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What Sustains Me

**Seven therapists write about
what sustains them as human beings**

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Edited by Serge Prengel

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Foreword from the editor

Several years ago, I started having conversations with other therapists about what sustains us. Not abstractions about what sustains human beings in general, but the specifics of what gives each of us a sense of meaning and purpose and keeps us going through crises.

Some of the friends and colleagues I talked to were willing to explore this further, which is how this book came about. It is a collection of personal essays.

Although the seven authors are quite different from each other, they have something important in common. Their longstanding practice of therapy informs their capacity for observation and self-reflection.

But this is neither a therapy book nor a self-help book. There are no rules or advice for finding meaning or building resilience. There is not even a common process that all authors share. Each author takes us into the intimate process of making sense of their experiences as a unique human being.

I hope that spending time in their company stimulates you to explore what sustains you.

For me, facilitating the emergence of this book has been a way to live what sustains me: the kind of mindful and creative connection in which giving and receiving flow organically.

Serge Prengel

Moving Into Meaning

Al Pessó

Based on a conversation
with Serge Prengel
edited by Nancy Eichorn

I was raised in a very, very orthodox family, and I'm so glad that with that upbringing came ritual rather than dogma. Perhaps I shouldn't be saying this but I can't stand the dogma of fundamental thinking of any kind. A part of me had to move away from dogma. I married someone who wasn't Jewish, my daughter is Buddhist. I don't want the singularity of one simple religion, where their belief, their 'God' has to be the one and only. I want universal things. For me, with ritual, there's a moment of sacredness in the present moment.

I think some of these feelings came from being in the synagogue with my father. Every Friday and Saturday he took me with him. He had six children and I was the littlest one. Our weekly trips to the synagogue were the only relationship we had. He never spoke; we never had any conversation really. But I'd be sitting in the synagogue and there was something about the tonality of the rabbinical singing and the Sephardic sound, which is very different than the Ashkenazi sound. In those moments, they followed a preparatory ritual for the Torah. First there was the movement of opening the cabinet, the sense of now we're going to open absoluteness. The sense that here is value, here is meaning, here is the sacred. What I saw in all of this was that now they're going to present the ineffable,

and I connected with the experience of waiting for the ineffable and preparing for it. Then there was the movement of touching it, opening it. Then they carried the sacred object in a ritual ceremony around the synagogue. And every now and then, my father would arrange that I carried the little Torah. So I was carrying this truth in a way. That's eerily a conscious sacred thing.

And there's something about immanence I want to put in that has to do with what people call spirituality. I don't believe in spirituality as something separate from the body; rather, it's the emergence of something. And that immanence is an emergence of part of the self, a quality that has to do with the ultimate meaning of existence or something in that moment where you're still very much in touch with who you are in a physical way, but at the same time there's an experience of something emerging that has a sacred quality.

Now, thank goodness, I don't believe what's written in the Torah is absolute. When I began to learn what was in it, I said, "What the heck? Thank God I was born a man and not a woman? God gets angry, then he punishes?" It's a lot of nonsense to me. But when I was young, I connected with the sacredness of the moment, of entering that space. I guess I began to see ritual dance at that point. When

you move with it and make a ritual with it, it changes life.

I started moving my body—doing specific body exercise—on my own when I was five years old, maybe even before that. Nobody told me, "Do it." I had four older brothers who couldn't pay attention to me and didn't give a damn what I did. My father had no idea what I was doing. My early experiences lead me to body building with Dan Laurie. I was in his gymnasium for years. Out of that came my experiences with dance and my focus on the quality of movement. You see, I wasn't just dancing. When I danced, I lived it. Wherever the source of that motion, there was an expression of some kind, a sense of meaning and rightness rather than an opening. I'm not dealing with something from the inside. I'm dealing with the quality that's making that movement. It's not a by-product, but rather an expression of what's inside. Nor do I try to follow. I don't try to follow it at all. I'm just being it, and I'm being it knowing I'm observing it. So I'm the observer of it, the liver of it, and the deliverer of it.

And I'm expressing with my body what could also be expressed in words, but has a totally different quality when bodily expressed. The resonance now is the resonance with the inner quality that produced the movement. My body is

resonating with the quality I wanted it to express. But when I'm saying something, if I go: Yes... Yes... Yes... [in a slower, reflective tone]... each moment of that is an absolute expression of what I feel inside, and I'm communicating it, and now I'm hearing my voice is doing the same thing.

My connection with Martha Graham and her dance and movement process didn't have to do with exhibitionism, it had to do with ritual re-drama, a combination of spirituality, without dogma, but with ritual, and how to make a moment in the present have a profound influence, even though it's only an hour. Which is the kind of thing where a moment in the present becomes a long-term memory rather than just a short-term memory.

What comes up in my mind now is the very first time I saw a live theater. It was breathtaking. I was quite young. We must have gone into town to see one in New York City, Manhattan. The color and the motion, it just dazzled me. I don't mean for exhibitionism. You know that it's just on the stage but it awakens something in your heart and in your brain that is so different than something that's just simply put on the stage—the stage in the brain—and that changes everything enormously.

Leaving dance and leaving New York City and the goals I had created when I was older resulted in

seven years of anxiety and panic— the most miserable years of my life. I think what sustains me is to know that I could be that miserable for that long and not give up, and have the world absolutely change. At that time, I felt like the world had no meaning. I was just a zombie. Not that I stopped working. I never stopped teaching a day or stopped working, but the fact that it could change so radically after being so bad so long lets you hold on and not quit, and know that something absolutely unexpected can come. In the middle of all that misery were parts of myself that had not come alive in the work I had chosen. So there's something to learn out of the misery. There's something in the qualities of the misery that has the unborn self in it, and I think it pushed me to find the whole system of PBSP. The lifetime's work has been to understand myself and to understand human beings.

When I'm in a leadership place in a group, I feel that I'm in a ritual setting. I'm very careful with what I say and what I do. But I'm not being careful in a sense that I'm elaborately putting together words and what not. I'm not just talking about movement and meaning in the abstract. I'm talking about movement and meaning connected to the experience of what I call the 'theater in the mind' and connected to the experience of the ritual space.

I'm moving in a space that's not ordinary or mindless space but a space that's structured by connection and attunement.

When I run a workshop, one of the things participants talk about is how I am with each person. That I'm really there. They say every move I make is there with that person, and they feel connected. Some people call that my 'presence' but it's not just about being present, I'm resonating and I'm really being there in the relationship. When I work with people, the words I use, the movements and gestures fit them, and they connect with it. But I don't do it to think I'm dancing. When I'm doing that, I'm totally unconscious. When I'm with people and doing the work, there is resonance going on. I pick up what's happening in the relationship. There's the attunement, a moment-by-moment connection of paying attention to the details. As I enter into that space, there is the connection that happens through the engagement. And at a much larger level, there is a sense of being part of this process of enrichment and opening up and growth. And that's what life is all about, you sense, 'I'm truly alive'. I don't try to be in that space. I don't get a signal like 'Ah, now I'm in that space'. It isn't quite like that. I think there's been a part of me that's had for one reason or another, the sense of the sacred from the beginning of time. I think I have been

weaving in and out of that without naming it as a little boy, through school, body building, dance, life.

I had that same sense of sacred when I watched Martha Graham do her movements. Just the way her body moved from an inner impulse, not from a volitional. In ballet, the movements are choreographed—you put your arms here, your feet there—but every bit of Martha’s movement came from an inner state. When we developed PBSP, we broke movement into three modalities: reflexive, voluntary, and emotional. And the basic part of PBSP is to let out what wants to come, without modulation, and that's what Martha was doing. Maybe there was some modulation, but she stayed right with the inner quality of it, rather than simply saying, “I'm going to make a pretty movement, looking good from the outside.” The movement rose out of an inner state, and Martha had that, and it absolutely drew me. She worked with fundamental human meaning.

The movement that comes from our body, comes from our emotional state. And while the body should be the expression of that, there also has to be a counter-shape and a response to it. So it isn't a matter of simply doing. It's that, when we let something out, there has to be an answer from the

outside, of satisfying the expression. In PBSP then, it isn't just letting it go, it's having an answer.

When I'm doing movements, they're connected to my feelings inside. When I see my wife or people I love, there's a feeling of being connected to them. When I look at my wife, or touch my wife, or I feel her touch, some connection with that quality comes in again. It might not be in movement; it might just be in seeing. Just on the sight, something happens in the heart where there's a connection going on without literally touching. As in my relationship with existence, here, inside of me, is the whole quality of existence. Something is happening in the movement itself, where it's visible, and in seeing, too. There's a sense of perceiving the relationship that happens or exists between us. Immediately, I think of my wife, I think of all my friends and my family, and all the people I work with. The love of humanity, of life, of believing this, the dearness and sweetness of that, that sustains me.

And if connection is the word, then we're all connected, and we're connected to everything that is. I feel connected to all that is; matter is divine. And in that light, everything that is, is divine. I don't think that the divine stuff exists separate from matter. There's living matter and so called inert matter, but inert matter interacts with other so-called inert matter, so reactivity is already the

beginning of aliveness, even materially. Everything is, in a sense, alive. We're all part of a totality, not a fragmentation. We're all part of the same stuff. We're all part of material. As a human being, I'm fortunate enough to be able to be conscious and to experience it.

There is an is-ness, which means an existence that is not just dead matter. That, in matter, is an is-ness. We're part of a huge singularity, which is the cosmos itself. There's a wonder in that. When I say wonder, two things happen. One is the tone and the other is the voice. It's Aah as is awe, the sense of awe. It is breath-taking. Aah. It isn't the Aaah of pleasure where you get a warmth and you go Aaah. It's Aah. Almost wordless wonder. When I say 'wonder' [pronounced one-der], I hear the 'one' of it, that we are winners, that we are alive, so there's that wonder.

And then there's the awe of speechlessness that is a so beyond comprehension that the wonder of existence is beyond human capacity to embrace it. The cosmos is so enormous and so complex we can only be speechless in the face of it. Anyway, that's the Aah, Ooh. And I think that some of the chanting carries that. The Om. The infinite quality in that. In all kinds of Buddhist chanting, or Indian chanting, it all carries that sense of wonder.

And then in a way, connection leads to that sense of wonder and the sense of being connected to ultimate reality. When I'm finished leading a workshop, I'm not exhausted. In fact, I'm enlivened. I end the workshop being more vivid and alive because I was part of furthering each of their individual lives. We all participated in the act of becoming the next part of the self or becoming another step in the realization of the self, which is endless. And the sense of meaning and that life has meaning and connection. And there's meaningfulness in human interaction.

About the author

Together with his wife, Diane Boyden-Pesso, Albert Pesso was the co-founder of PBSP (Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor), a widely respected interactive technique that helps clients create new memories to compensate for emotional deficits in the past. He was called one of the 3 living masters of body-based psychotherapy and was chosen in 2012 to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award by the U.S. Assoc. for Body Psychotherapy. Considered a uniquely gifted “therapists’ therapist” Al helped thousands of clients to achieve lives of greater happiness, satisfaction, & meaning. He established PBSP training centers around the world. It brought Al & Diane deep gratification in their final days to know that they left had their life’s work in capable hands. Like his wife, Al had a deeply compassionate wish to heal all the wounds of the world. Diane Boyden Pesso died on March 4, 2016. Al died soon thereafter on May 19, 2016.

Brief reflections on
sexuality, deathfulness, and
what it means to be a healer:
What sustains my praxis

Barnaby B. Barratt

Sustainability is a contemporaneous notion that has burgeoned since the 1980s. It gained traction with the dawning awareness that our species --- through industrial expansion, population explosion, and the current hegemony of transnational corporate capitalism --- seems hellbent on homicidal and ecocidal destruction. Although humans seem always to have had a propensity for destructiveness, the globalization of our cultural and socioeconomic structures, accompanied by technological capacities of a previously unimaginable scale and sophistication, make likely future horrors of an unprecedented magnitude. In the '80s, "sustainability" was articulated by prescient individuals aiming to rescue the planet or at least retard its devastation. Perhaps predictably, the term has been co-opted by the corporate boardroom and beyond, where it comes to mean specifically the ongoing "development" of self-interested economies; that is, the sustainability of accumulation, market expansion, and profitability. In short, sustainability has become a bit of a buzzword.

Now the *What Sustains Me* project invites us, as a diverse group of healers, to consider what sustains us personally. Serge Prenzel's editorial *Foreword* suggests this be considered in terms of a spiritual-existential quest. Yet just as the personal

cannot be separated from the political, I do not think that one can, or should, disarticulate anyone's spiritual-existential journey from its cultural and socioeconomic context.¹ I will offer some further thoughts on this as I proceed, because I want to offer the idea that an absolutely essential foundation for each individual's spiritual-existential growth is our mindfulness of, and our effort to assuage, the violences that we all unavoidably commit --- both directly and indirectly.

Allow me to begin this personal reflection on my life praxis with a few questions that I believe are pertinent. When interrogating *what sustains me*, we surely must ask: To which *me* are we referring. After all, we are all bundles of entwined versions of "me," intrapsychic, interpersonal, societal and ecological --- ugly as well as beautiful, nasty as well as nice, profane and yet sacred, perhaps even divine. Such bundles may, or may not, be well articulated or even partially integrated with each other. So we must surely also ask: Sustaining "me" *for what and how?* I do not wish to seem pedantic, but we might also consider the distinction between growth (as authentic development) versus the preservation or perpetuation of what has been developed (an inherently conservative perspective). That is, the sustaining of what *is*, as

contrasted with the potentiality of what might *become*. In this short essay, I will focus --- as I anticipate is expected --- on myself as healer. But here I am compelled to ask: *What is healing?*

In some of my writings, I have expressed vigorous opposition to criteria for healing being derived from implicit or explicit standards of sociocultural adaptation (or "adjustment") and maturation. There is no way anyone is able to concoct a concept of adaptation that is ideologically neutral, as if decontextualizing the individual from his or her social, cultural and economic arrangements. Given the varying degrees of oppressiveness and alienation that characterize our global circumstances, such an enterprise of attempted conceptualization is inherently problematic (i.e., it is itself an ideological enterprise, justifying these circumstances).ⁱⁱ Moreover, when we invoke the concept of "maturity," we invariably refer, again implicitly or explicitly, to some ideal model that is ideologically circumscribed (and almost invariably one that is insufficiently examined).ⁱⁱⁱ As a radical psychoanalyst, I think we also need to be suspicious of thinking about healing that is grounded on ideals of personal unity, interior harmony, lack of inner conflict, or "self-realization" and "actualization" (let alone "adjustment" to

prevailing "realities"). If indeed, as demonstrated by classical psychoanalysis, the human condition is one in which how we represent and coordinate our various selves is invariably and unsurpassably in conflict or contradiction with the wellspring of our desires (and any assessment of these various selves is invariably and unsurpassably mired in ideology of some sort), then it can be an illusory goal to imagine that we, or anyone else, can come into a complete state of integration or that we might possibly live without experiencing suffering (as much as I am some sort of Buddhist, I disavow the idealization of "Buddhahood" as some sort of fantastic ideal of *complete* or *completed* enlightenment).

I will return to this last point shortly, but it is, after all, the first truth taught by Gautama. Life is suffering (*dukkha*), which cannot be escaped by palliation or the pursuit of gratifications. In *The Emergence of Somatic Psychology and Bodymind Therapy*, I proposed that we need to rethink the notion of healing. We should not continue to confuse it: (i) With the avoidance of pain or with symptomatic relief; (ii) with the avoidance of death and, I have argued, with denial of the deathfulness that lies within every moment of our being-in-the-world; or as I have just indicated (iii) with sociocultural adjustment and the prevailing

norms of "maturity." Instead, I have advocated that we must rethink our ideas about healing in terms of three interlinked characteristics (all of which are contentious to varying degrees, given our current social, cultural, and economic circumstances globally).

(i) Healing is holistic. One cannot heal one part of our being-in-the-world, our lived experience, as if it were independent of all the other parts.

(ii) Healing involves the mobilization of subtle energies. One cannot heal by remaining static or by arriving at some sort of condition of stasis; whether one acknowledges and is aware that there are indeed subtle energies within us and all around us is thus crucial to whether "healing" is illusory or profoundly "real."

(iii) Healing involves some sort of appreciative connectivity that touches all aspects of our being-in-the-world with awareness. In previous writings (for example, *Liberating Eros*), I presented the significance of our appreciative awareness of connectivity --- a profound spiritual sense of the interdependence of all beings, *both* in their creation *and* in their destruction.

So, in this context, I want to suggest that healing necessarily implies *growth* in freedom (as freeing), in truth (as truthfulness-in-process), and in compassion (again as an active quality,

incorporating appreciation and grace).^{iv} "Growth" here implies not progress toward some endstate or goal, but a perpetual reworking of and replaying with what *is*, directed at all the limitations and distortions endemic to the "is." So perhaps a shorthand way of expressing this is to insist that: *Healing is the process of freeing, of the unfolding of truthfulness and of growing into compassion.* Note that, in this cryptic formula: "Freeing" is a verb, indicating an ongoing process, rather than a nominal achievement ("freedom"); "Truthfulness" is also an ongoing process (rather than a specifiable mode of correctness, such as "*the truth*"); "Growing into compassion" surely means that healing is *Love* (capitalized), but again this must immediately be qualified to indicate the notion of a universal vibration, which is to be distinguished from (lower case) *love* as the common idea of an affectionate (and not so affectionate) mode or bond of attachment. Compassion does not imply attachment or appropriation, but an active verb incorporating genuine empathy, appreciation and grace. These considerations --- and my constant awareness of my shortcomings in relation to them --- are, I believe, integral to what sustains me as a healer.

