

Chapter 8

The Fertility of the Dark

The Unbroken

There is a brokenness
out of which comes the unbroken,
a shatteredness
out of which blooms the unshatterable.

There is a sorrow
beyond all grief which leads to joy
and a fragility
out of whose depths emerges strength.

There is a hollow space
too vast for words
through which we pass with each loss,
out of whose darkness
we are sanctioned into being.

There is a cry deeper than all sound
whose serrated edges cut the heart
as we break open to the place inside
which is unbreakable and whole,
while learning to sing.

—Rashani Réa

FEAR OF OUR PAIN

Enlightenment consists not only in seeing the luminous, but in making darkness visible. The latter is much more difficult, so it is far less popular.

—Carl Jung

In the moment you are sitting here, reading this book, dew drops are reflecting the morning light; a rainbow of colors is appearing out of the heart of flowers; whales are singing their ancient tunes; babies who were just one seed nine months ago are taking their first breath; and wind is caressing

ancient bristlecone pines high in the alpine forests. All around us is a magical realm—earth, air, sun and water being woven over and over again into myriad amazingly beautiful forms.

Now notice where your awareness has been primarily focused for the last 24 hours. Have you been present for this wondrous unfolding? Probably not. If you are like most people, your attention has probably been focused on your own individual struggles—big ones, little ones, scary ones and fun ones. If we watch what we are doing all day long, we can begin to see that we are usually *working at Life*. We are oriented towards struggle, lost in the land of always trying to make ourselves and our lives different than they are.

The image I often use is that we are like children completely focused on trying to unravel a ball of yarn, and all the while we are standing in paradise. We are so busy with our struggles that we are not *here* for Life. Beyond this narrow focus is a reality—a safe, benevolent, trustable, magical and fascinating reality—that is always with us no matter where we are and no matter *what is* happening. But we don't notice.

One of the primary reasons we don't notice is that we fear all levels of pain —physical, emotional and mental. In this fear we have become addicted to the endless struggle of trying to get rid of what we don't like in our lives and to go towards what we do. We can see this in our commercials (if you ate too much, just drink this antacid and you'll be able to ignore the message in your discomfort and overeat again); it is evident in our religions (salvation is going to the light and leaving the dark behind); in our whole response to the aging process (the dramatic increase in plastic surgery, the billions of dollars spent on potions and lotions); and in our denial of death (the warehousing of the elderly and the sanitation of the dying process).

We want one side of Life (the pleasant) without the other (the unpleasant) and wonder why we are lost in struggle most of the time. "Don't respond to the pain in your life; just go towards the pleasant and the desirable and leave the rest behind" is our litany. If that doesn't work, we deny, blame and manipulate, absolutely certain that if Life is difficult, then something is wrong. This is broadcast from pulpits, the Congress, our therapists and especially ourselves.

In the belief that there is such a thing as a perfect and together human being, we have maimed, brutalized and tried to exorcise the weak and imperfect parts of ourselves. We struggle with what we don't like about our bodies, our minds, our emotions, our relationships, our communities and our world. We are conquerors, addicted to the belief that if we can manage Life by ignoring, denying, fixing or getting rid of what we don't like, then we will know lasting peace.

This approach denies that pain is a thread in the tapestry of Life and has an essential role in the scheme of things. It is as if we decided that the tide coming in is good and the tide going out is bad, completely ignoring the fact that it wouldn't work if the tide always came in. The land would flood, crops would die, and we'd have wet feet all the time! We fail to see that when the tide goes out, it then gathers up wonderful gifts from the sea—beautiful shells, water carved logs, rich communities of sea weed—and on its return, it deposits them on the shore.

If the tide of our physical, emotional and spiritual lives always came in, we would be stagnant creatures. Every single time our tide goes out, we are renewed and enriched by all the gifts it brings as it flows back in. Because of our refusal to see the essential nature of darkness and all of the gifts that it brings, we are caught off guard when the tide has gone out in our lives (as it is destined to do). We then look desperately for something or someone (oftentimes ourselves) to blame. "Don't trust the ebb and flow of Life; don't listen to the pain and what it is feeding back to you; just get rid of it," is the credo we live by.

We need to learn how to work with our pain in new ways, understanding that it is an integral part of Life. We need to learn how to include it rather than exclude it. To awaken our hearts so that we can heal, we need to recognize that each of us is destined to take on challenges in our lives, get lost in them and then finally bring them to the light of compassionate awareness. As John Lee said in *Writing From The Body*, “Letting the shadow speak its peace is part of the process that leads us to the good stuff. If we can’t let ourselves go deeply into the shadow, we may never reach the place in ourselves where tenderness resides.”

Freedom comes when we learn to respond rather than react to the difficult in our lives. Whether it is a deeply challenged body, a broken heart, an abusive boss, deep rage, freezing cold, an overdue deadline or a dying friend, we can learn the power of relating to the difficult parts of our lives rather than being caught in their web. Pain then becomes an awakener, an ally and even a friend. As Stephen Levine has said, “Pain sucks, but it grabs our attention.” That which is difficult in our lives is here to heal us, and our job is to learn how to pay attention. Let us begin by getting to know how our resistance to the uncomfortable keeps us caught in struggle.

VICTOR/VICTIM CYCLE

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,
you would be paralyzed.

Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding,
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
as birdwings.

—Rumi

Our addiction to struggling with our pain moves back and forth between two extremes: the victor (powering over) and victim (overpowered). We all swing back and forth on this pendulum, experiencing joy when we feel we *have it all together* and despair when we think our pain will never end.

The victor says that a successful life is one in which our relationships are always well-oiled and running smoothly, so we never have a compulsive urge, and we are *in control* financially, emotionally, physically and mentally. It is the fixing, changing, manipulating part of us that is irritated in rush hour traffic, believes that our lives would be better if only our mate would change, is hateful of those aging lines, and is absolutely certain that depression is an indication that something is wrong with us.

Its core belief is that difficulty and darkness are signs that we are not doing it *right*. This part inside each of us says that if we just think positively, be proactive, take vitamins and exercise, we will not only be able to deal with everything that comes our way, but we will also be able to control what comes. The victor completely ignores the fact that there are forces far greater than itself that influence its life. It is like each one of us is a tiny inlet on the Oregon coast saying that we can control the entire Pacific Ocean. When something goes wrong with our efforts to get everything *in order*, the only conclusion we can come to is that we have done something wrong or haven’t tried hard enough.

When trying to control doesn’t bring us the results we yearn for, we slip into the victim mode —

the part that feels overpowered by Life. We so desperately want to feel sorry for ourselves when we are greatly challenged. We also are certain, somewhere deep inside of us, that challenges are here because we have done something wrong. The victim's litany is, "I can't do this; I've always failed before; it's too much; it's not fair; why am I being punished; what did I do to deserve this; I'll never get through this."

The victim mode looks out upon the world and says "they" can do "it," but I can't. It is often times accompanied by blame. If we can't find someone to pin it on (I had bad parents), then we turn it against ourselves, spinning down into a maze of self hate and despair. On the surface it looks like a position of powerlessness but the victim holds great power. It keeps us from dealing with *what is* uncomfortable (oh, its too much), and it demands that others react to the definition of us as fragile (never confronting, always being kind). *The victim is scrambling for control as much as the victor is.*

The victor is *me against it all*—against my life, my emotions, my body, my mind. The victim is *all of this is against me*. The victor comes from the belief that I have to *do it all* and the victim's will is "I can't." Both are *reactors* to the experience of living rather than *responders*. Both are based on fear—the fear that we are separate and disconnected from the whole and that the entire responsibility for the unfolding of our lives is ours alone.

This addiction to struggle runs so deep that we never step back and examine whether it works or not. If we look carefully, it becomes evident that this approach to our lives only brings us moments of respite from the struggle of trying to manage our pain. We seem to get our lives together, only to have them dissolve into chaos again. We hide in the deeper realms of our consciousness the parts of our personality that we most hate and fear, only to have them subtly run our lives. We have learned to manipulate the appearance of things while sitting upon an ocean of pain, and we wonder why we are anxious behind the walls of our managing.

It is important to understand that we are talking about *becoming aware of*, not annihilating, the victor/victim mode, for it has a role to play in the maturing human. Going back and forth between the two extremes is a part of awakening. Rather than judging and trying to stop the endlessly swinging pendulum, it is far more helpful to begin to notice how we are functioning. In that awareness, the possibility of something new is born. From this noticing, it begins to dawn upon us that not only have we never been able to nail down perfection, but it is exactly this addiction to having everything together—this belief that *the good life* is one that is comfortable all the time—that keeps us caught in struggle.

