

Soulspeak: Women's Mental Health and Suicide

An enquiry into the evolving interface of spirituality, mental health
and the art of listening.

'What did the black dog say to the purple octopus at the mental crossroads?'

**This is a story and discussion in honour of all women who
have lost their lives to suicide, because they felt they could not ask
for help.**

It all started at *precisely* the moment the black dog wanted it to end.

Washed up on the shores of a lonely beach, a lonely seagull perched on the hump of the black dog's limp and sodden body. One of her paws was seeping blood, rhythmically washed over by the waves. Her tongue hung loose. Her gut hung heavy. Her life force was wrung dry. She panted little moment by little moment, a pant so loosely alive. As the tide rolled high and the moon hung low, the black dog lay motionless in the lap of the ocean. She felt nothing but the gravity of water holding her and the weight of a slimy cradle keeping her afloat.

Years may have passed until the black dog realised she was alive in the embrace of a purple octopus. Afraid to speak and with nothing to say, she remained furled up like a clump of weeds. It was silent underwater, and that was comforting. It was darker underwater, and that was comforting too. It was perhaps closer to being dead underwater, and the black dog liked that very much.

'Black dog,' said the purple octopus, 'Why did you try to kill yourself?' The black dog rolled her eyes with shame and dread. 'Because I don't enjoy living.' The purple octopus remained silent. 'I haven't enjoyed living for some time now, so much so that I reasoned if I tried to kill myself, then maybe dead would be better. I kind of left it up to chance. I gave it my best shot. I told no one. Everyone else seems to be enjoying life. No one else seems to want to die, even if they are having a hard time, so I thought I'd give it a nudge. And now, here I am. You have witnessed me. You have witnessed the failure I am. And there is no sense of failure quite like failing this way.'

The purple octopus smoothed her slimy tentacle across the black dog's forehead. 'It doesn't appear to have worked for you black dog. What are you going to do now?' The black dog realised she was at quite an unusual crossroads. Having given up on life really limited her options. What was she going to do now?

By the time the tide had faded back to the ocean's belly and a new day hammered over her tortured head, the black dog crawled away from the purple octopus in an awkward silence. She was not alone, however, as the octopus strategically left her tentacle wrapped around the dog's neck like a scarf, keeping her held, keeping her warm. Its suction caps latched on like hickeys. Limping home, bewildered and despairing, she returned to her kennel and found solace in the night. She curled up with the purple arm and relaxed into its cushioned skin. The purple arm, mysteriously and quite dramatically, began to glow. In the pitch black cave of the kennel, illuminated shapes and spirals formed on the skin of the arms, no longer purple but interchangeable colours of red, orange, lime and white. The colour almost hummed with electricity, radiating through the cracks of the kennel. Stunned, invigorated and curious, the black dog investigated the patterns forming on the limb. It read information, like a textbook, about an *illness* called *depression* that dogs *suffered* from. It described everything the black dog had been feeling for so long, the despair, loss of interest in life, the isolation, lethargy, oversleeping and overeating. There was even a section about no-feeling, about numbness and emptiness and a lack of will to try. And there was this thing they called suicide: the action of killing oneself, intentionally, that the black dog realised was what she had tried. In fact, she could tick all the boxes that represented everything described as this 'mental illness' and this made her feel somewhat relieved. She stayed awake, inspired through the night, reading all the information available on this technicoloured arm from the octopus.

She discovered there were psychiatrists who were doctors who could help this illness, so she made phone calls, attended appointments, and was told that a chemical imbalance in her brain reduced her experience of happiness. That there were medications that could help her replenish these happy chemicals, so that even when life was a challenge, she wouldn't feel so sad as to want to die. With nothing to lose and what appeared, a little medical hope to live for, she decided to take the chemicals every day. A month had passed and the black dog began to feel somewhat grateful that she had met the purple octopus after all.