It is a familiar platitude that healing must begin with self-healing. Not so familiar is the tenet that

both awareness of the need for healing *and* the perpetual work and play of self-healing (I favor the notion of a "workplay-in-process") are essential to the healing capacities of the healer. Distinguishing between growth as the fluidity of development and the conservative preservation (perpetuation) of what has been attained (which often implies a rather unwholesomely self-satisfied attitude), I am convinced that what has sustained me as a healer is my sense of myself as needing healing and becoming *somewhat* healed, as well as my ongoing awareness of my dire need for further healing. The notion of "self" in self-healing is perhaps paradoxical, because, in a profound sense, one's capacities to heal depend on the extent to which one is able to get one's "self" out of the way of the process of healing. That is, my capacity to facilitate healing in others requires that I hold the gratifications of being *me* in abeyance as much as possible. To express this differently, the process of healing is egregiously circumscribed (i.e., limited) by the healer's egotism or narcissism (e.g., the wish to feel that he or she is a "great healer" or even an "effective" one, and so forth). This point will be elaborated as I proceed. I do not wish to be immodest, but I think that one of the main forces that has sustained my workplay as a healer has been *both* the sense that I am myself growing

spiritually or existentially (even if in fits and starts), *and* my acute awareness of my ongoing "pathology." The former entails my ability to "let go" and not grasp for self-gratification --- and yet, of course, my egotism still remains the major limitation of my capacities as a healer.

I started life clearly in need of personal healing --- a physically damaged baby, a mother with postpartum psychosis and subsequent depression, a father often physically as well as emotionally absent, a boys-only elementary school that was emotionally as well as sexually abusive, and so on. Out of all this, I became involved in social justice issues even before puberty, and throughout adolescence I actively sought opportunities not only for political activism, but also for spiritual paths that would address my inner anguish.

Today I remain firmly, perhaps hopelessly, committed to some sort of decentered socialism (i.e., something other than the state-controlled arrangements of the Twentieth Century's communist experiments). But writing now in 2016, I no longer imagine I know how to translate my convictions into any effective mode of collective action. The possibility of creating, on any significant scale, social, cultural and economic arrangements that are not fundamentally based on

exploitation, accumulation and expansion, looks to me increasingly bleak. Although I am unclear how I came to this aspect of my socio-spiritual or politico-ethical commitments, I have known since a very young age that if one has more than enough of something that another person needs, one is engaged in a pernicious form of violence (and that the globalized social, cultural and economic structures that make this violence inevitable have urgently to be changed).

I also remain firmly committed to my dharma practice as a sort of "mix-and-match" Jewish-Quaker-Buddhist, more or less in a contemporized version of the Vajrayāna lineage (but without any of the traditional Tibetan adornments or allegiances, and still deeply skeptical of *all* organized religion). However, it was not until, aged twenty, when I experienced a depressive breakdown and was psychiatrically hospitalized for almost a year in an experimental institution, that I realized the profound possibilities of personalized healing in a secular context.

Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, the Cassel Hospital in London was, in the best sense of the term, an asylum (a refuge and a place for healing), which was entirely run on psychoanalytic lines. Although sponsored by the UK's National Health Service (which was a blessing because, as a

working-class boy, I did not have the funds for private treatment), there were no medications, no electroshock, no behavioral or cognitive manipulations, and no bars on the windows. Rather, there were regular individual and group therapy sessions, as well as community meetings. Patients were at liberty to come and go; but, if able to do so, patients were expected to find a local job and make a financial contribution to the institution. I feel privileged to have been an inpatient there for almost a year; indeed, I do not know if I would have survived had I not received this privilege. The experience was eye-opening and life-changing.v Not only did my fantasies, my narratives and my feelings about myself, my family and my early life, shift radically, but my use of my intelligence and my imagination blossomed. Moreover, although this was solely a "talking cure," my experience of my body opened. In relation to this last point, it is notable that I moved rapidly from being chronically constipated to having smooth and pleasurable bowel movements, and from having merely alleviative ejaculations to a far fuller orgasmicity. In short, I discovered the processes of suppression and repression within myself and consequently I started to reconnect with my "sexual body." I left the Cassel Hospital determined to seek more healing (generally as well as

psychoanalytically) and wishing to become a healer.

But even before my inpatient sojourn, there was a lesson I feel I learnt in high-school, under the influence of the Quakers (the school was conveniently located and so, since my parents knew virtually nothing about Quakerism, my attendance was serendipitous): Spiritual practice dictates political awareness. Later in my teens, when I lived in India and studied the activism of those who diligently followed Mohandas Gandhi in trying to translate the principle of compassion or ahimsā into the here-and-now struggle for freedom and justice (e.g., Vinoba Bhave, JC Kumarappa, and Jayaprakash Narayan), I became yet more skeptical of spiritual paths that seem to be disengaged (and also of any "existentialist" position that is fundamentally bourgeois). We may have to begin with healing ourselves, but the practices of self-healing cannot be dissociated from the implication of our actions for healing or hurting others, healing or hurting other populations across the globe, healing or hurting the health of the planet.

From my adolescence onward, I have rather consistently sought an alignment between the personal and the political. Sadly, what may be most tragically instructive about my individual

journey is the extent to which I now realize that I have sought an alignment that is, at this point in human history, ultimately impossible --- or, at most, only approximately possible. However, I still firmly believe such an alignment still needs to be sought. We need to strive to make our praxis of healing both personal and political (intrapsychic, interpersonal, as well as culturally and socioeconomically aware and activist); of course, most fundamentally, the personal is political, and vice versa.

After the Cassel Hospital and the completion of a few academic degrees, my career as a healer began formally in 1975 with the first very troubled patient I saw as an intern at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Having earned a PhD in Psychology and Human Relations (as well as a PhD/DHS in Clinical and Educational Sexology), I now practice as a psychoanalyst, somatic psychologist and sexuality consultant. Thus I have workplayed as a healer for just over forty years. Finding many psychoanalytic institutions too exclusively "cerebral," I have also trained, to varying degrees, in several forms of yoga, traditional sen-sib massage (and other forms of "hands-on" bodywork), subtle energy practices from several lineages, free-dancing, tantric meditation, psychodrama, and consultative clinical

psychology. In addition to two lengthy periods of personal psychoanalytic treatment at five sessions per week, which were unquestionably essential to my growth, I have benefited from workshops founded by the late Stan Dale, as well as from safely conducted experiments with certain hallucinogens. I frequently recall Osho's injunction that everyone should practice at least two modes of meditation --- heating and cooling --- and I have followed his guidance. But I also now think that, at this juncture in our understanding of the crafts of healing, every healer should learn two modes of praxis --- two that are significantly different from each other. How else are we to address the body/mind split still endemic to our North Atlantic cultures?

So what sustains me as a healer? In addition to --- or more accurately, as an integral aspect of --- my personal trajectory of self-healing, I find I am grounded when meditating, when listening to patients, when lovemaking (sometimes), and when writing (when it flows from within), and when dancing (so long as I am not expected to do anything remotely choreographed). By "grounded" here, I mean when I feel a deep sense of both of things coming together and of myself coming apart in my interconnectedness with all that is "other" or "otherwise."

I know that things can often seem to "come together" in moments that are utterly illusory --- so what authentically does this mean? From my personal experience, I believe we can only discuss the spiritual and existential grounding of our being-in-the-world (and the essentially concurrent sense of deconstructive dispersal, interconnectedness and ephemerality) in terms of three interrelated dimensions.^{vi}

- Our *relations* within our self (i.e., the psychodynamics of our bodymind), and how we conduct ourselves with others and with the planet. Here we cannot avoid the embeddedness of the personal within the political. If healing relationships entail compassion, it begins with nonviolence (*ahimsā*). Yet violence is unavoidable, even if we blind ourselves to this reality. So our spiritual and existential praxis must be mindful of the violences we inevitably commit.

- Our *sexuality*, by which I mean the eroticism of the subtle energies that pervade our embodied experience as well as the world around us. I suggest that it is only in the liberation of our erotic potentialities, our "lovemaking" (in a profound and specific as well as in a general sense), that freedom, truthfulness and compassion can be located. I have written about this quite extensively.

- Our *deathfulness*, by which I mean not merely our death as the endpoint of our life's narrative, but the deathfulness that inheres to every moment of life, every movement of our being-in-the-world.

I would like to amplify these reflections on *what sustains me* by offering a few comments on each of these dimensions.

About Relations. We must consider here the relations that I have within myself --- between events that seem more bodily and those that seem more mental, between different versions of *me* --- as well as the relationships I have with others and with the cultural and socioeconomic nexus I inhabit.

I am particularly grateful that my calling as a healer began with meditation and psychoanalysis, for the following reason. Although the latter has become, in the course of its history of just thirteen decades, too institutionally and theoretically ingrown, to the point of a certain sort of stagnation, there are central coordinates to psychoanalytic or psychodynamic thinking that should not be forgotten (but often are). As a generic categorization that encompasses the various strains of psychoanalysis (as well as other contemporary therapies), *psychodynamics* implies an understanding of the human condition that: (i) is non-manipulatively interested in the *meaning* of

life's events for the participant; (ii) is holistic in what is fashionably called a "body, mind, spirit" sense, which implies that it does not subordinate the body to the mind, or vice versa, but has a "bodymind" perspective; and (iii) is clear and consistent in acknowledging the inherently and interminably contradictory, conflictual and contested, character of human events (which is, after all, what is essentially involved in Sigmund Freud's classic discovery of the psychoanalytic method). That is, a psychodynamic approach recognizes the incessantly processive or "dynamic" character of the human condition. This third point is especially important, because we desperately want to believe that we are, or can become, *whole* in the sense of completely integrated, self-unified, or internally harmonious. I emphasize this point because many of the therapies that developed after Freud's revolutionary discoveries (including ones that call themselves "psychoanalytic") have forgotten it and labor under a formalizing and immobilized ideology that posits spurious ideals of stasis as "truth" and of a "freedom" that is without conflict or contradiction. Against such ideology, I believe that healing requires us to understand that, however much therapy we undergo, processes of suppression and repression will still be active within us, and our reflective self-consciousness will

still have only a partial and distorted access to our embodied experience and to our desire (that Freud called *Trieb* or drive). Our erotic energies and our embodied desires will always be in a contradictorious relationship with our inner theater of representations and our socialization. Our human condition is forever dynamically fractured.

This brings me back to the relationship between the personal (the intrapsychic dynamics of our bodymind) and the political (our interpersonal, cultural and socioeconomic milieu). If healing essentially entails the operation of compassion, then perhaps we can agree that the antithesis of compassion is violence. At the very least, healing involves moves toward abstention from violence (and here I consider manipulative therapies to be a mode of violence). In this context, Slavoj Žižek's characteristically provocative and polemical essay on this topic points incisively to the problem we all face (it does much else additionally, with which I am not concerned here). Žižek distinguishes the three "levels" of subjective (by which he more or less implies the intrapsychic dimension of violence in the internal relations of our bodymind), objective or interpersonal, and systemic violence. What is immediately and disturbingly evident is that to attempt to eradicate violence on one level almost

unavoidably (perhaps I just mean unavoidably, without equivocation) perpetuates it on another level. In large measure, this occurs precisely because of the way our world is arranged socially, culturally and economically. Our awareness of this --- our mindfulness of our participation in multiple levels of violence --- and our earnest activism against such embroilment seem to me essential to our capacity to be healers and to what sustains us as healers.

My decision to become a healer of individuals, rather than an activist for a revolutionary movement that does not even exist, positions me today in untenable circumstances (as, I submit, it does for all of us). Just as participation as an activist might well have inadvertently caused harm on other levels, so too healing the intrapsychic and interpersonal levels typically entails the perpetuation of a malignant system on the cultural and socioeconomic level. Wittingly or unwittingly, those healers, who assume that the dominant order is a "reality" toward which healing adjusts each individual, "make the formation of the illusions of the ruling class about itself their chief source of livelihood" (as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels expressed it). To give a mundane example, for a healer not to be compensated for his or her labors is not only impossible in terms of the livelihood of

the healer, but also sabotages the necessary interpersonal reciprocity of the healing process (philanthropy is rarely more than a gesture toward healing, most often it is an act of patronage that imprisons the recipient). Yet when we are compensated for our labors, we participate in a global economy that systematically impoverishes the "bottom billions." Working as I do in Africa (to which I was invited to emigrate in order to teach psychodynamic and somatic modes of healing), I feel this acutely every day. When a trainee pays me for a session or when students pay me to teach a seminar, the modest funds that are circulated could well save the family in rags that sits on the next street corner from starvation or the ravages of disease; moreover, somewhere along the line, the reason the trainee or student enjoys those financial resources is precisely because of a business enterprise, the success of which depends on the "wage slavery" of poorly compensated employees.

To express this differently, fighting for freedom and justice usually traumatizes the individual who fights (in South Africa the wounds of apartheid are alive, although sometimes somewhat hidden, in the souls of the supposedly "born free" post-apartheid generation, to say nothing of those who participated themselves in the struggle against the apartheid regime). But conversely, healing the

individual --- any individual, wounded in any way --- involves activities that perpetuate some other population's systemic wounding. So whereas I may establish nonviolence in the relationships that eventuate within my consulting room (and perhaps also, to some degree, within my circle of friends and family), I am still inevitably a bystander-perpetrator of the violence that characterizes the social, cultural and economic levels.

In this context, perhaps the most that can be hoped of healing is that we become aware of the multiple modes of violence that we all unavoidably commit; rather than blinding ourselves to them in the belief that we can become what Georg Hegel sarcastically called a *belle âme*, a beautiful soul. Since we cannot avoid committing violence --- intrapsychically, interpersonally, or systemically --- the most significant issue is whether we can be mindful of the violences in which we are implicated in relation to those from which we manage to abstain. Despite our righteous striving for thorough-going compassion, we are deluding ourselves if we believe we are ever able to live fully in *ahimsā*. Healing is not aided by any form of our denial of the violence within us, between us and, by implication, inherent in the world we inhabit.

About Sexuality. For obvious political reasons, many healers would prefer not to acknowledge the extent to which all healing is a matter of eroticism. Yet so many of us are aware that healing is neither just a matter of transforming physiological functions and anatomical mechanisms, nor just a matter of transforming the inner theater of our representations of self and others. Rather, healing involves the subtle energies that flow (and are so often blocked) through and within our bodymind, as well as circulating all around us. Psychoanalysis is much misunderstood (although perhaps for understandable reasons). When Freud discovered the suppression and repression (the ways in which our reflective self-consciousness systematically distorts or precludes certain of our thoughts, feelings and wishes that are nonetheless active ingredients of our being-in-the-world, our lived experience), he did not just discover that some of our representations or fantasies are suppressed into a preconscious or descriptively unconscious condition, from which they may therapeutically be returned to self-consciousness. Far more radically, he discovered that repression decomposes representations into an actively impulsive but unrepresentable condition. Our lives are lived subjected to forces of desire that govern us from beyond the "repression barrier" --- desire that

always eludes, evades or exceeds the possibility of our translating it into representations that might be reflectively articulated within the purview of our self-consciousness. What this implies is that our inner theater of representations of self and the "other" or "otherwise" is perpetually in a dynamic process of contradictoriness in relation to the energies of our desire. What is "in" the repressed unconscious is not representational, but a restless, persistent and insistent, momentum of free-flowing subtle energies, which are often held within our embodied experience.

When Freud wrote of *psychic energy* or *libido*, as a force within our lived experience that is nonetheless always dynamically "at odds" with how we represent ourselves and others, was this not the westernized discovery of *prāṇa* (*ch'i* or *qi*)? There are differences between the traditional Asian doctrines and Freud's discovery, but these need not concern us here. The point to be considered is that subtle energies flow throughout (and are often blocked within) our bodymind and do not take a detour around our loins (indeed, many wisdom traditions insist that such energy enters the bodymind foremost through the *mūlādhāra*, our coccygeal-perineal-genital root).

In my personal view, a diligent effort to be aware at all times of the energies of our bodymind

is essential to the praxis of healing. There is no necessary implication here about the sexuality of the healer, if "sexuality" is taken to mean the performance of "sex acts." The healer may be abstinent, unpartnered, exclusively or multiply partnered. That is not the point, but I do know from my own journey that my capacity to be a healer has grown with my increased awareness of my embodied erotic experience. And I know that one dimension of what sustains me as a healer is my ability to have a joyous relationship with my embodied energies, as well as those of partners. To be sensually alive seems to me necessary to the calling of a healer and I have become very skeptical of therapeutic practices that do not recognize the centrality of eroticism as the wellspring of our being-in-the-world.

About Deathfulness. There is an interesting, but perhaps in today's terms unremarkable, essay written in 1912 by Sabina Spielrein, who was the first genuinely feminist psychoanalyst.^{vii} It is a paper that she read to Freud and that considerably influenced his subsequent ideas about what I call the principles of liveness and deathfulness. Spielrein discusses the intimate and inescapable connection between what she labels as "destruction" and "creation." She explores their impenetrable interdependence. In terms both more

contemporary and more ancient (in their Buddhist articulation), this resonates with the doctrine of origination that intimates how fading is required for arising and how all that arises will fade away. Presences emerge from an all-encompassing absence --- a fecund void from which they emerge and then retire.

