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Stories That Heal

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GOING HOME

IN 1972, I was invited to be a subject in a research project conducted at the Esalen Institute by two educators, Sukie and Stuart Miller. At the time, the humanistic potential movement was at its height and Esalen was at the center of a paradigm shift that would ultimately influence the very foundations of our culture: education, politics, theology, the law, and of course medicine. It was host to such seminal thinkers as Gregory Bateson, Abraham Maslow, Aldous Huxley, Joseph Campbell, Alan Watts, Fritz Perls, and many others.

The research project was a twenty-four-month invitational fellowship offered to twelve established, conventional physicians. We were to have the opportunity to spend a weekend a month with one or another of these pioneering theorists, discussing new perspectives, experiencing new approaches, and attempting to see whether any of these new ideas about the nature

and capacity of human beings had application to the practice of medicine.

At the time, I was a young professor, the associate director of the pediatric clinics at Stanford, and holistic health lay a dozen years in the future. I was certain of my professional direction. I was an academic pediatrician, one of the few women on the faculty at Stanford, and my ambition was to become the head of a department of pediatrics at a major medical school. I had joined the project not because I recognized it as the open doorway to my future but because at thirty-four it struck me as a rather good way to meet men.

It turned out to be one of the most important decisions of my life, a turning point toward almost everything of meaning that has followed. Despite a decade and a half of scientific training, long ago I had still been a philosophy major. Many of the unanswered questions of my college days, put away as secondary to the technology of my profession, reemerged with all their power and mystery at Esalen. I loved these weekends. Yet about six months into the fellowship I began to suffer panic attacks. After the third of these, a pattern became clear; they occurred a few days before I was to go to Esalen for the weekend. Shaken by these episodes, I went to Sukie Miller and attempted to resign.

But Sukie was wiser than this. A master therapist familiar with the ways in which people grow and the psychological phenomena that occur as the old way is lost and the new way not yet begun, she asked me if I was curious about why these things were happening. I was still sufficiently attached to my objectivity that I could not readily admit that all I wanted to do was run

away. When I said that I would like to understand more, she offered to help me use imagery, a basic technique of the new psychologies we were exploring in the program, to uncover the meaning of these attacks.

We did a brief session. She asked me to close my eyes and encouraged me to allow an image to come to mind that related to my panic. Despite my skepticism about this new method, I found an image immediately: it was a thin, flat white rectangle. I described this to her, and with all the authority with which I was accustomed to making a rapid medical diagnosis, I added, "It's a business card." Sukie asked if I was sure. With horror I realized that I was not sure, that I didn't really know what this image was. With this realization came the beginnings of the dreaded panic feelings. I hastily opened my eyes. Sukie smiled at me in a comfortable way. She sympathized with my distress and told me that I could certainly resign from the project, but it might be best if I waited until the meaning of these episodes became clear. She suggested that I reflect on the thin white rectangle several times each day in my "downtime," wonder about it while waiting at stoplights or in line at the supermarket. She encouraged me to hold it in my mind and in a steady and un-demanding way to be open to knowing what it meant. She assured me that its meaning would come to me in time.

It took four or five weeks, during which I was frustrated and irritable, convinced that this was all Sukie's clever manipulation to keep me in the research program and preserve the integrity of her data. But this was not the case. I can remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when the mystery resolved itself. I was driving up Gough Street, one of the steepest hills in

San Francisco, in a car with a standard transmission. All of my attention was focused on shifting gears without sliding backward into the car behind me. Suddenly, the flat white rectangle reappeared in my mind's eye, but this time it started to change shape, to puff up. This image was accompanied by all the chaotic feelings of a full-blown panic attack. Drenched in sweat, I pulled to the curb and parked. Terrified, I remember thinking, "I'm going to die here." And then I knew what it all meant.

The understanding came in the form of a story. The white rectangle was not a business card after all. It was a marshmallow that had been subjected to a steady external pressure for many, many years. The pressure had distorted its natural shape so that it was long and flat. But now, this pressure had been released. Its shape was changing and it was terrified. It felt as if it were dying. But the marshmallow was not dying, it was returning to itself. The shape that had been most familiar to it was not its own shape. With the lifting of the pressure, something deep in it could remember its integrity, its true shape, and was reclaiming it now. And somewhere there were other marshmallows that would now be able to recognize it and befriend it.

With this insight, the panic was gone and I knew a number of things with certainty. This childlike story had nothing to do with marshmallows, this was a story about me. My family had the highest regard for scholarship, academics, research, and teaching and a significant contempt for the nonrational. My medical colleagues felt the same. I had been under a lifelong pressure to conform to this way of being in the world. It was the price of belonging. I could do these things very well, and would always be able to do them but they were not my natural way,

rather like writing with your right hand when you are a lefty. I had done them for so long and so successfully that I had not known that they were not my way, but I knew it with absolute certainty now.

The ideas of the Esalen program were transformational and the people I had met there were radically different from the people I had lived among for years. They were more like my grandfather and being with them had brought his presence back into my life. The integrity of their inquiry into the ineffable, their willingness to entertain questions that were larger than the available tools of research, had begun to release the pressure that had held me in a shape that was not my own. That shape was dying and I was changing back to a way of being that would fit me perfectly. Although I could be analytical and pragmatic, by nature I was an intuitive, even a mystic. I was my grandfather's granddaughter. I had remembered and I was going home.

The panic attacks never returned. Sukie did not seem surprised at all.