eightysevenminutes

What we were never told about why we suffer and how to live with tenderness

BY KENT HOFFMAN
Preface

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There’s a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn’t expect to find it, either.

— Marilynne Robinson

Many of us know precisely what it is to be haunted by dread and loneliness, to inhabit lives of periodic or continual desperation. Some days can be better than others. Hope happens. But each day can carry with it the hidden burden of negative certainty. We live in the presence of absence: something is almost always missing or about to go missing; wrong or about to go wrong.

Our negative certainty takes many forms:

- Unyielding fear of failure or never being enough
- Vigilance about others being too much
- Worry about being left alone
- The guarantee of never belonging
- Guilt about the past
- Dread of the future
- The agony of a painful present

We exist on some primitive edge of life, terrified of falling forever.
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My education gave me everything I needed except how to make it through an ordinary day.

— Søren Kierkegaard

What you're looking at here is a note-in-a-bottle; the human condition squeezed inside a brief summary of personal struggle and hidden possibility.

The experience requires eighty-seven minutes of your time. [Suggestion: You may choose an immersive binge-read of the full site, but it's likely your reading will best be approached chapter by chapter, or in brief increments, over several days or weeks. Word on the street is that the content is "just a tad bit heavy" and many feel a need to often take breaks. For some it seems too dark and their choice is to quit reading. This makes sense. Initially, the focus is both intense and painful. But the focus doesn't end there. For any who continue reading, please know that the closing chapters invite both trust and a sense of peace. Really.]
This site was obviously created for those who struggle internally. The shift can be from: "I think I'm alone in this pain," to "Others feel this way," to "My suffering makes sense and I have new options I didn't quite recognize before."

You'll be asked to consider conclusions about why we suffer that are based on my forty years of clinical experience as a psychotherapist, three decades of research regarding child development, and my own personal struggle. Also included in my understanding are insights gleaned during four decades of meditation practice. My commitment is to be as direct and honest as I can be about why I believe so many of us suffer.
As stated above, you may want to turn back now. You will be prompted to recall and explore pain, and the well-traveled patterns commonly used to stay away from that pain.

So. Psychotherapy, infant and early childhood research, being messed up, and (non-dogmatic) spiritual practice ... If something in this odd mix appeals to you, then the hard work of the next eighty-seven minutes may well be worth the risk.

Welcome.

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I was born in 1947, the year poet W.H. Auden coined the phrase, "Age of Anxiety." His famous phrase describes precisely how the first thirty-five years of my life felt: always worried, always afraid, always scanning for what terrible thing might happen next.

To paraphrase Rene Descartes, "I (over) think, therefore I am (anxious)." To say that I was anxious as a child would be an understatement. I've dealt with that same worry as an adult, although the subject matter has changed a thousand times. Mark Twain said it best: "I've lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened."

Anxiety disorders work that way.

My mother divorced when I was an infant and quickly chose a second husband who was
neither faithful to her nor safe for me. She was lost and confused. He was lost and dangerous. Any biological propensity I may have had for anxiety was multiplied by a growing sense of vigilance concerning family dysfunction.

Only years later did it begin to dawn on me why I was always haunted by a sense of dread, and always felt alone. Into my teen years, my questions were always the same: "Why is everything always so dark and frightening? How do I get through this day?"

After years of this gnawing fear and emptiness, I did what many do. I chose to enter psychotherapy in my early twenties with the hope of bringing an end to the endlessness of it all. Not long after, in an attempt to seal the deal, I entered graduate school to become a psychotherapist myself. (Like many, I lived under the cultural delusion that knowledge would finally solve my pain.)
Along the way, some things changed.

I released anger. I processed fear. I understood more of what had transpired for me as a child. I found some relief.

And along the way, nothing changed.

There remained an underlying experience of negative certainty. There continued to be, throughout each day, intense incredulity about the suffering that seemed to consume so many of us.

Eventually, I found myself working as a clinician with incarcerated women who had been labeled "mentally ill" (most of whom were serving life sentences for murder). Unexpectedly, I began to find my private despair matched by theirs. Though our life circumstances were radically different, as I came to know the stories of these deeply wounded and tender souls, I found myself having one thing in common with their lives, "the meaninglessness of it all." It's as if we were reading the same message from the same book. "So this is life on planet earth: Day to day suffering without hope of change; always concluding at the same endpoint; alone in pain, alone in pain, once again alone in pain."

Oddly, I felt a change beginning that would only make sense years in the future. I began to see that within a sense of shared absence we can, sometimes, experience shared presence.
I began working at a small college and, based on the suggestion of longtime mentor Allan Hunter, started a regular meditation practice. "Kent, there is always more going on than meets the eye. Sit with your hands open and learn to wait. Breathe. Life will open."

Something actually did shift. For several years it was as though my life did open, just a bit. Eventually I quit my job at the college and spent half a year studying with Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast at a hermitage on the coast of Maine. I counseled terminally ill cancer patients. I lived and worked for almost five years at the Catholic Worker in Los Angeles, finding hidden radiance in the vulnerability, depth, and dignity of the homeless women, men, and children I came to know. In the face of so much suffering, light seemed possible. The opening continued.
But my personal life intervened. As a central relationship in my life continued to fall apart, my life once again closed down. Eventual attempts at intimacy didn't go well. I increasingly felt like a failure at love.

Over the next few years I returned to my well known, deeply internal black hole. What I had hoped was behind me was, with too much familiarity, all around. During this time I also began experiencing chronic pain on the right side of my head. It started one night and regardless of what I did, it wouldn't go away.

I felt increasingly stuck inside myself. I couldn't find a way out.

Knowing of my interest in meditation, a friend introduced me to Robert Aitken, a kind and wise Zen roshi. His approach to Zen was in the tradition that welcomes “kensho,” an experience of enlightenment that often emerges in a sudden burst of insight. Hoping against hope, I returned to a practice of regular meditation with the possibility of changing my life (and stopping the pain).

Not surprisingly, within a few months my new practice simply mirrored my experience of life itself. Sitting alone in silence, I was merely reconfirming my well-worn experience of absence rather than revealing a shift in consciousness. I practiced off and on, but nothing changed.
How could anything change when emptiness, nothingness, and pain were so obviously the underlying truth of everything?

I kept getting up each morning, but with little hope for my future.

Over the next decade, two gifts gradually and inexplicably emerged in my life, surprisingly cross-joined. (Looking back, I must have asked for them. In asking, I had no clue what I actually needed.)

1. HOLDING

Aware that prominent psychologists and university laboratories had compelling evidence that the foundations for much adult psychological distress can be found within our earliest experiences in life, I began an in-depth study of developmental psychology and infant research. While studying psychoanalysis at the Masterson Institute, I found myself drawn to the work of Donald W. Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst from the middle of the 20th Century. Through his work as a pediatrician as well as child and adult analyst, Winnicott named the central emotional requirement for emotional health throughout life.

In coining the phrase, holding environment, Winnicott gave voice to every infant's core need: personal access to a primary relationship (one or several) that recognizes
the child's absolute dependence and offers sensitive and committed caregiving. Winnicott was unequivocal in his belief that at the heart of this first relationship is the fact that each child requires consistent, predictable, and soothing presence, especially during times of distress. A few years into this new understanding of a holding environment, I studied briefly with infant researcher Daniel Stern. His term for this same core emotional requirement: being-with. To be-with is to experience, what Stern and his colleagues call a moment of meeting.

Moments of meeting. Moments of trust.

Then a new opportunity was offered. Along with my colleagues Bert Powell and Glen Cooper, I was invited to become an attachment researcher under the guidance of Jude Cassidy from the University of Maryland. Based upon the theory and research of her mentors, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, Jude guided and supported our work with high-risk parents and young children. The outcome of that collaboration, known as the Circle of Security, and is now being utilized with parents and children around the globe.

Winnicott, Bowlby, Ainsworth, Stern, and Cassidy have brought clarity regarding the basic emotional needs at the heart of every person on our planet. They have also made clear the cost to each of us when these needs aren't adequately met.
You see two infants: one has been held (in my extended sense of the word) well enough ... and the other has not had the experience of being held well and growth has had to be distorted and delayed, and some degree of primitive agony has to be carried on into life and living ... The infant who has not had [this holding environment] has either needed to develop premature ego functioning [a self-sufficient, “it’s all up to me” strategy], or there has developed a muddle.

— Donald Winnicott, M.D.
"Every life is worthy of a novel.
— Erving Polster, Ph.D.

For the first time, the internal chaos of my life (Winnicott called it *primitive agony*) began to make some sense. For the first time an underlying structure, a deeper coherence within the nature of life, began to emerge into view. The experience of holding is somewhere on a continuum for each of us. Yet, in subjective perception we either have access to a holding environment or we do not. To the degree that we have access to a holding environment, we feel safe and secure. To the degree that we do not have access to this holding, we increasingly experience life as difficult unto impossible.