Jim Henson's movie *The Dark Crystal* beautifully illustrates the integral relationship of dark and light. The movie revolves around a powerful crystal that is the centerpiece of a mythical land. When a shard of the crystal is lost, the crystal becomes dark and the land is divided between good and evil, with the evil forces occupying the castle where the crystal resides, using its power to try to control the land. The forces of light are not the usual saviors committed to destroying any trace of the dark side. They know the light, but they are stuck in concepts and rituals that disempower them. When the shard of the crystal is found, the mystics begin a journey back to the castle. As they enter the room where the crystal is, they see the dark beings in a circle around the crystal. Instead of fighting with them, the mystics circle around the crystal too, and at the moment the shard is put back into place, the mystics *merge* with the dark beings. The crystal then becomes radiant, the darkness is transformed, and the land is restored. Jim Henson clearly understood the interdependent nature of the dark and the light in our world.

Until we wake up to our need to run away from our pain, we will never truly be free. Peace comes

from learning how to ride the pendulum of joy and sorrow, loss and gain, loving and hating, fearing and trusting. So let us explore how we can respond to the challenges of Life in a way that ennobles and energizes rather than depletes and degrades.

There are five basic skills that will shift our relationship to our challenges:

- 1) The ability to trust that pain is an essential part of our lives.
- 2) The art of including rather than resisting and fearing.
- 3) The skill of becoming curious—responding rather than reacting.
- 4) Naming the parts of ourselves that upset and disturb us.
- 5) Creating a relationship with our pain.

All of these skills allow our struggling mind to be touched by the vast healing of our hearts so that we can truly know the peace that we long for. Let us now explore each one in depth.

TRUSTING PAIN

NO OTHER WAY

Could we but see the pattern of our days,
We should discern how devious were the ways
By which we came to this, the present time,
This place in life; and we should see the climb
Our soul has made up through the years.
We should forget the hurts, the wanderings, the fears,
The wastelands of our life, and know
That we could come no other way or grow
Into our good without these steps our feet
Found hard to take, our faith found hard to meet.
The road of life winds on, and we like travelers go
From turn to turn until we come to know
The truth that life is endless and that we
Forever are inhabitants of all eternity.

—Martha Smock

What if pain was not a mistake? What if pain didn't mean that we screwed up, *they* screwed up, or God fell asleep on the job? What if each of us received our own measure of pain when we took on a body, not for punishment, but because it would be our teacher of awareness and compassion? What if there was another way to work with pain, a way that allowed us to open up into a place that was bigger than struggle itself? And what if one of the greatest gifts we could give the world would be to move beyond struggling with our pain into being able to meet it with great compassion.

To open up to this possibility, we have to first explore the very novel idea that pain is not a mistake. Agnus Whistling Elk, a Native American shaman from Manitoba, spoke this truth in a most eloquent way:

If you look at something carefully, you will always be able to see its dark side. And yet we choose never to look into the shadows. Understand that it is what you choose not to observe in your life that controls your life. Everything begins with a circle of motion; without the positive and negative poles there would be no movement, no creation. Without the dark side, your beauty would not exist. Don't be afraid to look at both sides. You need them both. Honor all as part of the Great Spirit.

Everywhere we look, we can see the truth of Agnus's words: "Without positive and negative poles there would be no movement, no creation." This shows up in the atom, which is a combination of positive and negative charges. It is evident in the acid/alkaline balance in our bodies and in the fact that the opposites of male and female are necessary in the procreation of complex life forms. It is also noticeable in the violence of nature. Mountain ranges are born when two tectonic plates collide. New forests are brought forth after lightning fires.

The importance of the negative aspect of Life also shows up inside of us. We need our pain, our imperfections, and our failures. We would not be who we are without them. The author Thomas Moore invites us into this spacious relationship with that which disturbs when he says:

This requirement that we have to be perfect, that we have to get ourselves emotionally right, is such a burden. The more we try, the worse it gets! And so we try one type of therapy after another. It's pretty defeating. See, soul really thrives in failure and imperfection. Jung said that soul moves at the weak point, where the personality is thin, where things are not secure and stable. That's where soul has an entry. We need those vulnerable points.

On every level, in every experience, and in each being's existence, the dance of Life is a dance of dark and light. Darkness is rich and necessary, the place of fertility and creativity. Half of the Earth is always bathed in the dark of night. Out of black, moist dirt comes astounding creativity. Seeds, including us, incubated away from the light, and plants do their growth work in the dead of night. The same is true for our emotional and spiritual lives. Each of us was given pairs of opposites, a desire to awaken and great resistance, vast courage and deep fear, raw hatred and an awakening heart. The opposites are our teachers. In a way, the dance of our lives is about cooking the opposites until they blend into the rich soup of our potential.

Brian Swimme, in his series *Canticle to the Cosmos*, reveals the necessity of the challenges of our lives through the example of a hawk that wants all obstacles to catching its prey removed. When it demands that the mouse slow down so that it is easy to catch, the hawk's speed is no longer necessary and begins to diminish. With further reduction of the mouse's ability to run and hide, the hawk would then not need to fly anymore for it could simply walk after the slow moving mouse, and so its majestic wing feathers drop away. Wishing the mouse to become immobile, the hawk's keen eyesight would not be required, for it could stumble around and bump into its meal. Asking to receive its desires with no obstacles in the way, the hawk's unique beauty would vanish as its razor sharp eyesight, its soaring flight, and its awesome accuracy dissipated.

He goes on to say that, embedded deep in the hawk's heart, is the desire for its enemy to flourish, for it knows that *in engagement with the obstacles in its Life is the birth of itself*. Brian concludes, "It is only in this engaged life, this marriage with our enemies that we can discover who we are, what our creativity is and what our destinies are."

To trust the benevolence of Life, especially around the challenges of our lives, is to transform our relationship to Life from one of struggle to one of creative response. Rather than being caught in the victor/victim cycle, we can enter the moment no matter *what is* appearing with a sense of adventure, a keen curiosity and a compassionate heart. Christopher Reeve, in his first interview after falling from his horse and becoming paralyzed, said,

Either the Universe is totally random and it's just molecules colliding all the time in total chaos, and your job is to make sense of chaos; or, you could say, sometimes things happen for a reason and your job is to discover the reason. But either way, I see meaning and opportunity, and that has made all the difference.

The healing we yearn for comes from a shift of perspective about the role that challenges have in our lives. Christopher spoke about the terror and despair he felt when he first grasped the enormity of what had happened. He had moments of wanting to die. Meeting something he had no power to stop or change offered the possibility of either ensnaring him in a web of rage and self-pity, or else of transforming his life.

When his son came running into the room yelling “Daddy, Daddy,” he realized in that moment that he was much more than his crippled body, and that he was needed. From this perspective, he began to discover the “meaning and the opportunity.” And for the rest of his life, he lived from a deeper purpose than before the accident. He became a spokesperson for spinal cord injuries and truly made a difference in other people’s lives. But he did so much more. He invited a society to acknowledge that the challenges in our lives can ennoble, heal and inspire us.

There is another wonderful example of this in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart* by Jack Kornfield. A physician speaks about a 24 year-old man who lost his entire leg to bone cancer. At first he was very angry and bitter, caught in a strong sense of injustice and a very deep hatred for all well people. After working with him for awhile, the doctor noticed a profound shift. The young man began coming out of his victim role and out of himself. He started to visit other people who had suffered severe physical losses. He became present for them in their grief process just as the doctor had been for him and offered a living example of the healing power of accepting *what is*.

A year later, this young man met with the doctor to review their work together. They came across a picture he had drawn right after losing his leg. It was of a vase, and running through it was a deep black crack. This was the image he had of his body right after he had lost his leg. He had perceived himself as an irrevocably broken human being. In response to the picture he said, “Oh, this one isn’t finished.” He picked up a yellow crayon and putting his finger on the crack he said, “You see here—where it is broken? This is where the light comes through.” And with the yellow crayon, he drew light streaming through the crack in the vase, through the crack in his life.

To get a sense of how profound it would be to begin to trust pain rather than always resisting it, let us go on a journey together:

An Invitation

After you read through this exercise, put down this book, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. Begin to notice the living moment of your life—breath rising and falling, pressure from the support you are sitting on, the warmth or coolness of the room. Be here with your life as it is right now.

In your mind’s eye, see Earth in all of its beauty—the blues and browns and the swirling white clouds. From this spacious view, imagine all of the suffering that humans have

experienced on our planet—terrorist attacks, starving children in Africa, men and women who have died agonizing deaths alone on a battlefield, people dying of painful diseases in all parts of the world. Feel what happens in your body as you resist this—your body tightens, your mind closes down and your heart aches.

