

From Post-Traumatic Stress to *Post-Traumatic Growth*: Transforming Adversity into *Creative Rebirth*

Mark Gorkin*

"The Stress Doc", USA

***Corresponding Author:** Mark Gorkin, "The Stress Doc", USA.

Received: August 24, 2017; **Published:** September 13, 2017

This is another head- and heartfelt essay and poem combo about the motivational forces that for me spurred new genre writing: *poetic allegory*. According to *Merriam-Webster*, "allegory" is *the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence*. The work below is a deep examination of early family of origin dynamics captured in a children's story-like format. More specifically, the poem illustrates one variation on the universal triangle themes of codependence, separation, loss, fear, and the struggle for individuation, for developing your own authentic voice. Mr. and Mrs. Spider and a little butterfly are the principal players. With its interplay of adult themes and children-of-all-ages format, I believe the piece (Parts I and II of a continuing saga) is both fairly compelling and insightful. I have placed it before the introductory essay. The essay explores – both conceptually and personally – the psychically disruptive backdrop to the creation of the allegory. As always, would love your feedback. Enjoy the journey. MG

The Spider and the Butterfly: *Not Necessarily Just a Children's Story*

The Fateful Encounter -- Part I

The spider spins a silky web
Of soft and shiny aura.
How will a little butterfly
Know the coming drama?

Lady S so wants a child
But she herself is dry
And a wounded Mr. Spider
Turns his back and cries.

Sunlight sparkles on the weave
Catching the 'lil butter's eye.
He soon alights upon the web
Her tapestry does hypnotize.

The 'lil one fills a big hole
In her broken heart.
The spin-stress knows not why she craves...
But he *must* play a part.

Is he embraced or entrapped
In the lady's many arms?
Instinct tells 'lil b to flee
Despite her luring charms.

But Lady Spider starts to sing
Her haunting Siren ** song.
How is one so young to know
Just what is right from wrong?

The moon has journeyed many times
Giving in becomes veiled lie.
'lil b now wonders who he is...
“Oh no. I’ve forgotten how to fly!”

**In Greek mythology, the Sirens were dangerous creatures, who lured nearby sailors with their enchanting music and voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast of their island (Wikipedia).

The Spider and the Butterfly: Part II

Mr. Spider’s

So where is Mr. Spider’s thread
In our enmeshed story?
For in this tale of web and woe
Lady S spins all the glory.

Mr. S, alas, cannot weave...
His scarlet mark of shame
Adding insult to injury:
The Queen’s needles are a pain.

To numb a spider’s injured pride
He gorges on the blood
Of his wife’s hard-earned bounty
Drinking far more than he should.

Mr. S silently seethes
Black smoke clouds his red-hot brain:
How can he seize *'lil b*
From the Queen’s web domain?

While *'lil b* so quietly
Morphs...now the “too good” child:
Wings aflutter cool spider fears, but
White noise “call of the wild!”

Then one day, Mr, Spider
Announces to his mate
That he and the butter boy
Have planned a hunting date.

lil b unexpectedly
Eyes Mr. S. with newfound hope
But quickly turns to reality...
Will she let us cut the rope?
© Mark Gorkin 2017
Shrink Rap™Productions

lil b may not know where he is going
but I believe he will know how to get there.
Just between you and me...
I'd stay tuned for Part III.

From Post-Traumatic Stress to *Post-Traumatic Growth*: Transforming Adversity into *Creative Rebirth*

We all have heard of “post-traumatic stress,” the aftermath of shock and hypervigilance, loss and adversity with its many lingering, disruptive signs and symptoms of mind-body turmoil. Hey, what about post-traumatic growth? To understand the latter, we must recognize the former. Potential major traumatic events include: a) the death or painful loss of a loved one, b) the end of a long-time, meaningful relationship, c) the sudden and unexpected loss of a vital job, position, community, or role, d) a life-threatening illness or accident, e) a social environment that has you always on guard or living with a smoldering, just beneath the surface sense of angst or near panic, whether because of a substance-abusing parent, cyber-bullying peers, a climate of harassment, or nightly gunshots in your neighborhood, f) a war-zone experience with its potential for multiple trauma triggers, or g) a shocking natural catastrophe, along with the uncertain waiting for aftershocks, as in the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal, etc. These complex events not only endanger a basic sense of security and community, but may threaten or unravel a personal identity. Such trauma can challenge our foundational belief systems. Assumptions and expectations about ourselves, our supportive circle, the surrounding world, about life or nature – human and otherwise – are being tested. Adding to the psychic injury, subterranean memories or, at least, the lurking emotions, further disorient as they surge to the forefront of consciousness. And nothing can be taken for granted; we must reexamine fundamental premises. We must entertain unprecedented survival, psychological, and existential-behavioral questions and patterns. And, of course, this reassessment or mind-body-moral inventory is the conceptual, psycho-spiritual, and creative bridge to new paths and possibilities.

