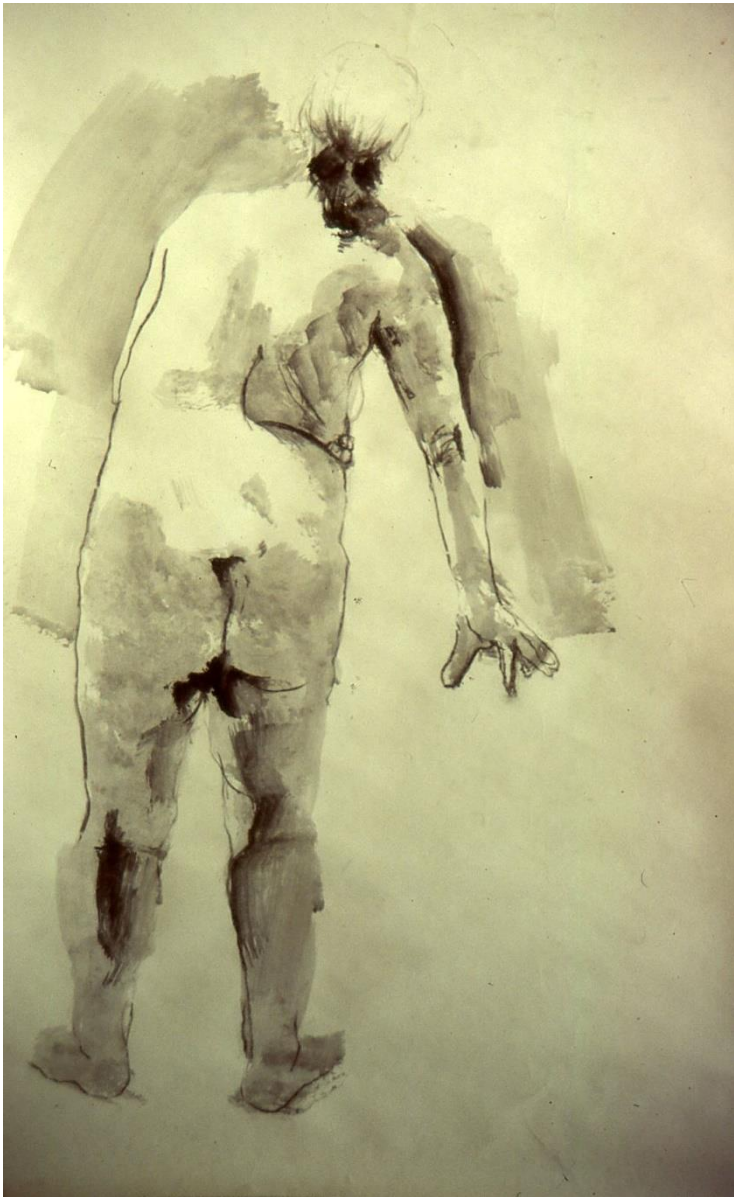


NAYSHA, THE WOUNDED WARRIOR

by Mehdi Darvish Yahya



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Naysha¹ walks into my studio with a look of determination keenly noticing my every movement. She is fifty years old, tall but somewhat slouching forward. She has come to see me on the recommendation of a mutual friend, a mentor of hers and a colleague of mine.

I invite her to sit down and begin talking with her about her history which has brought her here. She speaks of men, many men, who have hurt her: her father, brother, relatives, her father's friends, and partner after partner. For as long as she remembers, she has had pain in her joints and digestive system. She has had vaginal pain, tightness, and yeast infection since age eleven.

I ask her how she feels about doing this work with me, a man. She says she needs to do this to prove to herself that not all men are evil. It has taken her a very long time to take the step to come to see me. The thought of being touched by yet another man has been daunting (feeling a pain in her neck she mentions a spontaneous recall of memories of being forced into oral sex), and yet she feels it is necessary for her body to find peace and relief from all those wounds.

I'm aware of the immense responsibility I carry by standing in for all the men who have betrayed her. I feel I am asked to share a part of myself with her that is very different from those men. To heal the wounds inflicted and deepened by all those men, and the loss of trust, safety instilled in her by a rejecting and unprotective mother, she needs to experience a deeply empathic and loving feminine, and an ethically boundaried, strong masculine. An attuned and ethical practitioner can offer both, regardless of practitioner's gender.