As I deepened in my study (and corresponding psychotherapy) I realized that I did not have a history that included adequate holding. Attempts had been made by my parents, but these were two people with little clue how to offer soothing presence. These were two people still lost in misguided attempts to find their own holding. From an early age I had "developed [in] a muddle."
While delving into developmental psychology and research, I changed meditation teachers, briefly studying with Thich Nhat Hanh. His focus on simple breathing ("... peace is every breath") and kindness within a daily practice were remarkably beneficial. Having such limited access to someone living in France was less helpful. It is with Thich Nhat Hanh that I took sacred vows.

Then, unexpectedly, I was offered an opportunity to study with Joko Beck, a no-nonsense Zen roshi in her late sixties, teaching in San Diego. She graciously invited those of us who lived at a distance to call weekly and discuss our meditation practice in direct relationship to the struggles happening in our everyday lives. This was the consistent guidance I recognized as necessary.

By this time, I had been dealing with the chronic pain in my head for more than a decade, and we discussed this often. Joko was unflinching in her suggestion that I allow the pain to be exactly as it was, with no strategies to get rid of it. She kept suggesting that I "simply hold" the pain while simultaneously experiencing it.

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You have another choice Kent. You can quit fighting this pain and simply hold it. You don’t need to get some place new. This moment is merely another chance to be-with what is, exactly as it is. Nothing more. Nothing less.

— Joko Beck

(Suffice it to say that Joko had never heard of either Donald Winnicott or Daniel Stern. And,
while this terminology is now more common in Zen meditation circles, it was virtually unheard of 30 years ago.)

I practiced holding and being-with my pain for several years. The pressure to be rid of it or to change it did shift. Over time, on many days, the intensity level gradually moved from an 8 or 9 to a more manageable 3 or 4 on a pain scale of 1-10. The pain did not disappear, but something was different. The world I was trying to make sense of was different.

I was now married and the father of a young child. Intimacy began to make sense. Nothing else mattered half as much.

Life was beginning to shift.

“Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone.
— David Whyte

PRESENCE

Through the decades, I have patched together my learning from developmental research and my daily mediation practice, focusing my professional life on two clinical populations:

1. Homeless/street dependent teen parents and adults
2. Those of us who appear to be "normal." (People who seem to be relatively content and successful, but who, once we look beneath the surface, often reveal feelings of dread and loneliness.)
While life circumstances are profoundly different for each of these groups (this cannot be overstated), I have continued to find that we all carry a remarkably similar intensity when it comes to internal struggle. I know very few people, once you listen deep into their lives, who do not experience a stunning level of hidden, personal pain - often on a daily basis.

The human condition remains the human condition, regardless of who we are. No one escapes suffering.

I've come to the following understanding of our shared human predicament:

1. Every heart will inevitably be wounded by an absence it cannot comprehend.
2. No heart can forget the presence it was born to know.

Presence and its shadow opposite, absence, are always center stage.

To the degree that we know presence (along a vast continuum), we are at home in our lives. To the degree that absence defines our experience (along a vast continuum), we suffer.

The homeless street kid, the diligent university student, and the celebrated professional all live within the same condition: trust is the lived experience of presence and suffering is the lived experience of absence.

“Does not everything depend upon our interpretation of the silence around us?”

— Lawrence Durrell
We can be in pain *with presence* and do well (enough).

Pain *without presence* is hell.

What is, is.
What is, *without holding*, remains stuck.
What is, *with holding*, rests and transforms.
This, of course, is where things start to get dicey.

Presence = being-with  
Absence = being-without  
Holding environment is to primitive agony as presence is to absence.

Because many of us are wounded at precisely the point of experiencing being-without where being-with might have been, ours is an experience of daily, hourly, moment to moment struggle. This ongoing struggle is what comes from not being able to trust in simple presence.

Absence is the unshared aloneness of being-without. It is far more common than we would imagine. Unfortunately, repeated experiences of absence accumulate.

Absence happens. We all know that. But when it keeps happening and we have no way to comprehend or even acknowledge it, we build a life that in a wide variety of ways is designed to pretend the absence isn't even here.

And yet . . .
In words recently spoken by a client: "It's all so fucking lonely and it's all so fucking terrifying."

"Where can the crying heart gaze?"
— Naomi Shihab Nye

Absence happens. For all of us. For some it can be severe in ways that are obvious. For others, it can be equally severe in ways that most others would never notice.

I do not exaggerate when I say that the internal hell (self-loathing, harsh expectations, certainty about being alone) of many students I have worked with at the university level is often equal to, if not more extreme, than the
agonies of the homeless teens I've come to know through the years.

I am not making this up.

No one could ever truly love me.

In the face of so much that feels impossible and overwhelming, current neuroscience is now able to offer a clue to both understanding and working with our internal uncertainty.
Procedural Memory & The Voice

Affective neuroscience is now helping us find a hidden source of our internal struggles.

We call it procedural memory.

It might be called the neuroscience of learned presence and learned absence.

Some are fortunate to experience an abundance of presence in their formative years. But, for many, presence didn't always show up in the way it was most needed. This was the absence we likely still can't comprehend.

Here's a quick summary of procedural memory. Procedural memory is memory outside of words, because it began before we had words. All infants and young children are building memory based on patterns of micro-interactions with their caregivers. Every moment of experience informs every child's expanding procedural memory:

- *I like it when you smile so comfortably. It feels good to settle more fully into your arms.*
- *When you frown so intensely, I feel uneasy and look away. Why don't you notice my discomfort and return to being gentle?*
- *When I cry, you pull back. Your body tightens. Am I too much for you?*
- *I get so frightened when you're angry like that. I'm shutting down. Why don't you stop?*

What's so important about this is the understanding that so much of our learning about "the nature of relationship" is well
established through countless interactions (hundreds per hour), before we ever have access to language.

Of course, procedural memory continues to be formed as we get older. Early patterns merely become more firmly established:

- I come home with something less than an "A" and there it is, that critical tone in your voice.
- I begin to feel sad and you tell me it's not that bad. Why do I have to look on the bright side of everything?
- I tell you something even vaguely personal and suddenly you're way too interested. I need you to back off. You never do.
- When I disagree with you I feel guilty. It always hurts your feelings for me to want my own life.
- I try not to care about you. I care too much. Why are you so distracted?
- Busy, busy, busy. Would someone please just sit down at this kitchen table and tell me my life will be OK?

As infants and children monitor minute cues from those upon whom they most depend (facial gestures, tone of voice, posture, rhythm of bodily movements, intensity of gestures, dilation of pupils, level of comfort versus discomfort, etc.), they are paying exquisite, moment-to-moment attention to the procedures of how to be and how not to be in relationship. ("When I do this, she smiles. When I do this, she pulls back.") And so, before we have language and after, each of us come to know moments-as-patterns-of-presence and moments-as-patterns-of-absence in our primary relationships.
The seemingly small is so much bigger than we typically imagine.

These memories of presence and absence make up the hidden, unrecognized narrative of our worldview. For some of us this is good news. For others, not so much. Because, when repeated negative micro-interactions lead us to a sense that those we most need are easily distracted or demanding or intrusive or afraid of who we actually are, we become stuck with an ongoing experience of absence.

Here is the problem. For those of us who grew up with unresolved experiences of absence, our ongoing belief system becomes the certainty that absence is the definition of reality itself. When we are vulnerable or in need (as we were as children), we expect absence. We accept this learned pattern as simply the way things are. We ask ourselves, why would anyone think life could be different?

Side bar: At this point a lot of readers start deciding it's time to, well, stop being readers. "What hope is there if parents with the best of intentions make tiny 'mistakes' that end up causing ongoing loneliness in their children? Either this isn't accurate or it's right, but too despairing." Such a response is fully understandable. But there is another way to look at early procedural struggles that persist into adulthood.

1. We can, quite suddenly, realize how our persistent, internal pain actually makes sense (rather than being inexplicable and always confusing).
2. We can realize that our parents (and their parents and their parents) had no clue
they were passing on a difficult, unconscious legacy. The issue of blame immediately disappears. No parent intentionally wakes up in the morning and says, "Today is a good day to give absence to my child." Parents simply have no clue these procedural patterns of absence were handed on to them and no clue they are now handing them on to the next generation. (By the way, offering parents systematic access to these unconscious miscues is precisely the cutting edge work now going on in the field of early intervention. The results are remarkably positive for all concerned.)

3. Thus, the issue is neither blame or despair. The issue is coherence and clarity. "Of course! This makes sense. I had these moments (lots of them) when my dad just pulled away whenever I cried (or got angry or was asking for support). I always thought it was something about me. Now I see that he never knew presence in those moments either. He, too, learned that pattern from a parent who also wasn't offered presence in those moments. This has to go back countless generations."

4. Once recognized, we begin to have choice that was not available before. We see patterns of absence and recognize them as core beliefs learned early rather than a definition of ultimate reality. In attachment research, a new found capacity to reflect on our (procedural) history highly correlates with an increase in security for adults.

