



Beginning at the Beginning By Geills Meredith

It was the dog who convinced me.

I was at war with the world, apparently. Family members had been telling me my anger was raging out of control. I thought they were being mean. I didn't understand.

I didn't *feel* angry. Okay, so I was yelling a lot. But... I wasn't angry. I would have known, wouldn't I? What was wrong with them? They'd changed so much since my accident.

Then I noticed the dog.

Our border collie, Finn, usually so joyful and welcoming with me, had started slinking out of the room whenever I entered. I was devastated.

Often, it is the problem that is the powerful teacher. The problem is messy. We notice the mess. So I finally paid attention to what family members were saying about my anger. But I didn't understand how to begin learning to identify, name and appropriately express anger. How was I supposed to manage something I didn't realize was happening?

Life had become formidable. I moved in a fog. It was all so much blur and slippage... Inside my head there was nothing concrete with which to anchor my thoughts. I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem; depressed by the seeming hopelessness of it.

The only thing I could think to do was watch the dog. He became my external cue for emotion. If Finn was calm I knew I was also; he became upset in direct proportion to my level of agitation. So, Finn would tell me what I was feeling.

Looking at the dog, impressed by how effectively he communicated without language, the thought came to me: how had I taught my children to identify their anger? What had I done when they were really young, before they mastered words?

Ah... there we go! I had taught them to listen to their body. Our body is always truthful; always lets us know. We need to remember how to listen.

Listening to the body

The first physical anger response that I noticed was in my stomach—knots, a twisting feeling. However, Finn was still slinking away at that point. My self-correction lagged behind what the

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situation needed. Nonetheless, I learned to connect the feeling in my stomach with the action of yelling. I wanted a more subtle acknowledgement.

Incredibly slowly I began to listen, focusing inward, slowing myself down, slowing my breathing, paying attention. It was an internal whispering, an intense concentration, until I discovered that my anger came in stages, escalating eventually to the point of no control.

Fine-tuning my attention, I noticed that I first felt a flush as my body temperature rose, then my breathing quickened and my heartbeat increased. After that, my neck tensed and my shoulders tightened. I would start to lean forward at that point, moving in toward the object of my anger. Finally I felt the knots in my stomach.

With Finn as my mirror I learned to catch my anger at its beginning and for those times when I was too tired or stressed to succeed in calming myself, I simply left the situation. It took me three years to accomplish this.

Having grown up in a culture and a household that told children how and what to feel, where conforming to a homogenous, repressive norm was expected, re-learning to listen to what my body was telling me was liberating.

I have no idea how old I was when I let go of my inherent intuition. I do remember that often what adults were saying to me directly contradicted what I felt or sensed. In order to survive I learned to ignore what I felt, what I intuitively knew.

I developed a complicated persona based on the expectations of others, in the process disconnecting from who I originally was. That authentic person slipped away until I was no longer rooted in my true self—building walls between who I really was and how I behaved.

I had surrendered huge parts of myself in order to manoeuvre life. Somewhere in all the trading and hiding and denying I had accepted that I didn't matter, living my life with only an intellectual connection to my emotions. The brain injury put an end to that.

I was rudderless. Not only had my sense of self-worth been fuelled by intellectual attaching, this was how I made sense of the world around me. Internally fragmented, intellectualizing became the currency of my entire life.

Learning to regulate my anger was only one aspect of what I needed to accomplish. To my mind, loss of temper is intrinsically linked to impulse control, which is linked to making choices or decisions. Making choices depends on understanding—a fundamental component of effective information processing.

Problems with anger management put me on a journey of discovery that I could not have imagined. Seemingly separate challenges with organization, reading, language, numeracy and memory converged until I understood that everything I needed to address was interconnected.

I began to wonder how emotion and skills relate to each other. What if the brain fails in attempts to appropriately achieve impulse control and decision-making? What if we are reactively angry as a stock response? What place does that put us in—both inside our own head and out in the world? Who are we without successful management of these?

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I circled around these ideas and questions, no longer understanding what my brain could or couldn't do, how it worked, who I was in all of this. I picked over the bones of my pre-accident life: what was left? What could be useful in new ways that had value and meaning *now*?

Being a child again

Picasso said: "I have spent my whole lifetime learning to paint like a child".

Somewhere in the frustration and agitation it came to me: having studied early childhood behaviour, I had *learned* how to teach my children. I went back to what I knew: Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori, who both developed educational theories based directly on stages of child and brain development.

I found the texts I'd kept from university and started at the beginning. For the most part the writing in the texts was too technical for my comprehension level at that point; nonetheless I grasped some important basics.

Reading was painful and slow. My headaches were excruciating. *Thinking hurt!* This difficulty was unfamiliar territory for me. Prior to my brain injury I could push my brain as far as I wanted. Even after a lifetime of challenging myself academically and mentally I had never reached a limit. Now I felt hobbled and incompetent and defeated.

By the time I finished a passage I no longer remembered what I'd read. Slowing myself down, slowing the reading process, I took it one sentence at a time until I understood. I worked up to a paragraph at a time and then a page and so on.

The information resonated with me in a personal way. I *recognized* infancy: all sense and unnamed feeling, not quite understanding what was happening, absorbing other people's energy, unable to sort through and filter out stimulation, reactive, so little control... Oh, wow, this is what it feels like to be a baby! The brain injury took me back to life before language competency and conscious choices, before deliberate determination.

Like sliding into home base, the ideas connected. I hadn't lost me, I had lost the learned behaviours masking me! Stripped of links to how I had learned to behave, I saw my own truth—immediate, honest, undefended.

