



WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THE OYSTERS YOUR PARENTS GAVE YOU?

We take a step closer to inner calm, effective parenting and world peace when we acknowledge both the light and dark within us and in our backgrounds. When our parents strive to give our children our best it is inevitable that we also reveal our shadow-self - the shadow self that may well be made up of walls of cemented oysters we began gathering when we were children.

What do you do with the oysters your parents gave you? Yes, the oysters. You know the ones, even if you don't know them by that name: the hard crusty bits, not particularly attractive or appealing; grey, motley, pockmarked, hard and thick things that cement themselves, stiff and rigid to parts of your psyche, like blemishes on a beautifully sculptured rock. Not easy to use, to open, to know what to do with. The way your parents, or parent-figures, gave you these oysters doesn't help much. They came to you in a yell, a snap, a slap, a belting, a cross word, a ridicule, torment or a put-down. Perhaps this trusted adult was in a deep rage or maybe it was an irrational act, a frozen silence, a marked exit or an excessive pattern of behaviour. And there you have it, your internal response to a seemingly inconsequential 'moment' or a big outburst – an oyster! These oysters are the blobs of hard, crusty feelings you're left with after a trusted adult 'loses the plot' or does the wrong thing by you.

Out of their very human anger, frustration, irritation, impatience, confusion, sadness, grief, overwhelm, anxiety, distress, unmet needs, rage, or inner torment they've hurt you, confused you, let you down. What do you do with this oyster, this blob of hard crusty feelings you are left with? Some of us aren't as good at fishing as others. If you're like me, more often than not you tucked those oysters away, quick smart. I didn't know what to do with them, I simply 'knew' they weren't something the world liked to see or dwell on. I put them way back where they wouldn't be seen. I kept adding to the pile. They joined up with each other, cementing themselves into big clumps. Wherever I collected enough they created a solid rigid wall. A wall around part of myself, part of that true, pure self that was dwelling in my child's' mind, body, heart. Like all of us, though, I got on with my life, not really aware of the oysters or what they were blocking out.

Most of us have done this in some way or other. There are places in our psyche we just don't want to go to, so we move in other directions to develop our self and our life.

Many years later, long after your last memory of the oysters has faded, you have your own son or daughter and you're doing your darnedest to be there for them, to be the fair, even-tempered parent. They need so much from you, your parenting energies need to come from every corner of your being and sometimes that includes the place where the oysters dwell. You're pushed right up to the hard crusty clump, the rigid wall.

You're face to face with those ugly oysters and before you know it, before you can stop yourself, in a wave of hard crusty feelings you've flung an oyster at your child, perhaps in the same way your mother or father did to you.

And you swore you would never be like that with your children!

There you have it – a yell, a snap, a slap, an outburst, a harsh, cruel, unjust word or deed. Now your children may have started their own collection of oysters. You have never wanted this, that's why you've stayed away from oysters.

There is another way, though. Some of us learn it quite naturally in childhood, some of us need to learn it later, as adults, because of the overwhelming size, nature or abundance of oysters we experienced in the emotional climate of our childhood. It is the way of the fisherman and fisherwoman. You can take the oysters, in a clump, or one by one, if you prefer, and take time to look at them, marvel at them. Yes the oyster is hard, rigid, grey, motley and not very appealing, but turn it over, turn it around. It doesn't bite or spike you if you cradle it gently. Look at it carefully in the light of day and out of the distortion of the water. There's a ripply edge, a seam – two sides folded with each other, each with a smooth face, joined tightly but not cemented. There is a certain beauty and intrigue. When you are ready, perhaps after you have gathered yourself and when you are breathing more evenly, you might want to pry it open, to reveal the inner life-form, the shellfish. It could be a nourishing morsel even if it's not one you relish swallowing, or you may want to simply throw its grey sliminess away. Now look again at the oyster shell, the inside surfaces are smooth, rounded into curves. They're white or cream, some are even luminescent and pearly, how beautiful! Oh and look at this one, there's even a pearl, a thing of rare beauty and strength that can be strung together with others of its kind to glow and reflect the light, a symbol of a deep love, inner wisdom, with a beauty that is forged from working through the rough stuff of life.