5. It's never too late. Our identity is deeper than our history. New options abound once we begin to recognize
them. Discovering how this is true is precisely why this site was created.

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We do not see the world as it is, we see the world as we are.

— The Talmud

Donald Winnicott once said that we aren't afraid of what will happen to us in the future, we're afraid of what has already happened to us that we don't want to remember or can't yet make sense of.

Our history of absence tends to define our current experience of presence. For many of us, this begins to explain why we find it so difficult to trust - others, ourselves, "God," life itself.

Our unresolved past, just outside of consciousness, continually shows up, masquerading as the present.

What is going on that would keep so many of us incredibly, agonizingly stuck in negative certainty about ourselves, others, and our future? Why would we hold tightly to our experience of absence, rather than just walking away from it?
A young boy lies in a hospital bed. He is frightened and in pain. Burns cover 40 percent of his small body. Someone has doused him with alcohol and then, unimaginably, has set him on fire.

He cries for his mother.

His mother has set him on fire.

It doesn’t seem to matter what kind of mother a child has lost, or how perilous it may be to dwell in her presence.

It doesn’t matter whether she hurts or hugs. Separation from mother is worse than being in her arms when the bombs are exploding.

Separation from mother is sometimes worse than being with her when she is the bomb. - Judith Viorst

Developmentally speaking, we can now recognize a direct link between the story of the young boy clinging to the arms of a mother who has set him on fire and the predictable (and all too common) message revealed by the self-loathing of Hannah (from the HBO series, Girls).
Let's start with current developmental research to explore that link.

We were each born with approximately 100 billion brain cells. By the time we were three years old, those cells had migrated into 1,000 trillion neural pathways. Building at a rate of millions of neural pathways per second, infants and young children are creating the structure of their brains based upon what they experience with their caregivers. This is the basis of procedural memory: our experience is literally built into the architecture of our brains.

Infants are far more sensitive than most of us would imagine possible.

To summarize: What's central is how infants track their caregivers regarding presence and absence. "Are you (consistently and predictably) with me or are you (consistently and predictably) elsewhere?"
Here's the part many of us aren't sure we really want to know: Infants need presence. Infants are exquisitely sensitive, in a moment-to-moment way, to the presence or absence of their caregivers. Like the air we breathe, presence isn't a luxury, it's an absolute requirement. All current infant research agrees that our emotional stability and sense of security depend upon trusting in the consistent and caring availability of another.

All infants inevitably experience absence, moments when their needed caregiver is unavailable. As it turns out, absence does not have to be a problem. The life of any growing child on planet earth will include thousands of moments of emotional absence, moments that clearly bring distress and can be experienced as frightening and lonely.

RUPTURE & REPAIR

Absence sucks, but learning to deal with some absence in our lives is actually essential. It is only useful, however, when a caregiver's inevitable absence is recognized by the caregiver and repaired. As we just saw in the
above video, "the [inevitable] bad" is allowed to return to "the [essential] good."

Known as "rupture and repair," when a child experiences a rupture and also experiences a caregiver willing to repair that rupture, the research shows that such a child builds a deepening sense of trust.

"Bad things happen to me, but they are followed by good things. My caregiver cares enough to recognize her (or his) mistake and work it out with me."

So ultimately, absence, in and of itself, isn't the issue.

The issue is absence that is repeated in ways that fit a pattern, a consistent kind of absence that goes unrecognized by the caregiver. ("When I reach for you, you look away and start talking fast. Why don't you like my reaching? Is there something wrong with me?"

The issue is ruptures that go without repair on a regular basis; ruptures where the caregiver is blind to a specific pattern of rupture and thus does not repair the relationship back toward shared presence.

After working with parents for so long - upper class, middle class, and street dependent - I’ve learned that all parents bring some degree of patterned, consistently un-repaired absence to their children. Unconscious, unintentional, never on purpose, the fact remains that almost all parents block being-with their children concerning certain emotions. For some, it’s that we cannot be-with our child’s fear. For others it’s that we can’t tolerate our child’s anger or sadness or joy or curiosity. We can allow some of these emotional states, but it’s
very rare to find a parent who can genuinely support all of them.

For example, when a child is crying a parent may subtly attempt to cheer him up, thinking that making him happy will "solve the problem" of his sadness. What this parent doesn't currently know is that some version of "Don’t cry" (from “be a happy baby!” to “big boys don’t cry”) leaves the residue of being-without, an absence that lingers. To the child, this is subtle evidence that “No one can join me here in my sadness.” In some way this translates into "Don't have this feeling" and "Don't be you in this particular way."

Over time, the experience for the child is, "I require connection but I'm un-meetable here… Whenever I get sad, absence trumps presence."

Winnicott said that this point of unconscious realization is precisely where our innate "true self" begins to build the facade of a "false self" or protective self: "Be cute, be charming, stay hidden, etc., because they don't want to see how you really feel."

**Ordinary Heartbreak**

*She climbs easily on the box*  
*That seats her above the swivel chair*  
*At adult height, crosses her legs, left ankle over right,*  
*Smoothes the plastic apron over her lap*  
*While the beautician lifts her ponytail and laughs,*  
*"This is coarse as a horse's tail."*  
*And then as if that's all there is to say,*  
*The woman at once whacks off and tosses its foot and a half into the trash.*  
*And the little girl who didn't want her hair cut,*  
*But long ago learned successfully how not to say*  
*What it is she wants,*
Who, even at this minute cannot quite grasp her shock and grief, Is getting her hair cut. "For convenience," her mother put it. The long waves gone that had been evidence at night, When loosened from their clasp, She might secretly be a princess. Rather than cry out, she grips her own wrist And looks to her mother in the mirror. But her mother is too polite, or too reserved, So the girl herself takes up indifference, While pain follows a hidden channel to a deep place Almost unknown in her, Convinced as she is, that her own emotions are not the ones her life depends on, She shifts her gaze from her mother's face Back to the haircut now, So steadily as if this short-haired child were someone else. - David Levine

From this point forward – the point captured in Levine’s poem and the ones we all experience – people carry, in a place deeper than conscious awareness, underlying assumptions and an eventual certainty about "life" which includes an ever-present, albeit unconscious experience of "forever empty."

Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls this learned experience, especially when it happens at a phase of life before we have language, our unthought known: that which we always know but may never actually think. "We learn the grammar of our lives before we have the words." This early programming continues to convince us that the way we see ourselves and others from this point forward is unquestionably the way things are.

Ruptures without repair become the ongoing risk of falling forever.
It’s not true that life is one damn thing after another—it’s one damn thing over and over.
— Edna St. Vincent Millay

Attempting to cross a wide abyss on a tight rope, who among us wouldn't cling to something, anything that might keep us from tumbling?

The operative word here is thing. Some-thing. Any-thing. No-thing.

So many of us are haunted by absence ("nothingness" and "forever empty"). It is of clinical interest that this absence is always accompanied by a phantom sense of pseudo-presence, usually in the form of an internal voice that can seem utterly convincing and absolutely real.

Counter-intuitive though it may seem, our experience of absence always manifests within the context of this convincing presence; the ghost of a "not really here, but always here" companion following us through each day.
This companion is almost always negative. (When it's positive, it is merely an idealization crafted to cover over something negative, with the hope of happiness, success or perfection.)

Some people call this negative internal commentary, "the Voice."

- Life sucks. I suck. That's all there is to it.
- There may be an answer, but I'll never find it.
- If only I tried harder, did more, were better or more perfect, then ...
- What's wrong with me?
- What's wrong with you?
- You're perfect (because I can't risk feeling you have any flaws).
- I'm hopeless (or unlovable or destined for failure).

The Voice has (at least) eight common themes:

1. You're not worthy.
2. You're unwanted.
3. You're too different.
4. You're not enough or you're too much.
5. Everyone will leave you.
6. No one will ever understand.
7. Your future will only get worse.
8. You have no right. (Who do you think you are?)

We don't typically see these messages as strategies to stay out of the void and yet they always are. At their core they follow one simple principle: Something is never quite right or always wrong. And someone (often us) is to blame.
There is always something negative accompanied by a harsh companion that promises to keep us company.

Think about it. Your depression or anxiety or chronic disappointment or self-criticism (whatever fThis thing/problem will inevitably be accompanied by a Voice, a negative commentary that remains ever at our side.Orm your negative certainty shows up in) always has a subject; something bad or not so good is currently the focus of your attention. Something is always wrong or about to go wrong; missing or about to go missing. The focus is on something, either outside of you or inside of you. ("My future." "My badness." "This loneliness." "This unworkable relationship.")

Unable to stand absence, we're continually finding a form of pseudo-presence, something (a problem) to cling to. This thing/problem will inevitably be accompanied by a Voice, a negative commentary that remains ever at our side.