Shift your perspective, and accept for a moment the essential nature of darkness in this land of duality. Trust that it is here not to curse the world or because we are miserable sinners. It is just a part of Life. We live in a world where everything is constantly changing and everything dies. This is neither good nor bad, it just is *what is*. Know that the darker aspects of Life come from the same creativity that molded mountains and birthed stars. Notice what happens in your body as you let go of railing against these dark forces and begin to honor the fertility of the dark.

Now go back to hating and fearing these forces, and see what happens in your body. Feel the outrage and the unwillingness to let go of struggling with them. Then feel how this energy ricochets around your body, upsetting your inner balance and equilibrium.

Now go back again to the perspective of an awakening world and of trusting the fertility of the dark. When you are ready, come back to your awareness of the physical world around you and open your eyes. Your life, like the Universe, is made up of great darkness, brilliant light and everything in between. For a moment, just sit in the center of it all.

To see Life in this way is not to condone hurtful acts. There have been many unspeakably cruel things that people have done to other people. The point is that we've tried warring with them, and it doesn't work. We're seeing that fighting people or religions or countries will never solve these problems. We'll just find ourselves caught in the same mind that created them in the first place—the mind that perceives light as good and dark as bad. Healing comes in a shift of perspective and takes the radical and courageous step of trusting darkness. In this trust we can then *respond* to pain—both our own and everybody else's—from a clearer, kinder, more skillful place.

Each of us will have deeply challenging experiences in our lives. By changing our definition of what pain is about, and thus our relationship to pain, we can learn how to use these experiences to empower and heal our lives rather than to devastate and destroy. Both Christopher Reeve and the young man who lost a leg were catapulted out of a narrow definition of who they were and what they can give to Life. These challenges eventually brought much more into their lives than they took away. These two men literally became more alive because of their challenges.

The question we are living in is, "How can we change our relationship to pain in our daily lives, both the deep ones and the more ordinary ones? How can we make this shift without having to wait for the big guns of heartbreak, disease and death?" We've already taken the first step by exploring the essential and ultimately benevolent nature of challenges in our lives. The next step is to actually make room for what we most hate and fear.

INCLUDING OUR PAIN

Pain stayed so long, I said to him today;
I will not have you with me anymore

I stamped my foot and said "Be on your way!"
and paused there. Startled at the look he wore
"I, who have been your friend," he said to me
"I, who have been your teacher—
all you know of understanding, love of sympathy, and patience—
I have taught you. Shall I go?"
He spoke the truth, this strange unwelcome guest.
I watched him leave and knew that he was wise.
He left a heart grown tender in my breast.
He left a far clear vision in my eyes.
I dried my tears and lifted up a song
even for one who'd tortured me so long!

— Author unknown

None of us have the power to keep pain from our lives, and each of us will continue to be taught by challenges until our last breath. From a limited perspective, walling ourselves off from pain looks like a good idea. We resist, deny and then fight it with all of our might when it breaches our barricades. But a wall is a wall. It may serve to keep our darkness at bay for short periods of time, but it also walls us off from Life. The depth to which we refuse to be aware of our pain is the depth to which we are separate from Life. The radical notion of not fighting our pain is the doorway to freedom.

There is a wonderful story told by Jack Kornfield in his book *Stories of the Spirit Stories of the Heart* about Terry Dobson, a man who was studying Aikido in Japan. Having put in eight hours of training nearly every day for three years, he thought he was tough. He especially liked to throw and grapple, but his martial art skills were untested in combat. "Aikido," his teacher had said again and again, "is the art of reconciliation. Whoever has the mind to fight has broken his connection with the Universe. If you try to dominate people, you are already defeated. We study how to resolve conflict, not how to start it."

Even though Terry understood this intellectually, in his heart he wanted an absolutely legitimate opportunity whereby he might "save the innocent by destroying the guilty." One day he found himself on a train, lumbering through the suburbs of Tokyo. The car he was in was relatively empty and quiet, when all of a sudden, as the doors opened at the next station, the quiet was shattered by a man bellowing violent, incomprehensible curses. He staggered into the car, drunk and dirty. Screaming, he swung at a woman holding a baby. The blow sent her spinning into the laps of an elderly couple. Terrified, the couple jumped up and scrambled toward the other end of the car. The laborer aimed a kick at the retreating back of the old woman but missed as she scuttled to safety. The train lurched ahead, the passengers frozen with fear. Terry then goes on to describe what happened next.

I stood up and said to myself, "This is it! People are in danger, and if I don't do something fast, they will probably get hurt." Seeing me stand up, the drunk recognized a chance to focus his rage. "Aha," he roared. "A foreigner! You need a lesson in Japanese manners!" I looked at him with disgust and dismissal. I planned to take this turkey apart, but he had to make the first move. I wanted him mad, so I pursed my lips and blew him an insolent kiss.

He gathered himself for a rush at me.

A split second before he could move, someone shouted “Hey!” It was startling. I remember the strangely joyous, lilting quality of it—as though you and a friend had been searching diligently for something and he suddenly stumbled upon it. “Hey!”

I wheeled to my left, the drunk spun to this right. We both stared down at a little old Japanese man. He must have been well into his seventies, this tiny gentleman, sitting there immaculate in his kimono. He took no notice of me, but beamed delightedly at the laborer, as though he had a most important, most welcome secret to share.

“C’mere, and talk with me.” He waved his hand lightly. The big man followed as if on a string. He planted his feet belligerently in front of the old gentleman and roared, “Why the hell should I talk to you?” The drunk now had his back to me. If his elbow moved so much as a millimeter, I’d drop him in his socks.

The old man continued to beam at the laborer. “What’cha been drinkin’?” he asked, his eyes sparkling with interest. The drunk barked back, “I been drinkin’ sake, and it’s none of your business!”

“Oh that is wonderful,” the old man said, “absolutely wonderful. You see, I love sake too. Every night, me and my wife (she’s 76, you know), we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it out into the garden, and we sit on an old wooden bench. We watch the sun go down and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. We worry about whether it will recover from those ice storms we had last winter.” He looked up at the laborer, eyes twinkling.

As he struggled to follow the old man’s conversation, the drunk’s face began to soften. His fists slowly unclenched. “Yeah,” he said. “I love persimmons too...” His voice trailed off.

“Yes,” said the old man, smiling, “and I’m sure you have a wonderful wife.”

“No,” replied the laborer. “My wife died.” Very gently, swaying with the motion of the train, the big man began to sob. “I don’t got no wife, I don’t got no home. I don’t got no job. I’m so ashamed of myself.” Tears rolled down his cheeks; a spasm of despair rippled through his body.

The train arrived at my stop. As the doors opened, I heard the old man cluck sympathetically. “My, my,” he said, “that is a difficult predicament. Sit down and tell me about it.”

I turned my head for one last look. The laborer was sprawled on the seat, his head in the old man’s lap. The old man was softly stroking the filthy, matted hair.

As the train pulled away, I sat down on a bench. What I had wanted to do with muscle had been accomplished with kind words. I had just seen Aikido tried in combat, and the essence of it was Love.

The old man was neither the victor nor the victim. He didn’t *react* to the laborer, he *responded*. Without judgment and with great compassion, he accepted him just as he was. In the same exact way, our suffering needs us. The more we fight it, the louder it gets. As Terry’s teacher so eloquently said, “He who fights breaks his connection with the Universe. If you try to dominate people, you are already defeated.” The same is true with our internal community. The moment we try to power over the forces that scare and enrage us, we become caught in the endless victor-victim struggle. The way through is to welcome them.

Welcoming is the art of including, allowing, and making space for our pain, and it comes automatically when we begin to move out of the collective delusion that darkness is our enemy into a deep respect for it. To recognize that whatever causes havoc and heartache in our lives is a doorway into our healing is to re-engage with Life. The core challenges of our lives are the demons of renewal, and we can only gather the tremendous energy they hold for us by coming into direct relationship with them.

My body has been a great teacher for learning the powerful healing of inclusion. I was born with a very sensitive body, and the older I became, the more strongly it reacted to the slightest imbalance. Most of my life I tried to manage, bargain and plead with Life for a surcease from this discomfort. For varying periods of time this would make a difference, but then the symptoms would come back with a vengeance.

For a time I swung on the pendulum of victor and victim. I would go to doctors and read books on healing techniques. My mind would be in full gear, trying to figure out how to get rid of these unpleasant experiences in my life. I would do affirmations and bargain with God. When this didn't bring about the healing that I wanted, I would fall into the victim mode. Dabbling in the land of despair, I was caught in struggle. I moved back and forth from victor to victim, holding on for dear life, absolutely certain I could nail this pendulum to the wall.