The other dogs in the neighbourhood turned out to be less frightening than the black dog had perceived in recent times. She had started walking round the block almost every day. The neighbourhood greeted her, walked with her, patted her, they patted their knees when they saw her coming ... whatever that meant. She didn't tell anyone about this 'mental illness' business, nor did she speak about the psychiatrist and the chemicals. Whenever anyone drew attention to her paw, she felt anger and shame arise within, even though she

was taking the chemicals. She watched other dogs play, unwounded, in the park, chasing each other and bringing joy to the humans. But for the black dog, there was this mark of shame, this secret she was hiding, this thing called suicide that no one else tried, let alone ever talked about. The heaviness of mixed feelings began to weigh her down, even though she was taking the chemicals. She wondered, that perhaps the octopus might know more about these feelings, so she attempted to find her at the vast mouth of the bay on a stormy, wild-weathered afternoon.

'Octopus!' she cried, as she waded beyond paw-deep, feeling her insignificance within the enormity of the storm. The octopus emerged from beneath, wrapping her limbs at the dogs legs, easing her tension as though she could taste her concerns and fears. They conversed in the fracas of the storm. The black dog cried over the memory of her suicide and how hard it was to go on living, with so many questions that still remained about it, like, why did she become suicidal and other dogs didn't? What happens if she felt that way again? Even though she had the chemicals, sometimes she still thought about suicide and these chemicals weren't answering her questions. She still had no reason to feel worthy of being alive and still felt angry that she felt this way about life. She felt ashamed and weak because she took the chemicals, and even more ashamed and weak because she didn't know what would make life better?!

'Calm down, beautiful black dog,' said the purple octopus, 'Your questions are valid and interesting. I believe they are worth questioning and I believe you will find answers. Perhaps you can find a therapist to listen to you and help you while you make these enquiries?'

'A therapist?' queried the dog.

'Yes, someone who will support you to learn more about yourself. You are right, the chemicals won't answer your questions. A therapist can help you recognise your thinking patterns so that you don't end up washed up on the shore again. Here, grasp my limb and come for a swim deep below, and together we will marvel at the ocean's underworld of psychotherapeutic remedies.'

In locomotive style, the black dog ventured with the octopus to the depths. The octopus pointed out clusters of different structures, like thinking frameworks, maps and matrixes, with weird and varied names, all new to the black dog.

There was Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Psychoanalysis, Interpersonal Psychology, Psychobiological Therapy, Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, Existential Therapy, Behavioural Therapy, Group Psychotherapy, Systemic Therapy, Problem Solving Therapy, Art Therapy, Alderian Therapy, Dog-centred Therapy, Reality Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Cognitive Analytic Psychotherapy, Contemplative Psychotherapy, Core Process Psychotherapy, Drama Therapy, Dance Therapy, Expressive Therapy, Hypnotherapy, Multi-Modal Therapy,

Narrative Therapy, Neuro-linguistic Programming, Positive Psychotherapy, Primal Therapy, Thought Field Therapy, Transpersonal Psychological Therapy

'Howl!' Howled the black dog as she came up for air, saturated with psychotherapeutic seaweed, almost strangling her with confusion. She paddled for shore, therapies ringing in her head like off-beat nursery rhymes, lulling her to sleep; exhausted.

She woke from a dream with a knowingness, that despite the vast pool of therapies available, she would find the right person to help her deal with the thoughts in her head. She knew it would take time. She knew it would take perseverance. She knew she would be disclosing thoughts and feelings she had never told anyone. But this madness in her head had clearly become too much to manage on her own and the octopus was right, she really didn't want to end up washed up on the shore again. Perhaps there was a therapist that was the perfect match, someone who saw things a little more creatively than the psychiatrist, who could engage more with her character, help revive her past interests in the arts, in philosophy, literature and dance. Definitely someone who she could talk to about how often she hated being alive and what to do when she reached that mental crossroads.