I acknowledge her courage and the enormity of the journey. I begin to explain how important it is to me to know when and how she feels her 'NO'. Can she say NO with conviction or would she be concerned about my feelings or my reaction. The experience of trauma eschews the awareness of one's *NO* and the ability to voice it too.

I also explain to her how any touch offered in our sessions is asked for and guided by her. And that I would consistently bring her attention to her body in the present moment and would be curious about her genuine and true desire. I would then respond, to the best of my ability, if I can with a full heart, and not out of obligation or any expectation of reciprocity. I would respond either with touch or by observing, witnessing, and reflecting, or by saying words and affirmations that she would give me. The touch would be one-way, and I would wear gloves if I am asked to touch her genitals.

What follows is a brief description of changes and challenges over an 18-month process of working

¹ Editors' note: Although name and identifying details have been changed to protect this client's anonymity, this detailed case study was written with her permission, and she has approved the manuscript.

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together with Naysha, her heroic journey towards a better life, complete with my stumblings and learning moments along the way. Our sessions had a consistent structure which was a 5-10 minute check-in during which she told me about things that had happened since our last meeting and talking about her intention for the current session. Then we would begin bodywork, if that was her wish, with a short debriefing afterwards. The bodywork took up the bulk of the one and a half hour.

We began with a movement exercise in which she would signal me to approach her, or to stop, or to move away from her. To do this I invited her to be fully present and attentive to her internal signals of safety and danger, a quality of awareness that is also mangled by the early and chronic trauma.

Soon into the exercise she began to cry while telling me she suddenly *got it* how her mother never helped her feel safe. Her mother's neglect and abandonment had been stored in her body all her life and just now, with permission and an invitation to attend to the senses, she gained awareness of her chronic sense of danger and stress. When I asked her what she needed in this moment, she asked to be held like a baby and be told positive affirmations as if by an ideal mother and grandmother while she expressed rage at her father and grief over her mother's incompetence.

In our third session, she asked to be touched, fully clothed lying on the massage table, with some pressure along her sides, while she imagined being put back together. As I did that she felt she could do what she had always wanted to do, screaming "Please Stop! You're hurting me. Get your hands off me!"

Two months after our first session, she reported that a longstanding depression had lifted. She was now choosing more colourful clothes and felt she could express herself through mixing and matching various pieces. She seemed more attentive to her own sense of choice and less concerned with what others thought.

During a touch session she felt an old rage but was afraid of staying with it for too long. Father's rage was painful and frightening, and she was afraid of becoming like him. I coached her to soothe and ground herself through down-regulating breath until she felt safe enough to feel her anger. She understood "nothing bad is going to happen to me". She held my hand imagining I was her kind "grandpa". She asked me to put my other hand on her "mound of Venus" and spoke of a scene she saw in her mind: a horse in a meadow, strong, fast, and safe. I invited her to let the qualities of the horse settle into her body. She began to move in a playful manner and kick her feet.

Over the course of the next few sessions she seemed to be gradually 'thawing out' the freeze response brought on by the chronic trauma. In Naysha, this freeze state manifested in her loss of awareness of her body and its genuine needs and in her inability to say NO to violating, boundary-

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crossing behaviours by others. Now by being able to allow and feel the playful and strong qualities of horse along with a deep sense of safety, she was moving towards reconnecting with her innate ability to stop unwanted touch and to protect herself.

A few months later, Naysha reported many meaningful insights. She felt an old anger that seemed to belong to her five-year old self. The anger made her feel out of control and she ate junk food to calm the feeling. She also reported an improvement in her hearing. In the body work part of her eighth session, she asked me to hold the back of her neck while touching her solar plexus, and described it as “like holding a baby”. This resulted in a tremendous release of sorrow. She said “I am completely new” and praised herself for giving her children “what I didn’t get”. She stated the connection between the tenderness in her nipples and the chronic yeast infection under her breasts with the unwanted touch by her father; it was her body’s way of fighting against his aggression and violence.

