

## **Transcription of *Downpour Resurfacing***

film by Frances Nkara

text spoken by Robert Hall

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For more information on the film or to buy or stream it, please see:

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The thing I think that characterizes us human beings the most is that we're all in one way or another seeking happiness. Everybody I know wants to be happy and I think that's so for everybody on the planet. But unfortunately for most people there seem to be obstacles to gaining happiness. You notice I use the word seeking, seeking happiness means that it isn't quite here yet, so that there's this constant search for peace of mind and contentment and to get our needs met. But this level of anxiety that most people live with has something to do with not being quite fulfilled. Not finding total satisfaction in life. Having still the need to protect the heart and to make sure that there's enough food and shelter and that we're safe and in other words to--looking for security in a world in which there really isn't total security. A world that's characterized mostly by change and the continuous appearing and disappearing of everything, including us. You know, we're all going to get older and then eventually leave here and we don't even know when that's gonna happen. So, there's this underlying anxiety that we all deal with.

And it's especially true for victims of childhood sexual or physical abuse. People who have grown up dealing with a history of having been abused seriously by strangers or somebody in the family, have a very difficult row to hoe because there's this really rather high level of anxiety and a feeling of never being quite safe in the world, that has come about from a lot of trauma in the early years. The need to deal with high levels of

suspicion and the need to protect oneself is a constant drain on the energy. And--and it causes a certain struggle, a certain strain just to lead a fairly normal life.

When I was just a small child, maybe mm 3-1/2, 4 years old, my younger brother was born, and when my mother brought him home from the hospital, like any young child, I was a little bit feeling displaced and jealous of his presence, so what I did was run away from home. Well, running away from home where I lived meant walking a couple of blocks down the street, but something happened when I did that that has given me scars and ah anxiety to--to deal with for all of my life. And ah I have come to see that experience as, more and more, not something really horrible in my life but something that gave me the opportunity to develop myself spiritually and psychologically. Because what happened was that I was abducted by a stranger off of the street. And ah, according to my family missing for a couple of days.

I had no memory of this, as I grew up, because like most victims of severe abuse, I rendered the experience unconscious, because the feelings and the horror of it were just too much for my very young psyche, my ah innocent mind to deal with. So, all of it went underground and-- ah I only awakened to that memory when was about 32 years old, and that came about as the result of work with the body. Ah, developing body awareness through deep tissue work, rolfing, hatha yoga. What happened was that one afternoon when my teacher was working with my, with her hands on my legs, in the--in the muscles in the connective tissue, I started having spontaneous recurrence of memories of what--what happened and ah they were really puzzling to me because I had no idea what was happening. But I started to vividly, ah see that I had been tied up. I saw ropes and that I was being kept in a dark room, someplace where there was an earthen floor, and I had the experience of my face being pushed into the--the earth. I remember the coolness of the earth. It was very vivid. And that something very painful was happening to me. And then the next memory that arose out of the unconscious was one of being alone in this room, whoever had brought me there had left and locked me in and I was trying to put my clothes on. I was nude and ah I didn't know how to dress

myself yet, so I kept getting both legs stuck in the same ah pant hole and I kept falling down, and the--the humiliation and the--sorrow and the--horror of that experience reemerged in the--in the re-, spontaneous memory of it.

And then the next vivid memory was of being found, and it was actually my first real spiritual experience, strangely enough. At one end of this room there was a window, high up and a light was coming in the window and at the very worst of the humil--humiliation and the--the pain of it, I heard my name being called, and I looked up and--and there was a face in the window, with the light shining in back of the face, it was the face of my father's best friend. There'd been a search party, and he had found me and was calling me. And I--I--I immediately had this sense of being saved, and ah ah a great feeling of gratitude, that what had happened was that I was being saved, because there was something worthy about me and I think that--that experience helped a lot to combat the feeling of--of worthlessness and guilt that always goes with trauma like that, no matter what age at which it occurs.