In my view, the principle of lifefulness (sometimes translated as Freud's life-drives or *Lebenstriebe*) concerns the way in which investments of desire, even when modified by our egotism's defensive mechanisms, animate our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. That is, a principle of energetic movement that brings a (re)presentation into the present. Lifefulness accounts for the existence of the present. The principle of deathfulness (sometimes translated as Freud's death-drives or *Todestriebe*) concerns the way in which every moment of desire dissipates into the next moment, as if in an inexorably entropic imperative. That is, a principle of energetic movement by which all presences recede into absence. Deathfulness accounts for the way in which the life of the present is dependent on innumerable past-futures that appear non-existent (although this is entirely a matter of appearance).

Although these principles may seem metaphysically abstruse, there are three ways in

which they seem to me to be profoundly significant for our understanding of healing and for the sustenance of the healer. First, deathfulness is not to be equated with destructiveness, in that the latter implies violence. Destruction is an aggressivized assault by one entity on another, both of which are present as energized. It is, in a sense, an assault on the inherent ebb and flow of libidinized investments and often to be understood as a resistance to deathfulness itself. By contradistinction, deathfulness is the inherent ebbing that occurs within every life-filled moment of desire. Second, this inherent deathfulness of life itself is necessary for the liveliness or "creativity" of each new moment. In this sense, decomposition is integral to, and necessary for, composition and thus also for the recomposing process that we think of as healing. Thus, third, deathfulness is not to be resisted. Rather, healing implies that its participants embrace the inherently "necronautical" dimension of each life's passage (I believe this term is Simon Critchley's provocative neologism).

Here is, as I have experienced it, the essence of healing as a genuine awareness, not only of all our multiple modes of relatedness and of the erotic energies of our embodied experience, but also as an acceptance of this deathfulness that lies within and around every moment of our being-in-the-world. It

is only in this awareness that I feel things "come together" and my chattering mind recedes. Only in this sort of awareness does my egotism seem to dissolve and there arises a profound nonjudgmentalism. It is as if, in the awareness of the deathfulness of our being-in-the-world, we find the truthfulness of Seng-Ts'an's poetic insistence that the primal disease of the chattering mind is the struggle between what one likes and what one dislikes, between the good and the bad. This insight also seems essential to the healing attitude.

When meditating, there is no right or wrong way to meditate, one is either in meditation or not. When workplaying in bodymind modalities of healing, one either follows the pulse of our energies, usually indicated by the breath, or one is out of the process of workplaying. When listening to patients in psychoanalysis, one either listens in a free-associative reverie, or one is not listening but engaging either in one's own pursuits or in frantic calculations allegedly undertaken on behalf of the patient. When lovemaking, there is no right or wrong way --- except that one either abandons oneself to the authentic and spontaneous flow of sensual pleasure, or one does no more than stage an inauthentically imitative performance. When writing, the muse either comes or one mechanizes the production. And when dancing? No one can

tell you how to dance because, as many wise people have said, your dance either comes from within or you are rendering yourself into a marionette.

Perhaps I might add one last line of thought. Late in his life, Freud famously attempted to define "health" and found that he could not. Misery may be healed, but unhappiness is unavoidable, both because we live in an unhappy world and because our bodymind is perpetually in dynamics of conflict or contradictoriness. He argued that all we can strive for, as perhaps the key to living happily with our unhappiness, is the capacity to love (*lieben*) and to work (*arbeiten*). But here *lieben* surely means living in the universal vibration of *Love*, rather than in the bonds of "love" as participation in attachments that are invariably compromised by hate. *Arbeiten* certainly does not imply the alienated labor of the miner, the employee on the factory line, or the worker who sits for eight hours daily in front of a computer, but rather something that arises from the wellsprings of our creativity. Although he was notoriously adept at jokes, Freud was --- I suggest --- far from a playful man. So it is one of the rare advances of our thinking about healing that has occurred since his pioneering honesty that many of us would add a third dimension, play (*spielen*). Here I do not mean soccer, poker, chess or bike-riding. Rather, play is

surely to be understood as the free-flowing exercise of our capacity for whimsical adventure, spontaneity, and rejuvenation. It is the spiritual challenge of enjoyment; that is, of finding the joy in the mundanity of life. Healing is a process in *Love* --- it is necessarily *workplay*. For me, meditating, listening, lovemaking, writing and dancing are my personal manifestations of such a process; they help me balance *lieben*, *arbeiten* and *spielen*. I suppose, if sustainability is the apt notion, then this is how I sustain myself, at least in so far as I am a healer.

About the author

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The Paradox of the Challenge

A Challenge Is an Opportunity
To Expand My Reality, Overcome Fear
And Reorganize My Life

Erica Goodstone

I would never have written my novel if it hadn't been for the NANOWRIMO challenge.

It all started when my blogging friend, Willena Flewelling, told me that she and her family were participating in the National November Writers' Month challenge. Out of curiosity, I joined and started receiving some infrequent email updates. Then came the official invite to participate. The year was 2012. The month was October. At this point, the idea of attempting to write a novel had been in the back of my mind for almost a year. But I was still not sure I was ready to do this.

About 2 weeks before the start of the challenge, I received an unexpected phone call from Patrick Mascola, the publisher of the local Florida newspaper, *Around Town*, for which I had written a relationship and sexuality column about 17 years earlier. I had met him while I was on a year-long sabbatical from my full time job as a professor of health and physical education at F.I.T./SUNY in New York. I had not spoken to him since I had left Florida at the end of that sabbatical year. To my delight, he explained that he wanted to re-publish one of my previous columns, he praised my writing style, and then he shocked me when he shared that he had recently published a novel. To me that was

a serendipitous sign that maybe I would participate in NANOWRIMO.

Inspiration, Example and an "Aha" Moment

Immediately after that phone call, I ordered his book *Hell on East Rock*. When the book arrived, I quickly opened it, and after reading only the first chapter I said to myself: "Oh, this is how you write a novel." But I still was not definitely going to join the challenge. Then a few days before the end of October I was invited to attend a local NANOWRIMO kick-off party. So I thought, "What the heck. I'll attend the party and maybe I'll participate and maybe I won't". That party was delightful, inspiring, encouraging, and so much fun. I won a raffle prize of all sorts of goodies (candy, notepads, pens, and an inspiring poster) and I even received a few gold stars for showing up at the party and signing the form. In a state of lighthearted levity, I signed an agreement that I would commit to writing every day for 30 days. And I did, sometimes in the morning, sometimes mid-afternoon and a few times into the wee hours of the night. It did not happen on a rigid schedule. What worked for me was writing consistently, a certain number of words each day.

The goal was to start writing and complete 50,000 words or more of a novel during the allotted time period – the month of November. By the end of November I had actually written over 100,000 words and by early January my novel was published at Amazon.com. What I had not realized was that writing the novel was only the beginning. Once I had the words down on paper, getting it published became a whole new challenge. I chose to self-publish it at Createspace.com. That led to hours and hours of struggle, confusion and frustration. Trying to figure out all the details by myself, I did not realize I could have received assistance from a live person on the phone to help me format and upload the files. There's something about digging in my heels and learning how to do something new that gives me satisfaction at the end but puts me into a state of frenetic frustration in the process.

Originally, my intention was to write a semi-autobiographical story of my life as a professor and sex therapist, but that got abandoned in the first few days of writing. A story emerged in my mind of a beautiful young lady born on a special Greek island. The characters and scenarios began to pop out of my mind onto the paper and I found myself outlining and creating headings for future chapters. In no time I was aware of the ending and found a

natural way to bring together all the disjointed actions and events of the various characters' lives. It evolved into a star-crossed romantic love story that turns out right in the end and helps all those involved to emotionally heal. My novel, *Love in the Blizzard of Life*, was dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Sandy, an intense storm that had recently at that time devastated the northeast of the U.S.

What sustained me during this novel writing challenge was knowing that thousands of people around the world were also writing at the same time. Each day I would write the number of words completed and observe my progress on their online charts. And each day my husband would ask how "Dr. Erica Tolstoy" was doing. Every time he said that, I laughed and I felt this warm sense of creativity flowing through me.

Challenges Inspire Me and Get My Creative Juices Flowing

NANOWRIMO was not the first challenge for me. A few years earlier I had completed a challenge to write 100 articles in 100 days for EzineArticles.com. At first I had a pile of journal articles to sort through and a list of topics I wanted to write about. But about halfway through the

article writing, it became more difficult. It became harder to find new topics and to get started writing the next article. But again, it was a challenge and I was determined to complete it. That event rewarded me with a beautiful coffee mug, a mousepad, a coffee heating device, and a Diamond Author classification. Another challenge I later joined was to write 30 blogs in 30 days. I used my novel as the basis and chose healing words about love to influence the perspective of each blog post.

Challenges are not just about writing. Anything I want to accomplish seems to happen more easily as part of a challenge. In the past few years, wanting to get into better physical condition, I joined a small Facebook group, Goal Guru, with the expressed goal of walking or jogging 365 miles in a year. The first year I thought I had reached the goal but then discovered that my miles on the bike were really kilometers. So the following year, I upped the ante and did complete my 365 miles. I continue to participate in that challenge every year. It keeps me going when I feel like stopping. Just when I feel too sore and tired, one of the members will post their miles and I am once more inspired to keep moving. And my body thanks me for it.

Another challenge that I absolutely loved was the 100 Day Challenge, a set of daily inspirational videos created by motivational coach Gary Ryan

Blair. Every day, in his high energy, highly positive voice, he challenges us to be “excellent”, to think, talk, behave, believe and strive to be excellent in everything we say and do. One hundred days was quite a long time, difficult to persist, but well worth it.

That 100 Day Challenge inspired me to create my own challenge, based upon my lifelong learning about love, relationships, healing and spiritual connection. My *30 Day Love Challenge* was born as an evergreen course, a course that could be presented again and again to different groups of men and women wanting to learn how to create more sustainable and satisfying love in their lives.

Challenges Can Appear As Difficulties, Roadblocks, and Unwanted Setbacks

In the process of thinking and talking about how a challenge actually sustains me, I began to realize that challenges are not always presented as an invitation from someone else. Challenges are not always about expanding my abilities and stretching beyond my comfort zone to accomplish or achieve something new and adventurous. In fact, challenges often present themselves as difficulties, roadblocks, or unwanted setbacks. *Challenges can be frustrating, painful, upsetting, dis-*

heartening and can easily become an invitation to just give up.

I have certainly had my share of giving up, at least for a while, because the challenge felt too great. My first book was completed around 1992. With an agent and a slew of publishers' rejections, I finally just gave up and stashed the manuscript in a file box. Sixteen years later, in 2008, I had the good fortune to take a course with Glenn Dietzel about how to write your book in 12 hours or less. Of course, my book had taken about 2 ½ years to complete, but Glenn's course was a revelation for me. We had weekly mentoring groups. Several of these groups focused on promotion through social media, but one was all about writing and publishing e books. My goal and intention had been to write a new book until my mentor, Paul Jackson, causally asked me: "Why don't you take out the book you already wrote and get it published?" "Duh! Why hadn't I thought of that?" So I retrieved the manuscript, created a complete book, and then divided the book into smaller parts for e-books. *Love Me, Touch Me, Heal Me* was finally published online in 2009.

When Adversity Strikes, I Won't Give In or Give Up

Challenges present themselves at unexpected moments. I have a goal, a deadline and a certain amount of work I plan to accomplish. And then the whammy comes and I must stop what I am doing, rise to the occasion if possible and find a way around the problem, or just give up.

It happened while creating the 30 videos for my *30 Day Love Challenge*. Unable to use my desktop because the fan was too noisy for recording, I set up and recorded the videos with my laptop. After the first few videos, I had created an organized system. I would open up the power point slide show, start the Camtasia recording, give my intro for the day's lesson and continue to speak as I followed the power point slides. This worked well for about 15 of the videos and then my laptop had a mind of its own. Sometimes it would start out just fine until ... somewhere in the middle of the recording I would hear a strange sound and a message that the program was attempting and unable to upload a driver. So, I would have to stop the recording, delete it and start all over from the beginning. Sometimes the computer would just crash and I had to restart it before setting up the slide show and recording again.

There was an Adobe Flash problem in my laptop that was not going away, but I had several pre-paid customers that were expecting their videos.

One of my mentors had taught us to “sell the product and then create it”. Not my favorite way to do things. I had, in fact, already created all the power points including most of the images, but I had not yet completed the videos. So each day I struggled, often having to re-do each video 3 or 4 times until the computer would cooperate and let me complete the job and upload it to YouTube. This process of creating the videos took charge of my life for several weeks. And as I got closer to completion, it became a challenge between my laptop and me – and I was not going to let the computer win!

I Try Not to Let My Vision Be Obscured by the Obvious

A challenge is not always an invitation presented by someone else or the need to overcome an unexpected roadblock or problem. Sometimes a challenge arises because I have a goal and don't immediately know how to achieve it. What works best for me is to have a clear vision of what I want, to be honest with myself as I evaluate my current situation, and then to take small steps toward my goal. Holding on to my vision helps me to overcome obstacles by helping me get out of my own way and allow my creative imagination to take the lead. How do I know this is true?

The Toddler's Secret

I learned this secret from a toddler in a video. At first he was just standing in his crib. Then he began to slip his legs between the wooden slats until his feet were on the carpet. I watched in amazement as he started dragging the crib toward the nearby bed. Then, when the crib was close enough he climbed over the top of the crib onto the bed and immediately started jumping up and down. His mom picked him up, put him back in the crib, and I watched him do it all again. That baby had a goal, an intention, a vision and he did not allow his current circumstances, being stuck in an almost enclosed crib, to cramp his style and prevent him from reaching and enjoying his goal. He was not stopped by a difficult situation. In fact, he enjoyed the challenge and used his creative imagination to find a way.

The day after watching that baby's inspirational ingenuity, the green chroma roll arrived in the mail and I got ready to create my green screen video background. My plan was to perhaps tape the paper to a wall but that would have possibly caused some paint to chip. So I decided instead to drape the paper over my standing poster, a tall poster which I often used to

represent my work when I would speak or have a booth at a local event. However, the poster was too high for the ceiling and I had a real hard time maneuvering it out of my office into another room. Then I had to find a way to clip the paper so that it would stay in place. It all seemed almost impossible but in my mind I held the vision of that little baby taking his tiny steps, dragging the crib, and exuding absolute joy when he reached the bed and was able to jump. That baby inspired me to figure out how to create my green screen. And I did. In fact, I shot a video of my process and shared it in a blog post for my blogging and affiliate marketing friends.

Seeing Is Believing It Is Possible

Seeing that little baby drag a big crib, undeterred by the size or weight of it, was inspiration for my soul. If he could do it, hold on to his vision in spite of the apparent difficulties, then I could certainly find a way to accomplish my goal. Having a vision is the key to success. When someone else presents a challenge and they provide the goal, my vision is clear. However, when adversity strikes and I am suddenly blocked from carrying out my plans, my vision may get temporarily obscured.

Once I see the problem or difficulty as a challenge, instead of a roadblock, the solution seems to more easily present itself. It is the ability to see above and beyond my current adversity that helps me to get to the other side. In each situation, a shift in consciousness, a change in my perspective, is required. When I was living in Westport, CT, I used to attend poetry readings and sometimes read my own poems. At one of those readings, a man shared his poignant poem about seeing fields of green grass and colorful flowers. He then shared that he had written that colorful poem while living in a bleak and drab concentration camp in Poland. While living in the bleakest of circumstances, he imagined himself lifted out of the dreariness into a land of greenery and color. Eventually his vision became his reality.

The Paradox of the Challenge

When a challenge is presented, it can easily stir up all sorts of fears, insecurities and concerns:

- “Can I do it?”
- “What if I fail?”
- “Will I look foolish?”
- “I don’t have enough time.”
- “I have all these other tasks that need to be done.”

The paradox of a challenge, for me, is that the challenge itself can sustain me as it becomes a catalyst for completing tasks that I resentfully avoid facing. Give me a solid challenge and I will get those bills paid, papers filed, taxes done, and even do the laundry and clean my home. In my normal, everyday experience, these would be chores and I would most certainly procrastinate before getting them done. But for me a challenge creates meaning, purpose, often urgency and a sense of importance. Then those usually annoying chores become opportunities to clear my head, clear my living space and allow creative ideas to incubate in my mind.

Without a challenge, I may want to write a book. I get started, maybe even completing a few chapters. But somewhere along the way I get distracted, lose my focus, and put the project aside for a future time – sometimes never returning to complete it. When I have a real challenge, either an invitation to participate or an agreement to get a job done by a certain time, I cannot avoid facing it. The deadline and the commitment create a sense of importance and urgency. And with that clear goal, pre-determined deadline and definite objective, I cannot avoid facing the challenge head on. That not only sustains me but it propels me toward accomplishment of my goals.

Do I or Don't I? – That is the Question

Don't get me wrong. I do not jump into new challenges every day and I certainly do not seriously complete every challenge I take on. Each challenge begins with two questions:

- “Should I or should I not?”
- “Do I have the time or energy, passion or desire to do this thing now?”