Rarely in that whole process did I stop and listen to my pain. A voice inside of me said that I *must not* feel the depth of what was going on, for it would engulf me in an endless black hole. It was like sliding down a slippery slope, trying to hold onto every branch and rock I could get my hands on. I was lucky enough to be unable to find any hand holds—to be wrenched out of my ability to manage the process anymore. When the depth of discomfort in my body, (along with the terror, rage and despair) got deep enough, I was forced to begin to relate directly to what was happening.

A statement from Stephen Levine helped me immensely when I was learning how to relate to pain rather than being lost in it: “Discomfort is a drill, probing through our armoring and denial, reaching the deep reservoirs of long-held isolations and fears. The tip of the drill is honed by helplessness and hopelessness, the inability to control the uncontrollable.”

The moment for me that the drill of helplessness and hopelessness turned into empowerment happened when I got the flu. For most people, the flu is a great inconvenience in their lives. For me, it is like an atom bomb going off inside my body. The depth of terror (it's back!), rage (this is not fair), despair (I'll never get through this) and self judgment (what did I do wrong?) was immense. My first automatic response was denial. I noticed myself getting very busy, hoping to outrun these feelings. Of course, that only helped to enhance the imbalance. Then when denial didn't work anymore, I dropped into the land of struggle, seduced into trying to figure out where the flu came from and how I was going to get rid of it. It was like riding a slippery bucking bronco in a hurricane. All of the resistance to the uncomfortable aspects of Life arose and almost blocked the light of my awareness, throwing me again into the land of war.

But I had experienced too many moments of getting off the pendulum and resting in a place beyond the victor or the victim to stay lost in struggle for very long. I pulled on *what is*, becoming curious about what I was resisting, and then I moved into *this too*, embracing that this was just a part of the ebb and flow of Life and not something to resist. For moments, I was able to embrace my body from a spacious and curious heart. I was being healed, but not in the way that I had demanded it, since that would have been only a temporary healing. I was being healed of a pain that was far greater than any discomfort in my body. I was being moved beyond fear of Life and beyond the great desire to control it. For moments, when I was at the very center of my experience and beyond

the land of struggle, I connected with a deep peace and communion with Life, not on my terms, but exactly as it was appearing.

I was feeling better but the next day I had a speaking engagement I couldn't cancel. On the morning of the talk I didn't feel well and my mind freaked out. Closing my eyes to meditate, I found myself tossed back and forth upon a raging sea. I could only rest in the rhythm of my breath for moments before the storms would sweep me away again. Gradually, by persistently returning to the breath, my awareness began to settle, and I was able to be with the raging storm.

Then what happened was something I had been working towards my whole life. I finally welcomed the actual experience of feeling unwell, even though I had to be out in the public that day. It was surrounded by a feeling of deep exhaustion, a feeling that had always terrified me. I was able to become curious about what made me label it exhaustion. I followed and explored the feelings as they passed through my body. I began to ask these feelings, "*What is your contribution to my awakening?*" It was a moment of inclusion, not exclusion, and a moment of honoring the dark for the great gifts that it brings.

As I ceased fighting the experience, the feelings began to float away like clouds before the warmth of the sun. I discovered that most of the physical upset came from my fear and contraction around these feelings. This was an important speaking engagement and for days I had feared that these feelings of exhaustion would get in the way. As I moved beyond resistance and into actually welcoming these feelings, I began to feel better.

It turned out to be a wonderful, rich day. What I had heard for years—"It doesn't matter what happens to you; what matters is your relationship to it."—began to make sense at the core of my being. To find a balance and then lose it over and over again allowed the very depth of my soul to know that my daily life will always be a roller coaster ride. There is no way I can get all the 'rubber duckies' in a row and get them to stay there. As I have learned how to listen to *what is* with a welcoming and curious heart, I gradually opened up into a spacious and supportive place in which I could say "*this too,*" relating to my pain rather than being lost in it.

Trusting and including rather than eradicating all that is *wrong* changes our whole lives. The tremendous amount of energy we use to war with *what is* is freed up for curiosity, compassion and clarity. Welcoming is conflict resolution at its best, whether it is done over a negotiation table in Palestine or inside of us. War creates more war. Communication fosters healing, a healing that cannot happen until darkness is allowed a seat and a voice at the table of our being. When I first heard this, I felt such peace, but then I easily lost this perspective again. To the rational, logical mind this sounds like insanity, but to the heart it makes absolute sense.

For myself, at the beginning of my awakening there were just moments of being with my life in a compassionately curious way, like the flicker of a match in a dark cavern. But each of these flickers of honoring my darkness was a healing balm for my tortured heart. When the match flickers began to become beams of light, I was able to explore the immense cavern where all the unacceptable parts of me lived. Coming across the bats of terror and the drop-offs of self-hatred, I would again cower in this cavern and cover my head, blocking out the flicker of lights. But it was beginning to seep into my awareness that darkness wasn't here because I was inherently bad, lazy, stupid or stubborn. It was here to lead me to my wholeness. Eventually, curiosity would get the better of me, and off exploring I would go.

There are two main reasons why we have been reluctant to include pain as a crucial part of ourselves. The first is the belief that going towards it means more darkness. The exact opposite is true. Imagine riding down a road on your bicycle, heading into the setting sun. The details of the

landscape around you would be hazy and blurred by the strength of the light. Now imagine turning your bike around and heading into the coming darkness. In a flash, everything would be defined and clear. The same is true for going towards our own darkness. Fear may say otherwise, but it is not true. Meeting our darkness creates more light.

The second reason we resist the dark is that when we go towards that which we have formerly deemed as broken, inappropriate or bad, it is easy to get lost in judgment about ourselves. Coming across the parts of our shadow that we have hidden from our whole lives, it is easy to forget everyone has both dark and light inside of them. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross once joked about writing a book called, "I'm Not Okay, You're Not Okay, and That's Okay." Our perfection is in our imperfection, and each of us carries a part of the human shadow.

WHAT'S IN THE WAY IS THE WAY: THE ART OF CURIOSITY

If there were no confusion, there would be no wisdom...

Chaos is workable...not regressive.

Respect whatever happens, chaos should be regarded as extremely good news.

Respect the upsurge of energy that is emotions, no matter what form.

Nothing is rejected as bad or grasped as good.

We grapple only because we feel they will overwhelm the basic posture we have deemed ourselves to be.

To towards the emotion, then there is no resistance.

Let yourself be in the emotion, go through it, give-in to it, experience it.

Then there is rhythm.

Transmutation involves going through such fear.

—Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche

Imagine a fierce lion, one that represents all we hate and fear. It has been chasing us our whole lives. At moments it gets so close that we can feel its breath on the back of our neck. The closer it gets, the faster we run. If we are lucky, there will be a time when we can't run anymore. We are just too tired. As we fall to the ground, ready to be devoured, the lion screeches to a halt, and we find ourselves face to face with our pain. It opens its mouth (to eat us, we think) and instead, on its tongue is a gift that it has been trying to bring to us for years! *Our pain has waited our whole lives for us to be present for it.*

In order to respond rather than react to our pain so we can gather the gifts concealed within our wounds, we have been exploring two radical shifts in perspective. The first is the novel idea that pain in our lives is essential, trustable and ultimately benevolent. It isn't here because we've done something wrong or because Life is against us. Rumi speaks to the power of trusting pain in the following poem:

This Friend, who knows more than you do,

will bring difficulties and grief and sickness,
as medicine, as happiness,
as the essence of the moment when you're beaten,
when you hear, "Checkmate"!
and can finally say, "I trust You to kill me."

—Rumi

If we can trust that our pain is here to "kill" the illusion of being separate from Life, there comes a wondrous feeling of curiosity. If we really knew how much we were missing, if we really could see how much our radiance and our potential has been imprisoned, and if we allowed ourselves to really long for our spiritual vitality, we would be willing to explore our deepest of pains so that we can become free.

The second shift in perspective we've been exploring is the powerful tool of welcoming our pain. To resist gives that which we hate and fear great power. To include, as the old man did on the train, dissipates darkness like the sun meeting the fog. There comes more and more willingness to go towards and invite into our awareness that which we hate and fear, for we know that this is the way to freedom. The tree that resists the wind is uprooted. The grass that does not fight this powerful force—that in fact dances with it—lives.

The great beings on our planet—the ones whose very presence awakens something inside of us—are those beings who have met their dark side. Because they have welcomed their shadow, the energy they formerly used to deny, control, obliterate, understand, fix and control their darkness is now available for radiance, compassion, vitality and being fully present.

