

Danger

I was raised knowing that the world was a terrifying place. I knew that almost everyone was out to get me. I knew that, if I didn't stay on guard, someone would hurt me. I was trained to handle such an eventuality. I could deal with almost any violent situation from a ridiculously young age.

Eventually I realized that the world I actually lived in was not as terrifying or dangerous as I was told. I learned that a lot of people in the world were interesting and many of them were good people. I learned that the way I approached a situation often changed the outcome; if I went in assuming that people were going to be hostile and make me uncomfortable, I would get that reaction, but if I went in expecting kindness or, even better, not expecting anything one way or another, people would generally treat me well.

As an aside, I do understand that much of this is because I'm short, white, and female. I'm not seen as a threatening person, and that's just fine with me. I don't want or need to be threatening and it does not improve my world if people perceive me as a scary person. In high school a few of my friends and I experimented with how differently store owners and workers responded to us based on race, so I am very aware that I am speaking from a place of white privilege. That isn't really what this post is about, though, so I will let that be for now.

While the world certainly contains violence, at this point in my life I do not have to face it on a daily basis. While I've been working on meditating, though, I've been paying attention to the thoughts that float through my head. Many of them are how I would react if people are unkind or violent towards me or the people I love most. This surprised me. I thought I had mostly left the violence embedded in my upbringing behind, but apparently I still think about and react to fear-causing

situations much more often than I realized. Part of the meditation work is noting what goes on in my brain while I am meditating, noticing what feelings are brought up by these thoughts, and then letting go before I get wrapped up in responding to them.

Letting go is rather difficult.

There are a lot of emotions wrapped up in responding to people hurting people I love. Predictably, I'm sure, since no one wants to see that. It has been years since anyone I care about has been hurt, though, and it still shows up multiple times in a fifteen minute period. I keep being tempted to think through the scenario, figure out the best way of handling it, and then let it go once I'm really worked up about a completely imaginary occurrence. I am working hard on letting go before working through it, though, and that has proved to be challenging.

I don't know very many people who were brought up believing the world was full of enemies, at least not in this country, in this time. I know that it is not uncommon in other parts of the world. I know many children are trained to fight and look for danger, to deal with it before it hurts them, to always watch the people around them to see if they have weapons, but it is an odd mindset where I live and in my social circles. When I'm very tired or very stressed, I slide back into that mindset and I watch people differently. When I am awake and alert, that fear is mostly not evident, but apparently some part of me still worries quite a lot about how to protect the people I love.

That would explain some of my stress. If, when I get tired and overwhelmed, I also start working hard on protecting myself despite the fact that the fear is of things that won't happen, I can see how that would drain energy rather badly. My challenge now is to recognize those mental and emotional hamster wheels and figure out how to get off, to let go, and

to accept that planning for the worst eventuality is not going to make my life any better.

I am a pacifist. My upbringing taught me very well how not to be a pacifist, though, and I would like to change those patterns so I can work in my current reality without constantly cranking up my fight-or-flight response. If something comes up, we'll deal with it, and, for me, that doesn't require violence. I just have to work on my automatic responses to stress. Hopefully I will learn to let go without engaging.