Something within me is tempted to say:

'It behoves us, as parents to pass on to our children more pearls than oysters'.

"NO! Wait a minute! It might be a cute metaphor but that's one of those impossibly tall orders that send me scurrying away. How can it ever work in the demands of daily living? I can't dredge up all those oysters. There's too many, I'll be a wreck and that's no good from my children! I'll just try to be better in other areas."

OK then, let's acknowledge that it's an ideal, a vision: Parents who are in a position to hand on pearls rather than oysters or walls of oysters, so that our next generations of children can glow and shine their true light without having to go through the process of building up and then breaking down the hard crusty stuff of the oysters.

That's the vision, now for the reality. I have a collection of oysters and I know if I don't start dealing with them I will keep passing them on to my children. What can I do? Firstly I can simply acknowledge the uncomfortable feelings, the hurts. Whatever patterns were harboured in our family – snapping, yelling, slapping, ridicule or whatever - we can look back and see or feel how it was for us. Yes it was unjust, we were frightened, confused, betrayed, upset or angry.

It's OK now for us to experience those hard, crusty, motley thoughts and feelings, those oysters. We are in control now, we can have a look at the frightening experiences because this is not all they are. As we explore them, some will open up to reveal smooth glistening interiors, we'll find some that bear pearls. Pearls of love or wisdom that our parents would have passed on to us if they were able, if their cemented oyster clusters hadn't got in the way. Some will nourish us, perhaps in unexpected ways. We can talk about them, read books and see films that help us to look at our oysters, cry over them and lift them up out of our tears to see them more clearly.

For every oyster our parents hurled at us, there is a pearl of love or wisdom that they would have liked to have given us.

Once we have the inner stillness and courage to look at our oysters we can then feel more connected with our mother and our father as human beings. It doesn't really matter if we feel like being friends with them or not. We then start to break down those walls that block out part of our true self. We can be more of who we want to be, more connected with our true self.

Next time we face our children and we feel ourselves pushed to the place where the oysters dwell we can say..."OK, this is not going to be easy, I'm feeling a bit wobbly about this, but let's explore it together". Then we've handed our child an opened oyster. Isn't that so much better than throwing a hard cemented one at them? We've taught them to be pearlers and fisherman, so they won't fear oysters and will be able to handle the occasional ones we fling at them a little too fiercely. Of course we will still find ourselves flinging the odd oyster at our children. But then after the event, together, we can explore them.

For instance, our child vomits in a public place when we're in a hurry to make it to an appointment and we find ourself yelling at them, even though part of us wants to help and heal them, give them our love and compassion. We realise, later, that this event triggered in us a memory long since hidden (the oyster) of the time we were sick in a public place and our mother scolded us. We felt ill, afraid, confused and we looked to our mother for her understanding, compassion, guidance and she yelled at us as if we had done something very wrong. Now we can see that, like us, she was overwhelmed with all the demands on her, maybe she was embarrassed and maybe she reacted because this was one of her oysters, some hard crusty feeling and memory of an unjust reaction from her parent, a long time ago, when she was ill. Together with our children we can explore how inappropriate it is for us to react like this (to fling the oyster at them). We can simultaneously express our compassion towards them and ourselves as we explain that there was once a time we were yelled at for vomiting and it felt so unfair because it couldn't be helped. Even if they don't understand our words the whole nature of the interaction will have shifted to one that is healing. And even if we are not aware of a specific memory we can hypothesise about what might have happened to us. As we explore and open the oyster, our pearls can be revealed – the other part of our self that feels pure love, compassion and concern for our child in this moment. When we focus on these feelings we see that they are really the ones driving us, even in our fluster.

Most liberating of all is the discovery that when we have done this once, twice, thrice, the oysters become less of a problem. Just by loosening a few, the remainder seem to become less rigid and have less of a hold on us. We have become better pearlers, fishermen and fisherwomen.

We can then pass on pearls and beautiful, opened oyster shells to our children. They can then follow our example and become pearlers, fishermen and fisherwomen in their own right, without being overly damaged by the inevitable exposure to our oysters.

Lynn Romeo, 2004