From this foundation of trust and welcoming, curiosity about our pain is possible. Remember Carl Jung's quote at the first of this chapter: "Enlightenment consists not only in seeing the luminous, but in making darkness visible. The latter is much more difficult, so it is far less popular." The key word there is *visible*. Our healing is in *seeing* our darkness, not in fixing it.

Instead of paying attention to our pain, we have considered it an uninvited guest in the party of our lives. When we first become aware that pain has shown up at our party, we try to get rid of it. We uninvite pain only to have it show up anyway. We run around locking all the doors and windows, hoping this will keep it away. When that doesn't work, we try to ignore it, standing with our back to it whenever it is present. We feel resentment and rage for its ability to make its way in through locked doors. "Pain is ruining the party," says the victim inside us.

What we are exploring here is the possibility of trusting that this guest at the party—this aspect of ourselves that we wish were not there—is no accident. It is an essential part of our dance. The experience of going to the party, after we finally acknowledge that maybe this is not the enemy we thought it was, shifts our whole perspective of the party. We may not relish it showing up, but at least our energy is not spent in resisting. Even a begrudging willingness to include it in our social circle begins to show up. From this foundation comes the wondrous feeling of curiosity. "If pain (this experience that I fear and hate) is an essential part of my life, *what is* it here for? How can I bring it the light of my attention (*what is*)?"

Rather than always turning our back on pain whenever it is in the same room as we are, we begin to become very curious, watching (out of the corner of the eye), noticing and getting to know it from afar. Finally, we walk across the room, introduce ourselves and begin a conversation that ultimately allows us to listen and learn from it.

The best place to discover how to become curious about pain—learning how to respond rather than resist—is in our bodies. As author Clarissa Pinkola Estes says,

The body remembers, the bones remember, the joints remember, even the little finger remembers.

Memory is lodged in pictures and feelings in the cells themselves. Like a sponge filled with water,

Anywhere the flesh is pressed, wrung, even touched lightly, a memory may flow out in a stream.

If we can learn how to pay attention to what our bodies are saying, we will be amazed at the wisdom that we discover there.

Let us explore what it is like to bring our attention into our bodies so we can learn how to meet and release our pain:

An Invitation

After reading this section, put down the book. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, allowing your belly to soften and your jaw to let go. Ride the rhythm of your breath.

Now bring your attention to your right foot and be curious about what is there. There are many sensations moving through your foot right now—warmth and coolness, pressure (against the side of a shoe or the floor) tingles, discomfort. As you allow your attention to settle there, it becomes like a Polaroid picture that is developing.

Find at least 3 different sensations in your right foot. You may discover your foot is cold, or there is an itch, or there are tingles in the bottom of your foot, or maybe a toe that feels sore.

Now compare the right foot's experience to the left. How are they different? When the mind drifts off, bring it back, to simply being curious about the sensations that are dancing through your feet. When you are done, open your eyes.

This exercise hones our ability to pay attention, and it also shows us that at all moments of our lives there is a symphony of sensations dancing through our bodies. Whenever we are caught in reaction to Life, this resistance manifests in very specific ways in our body. To discover exactly *what is* going on while still lost in thought is like trying to read a book in the middle of a hurricane. The mind is usually a whirling mass of judgments and fears. But the body is very specific in its expressions. To notice the dance of sensations while you are in a heavy state is the first step in actually creating a relationship with the difficult parts of our lives.

The body has *never forgotten* its connection to the whole. It knows it arises out of, is supported by and is deeply interwoven with absolutely everything. The mind thinks it is the seat of Intelligence; the body recognizes Intelligence everywhere. Because of this, the body *resonates with Life*. It not only carries within itself the memory of all that humanity has experienced and learned, but it also knows *what is* happening in the environment at any given moment. If we walk into a room filled with strangers, the mind will probably be focused on looking cool, but the body will tell us exactly *what is* going on in the room.

It will also inform us about *what is* going on inside of ourselves. A friend may notice we are upset and asks, "Are you angry?" and we say "No." All the while our stomach is one huge knot. "Are you afraid?" the friend queries. "Absolutely not," we respond. And yet our anal sphincter is held tighter than a drum. The mind runs away from pain; the body does not. This makes it an exquisite biofeedback system. The body will tell us very clearly what we are actually experiencing.

And it will also tell us what we have experienced in the past. From the moment of our birth, every single experience has been registered and stored in our cellular memory. The rage we felt when our older sibling taunted us is there. So, too, is the terror of that rage. The agony and helplessness of watching our parents argue is held deep in our bones, along with the despair of losing our first love.

We can find the core places we get caught in struggle by listening to sensations as they move through our bodies. We may be whirling in a cloud of confusion and reaction, without a clue about *what is* going on but the body will tell us if we only listen. Every moment of our lives the body is saying, “Listen to me; I carry the wisdom you yearn for.”

There is a general language of the body. You can see it in our favorite colloquial phrases. For example, terror is often felt in the lower belly (It scared the shit out of me); anger is often felt in the solar plexus (He was livid; I am going to vent my spleen; that really galls me); judgment is often felt in the neck and shoulder area (She has a chip on her shoulder; He is a pain in the neck); and grief is felt in the throat and chest (I am all choked up; My heart is broken). It is best not to get any more specific than that, for our body has its own special language and as soon as we try to analyze a particular sensation, we are again lost in our heads and gone from the healing power of attention.

To get to know the language of our bodies is not about *understanding*. There is a phase in our growth when understanding is essential (I feel this feeling because my father beat me when I was young). But understanding keeps us in the mind. Stephen Levine calls understanding the ultimate seduction. Healing happens when we can learn instead how to *meet* what we are experiencing. *To be fully present for the feelings as they emerge is where healing lies*. And in a very wondrous way, when we meet our pain, the understanding that we’ve yearned for (the kind of understanding that arises from the core of the discomfort rather than from an intellectual idea about it) shows up.

Let’s explore what it looks like to be present for our pain.

An Invitation

After reading this section, put down the book, and find a quiet place to be. Close your eyes and begin to breathe long, slow breaths. Slowly allow your attention to meet yourself right here, right now. Feel the warmth or coolness of the room; see the light playing on your eyelids; feel the tingles of pressure in the places where your buttocks meet what you are sitting on.

Now scan your body, discovering a place of discomfort. If there is no definite spot of discomfort, go to one of your favorite places of holding on and begin to pay attention—a tight neck; a sore back; a pain in your head. It may be hazy and undefined, but allow your attention to rest there. When the mind drifts off, bring it back again.

Begin to describe the sensations that present themselves to your awareness. The sensation could be pulsing or aching, sharp or dull. It could have specific boundaries or could be fuzzy and undefined. It could be steady like a tight fist or come and go like clouds dancing with the moon. Does it move around or stay in one place? Is it warm, or is it cool? What is the truth of this experience?

For a few moments, be willing to be present, letting Life be exactly as it is. When you drift away, notice how the body tightens around the experience. As you again merge your attention with this discomfort, soften and open around this pain. Don’t push it away. If that is hard to do, enhance the contraction. Physically tighten the muscles surrounding this

area, and then slowly, ever so slowly, let go.

Meet this discomfort as if it were an abandoned child asking for the mercy of your awareness. Know your discomfort wants exactly what you want when you are hurting—loving acceptance and compassionate attention. Imagine your hands radiating kindness, and bring them to the discomfort. Gently and with great care cradle this experience. When you are finished, open your eyes.

By actually meeting an experience as it arises in the body, we are moving into *direct relationship* with whatever we are experiencing. This allows us to be present for that which we have formerly resisted so that we can unlock the valuable energy bound up within all of the holdings in our bodies. For the places where the body holds itself tightly—whether it is a knot in the stomach or an ache in the back—are doorways into the freedom we long for. As we give the tightness our undivided attention, the holding slowly releases. Eventually, as the muscle of our attention develops, we will be able to give this kind of focused attention to the feelings and thoughts that fuel these pockets of holding in our body but that also make up the stories in our head that keep us caught in struggle.

GIVING IT A NAME

This noting of mental states encourages a deeper recognition of what is happening while it is happening. It allows us to be more fully alive to the present rather than living our lives as an afterthought.

—Stephen Levine

The next step in truly healing our pain is to name these mental, emotional and physical states that we have formerly resisted and reacted to. We explored the power of naming in Chapter 4. Now we can bring this skill to our pain. To give these experiences a name allows us to bring them out of the mire of unconsciousness and fosters the ability to relate to them, listening and dialoguing with these formerly disliked and disowned parts.

When we first arrived here as an infant, everything was a swirling kaleidoscope of colors and sounds with things blending into one another. Slowly we began to see objects and associate sounds. After a time of pure sensual experience came the process of naming things. It was how we were taught to make sense of our world – Mama, bottle, my name is...

