



*The  
Path to  
Self Acceptance*

# The Path to Self Acceptance

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# Table of Contents

	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>Pg. 2</i>
1.	<i>Attentiveness</i>	<i>Pg. 5</i>
2.	<i>Leniency</i>	<i>Pg. 8</i>
3.	<i>Inclusion</i>	<i>Pg. 11</i>
4.	<i>Gratefulness</i>	<i>Pg. 15</i>
5.	<i>Nesting</i>	<i>Pg. 19</i>
6.	<i>Intuition</i>	<i>Pg. 23</i>
7.	<i>Nurture</i>	<i>Pg. 27</i>
8.	<i>Grounding</i>	<i>Pg. 35</i>
	<i>Epilogue</i>	<i>Pg. 38</i>



## *Introduction*

Have you ever found yourself trying to drive with the parking brake on? I know, it sounds like such a silly thing to do, but it's happened to me on plenty of occasions. Before I realize what's going on, I always have the same thought: Why does it feel like something is pulling me back while I'm trying to drive?

Life can feel like that sometimes. We can be trying to move forward in life-in relationships, careers, hobbies-and can feel like there is something actively working against us. Of course, there can be a lot of different reasons for this. There can be external factors such as financial difficulties or conflicts with others. There can be health related factors such as a physical or mental illness. There is one significant factor I want to address here that is an all too common culprit: a lack of self-acceptance.

When I was six years old, we moved to a new town where I started first grade. Of course, the relocation would have caused enough stress, but I also confronted a bully in my class. He stood a head taller than everyone else in our class. I imagine that he dealt with a lot of stress himself, which led him to take it out on others. Eventually, I didn't want to go to school anymore and my education suffered as I fell far behind on the class work. Thankfully my parents stepped in and helped to resolve the situation.

Imagine, however, if the bully were not a classmate or a co-worker, but a presence within you. Imagine that this presence is constantly telling you how stupid, or dirty, or worthless you are. Unlike my experience in first grade, no one can come along and resolve the problem because it's not out there, but in here. I imagine many of us don't have to imagine very much, because we know all too well what this feels like.

The thing is, we don't start out this way. If children are doted on by their parents from the moment they are born-which is what happens to most of us-we don't start out with that voice. Instead, we tend to think that the world revolves around us, which is a good and natural phase of childhood if parents are doing their jobs well.

Something happens along the way for most of us, however, that changes all of this. It can be something seemingly insignificant such as a parent having a bad day and scolding us harshly, or



it can be severe, such as a person of authority taking advantage of us. The most important element is not always what happened, but the message we internalized as a result of what happened.

For me, it was a moment where my father was trying to discipline me and did something that was too harsh-not physical, just too harsh-because parents have their bad days as well. In that moment, as a young child, I internalized a message to make sense of the situation. I, like many children, subconsciously needed to idealize my parents in order to feel like I was safe. Therefore, instead of seeing my father as acting badly, I assumed that I was the problem, that I was fundamentally unlovable and that I needed to be a good little boy to be accepted.

There are a lot of dynamics that go into why I developed those particular beliefs about myself, but the point is that I did, and they have traveled with me for my entire life. Whenever I am moving forward and something triggers me, those beliefs step in and inhibit my progress, like an engaged parking brake on a moving vehicle.

It is an exhausting pattern. It is the reality we face when we do not accept ourselves. While this is not something that can magically be resolved in a moment, there is hope. We can learn what is turning the parking brake on and work to release it. We'll find that it will often want to turn back on, but even learning to accept that part of ourselves will begin to break its hold over us.

In this short resource, I want to share with you concepts and tips for growing in the process of self-acceptance. I want to share them with you because they have been vital in my journey to a more joyful and free life. No one ever gets to a place where they perfectly accept themselves all the time. There are always challenges and room for growth, but I am in a much better place today because of the help of so many wonderful people in my life-from therapists to spiritual directors, from loved ones to mentors. I want to share this with you so perhaps you can gain some freedom from the parking brake that holds you back, and feel empowered to move forward.

There are eight areas that I will address here. I did not want to call them steps to avoid implying that this is a completely linear process in which you do so many steps to suddenly find yourself transformed. Unfortunately, the inner journey is just not that simple. It is a two steps forward, one step back sort of a process. However, I can tell you that these areas, when diligently attended to, have helped me and so many others in my life move forward.

The areas we will explore are as follows:

- **Attentiveness:** Learning to observe what is going on within us.
- **Leniency:** Learning to have compassion for ourselves when we make mistakes.
- **Inclusion:** Learning to see ourselves as belonging to the greater story.
- **Gratefulness:** Learning to appreciate the blessings in our lives, especially ourselves.
- **Nesting:** Learning to create a safe environment to help ourselves heal and grow.
- **Intuition:** Learning to listen to and trust our inner wisdom.

- Nurture: Learning to care for ourselves.
- Grounding: Learning to come back to the present moment when we are struggling.

Together these spell the acronym ALIGNING, because this is essentially what self-acceptance does-helps us align ourselves with who we truly are. It also serves as a convenient acronym to help remember each area.

Let's dive in.



## *Attentiveness*

Many years ago, my wife and I were on a road trip to see my parents. They lived in Iowa at the time, which is where I grew up. Driving through the flatlands of the Midwest gives one ample time to discuss a variety of topics.

I don't remember what we were talking about in particular, but one line from my wife stands out. Seemingly out of nowhere, she pulled out the line, "You really don't like yourself, do you?"

I couldn't have been more stunned if she had thrown freezing cold water on my face. I stumbled over a response to her that would somehow deflect her ridiculous observation. Looking back though, she was absolutely right.

I can see now that I didn't like myself at all. In fact, I pretty much hated myself, and yet I had no idea this was the case. I had no idea that I was constantly terrorizing myself with lies and attacks about who I really was. I believed I was bad, dirty, and worthless, and I had no idea.

It's remarkable, really, how oblivious we can be to our own inner worlds. How can we be that clueless? There are a variety of reasons in my case.

