



FACING THE BLACK HOLE, IN ORDER TO BE THERE

Most of us have, within us, the odd black hole or void. We know we are near one when we have that gnawing sense of lack, of being thwarted from within; perhaps an underlying boredom or a pervading, if subtle, sense of dread or anxiety about who we are and where we are going. These black holes can be small and transient but there are times it can feel like a vast abyss is threatening to consume us.

Parenthood can take us right up to our black holes, especially when we are really striving to be there for our children. It takes a great deal of strength and courage to face the blackness. We are not alone, though. It can be affirming to know that many others are meeting similar challenges and to hear about their particular paths.

I spent a lot of my first months, maybe even years of parenthood wondering what was wrong with me. These precious beings meant so much to me. I wanted to be there for them, wholeheartedly, to show them the love I had for them, to live out some of the visions and ideals I strove for. The harder I tried to be there, though, the more of a struggle it was, the more those feelings came, the ones that really frightened me if I let them in too much. I'm not sure I could have told you what they were at the time. I felt a constant undercurrent, a need to run and hide, to get away, to avoid facing ... Facing what? Myself? Those ideals? Yes, it was both of those. Yet if you had told me this at the time, it would not have helped.

If you could have been there with me and helped me to be still long enough to face 'IT', you would have seen 'IT'. You would have seen the BLACK HOLE. That huge dark pit – no, not simply a pit - more like an abyss. So big, so dark, so potentially all-engulfing, all-consuming, nullifying and immobilising. Of course I needed to run away from it, just even being near it felt dangerous. If I stood still long enough it seemed to have the potential to swallow me up. So quite naturally, I rarely faced it. I kept myself busy, kept trying harder. I tried to be a better cook, a better mother, a better organiser. If I came too close to the feelings that indicated I was getting near the black hole, I would quickly take on another activity, start another project for myself, my child or family or I would start thinking about going back to work. That's how I avoided the black hole and even avoided admitting its existence.

Lucky for me, I had established a regular yoga practice before I became a mother. Whilst I wasn't doing as much after the birth of my babies, I was able to

keep just a little thread of Yoga in my life. Just enough, it seems, to bring me a certain level of physical, hormonal, mental and emotional balance (although I often felt quite unbalanced at anything other than a superficial level). The physical stretches and postures; the deep relaxation, concentration and meditation opportunities; the breathing exercises; the moments of stillness, no matter how fleeting – all conspired to nurture me, cradle me and take me to the edge of the black hole and look in. It was so natural and gentle, I didn't realise what I was doing. Very, very gradually I felt stronger and stronger and more able to face the black hole. As I did IT became less fearsome, less dark and less deep.

Now that my children are older and I have a bit more time to myself, more sleep, less of the heavy physical demands and I now have the time and space to do more Yoga, the black hole even has some light shining through it and around it.

What is the black hole and what's in it? Well I'm still not exactly sure, but it is partly fear: layers of deep fear and anxiety that begin to grow in all of us during our childhood. The layers continue to grow, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how traumatic our childhood was, how much we are able to cleanse ourselves (I mean physically, emotionally and mentally work off the fear), to what extent we learn to face our difficult feelings (in childhood, adolescence or adulthood), and how good we become at avoidance strategies.

It's the same sort of black hole that we can feel when we experience addictions or obsessions. We could all admit to one or two of these – some come and go, others take hold of us for a period of time. It's the feeling that if you don't have another drink, another cake, another bet, another smoke, another new piece in your collection, another check to see that everything is exactly neat and tidy – something terrible will happen or people will realise what a sham you are, or you'll come close a terrible danger and risk being lost or engulfed forever. So it makes sense, you just have to drink it, eat it, have it, smoke it, do it, check it. When you're stuck in that state you'd be crazy not to, because it is in that moment, when you grasp the thing that is helping you avoid the black hole, that you feel good or safe, almost. But it's only a fleeting illusory moment. Almost as soon as you've had it or done it, you need another one in order to feel better about yourself. Thus the addictive cycles that can be so difficult to break.

These cycles may not be publicly noticeable but they can become particularly prevalent or evident in motherhood. The same patterns that have helped us avoid our black holes, and therefore our true selves, in the rest of our lives can help us avoid facing the challenges of being there for our baby and our children. It's natural for us to use these familiar cycles to deal with or escape the incredible emotional demands of parenthood. These are the internal patterns that can take us back to work when deep down inside we really want to 'stay at home'. I realise now that I had used my work and studies to avoid my black hole. It was understandable that I would be tempted to see work as a solution to my struggles in motherhood, even though I felt a deep urge to stay with my young ones. There are also patterns that can keep us trapped at home or in physical tasks when we might otherwise have reason to take a place in the wider world or develop another side of ourselves. Sometimes we stay at home for our children but are so caught up with the housework or other projects that we often aren't really there for them, emotionally. We can feel trapped by and addicted to the 'things' we just have to do, even when a part of our selves would question how essential they actually are.