We are now embarking on an exciting new adventure of naming. We are beginning to separate out who we really are (awareness itself) from who we thought we were (the objects of awareness—sensations, thoughts, feelings, and experiences). Our feelings, thoughts and experiences are a swirling, whirling dance that most of the time we are lost in. Naming these states allows us to relate *to* our experiences rather than being caught *by* them. Being lost in our thoughts is like being swept up by the swirling winds of a hurricane. Naming a state is like stepping into the calm eye of the hurricane where we can watch *what is* going on inside of us instead of being lost in it.

Let us explore again an exercise from Chapter Three:

☯ An Invitation ☯

Take your finger and move it all about in front of you, following it with your eyes wherever it goes. The finger represents the 60,000 thoughts you have each day. This is what happens when your attention is caught up in identification with all the various states of mind that pass through us. If the mind says, "I am depressed," you feel depressed. If it says, "I am angry," you believe you are angry. Now, still moving your finger, keep your eyes straight ahead. You can see the movement of your finger, but your attention is not following it. Instead, it is anchored in Life.

This is the difference between being lost in our experiences and the ability to begin to watch them. It is the difference between being in reaction (I am so angry), or being in response, (this is anger). Naming is the key here. It is an exquisite tool that frees us up from the constant shifting sands of Life. Naming brings the helter-skelter movement of our experience into our conscious attention.

At the beginning, this is difficult to do with more intense experiences. Our muscle of attention, being weak, easily gets caught in reaction. But as we learn to be curious instead, we will know great freedom. A woman from one of the Awakening groups shared her experience of naming terror. This state of mind had almost completely overtaken her life, making work impossible and causing great heartache. A wave of terror had been building for days, and she found herself caught like a rabbit trying to outrun a shotgun. She ended up lying on the floor, crying that she couldn't take it anymore, and imploring Life to take it away. Then awareness kicked in and she named what was happening. "This is terror." She began to rate it on a scale of 1 to 10. This is a 7; now it is a 10+. She was relating *to* it rather than being lost *in* it. *For that moment, she was no longer the state of terror; she was awareness that could watch the terror.* As she went towards it, in a flash she remembered experiencing this same terror when she was 8 years old, a particularly difficult year in her life. Her heart opened, and she was able to be kind and compassionate with this state of terror and with herself.

The first time I named one of my demons brought a momentous shift in my life. One of the core states that I used to react to is dread. This is a combination of terror (Something horrible is going to happen.) and self-hate (*What is wrong with me that I caused this?*). This was one of the primary feelings of my childhood. By the time I reached adulthood, the years I spent trying to get away from dread made me contracted and exhausted.

As it began to seep into my consciousness that healing comes through meeting my darkness, I was able to inch my way towards seeing and including irritation, self-judgment and fear, but dread was too big. Numerous times I was asked to teach what I was learning, but dread would say, "No! Absolutely not! I can't do that." I was terrified of even speaking with a group of friends and would often berate myself afterwards for what I had said. My greatest fear was that someone would ask me a question I didn't know the answer to and I would make a fool of myself.

A friend who was teaching a meditation class at a local college finally said, "Please, come, and share with us. You don't have to be in charge of anything. All I am asking you to do is to speak whenever it feels right." The first night I was there turned out to be a transformative experience. The next week he became ill, and with only a half hour notice, I discovered that I was to lead the class *by myself!*

The choice was either to freeze and not do the class or to go in and just let go. I let go and it was wonderful. It was a *do or die* situation, one in which I didn't so much meet and work with dread as I just rose above it temporarily. But it taught me that I could function in a place beyond dread. I

was slowly and surely moving towards being present with dread.

Later on, I was invited to spend a weekend with a group of women at a cabin mountains. At first I resisted, as socializing used to be uncomfortable for me. On the way up, my friend who had organized the weekend asked me if I would lead the evening sharing. Dread ricocheted through my body. “No,” I said. When we gathered in the circle, the group was floundering without a leader and so, being a confirmed rescuer, I stepped in. Things began to weave together until a friend lambasted me for what I was sharing and how I was leading the group. To this day I cannot remember what she said, but I can still feel the horror and contraction that took over my whole being. I froze completely.

When we broke for the evening meal, I was caught up in a whirlwind of self-hatred, mainly for freezing. I can still remember the agony of that evening. Some people came to me and criticized her, but that didn’t feel right nor did it make me feel any better. If I had driven my own car, I would have made a hasty retreat. Instead I was left in agony and in complete reaction.

Most of us were sleeping on the floor of one large room. I grabbed a corner, rolled myself deeply into my sleeping bag, and with my back to the room, covered my head with a pillow. This cocoon brought a modicum of safety, enough for curiosity to show up, and I began to respond. “What is going on here? What part of me is asking to be met?” I became curious about what was happening. I dropped into my body and felt the sinking feeling of dread, accompanied by terror and self-hatred. A thrill ran through me. “I’m here. I can see dread!”

I began to talk with it. “I see you. I know you have waited my whole life for me to not hate or fear you, for me to recognize and be present with you.” The dread began to dissipate, and I can remember saying, “Don’t go. I want to get to know you. I want to be your friend.” I slept a half-sleep that night, waking up over and over again into tenderness for this dread and a deep thankfulness that I was present enough to meet it.

Who we are is awareness itself, not the states of mind that are flowing through us. In the dark of the night in that cabin, I began to free myself from this ancient story of dread that had run me for years. There were three key shifts that night. The first came when trust and inclusion began to kick in and curiosity took me towards the experience rather than away. The second was when I dropped into my body and began to feel the sensations there. The third occurred when I gave a name to what was going on. When I am in reaction to dread, it feels like I am drowning in my terror. Naming is like a life raft. It allows me to relate *to* the state of mind rather than *from* it.

Another powerful story of naming came from a woman who was lost in self hatred over how she handled a meeting at work. From the moment she began her preparations, she knew she was not going to be good enough. To make matters worse, the boss who brought up these feelings the most had shown up at the meeting. As a result of her feelings of inadequacy, she led the meeting from a faltering and contracted place and was caught in a whirlwind of self-judgment.

In our counseling session, I asked her to close her eyes and recreate the experience as vividly as she possibly could—to see it in her mind and to feel the painful feelings in her body. As she did this, I could literally watch her whole being contracting. Asking her to stay curious, I invited her to feel what was present and imagine what this voice would look like if it had a body. She tried to go inside of this feeling, but couldn’t get an image.

“What is there right now?” I asked. “It’s self-hatred,” she responded. As she saw, rather than reacting to what was present, she told me that she immediately got a picture in her mind of a fire-breathing dragon. “If this is ultimately a benevolent force and not the demon you thought it to be,

what would be its name?" I asked. "Puff the Magic Dragon," she said.

In one name, her entire relationship with this cruel judger shifted. We then walked through the entire experience of the meeting from the place of power that comes from relating to the feeling rather than from it. She saw herself naming it whenever she felt the urge to believe what it was saying. As she did so, her body literally began to let go. When she opened her eyes, she was glowing with the understanding that her self-hatred had waited her whole life for her to see it without fear and judgment. She understood that being able to name it, she could see it when it appeared and get to know its many voices, its needs and the gifts that it held for her.

Let us explore what it looks like to bring awareness to your pain.

An Invitation

After reading this section, close your eyes, and bring to your mind a particularly painful experience, one that causes you to cringe when you feel the memory. See the experience in as much detail as possible in your imagination and feel the corresponding feelings in your body.

Now begin to ask questions like: "What am I experiencing right now?" or "What can I sense inside of me?" You are not asking a question to figure anything out. You're asking it to be curious about your immediate experience. Go first to your body and notice which parts of your body are holding, and acknowledge that by saying, "I see you." Every time your attention drifts back into your mind, return it to the sensations and acknowledge them again. As you stay with the sensations, a feeling that is generating this holding may show up. If it does, recognize its quality like fear, anger or sadness, then be willing to ask it its name. Allow it to be a somewhat light, compassionate and even silly (but kind) name. It could be "here comes da judge," if self-hatred is present or "little one" if fear is there. The key is to allow these names to be created from a light and loving heart. These aren't the horrible demons you thought they were. If you don't see anything, ask what is asking to be met and let it go. When you are ready, open your eyes.

