

Essay

PERSONAL PROCESSING: or, Truly "Learning from Experience"

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In this essay, I attempt to describe something that has become a mainstay of my life over the last 30 years. I call it "processing." Many other women call it that too. And we do not mean by this word any of its dictionary definitions. Our processing has various roots. One of them is gossip. Another is therapy. Yet another is feminist consciousness-raising. All of these modalities enter into our processing, and are changed by their combination.

"Personal processing" is a phenomenon which is so ubiquitous that we don't notice it; so much a part of daily life for conscious women in this final decade of the second millennium that we do not realize how radical it is, where it is taking us, how profoundly it transforms our lives.

Personal Beginnings

My best friend Mary and I loved Elvis Presley. Sitting in the lovely solarium of her parents' country home, we would listen to his throbbing, guttural wail and dream of

kissing our boy friends. In the process of hearing his songs together, we wordlessly supported each other's turbulent feelings.

Mary and I were also in competition — for high school valedictorian. But that did not affect our deeper connection. I have not seen her for many years. I still love her. I imagine she feels the same.

Mary was the first. There have been many others. I always feel an undercurrent of sheer purring contentment in the presence of treasured female friends.

Sometime in my early 20s my relations with women, already strong in that fundamental, primeval way, slowly began to undergo a profound change. It all started with Nancy, at my kitchen table in Cambridge. At first our connection felt more polite than real. Nancy and I didn't choose one another. She was Ray's wife. Ray was a fellow Harvard graduate student with my husband, Patrick. I was Patrick's wife, so Nancy and I were expected to be friends.

She started coming over in the afternoons, after teaching school, to visit me and gawk at my new baby. I was lonely, grateful for her company.

Sometimes the two couples would get together for dinner and conversation. Nancy and I acted like entirely different people in the presence of our husbands. The men would discuss abstract ideas, arguing points. I would sit on the edge of my seat, tensely listening, waiting to make my own points. I wanted to beat Patrick in logic. Though I admitted his talent in architecture, I thought *I* was the *real* intellectual. Once in a while I would burst in to make a point — and then shrink back, feeling Patrick's scorn, his impatience for me to be done so he could continue.

If I was trying to be more male than the men, then Nancy was more typically female. She sat silently off to the side, looking miserable, feeling stupid. Afterwards, Patrick

would speak cuttingly of Nancy, her pendulous breasts. He said she was stupid. His remarks didn't penetrate me, I was used to them. He said things about me, too — in public! —comparing me to other women, and asking why I didn't measure up to their clothes, their looks, their brains.

Nancy and I led two lives together — one for ourselves, one for the men — and eventually the split between them generated an internal tension within both of us, which spilled over onto the kitchen table. Before, we had talked the way women have talked for centuries — gossiping about others, complaining about our husbands, the housework, cooking . . . Now our talk turned intimate. We began to let each other in on how we were really feeling — opening a Pandora's box to the unknown. At first, we were nervous, fearful. Should we really do this? We were tiptoeing through forbidden chambers. We were speaking of our husbands in a new way, and of men in general; we were talking about our lives as "wives" — how boring they were, how much our lives had changed since we married.

The deeper our explorations, the more energy we contacted. Our emotions surfaced in all their wild and unpredictable rawness — and though we were still too polite to let these feelings rampage the way they later would, still, we hungered for more. We began to live for those late afternoons together, when we entered a world unknown to our husbands. Had they heard what we were saying, we would have been mortified.

The deeper we dug, the more we recognized what we had in common. The more profound our feelings, the more we discovered they were shared. The more familiar the territory we were exploring, the more we began to see it as not just ours, but as the internal world other women lived in too. Little by little, we were becoming sociologists, separating our selves out from the roles we were playing as women. We began to put things together, noticing how our roles dovetailed with those of the men; how men and women were two sides of the same coin in a social system of relationships which kept us all from truly living. We didn't know what living truly would be; we just knew something was very wrong with our own lives. The more we probed into the hidden world beneath our public behavior, the more we experienced our lives as false, inauthentic.

Now we knew that the split we were feeling before, between our own private connection and the faces we showed our husbands, was real. We were actually living in two different worlds, one outside and the other inside. The first was what others saw, our public behavior. The other was what we hungered for, our feelings; these we shared only with each other.

Not surprisingly, my dream images during those years presented alienation; they were filled with masks, theater roles, stages, or conversely: the shame of going naked in public. In my waking life I became obsessed with masks, with the false self that I was forced to wear to Boston University, where I was a doctoral student in philosophy. I was reading Irving Goffman's *Relations in Public*, and R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*. I was disgusted with society's roles, and fascinated with my own inner world. I wondered how I could ever pretend to be a "college teacher" and integrate with society at the end of my protected student career.