There are two options available – do it or don't do it. When faced with a challenge, my response is not automatic. I always have a choice about whether to do it or not. There seems to be a sense of self-definition right from the start, beginning with a conscious choice for me to say “Yes, I will do it.” Once I make that firm decision that I will do it, then everything else in my life around me seems to take a back seat. Chores like doing the taxes suddenly take on a new meaning. They are now seen as simple tasks that need to be completed to clear my space and my mind for this bigger, more important and more pressing matter – the challenge.

A Challenge Creates a Reorganization of My Self

Making that clear decision to take on a challenge is a redefining moment. In spite of my fears, doubts or worries that maybe this is not good for me, once I make that choice I have already crossed the line. Maybe no longer exists. I am focused on my goal, I feel the time pressure and my energy rises to assist me. The process of accepting a challenge and becoming determined to do what it takes actually requires a whole reorganization and reorientation of myself.

One example is the challenge I entered a few years ago in the Goal Guru Facebook Group. The challenge was to walk 365 miles in a year. The goal is clear and definite. How we get there is of our own choosing. That first year I thought I had completed the goal only to discover that the stationery bike miles were really kilometers. The second year, I doubled my efforts and barely made it through the end of December but I did make it. The third year, I started out strong immediately on January 1st so that I wouldn't have an end of the year crunch to meet my goal. The bigger purpose for this challenge, of course, is to continue to maintain and improve my health each year.

When we take on a challenge, we don't always realize at first just how much will be required of us. Sometimes we start a challenge with good intentions and drop out quickly because it seems

more difficult than anticipated. I have a friend who loves to write and even teaches writing who started the NANOWRIMO challenge a year ago and stopped about halfway through. It took her an entire year to regroup, emotionally prepare, and then decide to do it. The second time around she completed the 50,000 words before the end of November and received her congratulations certificate.

My *30 Day Love Challenge* taught me a lot. I discovered that when someone is not ready to do what it takes to complete a challenge, they often feel they must criticize and complain. That is a sign they have not made the full commitment to do what it takes. It is so easy to criticize the format of a challenge rather than to look inside yourself to discover what is stopping you from doing what it takes to complete the challenge. And often what it takes is a firm decision and a reorganization of your thinking, your behavior and your practices.

That Inspirational Moment and a Touch of Support

No man or woman is an island. We live in society. We interact with and rely upon other people. None of us can do it all alone, no matter how invincible we may believe we are. I have discovered two important components of my

process when I am facing a challenge – finding that inspirational moment and receiving the kind of support that sustains me.

Often, after deciding to take on a challenge, I will temporarily appear to be procrastinating. I can't seem to get started. I find myself doing all those chores I had been avoiding for weeks, maybe months, maybe even years. But I now understand that those tasks are helpful distractions while my inner creativity is percolating and assimilating. I can't predict how long that internal festering will take before my creativity bursts forth in what appears to be an inspirational moment. That is the moment when I begin the outward process of my challenge.

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can hurt me to the core. Especially during those early internal incubating days, the words I hear can make or break my confidence, my resolve, my intention and my focus. Once I have actually begun moving toward my goal, even negative words can more easily be shrugged off because I know I am already doing it.

Support can be so comforting and can arrive in many different forms. While I was writing the chapters of my novel every day, when my husband would call me "Dr. Erica Tolstoy," to me those were the sweetest words I had ever heard. Equating my

newbie novel writing to that of a celebrated and renowned author was his way of encouraging me, reminding me that I am okay and that I am in good company with authors who have come before me.

Coping with a temperamental laptop, feeling intermittently pressured and overwhelmed as I tried to complete my 30 Love Challenge videos, the support I received from my Google Hangout friend, Mary Gallagher, made all the difference. When I would share my latest struggle and difficulty, she would always help me to see the benefits of what I was creating and to imagine the videos already completed.

When the world gets to be too much, I do sustain myself by taking on a challenge. If there is no current challenge looming in my horizon, then I grit my teeth and delve into that task or chore that I have been avoiding. There are always several of those waiting to be handled. And a funny thing starts to happen. As I clear away the clutter and get those things done, my mind becomes open and ready to take on a new challenge. Every challenge I face begins with a commitment that must be made before my actual capabilities are revealed or before my accomplishments have built up my confidence.

Taking on a challenge, for me, is taking a leap of faith into the unknown. I have come to realize that my initial feelings of anxiety, fear, overwhelm,

even depression, take on a new meaning once I am committed to the challenge and have a clear vision of my goal. Maybe it's something deeply embedded in my personality that I seem to thrive on flirting with the danger and uncertainty of a challenge. As I propel myself out of my comfort zone into the unknown, I manage to redefine myself and grow more confident in the process. All of us get frustrated, blocked and even stopped by circumstances and life events, but for me many of life's challenges become a catalyst to reorganize and redefine myself. Challenge is not only about what I accomplish but each challenge leads to a continual expansion of the boundaries of who I am.

About the author

Dr. Erica Goodstone helps men and women heal their relationships through love. As a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Marriage Counselor, Sex Therapist, Body Oriented Psychotherapist and Personal Life and Health/Wellness Coach, Dr. Erica's life's work is about revealing the simple secret to healing and creating love that endures. Her popular book, Love Me, Touch Me, Heal Me and her novel, Love in the Blizzard of Life, as well as her Kindle and Smashwords books, all delve deeply into the heart of love – what interferes, suppresses or helps love to grow and thrive. Hint – it all begins with self-love. Dr. Erica's virtual courses guide you to heal your life and get ready for love. Check out her Healing Through Love Seminars, her Love Me Touch Me, Heal Me Relationship System, and the 30 Day Love Challenge. You will never look at love the same way again.

The Magic of Being Human

Gunilla Blomqvist

There is a reason it has taken me so long to start to write this chapter. It is about the intimacy involved. Should these experiences and feelings of what sustained me when life was hard be publicly exposed? It feels like betraying something. As I am writing this, I am still struggling with the feeling. And I feel a pressure over my chest and a sense of sadness.

Could I let these most intimate experiences out? How should I do that? How could I do it? I will give it a try. Thanks to friends who did it before me, I feel courage. In friendship is nourishment. They have done it, and I can do it. They would even like me to do it! Or would they? What would they say, do or think? Not all people, I don't bother so much about public opinion. I have always gone my own way. But those I call my friends, those I care about, do they like what I do, think, and say? Do they even like *me*?

Or could the pleasant face and smile cover the opposite? The voice behind the words, what does it really say? Something a friend doesn't want to uncover? About me or what? I have always found this kind of experience difficult, making me confused. Now, as time has passed, I have been able to touch the fear that comes from the thought: "Ha! You thought they loved you! But they hate you and want you just dead and gone!"

But before that, before I managed to touch and stand the dark cavern of the fear of being unseen, neglected, even hated, without one reason that I could understand, what sustained me then? What has sustained me through the years when I was a little girl and growing up as a teenager? What supported me to feel happy, lively, energetic, and curious? To be the person I was from the beginning and always have been through the years. And what helped sustain me as myself even when the face that I looked at lacked clarity of expression and the voice did not touch my heart?

It feels like betraying something. There is a saying in Taoism that "you should not talk about Tao, then it disappears." So, what is Tao? Another saying goes: "Don't mention the name of the Holiest, just call *him* the Lord." So who is the Lord? Is the most supporting and sustaining force in life a Lord? We can't talk about what we don't know, and it isn't easy to give form and name to experiences that are out of the ordinary but still authentic for the one who has them.

I called God my friend for life since my mother had taught me to say the night prayer to *him*, the prayer which ended with: "Look to me that is little." So, for the sake of simplicity, I will use my childhood's God and "*him*" further on for a while. When writing this, I again feel the pressure over my

chest and the sadness coming up to my eyes and face. I think about that need for intimacy with *him* again! To tell *him* what is on my chest, what burdens me, that he should see to me that is little. OK, now my eyes are filled with tears, so I take a short break. I need to stay with the feeling for a while.

Back again. The thing is, I broke up with *him* recently - - it has been about half a year. The honesty I asked myself before writing required me to do so. I wanted to test what it would be like to get into the feeling of being exposed to the toughness of the world without the magic support I usually had felt all my life when in crises. The exceptional experiences that I felt were connected to my childhood's intimacy with God. At now seventy-plus, I needed to stand on my legs all alone and support myself. And so I trusted that *he* could take it if I considered *him* not to exist!

*If there is No God
Shall the refreshing Summer Rain
Still Shower my Face?
And the Wings of the Wind still Enfold Me?*

*If I am Not but You are Me
Will You See with My Eyes*

*Through the Heat of Pain and Darkness?
And the Tears in My Eyes... in Your Eyes
Will they Comfort You then?*

To be enfolded by Nature

In Nature, my body feels at ease and relaxed. Surrounded by the big trees in a forest and feeling the damp freshness in the air, I am in my element! The wind gives me a variety of sensual feelings. The caress of a warm breeze and the stormy wind vibrate with my core. That inspires me to paint and write lyrics. So do my dreams.

I have had vivid dreams as long as I can remember, even as a child, and I still remember what were to me the most important ones. I have a continuing dialogue with that dreaming part of me even when awake. In the land of in-between, the dawn and the dusk, I am in my special time for magic.

Something from within that I don't control becomes visualized at moments like this. It inspires my feelings and thoughts about what is happening inside me and what step I am supposed to go further within my art, in my work as a psychotherapist, as well as in everyday life and relationships. I need these moments in the morning

and afternoon, all by myself. A feeling of being at home, being safe and complete.

As I am writing this, I am alone in the summerhouse. My man is somewhere else for the weekend, and it is calm and warm inside the house. Outside, it is a stormy December weather. The first snow has just melted away, and the wind is not cold but harsh. There is a warning for not going out. I am feeling good and contained. Do I miss the sense of closeness and intimacy with someone? Not at the moment.

*Did you Ever go to Swim in November?
Frozen Grass
Like Glass
Under Feet that Remember*

Hard times

One can argue that closeness and intimacy are supposed to be between humans. Of course, animals, too, can get attached to a partner, an attachment that can last a lifetime. I just saw something on TV about birds that would stay together for twenty years and that showed real grief when their partner did not turn up at the yearly mating place.

Maybe I was lonely in some way as a child; perhaps my God became a substitute at times for my beloved father, who was mainly away during my first three years of life, guarding the Swedish coast during World War II. I do not fully know why I have had this substantial help and protection coming through my body and mind through the years. Maybe it could be described the other way around as well: Something inside made me susceptible from the beginning to benefit from my own magic experiences, especially during hard times when no human support was there, but also for my pleasure and joy.

Compassion and empathy have always been important to me. When I was around ten, I used to think I would never do anything I felt was bad to any child as a grown-up. I had a little blue notebook where I wrote down these sincere thoughts. The notebook is now gone, but not the memory of it. What was the impulse for these pronouncements? I can't recall ever being poorly treated, but I might have heard or seen something that led me to make this vital choice about myself. It was natural for me as a quiet youth when confronted with an inhuman act of any kind to reflect that I would never act that way even if I had the power. It has taken me a long life to realize that this is not an obvious choice for

everyone. I think I was a sensitive child. And I was early aware of the sacred value of being a human.

Sustaining magical experiences

I remember being alone in the hospital as a twelve-year-old girl with flying long blond hair and long legs. I do not remember for sure why I was there. It could have been when I had scarlet fever and was in an isolation room. My parents could not visit me; they could only wave through a window.

But I was also hospitalized later that same year because of an operation on a non-malign tumor on the side of my neck. Quite possibly, it was then that I saw an intense light on the hospital wall that took the form of a light figure for my eyes, a figure that was familiar to me as Jesus.

When I left the hospital alone, I felt the sensation of my legs walking on the street and got this special strong feeling in my legs and my body, and my mind became filled with the understanding that "from now on I am standing and walking on my own". That felt like a good and liberating experience and, I think, a natural understanding of myself at that age.

Later, around my forties, I had another extraordinary experience: I was in a foreign country meeting colleagues at a training conference. However, the atmosphere was not good since the training situation was intertwined with organizational politics in a way that was unforeseen and surprising for most of us.

I was sitting alone on my bed in my hotel room before leaving, reflecting on the whole business and looking out through the window over the roofs of the big city. I could not understand what had been going on and was confused by the duplicity as I perceived it, especially from one person in the staff that I had trusted as being an excellent professional trainer. The roofs outside the window then started to move and undulate.

I experienced a short moment of being lost. But then it felt like someone was coming from behind. I was enfolded in wings on both sides, and there was this intense, special light all around me again to hold me. I felt calm, back to myself again.

As a girl of twelve, I had experienced a body/mind sense of being an independent individual standing and walking on my own two feet. Later, in a foreign country, in total confusion and lack of trust, my body felt a holding and

securing sensation and had an enlightening experience.

These incidents, among others, connect with a feeling of trust and an "inner knowing" of being helped, protected, and held. They give my life a happy and light tune, like a full and rich stream flowing beneath whatever hard times and sorrows are passing over my inner home, like changing weather.

I Am Who I Am

When I was around four years old, adults liked to fuss with me and ask: "What will you become as a grown-up?" meaning whether I had thought of a profession. I remember experiencing this question as a very stupid one. I always answered I would not become anything else: "I am Gunilla."

I had an early sense of the difference between my self-awareness and the idea that ego achievement over the years would turn you into something other than what you truly are.

My self-awareness has been deeply rooted in my body since my childhood. I feel happy when I enjoy life in dancing and music. As an artist, I like to move around, almost like dancing, when making

expressive paintings, and I like how the movement comes out in color and form in my paintings.

Movement and the sensuality in motion, alone and together, are as valuable to me as the magic of being all alone in a meditative mood, quietly contained. It is the experience of waiting for a deeper part of me to come to terms with and to be understood, loved, and given a form that people understand.

Dreams, visions, and expression

Two dreams, or rather an early morning vision and a dream that I had around my fifties, come to mind as I am writing this. At that time, I needed a change in my life. And it was not entirely clear to me what the restlessness and dissatisfaction that I felt were about. I had moved out from the marriage bedroom and was sleeping in an open room with space and bigger windows.

In the dawn between sleep and wakefulness, I saw a circling round fireball that tried to speak to me. I saw a mouth that was not in place but moving around, as well as eyes that tried to become visible. It was a powerful image, almost too intense to look at. And then a lot of small black snakes came in the air and knotted themselves together in the shape of

hearts like an iron fence between me and the circling fire.

This vision gave me a feeling of compassion. Compassion for the thing that could not express itself, that had difficulty in finding form. I felt this thing needed me because I had a mouth and eyes.

A few days after that vision, I had a dream that felt connected to it. There was this circling thing again, but now it was within black and yellow fields, revolving slowly, and there was now a voice talking to me.

I heard a question: "Who are you?" And I heard myself answer in the dream: "A dutiful academic." The voice then continued: "What would you want to be?" I heard myself answer: "Spontaneous." I perceived there was a waiting for the me in the dream to have a second wish, and I said I would like to Share Mutually in Love. After that, there was again waiting, and I said that I wanted to Communicate. The scene then changed. In my dream picture, there was a black something, and from it came a solid white light. This dream of inner communication started significant changes in my life.

Among other things, I finally acted on a commitment I had made in my twenties when I stopped attending Art school. At that time, my

parents and teachers felt I was too bright for not studying Math at the University. The promise I then made to myself was that I would go back to studying art and developing as an artist when I had lived longer and had more to tell.

And so, within a few years, I had divorced from a thirty-year marriage, started a new education, found a new love (the person I am still with), and was happily painting.

My paintings are fiery and forceful, some people say. That's how I like to express myself and give a form to what comes from deep inside. I get very energetic and passionate as I do this. The intense energy from within fuels creativity and change, which I can ride on for a while. Giving these energies color and form makes it possible to communicate and touch hearts and feelings—mine and others. And I appreciate the communication that takes place when I am having an exhibition.

*Flying with Flames of Fire
Thought I was carried
Lost Touch of the Fiery Body
That fell Dead to the Ground
Me still Floating in the Air*

Being a woman

At times, I have difficulty to express myself strongly and deeply in close relationships. I can lose myself in intellectual arguments instead of being more spontaneous and daring in what I say. But I fear that, without the intellectual framing, what I express would be like a burning fire that can hurt.

The forceful energy from within is my inspiration, my spark of life. It still needs my aging body and the feeling of pulsating life in my heart to come through in communication, to find the word and expression that reaches another human being.

As a woman, I have sometimes felt that I should not be too bright in a discussion. It is all too easy to be considered self-righteous when you stand for the right to know something. My father always supported and encouraged me. In our discussions, I felt free to express my thoughts. But, with my mother, this could lead to fights.

Dad used to say it was good that I was straightforward and didn't lie. I could have experienced this as pressure to behave in a certain way, but I didn't. It felt more like his wish for the world and its humans to be like that.

For me, this is just an easier way to communicate. But some people are different in this

matter, maybe brought up in other ways. My partner is more cautious and polite. On one occasion, he got annoyed at me for being, in his opinion, lecturing. He called me arrogant. There we were - - me, in my best intentions, and he in his! Life was playing with our differences and difficulties. Contact lost! I left, sad and hurt, to rest alone in the garden.

I looked up at a birch tree where a breeze suddenly moved the leaves. In my inner sight, there was a vision of Mary in the middle of the tree on a cross, holding baby Jesus in her arms. That sight was so comforting: I felt held like the little child I was then. At the same time, I could identify with the crucified Mary. And I became all warm and at ease and alive again in my whole body.

