptivity to a higher frequency, transmission through a teacher/guru, and or allies from the unseen realms. I think it requires amazing sensitivity and receptivity, courage and vulnerability. All difficult attributes in this world at this time. Pulling back and away to fortify and support is absolutely necessary at times for the healer. There's a lot of static, congestion and distraction of lower frequency that take a toll on the nervous system/body's delicate and vast sensory input/output.” Jamie continues about her own field of work as a bodyworker: “In the field of massage and bodywork, a lot of people speak of being a healer... It can be confusing and a bit over dramatized. Most of those folks created experiences that offered a temporary relief from emotional/physical/energetic pain and discomfort, but ‘healing’? ‘Healers’? Not so sure. The best healers enable another's inner healer, which we all have. The best guru doesn't create dependency, but rather empowers one to fortify that inherent, internal constant pulse of the Divine. Not easy, by any means, but I believe it's our birth right. There's attunement, focus, and study to highly develop capacities that aid in one's presence. I think devotion to spirit and the unseen is necessary for a healer. Daily practice and communion with ultimate presence/divine seems essential.” In addition to being active in the healing arts, Jamie is a poet. She talked to me about being a healer from this perspective as well. She sees words more as metaphors than anything else. She states: “ ‘Healer’ could be the experience of seeing an owl fly into the tree above you... or a glass of water that's drunk with total concentration. It could be lying on the ground, Mother Earth herself... it could be expansive, internal quiet... it could be a dream... ‘medicine’ could also be a story, arms of a loved one, warm chocolate pudding... greens from the garden... forest bathing... I could do the same with sickness and sacred... I believe we have to pull and stretch language to get it to do what we need and want it to do. Sometimes it takes a poem to convey one word's experiential meaning.” I relate to this statement quite a lot.

Throughout my life I have used poems and poetry, along with visual arts, and, in the past, dance to express my feelings and identity. These all fall under the category of “art.” I feel that arts are not always, but can be a form of healing, and I have used art as a healing tool. To me, the natural world is my divine space, and the arts are my only tools I have to communicate how this divinity makes me feel and how they inspire change in me. In fact, as an artist I have the power to inspire change in people. I can inspire others to become whole.

III. holding on to the mutable and ever-changing

In about sixth grade, I started to push my loved ones away because I had convinced myself that I was not worthy of them. By the time I was in seventh grade I lost myself and existed in a limbo between reality and some other world which was cold and dark and lifeless. I started to enjoy pain and made no attempt to escape from my Persephone⁵ life. I hated my blood and my skin and my weight and the size of my waist. I was angry at the world for not listening to me, even though I never tried to speak out of what I had put myself in. I never let anyone know what I was going through because I had some delusion that nobody would understand, and I believed if I were to speak it would be selfish because I would be burdening someone with a problem which was not their own. Eventually, I had a shift somewhere inside me to change and get better. In freshman year I started to go to therapy, which is when I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and panic disorder. I learned that my anxiety is what triggers my depression and my anxiety is triggered by feeling overwhelmed.

Shortly after starting therapy I found that it was not that helpful for me. I knew what to do to help myself intuitively and though I really did love my therapist, she was echoing to me what I had already told myself. I started to eat well and exercise more and spend more time in nature. This almost erased my anxiety and, for the first time, I was truly joyful. I found that the earth is my most powerful healer, and through this I started to find an interest in Wicca⁶, specifically herbalism⁷. People often associate Wiccan healers with the stereotype of a witch. The kind of witch with an evil laugh and a broomstick. In the fifteenth century, women were persecuted from being witches⁸ while they were only using the earth to heal rather than the Christian God. In our current society, Western medicine has become one of the most used form of healing.

⁵ Persephone is a goddess in Greek mythology who was the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of fertility and farming. Hades, the god of the underworld, fell in love with Persephone, and abducted her against her will. He then proceeded to keep her in the underworld to rule beside him.

⁶ Wicca is a religion which has roots in Paleolithic people who worshiped a hunter god and fertility goddess. It evolved over time to a religion which believes in finding oneness with the divine and everything that exists with an emphasis on nature as the divine.