Well, I stopped speaking after that experience. My mother told me that I didn't speak for a year afterwards. And my family who were pretty unsophisticated and uneducated people, particularly psychologically unsophisticated, they decided that the best thing to do was to let me forget the whole thing, and everybody ignored it. They didn't even call the police. So, as soon as that memory was repressed, I grew up with a vague feeling of not being okay, ah a constant need to deal with a certain level of anxiety, and what happened was that I developed a kind--a personality, what's sometimes called in--in Jungian psychology, a false personality that I identified with and that personality had to do with being okay, and being smart and ah being somebody who can accomplish things. And as a result, ah I excelled in school, I was very popular, I--I was president of everything. And ah my rational mind thought that I was really doing quite alright. But in certain moments, when I was alone and--and reflective and introspective of myself, I would discover that there was this gnawing feeling of some kind of danger that I was always in.

My mother, when I was about 5 years old, became, I think, I know depressed, but I think psychotically depressed, and she--she told me ah before her death that she became obsessed with the idea of driving the evil out of me, ah purifying me so that she could be seen by the neighbors as a good mother. She felt that she had been a bad mother because of the--the abduction. So, when nobody was around, she started to beat me severely with a leather strap, and--and I mean severely. I had memories of seeing blood running down my legs, and I had no idea as this 5 year old chi--child, why she was doing that. And so the whole thing further traumatized me and I split off more and more in--in my psyche and buried those experiences very deeply. And--and I didn't see them again in consciousness until much later in my life in the course of psychotherapy.

This happens pretty consistently with people who undergo early childhood trauma. There's this development of ah a replacement personality and very often the memories like mine are put away and outside of the conscious mind into the unconscious and--and maybe even stored in the tissues of the body. What happens instead is that we in order to deal with--with the fear and the insecurity, we start doing what's called repetition compulsion. We start repeating similar kinds of feelings in our relationships, and in our ah position in the world, over and over and over again. We unconsciously set it up so that we can re-experience the fear, re-experience the original trauma. The idea is to master it, to become free of it by looking the fear directly in the eye and making friends with it.

After the experience of--of being beaten a few times with the--the leather whip by my mother, I of course developed a kind of natural fear of her and--to say the least. But as time went on I started to feel more and more close to her and we became pretty good friends. But that fear never really totally dissipated. And so even well into my middle years, we never were able to regain any sense of intimacy or closeness. We were pretty estranged from each other. I--I was mostly indifferent, I think in the relationship and then when my mother was on her deathbed, my daughter, my oldest

daughter persuaded me to go visit her to say goodbye and I did that and I'm very happy that I did because something happened that--between us that was incredibly healing.

I walked into the room and instead of saying hello or you're here, or it's good to see you, she said, "this is the worst of all my life, this is the worst", and I knew that she was struggling a great deal, and I decided that I would do whatever I could to help her pass through this dying process. So, being a body worker, I sat many, many hours with her and ah with my hands on her heart and on her head and ah supporting her back, slow massage, and it was really very soothing, my touch was soothing to her--I could tell because when she would become conscious, she would shake her head yes, like this. And at one point, I said to her, "You can go now, it's okay for me if you go." And she said, "I am going now. I'm going now. Do you know?" And I said, "Yes." And ah I said that you-you've done a good job, you've been a good mother, and I really meant it actually, and I was holding her in my arms at that point and she looked at me and opened her eyes for the last time and her last words were, I did what I knew. I did what I knew. And I've thought of that so many times for all of us, what a really profound thing to be able to say, at the time of death. I did what I knew. It's the truth. It's the bottom line, bare bones reality, right?

This--this method of repetition compulsion, this repeating our experience over and over again, even though unconsciously is as a--as a way of mastering fear and anxiety is a--it's very interesting phenomenon because it's quite natural, it's how we learn. Repetition is how human beings learn and it's how we grow psychologically and emotionally, actually into adulthood. And--and even more interesting is that repetition is the foundation of all spiritual practices whether it's chanting or the repetition of mantra or the davening, the movement of the body in davening, or in conscious dance. The repetition of the drone in Sufi music, etc, etc. You'll find it everywhere. And I think that the abuse victim goes about healing himself or herself automatically. There's a kind of homeostatic healing mechanism that happens within us, automatically by repeating the original trauma, the feelings of the original trauma, in a way that's--that's--that allows us

to be masterful or to overcome the fear or to be somehow not losing ourselves in the fear but getting a sense, more and more, of personal identity by the repetition-going through it again and again and again. So, the healing process occurs as long as we're wanting to live fully, as long as we're wanting to be here. As long as we're wanting to learn. Ah, the whole idea of awakening has to do with learning to become conscious of how we repeat ourselves over and over and over again.

