

Bearing the Unknown

By Miranda Hoffman Jung

I am thinking about how to write something, when my whole job is about making interpretations and getting them wrong, and then changing them so that they fit. It is hard to write something down and not be able to change it once it's in the world.

Ideas come to my mind and I turn them over, chew on them, digest them. Feelings, too. My work, as I see it, is being with people and empathize with what they are too afraid to feel until it becomes tolerable enough for them to feel and think about. Sort of like a momma bird chewing food and feeding her babies. The idea is to digest what feels like toxic bits to our patients, to turn those into nourishment.

These days, I find thinking about our leadership in this country to be a similar process. The president spews toxic bits into the internet or the newspapers, and we all try to digest it. Some of us have to abuse substances in order to survive it, or distract ourselves. The toll this effort takes on our community is significant. As a therapist, it does feel as if things we were able to rely on (the concept of truth, the value of fresh air and drinkable water, the meaning of human rights) are becoming eroded and corrupted. As we attempt to hold on to our minds, we struggle with this effort to know what we know.

As kids, this happens when our parents deny reality. Children in difficult family situations already know this feeling. The harmful options (abusing drugs or alcohol, aggression, self-harm, and dissociation) that they might consider can feel like solutions to parents' denial. There is a similar dynamic here with our political leadership. Their job is to help us, care for us, set up structures for the society to have a safety net (health care, emergency services, education),

but things are backward, and the leadership is destroying what we are supposed to be able to rely on.

I had a dream as a child after I saw the movie “The Day After” about nuclear holocaust. In my dream, I was going to bed and brought my violin and my cat with me, knowing the world would end while I was sleeping. Last week I had a similar dream, but I didn’t know for sure whether the tsunami would come. And so, I struggled with what to pack, and when. I knew that I’d need rain boots to keep my feet dry, but I knew that if I left too early I’d regret leaving my leather boots for the winter. It encapsulates a feeling I struggle with: how do I live my regular life, behave in my regular way, work and think and help my patients think, while all the time knowing there is a chance that everything will be very different when this ends or even be destroyed in a moment?

How do I help my patients navigate this dilemma, when it is not a pathology to be healed, but rather an appropriate response to reality?

Miranda Hoffman Jung, PsyD is a clinical psychologist with an independent practice in Oakland, California. She is a community member of Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California (PINC).