Post-Traumatic Growth

Ironically, it is just because our worldview, beliefs, and role-identities have been so profoundly shaken if not shattered by physical, but especially psychic-seismic upheaval, that we have the opportunity to experience the inverse of post-traumatic stress...*post-traumatic growth!* “Growth after trauma can take a number of different forms, including a greater appreciation for life, the identification of new possibilities for one’s life, more satisfying interpersonal relationships, (including increased empathy and altruism), a richer spiritual life and a connection to something greater than oneself, and a sense of personal strength”. (Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gegoire, *Wired to Create: Understanding the Mysteries of the Creative Mind*, Perigee: Penguin Random House; New York, 2015).

How to achieve such lofty goals as post-traumatic growth? Chaotic reality flies in the face of past beliefs, emotional-interpersonal schemas, and action plans. Letting go of the once predictable or familiar, while scary – the approach/avoidance or risk/reward uncertainty conundrum – helps open us to new or “nothing left to lose” perceptions, to consider unthinkable problem-solving ideas and strategies, to generate novel ways of framing, defining and defying, and, ultimately, giving meaning to crisis and loss, to pain and suffering. Akin to a city whose neighborhoods, roadways, power lines, and monuments have been rattled, battered, and razed by an earthquake, we must first distinguish the functional from the dysfunctional. Then, one must learn from the past to rebuild schematic structures that guide understanding and decision-making; that harness – *individually and collectively* – purpose, passion, and persistence. Of course, initially there is a grief process – shock, sadness, loss, anger, doubt and ambivalence, and angst, etc. – that often precedes and gradually nurtures (though not always on a predictable schedule), sustained rebuilding and rejuvenation.

Grief as Growth

In fact, the path of grief is a major growth stimulant, a challenging and fluid formula for finding-designing renewed meaning for living. With sufficient support and time, by embracing the dark side of melancholy and mourning a new season of light and rebirth imperceptibly yet magically often appears on the horizon. As I once penned: *Whether the loss is a key person, a desired position, or a powerful illusion, each deserves the respect of a mourning. The pit in the stomach, the clenched fists and quivering jaw, the anguished sobs prove catalytic in time. In mystical fashion, like spring upon winter, the seeds of dissolution bear fruitful renewal.*

In summary, to stabilize a self shaken at its roots, we often must let go of comfortable and reassuring or stress-relieving habits, that is, coping adaptations that have become limiting or, at the least, do not fit a new post-trauma reality. We must learn to both explore wildly and fail fearlessly – “strive high and embrace failure” anyone? Or, at least move – whether steadily or in fits and starts – out of that proverbial comfort zone. Why? Because, as an adult, habitual cognitive-emotive-behavioral patterns not courageously and thoroughly questioned have decided dysfunctional, self-constricting, “b.s.” – *be safe* – potential. However, through individual and group grief, rumination, sharing, and reflection, and active trial and error exploration-experimentation we are in a position to gain up-to-date information about ourselves and our environments. My regeneration mantra: *Learn to Fail or Fail to Learn!* We are now rebuilding from the ground up; we are pursuing unprecedented – and perhaps creative – pathways and opportunities. The poignancy and pregnancy of this “no exit challenge,” will present itself, especially if we understand the wisdom articulated by French-Algerian, Nobel-prize winning author, Albert Camus: *Once we have accepted the fact of loss, we understand that the loved one obstructed whole corners of the possible...pure now as a sky washed by rain.*

That is, we have invested so much time, energy, emotion, ego in that one special person, one right position or living space, one acceptable self-definition, only one possible outcome, that we are not even aware fully of what else lives inside us and what is conceivable outside us...and the evolving magical “transitional space” when boldly and imaginatively playing with the two.