When I was 11 years old, my father had a hired man who was about 22. And ah my parents started going out at night quite a bit, and this man became my babysitter. Well, what had happened was that in the middle of the night he began coming into my bed, and using me sexually. I had no idea--11 years old, I had no idea actually what was going on, but in the course of time, when--after that had happened a number of times, I became really very attached to this--this man because he was the one who was closest to me. He had the most intimate relationship with me of all, much more of anyone else in my family. The relationship was very disturbing to me because I knew it wasn't right and I also knew that my father would very likely kill him physically if--if he knew about this. And so I was forced to keep the whole thing secret and ah I developed this double life and that--that alienated me from my friends and from my family, particularly from my father because we were just beginning to develop a father-son relationship and I wasn't able to be really open about what was happening in my life because of the fear of--of his retaliating.

The other thing that happened was that ah in my youth and in my developing sexuality and in the course of the--I was in puberty really, pre-puberty, I ah I--I think you'd call--I--I fell in love with my abuser and I've since learned that happens a lot to people who experience childhood abuse. And--and that only went to deepen the sense of shame because I was not only being used by this person, who was quite indifferent to me as a being, but I was attached and--and happy to be abused, and I used to--I remember I--I remember waiting on the back steps for him to appear and ah to take me fishing or to go out hunting. I wanted to be with him all the time and that affection, my

affection for him scared him, a lot, and he started to push me away, avoid me, consider me to be a pain in the butt, really, and I um--I think--as a result of that I became afraid of loving anyone, because this first experience of--of adolescent love, puberty kind of love was ah colored by the deepest kind of rejection and abandonment. So, it really left me a scarred person as far as relationships of the heart and the body and the mind go.

Healing from childhood trauma actually starts to begin when we learn how to use the repetition, the repetition compulsion and make it work for us instead of being something that's done automatically and outside of awareness but through therapy, through spiritual practices like meditation, through hath--hatha yoga ah we start to become more and more conscious in the moment of the repetition and behavior as we're actually doing it. Then there's a chance that we can begin to harness that energy and use it in service of health and in developing the openness of the heart and the capacity--and--and increasing the capacity to love. You see, because in the process of repetition one begins to notice more and more what it is that's actually happening. One begins to notice where the pain comes from, how the pain and the anxiety is connected to the memories and how the memories belong to the past. They're not any longer happening, that the fear itself, the anxiety, the discomfort is being brought along like old baggage from the past. In the repetitious movement of our behavior consciously in the moment, we see that there isn't anything actually wrong with what it is that we're experiencing in present time, that, in truth it's full of life energy. In truth it's possible to open the heart in the moment and not be afraid of being again attacked or again ah unfairly made use of, or again invaded, to open the heart to the immediacy of the moment, to the feeling of participation and connection and the experience of being fully alive and fully participant in life. That can only happen when we realize that the symptoms of anxiety, the memories of--of the past trauma are not necessarily the problem. The problem is our attachment to them as the story that we believe in about ourselves, the problem is in the being unconscious of the actual feelings themselves. When we open to re-experiencing them, and release the attachment to the--the feelings

of anxiety or pain that we've identified with, the possibility then comes of realizing who we really are and who we really are is not a victim. Who we really are is in no way powerless or subject to random abuse from the universe. Who we really are is life force itself, connected to everything else that lives. Full membership in the universe. When that happens we can begin to use the energy that used to be tied up in repeating over and over again and managing anxiety, we can use that energy creatively. For myself, I started writing poetry, then I started reading poetry publicly, and then I started performing concerts with musicians. All the while, working with the fear of being seen, the fear of expressing oneself, the fear of being vulnerable, all the while working with that, working with that until now, going on stage for a poetry reading with some musician friends of mine is not only healing, it's a total pleasure. So, we can channel all of that energy that used to go into maintaining ourselves into art and creativity, bringing more beauty into the world.