Epilogue

All my experiences sustain me. Each one of them is associated with a natural feeling in my body, a feeling of myself being myself, a sense that I am well taken care of somehow. They bring me back to myself again after being lost. They give me inspiration, trust, and courage to continue to communicate with others with a warm, loving feeling inside.

On the way to finish writing this chapter, I had a short dream that told me my mother was dead. She has been dead for twelve years! But at the same time, I saw her very vivid and alive in this dream that had bright and warm colors. She was at home, active with something, as she usually was!

It brought up good memories of my mother, her happy laughs, the songs she sang, and the stories she told. And it suddenly became clear to me that she had nourished the deep images in me with her fantasy and storytelling and with her faith in God. I got a sense that she is associated and connected to my inner world of images warmly and playfully.

From her, I also learned to care for what is vulnerable and small. Saying the prayer "See to me that is little" made me understand that a little girl is valuable and should be cared for. I have been called weak-strong, a nickname I like. It happens when I successfully communicate the feelings in my heart to the hearts of other human beings in a way that vibrates with our cores.

About the author

Gunilla Blomqvist is an artist and poet as well as one of the first registered psychotherapists in Sweden, where she counts as the "grand old lady" of body psychotherapy, specializing in psychosomatic illness. She brought Body Psychotherapy to Sweden from the USA in collaboration with Alexander Lowen in the later part of the twentieth century. She was also trained as a Jungian Psychoanalyst in Zurich. She started her career as a primary school teacher, and has written and illustrated books for children on existential topics. She shares her time between painting, writing, client work and supervision, with also space for downhill skiing and dancing and a growing group of grandchildren. She has a special feeling for all human beings, grown-ups and children, who are "falling out of the frame" and a strong trust in the continuing evolutionary and spiritual growth of humanity.

Feeling At Home

Ifat Eckstein

Several years ago, I was invited to give a workshop on Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy and Spirituality at a professional conference for therapists. On the morning of the event, I went to see the room where I would be working. Entering a lovely space bathed in shades of green, reflections of the trees outside created an expansive atmosphere. I looked around me trying to absorb the energy held there and then I saw it, on the wall in front of me: a big wooden mask of an Indian chief. He was adorned with a feather head dress, a solemn but kind face. I felt something move deep inside me.

Consciously noticing that something was awakening in me, I left the room and went to join the plenary, about to begin at any moment. Drawn into the events of the day I forgot about the room and my earlier meeting with the mask, a trigger to something which I was not yet aware of.

Walking down the path towards the workshop room later that day, I realized that my body was unquiet. Soon I began to sense my heart pulsing in stressful excitement. It became stronger with every step I took towards the room.

With only ten minutes before the participants would arrive, I felt overwhelmed and surprised at what was unfolding. I held a sense of anticipation and concern simultaneously but did not yet

understand what was happening. Starting to feel helpless, I knew I must find a way to reconnect to my center otherwise I would not be able to lead the workshop.

I asked one of my colleagues, a dear friend who was also attending the conference, simply to be with me outside the room, to help me listen mindfully to what was happening. I allowed myself to be present and to connect to what was implicitly there.

Taking some moments of silence, my body relaxed a little. Slowly, I could sense something vague, like a halo next to me. I opened up to it with curiosity, and with the waiting knew that the halo encompassed others. I felt myself beginning to engage with something beyond, something broader and bigger. It gradually emerged into a more familiar feeling and I realized that I was spiritually reconnecting with a group of friends known to me from another life time. I recognized them and knew without a doubt that we had shared a life together. I could sense their happiness at our meeting, awakening and opening many things in me in one moment, sensing the essence that encompassed all our relationship, our experiences and the time we had together. Something from the vibe that had existed then was vivid in the here and

now, as if time had not passed. I had missed them very much.

The connection was there, we were all present in one space. It was so alive, the energy holding our shared history and relationship, our mutual knowing. Soon I began to hear them, many things passing between us in a matter of seconds, both messages and feelings. There was much excitement in the air. It was a reconnection and a reunion.

This moment held everything: memories of this group of people which I was part of, who together explored life, touched dimensions and did spiritual work for our community; memories of the atmosphere, the sounds, songs, the flavor of it. I recall a sense of togetherness, sustaining us all on a deep level.

The memory of the trauma was also there, and a sense of the loss. In one moment everything had been taken. A massacre had occurred in the village while I was far away on a mission. When I had returned, I saw the death, the destruction. I had lost everything I had: my home, my family and friends, my security. All this created a deep breach of faith, rupturing everything that I held dear. Everything I had believed and found meaning in before then, fell into the darkness of the trauma.

This was the first time I felt them directly and not only as something that I had sensed a deep

longing for, something that I had missed very much. They were so vividly present, giving me a feeling of connectedness. I was deeply moved, able to sense once again the union between all things, the togetherness. I was not alone.

With this meeting, I realized that nothing had ended. What became crystal clear is that, although I had remained stuck in the trauma, they were well beyond it. They had moved on, they were alive here and now with me on diverse levels. I felt a deep clarity regarding the continuum of being: the cycle of life and continuation. It was as if I was seeing the essence, a deep and broad knowing in one short moment. It was like holding the secret of life.

During all this, part of me was aware of the external reality: the participants entering the workshop room, which was now full. I realized I needed to go in. Afraid of being pulled into the trauma space that existed in that moment, I literally sent a request to distance myself and only be connected to the togetherness and the energy it brings. It was a direct asking to the beyond and it was granted. Relieved and more relaxed, I knew that 'they' would be with me in the workshop and I was grateful. I felt the sacredness of that morning.

Back in the room, I saw the Indian mask once again and it took on a different meaning: as a

symbol from that period, triggering all those memories in an implicit way. I could not lead the workshop with it standing in front of me, arousing excitement again and distracting me from being fully present. So, I chose to sit in a way that the mask was behind me, silently asking it to be my tail wind, to support me gently that day.

Unable to ignore the special energy surrounding us, I felt I had to share a part of what was happening inside me with the participants. It became part of our gathering that day, part of the workshop I was planning to lead, in a way that I could not grasp at the time. Taking courage, I shared with the group that 'friends of mine' from another period of life were here with us today to support our workshop. It was as if the universe had brought me a precise opportunity to dive into the expanded spiritual realm and to lead the workshop with a special awareness of this state. There was an experiencing of past, present and future in the here and now, sensed as existing together naturally. I invited the group to open themselves to the many dimensions, to the large space, a place where we can sense partnership on our journey. I asked them to be open to what will come.

As I started to lead the workshop, I became aware of the posture of my body, a pose known to

me but not a pose that I usually sit in. With my feet planted firmly on the ground, a straight but not rigid spine, this was a still and calm position where I was aligned with heaven and earth. When I sat in this position, I could sense the energy flowing through me, a greater connection to something beyond. Surrounded by windows exposing us to the trees and nature outside, the atmosphere was sacred.

During the workshop, one of the participants volunteered to do a demo process with me in front of the group. At a certain point, she began to hum. In the beginning it was like a low sound coming from deep within, which slowly evolved into something that sounded like a lamentation song. It was very moving and resonated with something familiar in me. The group and I were with her in a gentle way, while the pain she expressed moved and was released.

When the workshop ended, I met her again outside on the path. She shared with me that she had many memories from Native American life, meeting them each time in a new and different manner. Something that morning reconnected her with them once again. At that moment, I realized that the workshop, with everything that had occurred during it, was a reconnecting journey, not

only for me, but for her and, I believe, in some way for others too.

Later, while going home, many questions emerged regarding what had happened. I was tired but at the same time, full of energy. I needed a few days to process all the many levels of information and experience that had occurred, and to make meaning of them.

* * * * *

There are many precious moments when I directly sense a connectedness to the beyond. These are experiences of expansion, beyond boundaries, where past, present and future are One, holding infinite lives and wisdom. Over the years, through my spiritual and psychological journey, the capacity to connect to this realm has grown, opening me to the richness of being.

My awareness of the multi-dimensionality of life has expanded as memories of other lives began to reveal themselves to me. These memories have brought a sense that we are all part of a huge dynamic web, where not only does each thread hold unique individual qualities, but also embodies a continuum passing through infinite times and lives.

Within these alignments, I began to see how some processes that seemed to have stopped in one period of time, can move forward and continue when the right conditions exist or arise in another. From this observation, it became apparent to me that processes which were blocked, usually following a traumatic experience, want to reveal themselves and find new ways of continuation towards manifestation. It is as if the blocked part waits for the moment when it will have the right space and circumstances to move, generating itself forward to the next step.

In this chapter I will share some of my personal journey, but I feel it is not only mine, it represents the universal journey of us all. It is a process of reconnection to my deep essence and sense of belonging, to feeling at home in this universe. Through sharing, I will attempt to explore and make more explicit the many levels, layers and continuums of individual threads, how they meet and cross others in an organic web.

* * * * *

It took a year for me to realize that I was avoiding proposals to facilitate workshops connected to spirituality in therapy. Unable to ignore this avoidance any more, I began to wonder

what was behind it. There were two contradictory forces, a deep wanting to expand my work within the spiritual dimension and an immense resistance and fear of taking another step in this direction. The inner conflict and struggle became very tiring. I decided to explore what was happening inside me, and turned to a close colleague to accompany me in this process.

It was a bright sunny day and we met on the beach. We sat on the shore and something in the huge expanse of the sea, the sunlight sparkling on the water and the sound of the waves, created a supportive environment. In the beginning, I felt heaviness and fatigue, a desire to leave. There was a kind of resistance which I could sense but not really understand at that point. I felt my body contract as if a heavy weight was taking me down. Gradually, it unfolded that this place holds fear. I tried to stay with the sensation and to give it room.

After a while something started to shift. Beyond the heaviness another part of me slowly began pulling upwards, higher and higher giving me a bird's eye view, broader and wider. A new perspective was opening up. I was able to see the whole sea beneath me and beyond. Everything looked so clear and beautiful, with many interchanging shades of green and blue. I

remember my body absorbing it all, bringing a feeling of physical expansion and a deep breath.

From this state of consciousness something started to emerge, becoming more and more visible and present. I began to see the image of a young woman with dark hair. She was sitting in the corner of a room, her attention focused inwards. I was curiously drawn to her. Deep inside, I knew it was me from another time. Flooded with emotion, subtle pain and sadness began to unfold in me. I felt so close to her and at the same time so distant. Both of us were in a shared space, where past and present are one.

I tried to make eye contact with her but did not succeed. Her eyes were petrified, darting in panic to all sides, not seeing me as I was standing in front of her. I started to feel her horror and traumatic memories began to awaken and relive themselves inside me. Staying with the muffled sense in my body, with gentle attention 'the story' began to unfold.

It became clear that a window was opening for me to see what had happened then. Later, I would understand how it connects to the now.

The woman that I saw in front of me had worked within the spiritual realm and had a deep understanding of the universe, of how working with the energy of nature and herbs can heal

people. At that time, this practice was considered as threatening the order of things, especially when carried out by a young woman. Even though she lived in fear of the possible repercussions, particularly of being banished and sent away, she could not deny the knowledge she held and her destiny any more than she could deny herself.

This fear led her to isolate herself and to spend hours in nature where she felt safer and more at home. Most people found her behavior strange and would not allow themselves to be helped by her. They did not understand her practice and perceived her as an outsider.

What slowly evolved was that at a certain point everything changed. From a setting in nature, I now saw her in an enclosed space, imprisoned in cold walls, the limited light illuminating her gaunt face. She had been locked away in a mental institution and put in a straitjacket. Shocked, she felt helpless, alone and betrayed. Losing all she had, her world falling apart around her, she was lost in a sense of fear and despair. Confined physically, emotionally and spiritually, she was so traumatized that she lost her ability to see the big picture as she had previously. Her awareness contracted into the darkness of the trauma and the fear. Being distanced from nature and losing the freedom to be fully herself was like death for her.

Surprised by all this, and yet in some way not surprised at all, an insight emerged. The implicit memory of that time was now manifesting itself in my life as avoidance to taking another step in my spiritual practice and work. I held an implicit fear that I would be excluded by my colleagues and friends, considered strange and unprofessional. I was ultimately afraid that people would think that I am crazy.

I tried once again to connect with the young woman, but it was not possible. She was too deep inside her fear and terror, feeling very lonely and unsafe. It seemed like she was unaware even of my presence.

Zooming out, I could sense an inner movement between the experience of the terrified young woman to the spaciousness of my bird's eye view. Letting go, I met an expanded awareness where all is interconnected and undividable, holding the infinite space between then and now, a continuum where past and present exist in one moment, here and now. I could sense that something wanted to continue the development that had stopped long ago, to release the pain and fear. It was like a thread that had been cut, awaiting the right circumstances to continue its manifestation. I surrendered myself into the process and allowed it all to gently unfold.

It took some time until I felt the moment had come to stop, sensing the resting point in me like a wave gently arriving at the shore. I still felt a dull pain but also felt more at peace. I went back to the physical sensation of being at the beach, the warm sand, the sea, the sun stroking my body. I felt the need to ground myself. New insights were emerging into my awareness and I needed time to let them sink in.

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Many thoughts and contemplations arose as a result of this process. I found myself pondering about the way we carry within us so many experiences, people and knowing, and how they are manifested each time in such different yet similar ways. The idea that individual threads hold a continuing process within the woven fabric of the universe grasped me and offered new meaning.

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As time passed, this experience became more and more vague until it left my consciousness. I found myself teaching and giving workshops regarding spirit and psychotherapy in Israel and abroad. All seemed well but something in me, on a

subconscious level, was pushing me to the next step, to more direct and expanded ways of working with energy and spirit.

The field of Frequency Medicine reached me from a number of sources, till the moment I felt inside, for no logical reason, that I needed to learn it. I sensed that I had to be there. I did not yet know why.

Three to four hours into the first lesson, I began to feel back pain. I immediately sensed that it was connected to the studies, to working with energy in such a direct way. As the pain turned into spasms, it began to physically limit me. Struggling to ease the muscle contractions, I knew I had to meet what the pain was holding, and what my body was indicating to me. Although part of me wanted to leave, another part sensed the urgency and potential of healing present there.

On the second day I felt a resistance to going, but with a desire for resolution, I went. During that meeting, I had a deep session. In it, I felt a struggle within me, a big battle pulling in two directions, one, to leave the course, the other, to stay. My body trembled and the pain in my back got worse. I stayed in a state of presence with these two contradictions, feeling that this was the best I could do, observing what was happening.

A deep message began to emerge from my body, clear and sharp: *If I deepen and expand my work within the spiritual realm, giving it more space in my life, people will think that I am crazy.* As this became explicit, I once again met the woman in the straitjacket. Within an instant, I could sense her and the complexity of what had happened to her. I wondered how it had become implicit in my being, how it was embodied in my being now. I was aware once again of her fear and it raised an internal warning: *Do not enter the spiritual healing realm so deeply. Don't do it! You have a thriving clinic, you teach many students and therapists, you do not need it. You will lose everything you have! Just leave!*

I felt that I needed to choose where to go. Should I listen to this message, or stay and deal with the new step that the deep me wanted to reveal? I took a long breath and went with the need to meet my fears and heal myself from so many memories and experiences, to fully fulfill myself.

After a while, I managed to create a connection with her, something I had not succeeded in doing in our last meeting. Although so much time had gone by, she was still restrained in a straitjacket. It seemed like she was locked in frozen time although in linear time we were in another era. So many things had changed since then, but she was still there, trapped.

Our gaze met and a deep connection formed between us. My heart went out to her, sensing the vulnerability of us both, she and me, me and myself. Glancing at her with full concentration, I could see her dark eyes looking for something, somehow pleading for release. A question arose in me and I asked her gently: *What do you need to break free?* She answered immediately: *I need acknowledgment that I am not and never was crazy.* I was silent and somewhat surprised by her need. I felt the holiness of her request and the necessity to hold it within me with upmost respect. Another question arose in me and I asked her who she needed acknowledgment from, and she said: *From you. You are the only one who can give it.* I fell silent again, checking inside me whether I could. It took time, many things happened inside me and the question came: *Can I really say it to her?* I saw her fear but her eyes looked directly into me, reaching for my approval.

Diving deep into myself through layers of doubt and fears, I experienced the sense of encountering a deep truth. This woman was not crazy. She had been connected to the spiritual realm when people had not been open to this reality. Pausing, I allowed my body to absorb this new insight and sensed how all my cells relaxed and expanded. That was when I felt that I could tell

her this and recognize her huge knowing about life, energy, nature and healing. At that moment, I was not only acknowledging her, I was acknowledging myself.

Listening carefully to my words, she relaxed and I could see her physical exhaustion. I began to see how the straitjacket slowly loosened from her body. As she was no longer restrained, I asked her if she wanted my help to accompany her to a place of light far from the darkness of that period. She thanked me and I watched lovingly as she walked towards the light.

Not only had she shed her straitjacket in this process, I also felt that I had released something very significant too, expanding my sense of freedom and permission to be myself. We had both needed to meet each other to heal and release our limitations, and this enabled us to move forward. I felt inside me the interdependency that had existed within both of us.

Looking back, I understand that what came to light in this process is an implicit part of my belief system, apparently hidden but manifesting all the time in my daily language. I would often find myself jokingly saying things like: *I want to tell you something but you'll think I'm crazy!* This would happen when I was talking about things connected to the beyond. I now understand the root of these

sayings and how they are connected to another experience in another lifetime, something that I was not previously aware of, and it makes me smile.