Corners of the Possible

Which brings me to five new or reinvigorated “post-traumatic” corners of the possible recently discovered and designed in the aftermath of: a) the end of a ten-year relationship, b) the loss of a three-year old “grandchild,” c) the dissolution of my Cleveland social network, d) having to find new living arrangements, e) decidedly more ebb than flow in my speaking gigs, that is, e) basically having to start over in Columbia, MD feeling mostly isolated, wounded, and defeated.

Five of the recent corners of hibernation and healing: 1) participating regularly in a variety of twelve step groups, 2) making new friends both inside and outside the “step” experience, 3) carefully listening to my dreams, 4) engaging in creative-therapeutic writing, especially capturing my traumatic stress to growth process through various forms of poetic expression, and 5) finding creative partners to help turn poetic concepts into creative products. I believe the common and creative threads connecting the five corners is simple yet substantial: *All corners, especially the first four, provide a space for me to discover what psychological emotions and ideas are swimming and swirling in my conscious and subconscious minds.* For example, the first four corners definitely hold up a mirror to my psyche, heart, and soul. This can occur by talking out loud in a group to hear and, thereby, clarify the jumble of mind-body-spirit thoughts and feelings. It also evolves through give-and-take sharing and feedback with self-reflective kindred pals. I hear disguised or denied parts of myself in their stories. Dreams are another subterranean, self-revealing mirror (sometimes of a fun- and not-so-fun-house variety) that often puzzle and propel me into deeper confusion and exploration.

Writing is Conceiving Is Believing Is Reframing Is...

Then, of course, there is creative writing. A number of colleagues have asked why I keep exploring what appear to be familiar themes: why don't you move on? For me, relationship loss – whether of early or more recent origin – is a mine of infinitely rich and vibrant, yet often painful, minerals. And the deeper I dig and sift, recall and sort, the ore brought back to the surface is not just richer but more of my

human essence. And under red hot, laser-like inner gaze, the ore becomes fluid and fleeting, inducing a state of mental meandering and kaleidoscopic possibility. In dream-like fashion, the interplay of past-present-future takes me down the rabbit hole...to unexpected places if not unimaginable spaces. Once the ore begins to cool and my mind begins to converge (that is, evolves from the seemingly psycho-logical to the more logical) ... the protean-like ore can be molded into a myriad of forms and functions, such as a new format like poetic allegory. Finally, not surprisingly, soul material always retains an element of unfinished mystery.

Let the writing adventure begin. As I sit before the computer, turned on by my performance angst, mind wandering is followed by more focused, mindful/meditative states (or as easily, the reverse cognitive sequence. I call this mercurial ebb and flow finding that elusive balance between mindfulness and *out-of-mindfulness*; the latter being my specialty ;-). Shifting between unconscious percolation to building surprising subconscious and conscious connections, then once more back down into the writer's well for additional sediments and sustenance. All this meandering, molding, and new meaning construction hopefully, gradually, leads to clear, concise, and compelling sentences or captivating visually rhythmic and evocative lines. This discovery-to-design process helps soothe past pain, clarifies present understanding, and purposefully yet playfully spins and shapes new corner possibilities. (In fact, I think an essay about the importance and power of these "five corners" is waiting in the wings).

Phew. Time to reread "The Spider and the Butterfly." Hopefully, it brings to life more tangibly the evolution – *from pain to poetry* – of post-traumatic stress, growth and creativity. To be continued! Amen and women, to that!

"Mining the Depths of Creative Memory" Essay and The Spider and the Butterfly: – Parts I-IV

For me, Part IV of "The Spider and the Butterfly" presented a fairly unique challenge: reconstructing the dynamics of individual and family life during an early childhood period that for the most part eludes conscious memory. Of course, early memory and its psychological charge is not fixed or static. One controversial arena involves previously unrecalled memories emerging for adults during the course of therapy, or when triggered by an emotional event. Is it "real" or faux memory? Does the memory depict an actual occurrence or more one's sense of a psychological context? I believe memory is ever-changing based on a variety of factors, including overall present mood/mental state and work-life satisfaction. Drilling down, one's sense of personal efficacy and social connection and support (or lack thereof) in the present often shapes the emotional hues of memory. (Of course, there are some historical-horrific events many never want to forget – *Never Again!* – for the sake of individual-communal survival. Yet, numbers of people try to place those same events in perpetual hibernation; others are active deniers).