Her search begun and her choices were plenty, until she met a gentle and intelligent psychologist with many tools to her name, many strategies to play with the mind, many reasons to believe that the black dog would find her inner peace again. For a year they met every week, and each time they met the black dog generally walked away wagging her tail. And what's more, she began to find inspiration to write again, to express herself through art, music and dance and her therapist appreciated this and helped her find meaning in her creations. This therapist had quite a gift, tapping into exactly what the black dog needed, to realise that she could learn to manage the meanderings of her mind and moods. There were still the daily chemicals, and there were still the dreadful days, but the impetus to express her emotional world was activated more so than before, and with that the black dog found a sense of purpose, self-worth and well-being.

As her inspiration prodded her back to the pen and page, the black dog began to read widely beyond the information she first landed upon about this 'mental illness'. She took a philosophical bent and explored the history of 'the void' and discovered that for thousands of years dogs had been encountering it, and painting and performing about it, and prophesising its impending doom upon dogs universal wide. Scientific enquiry and the prized knowledge that came with it was challenged by faith in the supernatural and the mystical. The romantic poets birthed hope through language and metaphor, rendering the nakedness of existence as divinely inspired.

There were existentialists, who talked about depression and its expression, and that life began on the other side of despair. Famous writers had wrestled with it, the same

crippling feelings of morbid descents and found meaning in their lives through their imagination. This all comforted the black dog, although, not so much as a cure, but as a salve for the discomfort she felt, with the persistent sadness that still privately haunted her. She identified, that beyond the chemicals, that maybe this wasn't an illness at all, that the dog condition was laced with stories, theories, philosophies and questions that also occupied her psyche. She decided to stop taking the chemicals based on that premise and believed that if other dogs could withstand the pain, that she could too. That she could learn to live through life's miseries with her therapy and her art. So she wrote a novella about her suicide and the philosophies entwined in her madness, and gave the medical system the flick, that no one favoured anyway, so she no longer had to pretend it was part of her life. What was once her depression was now her melancholy and her inspiration! Until one day, after a calendar of many uninspired dark days, she crawled back to the ocean with her tail between her legs.

'Purple octopus,' she murmured, 'my life is fucked. I can't seem to find any lasting meaning in anything. I've searched and I've found and I've questioned and I've answered but this feeling inside of pointlessness, of emptiness, it lingers and I keep meeting it over and over again. Now I remember why I turned to suicide that day, now I really remember how dark it can be. So dark, in fact, that I have absolutely no interest in making things get better, that my will to live is missing. My will to try and find meaning is lost.'

'Do you need to have meaning to live?' asked the octopus.

'It seems more enjoyable that way,' replied the dog, 'I see other dogs living with meaning and purpose and passion every day. It's what drives them, and of that I have none. It makes me feel that I'm not very good at this thing they call life.'

'Do you think meaning is what keeps you alive?' asked the octopus.

'It keeps my mind alive and occupied, but I guess, it's not my mind that keeps me breathing. It isn't my mind that survived my suicide, something else outlived that decision, I suppose.'

Seeing how distressed the black dog was amidst her attempts to overcome her darkness, the purple octopus extended another limb, this time with a map into the jungle. The black dog ran her paw across its simple design and memorised the symbolic map. She rubbed her furry side against the purple octopus with a sense of gratitude, even though she felt desperately hopeless. She decided to abandon her mind and the many theories, therapies, philosophies and diagnoses that had defined this mental crossroads of which she repeatedly encountered. She headed for the jungle and followed the map, eventually coming to a tepee that housed a woman.

This woman came to be known as a shaman who knew many of the mysteries of nature and offered to share her wisdom with the black dog. She said she could facilitate re-

birthing, simply by guided work with her breath and that this would heal past traumas that contributed to her suffering. The shaman, with her natural medicines and wise words, showed her how her suffering did not necessarily originate in her mind but was trapped in her body. The process of re-birthing was one way of accessing that pain, releasing it to the ethers and opening her up to the truth of reality. It was quite a mystery to the inquisitive mind of the black dog but certainly satisfied her desire to move beyond her mind. She agreed to dig a little deeper and experience these healings in exchange for working on the land.