For example, the person with an eating disorder is always seeing images of herself as "too fat" with a corresponding Voice reminding her that she will never be thin. Or the person with chronic anxiety will see images of malignant cells accompanied by a Voice that tells him the current pain in his stomach is most likely cancer. Or the perfectionist is always recognizing mistakes and the Voice is either devaluing her for being a failure or someone else for not meeting expectations.

Just like the little boy set ablaze by his mother, we can't not be connected. As we just saw with the baby in the above video, being in
relationship is, from the point of view of emotional survival, as important as air is for physical survival. In the absence of true presence, we listen for and cling to the nagging internal Voice-as-companion (negative presence).

As Judith Viorst so poignantly tells us, no child can withstand complete absence. Somethingness, even if continually devastating, is experienced as safer than absolute nothingness.

There’s a boy in you about three years old who hasn’t learned a thing for thirty thousand years. Sometimes it’s a girl.

This child had to make up its mind how to save you from death. He said things like: “Stay home. Avoid elevators. Eat only elk.”

You live with this child, but you don’t know it. You’re in the office, yes, but live with this boy at night. He’s uninformed, but he does want to save your life. And he has. Because of this boy you survived a lot. He’s got six big ideas. Five don’t work. Right now he’s repeating them to you. - Robert Bly

This child had to find a way to save us from moments of absence ("When I get sad, she gets upbeat," "When I'm upset, he gets more upset," "When I'm confused, she changes the subject"). This child-now-Voice doesn't have a clue, but does want to protect us. Her (or his) message was learned in a void. We keep thinking it's the way out.
“Hell is a state of mind ... And every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind - is, in the end, Hell.

— C.S. Lewis

A state of mind is a lens through which we filter our perception of reality. For many of us, this lens is a distortion that keeps our focus on absence and the strategies we use to avoid absence.

As beings hardwired for presence, we recreate our painful past again and again throughout each day (without knowing it) in order to avoid absence.

“The past isn’t dead. Hell, it isn’t even the past.”

— William Faulkner
"We do not treat our patients to cure them of something done to them in the past; rather we are trying to cure them of what they still do to themselves and to others in order to cope with what was done to them in the past.

— Phillip Bromberg

Suffering is clinging to our past while doing everything we can to desperately avoid it.

Once we become aware of the presence/absence paradigm, we begin to have choice. Said simply: We are either strengthening our procedural mind, or finding ways to build a new one. But to build a new mind, we must recognize how the old mind has us currently stuck.

TWO-LEVEL WORLD

I am deeply grateful to psychoanalyst James Masterson for the following insight, one that has revolutionized my capacity to understand human defenses. Given two options, the second being the black hole, all of us find a way to immediately exit such a dismal possibility. "All alone" vs. defense is never a jump ball. As infants and as adults, we inevitably choose to sidestep utter aloneness.

Attachment research adds a new wrinkle. Our chosen defense inevitably includes some form of relatedness. It's always about finding connection ("... grab that cell phone and text someone") instead of plummeting into lonely darkness. Our lives become an endless pursuit of "essential" yet meaningless "stuff," just to stay out of falling into "endless empty."
Two options, and only two options.

Think of it as living in a two-level world. Level Two is the promise of endless absence. Level One is our continual return to negative certainty, a harsh Voice (companion) telling us bad things about ourselves or our future, while also making sure we return to whatever "protective self" game plan seems to keep the terror at bay ("perform better," "keep quiet," "be smart," "give in," "try harder," "don't stand out").

We dip into Level Two and instantly jump out to our Level One strategy. Continually. Literally thousands of times each day.

The journey into Level Two is usually so brief, we don't notice it consciously. For example, an important person in your life seems bored during a conversation (glancing at her phone) and you have a millisecond of free fall (again at an unconscious level) into memories of feeling insignificant to your father or mother years before. Utter blackness enters for a
micro-second, and then the Voice: "You idiot, say something funny or smart or interesting. Don't be boring! Why are you such a loser?"

Or, you are feeling down and begin to say something about it to a friend. He listens for a minute, then takes over the conversation by describing how this exact same thing recently happened to him. Inside, you fall deeper into a feeling of being alone, then quickly the Voice steps in: "You aren't someone people will ever understand. You're so freaking weird. You'll never belong. Quit trying."

Utterly critical, yet absolutely here with you. Distorted yes; mean, yes. But with you ... for sure.

Psychoanalyst Ronald Fairbairn called this an obstinate attachment: clinging to a negative pattern in our history that we unconsciously choose to keep repeating, all in the service of staying (or feeling somewhat) connected. When Buddhists speak of giving up "attachments," this is what they're addressing. A connection is a connection is a connection.

What Fairbairn was getting at is that many of us form an attachment or a bond between Level One and Level Two. The Voice may be a distorted bond, but it is a relational bond. It joins our innate need for connection and our procedurally learned sense of futility. This bond shows up as a relationship, a harsh companion that is trying, as Robert Bly describes, to do its best to save us.

Having learned that it can't count on another in moments of vulnerability, the Voice is continually speaking a four-word mantra that will follow us around the rest of our life: "It's up to me."
Formed in childhood when we lack perspective, the Voice has no idea how to really be of help. Born within a context of confusion and pain, its attempts to take charge were desperate, flailing stabs in the dark: misguided strategies that sought to give meaning to what felt utterly meaningless. ("If you were just prettier, more intelligent, always upbeat people would like you.") Formed in emptiness, it continually reinforces emptiness.

Let's not forget that our Voice has actually saved us: we actually have something to focus on and a constant companion, relentless yet predictable. Something is better than nothing(ess).

And yet, it hasn't saved us. Learned in darkness, this Voice speaks only darkness. So many of us continue to suffer mightily because of this dark bond.
Here is the hope:

We need to realize that a reconfiguration of our brains, one that supports an updated awareness of holding and accepts that new possibility is actually available, requires repeated and genuine experiences of the presence we've been waiting for. Just as importantly, it necessitates our conscious, active participation in no longer dismissing the possibility of a reality (currently unseen) more loving, simple, direct, and generous than the one our procedural certainty tells us is the only option.

Here is where we're about to go: What if the presence we're all seeking is, well, always present ... hidden-in-plain-sight?

Mike Peters/Mother Goose & Grimm
Hidden-in-Plain-Sight

“

You think because you understand one you also comprehend two, because one and one make two. But to truly understand one plus one, you must first comprehend AND.

— Sufi wisdom saying

Within the paradigm of scientific materialism, over the past few centuries we have turned almost exclusively to trusting only what we can see and measure. If it can’t be recognized as some-thing, labeled and counted, then it isn't considered valid. Absence of proof equals proof of absence. Unseen is now synonymous with unreal.

Big mistake.

Until recently, science said the universe was made up of a bunch of things: asteroids, planets, stars, and galaxies, all floating in a hollow void. But in the past three decades cosmologists and astrophysicists have begun to recognize an unseen, yet always present, background in which all recognizable material exists. Known as dark matter/dark energy, we now understand this invisible background to make up more than 95% of the universe.

How do scientists detect dark matter/dark energy? By its gravitational pull on everything: from atoms to stars (which, by the way, make up less than 1% of the universe). All recognizable matter is under the direct influence of a non-recognizable force that exerts its influence on every known thing. Indeed, dark matter/dark energy is, in this very
moment, influencing and “bending” the arc of every galaxy in the universe.

Unseen, yet real.
So it is with AND.

Not dissimilar to dark matter, AND is always exerting its pull on our lives. Unseen and real.

**UNSEEN REAL**

_The following image is an orphan in Iraq, who draws a picture of a mother each night and sleeps inside._

AND is always hidden-in-plain-sight, calling the shots. Attachment research is remarkably clear: When a child experiences trusted access to AND, that child will be predictably secure and at ease in her life. We now have thousands of research studies from every continent, each arriving at this same conclusion. Some have begun to call attachment research "The Science of AND."

When a child can’t trust AND (when her caregiver can’t offer ways to mutually negotiate AND), that child will be insecure and will need to establish a protective strategy to avoid the pain of no-AND (absence).

I’m hunching you can’t think of a recent novel or movie dealing with the human condition (whether written recently or 500 years ago) that didn’t center around AND. The drama and difficulty at the heart of any story happens
because the key players require AND, are seeking AND, while struggling to negotiate AND.

Here's the heartbeat of what every child needs to learn about AND:
"I am with you.
You are with me.
No matter what happens, we will get through it together."
   You. Me. Us.
   You. Me. AND.

I have never seen anyone outgrow a need for this core requirement of shared companionship. Always carrying a sense of you, me, and us into each of life's circumstances is both good and healthy.

THE PLOT THICKENS: RESONANCE & POTENTIAL SPACE

As an attachment researcher I've come to recognize that infants and young children, as they are forming their view of how AND manifests in their lives, require two central themes from their presence-givers:

1. Predictable, steady, and tender availability.
2. Support for an ever-changing experience of fresh possibility.

Babies are hardwired for what we call resonance: presence that has both stability (steady predictability) and flow (non-formulaic attunement to the moment-to-moment shifts in a child's emotional state.)
Donald Winnicott also had a name for this other aspect of a child's need. We already know half of Winnicott's equation; here is the second half. Children need an underlying holding environment that simultaneously offers, in each new moment, what he described as potential space.