The Subjective Nature of Memory

Let me elaborate on memory shaping. If memory is basically subjective, then it becomes like a Thematic Apperception Test: what we recall or perceive, the interpretation we make of the image or event, is dependent on a host of influential – *historical-psychological-life in the moment-life in the future* – factors. Memory becomes a story we tell ourselves. And like most stories, the story line and the meaning we bestow upon our past experience, is malleable. Even if "the facts" remain, the analysis of those facts, the import we provide or significance we take, is subject to change. We shed light on certain parts of the story, the rest remain in shadows. Sometimes, with increased understanding, the spotlight and actors reverse positions and roles. The fluidity of recall and explanation becomes increasingly evident as we evolve or regress emotionally in the present. And surely, "letting go" and the subsequent reframing of acutely painful or traumatic events and memories, can take considerable "head work, heart work, and homework".

The Melancholy Memory Desert

Personally, creative writing is proving to be a vital tool for memory-crafting and meaning-making. Allowing my head and heart to quietly drift back into a mostly subconscious time and place, a wistful yet almost mysterious space, evokes a somewhat hazy, melancholy mood. My first ten years is a mostly arid memory desert. As I try to wander through it, some prickly memory-cacti appear, but mostly I feel lost; very little sense of being an evolving, life-shaping actor. In fact, when engaging a fleeting recall of events, aversive flashes far

outweigh positive ones. (For example, I've written about one such blurred memory: the shame of my father's unsuccessful and, likely impatient, effort to teach me to ride a bike. Email stressdoc@aol.com for the poem, "The Silent Wall of Shame"). From reading I've done, early childhood trauma or chronic stress levels can significantly disrupt memory consolidation and recall. In addition to few clear memories, pervasive childhood and teen years angst and escapist numbing, along with difficulty concentrating and studying, resulting in underachievement in public school, seems to support the findings.

Soulful, Mindful, and Twainful Discovery and Design

Another instructive analogy is depicting creative writing as descending into and exploring, selecting and extracting bits of a memory images from your personal memory mine. As Nobel Prize-winning writer, Albert Camus, noted: *In order to be created, a work of art must first make use of the dark forces of the soul.* Sometimes current ideas help shape the subterranean soul search; sometimes evocative memory extractions stimulate a conscious problem to solve or highlight a possible path for mindfully marching or merely meandering or daydreaming. Infusing the present idea or image with emotional memory and imagination also may spark unexpected connections among diverse elements...You just may have discovered a potentially prized gem. As Mark Twain observed: *Wit is the sudden marriage of ideas which before their union were not perceived to have any relation.* Of course, this newfound ore typically requires intentional play and fine polish before achieving precious – *beautiful and insightful* – status. *Discovery and design, daring and determination...*not only a 4-"D" process for artfully transforming emotional lemon into lemonade, but an opportunity to do quiet, reflective grieving and reach greater acceptance. The emotional pain enveloping a memory now placed in a new frame and life affirming-poetic structure provides "higher power" purpose and meaning. *The past becomes creative prologue.* Finally, might we speculate that the aforementioned 4-"D" process is a way of consciously and holistically integrating (in real time) memory-presence-imagination in myriad facets of being human: perhaps a template for a purpose- and passion-driven life. Hopefully, more to come. MG

The Spider and the Butterfly: Not Necessarily Just a Children's Story

Parts I-IV

A child-like family of origin poetic allegory captures meaningful complex family dynamics through the story of "The Spider and the Butterfly." According to *Merriam-Webster*, "allegory" is *the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence.* The work below is a deep examination of early family of origin dynamics captured in a children's story-like format. More specifically, the poem illustrates one variation on the universal triangle themes of codependence, separation, loss, fear, and the struggle for individuation, for developing your own authentic voice. Mr. and Mrs. Spider and a little butterfly are the principal players. With its interplay of adult themes and children-of-all-ages format, I believe the evolving piece is both fairly compelling and insightful. As always, would love your feedback. Enjoy the epic journey. MG

Part I of "The Spider and the Butterfly" outlines the meeting of our opening two protagonists – Mrs. Spider, head of her domain, and a little boy butterfly attracted to her silky web. Initially wary, *lil b* quickly succumbs to the Queen's arms and charms...but at what price?

