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Opinion Article

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# Traumatic Memories in The Body and The Soul: The Awakening of The Fight Against Fear

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At the end of June 2023, just turned forty-eight, I felt the need to start a new experience, on the borderline between physical and spiritual needs. But before talking about this, it is necessary to briefly tell the road that has brought us here.

I have always lived my sporting experiences with great passion and commitment. I went through combat sports when I was very young, then competitive motorcycling, finally horse riding. In all these disciplines I have experienced a very intimate relationship with the feeling of courage. Proving myself brave has always been a challenge within a challenge. Only with time did I realize that proving to be brave was only the superficial part of something much bigger and deeper: the fight against Fear. In all the sports and activities I have practiced I have experienced great fears and also many traumas. Despite this I have always moved forward but, being a psychotherapist by profession and a psychologist by vocation, I understood how much, year after year, the traumas experienced had left their mark, both physically and psychologically. Apparently, nothing serious but over time the consequences of certain events have caused periods of great suffering.

Shortly after the birth of my first child, in the winter of 2007, a bad form of slipped disc forced me to suffer a period of continuous illness for almost a year. For weeks on end, I couldn't get out of bed,

not even to go to the bathroom. I had already suffered from back pain as a boy but in 2007 I saw hell. It lasted a few years: I couldn't solve the problem which, on a fixed basis, recurred, throwing me into physical suffering and psychological discomfort.

In 2012 I had my third and last MRI. A rather heavy diagnosis: hernia expelled and migrated to L3-L4 level and also other disc protrusions along the spine. A neurosurgeon strongly advised me to have surgery. According to him it was the only solution to my problem. Despite everything, in periods of symptomatic remission I went back to racing motorcycles, the sport I practiced in those years.

At the time, I had no idea how the musculoskeletal system worked, much less had I undergone rehabilitation treatment. I simply treated myself according to the dominant Western system: cortisone and muscle relaxants for acute episodes and muscle strengthening in symptomatic remission.

However, there was one aspect that had deeply struck me from the resonances to which I had undergone: there was no lumbar curve in my spine. My lower back was straight as a wall. I hadn't paid particular attention to the thing, for me what mattered were only the herniated discs.



"In 2013 I had an encounter that profoundly changed the relationship with my body and in general my conception of the relationship between psyche and soma". At that time, while I was on the waiting list for the surgery that was supposed to fix my slipped disc, I met a martial arts master. The man, at the time in his sixties, had thoroughly studied the human body and many forms of rehabilitation. He lived alone in the Cefalù countryside. It was undoubtedly an initiatory experience. For one winter, every Saturday, a small group of people spent a day together to work on our bodies. We mainly practiced postural systemic integration, proprioceptive exercises and yoga. And then, again, a lot of rehabilitation work on the connective tissue with the strokes massage technique. And then lots and lots of breathing. I was definitely a patient but at the same time I was learning a lot. A sort of sorcerer's apprentice through my suffering, as at the time of my personal analysis.

The results were astonishing. First, I refused to undergo surgery. In a short time, I was fine as it hadn't happened for several years. Furthermore, little by little I began to understand what the consequences of that excessively straight back were: hardening, shortening, tension of the muscles of my whole body. And then the analgesic positions. I had found positions to not feel the pain. Positions that, little by little, had become fixed, creating a totally unsustainable musculoskeletal structure. Everything we did that winter in Cefalù had a single goal: to stretch the body and make it more elastic.

During the months of work the question that made its way inside me was the following: how was it possible that my body had assumed such a wrong position over time and had started to function so badly?

Before the physical responses came the psychological ones. Gradually I realized that there were two feelings that have always fueled my dark side: anger and fear. My body had fought back as best it could but finally gave in. Those feelings, working in synergy, had created a dysfunctional system that I was no longer able to fight and so I was knocked out. I had entered a cyclical vortex of suffering that sometimes forced me into a state of hopelessness without solutions.

