

FROM THE INSIDE OUT ¹

Putting a Reality together

by Guy Bilodeau

You land in this world here and the first thing you know, you're being hit and screamed at by this person who's gonna be around most of the time. You start to be scared of her and her reactions. But what gets confusing is that sometimes she takes you in her arms and she's really warm. So you're happy, you feel her warmth, it's really good. Then all of a sudden she starts screaming at you. You're scared and you cry. Looks like that makes her even more furious, and she starts hitting you. You're scared, you want it to stop, you show her you're scared, you cry, you scream, you call for help, but nobody answers. You're in an empty space and you're falling. There's nobody to protect you, nothing to grab onto. You hurt. Being hurt and being scared wear you out. You fall asleep.

And then you wake up. Here she comes. You stiffen. You're scared. She takes you in her arms and it's warm. You relax a bit. Her voice is soft, you love that smiling face, you feel safe, trusting. There are other people around. They feel good, they feel the warmth too. Then, there's no time for you to figure out what started it, but the room gets noisier, the faces get twisted, and you feel that things are heading fast, really fast, for what you're already scared of. There's shouting. You're scared again. You start crying. Now they're looking at you. You know what's coming and that makes you scarer. You already know you shouldn't but you're so scared you can't help it. Then somebody's hitting you. A lot. The screaming and that tone of voice hurt even more. You look for somebody or something to hold onto, but it's the empty space again.

Next time, not even the smiling and cuddling make you relax. Now you're always scared. You know the screaming fits are your fault but you don't know exactly what it is you do that sets them off. So you take up as little room as possible, you say as little as possible, you watch your every move like a hawk. Especially when, at home, you feel that uptight feeling you can recognize. You don't even want the warmth she used to give you any more 'cause now, when you get warmth, the uptight feeling is always there too. So you make a little place inside

yourself where you you can feel safe from being hit and screamed at, and be with your sadness that keeps you company and understands you. Then, to get warm, you hold on tight to your pillow, and you fall asleep inside yourself, away from them, away from people you love but that don't love you. That's the only place you don't hurt, the only place you're not so scared, and you go there every chance you get. So you learn that outside is a threat, it's dangerous, and no matter how often you try, outside you can't find the warmth you sense you need. So you hide out in the only place that isn't dangerous, the place only you know about.

Then one day, you're not at home, you're at your young friends' house or at school, and you come across something incredible: there, people laugh together, look each other in the eye, sing, hug each other, play. You think being that easy with people is a crazy thing to do. But... nobody there seems scared or uptight. You can't believe what they're letting themselves do. And the main thing you see is that the children don't seem scared of what the adults might do, and the the adults look so nice, so warm, that you love them right away. You feel as if all of a sudden there's a big push from deep down inside you to be close to these people, the ones you've been waiting for. But, hey, you don't say a thing. You make really sure you don't let anything out. You take those feelings back with you to your safe place. You're the only one who realized anything. All this time you thought your life was real, but now you find out there's your life and then there's real life, and there's some difference.

From then on, things don't look the same. There's something else: those smiles, that warmth, those safe places in real life, not just in the cave inside yourself — that now seems so cold to you. Even your pillow doesn't keep you warm any more. And being so sacred and so sad for so long: what for? Not fair! What did I do do deserve that? And your sadness gets worse and worse. It gets so bad that one time, you're shocked, it just blows out. It throws chairs around and lets out such an incredible scream that everybody around you is scared stiff. The whole thing happened as if you don't have a thing to do with it. You feel you've got it all out, and there was a lot to get out. You feel it, and at the same time you're looking at it from the outside, as if someone else was making all the fuss. And then it's over, you're sobbing, your hearth's been so full for so long. I feel as if I've blown away all the sadness and had nothing to do with the whole thing. Does that ever feel weird! Does it ever feel good! It feels like I just let go of being so uptight for so long. I've just discovered release. Happiness must be a lot like this.