Part II of this epic poem, captures the wounded Mr. Spider's story. More than ever, not only does he feel like the subordinate partner, but now he's being replaced. So, Mr. S begins to plot his "role model/rite of passage" revenge. But what is reality, what fantasy?

Part III captures the "family" showdown caught up in the classic triangle conflict: the Queen and Mr. Spider and the little boy butterfly. Who has the power? Who will be passive? Who will prevail? Who will part ways? Who will plot revenge?

Part IV depicts *lil b's* upset with Mr. Spider leaving the web in defeat. Also conveyed is his "captive bonding" with the powerful yet emotionally erratic – at times caring, other times frightening or intimidating – Spider Queen. Succumbing to a hyper-dependent and distracting role definitely takes a toll on a young butterfly's head, heart, soul...and true voice!

Links to Part I-III:

<http://www-stressdoc-com.blogspot.com/2017/08/from-post-traumatic-stress-to-post.html>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/from-post-traumatic-stress-growth-transforming-adversity-mark-gorkin?published=t>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/spider-butterfly-dueling-dance-codependency-part-III-mark-gorkin?published=t>

Parts I-III below Part IV

The Spider and the Butterfly: Not Necessarily Just a Children's Story

The Fateful Encounter – Part I

The spider spins a silky web
Of soft and shiny aura.
How will a little butterfly
Know the coming drama?

Lady S so wants a child
But she herself is dry
And a wounded Mr. Spider
Turns his back and cries.

Sunlight sparkles on the weave
Catching the 'lil butter's eye.
He soon alights upon the web
Her tapestry does hypnotize.

The 'lil one fills a big hole
In her broken heart.
The spin-stress knows not why she craves...
But he *must* play a part.

Is he embraced or entrapped
In the lady's many arms?
Instinct tells *'lil b* to flee
Despite her luring charms.

But Lady Spider starts to sing
Her haunting Siren ** song.
How is one so young to know
Just what is right from wrong?

The moon has journeyed many times
Giving in becomes veiled lie.
'lil b now wonders who he is...
"Oh no. I've forgotten how to fly!"

**In Greek mythology, the Sirens were dangerous creatures, who lured nearby sailors with their enchanting music and voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast of their island (Wikipedia).

The Spider and the Butterfly: *Not Necessarily Just a Children's Story*

Mr. Spider's Story – Part II

So where is Mr. Spider's thread
In our enmeshed story?
For in this tale of web and woe
Lady S spins all the glory.

Mr. S, alas, cannot weave...
His scarlet mark of shame
Adding insult to injury:
The Queen's needles are a pain.

To numb a spider's injured pride
He gorges on the blood
Of his wife's hard-earned bounty
Drinking far more than he should.

Mr. S silently seethes
Black clouds smoke his red-hot brain:
How can he seize 'il b
From the Queen's web domain?

While 'il b so quietly
Morphs...now the "too good" child:
Wings aflutter cool spider fears, but
White noise "call of the wild!"

Then one day, Mr, Spider
Announces to his mate
That he and the butter boy
Have planned a hunting date.

'il b unexpectedly
Eyes Mr. S. with newfound hope
But quickly turns to reality...
Will she let us cut the rope?

© Mark Gorkin 2017

Shrink Rap™Productions

*lil b may not know where he is going
but I believe he will know how to get there.
Just between you and me...
I'd stay tuned for Part III. 🤪*

The Spider and the Butterfly: Not Necessarily Just a Children's Story

The Dueling Dance of Codependency – Part III

Lady S and *lil b*
Still attached at the lip
Of the web hangs Mr. S, alone
By a thread gets a grip.