Presence must be both unchanging/unconditional and always-new. See how this works with baby Oliver:

Resonance is the opposite of static, rigid, robotic formulas. Resonance has no agenda or manual. It is attuned to the flow of another's ever-changing experience.

“A Zen student enters his teacher’s room. The teacher offers a cup of tea. “I don’t need tea Master, I need to be shown Original Reality.” The Master’s instant reply: “It just moved.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kcp6xw1qNZA

Comedy Central
Attachment research keeps returning to the same conclusion: healthy, secure relationships always include room for the uniqueness of each individual and the richness of the AND that connects them. (Interestingly, a significant characteristic of many insecure adults is the habitual denial and devaluation of the connection they most need. "I don’t really have needs. It's all up to me. I'm alone, I know we’ll all die alone and I'm courageous to admit it.")

In every culture thus far studied, genuine security in children (and adults) always includes the capacity to trust in AND. Me. You. Us.

Sadly, trust in AND isn't as common as we'd like to believe.

Our first relationships don’t have to be terribly bad in order for us to eventually feel both terrible and bad. Momentary cues for being-with from an infant that go unrecognized by the caregiver ("I want you here with me, and I need you to slow down to my pace and my rhythm"), are not experiences that most of us would consider dangerous or severe.
WATCHING LINDSEY

“

[From our earliest moments on planet earth] there’s one question that all brains want answered, and they want it answered, “Yes.” And they don’t want a lukewarm “Yes,” or a “Maybe Yes,” or a “Getting-to-Yes, Yes.” They want a substantial, resounding, unequivocal, “YES! Yes.” When the answer is something other than “Yes,” if the answer is “Maybe,” or “I’m not sure,” a confusion and uncertainty begins to take shape in our brains. The question our brains ask is: Are you there for me? Do I matter enough that you’ll put me first when I need you to? Can I count on you to attend to me in the ways I need you to? Do I truly and deeply matter to you?

— Mark Brady, Ph.D.

Attachment researchers spend a great deal of time watching babies with their caregivers in millisecond interactions. We notice how infants are always paying very close attention to the willingness of their caregiver to follow their lead.

So, as an attachment researcher it is my job to pay exquisite attention to how infants pay exquisite attention to the quality of AND between their caregivers and themselves. In the following observation of video freeze-frame you will witness baby Lindsey experience AND as a question: "Are you here with me now? And now? And now? Will you stay with me as I change moment to moment? Can you say YES to all of me or are there places in me where you start saying Maybe yes. Or No Way?"
I’m sitting next to a mother as she perches on her chair’s edge, looking toward a video monitor placed in front of us. Monica is a highly successful young professional seeking help because her four-month-old daughter Lindsey, “just cries and cries, unable to calm herself down.” After a brief pause she adds, “Maybe I spoil her, because she seems so ungrateful.” I’m about to show a recently recorded videotape of this mother and daughter in a standard laboratory interactive session. The screen displays Monica as she sits on a folding chair directly facing Lindsey, who is leaning back in a car seat looking in the direction of her mom.

As Monica and I watch the monitor, we see how she is smiling broadly, eyes dilated, intensely focusing upon her daughter. This mother, utilizing her signature upbeat intonation, calls out to Lindsey in a high-pitched voice. “Hey Linds! Watcha doin’?” Her daughter, head at the back of her chair, returns her mother’s smile for several seconds and then looks out beyond her mom, then down and to the right. Monica immediately shifts her weight, bringing her head into alignment with her daughter’s new position. With a cheerful, bubbly voice mom chants “Lindsey, Lindsey! Hey, Linds!” Her daughter’s shoulders shrug briefly as she momentarily meets her mother’s gaze. They both grin, each smiling, but this time Lindsey’s smile seems slightly odd, almost forced. The baby’s eyes quickly move up past her mother to the lights on the ceiling. The mother’s smile falters for a few tenths of a second, then seems to ratchet up a notch. Monica raises her right hand and commences to gently, but insistently poke her child’s tummy. “You like to be tickled don’t you? Yes, you do. Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha.” As she finishes the third repetition of “gotcha,” Lindsey winces briefly, then begins to whimper. Not yet crying, it is clear that she soon will. Mother
momentarily shifts her gaze out and away from Lindsey, frowns slightly, and with a barely discernible irritation turns to face her daughter. **This mother’s tone is suddenly flat, the cheer fully vanished. “I think you’re just sleepy. You just get so cranky when you need a nap.”** Now turning away, she begins rummaging through her purse. With a voice slightly aloof, almost curt, she intones: “Let me find your Binky.”

From a clinical perspective, what we’ve just seen is a mother whose hope for shared happiness makes it hard to read her daughter’s bids for personal space and a slower, less frantic rhythm. Because of this mother’s inability to dial-down her own need, her child eventually winces and whimpers, cuing ever more directly that mom’s intense agenda is simply too much. Unfortunately, when Monica notices her daughter’s distance, she misses an opportunity to experience the relationship from her child’s perspective. Instead, because she is feeling momentarily rejected this mother withdraws her warmth. She’ll back off, but with a sense of confusion and growing resentment. Sadly, they are moving into a relationship where neither mother nor daughter will feel they can get things right.

Moments of not meeting. Moments of void.

To paraphrase Winnicott: It is easier to remember difficult, even traumatic events, than it is to remember moments of absence, where presence was needed. How do you remember nothing happening when an attuned response was needed? How do you remember the specifics of emptiness?

What we’ve seen here certainly wouldn’t be defined as neglect or abandonment, at least not
in the way we might typically understand these terms. Even so, four-month-old Lindsey has begun to experience something of what it’s like to feel unknown. Naturally, instinctively seeking an experience of AND from a mother who is well-intentioned but unable to read some of her cues, Lindsey already has a dawning sense of being a stranger in a strange land.

How is Lindsey to make sense of the fact that the central figure in her life, the one teaching her the structure and nuance of relationship, is unable to read her requests for less pressure and more personal space? How, at four months old, is she to understand the sense of absence she is already beginning to know?

Years later, unable to decipher persistent feelings of isolation and a tendency for self-attack, Lindsey might find herself speaking to a therapist. “It makes absolutely no sense. I had an almost perfect childhood. My mom was utterly devoted to me. But, inside I feel lost, like no one actually ‘Gets it. Gets me.’ I’m never really happy, or even satisfied. There’s something really wrong with me. I’m such an ungrateful bitch.”

There she’ll still be sitting, feeling terrible and bad. There she'll sit blaming herself for an emptiness that makes no sense.

She will sit in absence, yet she won't feel completely alone. Lindsey will have something bad about herself and her life to focus on, and she'll have a persistent, harsh, yet ever-present Voice keeping her company. Unfortunately, I see this in therapy patients like a grown-up Lindsey all the time.
NO-THINGNESS

We're back at square one.

Many of us didn't actually know resonance (either holding or potential space) at the level we most needed it when we were building our definition of "reality."

The questions we need to ask: Can we change? Can we find AND now? Is it too late to know being-with?

Here's where the best hint I know begins: AND isn't to be found in the ways we're used to finding something. Because AND isn't a thing. Rather, it's the hidden-in-plain-sight, dark matter, unseen background being-with that is always present. For everything and everyone.

AND holds galaxies, atoms, and everything in between.
AND holds each of us, whether we know it or not.

AND isn't a thing. AND holds all things. AND is resonance-*between*-things.

When Piglet says "nothing" he is saying "no-thing." Piglet is saying, "What I most need is no-thingness. I need not-thing-ness. I need the AND-that-holds; resonance. I need the non-thingness at the heart of all things shared with you."


— John Cage

Each something is a celebration of the no-thing that supports it.

“
Out of no-thingness, holding and newness continually arise. As Meister Eckhart said 800 years ago: "There exists in the present instant, a *now* which, without end, is ever new." Presence is synonymous with emergence. AND is being born now. And now. And now.

No-thingness is actually the opposite of our procedural experience of "nothingness." Those of us who are afraid (or certain) that we live in a universe of random nothingness are actually reliving and describing the vacancy of our learned absence. This is memory now masquerading as "reality." Nothingness-as-worldview confirms itself, becoming increasingly rigid and ultimately static. It was
cool and distant when we were young allowing all of reality to appear impersonal and vacant now.

But no-thingness is vital, fresh, and filled with caring.

(And now and now) activated, alive, new... with shared presence.

Whenever we open to AND, we experience presence. Whenever we deny AND, we reconfirm absence.

Being-with is never some-thing. It's the utterly obvious but all-too-often unrecognized resonance of between-ness. Space that appeared empty remains space, yet it is now
TRANSITIONAL PRESENCE

I once heard a man say that he had decided to choose his religion by whichever one had the best imaginary friend. Donald Winnicott might have agreed. Winnicott believed that a young child’s holding companion (what he called a *transitional object*) was offering an essential relationship that was both imagined and real; more real and more essential than a rational mind can comprehend.