And then, you're not too sure what happened, but you look around to check out the damage. Only a few chairs lying around and some broken glass. But the weirdest thing is these people around you, not moving, as if they've been struck by lightning. And the way they're looking at you, you've never seen that before. They're scared stiff, as if they can't get over the shock of what they've just seen. From the way they're looking at you, you can tell they're scared of you, and most of all they respect you. They respect you the way people have to respect the power and the violence of an earthquake or some unstoppable danger. All these new, mixed feelings make you feel peaceful and strong, as if you're plugged into some new current. It's as if you've just arrived on the planet. It's the Big Bang. You've just been born. You've arrived. You're just hitting your stride. What's inside has come out. At last. Then, things outside start moving again. The people look at each other. They pick up the pieces. She manages to say: "Get into your room!" I feel so good I sleep like a real baby. Things are never gonna be the same again. I've popped my cork. It's as if all that pressure I was feeling has blown out at last.

But I had to put the cork back in, PDQ. It was as if knowing that all that punishment and not being allowed to do all those things wasn't fair made the sadness worse. I wanted things to be fair, and I got punished. The more I wanted, the more I got told I couldn't do things. I took it all, I took it all back to my safe place, the things I wasn't allowed to do, the accusations, the condemnations, the punishments. They never listened to me. All they ever said was: "Shut up!" But the more you shut up, the more characters remain locked up inside. In time, you realize that your hideaway has been invaded. That outsiders have found a way in. That violence knows no boundaries. That you must protect yourself both on the inside and on the outside. That the words that hurt are echoing inside. That memories are more real than the present. All of a sudden you hear a voice: "Hey! are you listening? Don't you care about what I am saying? How do you expect to understand if you don't listen?" It happens to me all the time. I get chewed out for being distracted as if it was my choice. But how can I explain that just a word or a flash can revive my nightmares and foul up the present. Even I don't understand. I am trying to direct traffic between jams!

Then I discovered the warmth of friends. We could talk about anything, absolutely anything. No accusations, no court cases, no condemnations. Most of all, they listened. Sometimes I was so surprised they were interested, I couldn't say anything. I'd learned what to do up to a point, how to ask for something, but I'd never got beyond that, I'd never got permission. Beyond that

point, I didn't have a clue what to do or say. And I could try anything. With them, I discovered more in a few months than I did in my entire life before: how powerful a smile is, a touch, having fun, letting it out, saying what you think. Sometimes we even made like adults, playing who's the strongest, who's always right, who's the all-round champion. And that was when I discovered the magic of drugs. I smoked a little joint and I got bubbly, high. It was incredible. Everything I didn't get to know or learn all those years came to me all at once. I was normal, I could laugh, I could have fun. I could try coke too. More magic. One line and I was in charge of my life. I felt I was in complete control. I even found out new things about myself, things I never dreamed I had before: how fast I thought, how creative I was, what a party person. Wowzie. I saw why doing drugs is called a trip. It takes you a million miles from that disgusting day-to-day life. It gets you out of all that shit. Really. And another thing, the best thing. It makes you peaceful inside. The volcano's quiet. And that was a good thing. I know now that if I hadn't done drugs then I would have done myself in. But it was too good to last. Sometimes then I was feeling so high and so good with my friends, I could forget everything else, forget about time. But one night things got really heavy. This time she was the one who popped her cork. The volcano inside her blew. What happened was that she found dope in my drawer. That time she did the worst things she ever did to me. I recognized the tone of voice, the screaming. But that time, the worst thing was the way she looked at me. I never felt so much hate, so much evil. If looks could kill, if words could kill... she really got me where it hurt. That's when I learned what it means to break somebody. Actually wear them down. Destroy them. I know right then something snapped inside me. I think it was something like hoping or trusting that things would get better. I thought: "That's it, that's all." And while I was feeling really down like that, she was keeping on at me. At one point through all that pain that was tearing me up, I heard her start into my friends, "those pothead buddies of yours", and saying there was no way I would ever be seeing that "scum" again. Hearing her start into the only people that cared about me, the people that had given me everything and taught me everything, made something snap. My cork popped. My volcano blew too. Confrontation. Sure, I was defending myself too, but it was mainly the attacks on my friends that made me blow up. I could take lots more about myself, but don't start in on my friends. They're my only safe place on the outside.

