

“Trauma May Speak. But Healing Talks Back.”

In 2002, my first husband left me for another woman. At the time, he and I lived in the Upper Midwest, while she (“the other woman”) lived faraway in the American South.

Which means, she had a deep and dramatic southern accent.

For the entire decade that followed our divorce, I felt an internal CRINGE every time I heard a woman (any woman, real or fictitious) speak with that same pronounced southern accent. This cringe wasn’t perceptible to anyone else; outside my own awareness, it didn’t even exist. But inside, it was painful and powerful and REAL. I’d avoid certain movies, music and even friendships, all to minimize my exposure to the simple SOUND of a southern woman’s voice.

At the time, I passively accepted this reaction. I didn’t over-think it; I had more urgent issues screaming for my attention, a virtual heap of time-sensitive emotional wreckage. “The cringe” simply was what it was. It didn’t seem abnormal, unreasonable or unrecognizable. It was just an obvious side effect of the pain I experienced from my husband’s affair.

But what I didn’t quite understand—what I didn’t really even try to figure out, until recently—is why it was the VOICES of these innocent women that got to me. Why was it their spoken words that triggered me most deeply? Why did THAT specific feature personify my ex-husband’s mistress so prolifically? Why wasn’t I triggered by other women’s physical attributes? Their personalities? Their professions? Why did HEARING THEIR VOICES push such a specific and resounding button in my broken heart?

The Shame

If I’d really put my mind to it, consciously and deliberately, I probably could have solved this “cringe mystery” long ago. But if I’m going to be honest, I know EXACTLY why it took a decade (plus) to get my answers. The truth is, I didn’t WANT to engage the issue, simply on the basis of its most functional and foundational premise: I didn’t want to admit that I, for the first time in my life, was actively and intensely reacting to a stereotype, cursing a broad population of women for wrongs that didn’t belong to them. In the violent angst of my

own inner dialogue, I felt deeply ashamed of my projected misgivings. I hated the idea that I could extend such residual ill will toward a collective group of other women, women who (through no fault of theirs) existed as some definitive representation of my husband’s mistress. How dare I? Why couldn’t my brain distinguish between HIS “other woman” and these other, lovely, INNOCENT southern girls, beautiful ladies whose only crime was usin’ the voice God gave ‘em?

I’m not entirely sure what precipitated my newfound willingness to entertain this whole premise. But something did. Early last year, something in me “switched gears,” and I actively attuned to the “why” of my reaction. I could chalk it up to a convergence between my personal and professional work, my expanding awareness of trauma (in general) and betrayal trauma (specifically). Maybe it’s because I feel increasingly safe, secure and happy in my own life and my second marriage. Or maybe it’s just “my time,” that moment when my stars aligned, my soul stepped up, and my brain finally deciphered my heart’s deep enigma.

Whatever the reason, I finally GET IT. It only took me twelve years to get here, followed by twelve months of processing my awareness deeply enough to consider sharing it. But today I’ve pieced together an understanding of what that “cringe” represented so deeply. Today I can identify what it resurrected, and I understand why that particular characteristic hit so close to home.

The Scoop

It all began in the era of Y2K. Thanks to the evolution of high-speed internet and chatrooms with titles like “Married But Looking” (they existed long before Ashley Madison), my husband’s infidelity began online. Because their affair was long distance and virtual, this other woman’s WORDS were among the first personal characteristics she offered to my

husband. Because they didn't initially meet in person (that came later), his earliest experiences of her were NOT of her face, her body, her smile or her laugh.

Instead, he first encountered her via typewritten words—the things she “said” and the ways she “said” them. My husband fell in love with all of THAT, hard and fast and almost (but not quite) irreversibly. In fact, when I first discovered their virtual affair, it happened because I stumbled across a history of back-and-forth emails, message after message of intimacies exchanged via modems. I could (but won't) tell you horror stories about my reactions to some of those emails, the outright panic attacks they sparked within my soul and my psyche.

During this long-distance affair, typing naturally led them to talking—and that's how this woman's VOICE entered into my equation. With that vocal development, her engagement with my husband broke the “inaudible” sound barrier. Her “voice” was no longer limited to the neutral expression of typewritten characters. Her existence was now nuanced by an animate tone, stylized with the flourish of a thick, southern drawl.

