

Epiphanies

by **Thomas J. Scheff** (May 2014)

When I was 40, long ago, I had what I think must have been an extremely unusual experience. I had just gotten divorced, and my ex had run off with our children to Hawaii for a year. Appalled, and not realizing I could have gotten a court order to bring them back, I was miserable.

To my surprise, I couldn't work. I seemed to have lost interest. I went to my office every workday, but if I didn't have a class or an appointment, I would put my feet up on the desk and stare at the wall. Something had to be done! I arranged to get time off for a trip to Hawaii in two weeks to see my children. In the meantime, I visited a psychiatrist, then a psychologist, but to no avail. I wouldn't take drugs, and back then, I didn't have the patience for talking therapy.

At the time I was chair of my university department, so I had contacts with many people, some of whom I hardly knew. I was puzzled when several had asked me why I was angry, even though I wasn't feeling anger. If I was angry, I certainly didn't realize it. Another experience arose because I was active in the Vietnam War protest. My fellow protesters called me courageous because of the chances I took. But after the experiences described below, I realized that I hadn't been feeling fear, so I had no strong and instant sense of danger. My bouts with police weren't courageous, just reckless.

Still in misery, I joined a self-help group therapy class. The night after the first meeting I was telling my then girl-friend how envious I was when others were crying during the session. She encouraged me by listening sympathetically and without comment. After a few minutes of complaining, I began to cry. This episode lasted at least fifteen minutes: it became quite intense after a slow and somewhat painful start, and was a huge surprise. It was probably the first real cry in more than thirty years. The crying part of me had been completely unknown. In fact I couldn't remember ever a cry like this one, with my whole body, sobbing loudly and rivers of tears. Also peculiar: I had absolutely no idea of what I was crying about. My mind was blank.

A few minutes after the crying stopped, I was catching my breath when a new episode began. I became colossally angry, but without the faintest notion of why, just as I hadn't known why I was crying. With no volition on my part, I began to growl, writhe and bite at the air. As in crying, my body seemed to take over. The writhing became so pronounced that I fell out of bed.

Finding myself lying on a shag rug provided an actual target; without hesitation I began to bite the rug. But then a thought: what will Rachel think of me acting in this ridiculous way? Since I couldn't guess, I stopped and looked up at her, saying: "Are you OK?" She smiled, "Go ahead. Do your thing." I resumed writhing, growling and biting as if without interruption. In retrospect, the fact that I could stop and start seemed important; how could I possibly have so much control when my body was in the grip of an intense emotion? The idea of a safe zone for resolving emotions will be described below.

The anger stopped after fifteen or twenty minutes. I lay still, wondering what next. It wasn't long before my body took over again, shaking and sweating. The shaking was quite extreme, and the amount of sweat was surprising, drenching my pajamas as if I had gone swimming. In the therapy class they had talked about shaking and sweating as the resolution of fear. Otherwise I wouldn't have known what was happening, since I had no consciousness of fear, or any thoughts, for that matter. Actually, like the other two episodes, it was quite pleasurable, this time riding a vast and completely safe rollercoaster. Again, after some 15 minutes, my body grew still.

Very quickly, however, a thought entered my head, unbidden: "I believe Lord, Oh let me believe." This sentence kept going around as if playing on a record. Having this going on in my mind, unbidden though it was, made this episode somewhat different from the other three, but it was mostly quite similar. Once again my body took over, this time with laughter. But it was a different kind than I had ever experienced: I wasn't laughing in the usual way; instead my body was laughing me. It was enormously joyful, even more than the other episodes. It felt heavenly, an epiphany or ecstasy. After about the same amount of time, I stopped laughing. Exhausted, I fell immediately asleep.

In the morning, waking was a new experience also, since I felt incredibly refreshed. At breakfast I seemed to taste every molecule of the orange juice and food, and the pop music playing on the radio sounded so beautiful that it distracted me.

Several months later, a similar episode was touched off by an anonymous phone call. With the other campus Vietnam protest leaders, I was planning a large on-campus event for the weekend after I returned from Hawaii. This event was causing friction, because the Chancellor had specifically forbidden it, as well as all other protests on campus. I got several phone calls from colleagues in other departments objecting to the plan. Some of the callers were vehement; one challenged me to a fist fight.

The morning of the protest, I was awakened in my apartment by an unknown phone caller. He said

that I was the one stirring up the students, and that he planned to kill me and my family. I was upset by the call, particularly the part about my family. Even though the children were in Hawaii at the time, the idea that there was someone in the world that wanted to harm them got to me. I was so rattled that I thought I would be unable to speak as planned at the protest. It was like being in shock.

Then I remembered that the self-help therapy class had taught me to repeat a mantra over and over concerning whatever emotion might be hidden behind upsets. So I begin repeating "I am afraid." It occurred to me that I hadn't said or even thought that sentence since my teens. After a considerable number of repetitions, I begin to shake with such force that I lowered myself to the rug, so as not to fall. I was also sweating to the point that I again soaked my clothes. I had no thoughts.