First of all, I believed that my survival was dependent on the lies I believed about myself being true, which was an idea I had carried with me since childhood. The thing is, even though these beliefs are concocted in our early years, we continue to hold onto them into adulthood. We often don't even stop to ask if they make sense because we're not aware that they even exist.

The lies that I believed also fit together with the belief system within which I was immersed. We all have systems that we are born into and that guide our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. For me, this came in the form of a conservative, fundamentalist Christianity which taught us that we were inherently bad, and that God's disposition toward us was primarily wrathful. So my belief that I was no good stemmed from multiple sources.

We all have different beliefs and influences that impact us. The issue arises when we do not know what those influences are. Thus, the path towards self acceptance begins with learning to be attentive to ourselves so we can become aware of what is happening within us.

We usually don't want to become aware of it though. It feels too painful. It feels like it would overwhelm us. So we often decide it would just be easier to ignore the beliefs inside us and the wounds that help create them. Opening them up would feel like we are giving them control, and we can't stand to be out of control.

That's not how it works, though. As Anthony De Mello phrased it, "What you are aware of you are in control of; what you are not aware of is in control of you. You are always a slave to what you're not aware of. When you're aware of it, you're free from it."<sup>1</sup>

Many of us were taught the very opposite, though. We grew up in environments where we weren't allowed to talk about certain things or ask difficult questions. In such secretive contexts, things do not get normalized. As Brené Brown describes the experience, "You assume that if no one is talking about it, it must be just you."<sup>2</sup>

There's a powerful lie all on its own: "It's just you." There are few things more shaming than feeling as though you are the only one who is struggling. That is the power of support groups, therapists, and confessionals-the power of knowing we are not the only ones who are struggling.

None of this is possible, however, if we don't first become aware of what's going on within us. This is why we begin with attentiveness.

How is this accomplished? There are a myriad of ways this can be done, but they all rely on a pivotal approach that we often don't want to hear, let alone do, and that is to slow down. Make time to be still, whether through meditation, contemplation, or prayer, and notice the thoughts and patterns within yourself. Sometimes we must slow down during our day, acting with less urgency and more awareness.

All of this serves to turn us from being pushed and pulled by our thoughts and emotions to observing them objectively. We must begin asking curious questions about ourselves, like, "Why did I feel the need to respond that way?" Or, "When did I begin feeling tense and nervous? Did something happen then that contributed to this change in me?"

Of course, this is a very humbling process, partly because we learn just how little we know about ourselves, and partly because we come face to face with our self-sabotaging patterns. But this is a good thing!

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<sup>1</sup> De Mello, *Awareness*, 81.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*, xiv.



Part of the freedom that comes with humility is learning that we have a place in this world. It is accepting that we are not better than others, but also learning our true significance. When we learn our less attractive patterns, we finally realize that they are just that: patterns and behaviors. They do not define who we are. Instead, they were survival mechanisms that we concocted along the way. With self-enlightenment comes the opportunity to see who we truly are and to develop new patterns that reflect this identity. What a beautiful change!

As you put this into practice, it will eventually become more natural. Over time, you will not only observe yourself in the quiet moments of meditation or prayer, but you will learn to observe yourself throughout the day and recognize your reactions as they happen. This will take time, of course.

You will find, as De Mello stated, "What you are aware of you are in control of." Seeing is the first step towards change.



## *Leniency*

As I mentioned before, when we become more of what's going on within us, it can be a humbling experience. Actually, sometimes it is downright humiliating. Richard Rohr is brutally honest when he says, "The first voices we hear are normally negative. They are paranoid and obsessive voices. They are agenda-driven and insecure voices. They are lustful and lazy voices. You will want to run, I assure you."<sup>3</sup>

Self awareness is not for the faint of heart, and this is why our second area of focus is so important. When we begin to see the pain and dysfunctions swirling around within us, our initial reaction is often harsh and judgmental. This will get us nowhere. In fact, much of what we have buried deep inside ourselves was the pain that resulted from being judged in the first place. Instead, we must learn to meet our wounded parts with mercy and compassion.

During the first few years of our marriage, my wife and I began to struggle in our relationship. I had little to no awareness of myself at the time, but I was hurting deeply. I was carrying the beliefs I developed about myself when I was younger-that I was bad, and that I needed to be on my best behavior so that I could be loved and accepted.

When my wife and I first met, I was excited about starting college and had come out of my shell. She fell in love with a confident young man who made her feel safe, and I fell in love with a free-spirited woman who made me feel comfortable.

After we were married and the realities of life hit us, I lost that confident side. I reverted back to the boy who was afraid of being alone. Eventually, I closed off to her in fear that she would see too close and reject me. I began seeking relief in unhealthy and hurtful ways, and we became very distanced from each other.

Thankfully, we chose to go to therapy together and found healing. As I began to see what was really going on and acknowledge the hurt I had caused, it was easy to get frustrated and angry with myself. That really didn't accomplish much. Instead, it only added to the pain I was working

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<sup>3</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 76.

through. I needed to offer a compassionate observation to myself: I did all of that for a reason, and that reason was to survive dysfunctional moments of my childhood.

The survival mechanisms we develop are in direct response to the pain we experience. They make sense.

It makes sense for the survivor of physical abuse to struggle with handling even healthy touching.

It makes sense for the child who was abandoned by their father to worry that their significant other is going to up and leave one day.

It makes sense. There's nothing wrong with us.

That's the question that usually arises, though, right? "What's wrong with you?"

When I was in college, I heard a woman speak who had struggled with homelessness for years in the past. Frequently she would hear that question. "What's wrong with you?"

It's a deeply shaming question, as if everyone else is doing just fine and it is you who are the problem.

She shared that it wasn't until people started asking a different question that she was able to find healing. "What happened to you?"

We don't exist in a vacuum. We are impacted by what happens around us, especially as children. Those impacts remain with us long into adulthood.

"What's wrong with you?" That's a question filled with judgment.

"What happened to you?" That's a question filled with compassion.

When we learn to have compassion for ourselves, we will get to the deeper reasons of why we function the way we do. Then we will not only have compassion for ourselves, but empathy as well. Instead of running away from the pain, we learn to embrace it and experience the healing of affirmation.