In the next session, fully clothed, she asked for touch everywhere on her body. She wanted different parts to be held and rocked. She also guided me to move the toxic energy out of her body and to throw it away with flicking motions. She suddenly sat up and burst into tears, stating she felt ashamed for feeling aroused. She wanted to be hugged and expressed her fresh realization that she didn’t have to “endure touch”. She reported she felt naturally lubricated - something that she said “had not happened in years!”

Throughout her process, Naysha was imaginative and open to speaking about her mental imagery, no matter how painful and ugly it was. On the one hand she was able to find strength in her imaginations of the horse, the safe meadow, and a familiar wolf pack. These images connected her with a deep but long-lost sense of safety, intuition, and purpose. On the other hand, she was active in letting go of the “toxic waste” that she had carried in her body and her mind for so long.

About nine months after we began our work together, Naysha’s father died. In the next few sessions, she felt light, spacious, and more open to experiencing joy and pleasure. She wanted to move and dance, and wished to be touched more in pleasurable ways. In a session, she asked to be touched all over her body with some focused touch on her sacrum, and pelvis, and gentle touch on the genitals, she said “It is like I’ve been waiting for this all my life”. She wanted to absorb the joy and pleasure of this experience while she also felt her habitual armouring against pleasure.

It was at this point in the process that she reported she felt healthier, more energetic, and her thinking was clearer. She had no pain and felt more sexually aroused. She felt more excited more often and was masturbating twice as much as before. She felt less hungry, especially for junk food. She spoke

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of a felt sense of being in a “plaster mould” that stopped her from being alive. This seemed to be an apt description of what trauma had done to her sense of self in the world; there was always a degree of separation that blocked her ability to experience the reality of her life. She guided me to gently touch different parts of her body as if I were massaging a baby while she told those parts they were safe.

Later she reported she felt more confident facing “all men ever lying” to her; “I feel like me for the first time”.

When we met up for our fifteenth session she announced “I got it that I can give up the belief that that any man coming close to me is going to have sex with me. When I gave that up, I felt safe with you”. Later she asked for touch in the mid and lower body. The touch triggered anxiety related to “dad”. There had been a flare-up in the yeast infection and hives on her inner thighs. As Naysha guided me to touch her legs I noticed a drop in temperature in the area between her hips and thighs, and I asked her to tune in to the area and see what she noticed.

This method of bodywork is more of a *client-centred* practice than a *client-guided* one. There are times when clients might ask for certain touch because they believe the touch to be necessary or expected. This is the indoctrination and disempowerment caused by generations of ‘experts’ imposing their will on ‘patients’ and telling them what they should want and how they should accept what they are given. A practitioner’s finely attuned attention to the client’s body can help the process. We can keep bringing client’s attention to their bodies and to the work of staying present to their bodies’ true needs in the moment, regardless of what they *expect* to experience in a session.

In the next session, Naysha expressed lots of anger towards her mother and “all the selfish things she did”. In the bodywork, she guided me in a touch that helped her feel an opening up in the upper chest. She then asked me to slide my hands down her sides and lift her hips. She recalled her father lifting her as a baby to change her diapers. She allowed herself to feel a lot of tremors and tears. I coached her in making sounds that vibrated her belly from the inside. She felt the urge to move and I encouraged her to run in place, and kick and hit the massage table with her legs. She asked me to lift her hips again in the exact way her father used to do. She was able to stay present and differentiate the present moment from the old experience.

This was a critical shift in her in that she was able to prevent herself from being ‘hijacked’ by the old trauma memory, something that makes a traumatized person get lost in the frightening feelings and experience the memory as if it is happening in the present moment. This is how trauma damages the sense of time in its victims. To heal from trauma, it is necessary to arrive at the point where we

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can see clearly 'that was then, this is now'.

In the next little while she reported her urge to declutter her home while in the bodywork she worked on "clearing energy blocks".