Then it was the social workers. The youth workers. She said she couldn't handle it all alone any more. So a bunch of them started to handle it. Now I was

a case. They studied me, assessed me, classified me, diagnosed me. And placed me. Incredible. It was really bad. One thing I remember was a screaming match with my mother in the social worker's office. She said I was the reason her life was a mess and the whole world was a mess. She said again she didn't know what to do with me any more. I was her problem. I was a problem. None of that was fair. That was too much. The volcano inside started to shake and rumble. I was keeping the cork in, I knew I had to shut up, but it was too much. I blew up. When you've been there a hundred times, it's hard not to. So they placed me under round-the-clock supervision in a center 'cause, the way things were, it was too easy to blow. Then I realized that I was screwed, either way. If they believed her, then I was inside to be rehabilitated. But even if they believed me and all the bad things she had done to me, they couldn't send me back home and I'd still be inside. There was no way out. So I started living like a tourist in foster families and group homes. But the hardest thing was being cut off from people like me, from my friends. And they know it, too. They know that no contacts is the worst thing, the worst kind of blackmail they can hit you with. I learned a lot more then about the rules of the game. Every time, somebody's responsible, it's somebody's fault, and that somebody is you. If you rebel against things not being fair, you're antisocial and you've got to change. If you shut up, then you're withdrawn and that's not good, you've got to open up, but when you open up, nobody believes you. It's the old game: "Answer me when I say something to you!" and "Don't answer me back!". Either way, you lose.

You can't take it any more, things not being fair. You fake going along with things. That's how you stay out of trouble. That's another rule. But sometimes it's more than you can take, the volcano rumbles, and something or somebody gets hurt. Now you're into volcano management. Sometimes you manage OK, and sometimes you lose it. And some people know just how to get you going, as if sometimes they've got to prove they were right that you're the problem, the problem's inside you, you're the one responsible for the whole mess. And the solution is for them to break you. All the time, you have to find safe places, even if it gets harder and harder, even if they try and control you more and more. Some friends, some dope, some freedom. Gimme a break. When you're moving around a lot, it's hard to keep your friends. But you get so you can recognize each other. Even if you don't know each other, you recognize when people are scared, when they're not really there. And sometimes you feel warm again together, like in a pack. Doing dope makes you do other things. For one thing, you have to find the money you need. That's a violent place to be, too. You

don't get something for nothing. And then sometimes you're free, you exist, with everything good about you, all your fantasies, all your warmth, all your trust. Usually that happens with friends that know where you're coming from. They've been there. They understand. Too bad you've gotta sneak those times away from the people that never think you're OK.

Good thing there are some people who listen, though. Sometimes I find myself dreaming that there are people like Pops and Dan all over the place, real people that don't analyze you or label you or condemn you but see your volcano inside, connect with your pain, right on, take the cork out gently and give you a hug, for free, not to prove they're right or use you for anything at all but 'cause they love you, just like those cute kids with pink cheeks in happy families that live on that another planet. Know something? They organized a deportation of violent kids to that planet with the cold caves, and what they do when they get there is to get together and make the volcanos burn and make so much smoke you can see them light years away. Really. My dream is that some day everybody who sees that kind of violence happening will sign a petition to set up safe places that are open, with friends and help, where people could learn and practice understanding, warmth and trust. That would replace all the court cases that just drive people farther apart. We need you. But, careful, we've been hurt.

We're open to people that want to listen.

Text written by Guy Bilodeau ©, based on comments by young persons at a workshop on Violence among young people at the Théâtre Parminou.

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