Insight is a great starting place, and it is necessary, but it is not enough to move us to a place of healing. Insight can help us understand why we did things, but when we learn to empathize with ourselves, we communicate to the wounded parts within us that they are not alone.

There is a neurological reason for this. Our trauma memories are stored in the amygdala. This is the part of our brains responsible for survival-for the fight or flight instinct. The part of our brain that controls insight and reasoning has no direct connection to the amygdala, meaning insight

cannot directly affect the trauma. However, our prefrontal cortex does have a direct connection, and it is what some call the “noticing brain.” It is like the friend who sits with us when we're hurting.

We can say things to ourselves like, “I see that part of me is feeling anxious.” Or, “I sense that something in me is afraid.”

This almost sounds too easy, though. We want to figure things out and fix them. The reality is that what we need most of all is an empathetic presence that can affirm what we are going through.

A wonderful thing happens as we learn to empathize with ourselves—we learn how to be more empathetic with others.

When I began really facing myself and working through the pain that was weighing me down, I gained more empathy for my father. I can now understand his reactions and know that they don't truly reflect him or how he thought of me. Having empathy for myself has made me a more capable son, husband, father, and person. There's not much more I could say to affirm this process than that.



## *Inclusion*

The third area we are exploring here is inclusion. Inclusion has rightly been a highlighted aspect in our culture as of late as we seek to right the wrongs of our past and ensure that everyone—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation—is accepted. For our purposes here, however, I want to focus on including ourselves. By this I mean two things. Firstly, accepting that we belong, both to our particular communities as well as to humanity as a whole. Secondly, accepting every part of ourselves, even the parts that we tend to try and avoid.

When we are little, assuming we have a reasonably loving family, most of us don't even question whether or not we belong; we just take it for granted. In a healthy family, the children are not only included, but are made the focal point. Thus, children in these settings tend to think that the world revolves around them—and this is a good sign. It is the natural reaction to being loved so well. As they grow and mature, they will learn how to share the spotlight with others.

We take for granted that we belong...until we don't. Somewhere along the way we experience something painful, something traumatic, that combats our sense of belonging. This can come in many forms. It can be the result of a malicious act, such as physical or sexual abuse. It also can be the result of someone having a bad day and inadvertently causing pain, like snapping in the heat of the moment or making a hurtful remark.

As children, when these painful incidents happen, we tend to take all the blame on ourselves. The world makes more sense if our parents still know what they're doing. Thus we begin to think of how we can measure up to fit into the environments in which we live.

These environments look different for all of us. A significant one for me was church. As a pastor's kid, I felt intense pressure to measure up to the church community and ensure that I was accepted. On top of this, there were many toxic beliefs that taught us we were inherently bad, that God was angry, and told us all the ways to ensure we would not be cast out.

We get this sense in society as a whole as well. Advertisements prey on our insecurities and ensure us that if we just go for the right product or service, we will finally find our place. Of course, now this has gone far past ads on television and drives much of what takes place on

social media, where everyone glosses over their perceived flaws and presents their more desirable attributes.

If nothing else, though, it at least shows us more plainly what we have always done anyway. We take the parts of ourselves that seem less acceptable and tuck them away. The wounded, insecure, frightened parts of ourselves so often just seem to get in the way, so we try to keep them hidden. When we do this, however, we are preventing ourselves from belonging to the larger story.

This is where healthy shame comes into play.

It might sound odd to think of shame as possibly being a good thing. There is a distinction between healthy shame and toxic shame. Healthy shame is “the permission to be human,”<sup>4</sup> as John Bradshaw put it. It reminds us that we are not in control, and that is okay. When we are wounded and trauma is allowed to grow within us, however, toxic shame begins to form. Toxic shame sends the message that we must strive to be more than human, or that we are hopelessly less than human. As Bradshaw explained, “The more-than-human have to be perfect to cover up their feelings of being flawed and defective. The less-than-human feel flawed and defective and act accordingly.”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, if we feel that we must be more than human or less than human, then we do not inherently belong. For us to be at home, our entire selves must be welcome. For that to happen, they must feel safe.

This is why the larger story we tell about what it means to be human is so important. For us to move forward, we need to accept that we objectively belong in this world, in this universe. We also need trusted others to help us live in this truth. If we don't believe that we are included, we will look for ways to make this happen. Those ways will usually be disingenuous at best and destructive at worst.

When we have a sense of inclusion in the greater story of humanity, we can live from a place of freedom. We don't have to prove anything to anyone, least of all ourselves. Our goals and ambitions can come from our hearts rather than an attempt to gain acceptance. I spent many years training for and working as a pastor. Only after I took this journey to self acceptance did I realize such work was not from my heart, but rather was from a desperate attempt to feel like I belonged. Once I was able to welcome the wounded parts of myself, I didn't need to chase after goals that were hurting me.

How does one move to this more holistic space of belonging and inclusion? I cannot give you a step by step process, but I will touch on some pivotal notes for this journey.

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<sup>4</sup> Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



It is helpful to know that this sense of belonging to the greater story is a consistent message across religious experiences. The Perennial tradition is a term given to the collective of mystics across the various world religions throughout their history. They are the ones who go beyond the dogma and rituals and experience the deeper presence through contemplation. As Richard Rohr explains, “The gift that true contemplatives offer to themselves and society is that they know themselves as a part of a much larger Story, a much larger Self.”<sup>6</sup> This tradition assures us that we all belong.

This experience of oneness has been a consistent theme among spiritual people throughout history. Now, in our time, quantum theory is affirming this message of oneness.

As physicist Fritjof Capra explains,

“Careful analysis of the process of observation in atomic physics has shown that the subatomic particles have no meaning as isolated entities, but can only be understood as interconnections between the preparation of an experiment and the subsequent measurement. Quantum theory thus reveals a basic oneness of the universe. It shows that we cannot decompose the world into independently existing smallest units. As we penetrate into matter, nature does not show us any isolated “basic building blocks,” but rather appears as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a “basic oneness of the universe.” That means we are never cut off from life, the universe, or the divine—no matter how much we're struggling, no matter what we've done. We can diminish our experience of that oneness, but we can't diminish the oneness itself.