I realize how much struggle has been held implicitly inside me, and this brings me deep peace and acceptance. I can acknowledge that, in a way, I have always been a little different and accept it with love.

From this softer and more open state, I am responding to the inner calling to expand my exploration and work with the many realms that exist, and to bring this to modern daily life through discovery and experiencing. I can sense how themes and beliefs connected to various life times are implicitly embedded in me, affecting my choices in this life time, and expressed through thinking, language and ways of living. It is as if there was a thread creating a continuum of my Self holding within it all that I have ever experienced from the beginning of all times and how it has affected me.

The fear of being different, misunderstood and excluded is continuing to manifest itself in new forms in this life. Like an implicit thread, it is revealed at moments when I challenge these embedded beliefs. At other times, it remains held in an inaccessible place.

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I was the first-born daughter of young parents, emotionally unprepared for my arrival. A tiny baby met her parents, who to a great extent were helpless, unable to contain difficulties. I recall the moment when I decided to comply, to be a good baby, sleep a lot, be quiet. I became a parental child, able to recognize others' needs and expectations, adapting myself in the best possible way at home, at school and with my friends. I was a lovable child, held dear by all. Through the ability to sense my surroundings and be empathic, I developed skills which would later come to light as a therapist.

However, something deeply basic was missing. On an emotional level, I lived in a beautiful suit perfectly adapted to my environment. I liked this suit and who I was able to be in it, whilst at the same time often feeling disconnected from myself, unable to sense a wide range of emotions, longing to feel, touch, be connected, but not knowing how. I wanted to express myself but could not find the words. Looking back, I can see how this suit and everything it represented allowed me to develop but also restrained me, just as the straitjacket had done in another life.

On a spiritual level, I felt like I had chosen parents who would protect me from being different. Through them I learned to play the game by the rules and be socially acceptable. I had an active social life and doors were open to me in most areas, but inside I felt alone, not connected and different. I was unable to share the many things that I saw and understood with the people around me, feeling that I do not have a safe place to just be me. I was caged.

Endeavoring to make sense of all this, what came to me was that all these experiences have created belief systems and patterns of behavior, some held in awareness and some beyond. I can see this like a kind of inner structure, embedded in the body. Although invisible, these constructions have shaped me, the way I live, make decisions, experience things. Like building constructions, they bring stability, order and a sense of safety, but at the same time limitations.

This understanding brought curiosity and a wanting to go deeper in an experiential way. I invited a good friend to accompany me in a process of deep inquiry. During this meeting, I allowed myself to slowly sense these constructions in my body. For the first time, I could meet them from a wider perspective not connected to a specific story, but in and of themselves. Zooming out in curious

observation and acceptance, I could be with them in a friendly way and this brought a little relaxation.

After a while, something began to move. I felt that structures created over the years, throughout different life times, constructions of protection and beliefs, began to change and my soul was granted a freer space to be. It was as if my body had been bound and tied in invisible rope which gradually began to loosen.

I felt a lightness and through it I could sense the heavy weight that I had unknowingly carried. I was glad for this relief and the new level of freedom that came to me. I allowed it to fill me with gentle happiness and found myself more at ease.

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A couple of weeks later, I realized that waves of anger were emerging. An inner anger for all those years of encagement: angry at myself for choosing to be so adaptable at the cost of self-expression, up to the point where I no longer knew how to express myself and was silent; anger at my parents for their weakness and inability to contain my power, my complexity, my unique colors.

When I looked deep inside me, it gradually became apparent that underneath the anger there

was sadness and a sense of loss. It was hard to meet these things but at the same time it brought some relief and inner peace. I managed to contain these feelings and with that holding, questions arose: *Can I forgive? Can I forgive myself for all the years of limitation within these constructions? Can I forgive my parents for not being strong enough for me?* I stayed with these questions and waited.

It took time, but something started to move. Pain arose. Pain mixed with anger and sadness and acknowledgment of the past. I could sense it in each and every one of my cells, cells that were entrapped and wanted to live. I agreed to be with this.

After a while, I sensed that the option of forgiveness was becoming a possibility. First, forgiveness to myself, a small child with big fears, who found a way to survive and feel safe. I could feel deep empathy towards this child and it brought a kind of gentle quality inside me. A new insight came and I could see how my engagement and self-development had co-existed in undivided dependence as one complete process. Without all that, this could not be. My whole life spread before me and I acknowledged it.

A little later, not immediately, I felt that I could forgive my parents: forgive them for being so young and insecure; forgive them that to this day they are still afraid of life. I realized that their

intentions were good, that they did the best they could. Something shifted in me, I felt relief accompanied by tiredness. This inner process had come to a resting point. I took some time to digest what had happened.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, I sensed a huge opening. It was as if my vision had become holographic and at the same time I was part of this hologram. I held an awareness of the interconnection of generations, periods of time, the many threads that cross each other, individual and communal. I could sense the huge dynamic quality of the infinite elements that are the universe. I sensed the Oneness.

I saw my parents and myself, and countless people from different places and periods of time, all of us participating together in a journey of life. I could see the endless life times and experiences that each of my parents brought, and understand that all this is an integral part of a journey that has no start, middle or end. I could sense an understanding that I chose them exactly as they had chosen me, to take another step in the big life process.

In a flash of clarity, I saw a multi-dimensional picture of life. Like a kaleidoscope in constant movement, reflecting infinite holograms of reincarnation and times, meetings and contracts,

floating within themselves. Frequencies and colors, universes and cultures embedded in one moment. The sense of Oneness was real in my body, I could physically feel it, I was One with all this.

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The deep knowing of all this gave me a glimpse of our shared journey. Each relationship and each crossing holds endless movement, thought, experience and expression influencing the whole. All is inter-affected and interdependent in a precise way.

When this deep understanding reveals itself, I can rest. My heart fills with happiness, and slowly my heartbeat becomes more than physical. I can sense the pulse of the universe, the pulse of life. I can hold the infinite periods, experiences and processes, the known and the unknown. I feel a part of the big Universe, I feel I have a home. I feel at home.

* * * * *

Six months later

Since finishing this chapter, two very dramatic events have occurred in my life, pushing me to go further. In both events I directly and experientially met the fragility of life and how it can end at any moment.

In the first case, I found myself losing inner connection with my essence and could not sense interconnection to the wider universe. I lost my faith and sense of security in the wider mesh, losing my sense of support and meaning. There was a sensation of stiffness and contraction. I found myself diving into a cold nothingness, unable to sense any order. Big questions regarding existence and life emerged. During this time, any attempt to leave this place was like sliding on a wall with no anchors to hold. It took almost two months of deep inner inquiry to find the way back to reconnection with myself and then to something broader and more meaningful, beginning to breathe within it.

During the next traumatic event, I found myself moving between two sensations: expansion and contraction. At the moment of trauma, I felt held and collected within my center, feeling protected and guarded by something beyond, connected to a broader existence that sustained me. A few seconds later when my mind realized what

had happened, I felt panic approaching, contracting me. I found myself falling into a field of fear and trauma, feeling helpless and not in control.

The sense of not being alone at the core of this event was immensely meaningful, and a significant part of the healing process, helping me to deal with the symptoms, the fear and the pain. Through this process, my connection to the beyond was deepening and expanding, and I realized that this event was pushing me to take further steps on my spiritual path.

What is it in traumatic moments that enables connectedness to something broader, when the survival nature of the body is to contract? What is it that happens on other occasions, when during the traumatic event the sensation of connectedness to a wider universe collapses, remaining only as a vague memory in the darkness of the loneliness? Can it be that many experiences of connectedness to the wider universe result in building up an accessible resource for the body in times of crisis?

Observing these experiences of expansion and contraction as natural movements, as a whole and undivided process, brings to me a sense of peacefulness. It is like an acceptance of the rhythm of life.

I am now putting an end to the process of writing this chapter, feeling that this ending is a

meaningful station on my journey. From a wider perspective, I can see it as one of many points along the way. Like a frame in an infinite movie, it is a specific frame in a chain of infinite frames that were and will be. Each moment that I pause to write is like a pause in a rhythmic multidimensional continuum. It is this picture that can now become clear to me. It is a resting point for observation and processing. It is part of my next step.

About the author

Ifat Eckstein says:

With more than 20 years experience of working as a couple & family therapist, for the last 10 years I enjoy bringing the world of Focusing Oriented Therapy to the therapeutic space, giving workshops, teaching various courses and coordinating workshops.

My desire is to bring an awareness of our interconnectedness through the felt sense, to bring back our sense of Oneness, our shared journey in this life. This process involves writing as a channel of expression. Through it I explore and try to find ways to bring this expanded perspective to daily life, to bring us back to our natural roots.

To all these endeavors I bring experience and insight from couple and family therapy, group leading and teaching, my meetings with patients and colleagues. Inspired by the worlds of Judaism, Buddhism, the philosophy behind Focusing, Indigenous traditions and more, my personal journey and professional work is nourished and enriched.

Cracked Open

Embracing my humanity
as a path to embodied spirituality

Inge Sengelmann

We sit around the breakfast table inside a beautiful log home, surrounded by the foothills of the Colorado Rockies, my husband at one end, I at the other, and my parents on opposite sides. My father, all-white hair and with a shaky voice, begins to read his morning devotional out loud.

Oh, no, I think, here we go again. Along with the thoughts, I feel a slight constriction begin to squeeze my entire digestive tract from throat to perineum. It's as if I'm being force-fed something distasteful and my body wants to reject it. But I don't want conflict. I have promised myself that this visit will be different. I want to be unconditionally loving, nurturing, and compassionate. Arguing with my father about religious beliefs will not achieve that. But do I have to swallow my truth and not speak my words to keep the peace? I long to be more fully authentic in all my interactions, and pretending to agree with others to avoid conflict leaves me feeling half-dead and not fully alive.

My mother, whose body I have inherited to the receding vertebra in the middle of our backs, sits silently in her usual disengaged and disconnected state, pawing away at her iPad like a cat on a scratching pole. *I'm not hungry*, she'll say after not eating for hours. *I'm not cold*, she'll respond when I offer her a jacket at the top of Mt. Evans where the

temperature with the wind-chill factor is six degrees. My viscera churn like a washing machine on a high spin cycle. There's a mild nausea with a hint of rage threatening to erupt. I recognize the feeling as one I must have felt as an infant reacting to her post-partum depression neglect. *You were a terrible baby*, she was fond of saying to me as a way of explaining her failure to comfort me when I was an infant, and her disgust with me when I failed to soothe myself.

As I observe my reaction, I am not surprised by all of the digestive metaphors: being force-fed, rejecting what is distasteful, swallowing truth, visceral churning, and mild nausea. It is no coincidence that I developed anorexia and bulimia by the age of thirteen, symptoms that were to last twenty-five years until I found a way to embody my life. Now symptom-free and fully recovered, my goal is to open completely to each experience so it can be digested and, nervous system in balance, I can respond appropriately in the moment rather than react to these ancient triggers.

As the nausea settles and my digestive tract relaxes once again, I look around. My husband is a great resource. He does not share a history with them, so he speaks up, voicing his opinion. I feel his strength backing me up, so I voice mine.

“Dad, you don’t have to worry about the state of my soul,” I tell him. He is concerned that we do not believe in original sin or the presence of the devil in the world. He argues that we have to acknowledge that we are damaged, stained, inherently evil and hopeless unless we profess a belief that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins, and that we can only be “cleansed” by that blood. We confess to a belief that we are pure, limitless beings, infinitely good in our truest essence, one with divinity, parted from this awareness only by a false sense of separation.

Caught between my longing to be myself and the pressure to submit to beliefs and restrictions imposed by others, I feel the constriction again, now in my extremities. I am going into a fight response. I am not doing it, but I feel the impulse to clench and unclench my fists and pounce with all the power in my backside.

“Dad, if you believe you are saved by Jesus, why are you so afraid all the time?”

Oh, what am I doing? Unwilling to fight, I now feel the impulse to flee. Automatically, without thinking, I get up from my chair, feeling the ire rise to my head and out my ears. Rather than stomp off, I stop, turn around and grasp the backrest. I don’t want to hurt him, but I want to challenge him. I want to tell him what I believe.

“I believe Jesus was the example, rather than the exception,” I tell him. “He said we could all be like him and do even greater things than he did. I believe in practicing what he preached, rather than preaching to others to believe in a conceptual Jesus.”

Even as I say that, I realize that I must move beyond words, and beyond concepts. To practice the love that Jesus taught, I have to stop trying to be understood and try to understand.

I come back into my body, take a few deep breaths, shudder and shake out of my combative stance, and take a deeper look with the eyes of my heart, not my mind. *Turn the other cheek*, Jesus said, which I interpret to mean that I must return attacks with an energy of love and compassion.

My mother has moved away from the table. She is now frenetically washing and drying dishes, reorganizing the cupboards, and generally banging around to avoid getting involved in the discussion. Her jaw is set tight, so I know she’s clamping down on her own words. She’s learned through the years that I get angry and withdraw if she becomes critical, and she’s taken her silence to an extreme, shutting me out most of the time.

My father’s jaw is not clenched. It is making rapid chewing motions because I’ve hit a nerve. He has an urge to respond but is not sure what his next

argument should be. He knows he's chronically anxious, and that his professed faith seems to have little effect on his preoccupations with his health or the safety of his family members. He sees danger where there is none, and carries a concealed weapon in his car from an arsenal of guns and assault rifles he keeps under lock and key at their home in Miami.

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Observing them keenly, in the present moment, something unlocks in my heart. It begins as a sharp sting, the sword of truth cracking the armor that had closed me up, gripping my heart in a tight fist. My heart begins to expand, slowly, and with some trepidation. If I'm not cautious, I might just begin to weep. I see their age and their vulnerability. They have not had the fortune I have had to heal from psychic wounds. I have worked with amazing healers and trained under some great masters for the past twenty-five years.

I see their suffering, how it has informed their spiritual belief system, and why it brings them comfort.

My mother experienced significant trauma in early life, from birth through childhood and into adulthood. She was born to an alcoholic father whose political activities against the first Somoza dictator got him killed when she was nine, and a

helpless, dependent mother who could do nothing to help her, she learned to dissociate at an early age to disconnect from her pain. Of course she would gain immense comfort from the idea that we are living in the “end of times” and Jesus will soon return to take her up in the rapture. She *wants* to leave this embodied plane, and the sooner the better. She *already* lives somewhere other than in her body and on this planet, so the idea that she can soon go to this place called paradise, where the pain of living cannot touch her, makes perfect sense.

My father’s life was impacted by the inter-generational trauma of war. Born in Nicaragua of German parents who escaped the aftermath of World War I, his cells must have carried their war trauma, only to be faced with the Nicaraguan civil war of the 1970s, when he had to create an arsenal of guns to defend his family and his home. When he couldn’t do that anymore, he had to flee into exile to the United States, losing everything. Of course he can’t feel safe and fears that without guns he will not be able to protect what he has left. His political and religious conservatism is a fear-based attempt to establish order and predictability.

Without the embodied feedback of my felt sense, I would have been stuck in theoretical concepts of compassion. I would have swallowed my own body sensations as a bitter tonic and

created a façade of saintliness that was nothing but a mask. Still standing behind my chair, I recall the words of Pema Chödrön, “compassion requires fierce courage.”

*It requires fierce courage, and a strong nervous system,* I think to myself. Compassion requires me to truly see, feel and take in the suffering of others and metabolize it in the pool of love in my heart so I can return a soothing balm of comfort to them. Compassion requires embodied self-awareness.

“Dad, I think we all want the same thing,” I say. “We all want to be happy, and we all want to be at peace. Maybe we just have different words to explain the same thing. Let’s not let language confuse us and create discord.”

My husband offers his own words to find commonality and bridge the gap between us.

“Peter, perhaps what you mean by sin is what I call selfishness,” he says. “I believe it is our selfish tendencies that separate us from living our faith.”

Feeling understood seems to relax my father. He heaves a sigh of relief and his defenses drop. My mother dries her hand on the kitchen towel and rejoins us. We have now moved beyond language and concepts and are speaking a silent language that unites us in a common goal, which is connection.

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Disembodied, I would not have taken notice of the constrictions that arose in me and sent me into a fight-flight response. Embodied, I became aware of those energies and of channeling them appropriately to create new possibilities for connection with myself and with others. Disembodied, I remained mired in mental, abstract, moral “shoulds” instead of allowing the natural, organic flow that embodied awareness affords me. Disembodied, I could not know my body, my ego, my personality, my Self. Embodied, I can be open to everything, including preferences and aversions because my body can balance those rhythms. Disembodied, I was lost to myself. Embodied, I am found, infused with the grace of a life-force that eluded me for half a lifetime.

This is what spirituality has come to mean to me. It is a way of being, rather than something I believe in or talk about. I would venture to say that there are no words to explain a lived experience. Words are limiting. Language gives us a context for communication and mutual understanding, but the minute I get caught up in words, I lose the experience of lived reality, as it is, moment-to-moment, in the body. This is how I have found my “salvation,” as an internal process of experiencing and being my authentic, essential self, rather than

by conforming to externally imposed ideas. My spirituality is a lived experience. It is embodied.

Living in my body opens me up to receive the fullness of life riding on the breath. Thinking, talking and explaining blocks me to that fullness, in a visceral, cellular way, as if my skin becomes too tight. I cannot seem to talk and breathe at the same time. It is no surprise that I have landed in a spiritual tradition that considers the body a sacred temple for the divine and the gateway to spiritual experience.