Because my ex-husband and I shared our apartment for six months following his request for a divorce (essentially an in-home separation), I had plenty of opportunity to overhear this woman's voice invade my private space. I heard her voice recorded on our answering machine. I heard her inflections echo from his cell phone and computer speakers. And even though their sexual relationship wasn't one I could see with my eyes, it was one I could HEAR happening with my ears (night after night) from my own adjoining bedroom.

All I can say is, thank God for noise canceling headphones.

Connecting the Dots

Once I put all of this “type-turn-talk” stuff together, it actually makes perfect sense. In the months and years that followed our divorce, my trauma wasn't triggered or compounded by women who LOOKED LIKE my husband's girlfriend. It wasn't piqued by women who shared her profession, her interests or even her name (which, incidentally, is similar to my own). Instead my deepest trauma was triggered by women who SOUNDED LIKE my husband's “other woman.” And that is absolutely logical, given the fact that HER WORDS (not her image or anything else) provided my introduction to the fact of her existence. HER OWN WORDS initiated my earliest experience of her personal identity, and they spoke loud-and-clear about her role within the end of my marriage.

That's a pretty crappy story, isn't it? Betrayal trauma, I've learned, comes in all shapes and sizes. Mine, as it turns out, also comes in sounds.

I wish I could say that such stories are rare. But I can't, and I won't sugarcoat it. In my work with women facing “S” issues—discovering their partners' infidelity, pornography, secrets or sex addiction—I hear an EARFUL of betrayal trauma. Many of these stories share resonant characteristics, including emotional

fallout that's impossible to quantify, equate or compare. But beyond a few thematic commonalities, I've never heard a story that doesn't have at least one unique, unconventional and altogether INIMITABLE element of emotional brutality. Each story features SOME cruel twist of torture, some personified little “tweak” that hits a girl in all the wrong places.

Mine just happens to be the sound of a deep and dramatic southern accent.

Because of such stories, I no longer believe in fairy tale endings. But do you know what ELSE I don't believe? I don't believe that ANYONE trauma or tragedy mandates ANYONE predetermined ending. Because, here's a beautiful truth I've discovered about betrayal trauma: like our other “life languages,” these stories unfold within an ever-evolving context. Plot twists often happen when we least expect them, and there's almost always a few hidden gems nestled toward the back of the book.

Take THIS story, for example. I sat down yesterday to write one paragraph. Two hours later, I'd reached my intended “conclusion.” I'd made it to an obvious stopping point, a place where I could authentically and effectively declare it The End.

But then, this morning, my eyes flew open. (And that's a rare occurrence. Just ask my husband.) In one breathless moment, I knew that this story—the one I'd “finished” so neatly the day before—was literally ONLY HALF written. Talk about a near miss; I'd come within a hair's breadth of skipping over the very best part, of staring straight past the “end” of my long-sought, hard-fought, newly acquired insight. Had I clicked “send” just a few hours earlier, this story would have ended with painful prematurity—just as abruptly as my first marriage did.

Another Chapter

This past summer, I began speaking weekly, by phone, with a dear and delightful woman named Gracie Bea. (Okay, that's not her real name. But that's what I'll call her for now, because it seems to suit her perfectly.) Gracie Bea is my most recent and unexpected soulmate, someone I met along an altogether unexpected path. This beautiful woman is twice my age, but the gap between us seems utterly nonexistent. Gracie Bea shares my passionate commitment to lifelong learning, spiritual growth and a proactive sense of self-development. She lives with an admirable measure of dignity, depth and determination, all in the face of her own life-altering transitions.

And wouldn't you know? By no orchestration on my part or hers, it turns out that Gracie Bea and I hail from OPPOSITE ends of the country. I'm on the west coast in Southern California, while Gracie Bea (you guessed it) lives faraway in the American South.

Which means, she has a deep and dramatic southern accent.

Here is the miracle of my relationship with Gracie Bea: Every Friday, as I pick up the phone and hear Gracie's accent, the first thing I think about is NOT my former husband's former mistress.