We all have many parts of ourselves that are longing to be seen. They have been either partially or completely excluded whenever they have begun to enter our consciousness. Becoming whole is seeing, naming and integrating these parts. Some of the parts that you may meet are:

- Fearful one
- Procrastinating one
- Perfectionist/controller
- Scared and overwhelmed one
- Pusher (thinks it knows the way)
- Despair (it's too much/too hard)
- Stubborn (wants what it wants)
- Exuberant & playful child
- Wise crone
- Needy one
- Victim
- Cruel judger
- Angry one
- Rebellious one
- Noble warrior
- Inclusive mother

Allow your life to become an adventure, discovering all of the alienated parts of yourself. See it as a treasure hunt for everything you formerly called *bad* or *wrong* or *too scary to be with*. Know that your daily life is perfectly orchestrated to bring these disowned parts into your awareness over and

over again until you can meet and greet them. You can keep a list of all the parts of yourself that you discover. Ask them what their names are, and as you hear them, write them down. As we learn how to approach these forces, they will reveal, not only their stories, but also the gifts they have been waiting to give to you

CREATING A RELATIONSHIP

What we choose to fight is so tiny! What fights with us is so great!
If only we would let ourselves be dominated as things do by some immense storm,
We would become strong, too, and not need names.
When we win, it's with small things, and the triumph itself makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal does not want to be bent by us.
I mean the angel who appeared to the wrestlers of the Old Testament.
When the wrestlers' sinews grew long like metal strings,
he felt them under his fingers like chords of deep music.
Whoever was beaten by this angel (who often simply declined the fight),
went away proud and strengthened and great from that harsh hand,
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.
Winning does not tempt that man.
This is how he grows: by being defeated decisively by constantly greater beings.

—Rainier Maria Rilke

Now that we have been introduced to the formerly unmeetable parts of ourselves, it is time to create a relationship with them. When I believed that healing was about trying to get rid of what I didn't like rather than meeting it, I spent my whole life feeling like a failure. I couldn't seem to rise above my darkness. Stephen Levine taught me to go the other way, to realize that my suffering *needed* me. What a novel concept! I had been resisting it so hard my whole life I had never *listened*.

The healing we seek is not about going *away*. It is about going *toward* what we don't like. As long as we cannot welcome and integrate the darker parts of our lives, we give them enormous power, staying stuck like a fly on flypaper, twisting in the wind. As Robert Bly once said, "The dark forces get pissed because we are not listening to them." In order to heal, besides trusting, welcoming, being curious and naming, we need to learn how to *be with* our pain, allowing these parts of ourselves a voice.

The ability to create a relationship with that which we formerly hated and feared rests upon a foundation that knows you are not alone in your suffering. Stephen Levine tells a story of one of the most miraculous healings he ever witnessed. Rose was a hard-nosed businesswoman, dying of cancer. During her hospitalization, the nurses called her the "bitch on wheels in 42-B." Because of her adversarial, resentful life-style, she found herself dying with no one there to support her. She was estranged from her children and had never even met her grandchildren.

One night, after repeatedly ringing the call bell for more pain medication and not getting an answer, she felt she was going to be engulfed by the unbearable pain in her hip. With no way out, she

spontaneously began to go towards her pain and suddenly experienced herself as a young Eskimo woman, dying in a breech childbirth with unbearable pain in her hip. She then was someone who had fallen and was dying alone in a jungle with searing pain in her hip. She experienced many other people, all dying with the same unbearable pain. She realized from the depth of her being that this was not her pain—this was *our* pain—and her heart was torn wide open. In the six weeks before her death, she reconciled with her children, met her grandchildren, and the nurses would come to her room for their breaks.

Let us explore how to realize that we are not alone in our pain.

An Invitation

After you read this section, put down the book. Breathe a few deep breaths, and soften into your body. Find yourself here in the living moment of your Life by connecting with the actual sensations of warmth or coolness, breath, heart beat.

Now bring into your heart a particular challenge that you have been experiencing in your life. Imagine this experience on a continuum. If you are feeling the loss of a relationship, acknowledge all of the thousands upon thousands of people who are also experiencing the same pain, including someone who just lost their whole family to death. If you are dealing with a muscle injury in your body that is limiting your physical movements, feel all of the people with ALS, the many amputees and the myriad paraplegics and quadriplegics.

If you are experiencing waves of depression, feel people who right now are lost in a seemingly endless tunnel of hopelessness and helplessness. If you are overwhelmed by your life, connect with all of the people who, at that same moment, are in the act of killing themselves. Open your heart to our common pain.

When you are ready, open your eyes.

Now that you know that every single pain you have ever felt—whether it be deep grief, irritation at the driver before you, cruel self judgment, whirling worry, consuming hatred, a stubbed toe or immobilizing terror—is being experienced right now by millions of human beings, you will never be alone again when you are in pain. The full continuum of that particular pain is being felt by hundreds of thousands of others *in that same moment*.

This allows us to be present for our pain – to actually feel a stubbed toe or truly listen to our feelings. To bring our full attention to our physical pains is one of the most powerful healing tools we have available to us. And with our emotions, attentive listening works the same kind of magic. Each feeling we have has their own view of Life and as we listen to them, they relax and release just like we do when a friend or therapist listens to us without judgment or the need to fix us. Don't we have the healthiest relationships with people who listen, really listen, to us – people who accept us as we are, warts and all? Your pain wants the same kind of relationship with you. Your deep fear, your irritation at your mate, your sadness about being alone all want you to say “Hello,” to say “I see you” and “Tell me about your world.” What a joy it was when I finally stopped taking my feelings personally and instead listened to them.

Let us explore what this looks like.

☯ An Invitation ☯

Take a few deep breaths and settle in, becoming curious about what you are experiencing in your body. As you come across a pocket of holding, invite your attention to settle there, allowing the sensations to reveal themselves to you like a Polaroid picture. As things become clear, whether it is sensations or the feeling that is fueling the sensations, say, “I see you.”

Settle into that for a few moments allowing yourself to be deeply curious about *what is* happening there. As what you are experiencing becomes clearer, invite whatever is there to speak to you about its world by saying, “Tell me about you. I want to know your world.” Then listen.

At the beginning, you may not see anything except that your shoulder is tight. Then simply acknowledge the tightness and say, “I see you”. The parts that are fueling this holding in your body—the parts you’ve turned away from your whole life—are not going to suddenly open up to you. But as you willingly go to your holdings with compassion and curiosity, they will eventually speak to you and thus receive the listening they need to heal. When I could finally hear how my terror experienced the world, it felt heard, and now I feel safe in my world most of the time. And when the terror wakes up again, I turn toward it saying, “I see you” and “Tell me about it” and everything calms down again.

There are many other things that we can do to create a healing relationship with our pain. When a formerly disowned part is present, like anger or grief, we can allow it to reveal itself through movement. Put appropriate music on and dance it. Encourage it to unfold and express itself. If you find yourself moving again from your head, stop, standstill, and ask your body how it would like to move. It may be one movement repeated over and over again or a spontaneous series of movement. By allowing the body to share these feelings through movement, we not only become more aware of them but we free up the energy bound within them.

If writing is your way, write letters to whatever you are feeling as if this were an old friend with whom you had a falling out. Write of your rage, confusion and despair and of your desire for a lasting friendship. Then allow it to write back to you, telling of its experience of being cast out from the community that is you, of being branded the bad one and of its desire to be respected and heard. These parts of us want a voice, just like you do when you are deeply wounded. They want to share their hurt and their rage and their wisdom.

Ask them questions. Remember that these are ancient forces that come from the depths of our yearning to awaken. Ask open-ended questions in which you do not expect an answer. “Who are you?” “What are you trying to tell me?” If the feeling is not clear, ask, “*What is* asking to be met?” My favorite question right now is, “What do you need from me today?” I can be in reaction to a challenge in my life, and when I drop into my body, feeling the contraction there, I then ask it how I can be of support. This lessens my resistance and opens my heart. Usually, I then experience a flood of connection with my own life and a knowing that help is always with me.

We can also perform acts of honoring these forces and the roles they have played in our awakening. For a while I wore a pouch filled with soil. I did this to honor that I come from the Earth and I am the Earth awakening. It reminded me that an essential part of my awakening is receiving all of the gifts that darkness brings.

I also do rituals with my darkness. When I met my stubbornness, I did a forgiveness meditation with it while holding a stone. Then I went and asked the Earth to hold my stubbornness, to remind me not to war with it. I buried it in a wonderful place high in the mountains where I can visit it from time to time. Another way to honor the dark is to create an altar in your home honoring these forces. It can be as simple as a candle you light every day or as elaborate as a dark velvet cloth on a table that holds the symbols of your grief, rage and terror.

