

Fog

A Poem to Understand
What an Emotional Flashback is

Fog



As the car
Traveled from clear sky
To heavy fog,
I thought about
Being in the fog.

When I'm "in it,"
I can't see much.
Perhaps I can see
The taillights of the
Car in front of me.
Perhaps not.
I can't tell how long
The fog will last.

If I'm "in it" for a long time
I kind of get used to the fog.
Drive more slowly.
Drive more cautiously.
It's hard to see a deer
In my path until
The last moment.

Being in the fog is kinda like
Experiencing an emotional flashback.

When you are in an emotional flashback,
You are “in it.”

It feels like it will never end.

As the fog distorts our ability to see clearly,
Being in an emotional flashback
Distorts our ability to think and feel clearly.

An emotional flashback is like a
Flashback from war—

The soldier is now off the battlefield,
But once he hears a car backfire,
He’s on the floor, seeking cover, assessing danger.
He experiences life as if he is still at war.

Let’s call that “survival stress.”

Some of us experienced childhood
As dangerous.

But when we experienced it
As small children—

Before we had words,
Before we had visual memories
(Because our brain hadn’t yet
Developed that ability),

We had (and have even now) what is called
“Body memories.”

So, when we see an angry face
Or smell an abuser’s cologne
Or see a red shirt that
A perpetrator wore
Or hear someone yelling in rage—

Many things can be a trigger—

Then we are suddenly
“IN IT!”

We are experiencing an
Emotional Flashback.

But we often don’t know it
Because there is no visual memory
Or coherent story
(Because, again, we were too young
For that brain development yet).

And we,
Like the combat soldier at home,
Are suddenly running
In survival stress.

We are experiencing the world
As dangerous, chaotic, unpredictable.

And it feels overwhelming.

It is as if we are feeling now
As helpless and hopeless and alone
As we felt many times as little kids.

It's terrifying--
Those times of being hurt or scared—
When no one helped us
Return to a place of calm and feeling safe.

And what happened to us as kids,
To survive,
Our bodies unconsciously and automatically
Pushed those terrible feelings
Back down inside our bodies
And put a lid on it so
We didn't have to feel
All of those terrifying feelings.
And we didn't have to feel
All of those horrible body sensations.

And now, when something
Unconsciously reminds us of the abuse,
Wham, we are back in it,
And it is overwhelming.

What's harder,
Is our body and mind unconsciously
React in less than a second
To this trigger,
To this perceived danger—
And our adult, rational part
Of our brain goes offline
'Cuz we are now
Experiencing survival stress.

Now, if there is
Real Danger—
Say a person wants to hurt us,
We want to instinctively react
Faster than a second
To hide, to attack, to run.

We don't want to think through it,
Nor make decisions consciously—

That takes too much time
When there is real danger.

So, we want our instincts
To work fast!

But now,
We get triggered at times
When there isn't danger,

But our bodies and minds
Believe there is a threat—

That's what an emotional flashback is!

Questions you might want to consider:

- Tell Jesus about a time you experienced an emotional flashback.
- Do you recognize yourself in a part of the poem?
- What feelings do you experience as you read it?
- What does this poem remind you of in your own life? Any adult memories? Any kid memories?

Feel free to mark up this poem—make it yours! Put your name in it, rewrite passages, cross out what doesn't apply. Share with others if you want!

*I created the character Zoey to help people
understand and heal from childhood trauma*

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(No. 3—1.31.25)