The question then becomes, how do we avoid diminishing our experience? Well, part of our existence is living in mystery, but there are important practices we can emphasize in our lives. The most tangible and helpful one I know of is confession.

I apologize for using a word with possible negative and religious undertones. Most of us will think of confession in terms of meeting with a religious figure and admitting wrongs we have done, but confession is so much more than that. It can be concerned with wrongs done, or can simply be sharing the heaviness that is on our hearts concerning shame and trauma. It can take place in a confessional, but it can also take place in a therapist's office or on a phone call with a trusted friend. The bottom line is that we all have lies swirling around in us, distorting how we see ourselves, others, and the world. As the saying attributed to many different people states, we see the world not as it is, but as we are.

So we must face these lies, and the most powerful way to overcome the lies is to bring them into the light of a loving and affirming relationship. In that context we will find what we are desperately searching for: Forgiveness. Acceptance. Empathy. Compassion. Love.

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<sup>6</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted by Ilija Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, 44-5.

And we will return to the truth that undergirds it all: we belong, always have, and always will.



## *Gratefulness*

A couple years after I graduated college I was attending seminary and feeling lost about what was next for me. My wife had just begun a job as an insurance agent. As her company told fairy tales of how much money she could be making in a short amount of time, I became intrigued. At the time, I was working as an evening custodian. It was an easy gig and it worked great with my school schedule. We only had to clean floors, not bathrooms! I enjoyed it quite a bit. As I thought more about the money, though, I decided to take a chance and join my wife in the sales position.

Looking back, it was one of the dumbest things I've ever done. Even if the company had been a trustworthy one, sales fits me about as well as high heels on a fish. It was a complete disaster. By the third week, I had quit just to keep myself from falling into a deep depression.

A month prior I had a job I enjoyed. Now, I was jobless and needed something fast. I remembered that one of my cousins would always turn to pizza delivery whenever he was between jobs, so that's what I did. It was difficult at first. I was used to working by myself, cleaning floors at my own pace. Now, I hurried along with everyone else to get through the dinner rush each night.

Every so often, I would deliver somewhere that would lead me past the building where I was a custodian. I would look at that building and think about what I left behind: a dependable and enjoyable job with decent pay.

That was 14 years ago. Today, I would tell a much different story. I would tell you that my pizza delivery gig turned out to be a huge blessing. It had its difficulties, of course, but it also helped me to come out of my shell. I also met friends that led me to pursue a career in IT that has served me well ever since.

That's one of the benefits of hindsight and wisdom. We can see the nuance where before we could only see black and white. Most of the time, it's hard fought wisdom, but somehow we learn to be grateful for things that once upon a time seemed to be catastrophic. It takes a special journey to get there.

When we are young, especially as children, we see the world in very black and white, all or nothing terms. This is how the world makes sense to us. There are good people who are part of our family, group, or tribe. There are bad people who are not a part of our family, group, or tribe.

This is why, as mentioned before, children blame themselves when their parents act badly. The idea that an authoritative adult could be a good person and also be capable of doing hurtful things is too nuanced for a young mind to comprehend.

Of course, bad things do happen. Over time, they erode our simple way of seeing the world. This is often referred to as a “loss of innocence.” For some children, this tragically happens very early in life as people prey on their inability to protect themselves. For others, it happens much later and involves much less nefarious causes. Either way, it happens for all of us, and we struggle to know what to make of it.

This loss of innocence is always painful, but it also seems to be a necessary part of our journey. As children, we need to be shielded from the harsher realities of life. A toddler doesn't need to know that their parents' marriage is struggling, or that their uncle is in rehab, or that their family almost lost their home earlier that year. One day, however, life will get more complicated and challenging. Much of our lives revolves around the question: How will we face this? How will we deal with reality?

For many of us, that comes when we are children and have no tangible way to control anything in our lives, thus we develop coping mechanisms. Some of us became people pleasers. Others, overly ambitious, or perfectionists, etc. We lose our sense of happiness and we desperately cling to ways to get it back.

Over time, these mechanisms become so entrenched that they begin to define us. It seems incomprehensible that there could be any other way to live. We are faced with another daunting dilemma: continue in this unhappiness, or give up the devices that have helped us survive.

Religious traditions, when healthy, have spoken of this need. The Christian tradition speaks of losing our lives to find them. Buddhism and Hinduism speak of letting go of attachments.

These teachings ask us to let go of seeing the world as black and white. There is darkness ahead, and our all or nothing thinking convinces us that nothing good could come from there, because darkness could not possibly coexist with light.

What we don't realize when we're younger, though, is that this way of seeing the world has led us to outcast anything that seems to have any darkness in it, and that includes the uncomfortable parts within ourselves. Eventually, this begins to catch up with us, because those wounded parts control us more than we often realize.

I remember how much this happened in the early years of our marriage. My parents fought when I was a kid. They fought a lot. There was screaming and hurtful things said. They had their own wounds that often came out at each other. Because of this environment, I had a really difficult time with any kind of conflict, especially if it involved yelling.

This made it incredibly difficult for my wife and I to have any serious conversation. In truth, we both had filters through which we heard what the other person was saying. Anything my wife said in those arguments was taken to be accusatory and harsh. I was terrified of being rejected and tried to use my most practiced defense mechanisms. I tried to say what I thought she wanted to hear, what I thought would bring the conflict to a quick conclusion. This had worked most of my life, but it was now beginning to backfire.

Paul Young says this about holding all of our pain inside ourselves:

“We believe it’s safer there. And, sometimes, when you’re a kid trying to survive, it really is safer there. Then you grow up on the outside, but on the inside you’re still that kid in the dark cave surrounded by monsters, and out of habit you keep adding to your collection.”<sup>8</sup>

These monsters have devastating impacts on our relationships and our health.

Several years ago, I began experiencing random pains in my body. At first it began on the left side of my abdomen, then in my back, until I had four places where the discomfort was located. Needless to say, I was pretty concerned.