After some 15 or 20 minutes, the shaking/sweating fit stopped. I got up off the floor, took a shower, and got dressed in dry clothes. I was just in time to get to the huge protest, where I gave a brief extempore talk that moved the audience. The fear resolution had cleared my head to the point where I knew I would need no preparation.

Before going on to weigh the effects of these two events over the long haul, I need to say that both felt extraordinary at the time they occurred, regardless of the long term. The first series of four emotional events felt at the time, and still, like the best moments of my life, without question. I have had some other wonderful times over the years, but nothing approaching the ecstasy and relief I experienced from these moments. The second event, dealing with fear, also felt immensely powerful, since it completely relieved the paralyzing dread about the safety of my children. Both were epiphanies, revealing a world to me that had been virtually unknown. They reminded me of a song that I had heard as a child, *The Lost Chord* (1877):

Seated one day at the organ,
I was weary and ill at ease,
And my fingers wandered idly
Over the noisy keys.

I know not what I was playing,
Or what I was dreaming then;
But I struck one [chord of music](#),
Like the sound of a [great Amen](#)...

Smaller Effects

I had the notion at the time that the emotion episodes just described had changed me utterly, as if I had been reborn. But in a little while I realized that although I had changed, in many ways I was still the same person. My experiences of partially resolving what must have been huge backlogs of fear, anger, grief and shame were a big help, but it wasn't the end of the line.

The psychiatrist I had seen occasionally, Ben Weininger, was still more skeptical. When I told him about the experiences, he said: "It just shows you are a good student." He meant that it was much less of a step forward than I thought: I was just automatically following the prompting from my teacher. I think now that he was also a bit jealous, since my sessions with him had not resulted in any great strides. But I also realized that he did have a point, that I was by no means cured of all of my hang-ups.

However, I did notice some positive changes that have stayed with me. With regard to anger, for example, my typical reaction was to hide it. Occasionally, however, I would vent, getting loud and unreasonable. After my emotional episodes, the pattern was much the same, but occasionally I managed to express anger in a new way. Here is an example.

On a short flight from Santa Barbara I happened to be seated by chance on the plane next to Professor KP, a famous psychologist on my campus and very much my senior. Nevertheless, full of my story, I started to tell him about my recent emotion experiences. He interrupted me after a few sentences, however, coldly analyzing what I had said. I became intensely angry and interrupted him in turn. Without thought, I blurted out: "Professor P, you are trying to reduce my experience to yours, and I won't have it." I spoke rapidly but courteously, I was not loud or demeaning.

Three things happened: P began apologizing at great length, I felt calm, and the plane seemed to get hot. I was very surprised at my calmness, since anger usually made me hyper, sometimes for many hours afterwards. Looking at other people on the plane, I realized it wasn't the plane that was hot, it was me. Could a rise in body temperature instantly metabolize the adrenalin rush that comes with anger?

This idea was new, since the class had taught that venting led to the resolution of unresolved anger, "getting it off your chest." I was skeptical about this idea even at the time, since I suspected that venting didn't help, and certainly was bad news to whoever you were yelling at. It now seems to me that the best way to deal with anger would be to explain the reason for it courteously to whoever was responsible for it. It hasn't been easy to break the old habit, but when I do, it works like a charm.

Returning to the moment during my anger episode, the way that I was able to stop the anger fit instantly, and just as quickly, return to it. I was puzzled by this moment for several years until I began to read theories of drama. The earliest version of their idea for emotions is found in Aristotle's theory of the theatre: one purpose of theatre, and by implication, most forms of entertainment, is to help audiences resolve their unresolved emotions.

The trick, according to modern drama theory, is for members of the audience to actually feel the emotions the actors arouse, but at the same time stay aware that they are only watching a play. The key idea is called distancing: the emotions aroused are not painful because they are not too close (under-distanced), not too far (over-distanced), where there is little or no emotional involvement, but at aesthetic (optimal) distance, both in and yet also witnessing the feelings.

Over-distancing involves too little emotion; in the theatre, the audience would be unmoved by the play. Underdistancing means too much: the audience merely relives painful experiences rather than resolving them: no fun at all. In my first outpouring, it must have been Rachel's encouragement that allowed me find the zone where I was both experiencing the emotions and also watching myself doing it. In the second, the repetition of the mantra might have given me the ability to not only experience fear, but also watch myself feeling it.

These events changed me in some ways, but I haven't had emotion episodes anywhere near those dimensions ever since. I laugh and cry a lot more than before, my anger expression is sometimes improved, but have had no more fear giants. It could be that since I had two fear resolutions, I was able to navigate better with it than with the other emotions. Certainly I am able to feel fear now, such as when I am driving or being driven on the busy freeways. Maybe more releases will come later in my life, I am hoping.

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