Thirty years later, the secret life I led with Nancy is my daily world. I no longer have to hide. Our passion and our search is now more obviously shared by others. I am no longer obsessed with the differences between the inside and the outside. The splits which were inevitable in those early days — and which would have to become much wider before they could heal — have resolved themselves into a larger whole.

With Mary, I experienced an instinctive intimacy. My connection with Nancy was at first instinctive, and then increasingly conscious, on both verbal and emotional levels. She was the first of many conscious female friendships. The older I become, the more I appreciate our capacity to both listen to each other and speak our own truths. Indeed, I view this capacity, that of helping each other *process our experience*, as a crucial phenomenon, which has made possible our accelerating evolution. For the past 25 years, when a woman leaves a difficult marriage, she immediately finds support from other women. Our connections help us grow. When a man, on the other hand, is left by a woman, he usually stands alone, isolated, and fearful of letting anyone, even himself, know how he feels. This, I feel, is why men often get stuck and women usually keep growing.

What is Personal Processing?

But just what is this "processing"? How does it work in daily life? What does it really mean, "to process" something? What makes one want to process in the first place?

It is difficult to speak of processing in any kind of general way without sounding either banal or grandiose. Processing is no big deal, really, and yet the opposite is also true: processing is a universal dynamic, an overall way of moving through one's experience. Processing is, to my mind, what we really mean when we say we "learn from experience." And the more conscious we can become of the actual *process* we undergo in such learning, the more profound that learning becomes. In processing, we utilize any and all daily life experiences as food. A dialogue is established between inside and outside. That dialogue is continuous and results in continuous change. And yet nothing changes. One's life goes on as before. One has not added anything to one's life — no schedules have been altered, no therapist or guru or money is required. And yet, in the long run, the results of such personal processing are simply astonishing.

For me, the root of the need to process begins in the world of feeling, as an initial response to something new. I encounter a new piece of information, or a situation — from the external or internal world — which throws me off-balance. I feel vaguely irritated, off-center. Something sticks in my craw. It's as if I have a need to scratch, and cannot find the itch. As if there is an energy, bottled up inside.

Sometimes, at first, the feeling is so subtle that I don't notice it. Then the energy builds — until it breaks out in conversation. Or I'll find myself writing in my journal. Usually, however, my first awareness of this feeling comes in disguise: I blame something in the external world for something which is going on inside. Sooner or later I recognize that this is what I am doing. And that awareness usually comes as a shock: I'm *still* doing that?!?

When I was younger, acting out was my *only* response to that original feeling or irritability. And the fact that I still do it on occasion is a lesson in humility. What

happens here is I project what's going on inside me onto my external situation. I create a drama, in which I am both a player and, without realizing it, the author. I pull other people into the drama as well, projecting onto them certain qualities within myself — and then do battle with them, or become entranced with them. In the past, my dramas have gone on for years.

I am 51 years old. Thank the Goddess! For I can now gratefully say that I have learned enough from long experience to be in the position where my dramas take mere days, hours, or even minutes! Some of them get nipped in the bud. I listen to the subtle changes in feeling tone within myself, to what needs to be attended to within, rather than instantly projecting out.

And the major dramas? Tho ones, variations on themes, which have been present all my life? The ones which gift me with life-long lessons so deeply a part of my nature that each time they come around again I am still initially blinded?

One of my life-long lessons is to transform the "patriarchy" within myself. I have "acted out" this lesson with men, over and over again, starting with my father. As an adult, my primary relationships with men have all introduced or reintroduced some aspect of this theme. And the dramas enacted here have been intense and life-changing. I still engage in them with my new husband Jeffrey — when his nit-picky criticism reminds me of my father . . . At first I feel terrible, full of self-loathing, as I unsuccessfully attempt to narrow my focus to the smallest of details. Then, as it dawns on me that my natural expansiveness is being squeezed into a tiny space, I erupt, *furious*. There are times when we act out this drama in a big way, from tragic beginning to bitter end. But we do it faster now, much faster. And the quality has changed. The situation doesn't carry as heavy a charge. And part way through we begin to see ourselves and our drama as transparently silly. What used to be taken in great seriousness becomes a joke. We end up laughing.

So, when I am being totally unconscious, then my initial response to an uncomfortable new situation, is to create a drama. And when I notice that I have done

so I realize there is something which I need to "process." The particular drama enacted gives me clues as to the nature of the original itch, what I need to work on now. But still, the question becomes, why this drama, and why now? What triggered it? What am I supposed to learn?