Of the healings, sometimes they were emotional, sometimes theatrically cathartic and other times she meditatively soared through visions of childhood moments. Quite often she revisited memories of relationships and events and stalked a whole history of family horrors stemming from the war. She re-experienced her suicide and re-visited her own birth, even one in Mexico, and all by the grace of her breath surfed the pain, the struggle, the exhilaration that came with it. And the more she breathed, the higher her consciousness soared, reconnecting her with mystical insights long forgotten. Her chakras, the devas and saints and angels became usual references and friends and communing with the divine, something she had longed for and lost, was certainly unearthed now forever. Gateways to other worlds flung open as doorways to the past gracefully shut. The black dog, somewhat a very colourful dog since spending time with the shaman, clearly understood her existence as a pure channel of divine light. Her feathered ears and dread-lock tail became new expressions of her reconnection with nature. Her kundalini, now awakening, shattered old paradigms of her being and what felt more natural to her was the experience of being a spirit shaped like a dog walking the earth, rather than a dog having a spiritual experience.

With reverence for everything the shaman had shared with her, the black dog made her way back to her kennel, feeling enlightened. What she had learned in re-birthing herself, was that death was a necessary part of transformation and healing. She could identify the death instinct that so often seduced her and now believed it was a natural part of a dog's condition, not to be feared but to surrender to, as with the breath.

As time went by, the black dog noticed that there was a big difference between living in the jungle and living in her kennel. She noticed that the mundane aspects of life, of going to work, paying the bills, doing the shopping, taking her walks, was quite boring compared to the spiritual communion that she experienced in the jungle. She wanted to live with the shaman but she had other responsibilities. She wanted to rebirth again but she didn't know how. She wanted, in all honesty, to feel enlightened again and now all that seemed unattainable. Keeping up with her work life was taking its toll and it seemed that all the other dogs wanted was more attention, more success and more toys. None of what they wanted seemed to interest her, not since her jungle lifestyle that was simple, natural and nourishing.

But she felt expected to want things and to strive to make something of her life, but how and by what means was a mystery. It was as though she had experienced two worlds, one of spiritual awakening which rendered the material world quite absurd, and the material world that was trying to control her spirit. With one paw in each world, she felt torn, prising open that familiar space of pointlessness, of meaninglessness, of the void!

In a frenzy of fear for her life, she hunted down the poetry of the romantics that once soothed her, which now read like melodramatic fluff. She recalled her therapists tricks, investigated her thoughts and drew mandalas, but her mind banged on with self-defeat. She turned to her novella, which made no sense to her now, driving more questions of a lost identity. She scampered laps around the block to exercise out of this rut, exhausting herself to tears of defeat. In an effort to pretend she was ok, the black dog realised, she wasn't ok and spiralled down a hole of self-defeat. For all that she'd tried, she had failed, so she felt, and the all too familiar space of depression took over. She was bewildered at how high she could feel then how low she could fall, and began to believe that falling was her destiny.

Meditating on this, the black dog hopped into the bath with the hairdryer in one hand and the purple arm of the octopus over her shoulder. Unable to see past her feelings of hopelessness, it felt normal to create such a plan. She sat in the bath and pondered her scenario, this place that she had been in before, where nothing felt good, and nothing felt helpful, and everything was defeated by a mind driving her to death.

She nuzzled into the purple arm remembering the gift that it was and paused to recognise its meaning. This lifeline, extended to her long ago, brought more with it than just a message of mental illness. It was a source of help. A safety net of support and right now, the black dog certainly needed a helping hand. But she didn't want to see the psychiatrist because she defined that non-spiritual. It seemed to rule out everything the shaman had taught her. But she couldn't trust in her just her breath at this dangerous mental crossroads because she couldn't trust she could breath through this alone. In the bathtub, just like beneath the ocean, she focussed on the same silence abound, a silence that from which came the speak of her soul. It whispered, 'help!'

She called her psychiatrist and took the steps to get to safety, calling from a place that was beyond what her mind directing. It was the voice of her soul, utterly shy but fiercely strong, who cared nothing about the story, the illness, the judgement nor the future, but only the present moment to be met with safety, love and understanding.