I traveled to a nearby city to see my doctor. He examined me but could find no reason why I would be experiencing the pain. He offered to have some tests run.

My day was not over. I had also scheduled an appointment that day with a psychiatrist at the behest of my therapist. The psychiatrist suggested I start taking medication for depression. If you are unfamiliar with clinical depression, it involves a chemical imbalance in your brain. This imbalance can sometimes be caused by unresolved trauma. It can also make it extremely difficult to try and work on the impact the trauma has had on us as it works against the brain's memory, attention, and information processing.

As the medication began to take effect, I was better able to work through my trauma. In turn, all of the pains I was experiencing in my body vanished.

Our trauma, lies, and pain really do feel like monsters that could destroy us at any moment. We try to bury them, but it only makes it worse. I titled my first book, “There's a God In My Closet,” alluding to this dynamic.

The thing about monsters, though, is that when you begin to explore them and shed light on their identity, they don't seem nearly as intimidating. It's like clothing piled high on a chair in

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<sup>8</sup> Young, *The Shack*, 188.

one's bedroom. In the dark, it could look like an intimidating figure, but once the light is turned on, it is revealed to be nothing more than a construct in one's mind. Furthermore, the issue could be solved with a little house cleaning.

That's what we're talking about here: cleaning one's inner house. Exploring the closets and dark corners to discover the truth of what's really happening. What we find is that so much of what we were afraid of was just a mirage, and that the core of who we are has not changed. We have dealt with the monsters of trauma and shame, we have even created some of our own in our attempt to survive, but none of that defines us. We are still good. We are still loved. We still belong.

As our awareness of who we are deepens, something remarkable begins to happen. We develop a new kind of innocence, or what some have called a "second naiveté." We can believe in goodness again, goodness in ourselves and others, not because of ignorance of the darkness, but because we have discovered that in some mysterious way, dark and light can coexist. We can be in pain and even cause others pain, and yet strive to be better because we know, deep down, that we are good. We can begin to hold others in a less judgmental light because we know the same perplexing cohabitation of light and dark exist in them as well.

We also learn something else: that the darkness can be used for good. The pain we have faced and the frightening journeys we have traversed have somehow led us to this spacious place where black and white thinking is no longer adequate. And we become more grateful: grateful for the things we have endured, grateful for the good that has come out of them, and grateful for life itself-life that is so good, not even the darkness could overcome it.





## *Nesting*

When women are pregnant, they often experience an intense drive to prepare their home for their soon to arrive child. They clean to prevent their new child getting sick. They baby proof the house to make sure the little one doesn't get hurt. They organize so they can serve the baby as efficiently as possible. In short, they seek to create a safe and stable environment in which their child can grow and develop.

This instinct is often termed "nesting." There's a sort of nesting that we must do for ourselves when we are on the path to self acceptance and inner growth. In a way, it feels like we are protecting a child as the parts of ourselves that were wounded begin to come out.

As babies grow and develop, they will try to push themselves to do new things. They will crawl, walk, run, and explore. They need to be given a place where they can do this without an unreasonable fear that exploring could bring severe consequences.

We must do this for the wounded parts within us as well. In truth, those parts hurt so much because they did not have those safe environments. They are the parts of us that, for example, could not play without fear that an adult would become enraged by interruptions. Perhaps they could not trust that physical affection was not going to include a swipe across the face, or that a mistake was not going to elicit a terrifying barrage of belittling words. When these parts did not feel safe, they hid away deep inside of us.

When we were young, we did not have the capacity to protect ourselves from harm. If an adult hurts a child, there's very little that child can do to stop it. So, we developed other ways to handle the trauma. They served a purpose at the time, as they were the best ways we could concoct to protect ourselves. Sometimes this comes in the form of disassociation, where we separate ourselves from terrible things that happen, lest we become overwhelmed by them.

We are so impressionable at a young age that we often take over the behaviors modeled to us and use them against ourselves, so that even decades later we can still struggle with them. This was one of my coping mechanisms. I experienced harsh reactions to making mistakes. My response as a child was to give those harsh reactions to myself. I would beat myself up and tell

myself that there was nothing good in me. It was meant to make me afraid, to prevent me from doing anything that would elicit harshness from others. Over time, however, I beat myself up for any sort of infraction, even miniscule ones. It also had another function. If I hurt myself, it would limit other's ability to hurt me, or so I thought. That was the best response that my six year old self could concoct to survive. Those mechanisms don't just stop because we grow up and are no longer in those environments. They hold on because they are all we ever learned, and this only furthers our wounded parts' desire to hide.

Growing in self acceptance meant that I had to create a safe place for those parts of me to come out and explore. I needed a safe place within myself as well as a safe place among others.

This is why attentiveness is so vital. To create a safe place within ourselves, we must know the ways that we tend to hurt ourselves. To do this, we must be aware of what is going on within us. We can learn this by watching ourselves, but we can also learn this as we find trusted people who can make honest and compassionate observations about us.

This happened for me one day when I was sitting in my therapist's office discussing some of the painful experiences I had when I was younger. I was kind of ranting, going from one account to another. I kept digging deeper and deeper, but as I shared in my first book:

"Finally my therapist stopped me and asked, "Are you a bad person?" I was taken aback a bit, and frankly frustrated...I just wanted him to let me ramble, but I answered the question as honestly as I knew how.

"Well, I know the right answer is no. I know those around me would not say I'm a bad person. But it feels wrong to say that."

He pressed into my answer, "Why does that feel wrong?"

"Well, I have bad thoughts sometimes," I explained.

"Everyone struggles with that."

"I've made a lot of mistakes," I insisted.

"Everyone has."

I didn't know what to say. Again he asked me, "Are you a bad person? Are you a bad person? Are you a bad person?"

As he kept posing the question, this sensation came over me—as though I had a gaping wound in my heart. I had ignored it for who knows how long, but now it was being exposed. I wept like

a baby. I was completely vulnerable in front of this man who would not let me keep beating myself up.

Then he began repeating, “You’re not a bad person. You’re not a bad person. It’s all a big lie. You’re not a bad person.”