This is the beginning of processing: I'm uneasy, I know it, and I want to know why. How can I find out? Not through any left-brained approach. Not through logic, or making lists, or any kind of directed action. Instead, I must listen. I must listen intently, to what is going on inside.

The first thing I do is ask for a dream — and I usually get that dream, the same night I ask for it! When the dream is relevant to my current situation, it shocks me awake. A dream figure or situation will echo something in yesterday's experience. This sets up a reverberation, a hum — as if some cosmic musician plucked a string, and set up a harmonic between two points — one in my dream, the other in waking life.

Sometimes the dream itself is the first clue that something is off-center in my life. If a dream awakens me, if it has a powerful, numinous charge, if on awakening from this dream, I feel altered in some mysterious manner, then the dream is telling me: something in my waking life needs my attention.

For example, over the period of the last ten years or so, I have had a series of dreams with a repeated theme, that of a nasty skuzzy man chasing me. The male principle within myself, still acting patriarchal! My *animus*, the male principle within, is trying to meet me, and I keep running away! And no wonder, since he is so nasty! I've worked with this aspect of my personality for all these years, and still there are times when it continues to teach me, and to demand that I listen. So, even if I haven't paid conscious attention to a feeling of unease before this, the dream itself will wake me up.

So now I am charged. Something is bothering me, and I know it. I *feel* it. In processing, there is always an emotional component. Processing goes nowhere unless the situation becomes thoroughly embodied. And though I don't have words for what is

going on, I will probably notice that inside me there is a question hovering just out of reach, which needs to be addressed. But the question itself is still vague. I need to allow it time to formulate itself.

In order for this next step to happen, I have learned that I must let the question go, allow it to submerge in the subconscious. Meanwhile I do other things, preferably in the physical world, which require no thought — like cleaning out that closet or weeding the garden. It is during this "downtime" that the subconscious ferments. It feels as if all the elements of the confusing mix I have been feeling melt down into a medium in which new forms gradually reveal themselves.

At this point in the process I will also look at the astrology of the time (I have been a professional astrologer for 20 years), and I may also do the Tarot, pick a Rune, or read the I Ching. I pull in my symbolic languages, and let them speak. They help me to become more present in my life. In their presence I center myself, moving beyond the continuous buzz of the passing show to encounter the stillness of essence, or soul. These sacred, metaphysical languages suggest symbols, which help me make sense of the current disturbing situation, one that seems to call from me some shift in values, or a decision, or an action.

Co-processing

Sometimes I process my experience entirely alone. Usually, however, I seek out another woman. "Girl talk," we call it, to the men. Most of them do not understand processing. They think we "go round and round in circles," repeating ourselves. They see what we do as gossip, since what fascinates women is so often in the personal realm.

But there is an enormous difference between gossip and personal processing. Gossip is a prurient or voyeuristic interest in another's personal affairs. We gossip about a person as "other" than ourselves, and implicitly compare them — their troubles, their sins — with ourselves, who, of course, would *never* do such a thing.

Personal processing is a transformation of gossip. In helping each other process our experience, or even when two women talk of a third woman's experience, the feeling is that of empathy, compassion. We see her as ourselves; we attune to her psyche in order to more fully comprehend our own.

Female knowing comes from the heart. Our capacity for intimacy is instantaneous. We can be strangers one minute, and deeply connected the next. This leap we make into each other's personal space is the vibrational recognition of a certain quality.

This "quality" is instantly recognizable. It radiates from the inner being — as a certain way of being in and moving through experience. When I am instantly aligned with someone in this manner (usually, but not always a woman), I intuitively know that she too is dedicated to the search for meaning in her life; that she not only lives through each experience, seeking to become more and more alive to its possibilities, she also "processes" that experience over time, wanting to glean its lessons in the fullest possible way.

We tell each other our stories, tune into each other's situation, share with each other what each of us is "working on." We circle round and round, probing ever more deeply into feelings hidden within the obvious. Our empathy with each other's process both amplifies any situation, making it stand out in sharp relief, and it clarifies. By talking a situation through, the light keeps changing. Shining different lights on the same thing changes the way we see it, changes our relationship to it, changes us. We become aware of how both the situation in question and our very beings are subtly altering their tone through time.

It's true, in our talk we do go round and round in circles. And as we do the circles change. There are many circles, and they nest inside one another; or different cycles meet, overlap, intersect. We go round and round in circles, gradually changing our view of a single situation, gaining new insight with each subtle shift. We seek analogies, images, patterns, linking this situation to others, the cycle it is a part of to other larger ones, or smaller. Our circles mutate into spirals. We ascend the spiral, gaining more and

more perspective, distance, equanimity, acceptance of what was bothering us. Or, we descend the spiral, uncovering more and more layers, descending further into darkness, feeling our way through that wordless pregnant space to that still point where pain originates and experience is born.