My first emotion is NOT grief, resentment or regret, and my first physical sensation is NOT “fight, flight or freeze.” Instead, when Gracie’s voice greets me, the first thing I think of is her beautiful soul. My first emotion is gratitude, knowing that even though her time is precious, Gracie consistently chooses to spend a little weekly piece of herself with me. When I hear Gracie’s greeting, my first physical sensation is stillness and relaxation; my body recognizes “safety” when it sees it, signaling to my spirit that, for one upcoming hour, during my time with Gracie, I can speak my words as freely as I feel them—without filtering, without faltering and without fear of falling short.

Gracie Bea has become the friend who, on every Friday call, invites me to drop whatever mask I’ve been carrying the whole weeklong. She listens to me with silent understanding, holding space for whatever burdens I’ve been bearing alone. She validates me with an endearing, enduring and evolving depth of character. And she demonstrates a delicate balance of softness and strength, one I’ve admired in women since childhood. In short, Gracie Bea is the kind of woman I want to be when I grow up.

I’ve never yet told Gracie Bea about my historic aversion to her accent. She’ll probably read about it for the first time here, along with the rest of you. But I don’t think it’s an accident that Gracie Bea came into my life THIS YEAR, just about the time I finally made my conscious peace with that audible trigger. And I don’t think it’s a coincidence that today, the SPOKEN WORDS OF A SOUTHERN WOMAN reinforce for me, week after week, that I am enough.

And that’s when it hits me. There is still ONE THING that makes me cringe when I hear Gracie’s accent:

I cringe to think of everything I could be missing, had I let trauma have the last word.

In Closing...

As I mentioned at the beginning, I’m writing this post as a spinoff from my previous one, shared against the backdrop of my personal “life languages.” If I needed further evidence that life isn’t static, this latest chapter of my story provides it. My experiential vocabulary is both evolutionary and revolutionary; it learns and unlearns and relearns just as fast as I do.

As trauma speaks throughout this chapter of my story, its words are profound and powerful and penetrating. Trauma’s words slice to my innermost core, piercing to my deepest vulnerabilities. But trauma is NOT the only voice to speak in my narrative. Healing has a lot to say too, with words that are equally pervasive and persuasive. Healing’s words radiate to and through my very same core, tending to the very vulnerabilities that trauma’s words once molested.

In my story, I was wounded by words—words that bore a deeply personified accent, one that’s forever seared into my traumatic memory. But as my story evolves, I am also being healed by words—words that bear an identical-yet-redefined accent, one that I’ll cherish for the duration of remembrance itself.

In my story, “the other woman” wielded her voice as a weapon of my destruction; her voice became the soundtrack of trauma, shattering my life from the outside in. But as my story evolves, NO OTHER WOMAN can raise a voice that’s stronger than my own; my voice is becoming the soundtrack of healing, repairing my soul from the inside out.

**Yes, trauma may speak.
She’s kind of a bitch that way.**

**But I will speak louder.
Because this is MY story, and this is MY life.**

**And in my life? And in my story?
Healing is the heroine that slays trauma’s dragon.**

**Yes, healing will speak.
She’s kind of a badass that way.**

**But, in MY life? In MY story?
Yes, trauma may speak. But healing WILL talk back.**

I’M CRYSTAL RAE MORRISSEY—and I’m irrepressibly passionate. :) I care deeply about everything I do, from writing, to coaching, to living as a woman in long-term recovery. I’ve spent nine years in the rooms of S-Anon, Al-Anon and various therapists. I’ve healed (mostly) from the trauma of my first marriage and divorce, ultimately learning to survive and thrive in love with my AWESOME second husband (who is, incidentally, a recovering sex addict). I’m professionally certified as a Women’s Life, Couples Relationship and Divorce Recovery Coach, working and writing from my home office in Redondo Beach, California. I practice a trauma-sensitive model for coaching and recovery, providing specialized support for women affected by their partners’ infidelity, secrets or sex addiction. I’m committed to support my clients within and/or beyond their presenting relationships—and that’s precisely why I’ve named my coaching practice Women Ever After. I’m keenly aware that relationships typically don’t conclude with fairytale endings. But that doesn’t mean we give in, give up and go home. No matter how our individual stories unfold, we exist within a greater, kick-ass community of empowered women. Within this community, we don’t give up on each other—because we don’t give up on ourselves.