For the next several minutes he kept repeating this. This was a life changing moment for me.”<sup>9</sup>

I can see how hard I am on myself at times because of moments like this where a trusted person saw what was really going on in me.

Here is a similar experience I also shared in my first book:

“The first time I shared my darkest thoughts with my spiritual director was one of the scariest things I’ve ever done. I had spent so many years hiding and pretending to be someone else. My sense of self-worth was completely warped because of it. I had spoken to him about confession a few months earlier. Confession to another person, especially a priest, was highly stigmatized in my church heritage, so I wanted to feel it out first. He assured me that nothing I shared with him would make him care any less or think differently of me.

As our next meeting was approaching, I was preparing to share my deepest feelings, failures, and scars with him. I pulled into the parking lot knowing that I needed to move forward. Even still, I contemplated driving away and never returning. I was so nervous. Once the floodgates were open, however, I couldn’t stop talking. I was astonished that no matter what I shared with him, the compassion in his eyes never wavered. I cried like I had been storing up tears for ages. “That’s my baggage,” I concluded after several minutes of silence, unable to think of anything else to share. In his prayer room were icons of different saints of the church. He began to speak to me about some of their backgrounds and shortcomings.

“You’re in good company,” he assured me. “None of them are any better than you are. You belong.”<sup>10</sup>

In that moment I learned another important element of my defense mechanisms and the impact they had on me. He helped me to see why I always felt like an outcast. I was communicating to myself that my baggage and shortcomings were worse than others, and that I therefore did not belong.

These are the kinds of people we need in our lives. They don’t have to be therapists or spiritual directors, they just have to see us and affirm us for who we are. That doesn’t mean they won’t challenge us, but they will do so in a compassionate way that calls us to live out of our true identities.

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<sup>9</sup> Ben DeLong, *There’s a God In My Closet*, 157.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 155.

We need these safe people that encourage us to step out in the faith that we truly are loved. We also need them to help us when we inevitably struggle, or we are triggered and our wounded child wants to retreat. With their help, we can begin creating safe places within us. We can affirm the wounded parts of ourselves. We can let them know, "I see you, and you matter."

It is in these safe places that we can see those parts begin to grow and develop, just like a child. We can also provide those spaces for others to do the same. It is a breathtaking process to behold.



## *Intuition*

When I was in college studying to be a pastor, I began to have some serious questions about what I believed. These questions only spread as I entered seminary. Part of the issue was a growing depression and anxiety that my faith was doing nothing to address. The other part was the validity of the doctrines we were being taught, especially as it pertained to hell and to God's character.

For many years I pushed these questions to the side. When I did get the gumption to voice them, I was given pat and dismissive answers, even by seminary professors. I knew deep down, in a way that I couldn't articulate very well then, that there was something wrong about what I had been taught. For years I tried to tow the line and make everyone happy.

There are a lot of reasons for this, but a major one was that I had no concept of trusting myself, nor believing that I had an inner wisdom, or intuition, to guide me. Not only did I not trust my intuition, I didn't believe that I had any.

I've heard many others describe facing the same problem. Sometimes this can come from family dynamics. Many of us grew up in homes where no one talked about anything serious. We could never ask questions about why dad was so angry all the time, or why mom always seemed depressed. Things were swept under the rug in these environments. It can start to make you doubt yourself and wonder, "Am I really seeing what I think I'm seeing?"

Another impact can be unhealthy religious environments. They often are dependent on everyone accepting the authority of the chosen leader without question.

This is a big issue within many church environments. Parishioners are often given a dangerous mix of beliefs. These include the teaching of hell as eternal and violent punishment, humanity as inherently depraved, and God as fundamentally wrathful. As someone who grew up in this sort of environment, I can attest to the psychological damage it can often cause.

These were the kinds of teachings with which I was concerned. I shared them with my first spiritual director as we got to know each other. He was very studied in the Eastern Orthodox

tradition. As I voiced my objections, and shared the deep angst I had about these beliefs, he shared with me that my concern was warranted. He explained that many of the beliefs I had been taught were not the only way that the church had understood them. In fact, many of my concerns were the same ones that the early church had as well. It turned out, my intuition had been in good company all along, but I had been taught not to trust it.

Once again, we need these sorts of people in our lives-the sort that encourages us to follow our inner truth-to be able to move forward.

As we're exploring the idea of intuition, a distinction needs to be made between inner wisdom and survival mechanisms. Intuition is based on our true identities-the ones that have been gifted to us by the divine. Survival mechanisms are how we have adapted to trauma. They are the behaviors that helped us survive in childhood but then often shoot us in the foot when we grow up.

Part of the path to self acceptance is learning the difference. The terms that many use to make this distinction are "true self" and "false self."

Your true self knows you are good. Your false self concocts ways to make yourself good.

We must get to know ourselves in order to see the truth lying underneath all the facades. We must get beyond the survival instincts that are focused on constructing a future that doesn't exist and get to the present moment. This comes through exercises such as meditation, prayer, and contemplation. It also comes through practicing being in the present moment and letting go of all the distractions.

It comes through finding, as Wendell Berry writes, that "what we need is here."<sup>11</sup>

Or as Richard Rohr puts it, "If you are present, you will be able to know what you need to know."<sup>12</sup>

In other words, you don't need someone to mediate divine wisdom. It is available to you right here, right now.

I remember the first time I experienced this. I was seventeen or eighteen and working in a grocery store. I had recently broken up with my girlfriend and was devastated. The way I made it through life was to look to the next thing: the next event, the next relationship, the next entertainment. I was helping the others I worked with tidy up the shelves toward the end of the night. I had this realization that there was joy available to me in the moment. I didn't need a new girlfriend or something exciting to look forward to. I could be happy right in that moment.

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<sup>11</sup> Berry, *Wild Geese*.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rohr, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/one-thing-2017-11-22/>.



Of course, I would have had a difficult time articulating that back then, but it gave me hope. It was a glimpse of something that I would not really begin to understand until years later as I began to face myself and do the inner work. Only then could I see the wisdom there all along.

