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OUT OF THIS WORLD

Learning that I was an empath changed my life. It wasn't that this label gave me meaning or purpose; it just simply explained "me." As an artist, being sensitive is celebrated and somewhat necessary to create. In academia, emotions and feelings should be kept at bay, especially if you're a woman, mainly if you identify as Latina. After all, chances are, you were raised on telenovelas, superstition, and many rules about your body that wore heavy on your heart and made you feel gaslit by the world.

Notwithstanding within popular culture, the word "empath" conjures images of mediums and women who read your palms, tarot cards, or crystal balls. Growing up in the Latino Pentecostal church, everything that suggested the esoteric or any form of mysticism was immediately branded as sinful and therefore was repudiated in the same way as ouija board, magic, and psychics. At this risk of essentializing, I think we Latinas have a bit of "witch" (*bruja*) in our DNA. I had to reason at a very young age about who I was and what I was supposed to become when I (eventually) grew up (in America.) I had to reject the supernatural and science equally. After all, I could pray away a cold and know better than ever sitting my purse on the floor or walking under ladders. This felt like growing down.

Up until my fortieth birthday, I felt like I was still waiting to "adult." Then, all of a sudden, the pandemic forced me (and the world) to pause. So, I was in an endless loop of looking back to move forward, sitting in my subjectivity and mourning. Judith Orloff, who, in addition to being an empath, is also a medical doctor. In many ways, because of this "credential," she is taken (more)

seriously when she provides empirical receipts that empaths are wired differently. She explains that Empaths have a highly reactive neurological system, and as such we don't have the same filters that other people do to block out stimulation. However, this impotence to "block out" noise really does depend on the scenario because I learned how to write while sitting in the loudest bar in the Village. This gift (or superpower) developed because I sat in church for hours and hours as a kid, and therefore had to daydream about the days when I no longer had to sit in a pew to appease my family. I actually learned to sleep with my eyes open, which has come in handy.

Consequently, we (empaths) absorb into our own bodies both the positive and stressful energies around us. Orloff describes, "We are also sensitive that it's like holding something in a hand that has fifty fingers instead of five...We are truly 'super responders'" (Orloff 2018:2). Could I apply my anthropological research methods and theories to make sense of the first half of my life, now that I was at a critical turning point...forty. Is this a crossroads?

TURNING POINT OR CROSSROADS?

Carl G. Jung stated, "life really does begin at 40; up until then, you are just doing research." I'm Latina, so my culture stigmatizes women in their forties by calling them *cuarentonas*. In the best case, the translation of this word is "cougar," but not really. *Cuarentonas* are seen as bitter, frustrated, and finished. Cordelia Fine notes that "When gender is salient in the environment, or we categorize someone as male or female, gender stereotypes are automatically primed. For several years, social psychologists have been investigating how this activation of stereotypes affects our perception of others" (Fine 2010:7). Gender in this way is also entrenched in agist discourse, that can be inescapable. There is an entire recession-proof industry dedicated to helping "women" stop the aging process. How many products are marketed as "age-defying?"

In your thirties, you learn to keep your age a secret. If you're still in school like I was, it helps also give the perception that you're younger (or that you're deferring growing up.) Birthdays can become triggering because you fear that your best years are behind you, or at least, this is what you're led to believe. I remember when I applied to get my marriage license at City Hall, the clerk looked at me and asked, "are you willing to give him the best years of your life?" In his view, I had more "life" to live (as a single person.) Hence, you are made to feel humiliated when those years are over because forty is the expiration date for beauty, pleasure, and success and it is socially imposed and policed.

I thought to myself, at least I feel moderately accomplished (on paper.) I had checked off many exclusive boxes and defied many statistics that systemically did not favor me (or those who look like me, come from where I come from, and who sound like me.) Sharkey and Sampson note, "The impact of violence is not limited to the communities where it is concentrated. Violence exacerbates urban inequality by altering social life in the most disadvantaged communities, creating an added layer of risk that amplifies the effects of economic and racial segregation (Sharkey and Sampson:321). Interestingly, a woman's worth is socialized even before a fetus is born into the world, and this is why women of color pay the highest price for every failed policy.

We are believed to be less, paid less, and all this while doing so much more. Unacceptable.

MILESTONES AND STEPPING STONES: STORYTELLING AS LOVE

When I was pregnant with my son, I had to stop myself from buying into the gender industry because everything was organized around a binary that was further cemented in my Latinx culture. Cordelia Fine highlights how difficult it can be to promote gender-neutral child-rearing practices noting, "...children are born into a whole in which gender is continually emphasized through conventions of dress, appearance, language, color, segregation, and symbols. Everything around the child indicates that whether one is male or female is a matter of great importance" (Fine 2010:227). In my case, I could have not imagined my teenage son would end up being a mixed martial arts fighter who writes folk music, wears his hair long, and is best friends with his mama. When he was teased by other kids for his long hair in first grade, he said with complete confidence, "I am gender non-conforming."