But I cannot discuss this with my parents. It would shock and alarm them and create only more distance between us. I cannot tell them how the previous February, listening to my teacher speak about Sri Vidya, my heart cracked open and I could not contain my tears as life itself flooded me.

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*I am going to tell you about Sri Vidya.* We were sitting on our yoga mats and meditation cushions in a large open room flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows facing the frozen Minneapolis tundra outside when he uttered those words and I felt my heart flutter and leap. The snow was several feet high on the golf course outside. It had been nineteen below zero for three nights in a row and the temperature had not risen above freezing since my arrival.

I am a long way from Managua, where I was born in 1961 to my icy but stable German father and a mother as volatile as the land of lakes and volcanos that is Nicaragua. Fertile with creativity yet fiercely destructive, my mother's silence was as cutting as her words and her five-foot stature projected a seven-foot shadow that trapped me in a suffocating grip.

The Nicaraguan civil war raged as I entered into adolescence, an outward extension of the war within my family and my endless battle for the right to take up space, to breathe my own air, to exist without having to compromise my authenticity to fit a mold and be accepted. War, external and internal, ripped apart everything that held me together in one piece.

My attempts at creating order out of the chaos of my youth gave way to a rigid perfectionism that left no room for error. I longed for a sense of permanence, solidity, and identity, for some semblance of meaning and belonging in the midst of the social, cultural and political upheaval that framed my upbringing. The Russian missile crisis, the Bay of Pigs invasion, JFK's and Martin Luther King's assassinations, the Vietnam War, protest marches and the anti-war movement, the sexual revolution, the birth of feminism, the death of racist structures, transcendental meditation, LSD and

psilocybin psychedelic explorations into altered states of consciousness, peace, love, Rock & Roll and flights to the moon. This was the backdrop of my formative years.

Yogarupa, as we call our spiritual teacher, continued to speak, and not without hesitation. *Perhaps I shouldn't be speaking about this*, he laughed, vacillating because the audio system had cut out three times since he began his talk. Sri Vidya being an ancient Tantric lineage from the Himalayas, a wisdom that was hidden for eons, he paused to assess if the audio difficulties were a message from the ethers to maintain its secrecy.

My heart cried out, *please don't stop!* My yearning to know and experience this spiritual tradition feels urgent. It is a perspective that views the creative impulse that generated the very universe we inhabit as a feminine force, a Divine Mother, and the human body as Her seat. For most of my life I had viewed my body only as a source of suffering, a fleshly prison of tissues and bone to be bypassed through any means available – alcohol, drugs, food, sex, suicide, and yes, even transcendental meditation and all forms of disembodied spirituality.

Sri Vidya literally means auspicious wisdom, or supreme knowledge, the knowledge of the Self, and its goal is to lead us to a direct experience of

ourselves as “a wave of beauty and bliss arising from the ocean of pure consciousness.” Sri Vidya is devoted to the Divine Mother, the divine feminine principle which is seen as the cause of all creation. She is pure consciousness. She is the absolute, non-dual, ultimate reality in which the appearing dual manifestation of Shiva (masculine force) and Shakti (feminine force) only look as if they dance as separate entities but are always one and the same.

As I hear commentary on sacred texts describing these elusive, powerful, divine ideas, I am comforted. Finally, there is an explanation to the questions that plagued me since that day in kindergarten when I wondered why it was so bad that Eve wanted to have the knowledge of good and evil, since I questioned why God was only known as Father while Mother took a subservient role, since I made my first attempts to understand the story of Genesis when God created us “male and female” in God’s own image. More importantly, I am comforted because I can experience myself as waves of bliss and delight, instead of experiencing my humanity as a “vale of tears,” and my body as a prison to be escaped.

In “The Transformative Power of the Goddesses of Yoga,” Sally Kempton, a writer teacher of contemplative Tantrika, tells us that “the divine feminine has a thousand names and a



thousand moods, but when she chooses to show up for you, she very often shows up as ecstasy." She also reminds us that "without Her presence, Shiva cannot act in the world." Shakti is the innate power in reality to be conscious, to know, and to create, and in the Tantric tradition, all of reality is her expression. She nudges us to evolve our consciousness. She is our hope to create a new reality.

In the Christian book of Revelation, "a new heaven and a new earth" come into existence and are described as "a bride beautifully dressed." She is "God's dwelling place," She is us, we are Her. And, the book tells us, when this happens, "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Because Tantra is basically a set of teachings and practices to help us embody this divine Shakti, it is essentially a Goddess path. She describes the creative surge of Shakti and how the Tantrics view Shakti as having disguised herself by "disappearing into the tapestry" of creation. She is the force of life in all things, the power behind the breath, She Who Supports the World. In other words, consciousness and matter, spirituality and body, all of the manifestations of duality, are equally important and one and the same.

Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, PhD, head of the Himalayan Institute, says that in the Sri Vidya tradition, “the body is a living shrine, and every force in the universe is contained within.”

As Yogarupa continued to teach the elemental aspects of this oral tradition, whose transmission from teacher to student has been unbroken for many thousands of years, the energy that had moved within my heart burst, as a dam that is cracked and floods every arid inch of land in its path. This is liberation. The dam was the cement of protection I unconsciously built around my true self, dare I call it my soul. I was the arid land now flooded with life and on the verge of becoming fertile with creativity.

My tears flowed without restraint, tears that spoke to the endless gratitude I feel to be alive and to have survived the strange compulsion to die that I seemed to have been born with.

*I am here! My soul exclaimed. I am alive!*

In that moment, a continuous string of memories flowed with the flood of tears, like black pearls knotted together with soft string: the early years of insomnia and night terrors, the later years of seeking to end my life through alcohol and drug abuse, the starvation and bulimia that decimated my body, the first time I wanted to kill myself at fifteen after my parents discovered I’d had sex with

a twenty-one-year-old man and blamed me for it, the last time I planned a suicide at age thirty because my boyfriend was threatening to leave me, the abusive marriage that I narrowly escaped with my life, my cancer diagnosis and the months of grueling chemotherapy, and the time my mother threatened to cut me into sixty-four pieces, which might explain the subtle lines that scar my forearms as clear reminders of my self-loathing.

Concurrently, as diamonds illuminating the darkness of these black pearls of experience, I remembered the time I experienced oneness with all of life in our backyard at the age of thirteen after meditating on a mantra for thirty minutes, the prayer groups and bible studies I sought out to find solace from my suffering, the Native-American sweat lodges and Kirtan chanting and crystal bowl meditations that I pursued through the years in order to survive my own self-hatred, the bolt of lightning that shot through me the day I begged to be relieved of my compulsion to drink, the warmth that flooded me when I asked the universe to comfort me after a miscarriage.

What sustains me? Knowing that experiencing the pain of living won't kill me. Instead, it will crack open the shell that impedes my connection to the fullness of life, love, compassion, joy and

wholeness, just as sun, dirt and water crack open a seed so it can give way to a magnificent flower.

Flashes of images weaved together the fragments of my life into a cohesive whole, like a patchwork quilt whose individual patches of fabric become a tapestry filled with meaning. It is the double-helix of duality joining into non-duality. This sustains me.

As the snow continued to fall outside on that winter day in Minneapolis, tears still streaming down my face, along the sides of my neck, through my collar bones, and in between my breasts, the irony that somehow, through no design of my own, I have landed in a spiritual tradition that worships the feminine divine is not lost on me, whose mother's perceived rejection nearly snuffed the life out of me. Uncomfortable in my own skin, I spent half my life trying to escape the places I felt I did not belong – my country, my family, my very own body.

*I am here!* My soul sings, recognizing the winding road to returning, or arriving for the first time, to a sense of belonging in my body. *I am alive!*

Having waged the war between my impulse to live and my longing to die, I have embraced an existence I once condemned, and a body I once despised. A long way from where I was born, I am home. I survived my curious and cunning

compulsion to die long enough to comfortably take up residence in my skin, in this life, in this world.

The choices I made have helped me embrace life as an embodied being and stop wishing for death as the only means to reclaim my divine nature. One can say that I “hallowed this life,” in the words of the twentieth-century philosopher Martin Buber. I stopped living in the delusion that life in this world created a separation between me and Spirit, ripping my Soul from its divine connection as if flesh and bone were a prison that removed me from my blissful nature. I can be blissful as an embodied being, provided I am willing to experience everything, including the animalistic survival emotions of fear, anger, rage, sorrow, grief and everything we so often consider incompatible with the mask of saintliness.

At three, I delighted in foraging for wild strawberries in my great-grandmother’s garden. At fifty-two, I delight in foraging for wild raspberries in the front range of the Colorado Rockies. I’ve stopped warring with my body’s hungers, and I honor my body as a temple of my Soul. I do not compromise the health of my body, or the integrity of my Soul, to weigh a certain number, or to wear a particular size of jeans. I dedicate myself to using my experience to help those who want to, as

desperately as I did, to liberate themselves from the chains of the prison of conditioning.

My entire life's journey--walking through "the valley of the shadow of death," the fear and terror of multiple traumatic experiences, the descent into the pit of addictions and self-destruction, the torturous, labyrinthine ascent back to the light--all of it has been purposeful and meaningful, *all of it* has contributed to my ability to sit with and embrace others -- including my parents -- with compassion.

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Back where we started at the beginning of this essay, I take another clear look at my parents. They do not know that bliss in this lifetime is possible. They do not know the wave of light they truly are in their most essential nature. My goal is to look beyond abstract concepts and incorrect appearances and see them as they truly are. In my Colorado kitchen, I cannot and will not explain my spiritual beliefs, experiences and practices to these aging parents. I do not need shock them or to argue about who is right and who is wrong. I do not need them to understand me. It is sufficient that I understand their fears and their suffering, as well as their comfort in their beliefs. It is enough to allow the flourishing of love and connection between us to organically unfold, as it will, when we are fully

human. Instead of talking, I embody this love flowing from my heart, and I simply hug them. In this embrace, they soften.

About the author

Inge Sengelmann is a clinical psychotherapist licensed in Florida and Colorado, a Somatic Experiencing® Practitioner, and a registered yoga teacher focusing her practice on the treatment of traumatic stress and eating disorders. She considers herself a mind-body-spirit specialist who believes in the power of creative choice and conscious embodiment. Weaving ancient and modern wisdom, Inge integrates the latest developments in the field of neuroscience with yoga practices to help people embody their lives in a fulfilling way. She was a founding member of Miami's first intensively-trained Dialectical Behavior Therapy consultation team. Inge has completed a ParaYoga Master Training and has been initiated into the Himalayan Tantric lineage of Sri Vidya. She has taught workshops locally, nationally and internationally on the topic of eating disorders, somatic psychotherapy, and integrative mind-body-spirit healing, and is writing a book about embodiment as a path to healing from eating disorders and trauma.

The Space Between

Jill van der Aa-Shand

Sadly our ability to harm and mutilate one another has kept pace with our extraordinary economic and scientific progress. We seem to lack the wisdom to hold our aggression in check and keep it within safe and appropriate bounds.

From the Introduction to *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong, 2006

I no longer practice as a psychotherapist. I am 'retired' and live with my husband in a quiet town, Valkenburg, in the south of the Netherlands.

I have a voluntary board function so spend a lot of time sitting at the computer, where I am now, day in, day out, emailing and skyping, thinking, and tapping away at my keyboard. Otherwise I am in my garden, taking note of the cycles of the seasons, tilling the ground, planting seeds, weeding, and enjoying the fruits of my labours.

I am happy with this existence. Nothing much more to say!

Except that some time ago my internal volcano erupted unexpectedly, and without warning, over a rather trivial issue. I was at the gym, had done my forty minutes aerobic exercise, worked on a few machines and just wanted to finish off with an exercise machine I hadn't used, before returning home for my morning cup of coffee.

Sitting on, and standing around, the machines, including the one which I had thought of using, was a group of 6-8 young adolescent girls – as I suddenly perceived – doing nothing but 'hogging' the machines, looking vague, one or two playing with their smart phones, others just staring vaguely. I lost it! My blood pressure rose and before I could stop myself (just a fraction of a second of hesitation) I yelled at the young ladies. "Why are

you sitting around doing nothing when people want to use these machines?"

They said nothing, just stared insolently.

Before the volcano could explode completely and do any physical damage my, 'Oh so reasonable self', decided to make a quick exit to the changing rooms. I felt a wave of shame – a burning feeling spreading over my face, tension in my breathing, a little shaky all over. I sat still saying to myself, "Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out". I splashed cold water over my face and hurriedly dressed feeling myself calm down – a little.

My, Oh so reasonable self popped her head up again. "You speak Dutch with an intolerable accent and impossible grammar and not even the local dialect that they are used to. They probably didn't understand a thing you said. Perhaps they were just aware that there was a bulldog barking at them – you can look rather frightening when you are in a rage! Perhaps you should be graceful and apologize. After all, you are an adult and they are still children!"

I collected my bags and coat and went out to find them sitting around another set of machines. They indeed looked so young and another wave of shame came over me. "How could I have yelled at them? They can't help it."

So, feeling a little regretful, I took my courage in hand, approached them again and apologized, trying to smile pleasantly. However the anger was still bunching up around my shoulders and chest - there was no opening to relaxation or warmth; I could feel the stiffness in my face and it all came out rather abruptly.

As I sit here now I can feel the shame again. I can feel a few tears welling up, tears of compassion perhaps? Firstly, compassion for myself. So, I yelled a little! Yes, I find it painful to see young women so uninterested in life, so closed off! This is what I felt at that age, confused, cut off, wanting so much, and angry at the world because everything feels beyond reach. And secondly for these young girls: I had wanted so much to say to them, "I have been there, I know what it feels like. Take this opportunity being offered to you! So many young people have nothing. But you have! Grasp life now while you are still young."

There is a lot of intensity in these moments. I want to not just focus on the ideas and intense feelings, and pay attention to the experience itself: The eruption of my anger, the tightness of my chest and back, my neck becoming stiff and my jaw chewing away. I often get the image of being in a glass cage, not being able to hear anything, banging on the glass, trying to cry out, feeling asphyxiated,

my thoughts going around in circles, getting jumbled or becoming woolly and passing into a state of numbness. The world outside fades away - there is no possibility of communication.

As I stay with the experience itself, not just the ideas, the tears come and I can feel a softening; I move into a more authentic state where I not only feel the anger and shame but can also allow the feelings of loneliness and isolation to surface, out of which, like a flower coming into bloom, my heart opens up. I can feel the warmth flowing through my body; I can feel compassion with myself and for the little girl inside of me who is so keenly trying to reach out, longing to be heard, feeling choked up inside her glass cage, unnoticed by the outside world.

Still shaken by this experience, I described it to a friend. I did so with some trepidation: Was I showing that I had been incoherent and out of step and revealed a darker, less worthwhile, side of myself, when what was needed was a positive attitude towards the world? But my friend said: "It sounds as if you got to the stage of being in harmony, as if, you were lost and now you are found". That felt good and I felt grateful and could rest a little from the fear of being ostracized for my bad, inappropriate behaviour over such a trivial incident!

When these volcanic eruptions occur I see a lot of my personal history pass the review. In the context of what I am writing the details are not so relevant except to note that these experiences give me, each time again, an opportunity to bring aspects of my past and my family relationships into perspective – each time I get a little more depth of understanding. Sometimes it feels so hard, this inner war, I feel torn by all these conflicting emotions, but I console myself that even at 70 I have the possibility of changing the way I react in my present life. I trust that I can still grow, become more flexible and can still make a contribution!

But - enter from the wings my inner critic. “You are 70, are you still busy with all these things? Get over it! You are like a child with your red cheeks and shame and tears, your self pity, your continuing to work on yourself.”

Indeed, I have a very strong critic in me. I have to say – mostly I like her a lot – she is sharp and funny and warm and intelligent – but sometimes she takes the high road and there is no talking with her, no dialoguing, absolutely no warmth, absolutely no way out. I have such faith in my inner critic that sometimes it takes quite some effort to “push” her off the stage. In fact pushing doesn’t do it. I have to sit down and have a talk with her, get a little dialogue going, create a little contact when I

can suggest that it is OK to go a little easily, to leave things to others sometimes, be lazy and not always to have the answers. She/I actually feel(s) quite good with the idea that I can ask her to stand aside and not take all the decisions on her own shoulders. I say to her, "I hear you – you have a good point and perhaps together we can look at a step by step process to reach the goal or perhaps we can adjust our expectations." We take time for an inner dialogue to reflect, to share our loneliness, to connect again to each other, and to the heart content.

It is my anger that hides my loneliness – the feeling of being unloved, unheard. But I am loved and can love, and I can hear and am heard. And this is what I continually need to connect to.

At the age of two when I crawled through the hedge to the neighbours' place I found a family where father worked repairing roads and mother stayed at home and cleaned. My parents were professionals who were smitten by their work and my siblings were away at boarding school. I attached myself like a clam to their two year old, Joan, and for the next nine years would not let go. Joan was my twin and had to go everywhere with me, to do everything with me and I was there with her mother, cleaning, doing the washing, milking the cow, making butter - I was there at their kitchen

table till dusk when I was called back home by my pregnant nanny. When we moved house eight years later I was devastated to lose Joan, but in the meantime I had a place in myself where I had learnt to laugh and love and not to judge, where I was seen and heard as myself.