⁷ The American herbalists guild defines herbalism as, “the art and science of using herbs for promoting health and preventing and treating illness. It has persisted as the world's primary form of medicine since the beginning of time, with a written history more than 5000 years old.” (American Herbalists Guild, 2016)

⁸ Witch trials against herbalists and wiccan healers gained momentum starting in the late fourteen hundreds, after the publishing of the *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* by Pope Innocent VIII, which was a papal bull, or edict, that acknowledged the existence of witches and gave people permission to hunt them. For the most part, people accused were lay healers who used wiccan herbology to heal common illness⁷. Most of these lay healers were women. This, of course brings us to the much more deep-rooted issue of sexism, particularly in the medical world. This can be seen in the following quote from the essay, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, written by Barbara Ehrenreich “Witches lived and burned long before the development of modern medical technology. The great majority of them were lay healers serving the peasant population, and their suppression marks one of the opening struggles in the history of man's suppression of women as healers” (Ehrenreich, 1972) The essay goes on to explain how wiccan medicine became nearly extinct due to the Medieval Church. The idea of witches worshipping the devil began because the church believed that God was the only one who could cure the ill; if someone was sick, it was in God's will. Since “witches” practiced healing independently from God, they must have been working with that which lives in Hell. In addition, in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a book by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, which essentially is an instruction book on how to hunt witches, it is said that women turn to the devil due to their innate lust and evil

Western medicine⁹ is probably the most relevant form of healing which I have been exposed to. When my mom went through cancer, drugs and surgery helped her. When she went through septic shock, drugs and surgery helped her. When she broke her foot, drugs and surgery. If it were not for Western medicine, my mother would be dead right now. My grandfather was a doctor of Western medicine, and he helped many people through their pain. Western Medicine is his chosen healing power. I know many people who use medicines to help them with depression and anxiety. This has never worked with me. Physical health, such as exercise¹⁰ and eating well, has helped me a lot, which has proven to be successful healing method.

Over and over again, people ask me what initially triggered my depression¹¹ and anxiety. I'm still not entirely sure because it may have something to do with my body's biology, but I also think it may have roots in a sense of being worthless brought on by our society¹². Since I can remember, I have been exposed to an idealized idea of what a woman should look like and how a woman should act. These ideas permeate the middle and high school culture where there is strong pressure to conform to standards. I now despise conformity, but when I was young all anyone wanted was to be considered "pretty" or "hot" or "popular." In addition to that social pressure, I have been exposed to sexual harassment many times. Nearly every time I walk down

which overpowers them, for they are just creatures of sex who were created specifically to carry children until born. It states that : "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil." (Kramer and Sprenger, 1487)

⁹ The church was not all against human healing. It was just against women healing. As for men, however, it was fine. For a very long time before these accusations against witches, male priests acted as medical practitioners for the upper-class. This, of course, was okay because they were male and working under God's name. Without surprise, though, there was absolutely no medical reasoning in this practice which had foregone the use of the earth as a healer. Soon after the witch trials in the sixteenth century, there was a demand for formal medicine; so, with very strict parameters, the church let men study medicine in universities. In this time, there wasn't much medical knowledge besides for the witches knowledge, which was unspoken of, so doctors started bleeding people. From then until contemporary Western medicine after bleeding ended, people started using opium for every illness imaginable, and once people got too addicted to that, new pharmaceuticals were invented, and now here we are, prescribing everyone with drugs for every illness under the rule of extremely corrupt pharmaceutical companies.

¹⁰ "*The Benefits of Exercise for the Clinically Depressed*," a paper by Lynette L. Craft, a professor in the Division of Psychiatry, Boston University School of Medicine, states: "Involvement in structured exercise has shown promise in alleviating symptoms of clinical depression. Since the early 1900s, researchers have been interested in the association between exercise and depression. Early case studies concluded that, at least for some, moderate-intensity exercise should be beneficial for depression and result in a happier mood."(Craft, 2004) Historically, exercise was not an option.

¹¹ Mental illness is a fairly recent discovery, and before it was a notion, it was called melancholia. In the paper "*From Melancholia to Depression; a History of Diagnosis and Treatment*" by Thomas A. Ban, an author, he writes that there is evidence of an awareness of melancholia as early as 460 BC, in the Corpus Hippocraticum, a grouping of medical writings associated with Greek physician Hippocrates and his teachings. The term "depression" started to be used only about one hundred years ago, in 1908. In addition, treatment for depression was opioids from as early as the 16th century. This only recently was abandoned in 1957. Now, depression along with anxiety is treated with various antidepressants, and various therapies.