Thanks to functional neuroanatomy, we now know that anger and fear are feelings that activate the sympathetic nervous system, better known as the fight-flight system [1]. As I have had the opportunity to write elsewhere [2], the contemporary problem of activations of the autonomic nervous system is functional chronicization. The autonomic nervous system is made to react to limited temporal situations. In our world, the biggest problem has become learning how to turn off the switch. Anger is functional in life. But if you're always angry, you eventually get sick. Same thing for fear. Fear has its own biological function as well as anger. But if fear acts constantly, then you live in precarious conditions. To aggravate the clinical picture, today I can add that, unlike anger, the fear inside me acted subtly, below the level of consciousness.

It would be too distracting to summarize my psychological history to get to the roots of those angry feelings that have characterized my inner life until recently. Instead, here it is much more interesting to talk about fear. Without a doubt fear is one of the most important emotional states in every living being to protect

life against serious dangers. The same traumatic experiences that prompted anger (I think!) triggered fear beyond physiological limits. I battled fear by engaging in activities where a high level of courage was required. Up to a certain point I succeeded. The problem is that my body has never worked well: too much muscle tension, too much useless rage, too little elasticity too much apnea. I think all these problems have helped to harden my structure but little by little, since 2013, things have started to change. The episodes have become rarer and shorter.

There is a fundamental aspect that needs to be addressed: in the first acute episodes of pain for my herniated disc, between 2007 and 2012, at the beginning of an episode I always felt a very strong electric shock at the level of the nerve roots. An unmistakable sensation. After the first time, every time I felt that sharp pain I went into despair. Within half an hour, my entire back locked up as a result of the postural attitude my body assumed to protect me from acute pain. Gradually this situation changed. Since 2013, after my initiatory experience in Cefalù, I have no longer had those electric shocks at the beginning of an episode. But then, why did my back continue to hurt episodically until it blocked in some cases?

What I can tell today is that, little by little, through constant work on myself, a large part of my feelings of anger dissolved and with them also a good part of my muscle tension. This is another part of the story, which is not useful to deal with now.

What matters is to keep the attention still on the fear. I believe that, on a physical level, the fear of facing a new period of illness, of enticement, have created a sort of traumatic memory within me, on the border between physical and psychic, which in fact continued in silence to condition all the physical activities done in these years. Having a strong-willed temperament, I have never given up on my passions, but it is as if I have continued to travel keeping one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake, sometimes stressing both the engine system and the brake system.

Despite everything I found a balance. In a sense, when my body (and my psyche) can convince itself that there is no reason to be afraid, then everything runs smoothly without any particular consequences. In those moments I feel an immense sense of freedom.

I have been practicing horse riding since 2016. Sometimes, I face trekking days of six or seven hours on horseback. Once even eleven. At first my back was very, very scared but then it relaxed. I have always looked for the mobility of the column in my experience as a rider and, up to now, my back has never given me particular problems while riding a horse.

Then came June 2023. But first a small step back to 2018. In the spring of 2018 I had started practicing Brazilian jiu jitsu. It had seemed like a wonderful martial art to me. There was one aspect that deeply fascinated me: BJJ fighting reminded me of snake fighting. There was something ancestral in those bodies that intertwine in order to overcome one another due to suffocation or the impossibility of continuing to move. Unfortunately, that experience didn't last long. A period of profound hardship and inner suffering had taken precedence and so BJJ remained a long-held dream.

But 2018 also marked the beginning of the end of my rage. Anger shouldn't be controlled, it should be resolved. I believe that problems should not be suppressed. If you're angry but you hold back, I think it could be even worse for your body. Problems and anxieties must be allowed to emerge from the depths of the soul and therefore recognize them and try to solve them. In me, little by little, things changed thanks to God and trust in the process of evolution of the psyche. When things start to change inside, so does the same around you. In short, I had survived 2018 and in many ways I felt stronger.

Small parenthesis: As a psychologist, in my professional mission I have been fighting a battle for a change in the treatment of psychotic disorders for many years but recently something in me has changed. I had the impression that my way of fighting was not the right one and I felt the need to rest. I felt the need to turn attention to myself.

