

Content Warning: Neuropsychological Infohazard, Evocation Infohazard, Suicide, and Self Harm

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

~Mary Oliver, *Summer Day*

I turned thirty this week, I'm still trying to process that fact. Ten thousand nine hundred and sixty two days on this Earth on the day this post is published. Three hundred and sixty months. Two hundred and sixty three thousand six hundred and thirty five hours. Parts of me are shocked that we made it this far, while other parts of me are angry and bitter that we've wasted so much of the limited time we have on this Earth. My life is not where I wish it was, I'm not the *person* I hoped to become. So much has happened to me, life has been at many times been harsh and unforgiving, and time has a way of catching up with us.

I was treated poorly as a child, and I'm also still trying to process that fact. I'm sure my parents will argue that they did the best they could, and maybe they did. I probably have undiagnosed autism, which I'm also trying to come to terms with, and if no one including me realized that then I of course that couldn't be taken into account by my caregivers...Not that our society is particularly kind or good to autistic children who *are* identified young either.

I don't want to start some sort of fight with them or blame them for the trauma I experienced, but they also made lots of mistakes and to this day seem rather detached and oblivious to the world I inhabit. They grew up in a very different time and their expectations of how the world works have never fundamentally been updated from those times. They seem trapped in the just world fallacy and willfully deny the horrors of reality, taking shelter in the blind faith that everything just has to work out in the end somehow.

It doesn't. It really really doesn't.

I had different and contradictory demands put on me by school and my parents, I wasn't ever really allowed as a child to explore or express my own preferences and for a long time, even into my young adulthood, I didn't really know what I wanted. None of the things I was allowed to want were appealing and when I was punished for exploring the things that did seem interesting to me, I learned to just stop trying and stop wanting things. Contradictory demands to have preferences I didn't have were poured into me until I shattered and became a husk of a person. I had a lot of people tell me that when they knew me as a child or teenager that I seemed like this empty shell to them. That didn't really improve until I moved out of my parents' house and was finally able to start considering what I actually wanted out of life. Of course, by then the damage was already done and I wasn't remotely in a place where I could intelligently pursue those desires.

I entered adulthood armed with a broken sense of agency and an incoherent view of reality that metamorphosed itself to appease all the authority figures I interacted with. I was pushed into college and pushed into taking out loans without any real idea of what was happening to me. I didn't understand the world or my place in it, I was just dragged through one awful experience after another while being told that the world was magical and wonderful and everything always worked out for good people who followed the rules.

For a long time I wasn't able to form a coherent worldview because I was getting told one set of facts by my parents, another alternative set of facts by my teachers, and yet another alternative set of facts by popular media. I would be yelled at if I said the wrong set of facts to the wrong people, so I had to learn to code switch before I learned how to actually recognize which of the facts I was getting were true. The answer: almost none of them.

The nineties were characterized by a culture of everyone aggressively lying to children, of telling us we could be anything, do anything. It was thought that children had to be eased into reality and that we couldn't handle the truth so we had to be lied to and told the world was more just, more kind, more fair, and easier to navigate than it actually was. Not only were we ill prepared for the real world because of these lies, but our ability to respond to the truth when we finally started to see past them was also stomped on by forcing us to sit in classes and have our sense of curiosity and agency destroyed because 'learning obedience' was more important than becoming knowledgeable people

prepared to confront a rapidly changing global landscape. I still remember an art teacher saying to my mother at one point “It’s not about art it’s about discipline” when I was punished for not following the instructions closely enough.

It might have been better if I’d had friends, but I was a shy socially anxious kid who quickly became the magnet for bullying and ostracization, so I couldn’t even find support from my peers. Worse, I was kind of naive and gullible and the kids around me realized they could offer to do things like trust falls with me and then let me hit the ground, and it was funny to see my confusion and horror at being betrayed. I’d be invited to things and then ditched, told I was welcome somewhere just as everyone else decided to leave, and generally treated like a punching bag because I was small and seen as an easy target. I know a bunch of them later became worried I would become some sort of school shooter. I admit, I had some fantasies about ‘getting even’ against those bullying me, but most of them involved me having magical powers so it was never particularly realistic.

The few places I was able to find solace from the world was to dissociate into useless tasks like video games and television. I was taught to hate learning, to distrust authority, to assume kindness was a sign of someone tricking me or expecting to get something out of me, and I entered adulthood on a path where I immediately collapsed in on myself as soon as the external pain driven demands were removed. I had no intrinsic motivation so as soon as the pain-conditioned motivation was gone I was left completely adrift and spent the next several years playing EVE Online and bombing out of community college.

I was set up to fail, then collapsed into a hole and was left there to die. This is where the surprise that I didn’t comes in. My priors up to this point featured betrayal after betrayal by those charged with teaching and caring for and protecting me, and as such, I didn’t really trust anyone at all. I didn’t know *how* to trust anyone. It seemed very strongly like the entire world was out to use me and take advantage of me, which was why I was great at EVE.

But something funny happened, starting *in EVE* of all places. Sometimes, for absolutely no reason and without benefit to themselves, people started being nice to me at times. For a long time I just flat out didn’t know how to deal with this. I didn’t trust it, there had to be a catch. When I started dating my first serious partner I continuously thought that it was only a matter of time before the rug was pulled out from under me. That relationship probably would have gone better if I had been *capable* of trusting people, but it took probably another five years before my ability to trust anyone at all finally started to heal enough to not expect my friends to turn on me.

My twenties were mostly spent trying to recover from the damages of childhood and piece myself back together. While I was doing that, I let myself slip deeper and deeper into the hole I’d fallen in. I didn’t really have a choice, I was too shattered to think much

beyond the next day, so I couldn't plan for the future or work to improve myself. It was only within the last two or three years that I healed enough to actually think about who I was and what I wanted.

This presented its own form of pain, because I found myself down a mineshaft with the surface lost to the gloom above. I wasn't starting from zero, I was starting from negative three thousand six hundred and fifty, in a place in my late twenties that most people entered in their late teens. I still don't know if I'll ever really be able to reach the surface, much less build anything new. I constantly struggle with not simply giving up and letting the world roll over me, and sometimes it's really hard. The bottles of pills on my desk whisper of the possibility of escape and the razor blades sing their own sad song of pain and release. I don't want to go but sometimes staying is the hardest thing I can do.

However, there is something working in my favor, which keeps me going seemingly in spite of everything else. I'm not the child I was before I shattered into a million pieces. That person is gone and is never going to be recovered. The thing about trauma is that it never *really* goes away. Even if you reassemble all the pieces the cracks remain in the material, the structural discontinuities and weaknesses are all still there. You can't *really* fix that, but you move on anyways. Just because something is broken doesn't mean it's useless or trash.

In Japan, a technique called kintsugi (金継) developed to repair broken pottery by using a lacquer mixed with gold to reassemble the broken pieces. The end result isn't the original, the damage remains, but instead of being hidden or treated as a bad thing, the flaws are emphasized and highlighted, adding to the beauty and history of the piece. You might not be able to undo what happens, but skin heals in spite of scars.

You might not be able to be who you were, but at least you can be *someone*. Put one foot in front of the other and step forward into life as something whole, something new, something better.