By the time I turned forty, I had a doctorate in anthropology and completed three Master's which only means that before that I do not remember my life outside of a classroom. Also, despite all my education, I know I still have so much to learn. On the heels of my forty-first birthday, I am rethinking the lessons learned four decades prior.

I am the first to admit that my life turned out better than I could have ever imagined as a child. I did not grow up playing with dolls. Mothering did not appeal to me until I fell in love, which happened for the first time at twenty-three. Yet, it is the role that matters most in my life. I have already outgrown most of my vices and broke up with alcohol (it was a complicated relationship.) I am in active recovery. I tend to resist most things that take time and focus away from what I love to do because after Covid-19, I feel being present is vital to surviving, and living is essential to thriving. Yet, I self-consciously reject routines that leave no room for improvisation. I am not satisfied living vicariously through social media posts. Is this what a midlife crisis looks like? Orloff clarifies that "...empaths can have many emotional issues going on simultaneously, which can be overwhelming for them and their partners..." She discusses how her partner feels like his brain is "being squeezed". Centering yourself and processing issues and emotions has to be part of a daily ritual that only now I understand is necessary (Orloff 2018:97). It is not a luxury to rest, refuel, and recalibrate. If you do feel like it is, then a hard reset is crucial.

Recently when I look in the mirror, I can now see my mother's face clearly, and she comes through on her own and distorts my reflection. My mother has always been big on optics and upholds the honor and shame systems that privilege other people's opinions about your life. In Spanish, we call this condition *el que diran*. If you suffer from it, it never goes away. McBride writes that mothers can perpetuate this behavior because "Your mother emphasizes the importance of how it looks to her rather than how it feels to you." (McBride 2008:20). While some experts might call this behavior narcissistic, I wonder if it is just misconstrued. On the side of my forehead, I see her relentless white hair peeking, signaling it is time to get blonder, but never older. I appreciate the laugh lines

on the sides of my mouth, but I scoff at the wrinkles on my forehead. They remind me how different my home is from the one I grew up in.

I started to tell my stories when I turned forty. It became “my thing.” For so long, I felt guilty and ashamed to disclose, to confess, to share. Since I could remember, I have had trouble sleeping. A significant marker of my childhood photos is the dark circles under my eyes. I would worry that no one would speak to me at school since no one really acknowledged me (the full me) at home. As a result, I learned to find everything wrong with me and took inventory lying in bed instead of counting sheep. I avoided my reflection until I knew how to starve myself of food, connections, and emotions in my early twenties. I was tortured but surprisingly productive and deceptively lonely until I learned to love myself unconditionally and unapologetically. Sobering, no?

Orloff explains that this state of disorientation induced by augmented feelings is not uncommon for empaths; this is why we are prone to all the things that feel transiently pleasurable. Thus, “Empaths commonly self-medicate the discomfort of being overstimulated by turning to alcohol, drugs, sex, food, gambling, shopping, or other addictions. Why are empaths so susceptible to these behaviors?” We can get overwhelmed by our extreme sensitivity and feel too much, “including our own and another’s pain” (Orloff 2018:2018). When I say, “I feel you,” I mean it.

I believe this realization is why I decided to leave my beloved neighborhood, the Lower East Side. Up until before forty, I was just not ready. I can say that the incident that ripped the Band-Aid off was that I heard that there had been a home invasion in my building, and apparently, the entire family (kids included) was beaten up. Granted, I also learned through the grapevine that this was a family dispute. But, I figured, there is only so much pain a place can hold, and I had to move on (upstate.)

(MY) LIFE AS DATA

Growing up, my mother’s condition made it so most things felt extreme and needlessly complicated. Her insecurities left me feeling out of sync, unbalanced, and in need of quiet because she was the constant voice in my head. Now, clinically, her parenting style might lead her to be diagnosed narcissistic. For example, “A narcissistic mother sees her daughter, more than her son, as a reflection and extension of herself rather than a separate person with her own identity. She puts pressure on her daughter to act and react to the world and her surroundings exactly as Mom would, rather than in a way that feels right for the daughter” (McBride 2008:7). However, I do not know if it is a cultural pattern, but the more daughters of Latina moms I talk to about my childhood, the less alone I feel. We tend to bond over our *mami* issues.