Fighting is probably in my destiny and I can't stand without it. So, in June 2023 I followed my eldest to the gym to practice BJJ. He had started a few months earlier. It was a profound awakening. That of the struggle but also that of my deep fears of being sick again. BJJ workouts often start with long yoga sessions and I think this is essential to prepare the body for the typical stresses of the fight. The practice of yoga brought me back to my initiatory experience of Cefalù. However, not everything went smoothly.

In the space of a month I had at least three episodes of back pain, but something had changed in my body perception and pain awareness. It wasn't the twists and turns that created the pain, it was my fear. I have been working with psychic trauma for years and I know well how the recurrence of certain situations reactivates traumatic memories on a psychological level, causing suffering and fear, I added (van der Kolk, 2014; Porges, 2011). I realized that on the physical plane it is the exact same thing. I think my connective tissue, stimulated by those profound and new movements, reacted by contracting out of fear. But this time there was no electric shock to inaugurate the dances. No nerve root involvement, no sciatic nerve inflammation. At least three times I was of the opinion that I was not able to continue the BJJ. Then the pain, without using drugs, went away after a few days and then I started training again. What I got the impression is that it is the connective tissues of the lower sacral area that are activated to protect the structure. [4] taught us, when myofascial tissues create pain they are shortened, contracted, hypertrophic. Today we can add that, most likely, this is related to a persistent activation of the sympathetic nervous system. Fear contracts the body and every new experience that stimulates the body reactivates fear, creating a vicious circle. The most serious problem is that a solution that should last a short time becomes a stable defense of the organism. The connective bands, already tested, go into alarm and it is my fear that activates them. In summary, the fear of getting hurt is like getting hurt for real. But I also believe that, if it's just fear, then going forward the somatopsychic system reassures itself, and the pain ceases.

There is one aspect that impressed me more than the others in the personal experience I tell about in these pages. Starting from 2013, during my initiatory experience of getting to know the

body, it had happened to me from time to time to experience very particular moments: under certain circumstances my body began to have very intense tremors, as if my muscles autonomously, starting pelvic area and behind, in the low-lumbar area, began to activate themselves, creating autonomous movements. Here, too, I was initially very afraid. I did not understand what was happening to me. These movements were initially very intense and undisciplined, then over time they had found an order. The impression I had was that a wave crossed my back. I felt a lot of energy being released. Internally, what I can describe is as if a deep movement, similar to what snakes do to move, runs through my body, from the coccyx to the head. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, it happened to me to wake up with the body moving autonomously, creating movements resembling deep ascending waves like those of a whip waved in the air, from the pelvis area up to the head. By the end of those episodes, I felt much more freedom of movement, both in my back and neck. And I also felt a higher level of body energy. I believe these involuntary movements are very close to what [5]. On the border between psyche and soma, Boyesen clarifies that there is an emotional reaction to the trauma and a deeper, bodily one, which is released only through the activation of the autonomic nervous system. I fully agree with Boyesen that, in the elaboration of a deep trauma, it is important to work on the level of psychic elaboration, but it is equally important to face the profound consequences that the trauma produces on the body system.

I believe that these autonomous bodily activations of mine, which have points of contact with what is called "regenerative movement", are experiences of liberation of the energy imprisoned in the body. In my personal experience, through yogic practices, the repressed energies in an area of the body begin to flow, activating a potential that has remained unexpressed up to that moment. I'm not yet at the point where I can go too far on the subject but I think this all has to do with the activation of kundalini, the primordial yogic energy "represented in the form of a snake coiled around the spine, lying asleep in muladhara, the lowest chakra [6]".

## Conclusion

In conclusion of these pages, what I can say is that, in the last ten years, I have felt that my body has sought a new structure and I have supported it. The structures sometimes tense, stretch and this can cause pain. But it's a pain that passes quickly. I think my back is not vertical like it was ten years ago. At least that's my feeling.

It is still too early to reach definitive conclusions on the topics covered in these pages, both on a personal experiential level and on a clinical-scientific level. It would already be a lot to go forward and discover something new, both on a physical and theoretical level. And who knows, maybe go back to writing something in a few years, and find out if it was just a passing phase or if something has taken root in the soul, both individual and collective. God willing, we will have an answer to our questions. Have a good fight everyone.

## Acknowledgement

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## Conflict of interest

None.

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