I will admit, this area of intuition is a difficult part of the path to self acceptance. There is an incredible amount of nuance. In learning to trust the real you, you are also learning to distrust the mechanisms that you thought were the real you. It is quite disorienting.

It reminds me of the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. The main character, John Nash, is a genius who suffers from schizophrenia. When he is in graduate school, he begins seeing people who are only in his mind. It culminates in him living out of a fantasy where he breaks codes in magazines and newspapers for the government.

Eventually he is taken to a psychiatric hospital, where his wife reveals the truth about his hallucinations. He is understandably reluctant to believe her, but eventually is forced to accept the truth. He tries taking medication, but it leaves him without a life worth living, so he decides to face it with his own mind.

There is a progression to his ability to face his hallucinations. First he accepts them. Then, he fights them, trying to convince them that they are not real. Eventually, he accepts them as part of who he is, and chooses not to feed their desire for attention.

In a humorous scene toward the end of the film, he exits a classroom where he teaches and is met by an older gentleman whom he has never met. He requests the assistance of one of his students, and asks her to confirm that the new gentleman is in fact real.<sup>13</sup>

I swear that this is what it feels like sometimes to walk the path of healing toward self acceptance. The lies and tapes we have believed about ourselves have been so entrenched in our lives that to deny their validity feels like waking up from a dream. Sometimes I need to essentially do what Nash did in the film with these lies. I have to meet with a trusted other to help me confirm that they are, in fact, illusions. As I learn with them, I gain the confidence to start identifying truth and falsehoods for myself, knowing I will never be able to do it completely on my own. Healing will make it feel more possible, though.

Without healing, we have a very distorted view of ourselves and the world. Without healing, we are consumed by our defense mechanisms, which severely limit our ability to appreciate the goodness in ourselves. We may find it extremely difficult to trust ourselves if all we see are these mechanisms. They are the parts of us that project, and lash out, and hurt the people around us. We may not want to trust those behaviors-and for good reason. But the truth is our identities go deeper than that.

We can learn to come to a place that Richard Rohr describes,

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<sup>13</sup> *A Beautiful Mind*. Directed by Ron Howard, 2001.

“If you can trust and listen to your inner divine image, your whole-making instinct, or your True Self, you will act from your best, largest, kindest, most inclusive self. I would also like to add “your most compassionately dissatisfied self” because the soul’s journey invites us to infinite depth that we can never fully plumb!”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Rohr, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-voice-of-god-2019-05-28/>.



## Nurture

One of the perks of being a pizza delivery driver is easy access to free pizza. Sometimes it was because a customer never came for their food. Other times it was because we made a mistake on the pizza and had to remake it. Of course, there was also the employee discount. All of this meant that I had pizza for dinner several times a week for about four years. That was back in my twenties when my metabolism was still a prominent ally.

As I've gotten older, I've faced the effects of aging that we all do. In turn, I've learned to be more aware of my blood pressure and the impact that the food I eat has on me.

When it comes to physical health, you need certain resources in place—preventative resources and emergency resources—to stay fit. If we experience a major health issue, we have urgent resources in place like doctors and emergency rooms. If we are smart, however, we will also put preventative measures in place. We will eat right and exercise to make sure our bodies are healthy.

As we work toward self acceptance, we will need the same kind of resources in place. We will need preventative practices that help us stay in a healthier mindset. Despite our best efforts, however, we will get triggered at times as well and need more emergency type approaches to help us work through them. In this chapter, we'll look at the ongoing practices we can have to maintain inner health. In the next chapter, we will look at the approaches we can take when we are in the thick of it and need immediate help.

To become a healthy person we must learn to nurture ourselves, to practice self care. We need to clarify that term, though. In an affluent country like the United States, it is easy to confuse self care with pampering oneself. One might think of Tom and Donna from the show *Parks and Rec* shouting, "Treat yo self!"<sup>15</sup> That's not what is meant by self care.

Self care is getting in touch with your soul. It is attending to the parts of yourself that need to experience compassion. Pampering oneself is not a bad thing as long as it does not become

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<sup>15</sup> "Pawnee Rangers." *Parks and Rec*, created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, season 4, episode 4, NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2011.

over indulgent. An issue with pampering ourselves is that it often serves to distract us from the hurting parts inside. A fun-filled vacation, while obviously important at times, may or may not be what one needs when their inner child is screaming for relief. Of course, this is not a black and white issue. It is important to be honest and ask oneself, "Do I really need a vacation or a night out, or am I using this as a distraction from what's really going on inside me?"

Self care is vital. It is vital for ourselves, for the people around us, and for living out of our purpose and true identity.

As we looked at earlier, the inner journey is like going through our house and exploring all the things that terrify us. Without doing this, we cannot ascertain what is really going on. Having healthy self care practices is like turning the lights on around the house so we can see clearly what is happening. When we are frightened and turn on the lights in our actual house, our breathing slows down and our heart beat steadies. As we do this in our inner house, we can live from a more secure place where our behavior is more consistent with who we are and what we want.

Self care is also incredibly beneficial to the people around us. When I am struggling internally and beating myself up, my whole demeanor changes. I become like an injured animal snapping at anyone who comes too close to my wound. I am not a pleasant person to be around in those instances, which obviously makes it difficult for my wife, son, and others.

That is not the way I want to live, which is why attending to my hurting self is so important. It has almost become cliché to compare self care to receiving oxygen on a plane. When it is offered, we are told to give it to ourselves before we help our child. We cannot help them if we are not present to do so.

With that in mind, here are some helpful possibilities for self care practices. Clearly, this will not be exhaustive, for everyone is different and can find their own blend of practices to help center themselves.

### Meditation

Meditation is a powerful tool in learning to be present. When some use this term, they are referring to taking a word or concept and thinking on it deeply. This can be helpful, but there is another form of meditation that can be just as, if not more, helpful. It is being still and observing the thoughts and emotions that emerge within us.

You might wonder, "What's the point of this? I already know what's happening within me." Perhaps, perhaps not. I would say that most of the time we are not as cognizant of ourselves as we would like to think. Therefore, one purpose that this practice serves is to help us become more aware of what's happening within us.