Since her moment in the bathtub, the black dog endured a long 3 month admission in hospital, refusing to take the chemicals but grappling with her tumultuous mind and her moods. She observed the clinical culture around her, this medical system of diagnosing mental illness, prescribing drugs and applying therapy that she had ventured through long

ago. And she observed other dogs claiming to *suffer* from something beyond their control, seeking solace in the chemicals that she questioned. Drawing on the many spiritual insights she experienced in the jungle, pouring over her artwork and remembering fondly the love and acceptance of the purple octopus that was always present for her with her many arms of support, the black dog decided that yes, she was suffering but if she conversed with her spirit, she believed that a dog's life needn't be such a horror. The answers to her questions didn't lie outside of her being, in the books that she'd read, or in notes the nurse recorded, that the only true path to experience happiness was her responsibility. She could chose to suffer from this supposed illness or she could chose to evolve as she had been over the years, recognising that coming to these mental crossroads were opportunities to discover something new about herself and about life, even if that meant being found in bathtubs with hairdryers and lots of questions. So many of the dogs in the clinic seemed to hand over their decisions to the clinic, and that is what inspired her to make a difference. That is what truly became her spiritual awakening, within the concrete jungle of the clinic.

So she trialled a new chemical, a mood-stabaliser designed to help her ride the vast waves of highs and lows that she honoured as her experience but with the belief that the chemicals were not the ultimate solution. Despite what the psychiatrist told her, she believed she was destined to take them while she felt she needed them and destined to learn to manage her mental health without them, and this would mean educating herself beyond what she had learned so far. She found her balance. She left the hospital. She took her health seriously and she respected that as a mind, a body and a spirit, shaped like a dog, she could no longer reduce her perspective to one view.

Driven by this insight, the black dog started to appreciate rather than be ashamed of, the trials she had endured. She had come to a place of stability within herself, noticing that she hadn't experienced such dark depressions that would draw her to suicide nor spiritual highs that disconnected her from the beauty and the sacredness of the physical world. She knew that the time had come whereby she had restored her strength of mental health and trusted her spirit enough to lead a life without the chemicals. She decided to visit the purple octopus to discuss this idea that bought with it some fears and concerns.

'Purple octopus, I've had some miraculous insights since we last met and I'm ready to stop taking the chemicals.'

'Do tell,' said the purple octopus, 'I have enjoyed watching you grow.'

'Well, I can see that I really have been learning, that what have been my darkest moments have also been my evolution, as cliché as that may sound.'

'I don't think it matters if it is cliché. Turning victimisation into empowerment is always cause for celebration!' said the octopus.

The black dog went on. 'It's a fine line between being consumed in your own pain and surrendering to your pain, and I think I have grown to know the difference. I think I have grown to know within myself when I allow the darkness to take over and when I am aware of but feeling vulnerable to the darkness. It's the awareness that I now I have that I didn't have before, which is why I think I am ready to stop taking the chemicals.'

'There are many ways to strengthen that awareness that you speak of, and many ways of being aware, depending on how you are shaped.'

'What do you mean?' enquired the dog.

'Well, I, as an octopus, am different to you, as a dog, so I draw on my awareness in different ways. For starters, look at how different our limbs are. And I have 3 hearts, providing me an abundance of love, and I don't have a skeleton, so flexibility within my world is an asset. Everything I can touch, I can also taste, which feeds me with information about my environment. If I feel threatened I emit ink to create illusion. These are some of the ways I survive in the depths of the ocean'

'You're fascinating!' remarked the black dog.

'And so are you,' claimed the octopus. 'You said so yourself – as a mind, body and spirit shaped like a dog!'

'Quite right you are!' exclaimed the dog, 'There must be many ways I am aware, in ways I'm not even aware of.'

'Quite right *you* are!' said the octopus, and on that note, the purple octopus motioned back to the deep, with her jet propulsion technique sinking her in a flash.