Grabbing a loose strand
He Ninjas towards the pair
To cut this Oedipal ** knot, but
Jerks to a stop mid-air.

A flash of panic in her orbs
Then a Queen Cold Medusa ** stare.
“Why this male bonding quest?
Mr. S... time for *truth or dare*”.

A survival of the fittest test:
Is a safe nest the answer?
Or is her “be safe” just b.s.?
Who folds from *high noon* terror?

She shoots the little one a look
A laser to his brain...
The winner of this domain duel:
The hypnotic, symbiotic
E-magnetic *ball and chain*. **

Still Mr S. turns to the boy
Soul pleading with his eyes.
The little wings but sadly shrug
He knows where his butter lies!

Mr. Spider's agony
War paint drips down his face
Turns fiery rejection red...
How to live with such disgrace?

For the little butterfly
One question rends his heart:
Why won't Mr. Spider
Play his manly part?

Simply say to Mrs S.:
"The boy will come with me!"
But he meekly bows to the Queen
Yet scorns the *lil b*.

Mr. S crawling in pain
Takes one more parting glance:
First heal his own wounds, then
End the spider-butter trance!

****Oedipal** – Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is a Greek play that has captivated audiences and readers alike for centuries. In Freud's hands the play became an illustration of the supposedly universal "Oedipus complex"—a group of emotions, usually unconscious, involving the desire of a child, especially a male child, to possess sexually the parent of the opposite sex while excluding the parent of the same sex (Psychology Today and *The Free Dictionary*).

****Medusa** was a monster, one of the Gorgon sisters and daughter of Phorkys and Keto, the children of Gaea (Earth) and Oceanus (Ocean). She had the face of an ugly woman with snakes instead of hair; anyone who looked into her eyes was immediately turned to stone (*AOL/Medusa Greek Mythology*).

****ball and chain** – something that limits one's freedom or ability to do things (*Merriam-Webster*); someone who won't let you do or go anywhere without him/her (*Urban Dictionary*).

© Mark Gorkin 2017

Shrink Rap™Productions

To really know the spider score
Keep an eye out for Part IV!

The Spider and the Butterfly: Not Necessarily Just a Children's Story

The Dark Side of Devotional Dependency – Part IV

Mr. Spider seems to fade
Wrapped in a silent shroud.
Until the boy dreams of a ghost
Who calls his name out loud.

His head rocked wildly *side to side*
By the spider man in the moon
Begetting daylight wings with hives
Oh, for life in the cocoon.

Is he a prince or prisoner
In the lady's storied tower?
Her chants churn mind to butter
Now wide eyed for spider power.

The Queen cradles the butter cup
As if a fragile flower.
When instinct says take time away...
Eyes ablaze make him cower.

'*lil b* soon learns his place
To mirror back emotion
A sponge for untold spider fears
The price for her devotion.

Most days she spins spider lore
He's being schooled at home.
Beneath a soft butter façade
A broken butter boy on guard...
*My God: Stockholm Spider Syndrome! ***

One source of psychic shock
Soothing sounds of spider aria...
Wait, what's wrong? Why mood code red?
Was it something that I said?
To cause *lightning Hysteria*?

Two, '*lil b* knows the web fate
Of flailing arms and wings.
Repressed rage saps his *courage*, then
That out of body stare dread brings.

What happens when a little boy
Butters up as a "life choice"?
When wings veil both eyes and ears...
Can a *wild call* lose its voice?

Without a real inner spark
For survival *fight or flight*...
Might an AWOL spider man
Deliver daylight from dark night?

****Stockholm Syndrome**, also commonly known as "capture bonding," is a condition that causes hostages to develop a psychological alliance with their captors as a survival strategy during captivity. These feelings, resulting from a bond formed between captor and captives during intimate time spent together, are generally considered irrational in light of the danger or risk endured by the victims. Generally

speaking, Stockholm Syndrome consists of strong emotional ties that develop between two persons where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates the other (Wikipedia).

© Mark Gorkin 2017

Shrink Rap™ Productions

In "As the World of Spider Spin"

Pray tell...*Where has Mr. Spider been?*

Let us all keep hope alive

And breathlessly await Part V.

Volume 5 Issue 3 September 2017

©All rights reserved by Mark Gorkin.