Lying face down on the table one day she remembered being sodomized by her father. She noticed how by habit she tightened her body and held her breath. I asked her if she wanted to tune into those feelings now. She asked me to hold and open her hips at the same time, which prevented her from tightening her genitals. She then released many tears with anger. As she shook and sobbed intensely, she said "This is my body, I am not bad, I did what I could to stop it". Indeed, she had done all that she could, despite the great cost to her body and her physical health.

In debriefing the session, she said: "This was new! I feel a burst of love and a heart opening. This is beyond the earthly reality. This is the deepest work I have ever done!"

During this period she was involved in clearing her father's place to prepare it for sale. This was a constantly triggering experience due to the fact that she often came across things he collected for his sexual obsession, or objects with which he had violated her. She became highly agitated in a session during this period. After helping her to get grounded through breath-work, movement, and sounds we ended the session early.

In the next session about a week later, she stated she had come back despite the bad experience last time and fear of that happening again. She seemed like a severely wounded but proud warrior who could not and would not accept defeat.

In this session, she spoke about feeling her father on the left side of her body, even smelling a putrid odour on the left side of her forehead. She sensed a viscous fluid in her lower back between her hip bones. I focused her on the flow and how it was emptying out from one side of the body. A new joyful light energy began emerging in her uterus, filling her pelvis, and the right side of her body. She was able to focus on the pleasure of this experience, which felt like another shift in the habitual tendency to focus on the pain and fear. When she felt the fear she also felt very angry and called out "Fuck off! Enough is enough!" She seemed to feel her power to stop the intrusion.

In an email she stated: "It has been a powerful week. I am more aware of the change/awareness that I have with my power to see things differently... I am happy and celebrate every small thing I accomplish".

In the following sessions she was gradually able to focus on pleasure. While she noticed sensations that in the past would have made her "freak out", she was able to *stay with them*. In the world outside she reported she felt more confident, and less guilty or ashamed.

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At some point in a bodywork session, she began to respond more positively to touch, feeling excited and engorged, and asked for touch on her G-spot and clitoris. Quickly though she became overwhelmed with pain. On reflection it seemed to me that we were both excited about her progress, and we might have rushed forward too fast.

In the same way that a child's development can be disrupted as a result of untimely, unwanted and uninvited sexual touch, the healing process can be disrupted by rushing towards ecstasy if the client is not equipped to manage and regulate the experience. Such an experience can be triggering and traumatic in itself. So while dealing with effects of sexual trauma, we must keep in mind all aspects of the client's experience which would empower them to invite and receive that state of bliss in complete safety and with full mastery. We cannot impose sexual happiness on anyone.

Naysha reported that despite (and maybe because of) the previous session, she felt better about herself and "loving every part" of herself. "It's a strange way of viewing myself" she said. In the body work that day she moved in and out of anxious and reactive states, and she managed to connect with her inner safety. She guided my touch to experience pleasure around her groin and vulva while staying present to the sensations.

In our final session, she set her intention to feel love for her Self. While receiving touch, she felt overcome with feelings of self-love and her constant longing for it. Feeling her grief she sat up and cried, laid down again, and this time noticed the divide in her Self: the older, motherly and mature part, which she named "the wise one", and the "little one", who at my invitation was able to stand in the corner of her bubble, observing and learning from the wise one.

In this final session, Naysha was able to recognize and to differentiate two important parts of her psyche, parts that had been sent *into exile*, her "inner child" carried the early life wounds. Another part had matured through hardships and had discovered her truth through raising her own children. She wrote to me later that the newfound awareness of these two aspects helped her achieve better mastery of her day-to-day challenges. "The realization that I have a choice on how I respond to experiences has made such a difference on how I live my life. I am always surprised at how my life continues to change every day. I am comfortably growing into my own power with ease and excitement".

And a few months after finishing our sessions, Naysha wrote: "I realize that even though I have never felt loved from a child's perspective, it is an old pattern that doesn't apply and that I have always been surrounded by people who love me. I also came to the realization that it is safe for me to be well... There is power in knowing that I don't need to be sick to be safe".

Reading this I imagined her taking her constant armour of pain, infection, and numbness off and

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walking away from the battle which had been imposed on her by her traumatic life. Now she could rightfully focus on her own desires and voice them to the world with confidence, and best of all, without shame.