Just a few months ago (now 60 years later) Joan's mother died. I spoke to Joan, our two villages a world away, and heard with an enormous shock of recognition right down to the tips of my toes, that warm and wonderful sense of humour that she and her Mother had. This recognition of each other in my core has such momentous power to dispel the loneliness, the numbness, the frustrations of daily life or the horror of death, which always seems to be coming closer.

Throughout my life I have always had a community of people around me that I have cared deeply for, with whom I have shared my life. As I reflect on how much my husband means to me, I think also of those family members, old school friends, girlfriends, colleagues that have walked along the years with me, been part of my life. It creates an indescribable feeling of joy when I talk to my siblings on the phone and once again recognize them as part of me, not separate and antagonistic, just an accurate reflection, people who love me for who I am not what I am – my family!

There have been times when I have rejected this contact. When I left my protestant girl's boarding school for University I was happy to distance myself from my classmates. They were all going on to marry and have children, to work on the farms – I was destined for other places. Years later when I was contacted because one of them was very sick and subsequently died, I was surprised at how so many of them had stuck together and supported each other through the years. They were there at each other's weddings, children's births, divorces, accidents, sicknesses and now funerals. This seemed such a rich, warm history that I had excluded myself from by emigrating. Five years at a boarding school makes these women as much family as my own sisters and brother – we know each other inside out, which is wonderfully satisfying; when I reach the milestone of 40 then 50, 60 and 70 the others are going through the same phases and these are celebrations rather than losses. We can laugh together about wrinkles, extra weight and getting old. It makes me feel humble – I feel part of a rich tapestry – a thread in the great weave of life. In fact I feel part of many tapestries – networks that I connect in with, work with, support and feel supported by. When I get stuck and forget that I am loved and get stuck in the extremes of

emotion, they gently bring me out of my lonely glass cage.

My inner world needs space to navigate moment by moment between these conflicting extremes within me. The space in-between is a place where I can reflect more comfortably but also where I can revert to delightfully childish habits – I can allow myself to play, banging away with my emotional pots and pans on the floor like a two year old.

The two year old loves to laugh. I was considering calling this piece of writing 'A drama in five acts'. With the advantage of a little time it became, 'A comedy in five acts'. Now I can chuckle away gently at myself and take in both the drama and the comedy, without feeling I have to label my experience as such!

Although I do like the image of myself as a bulldog, I know that when I am happy I look more like a little puppy. I am an expert in exaggeration and if I could draw, I would rework the gym scene into a cartoon – such a great way of pointing up the ridiculousness of some of the extremes I hang onto. I exaggerate, I act out, but in doing so I feel the extremes, can somehow reunite the opposites within me and get things more in perspective.

When a situation gets a little heavy and a little lightness feels appropriate I like to use my sense of

humour to take the sting out. As a child my humour was a defence mechanism, and I was the family clown, as an adolescent it became self-destructive and nihilistic, but gradually it has blossomed into a more gentle ability to deflate the negative. I can feel that lovely tickling in my chest, reaching down into my arms. I can sustain the feeling of warmth and move to finding a solution rather than standing in one spot or stranding in repeated negatives. Along with laughter the space in-between is somewhere I can be curious, reflect and explore the triggers to my emotional world.

Recently we visited an, 'Art for All' exhibition in our hometown. It was a modern, lively, colourful exhibition with paintings and figures to delight the senses but in this 'hobby' atmosphere I was looking (and longing) for the engagement of my mind and feelings with an artist. I found it in a white square. Little white hands were coming out of the middle of the canvas. Suddenly I could feel some movement in my stomach, a little shiver of cold coming over me – this was something about hands, hands touching, unwanted hands touching – memories, sensations within. Ah yes – this is about ... and I breathed into the feelings, in and out, letting the emotions rumble away and finally subside until I could feel thankful to this artist who had expressed herself in such a way that I have

been able to connect and work with these powerful emotions inside of me.

Often I do not know what the triggers are to my inner world, why I am feeling powerless, laughing, crying or feeling something strange and exciting rumbling about inside, but I trust that the cycle will go its course that these energies will work away, bouncing off each other. I try not to label them although sometimes I feel words bubbling up – I do not always have to consciously connect them, either to the particular circumstances in the work of art, or to my own specific history. I feel myself resonating, being touched by others who go deep into their own experience and miraculously transforming it into something of great magnificence and power. I am transported and feel myself crawling, scratching, wondering and soaring through many difficult and confusing layers of feeling, led by those who have taken their courage in hand to step out of the ties that bind them to material reality and who are able to give movement, shape and form to the horror, transforming it into hope.

Working in theatre – particularly as an actress gave me a wonderful vehicle to explore and play with feelings and emotions. Outward expression of feeling through acting or painting or writing are wonderful vehicles to explore this raging world

and give it some form. When there is some form there is some satisfaction.

In recent years I have turned more to books, paintings, sculpture offering a calmer way of reflection on my inner life. What would my life be without them? I can wax lyrical over an installation made of old machinery, weep tears over the small kindnesses that characters in books demonstrate in the most horrific of circumstances. I get angry and disturbed by a Lucian Freud or a Marleen Dumas painting. I just love the beauty of modern dance stripped of tutus and blocked toes, the fluidity of the bodies. And I can smile and laugh with joy at the way some writers deal humorously with the starkest of circumstances.

I visited the world photo exhibition in the New Church in Amsterdam. It was packed with people but I was alone so attempted to work the exhibition in a reflective mood. As I entered I could feel my body tense up, my chest becoming tighter and my jaw at work; irritation and frustration at being pushed and shoved by others eager to crowd into the photos. I slowed myself down, breathed into the tension and let others take their space. As empty spaces opened up in the crowd I moved forward and found gaps that I could safely stand and observe. At first my head was whirling as I engaged with the content and then I moved to

disengage and allow the photos to work in on me – getting a ‘felt sense’. I waited for this to emerge, something touching me and then I took the time to let the feeling grow and expand. Then a process of going back and forth from the feeling growing inside to my mind, asking what it is this photo evokes in me?

The winning photo was of a young boy kneeling beside the lifeless body of his father. It was in the middle of war, the building had been bombed and the sun cast its silent, golden shadows across the desolate space. I felt angry at all that war creates, the hopelessness of this young man, the desolation.

It reminded me of a sculpture in the Liebieghaus in Frankfurt where I found myself standing in front of a man in a suit, carrying in his arms the lifeless white naked body of his father. Michelangelo’s pieta has never particularly spoken to me but with this work something deep down in my gut was touched. There is no answer to war, to death, or the loss of a loved one and both the photo and the sculpture talked to me of suffering but even in the worst of situations, amid the horror, there can be something tender, touching, beautiful. I carry these images within me, where they are still working away quietly.

The image of a white canoe comes to my mind, with white heads packed within it floating on a pedestal. I feel slightly sick, absolutely powerless. In her book Karin Armstrong describes how tribes in ancient Greece, India and the Middle East fought and conquered and sacrificed each other thousands of years ago. Yet if the Mediterranean parted today it would be littered with bones of people who tried to flee. Are we no more civilized? Will we ever be civilized? What can I, one in billions on the planet, do to stop the wars and the fighting and the 'mutilation' we do one to another?

Again in the recent Monet exhibition in Frankfurt crowds of people surrounded me. It was an 'interesting' and 'beautiful' exhibition and I could have engaged with the story about the beginnings of impressionism or with how Monet and the others were working with the issues of their time. But instead I moved steadily through the rooms, enjoying Monet's garden at Giverny, observing, connecting, disconnecting, waiting and watching my inner movement. I was standing in a room of pictures of bridges and churches in the mist! A white veil covered the scenes and I read in one of the comments that the person who commissioned one of the pictures refused it saying that, "He wasn't going to pay for a painting that was covered with white paint". I felt the cold

landscape creeping through me. I stood quietly for a few minutes and as I continued to let the painting resonate in my body and mind I became one with the stillness, it was no longer eerie just a feeling of emptiness.

And when I encounter and surrender to these experiences I come just to the acceptance of myself as I am with all my disconnected parts and then I feel no differentiation between me and the other.

Yet the utter powerlessness I feel, is paradoxical. To feel my own power I must give up, surrender. And yes, then and only then can I do something. Surrender does not lead to inertia but to action.

I love striking up conversations with whoever passes in my life, on the train or in the street. It is not always easy going as I often feel the challenge to my personal belief system and have to call up my curiosity. I listen to their stories and try to feel and understand how they have developed into who they are – and how they manage their anger, their frustrations, their pain, their family and group contacts – also their happiness and joy – what resources do they pull out from the bottom of their toes to cope with life's difficulties? People that I might have passed by have brought forward tremendous strengths in intolerable situations or express their joy and happiness in tiny things. Their

stories move me and make me feel humble; allow me to feel compassion both for them and for me. Being human is interaction, communication, and intimacy, touching each other to the core, the feeling of resonating deeply with another human being. When I can empathize with someone's pain or joy, breathe into it, contain it, give it a place in myself, know it, understand it, I can then transform it into something beautiful like the sculpture and the photo.

I never saw the young girls again. I overcame my dread and went back to the gym but they didn't return. A little part of me feels disappointed – I would still love that opportunity to talk with them with an open heart. But sometimes the lesson learnt in one place transfers to another.

During the last few months as my husband and I have been sharing our lunches and dinners our daily walks, I have noticed a little change in our interaction. I feel quieter; able to relax a little more and less inclined to talk about just anything for the sake of it. Instead of using our exchange to present my own ideas I find myself questioning a little, giving my husband more room. Sometimes he stops and I realize that he is preparing for me to take up the reins, as if he feels I was listening, but not hearing. And then he goes on and explains a

little more. I enjoy the slight surprise on his face. I ask him what he thinks and he continues and I myself am pleasantly surprised. I notice myself thinking, "I hadn't thought of it that way". I allow him to have the last word, which actually feels as a relief, a weight off my shoulders. Surrender is not so difficult after all! We fit well together – we have been married for forty years but I feel new warmth accompanying our interchanges. Still – change does not happen over night – I must work to take this into my other relationships and interchanges.

The gym remains important to me – not purely for the physical exercise but because like the awareness and reflection moments with works of art, there too I can use the exercises to breathe and feel what my body has to say. Pumping away at the machines awakens feelings thoughts, insights and ideas inside of me.

Just this morning I found myself reflecting on the generations of my family who have been politically engaged in New Zealand on a variety of issues. I feel very proud of the work they have done – the contributions they have made. As a child I was unable to engage in the discussions that went around the table – about politics and medicine. I wanted to talk about how I felt! I related more to the warmth of the family next door. Thankfully discovering my inner world and 'the space in-

between' where I can reflect and trust and play has given me a balance in my being between the intellectual and emotional sides and continues to help making my brain more flexible. I feel more at home and whole in myself and able to act rationally in situations where previously I might have been too emotional.

Sometimes, on very rare occasions, I have experienced an almost perfect alignment in myself of mind, emotions and body. I hardly dare give words to this experience because it is so precious. I feel then that there is more to this ALL than I yet know or perhaps can ever know. I experience it as energy just flowing effortlessly through connecting me to everything around. It is the same feeling I have listening to the Ukrainian pianist Alexander Gavrylyuk playing Liszt. His hands ripple over the piano, he seems to do nothing – it is as if he is one with the music, the music with him – and as if the music is just the sound of the universe flowing gently on.

I am grateful. I bow my head in thanks.
And now... back to our garden.

About the author

Jill van der Aa-Shand says:

I was born in New Zealand but have lived since 1972 in the Netherlands. I have had many different changes of occupation – teacher, cook, theatre director, actress, organiser of courses and trainings, massage therapist, body psychotherapist and now retired, currently General Secretary/Vice President of the European Association for Body Psychotherapy and now, owner of an art collection.

My husband was an art dealer. During the completion of this chapter he was diagnosed with lung cancer. My sister immediately arrived from New Zealand and early sisterly rivalry melted away as she cooked, shopped and did the housework while I was able to nurse him. Family and friends skyped and rang and visited to say their goodbyes. All three of us felt enormously supported.

This chapter was meant as a meditation on what has sustained me in life – it turned out to be a preparation for one of the deepest experiences in my life – the loss of my life partner. I miss him deeply but am thankful that in the time we had together life gave us so much.

A recent exhibition I have visited – Bottle River (Vessels) – by Stephen Wilks has given me a universe to reflect on.

A river made up of hundreds of fragile, individually made ceramic bottles meandering through the floor space of the Hedge House Art Gallery in Castle Wijnre. Each bottle with its own character and atmosphere reveals "a personal cosmic space" and looking closer a universe of individuals and groups silently moving through their lives.

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Endnotes

Barnaby Barratt's chapter

ⁱ "The personal is political" is, of course, a '60s slogan often attributed to Carol Hanisch, but I continue to believe that it expresses something fundamentally correct --- and indeed inescapable --- about our existential situation. To give the most mundane example: I brush my teeth. Who manufactures the toothpaste? How much are the factory workers paid? How much profit is enjoyed by the directors and shareholders who own the company? The aluminum hydroxide (to name just one abrasive typically used in commercial toothpastes) was either extracted from the mineral called gibbsite (also known as hydrargillite) or more likely processed from bauxite (which consists largely of gibbsite), which was in all probability mined in Guinea, Australia or Vietnam. What is the standard of living of the average mining worker in Guinea, Australia or Vietnam? And who enjoys a much higher standard of living --- indeed, one that might be dubbed exploitative --- from their labors? Also to be noted is that workers in bauxite mines and in the production of aluminum are at a higher risk for renal function disorders and for pulmonary fibrosis; exposure to

aluminum is also controversially implicated in the formation of brain plaque and consequently Alzheimer's disease. While one can try to be mindful of the complex nexus of socioeconomic relations in which we are all embroiled, one also cannot avoid the reality that "dropping out" is not an option --- the fabled desert island has long since been appropriated by the long arm of transnational corporate interests.

ii To be polemical: Were not Bernie Madoff and Martin Shkreli well adjusted to their milieu (except perhaps that they got caught)? Is not the CIA Agent who tortures a suspect to get him to reveal his treacherous sources? Is not the Afghan man who joins in stoning an adulterer to death because this is the proper *Hudud* under Shariah Law? Or the English-Egyptian woman who participates in having her five-year-old daughter's vulval structures excised? There may well be an average American middle-class citizen who is "well adjusted," but that average American middle-class lifestyle was historically constructed on the basis of genocidal actions toward indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans, and it is currently perpetuated by the USA's exploitative and aggressivized relations with the third-world. If I purchase a pair of inexpensive sneakers, made by child labor in some seemingly distant land --- or simply by the labor of what Karl Marx called "wage

slaves," fathers and mothers desperately dependent on meager daily earnings in order for their family to live from day-to-day in the most minimal way --- what exactly am I doing, *ethically*? In short, the concept of being "well adjusted" to prevailing cultural and socioeconomic circumstances reeks of ideological forces that propel our species toward yet more (and ever increasing) barbarity.

iii Biology provides us with scientific models of maturation, but these are little help to the mandate of healing, specifically with regard to the healing of our soul, or *psyche*, let alone the healing of our problematic sociocultural arrangements. Ontogenetically, an adolescent is more mature than a child...at least physically...but this says nothing about his or her inner world of representation and desire, let alone the "maturity" of his or her behaviors. In the field of mental health, the concept is regularly invoked to describe an individual who is "well adjusted" to prevailing norms. The ideological pitfalls of the concept thus parallel those of the notions of adjustment and adaptation. I am "mature" if I can hold a corporate job without creating a ruckus, if I have two children who mature into such jobs, if I have a nice house in the suburbs, am not conspicuously addicted to illegal actions or substances, and have the normative divorce or two...

iv I have discussed some of these ideas about healing not only in *The Emergence of Somatic Psychology*

and Bodymind Therapy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), but also, with a more spiritual emphasis, in *Liberating Eros* (Xlibris/Random House, 2009). My more recent books have been an effort to advance a radical version of psychoanalysis that aligns it with somatic healing: *What is Psychoanalysis?* (Routledge, 2013) and *Radical Psychoanalysis: An Essay on Free-Associative Praxis* (Routledge, 2016).

^v I have written some more about this in my 2004 essay "Desire and Death in the Constitution of I-ness." In: J. Reppen, J. Tucker, & M. A. Schulman (eds.), *Way beyond Freud: Postmodern Psychoanalysis Observed*. London, UK: Open Gate Press, pages 264-279. Also, I think I should note, that recent accounts for the functioning of the Cassel underestimate, in my opinion, the full significance of this mode of healing. It should also be noted that the UK National Health Service has, in most respects, abandoned the funding for many of the essential aspects of this experimental facility; in my view, this move is, of course, nothing less than tragic.

^{vi} With regard to my use of the term *ephemerality*, I think perhaps the essential challenge of our spirituality is to maintain our awareness of being "grounded" and yet, at the same time, of being utterly unimportant --- we are each, after all, the merest spark of "stardust in the wind."

vii Spielrein, S. N. (1912). Die Destruktion als Ursache des Werdens. *Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Forschungen*, 4: 465–503. English translations: (1) Destruction as the cause of coming into being. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 39: 155–186, 1994. (2) Destruction as cause of becoming. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, 18: 85–118, 1995. Much of what I am discussing here has been addressed at greater length in my *What is Psychoanalysis?* and in my *Radical Psychoanalysis*, both of which emphasize the bodymind or somatic dimension of a healing praxis that has, in its institutional transmission, all but lost sight of the centrality of our embodied experience.