Gratitude can help immensely too. Stephen Levine has spoken many times of people who were truly thankful for all the gifts that life-threatening illnesses have brought them, even if they went on to die. In my own life, self-hatred has taught me about kindness. Terror has taught me about deep, abiding trust. Despair has birthed me into knowing I am never alone. My darkness wouldn't allow me to stay asleep. It stayed with me, persistently pushing and shoving, sometimes gently and sometimes very forcefully. You can express gratitude by writing it letters, or put a symbol of gratitude on your altar to honor the gifts that darkness has brought you.

Be willing to be silly. Laughter is music for the soul. We have been struggling with these states so much and for so long that whenever we get close we get very serious. A man in one of the Awakening groups shared one of his dreams. He was standing on a flat plain with a full-blown tornado bearing down on him. He was frozen to the spot, unable to move at all. Right before the tornado was ready to engulf him, out of the ground popped a goddess in full goddess regalia. With a twinkle in her eye, she turned to the tornado and waved her magic wand. In a flash it dissolved and there on the ground was a little tiny man with his eyes closed and his body twisting all around, trying to keep the tornado going!

When he shared this dream, he said it reminded him of the perspective of lightness, of not being quite so serious about the ups and downs of his life. To create lightness, you can write silly love notes to yourself or dance like a fool. Be a little kid, and do somersaults and log rolls in the back yard. As Stephen Levine would say, "In order to awaken you have to be willing to be God's fool."

Be patient. In the book *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis, Zorba one day notices a cocoon in his back yard that was just barely beginning to open. He makes a commitment to watch the birth of the butterfly. Soon he becomes impatient and begins to blow his warm breath upon the cocoon to hurry up the process. As the butterfly emerged, it struggled in vain to open its wings. As he holds the dying butterfly in his hands, Zorba realizes that in his impatience he has forced the butterfly out of the cocoon before its time. Just like him, we blow the hot breath of our own impatience upon our journey and wonder why it gums things up.

Turning towards what disturbs us is the birth canal of our healing. It will take all the courage, cuddling, humor, discipline, vision and compassion we can discover to create a relationship with that which we formerly hated, judged and feared. But the time and commitment is so well worth it. It will take us into the wholeness we long for.

THE RESPONSE OF KINDNESS

To open to life requires a deep and heartfelt compassion for all that is around and within us. The place where we can most directly open to this mystery of life is in what we don't do well, in the places of our struggles and vulnerability.

—Jack Kornfield

Ultimately, the core intent of these five skills for working with our pain is to awaken our heart for it is the place of healing. It is the only part of us that can see, allow and include all of the many parts of ourselves and the many experiences of our lives. It is the chef of Life that knows it is only when we include the sharp and the bitter, the pungent and the sweet, the succulent and the delicious, that we can move into something greater.

A number of years ago, I got a visit from the latest flu bug. It settled in my throat and I sounded like a bevy of frogs had moved in. The worst part of it was the nighttime coughing. Whenever I would finally drop off to sleep, a coughing fit would awaken me. I finally broke down and took Nyquil, only to wake up with a medicine hangover and a very nasty mood. “This is it. I’ve had it. This is too much,” I chanted. I hated my life; I hated myself; and I definitely hated those frogs. It took all of my discipline to sit and meditate. I just wanted to read, eat, sleep—anything but be with this discomfort.

Instead, I decided to listen to myself. At the beginning, it was like living in a dust bowl during a hurricane. But I know from experience that when the mind is wildly whipping around, it’s because there is a feeling it doesn’t want to experience. Slowly, I caught the rhythm of my breath and curiosity kicked in. “What am I feeling?” I first noticed the physical sensations—the sore and congested throat, upset intestines from the Nyquil, and a feeling like a truck had hit me.

As I named and acknowledged each one, I began to move under them. It was foggy at first, but slowly I was able to recognize and name despair. “I want to give up,” despair said. “I can’t take anymore. I’ll never feel well again.” I stayed with it for awhile. This is never done with great precision. It’s like the sun dancing in and out of the clouds. It becomes very clear, and then the mind wanders off into some story about despair. When I bring it back, it takes a few moments to focus again on the feeling.

It felt like I hadn’t quite met what was really there. I asked my body, “What do you want to show me?” Almost immediately what began to reveal itself was meanness. It was the ancient self-hatred that believes when something is painful, I am to blame. It was breathtaking, the depth and breadth of it. I approached it in curiosity. In that moment of meeting, something very deep inside of me let go. What came burbling up from the depths of my being was the statement, “Let kindness be your response to pain.” My whole being began to soften and glow. I had moved out of struggle into inclusion and compassion.

I then took a walk. One of the great fears of these heavy states is that they will be here forever. Before I began listening, my mind had already claimed that this was going to be a rotten day. Instead, my walk became a time of wonder and mystery. Everywhere I looked, I saw the sacred, creative force of Life spiraling out of the void and manifesting as trees, dogs, people (including myself), houses and grass. When I was caught in struggle, I was lost in separation. It was the world against me and me against the world. Simply by meeting the darkness that was present, I was moved into the experience of connection and interconnection. Did it fade later? Yes. Was there some grief and struggle associated with this? Yes. But I am learning to not blame myself for contraction and to trust the rhythm of Life.

Jack Kornfield tells the story of Maha Gosananda, a Cambodian monk who was in the refugee camps where thousands of Cambodians fled the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime. Maha called upon the people to gather for a Buddhist ceremony. The soldiers roamed through the encampment and swore that anybody who went would be killed. The next day over 10,000 refugees converged at the tiny temple the monk had built. As he chanted the invocations that started the ceremony, people began to weep. They had been through so much, lost so much, and now they were risking their

lives for this all-important connection with their religion which had been suppressed by Pol Pot. Maha went on to chant the following verse from Buddhist scripture:

Hatred never ceases by hatred; but by Love alone is healed. This is an ancient and eternal law.

Over and over again these people who had lost everything and had every reason to rage and hate, chanted with him, moving into the knowing that all healing is done in the heart.

All that we have explored has been for the awakening of the heart. We touched on trusting darkness and being willing to include it as a part of our lives. We contacted the wondrous tool of curiosity, the willingness to go towards what disturbs us, along with the ability to actually create a relationship with it and even give it a name. The radical notion we are exploring here is that *our pain is longing for our heart*. Our terror is afraid; our aloneness is lonely; and our rage is isolated and alone. The only way they will be safe enough to reveal themselves to us and give us the powerful energy and gifts that they carry, is to meet them with kindness and mercy. Our pain is not only worthy of our attention, it is worthy of our love.

THE DOORWAY TO FREEDOM

Pain which we cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair and against our will, comes wisdom...through the awful grace of God.

—Aeschylus

To honor rather than suppress or get lost in our pain is a radical step in our growth. It is *how we view our pain* that either opens us up into the possibility of creative living or condemns us to the status quo of struggle. In the movie *Mindwalk*, a physicist is talking to a politician and says,

“We are destroying rain forests at a rate of one football field per second. Brazil is doing this in order to pay their national debt through money raised from cattle ranches and land speculations. The barren forests are one of the main causes of global warming. We create cattle ranches in order to produce more red meat, which is one of the direct causes of heart attacks and high medical costs. These are examples of interconnectedness. You cannot look at a single one of our global problems in isolation, trying to understand and solve it. You can fix a fragment of a piece but it will deteriorate a second later because what it was connected to has been ignored. We have to change everything at the same time.”

The politician then says, “Suppose you are right and everything is connected to everything else. Where do you start?”

“By the way we are seeing the world,” the physicist responds. “You are still searching for the right piece to fix first. All the problems are fragments of one single crisis, *a crisis of perception*.”

The shift of perception that is being asked of us as a group begins with individuals transforming their relationship with the challenges in their lives. Most people are lost inside their own personal war. So, of course, humanity uses war (trying to get rid of what we don't like) as a solution to its problems. The challenges we face on this planet are too great to meet with war (the victor/victim

pendulum) anymore. We are in the no-man's-land between the old and new perception. The old style meets our problems on the same level they were created and only creates more problems.

The new style says that our challenges haven't gotten so complex because we've done something wrong or because Life is out to get us. The very complexity of the crisis is a gift, forcing us out of the old style and into the new. The new style says *pay attention*; trust and work with *what is* rather than always trying to make the circumstances of our lives different, and slowly bring them into the inclusion of the heart (*this too*). To bring curiosity and compassion to whatever is happening right now is the movement out of separation into immediate connection with Life and into becoming a healing force in the world. Every person who has learned to include rather than war with the opposites of dark and light in their lives holds the transformation of Life in their hearts.



May we know that pain is
an essential thread in the tapestry of Life.

May each of us discover the courage
and the compassion to meet our pain.

And as more and more people move beyond war,
may the world become free.

Core Intention: I'm here