Paraphrasing Winnicott: "My fuzzy friend is partly me and partly you. My friend is me-with-you; you-with-me. Me AND you. Otherwise I’m only me ... alone."

Transitional objects allow us to, well, transition: to bring *being-with* with us. They also allow us to loosen our grip on "reality." Children can be given the luxury of not having to decide between the "real" world and a world of deepening, rich, relational complexity, one that includes me, you and us in the essential form of tender, ongoing (wherever I go there you are) companionship.
“

When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

— Margery Williams

We are hardwired for relationship. We are hardwired for an experience of me with you; you AND me. This need never goes away. When allowed, young children don't outgrow their gentle companions, rather they bring this trusted presence with them into each encounter from that point forward.

As adults, can we give ourselves the option that securely attached children are given, the option of not having to decide between the “real” world of consensual reality and a reality that offers shared presence deeper than proof?

Rather than wishful thinking, our willingness to risk and trust may be precisely how we enter a realm that can only be experienced through a combination of uncertainty and confidence. It just may take more courage to risk trusting in the unseen (almost) known than to remain safe in our predictable, procedural ("It's up to me alone, but at least I'm not kidding myself") certainty.

I Pick Up a Hitchhiker

After a few miles, he tells me that my car has no engine.
I pull over, and we both get out and look under the hood.
He's right.
We don't say anything more about it all the way to California.

- Jay Leeming
BACK TO AND

As is true with dark matter/energy, we can’t see AND. But, from the perspective of developmental psychology, AND is the “context” that is always actively influencing the “text” (bending the arc) of every life: child or adult.

If AND is such a central player in all that we’re about, if AND is always present and negotiable when we’re secure, yet limited and not-so-negotiable when we’re insecure, maybe AND has something to do with the underlying structure of the universe we were born into.

Our hardwired need for AND (simple, attuned presence with us) is definitely no sentimental pretense in an otherwise “real world” understanding of things.

AND is never a secondary factor in our lives.

When AND isn't present we always suffer. Can you think of a time when the loss of a genuine experience of AND felt good? Isn't the inability to experience AND at the heart of your deepest pain, either past or present?

Finding ways to directly access AND becomes, from my vantage point, the central task of our lives.
Thirst. And. Tenderness.

This is my core contention: We live in a Mysterious, yet deeply coherent universe. Absence implies presence. Need implies holding. Our hidden longing is indication of Hidden Intimacy awaiting us.

TURNING WORD

Almost thirty years ago, during a week-long meditation retreat with my Zen teacher Joko Beck, something snapped in a very negative way. Seemingly out of nowhere, the chronic, relentless pain that had been in my head for the past 10 years seemed to intensify, and over the next few hours my mind felt as though it might shatter. The very pain that I’d been learning to hold and be-with was suddenly unbearable. Everything in my life that had begun to make sense, now seemed an illusion.

Immediately I reverted to my earlier certainty that life was suffering and suffering only.

I was desperate to talk with Joko in the midst of this all-to-familiar free-fall; it was as though I was reliving my childhood. While
making arrangements for this conversation, the monitor with whom I was interacting seemed to be exceptionally kind, calm, and focused. Was it her tone of voice, her quiet smile, her unrushed manner? I didn't know, but as I entered the consulting room to talk with Joko, I mentioned my momentary interaction with the monitor. Then I named my overwhelming despair about how the pain in my head was suddenly, yet again, swamping me.

Joko listened with great care, saying nothing. Finally, after several minutes of silence, she asked a question that included a central observation: "Kent, you don't really know much about tenderness, do you?"

The world literally stood still. In that stillness a childhood of loneliness and ever-present fear exploded through my body.

I began to sob. "No, Joko, I do not. I don't think I ever have."

Her next statement would alter my life forever: "What do you think this is all about?" (As she said the word "this" she gestured with her arms in a full circle.)

"What do you mean Joko? Are you saying that enlightenment has something to do with tenderness?"

She slowly began to smile, nodding in agreement.

I continued to cry throughout the remainder of the retreat and into the weeks that followed.

During another retreat, maybe a year later, Joko said what I now consider to be a summary of her teaching. "If there's an orphan in our lives, it's our pain. Nobody wants their
pain. We want it gone. That's a big part of what meditation offers, no longer pushing pain away. Sitting, just being—with this exact pain. Every moment is just another opportunity to stay simple and hold the orphan of your pain."

All these years later, the continual pain on the right side of my head continues. On most days, most of the time, it is no longer an orphan.

“Underneath all his preoccupations with sex, society, religion, etc. (all the staple abstractions which allow the forebrain to chatter) there is, quite simply, a person tortured beyond endurance by the lack of tenderness in the world.

— Lawrence Durrell
These days, as I observe a teenage, recently homeless mother with a history of severe abuse and neglect offering simple, genuine, ongoing tenderness to her baby, I trust that I am seeing the hardwiring we all share. Over the years I've observed dozens of young mothers choose to dig deeper than a personal history of pain. In every case these parents find an innate capacity to become increasingly secure and lovingly available for their (increasingly) secure children. I fully trust that these courageous souls are manifesting what D.H. Lawrence called, "the living, incarnate universe."

Love is given, not taught. AND emerges naturally, rather than being learned. Original presence is always awaiting discovery.

Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen once described our capacity to love as "the most divine captured in the most human."

Seen in this way, the universe is a fractal. The smaller is a direct manifestation of the Larger. Like Russian nesting dolls, the Larger-as-
original pattern is contained within the smaller. At every level: everything is the same, only different.

Tenderness is a fractal. Being-with is a fractal. Presence is a fractal.

Is it a coincidence that Jesus used the word *Abba* to describe the ultimate nature of the universe? (Abba or "Daddy" is the most intimate term for father in Jesus' native Aramaic. Who knows, he may also have used the word *Amma.*)

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.
— Philip K. Dick

Fortunately, for many of us the ultimate nature of reality is infinitely larger than our early experiences here on planet earth. As a clinician and one who meditates, I have come to trust that my (and your) hardwiring for presence isn’t some random occurrence within a cosmos empty of compassion. Rather, this deep coherence is built into who we are. We are, as James Joyce said, living within the "Mama matrix most mysterious."
Throughout history, the originators of the major faith traditions have sought to offer a path to this hidden-in-plain-sight deeper dimension. (Sadly, their followers have often been swamped by the same procedural strategies for self-protection and control that blunt or fully block access to this hidden reality.)

A man had spent years in search of what he described as "the key to the universe." Seeking only the world's greatest teachers, he continually found himself disappointed in their answers. He was finally led to the cave of an old monk secluded deep in the mountains of Tibet. All who knew this monk assured the man that his answer would finally be found here.

"Most Revered Master, please, I've traveled for years in search of the key to the universe." "Well," said the Master, "I have some good news and some bad news." "The bad?" inquired the man with a very worried face. "There is no key." "And the good?" the man blurted out, now desperate. "It was never locked."
PRESENCE IN ABSENCE

After years of focusing on presence and absence, I was walking down a street in Amsterdam in 2014. There, on a vacant storefront window, was written - in English - the following piece of graffiti.

“

The whole world lives within a safeguarding, fish inside waves, birds held in the sky ... even the ground, the air, the water, every spark floating up from the fire: all subsist, exist, are held in the divine. Nothing is ever alone for a single moment.

— Rumi

Often, as people learn about the specifics of procedural memory, a certain despair sets in. “If I didn’t get what I needed early on, and I’m now stuck with an automated belief system that isn’t particularly good at trusting, where’s the hope?”

Adding insult to injury, procedural memory turns out to be remarkably resistant to change. As infant researcher Daniel Stern states it,
“History creates inertia.” Experience follows expectation.

So, yes: many of us have something of a tall mountain to climb.

This is where our deepest hardwiring comes in. Said another way, this is where the underlying nature of our need, and the larger universe from which it emerges, comes into the picture.

Robert Frost wrote that each of us have “an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired.” Developmental psychologists the world over know we’re hardwired for relationship, that built within us is an undeniable thirst for the AND of love. Our need for presence isn’t a luxury, or some “add on” should we be fortunate enough to find it. We don’t choose our longing for presence any more than we choose our need of water.

"Thirst is proof of water."
— Sufi wisdom saying

"We cannot live dry." - Mark Nepo

Only love fulfills.

As I’ve said previously, I believe our need for intimacy is the manifestation of a universe ready to meet it. Our thirst for presence is map, not aberration. Neither is it failing or indication of something wrong with us. Our thirst for belonging is our greatest guide.

Original need requires original presence.
At this point, the only issue is whether we’re willing to allow our deep need for presence to change us, or if we'll keep our longing buried in negative certainty, locked inside lives as we’ve always known them.