I got used to self-sabotaging myself growing up because the chaos was familiar and comfortable. The world felt as if it was fast-forwarding along while my default setting was slow motion. I was always on edge and on the verge of going over it. Then I started to talk about it. Arthur Frank states that “Telling stories of illness is the attempt, instigated by the body’s disease, to give a voice to an experience that medicine cannot describe. This voice is embodied in a specific person, but it is equally social, taking its speech from the postmodern times we live in” (Frank 2013:19). While I can

point out how society made me sick, I am still developing a language to understand and share. This means that storytelling, in addition to being therapeutic, for me, is also vital for forming a community and taking control of your own story. You can revise and resubmit. Frank writes that “The ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience; the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability” (Frank 2013: xix). Maybe, silence can be the immobilizing condition.

Books, music, and films opened up a world that I was refused at home, I abandoned my monochromatic existence to discover who I was and, more importantly, who I could become. Nevertheless, my adolescence was marred with feelings of displacement and doom, and I tried to make myself small to avoid explaining myself. McBride notes that given this upbringing, my range of emotions would be limited. She confirms, “As a child growing up, you were likely very good at denying, numbing, or compensating for your own feelings rather than allowing yourself to feel them.” This is why self-doubt becomes inextricable from every thought and feeling. I would not call it imposter syndrome because it feels more like a paranoia.

If there is one thing I would tell my twenty-year old self is that I do not need to conform to surviving. Surviving makes for a great anthem but it can't be the soundtrack of your life. If there is one thing my twenty-year old self would tell me now, is to thrive. To do this, I need to be the voice in my head. McBride notes that when you make this realization, a pathway to healing is made possible. She underlines a call to action, “...it is time for you to come to terms with the past, release your unrealistic expectations of your mother, and take charge in your life to heal. Now it's your time to make your life more peaceful and comfortable” (McBride 2008:135). To be comfortable in your own skin feels impossible when you can't fully appreciate yourself because of all the blind spots... and eczema.

THE (FUNHOUSE) MIRROR

When my hips and waist expanded, and I deviated from what my mother deemed an appropriate size, she warned me that my family would fall apart. It happened to her sister, she said. She cautioned that my aunt Melida's marriage fell apart because she had gained so much weight. I wanted to reply that the cocaine and the whole side-family he (her husband) kept were more of a cause.

Indeed, I had learned to eat my feelings and drown them in vodka because I did not know how to ask for help when I was coming of age. According to my mother, weight gain was an irreconcilable difference and a justification for divorce. I felt sad that she did not understand real love. It endures even the extra pounds. For many years, I thought she tried hard to shrink my soul, to silence me, to make me feel small. However, this was part of her tough love, this is why she was so hard on herself. I started to make sense of myself and my (self-destructive) behaviors after accepting and seeing my mother's story in a new light. I afforded her the compassion I denied myself. I feel lighter. She is my prequel. McBride elucidates that “Busyness or workaholism can be a form of self-destructive behavior similar to alcoholism and drug or food addiction. It works the same to numb

the pain...Looking strong and invulnerable on the outside may be an attempt to escape the emptiness and pain of feelings of unworthiness.” (McBride 2008:91). My life is so full now. I find no need to escape it though, after this pandemic, I cannot forget how easy it can be to lose it.

One of the things I feel in my body after surviving COVID is when I get a cold, I feel like there is a weight on my chest. If I think about the metaphor of this virus, it helps to believe that its impact on my body will always weigh heavy and even more when I am not taking care of myself. At the heels of forty-one, I decided that pursuing happiness was an act of love, of self-love, and I was worthy of it. We all are. This is how I reimagine health. I do not know if I would have come to this firm conclusion had I not reflected on this moment and time. I did not want to repeat my mother’s story, so I started to tell my own. In this way, I began to feel stronger. Keshavan comments, “The nature of being human is to live in continuous interaction with each other and the social world. We construct our social world by engaging our complex apparatus of the social brain, and in turn, the mind and the brain are constructed dynamically by interactions with the social world” (Keshavan 2015:37). At forty, I learned I can adapt and reinvent myself (now) because I accepted that I am evolving and that is progress and one that age has very little to do with age. This is life.

And just like that, my life started to feel like a technicolor rainbow. I began to dream again. There is no noise in my head, only music. I realized that I finally began to live, fully and fearlessly, celebrating every moment at forty and beyond. ¡Viva las Cuarentonas! (Long Live the Cuarentonas!)

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ENDNOTES

[1] Within Latinx culture, it is considered “bad luck” to place your purse on the floor as it brings (calls) financial ruin.

[2] *El que Diran* literally translates into, “what will people say?”

[3] “Mami” is mommy in Spanish. Sounds the same, spelled differently. It is also a term of affection in the Latinx community. Interestingly, I go by “mum.”

