

USING THE PAST TO CHANGE THE FUTURE

How often do you think of death? Rarely, sometimes, often or very often? I think about it a number of times every day. I grew up this way and was surprised to learn that most people do not think as I do. Some rarely think of death.

It was only later, after I studied psychology that I was able to understand my seeming obsession with death. My mother died when I was 5. I was her favorite. Her death was traumatic for me. I could not understand what was happening to the woman I loved so much and needed so badly.

My dad was a farmer and when mom passed away, he couldn't take care of us four kids and the 2,000 chickens that he had. So my sister and I were sent to an orphanage while my two brothers went off to stay with relatives. We kids were all separated.

I wasn't eating so dad brought me to the Boston Children's Hospital where the doctors could find nothing wrong with me, but determined that I was grieving over the loss of my mother. (I had been so traumatized that I didn't cry when she died.)

I was miserable in the orphanage. There were high walls topped with barbed wire (to this day, I hate walls) and I was terribly lonely. I remember being forced to eat molasses. (I never ate them again after leaving that place.) My father couldn't handle mom's death and became an alcoholic. I was a miserable kid. All this because the Angel of Death came and got my mother.

Now you might understand why I think a lot about death. Death took away the woman I loved dearly and, as a result, my life fell apart. My family was shattered and my happiness destroyed. All this because of death.

Mom's death so traumatized me that it burned itself into my memory with such an impact that the thought of it has remained ever since.

All of us have suffered from some kind of trauma whether we remember it or not. Often, it hurts so badly that we repress the painful memories that trauma has caused us. We cope with the hurt by forgetting what caused it. Though the pain remains embedded in our hearts, the memories are pushed into our unconscious and covered over by self-induced amnesia. That way we don't have to keep remembering the awful experience.

The problem is that the effects of the trauma don't get buried. They keep popping up in our behavior and out thinking. We may have forgotten the cause of our trauma, but we continue to live with the harmful effects of it.

This is why it is very helpful if you can pinpoint where some of your fears, your compulsions come from. Much of the way you live your life comes from the distant past (I never drank alcohol because of my alcoholic father).

It isn't healthy to say, "That's the way I am," when you are confronted with your negative behavior or "stinking thinking". Better to stop, check out where it comes from and do something about it. And you can always do something about it. You may have been damaged by past traumas, but you can change, and change you should, if you want to find happiness and peace of mind.