Somehow or other the black hole also has a lot to do with our true self, or rather, blocking our true self. Each of us has immense power that we can tap into if we connect with our real essence. Perhaps who we really are seems too powerful, too bright and brings with it too much responsibility for us to face. Maybe we store our fears in the black hole and that helps us avoid our real essence and power.

Whatever it is that is in our black holes, if we are able to face them and therefore open up to our true selves, we can reduce the power that our addictions, obsessions and avoidance strategies have over us. We all have, then, the potential to BE THERE more fully for our selves and thus for the children of our world.

A PRACTICAL POSTSCRIPT

What can you do about your black holes? Here and now there are six things you can do, and none of them take more than a minute. You can do most of them right now, while you're reading, if you want.

- **BREATHE** – Imagine a balloon in your tummy. Breathe in a full deep breath as if to fill the balloon and then keep breathing in to finish filling the lungs. Hold the breath, feel the sense of abundance and then let go gently, slowly releasing all of the breath. Repeat three times now and again before bed tonight.
- **STRETCH** – If you're sitting, lift your crown (which is towards the back of the top of your head), let your chin drop a little towards your chest and feel the back of your neck stretch. Raise your shoulders up towards your ears, back, down and forward. Repeat and reverse. As your shoulders roll back feel the openness over your heart.
 - If you can stand, lift up through your crown, clasp your hands together behind your back and pull them down, draw your shoulders back and down and enjoy the openness over your heart. Repeat before you go to bed,
- **BRING YOUR MIND HERE AND NOW**- choose one thing to observe. Perhaps watch your breath as it comes in over your nostrils or focus on a leaf outside your window. Aim to focus on this for five breaths in and out. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back. Do so with a smile, because many of us find this little exercise is not as easy as it sounds. This is your time and you have chosen to focus on just this one thing. Notice if any feelings come up and simply sit with them for a moment. Then go back to your life.
- **RELAX** – easy to say, not always so easy to do. For a moment squeeze or scrunch your hands, toes and face. Now release. Repeat a few times and allow yourself to experience the physical feeling of letting go. Now if you sigh out your breath as well you know you are also beginning to release emotionally and mentally.
- Bring **BALANCE** into your everyday. Allow yourself some time outside as well as inside. Receive something gracefully from someone (even if it's as simple as a smile). Do something new or positive for your mind, your body and your feelings (stretch out along the floor, read or recall a special thought or memory, write a line in a journal, read a poem or sit with a feeling as if it were your child needing to be coddled or nurtured for a moment). Take a few moments for yourself to try something new and uplifting like a walk, a yoga class, find a place with a view and give yourself an overview, try sitting beneath a tree or out in the sun. Then next time you indulge one of your old patterns like a cuppa, a cake, a chocolate, compare – just notice any difference, no need for judgement.
- Watch yourself for a moment, and practice the three A's, **AWARENESS, ACCEPTANCE, ALLOWING GROWTH**. Once you become aware of something about yourself and if you can simply accept yourself as you are (with all your wonders and foibles), then growth and change will follow without much effort. You can just allow it to unfold.

If you have just tried these exercises you may or may not notice a difference straight away. You may not notice it tomorrow, the next day or next week but there's a good chance that some day soon you'll feel a little lighter, clearer and less fettered. When you do you may not remember having done any of these things. But if you keep repeating them over a few days you may be surprised at the shifts within, especially if you have been experiencing the inevitable struggles of adjustment to life as a parent.

Have any of these little exercises captured your interest?

You might feel inclined to try Yoga for the first time, or pick it up again. There's now growing listing of Yoga Teachers on the Yoga Australia (The over-arching professional body) website:

www.yogaaustralia.org.au

There's probably as many types of Yoga around the world as there are different breads. Some forms are more physical, some more meditative. Many are in between, with a mix of physical postures and stretching (HATHA), breathing (PRANAYAMA), meditation, relaxation (YOGA NIDRA). Many are taught in a way that everyone can work at their own pace and many defy the popular belief that you have to be flexible to do Yoga. There's bound to be a type of Yoga that's right for you not too far away. You might even discover a nurturing, delightful mother and baby class near by.

Before long you may well be seeing motherhood as a most wonderful vehicle for your own growth as well as - in the words of the wise shop assistant, as she gazed at my new first-born in his pram, - *"...the most difficult and most important job you'll ever do..."*.

Lynn Romeo, 2004



MOMENTS OF YOGA ON THE DECKING