Re-learning was like carefully unfolding a piece of paper that's been crumpled into a ball. Smoothing it out flat. Assessing its crevices and nooks and crannies. Pressing out the wrinkles. Writing on it anew.

Not rooted in language or intellect, babies use all of their senses to learn. They connect everything around them through sound, sight, taste, touch—everything they learn is in relation to every other thing they know, and so I thought: they intuitively and naturally connect what they learn to what they feel. For me this was key to my own healing.

I decided to re-teach myself as if I were a child, newly learning everything. I bought pre-school workbooks on shapes, letters, numbers and connect-the-dots from the grocery store. I re-read the books I had raised my children with; Dr. Seuss' rhyming was excellent for verbal language proficiency and ease.

Even though I could read at an adult level, choosing to start with children's books gave me the opportunity to go through natural life stages—to raise myself up emotionally and intellectually in

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the appropriate ways I had missed the first time around. Moving quickly through what came easily gave me successes to counteract my sense of loss.

Developing concurrently, emotion and intellect took root together—becoming mutually supporting rather than disconnected and estranged. This grounded me, ultimately converting my self-perception to a healthy, positive one.

As well, I used flash cards for memory building. All in all, I went through workbooks from first learning to the end of elementary school, building my skills and rudimentary knowledge at a pace I could cope with.

I developed an interest in jigsaw puzzles because some days I couldn't even identify shapes. Finding the correct place for the shape forced me to pay attention to its relationship to the shapes around it. How did it fit in? Did the size, edges and colours match?

Simple jigsaw puzzles put me on a trajectory that assisted my brain in developing new connections to what I was seeing, hearing, tasting, touching. Who would have thought that such a simple thing could have the profound impact it did—re-connecting me to myself, to the world around me? Yet it was a foundation for all my learning. We understand the world because of context, recognizing what we do, as much as anything, because of its *relationship* to everything else we know.

Eventually I moved on to online jigsaw puzzles that were timed. That wasn't quite as successful as the workbooks but I think it helped me to speed up information processing a bit and to become more accepting of time pressures.

Throughout this massive re-construction, I carried a dictionary and thesaurus around with me, bookmarked them online, to handle memory lapses and word recall difficulty.

Once annoyingly efficient, I no longer knew how to complete tasks. The brain injury had eradicated my organizational skills. With that came a sense of helplessness, loss of control and dependence that I found frightening. I needed to find props and aides in order to carry out multi-step tasks. The fear lingers because, despite supports, anxiety about losing my way can still escalate alarmingly to full-blown panic.

Highly motivated to help me find ways to calm myself, my daughter worked with me to identify my primary anger and anxiety triggers: unwanted spontaneous events, situations I had been unable to prepare for in advance, fear of being unable to help myself. I discovered that fear is the source of much of my anger.

Together we created a statement I can mentally leap to when I feel anxious: "It's not what I expected". For me it is precisely the diffuser I need in anxious moments and carries my thoughts away from escalating emotion, reactivity and confusion. It is the tool that allows me to pause and *think*.

As well, I found online tips and templates for organizing that I use constantly. I no longer need copies taped to the inside of the kitchen cupboard doors as I had in the beginning, but still refer to them online as I require. These are effective resources that take care of the details I frequently forget, leaving my brain free to attend to bigger, more pressing issues and challenges.

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Pulling it all together

While I initially focused intently on Finn in relation to my anger, taking charge of my emotions left me free to consider more contemplative ideas. I began paying attention to all his reactions and was deeply moved by how joyful he is. Finn throws his whole being into every single moment of his life. There is not a bit of himself he holds back.

He lives fully in a perpetual Now and the richness of his immersion is awe-inspiring. Finn, my inadvertent teacher, shows me how to connect to the moment, to joy, to being focused and attentive. It can still be very difficult for me to hold onto the threads of what I've learned these seven years since my accident. Finn reminds me that sometimes the best I can do is navigate life a moment at a time—and that's okay.

Brain injury survivors have challenges most people don't have to think about. Staying in the moment, being carefully conscious of everything we do can be exhausting. There are too many distractions assaulting our attention, bombarding our brain with non-stop stimuli we struggle to process. We live in a social structure that pulls us away from now, that fragments us—insisting we focus outward, on the external, inclined to the future.

Ultimately, for me life isn't a destination, but a journey and I am determined to extract the most I can from it. Not for any perceived utility or pleasing others but simply because I am here, I exist and I deserve the best I can give myself, from the inside out.

Having identified the opportunity to re-form who I am as a person, I have made a commitment to myself to be a supportive friend to Me—and consider it a priority to provide for my brain the information and conditions it needs in order to function comfortably and somewhat smoothly. Pursuing these has connected my mind, body and spirit in ways I had never conceived. It has strengthened me immeasurably at my core.

The sum of what I have gained has been more than skills and self-knowledge—it has been a personal *re-emergence*.

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Some useful online links that have helped me:

Jean Piaget quotes on the learning process (Jean Piaget's Educational Theory):
<http://www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Piaget.html>

"Learning changes the physical structure of the brain ... learning organizes and reorganizes the brain"; *How People Learn*: Chapter 4: How Children Learn & 5: Mind and Brain
http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=6160

Anger management:
<http://www.angriesout.com/>

Setting boundaries:
<http://authenticmama.com/setting-personal-boundaries-family/>

Organizational tips and templates:

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<http://organizedhome.com/printable>

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