¹² Peggy Orenstein, a writer, talks about this in her book *Girls & Sex*: "I worry about the incessant drumbeat of self-objectification: the pressure on young women to reduce their worth to their bodies and to see those bodies as a collection of parts that exist for others' pleasure; to continuously monitor their appearance; to perform rather than to feel sensuality."(Orenstein, 2016)

the street in downtown Santa Fe, I get cat called and honked at multiple times. The most memorable ones are when a group of teenage boys in a Jeep slowly follow me, playing “tap or pass”: “Bro, I’d tap that.” “Yeah, I’d tap that ass.” They hurled insults, making sure that I understood they saw me as a toy. Another time I was walking out of a coffee shop and a man in a red car yelled, “Hey little girl, sit on my face. I bet that pussy is real tight.” I was *thirteen*. These are only a fraction of my encounters regarding sexual assault and harassment, and not even the most nauseating ones. I have learned to disregard these experiences now, and speak up against them and educate people about this issue, but when I was younger, it felt like a few tons of low self-esteem, feeling like trash, and feeling like a worthless object was thrown on me every time something like that happened. It was scary and I didn’t know how to protect myself. Of course many women experience daily harassment, and it hurts.

Many women in my family have been abused by another family member. There is a man in our family who, when I was little, I was always told to avoid. I accepted that, but never understood why. About three years ago, I learned why. He was the man who sexually abused my mom when she was young, along with other relatives. I know my mom has worked on healing from this for her entire life and has, for the most part, recovered now. I asked her if she could tell me about her experience following the assault. In terms of the memory of the assault itself, mom shares : “It was a weekend when I was seven. This man came to our house because my parents were leaving town and asked him to watch my sister and me. The memory comes and goes, but all I remember is that he came into my room and then my memory blacks out after that.” She then said that she didn’t remember the incident at all when she was young until her twenties when the abusers own eighteen-year-old daughters came out about their father. At this point, my mom was in a safe place: “When I was in my twenties I was in a good and safe relationship and these memories came up...it was a re-living, but it allowed me to process it for the first time and in a supportive environment from my partner along with my mom and sister.”

That same year my mom decided to write a letter to the man setting a boundary--that she wanted nothing to do with him. About this she said: “This was extremely difficult because I took on his shame in my own body...It’s scary confronting your abuser.” After she wrote the letter, the entire family split in two...the people who believed and supported her, and then the people who demonized and cut off my mom. The part which supported my mom also set boundaries and cut off my mother’s abuser. This meant my mom didn’t have to carry this by herself anymore...she had a team.

Healing both her body and mind took my mom years and years. She had confusion around sexuality, health, and safety because sexual abuse can obliterate a sense of protection and boundaries. She had to completely redefine what safety meant for her. “I had to become very honest with myself with what happened...I couldn’t leave out anything or defend my abuser. That took years and a large community of support...I had to feel heard and valid, and I had to have a very stable outer life. If I did not have that, outer events would distract me from tracking my own internal experience.” My mother still maintains a very stable life to be in touch with her internal world . She said she’s just now getting used to being fully in herself. It can hurt to be fully here because it is very vulnerable. When I asked her about that vulnerability, she said: “You know, I’m fifty now, I don’t have to hide. There are no exit doors and now I’m really here; all of me.”

IV. trauma transformation

My relationship with suffering and healing has forced me to grow and change. It has morphed my morals and perspectives. It had changed how I know myself right down to how I define who I am. I believe it is necessary for growth. I believe that, if processed in a healthy way, in my experience, suffering leads to more emotional strength and intelligence. It has made me question myself and find answers and new knowledge and wisdom. It has made me grow and learn. To heal, I had to meet the entity which is my trauma, and negotiate with it face to face. Through that, I transformed my trauma from an enemy to a partner or a teacher. I used to wish that I had no pain, but I am truly very thankful for it because it has been a part of the development of who I am now, and I am finally very comfortable with that person. I love who I am now. If I never had any pain in the past, I would never obtain the tools I need for healing in the future. I would not have as much respect for the world around me because I would not know to be careful in it. I would not know the importance of wholeness. To be wholly myself, wholly here, wholly there, and wholly nowhere. To live in multiple dimensions, not just one. To feel whole. To have a heart full of love, and a brain full of knowledge. To have a belly full of laughter, and eyes full of tears. To have a voice full of rage, and a hand full of will. I am not completely whole, and my life is not even near being complete. If to heal is to become whole, then it is a lifelong, and nearly impossible goal, yet one that should be attempted. I will always strive for that goal.

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