We spiral up and down: we are enlarging the scope of our awareness and we are deepening our felt response to the original situation. We weave meaning from the various threads of our lives and our deepening charges us with new life. And we are fascinated by the continuous search for more, more — more meaning, more aliveness.

For me, processing something which bothers me can take anywhere from a few minutes to many months to years. It begins as an uneasy feeling, and it ends with a feeling of peace, calm. In between I have called upon dreams, symbolic languages, female friends. The original situation, once completed, no longer carries an emotional charge. Through processing I integrate what is new and eliminate what I no longer need.

Why Process?

But why process? Why spend so much time reflecting upon experience? Wouldn't time be better spent "doing things"? Or, wouldn't it be better to just go into therapy, spend one hour a week on this business (like church on Sunday), and forget it the rest of the time?

I realize that "processing" is not the way of the world we live in. Self-reflection, when engaged in as a deep personal commitment, does require a great deal of energy. For me, however, it has proved invaluable.

The rewards of personal processing are difficult to describe to anyone who has not experienced the richness of this dedicated journey of self-discovery. Simply: I have moved into a different way-of-life than I inhabited before. Furthermore, the rewards of processing are not really separable. One might call them steps along the way. Or better: they are aspects of a single flow, a flow that spreads and deepens into increasing

richness and complexity as time goes on. I list four of these "rewards" here, in order of increasing value, each one building upon the one before it.

1. ***In processing my experience, I am becoming truly free.*** Free from habit patterns of the past. Free of addictions. Free to encounter and enjoy the uniqueness of each moment. Rather than experiencing life as a treadmill, and myself as a sort of robot mechanically moving through each day, my life feels like a flower, forever opening into bloom. If processing did nothing more than this it would hold extraordinary value. How many of us can claim to be becoming truly free?

2. ***The more fully I process my experience, the more capable I am of putting what has happened into context, the more insight I gain into my own original nature.*** This discovery process is inherently satisfying to the mind and spirit. It is what Socrates counseled, and before him, the female oracle at Delphi: *Know Thyself*.

3. This next result is utterly unexpected; it is a sort of grace note, a mysterious blessing: ***as I learn, through processing, to understand myself, my deeper motives, the wellsprings of my action, my heart opens!*** I can visualize this by saying that the more fully I understand something, the more my "point of view" tends to enlarge — from a point into a space. Spaces, as they open, fill with love, compassion. I see why I acted that way, given my understanding of the roots of that action. I see how others acted in their ways as well. I feel for our mutual painful ignorance. I forgive.

4. Finally — and now I am venturing into territory I do not comprehend; it feels as if I am glimpsing dimensions which are way beyond my capacity, and yet I *know*, intuitively, something about them, and that they are real: ***the more fully I process my experience, the more I "know" that I know nothing!***

As I say this I become frustrated, because it sounds like a cliché. We often hear people talk like this, especially those who are looking back over long full lives and remembering how brash and cocky they were as youngsters. "I used to know a lot. Now I

know nothing . . ." But what, really, are these people saying? I feel that this is one of those clichés which hides a profound understanding, and which we seldom bother to investigate.

Let me present this fourth reward of processing again, in another way: ***I realize that no matter how large my understanding, it is as nothing compared to the infinite.*** Now here's where it becomes difficult for me to describe further, but I will attempt it anyway: it feels to me that ***the more full of insight and love I become, the larger do I feel the space within which my own understanding operates as a mere point within it.*** No matter how much I understand, it is as nothing compared to its larger, more spacious context. I begin to sense my own infinitesimal place in the universe, and I surrender to that larger mystery.

So the fourth reward of processing is that as time goes on, I understand things both more and more and less and less. This conjunction of ideas is achieved simultaneously, and it is contradictory, a paradox. In order to embrace a paradox, my very being must become larger than two apparently contradictory truths, which I am simultaneously holding. In order to truly embrace a paradox, I, myself, must expand, or grow.

To process my experience is to grow. Is to become my fully creative self, expanding indefinitely. No matter how long I live, I remain flexible and curious, alive to the world around and within me. For the more I learn, the larger is the space which I am sensing, the more I open into that space, the more full of love I become, and the more I surrender to the infinite vastness within which I am but a tiny speck in the Goddess's eye. To process my experience is to live my life fully, and with sacred intent.