In her quest for self-awareness the black dog began to research a female dog's physiology. Surely if the purple octopus was blessed with such gifts, then black dogs were too. She kept recalling what the octopus had said, that, 'there were many ways to strengthen that awareness, and many ways of being aware, depending on how you are shaped'. One day, sitting in the park, contemplating a very boring scientific text book, the black dog noticed a circle of tigers', meditating and moving their body. It was obvious that they were cultivating awareness of their bodies, by placing their paws on their hearts and their wombs, massaging and manipulating their limbs, releasing tensions through sound and movement, and sometimes weeping, resting or laying in stillness. It all looked so normal, so organic and very real. The black dog was eager to learn more about it

She approached the leading tigress', feeling like quite a misfit, but enquired if she could learn about what they were practising.

'Please, join in beloved sister!' invited the leading tigress, and everyone wriggled to make space and welcome her into the circle. It didn't seem to matter that she was a black dog, they all smiled and silently acknowledged her presence. There was unity within the circle

that came simply by being female, and that was a very powerful, yet nurturing energy that had drawn her to be amongst them.

The black dog walked to the park each morning to practise, what was called, Tigress Yoga. It taught many things about what the teacher described as, *sensual intelligence*, and this was optimal for the black dog on her quest for greater self-awareness. She learned about the world within her body and the spaces of silence and replenishment that came when focussing on her heart and her womb. Her breast and her yoni were not just breasts and yoni's but sensually alive, energetic realms that, with nurturing touch and focussed attention, could transmute fear into love.

The teacher tigress seemed so well practised at working with her body to create harmony and peace within, that bliss and gentleness were ever-present in her ways. The black dog felt this would be helpful to bring into her life, especially since she had decided to responsibly stop taking the chemicals. To learn to draw from the resources she carried *with* her, *of* her, embodied gifts, that all females possessed, was bound to offer the sustainable well-being that she was seeking. For the first time the black dog discovered that no matter what thoughts were racing through her mind, no matter what chemical she was or wasn't taking, she could always focus her attention on her loving heart, within which, there was always a warm smile calling her home.

It was a heavy and overdue menstrual bleed that caused the black dog to miss her first yoga class. Even though the teacher Tigress often spoke about moontime, and encouraged the other tigresses to honour their cycle by listening to their body, still coming to practise even if just to rest, the nature of the black dog's cycle was commonly overwhelming for her. She felt challenged by the awareness she practised, to keep distance between her pain and her presence. So often during her moontime, she was seduced to the depths of despair.

During this particular cycle, she sought solace in the company of the purple octopus, who had proved to be such a confidant and a source of inspiration. She wasn't hard to find, as usual, always there right at the needed time, however on this somber day, she lay washed up on the sore.

'Purple octopus!' cried the black dog, 'Are you dying?'

The purple octopus lay lifeless but at peace with her state. 'Yes, black dog, my eggs have newly hatched. My journey here has come to an end. It's natural that I die after giving birth.'

The black dog was shocked and unprepared. She felt saddened, as much as abandoned.

'I'm sorry purple octopus, but this is not easy for me to accept. I have come for you in times of agony and you have always given me hope.'

'Black dog, I've given you my presence and shared with you as many dimensions to life as I have limbs, but you know you are the creator of your own hope. You have been forging your own path all along.'

'Yes I know that's the case and I know all about self-responsibility but understand, that without you I feel truly alone.'

'Without me you feel truly alone?' repeated the octopus, 'surely you have made new connections with your sisters.'

'Yes indeed, but they don't know everything, only you know the depths of my despair, only you I have trusted with my secrets.'

'And why, asked the octopus, 'when there are many willing to listen, you have chosen to keep your stories in a vault? See, just as I give birth to new life and create as nature intended, then I die to move on and evolve. Just as you give birth to your stories, of your woes and your pains, by sharing them with others, so does something in you die and sets you free. There is magic, in the telling and the listening as there is love in giving and receiving. Leave me rest, black dog, and share your stories without fear, and honour the silence that opens hearts in their wake.'

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