It’s one thing to recognize our thirst for AND; it’s another thing altogether to make the decision to access it.

Give your weakness to one who helps.

Crying out loud and weeping are great resources.
A nursing mother, all she does is wait to hear her child.

Just a little beginning-whimper, and she’s there.

God created the child, that is, your wanting, so that it might cry out, so that milk might come.

Cry out! Don’t be stolid and silent with your pain. Lament! And let the milk of loving flow into you.

-Rumi
A SUMMARY OF WHERE WE’VE COME

Without knowing it, we typically recreate our painful past again and again throughout each day. But, our early procedural programming can only continue to call the shots if we stay inside the spell it keeps weaving, recommitting thousands of times each day to see the world through a lens of negative options.

Not only were neural pathways formed in our earliest years, but new neural pathways are now being created by our *current agreement* with what we originally learned about relationship. The prisoner has unwittingly become the jailer.

We may not be able to stop the old messages that the Voice continues to whisper, but once we recognize these messages as early programming, any ongoing acquiesce to their validity becomes consent.

Once again: We are always either strengthening our procedural mind or finding ways to build a new one.

Waking up includes becoming aware that we live inside a pre-programmed jail cell. It also includes finding a way to live outside its limitations. In order to do so, something essential remains to be done if we wish to gain access to a more freeing option. Initially, we’ll need to ask several questions in order to find
the way beyond the limitations of procedural memory:

- What if reality is actually larger than the one we were first taught to know?
- What if there is a context bigger than the narrative/text we were taught to believe? (Not that our early learning was inaccurate, because it clearly does tell the story, true in its own way, about what our initial experiences felt like.)
- Does the sense of certainty instilled in our early neural pathways define the full range of options available to us now?
- Do the limitations of our original caregivers accurately describe the entire spectrum of holding and possibility available to us in this moment?

Said another way, can fresh options be added to our sense of what’s possible? Can we experience a new mind, even though the learned difficulties of our old mind continue to persist?

Daniel Siegel, a brain researcher at UCLA, puts it this way: “Where attention goes, neurons fire. And where neurons fire, they rewire.” Our sense of “reality” is indeed fully capable of being expanded. Our brains, regardless of age, are available for rewiring.
Our worldview is not limited to our initial, procedurally learned conclusions. Deeper down, the cement remains wet.

But, there remains a central caveat. The rewiring of procedural negativity doesn’t seem to happen without two key ingredients:

- Actual experience of authentic presence and possibility, holding and potential space beyond our original sense of negative certainty,
- A willingness to actively try to accept this new experience of presence in spite of a continuing felt certainty about absence.

In other words, we need to find a way to practice presence in absence.

Fortunately, we have that exact option: the intentional, gradual acceptance of a deeper, always-present, underlying AND; presence that holds the possibility of new possibility. Being-with that meets us (and our orphaned selves) exactly where we are, offering tenderness.

Moments of meeting. Moments of trust.
EMERGING THEMES

We are, of course, venturing into that place where the core themes of psychology merge with the core themes of sacred practice.

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest... the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.

— Annie Dillard

There is, indeed, a place of "forever empty," a lived absence that brings only terror. Deeper still there exists hidden grounding: Sacred ground, holding all things, even the black hole itself. Catholic monk Thomas Merton
described it as "hidden wholeness," the unseen, unrecognized source from which all things unfold. Now. Now. And now.

This hidden dimension has a thousand names, yet remains beyond all names.

"God," "Original Presence," “Ground of Being,” no matter what name we choose, the Source of all things cannot be owned, trademarked, or controlled. Great Mystery simply cannot be possessed. (This has not stopped many within organized religions from attempting to do so for millennia.)

Named or unnamed, hidden wholeness is always grounding us. It always holds what is and offers newness from the roots we find here. This dimension, further down, cannot be attained or acquired. It is given. We either awaken to holding or we don't. We either trust in roots that are already deep and sustaining us, or we deny them by believing they must first be earned or we refuse to believe that grounding is even possible.
How long does it take to discover hidden holding? Only as long as it takes to realize it takes no time at all.

We dare not call this deeper dimension anything. If we were to call it Level Three, we would immediately "thingify" what is continually emerging, fresh, unbound. ("It just moved.") Wholeness-as-potential space is always dynamic, alive, and outside the control of any set definition.

Maybe it’s Level AND.

Now. AND now. AND now.
HIDDEN HOLDING

“The first step in spiritual practice is to know ourselves to be lovable and allow ourselves to be loved.”

— John Main, O.S.B.

In the decades since my “tenderness opening” with Joko, I have continued to sit in meditation as a way of gradually accessing the presence I didn’t know as a child. Slowly, year-by-year, I have increasingly opened to the underlying tenderness of hidden holding, a presence I could never have imagined in my earlier life.

Through the years I have come to realize that psychotherapy and meditation practice are ultimately about the same theme: coming to trust that we are lovable and loved, that belonging is our original nature. Until and unless we begin to know this, nothing else actually matters. John Main says “the first step” is all about this learning.

I do not expect to ever move beyond this first step.

This picture of a young child’s hands in the larger hands of his loving parent is the image I
now look upon in order to be reminded of my deepest need. It is this image I bring with me into my daily meditation practice.

Until and unless I know the truth of holding, what I do with my life is just more of being busy and self-protective at Level One, trying to stay away from each “you’re unlovable and unloved” being whispered from Level Two.

This is big work.

HARD WORK

“...

I use ‘centering’ as a verb, to mean a continual process of uniting the opposites. Centering, for me, is the discipline of bringing in rather than leaving out; of saying yes to what is most holy as well as to what is most unbearable. The severity of that, as a discipline, is not widely understood.

— M.C. Richards

Trusting, for those of us who first learned not to trust, is no simple task. Thomas Merton says it well: "Prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone." There are many days when I’m forced to realize that my heart is hardened and that I’m unable to even consider trusting in love.
Here is the learning: the most unbearable can (and must) be brought into direct contact with the most sacred; the orphan needs to finally come home. It is here that we discover a hidden alchemy.

It is precisely in these moments, when being met seems impossible, that I am learning to choose the discipline of inviting Presence. This is the hardest work I know.

And it is no work at all.

The hard work is that I must choose to allow the unbearable (a dark memory or a seemingly impossible circumstance in my current life) to come into focus. The "no work" is that I realize it's no longer up to me. I'm learning to allow AND (hidden wholeness emerging in this new moment) to do the deeper work - often at a level my conscious mind can't fathom. I sit inside the pain, but I no longer sit alone.

In practical terms, how do I do this? I stop doing. I simply allow my breathing to slow to a gentle pace. I ask this next tender breath to meet me in the darkness of the painful ordinary.
Above Video: Tender in-breath, tender out-breath, tender in-breath ... whether for 30 seconds or 30 minutes, this is the hidden-in-plain-sight gift of finding a simple, always available practice. (More on this in the conclusion.)

This moment, exactly as it is (good, bad, or ugly), is met with this tender breath.

The tough news: In certain moments "the most unbearable" will inevitably emerge. The good news: There is a radical difference between sensing "the unbearable" while feeling alone in the darkness ...
... and experiencing the same sensation within the holding of a tender breath.

“This we have now is not imagination. This is not grief or joy. Not a judging state, or an elation, or sadness. Those come and go. This is the Presence that doesn’t.”

— Rumi
DAILY PRACTICE

The outcome? Change happens. Real change at a level I have not found any other way. This process of change, of necessity, requires a daily discipline, the importance of which is not widely understood.

It's one thing to have a new insight. But the capacity to trust is a whole new ballgame. When our "unthought known" speaks absence, trust can be gradually built through a discipline of dual awareness. For ten or twenty or thirty minutes a day we can sit and breathe with an intention: 1. to recognize negative or fearful thoughts as memories-of-absence (while periodically saying "Of course," which dissipates their power), and 2: of simultaneously rewiring our brain's architecture by creating new neural pathways bathed-in-Presence. More on this later.

You may notice that I now capitalize the word Presence. I have gradually come to recognize that presence/Presence is a fractal. I have gradually come to trust in a sense of loving, holding companionship in all of this – an Other who is with me and, inexplicably, for me. (I tend to get nervous when people talk this way. It can so easily be filled with a self-certainty that puts me off. Even so, in my own experience, this quiet awareness is simply true.)

Me. AND. Another. Hardwired and simple. Nothing special, yet absolutely essential.

Through the years I have moved from silence to Silence, from presence to Presence. I’ve come to recognize that tenderness doesn’t show up as some-thing; rather, tenderness is found with another.
Moments of meeting. Moments of trust.

Buddhists often speak of enlightenment as the direct experience of intimacy. Christians, in the 1800's, would speak of finding God as "being met by the Great Affection."

Sometimes this intimacy is experienced with another person: the touch of a friend, the memory of a teacher's voice, the glance of a child. Sometimes, it’s the greeting from an animal, walking past a familiar tree, the coloring of the sky. And sometimes, sitting in the quiet of the morning, I find tender companionship in an ineffable, discernible Presence too subtle to be grasped. Uncertain, yet sure.

Absence of proof is no longer proof of absence. Unseen isn’t the same as unreal or unavailable. I’ve come to know Presence by how I shift internally: I settle, I rest, I feel less alone, and – sometimes – I feel deeply connected, as though I’ve come home.

How could it be otherwise? The child/parent paradigm wasn’t pathological when we were young. It isn’t pathological now. The needs each of us originally had for holding from a loving caregiver (soothing, support, organizing guidance) don't disappear. Our early absolute dependence hasn't disappeared, we just learned
to defend against it. ("It's up to me.") Our original needs are primal, ongoing, and always relevant. Acknowledging this has become the foundation of my daily practice.

This has led to a new kind of trust. Admitting need on a regular basis, I have realized that I’m no longer the prime mover in my life. As I said a few moments ago, it isn’t “up to me” after all. I’ve chosen to be less in charge and more available to the hidden, yet consistent Presence and gradual transformation being offered.

“Give your weakness to one who helps ...” is the very thing I learned not to do as a child. As an adult I’ve had to admit the painful cost of this negative conclusion, and to gradually recognize that hell has nothing to do with weakness or vulnerability and everything to do with isolation.

Vulnerability is sacred. Isolation is a lie. Which is to say that I’ve learned to risk becoming dependent in a way that is risky and soothing in the same moment. I often enter my procedural certainty ("absence is the final word") while at the same time trusting that Presence (vast, fathomless, tender, and intimate) is with me and for me, holding and providing what I most need.

Thirst is, indeed, proof of water.

This learning has made all the difference.
I have a dear friend, a Catholic Cistercian monk, who has dedicated her life to meditation and prayer. I once put the following question before her: "What, in all your years in this monastery, is your greatest learning?"

Veronique's answer was immediate, brief, and confident, "I have learned to ask."

"So prayer is our sometimes real selves trying to communicate with the Real, with the Light. It is us reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found by a light and warmth in the world, instead of darkness and cold.

— Anne Lamott

**MEDITATION-AS-PRAYER**

Gradually, over the years, my meditation practice has become what might better be described as a life of prayer. Maybe it's meditation-as-prayer.

Where nothing was, no-thing now is. AND abounds.

This next breath becomes an opportunity to ask the Real to enter my still complicated and often confused life. This next tender breath is an admission that my need is deep and that it won’t ever be met by me alone. My great mistake has been the belief that it could be.
You have done well
In the contest of madness.

You were brave in that holy war ...

May I speak to you
Like we are close?

Once I found a stray kitten
And I used to soak my fingers
In warm milk;

It came to think I was five mothers
On one hand.

Weary traveler,
Why not rest your tired body?
Lean back and close your eyes ...

Surely
There is something wrong

With your ideas of
God,

O, surely there is something wrong
With your ideas of
God,

If you think
Our Beloved would not be so
Tender.

- Hafiz

Surely
There is something wrong

With your ideas of
God,
My "unthought known" is gradually becoming Unthought Knowing, trust deeper than words.

I no longer ask for an end to darkness, only to draw my next breath in tender Presence.

"I am with you. You are with me. No matter what happens, we will get through it together."

Presence in absence; I find ten-thousand blessings.

Conclusion

“... enter the breathing that is more than your own.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Show me the path to enlightenment.
It just moved.

Breath is always moving.

Most of each day we're taking breaths. Rarely do we slow ourselves enough to enter and receive a breath. This next breath can be entered as one might enter a sanctuary.

Entering. AND. Receiving.

Yet, there remains one additional step: As I enter and receive, I also open to being received. I open to being welcomed. The Silence deeper than silence is Presence, One always waiting and always welcoming me home. It is here, in this quiet affection (one so many of us have no clue is possible) that I finally know peace.

I am lovable and loved, after all.

We all are.

Tenderness offered, tenderness finally received.
I've never been one who was particularly good at "living in the now." Even so, I've gradually built a capacity, during random moments each day, to *be-with* one tender breath (or two, or seven).

Entering *this* breath I receive *this* offered tenderness: deeper than thought, deeper than negative certainty; a sanctuary hidden-in-*this*-moment.

I'm less focused on my awareness of each breath and increasingly focused on reverence and gratitude for each breath. The shift is away from "being aware" or "self-soothing" (often just another version of "it's up to me") and simply toward entering *and* receiving *and* being received.

I now awaken each morning, pour a cup of tea, light a candle, and sit on my couch in Silence.

Gone are the days of a more formal sitting posture (I continue to sit respectfully, yet comfortably). I say a brief prayer that admits my ongoing need, slow my breathing, allowing it to deepen just a bit, and enter the Tenderness I cannot own. Sometimes I silently breathe the word “Tender” or “Abba” or "Amma" or "Home." Sometimes I simply breathe.

*Presence beyond all names,*

*I need more deeply than I can know.*

*I ask to be given what I most need.*

*Please be with any thought or memory that tries to convince me I’m all alone.*

*Please heal what I have no power to heal.*

*Please fill me with your Tenderness.*

*Amen.*

Words, briefly. Then Silence.
Mother Teresa, when asked by an interviewer what she says to God when she prays answered: "I don't say anything. I just listen." When the interviewer asked what she hears God say, Mother Teresa replied: "God doesn't say anything. God just listens. And if you can't understand that I can't explain it to you."


... entering the Love that is more than our own.

I’m coming to trust this Presence we're each hardwired to know. My lens of learned absence ("forever empty") no longer runs my day. I have another option. This universe is different and kinder and more generous than my procedurally imbedded worldview would have ever believed.

Too good to be true? Or too true, simple, and hidden-in-plain-sight to fit my previously limited understanding of good?

In every moment, I am either agreeing with my procedural history or breathing within communion. So it is for many of us.

Standing outside a door, we believe we must find the key or, even worse, we are certain that no key exists.

The door was never locked.

Opening happens ... with this tender breath.
Not only is the hidden heart of our universe deeply tender, it is surprisingly personal.

Absence.
Presence.
Presence in absence.

“

It’s what we all want, in the end, to be held, merely to be held, to be kissed (not necessarily with the lips, for every touching is a kind of kiss). Yes, it’s what we all want, in the end, not to be worshiped, not to be admired, not to be famous, not to be feared ... but simply to be held.

— Alden Nowlan
I want to honor your commitment to an eighty-seven-minute experience and nothing more. That time has likely come and gone.

This means that eightysevenminutes.com ends here.

I have an aversion to sites that assume further contact is something we’re interested in. Hence, I want a clear demarcation between what I've presented in these chapters and another option that is available, but only to those who make the intentional choice to access it.
You have the choice to explore my interactive website, *hiddenholding.com*, should you be interested in:

- Options for building a daily practice (brief video instruction, readings, etc.).
- Periodic updates to the writing presented on this site, shared comments from readers, etc.

As was true with this site, the experience is gratis. Another small donation to someone in need would be fine, but not expected.

Thank you for being here now, whatever choice you make.

Here is a brief sample of what you will find:

I no longer believe that what we're lacking is additional information, more learning, better thinking. While sometimes helpful, our tendency to seek “more” is often an attempt to side-step our deeper experience of absence.

Said simply: I'd gladly trade 1,000 books and 11,000 new ideas for a Daily Presence Practice (10-30 minutes), one that continually deepens my roots within hidden holding. Truth be told, I'd trade nine remarkable ideas for a single, tender breath (8 seconds).

So, how might this look?
The blue line in the images above represents the breathing pattern shown in the last chapter, a restful, tender inhale and easy, restful exhale. (Approximately 4 counts on the in-breath and 4 counts on the out-breath; breathing into the belly, rather than into the chest. The emphasis is upon gentle breathing rather than deep breathing.)

The above image depicts our two-dimensional world, with the new option of breathing from the grounding resource of a hidden dimension (AND).

Breathing from this dimension into our Level One strategies and Level Two negative certainty is how transformation can happen.

Only this: tender breath ... tender breath ... tender breath.
My original meditation teacher in the early 1970's, Allan Hunter, would say "Breathe and wait." He was essentially saying, "Don't be expecting something new or special when you're meditating. Don't go looking for profound experiences or new insights. Just be faithful to your daily practice and pay close attention through your day to the shifts and changes in your life.” Other than feeling calmer, accessing what we deeply need will likely not be a conscious experience during our time of meditation. Rather, it will show up in how our lives begin to transform: day by week by month by year.

Trust roots that move in dark soil. Blind, but not blindly.
SHARE EIGHTYSEVENMINUTES.COM

This site was not designed to go *viral*. It was written to go *dual*. One AND one.

While you've been reading, there may have been several people who came to mind, people you hunch might find this experience useful. Connecting them to what is presented here is my hope.

By the way, if you also want to share this on a social media site, that's fine too. Who knows where this note-in-a-bottle might end up?

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