Another reason this is important is that it helps us to gain a little more objectivity about our thoughts and emotions. Most of the time, as these realities pass within us, we end up attaching to one of them and going ever deeper with it. Perhaps we remember a conflict we had and start obsessing about what we could have or should have said. Perhaps we are anxious about a project we need to finish.

When this happens, we often get so attached to the thought or emotion that it consumes and defines us. To aid with this, a psychological approach called the “parts perspective” has become more common in therapeutic settings. It helps us identify that our thoughts and emotions come from parts of us, and that our beings are bigger than those parts. It is a helpful way of affirming what's within us while not letting our emotions overwhelm us.<sup>16</sup>

This perspective is nothing new, however. If we look to the Perennial tradition, the mystics have been teaching us the same thing. They have been teaching us that our true identity is firm; it has been gifted to us and nothing can change it. It is our thoughts and emotions that change and flux.

The mystics give us analogies to help us think about this important distinction.

There is the analogy of the traffic and observer. If you sat down to watch cars traveling on the highway, the cars are your thoughts and emotions. They come and go, but you remain.

There is the analogy of the sea and the waves. Our thoughts and emotions are like the waves rolling across the surface of the water. They change in speed and size, but we are the sea. The waves are part of the sea, but do not define the sea.

There is the analogy of the clouds and the sky that Anthony De Mello referenced when he stated this:

“The reason you suffer from your depression and your anxieties is that you identify with them. You say, “I’m depressed.” But that is false. You are not depressed. If you want to be accurate, you might say, “I am experiencing a depression right now.” But you can hardly say, “I am depressed.” You are not your depression. That is but a strange kind of trick of the mind, a strange kind of illusion. You have deluded yourself into thinking—though you are not aware of it—that you are your depression, that you are your anxiety, that you are your joy or the thrills that you have. “I am delighted!” You certainly are not delighted. Delight may be in you right now, but wait around, it will change; it won’t last: it never lasts; it keeps changing: it’s always changing. Clouds come and go: some of them are black and some white, some of them are large, others small. If we want to follow the analogy, you would be the sky, observing the clouds. You are a passive, detached observer. That’s shocking, particularly to someone in the Western culture. You’re not interfering. Don’t interfere. Don’t “fix” anything. Watch! Observe!”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> My friend and mentor, Paul Fitzgerald, offers a course online that deals with this. It is called “Growing Bigger Than What’s Triggering you.” You can check it out [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> De Mello, *Awareness*, 43.

Meditation helps us to become the detached observer that De Mello speaks of. It helps us to see what goes on within us with more objectivity. Instead of chasing the cars, or riding the waves, or following the clouds, meditation helps us to remain centered. It helps us see that while the sadness, or anger, or anxiety is real, it is certainly not the whole story. De Mello went so far as to express, "All suffering is caused by my identifying myself with something, whether that something is within me or outside of me."<sup>18</sup>

It takes much practice, and no one ever comes to a place where they are constantly centered, but it can become more common. It can become the guiding disposition for how we approach life.

As we learn to see our parts for what they are, we can actually learn to embrace them in a healthy way. This can only be done when we can see them objectively, without idolizing them but also without judging or condemning them.

This is vital because, as Robert Jackman writes,

"The final and most crucial goal of healing and embracing an authentic life is to create a foundation of support and encouragement for all of the wounded parts to integrate with your responsible adult self. Through your introspective work, this integration will bring together those parts of you that are stranded, frozen in time, and stuck."<sup>19</sup>

Not only does meditation help us become more aware of our thoughts and feelings, but also of our bodies. The body has a powerful way of communicating to us about what our state is. Listening to my body was a foreign concept to me for a long time. Looking back, I can see how often my body was screaming at me to pay attention. Instead, I mostly kept pushing myself, all the while wondering why I was so stressed.

Meditation can help us see where we tend to hold stress, pain, and trauma in the body. When we are struggling, some of us hold the tension in our shoulders, others our necks, backs, stomachs, etc. The body is a valuable resource to us in gaining emotional and spiritual health.

Our dog is very adept at telling us when she has reached her limit. She is a dachshund mix named Zoey. If you know anything about dachshunds, you know they are notoriously stubborn. Whenever we take her for a walk, she will start out very excited. She will look around and explore. As soon as she reaches her limit, however, she simply lies down and refuses to move. We've learned to walk her in circles close to the house, because wherever she stops is where you will begin carrying her. It's pretty funny, and a good reminder to me. When my body has had enough, I would be wise to listen to it and take a break.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Jackman, *Healing Your Lost Inner Child*, 56.



## Journaling

Journaling is another powerful tool for inner healing. Much of the trauma that we endure often has less to do with what actually happened and more to do with what happened, or didn't happen, after the incident.

Difficult and painful things occur in life, and there's nothing we can do about many of them. People get sick. They say hurtful things in the heat of the moment. Accidents happen. What's vital, however, is having someone to come and walk with us through it.

This is especially important when we are children, because we don't have the ability to sort things out ourselves. If a parent says something harsh, it can be traumatic and harmful. If that parent comes back and addresses the situation, saying something like, "I'm very sorry I acted like that. I should not have done that. It was not about you. It was my fault. I love you," the situation can be resolved. What could have left a traumatic scar has now been rendered much less severe.

John Bradshaw explains it this way,

"When an emotional event happens, emotions must be discharged in order for the intellect, reason and judgment to make sense out of it. Emotions are a form of thinking, and blocked emotions bias thinking. As emotions get bound by shame, their energy is frozen, which blocks the full interaction between the mind and the will."<sup>20</sup>

To use Bradshaw's language, journaling is a way to discharge the frozen energy of those emotions. We often did not have someone to walk with us, and had no way to get our thoughts and feelings out. When we journal, we get it out. Even if we're the only one that ever reads what we write, there is still an outlet being utilized.

## Therapy

Have you ever experienced something that you could not explain? You searched for words to somehow convey the significance of it, but nothing seemed to suffice. It is immensely frustrating, partly because you want to bring another person into the dynamic, and partly because you want to understand it for yourself.

Brené Brown, in her book *Anatomy of the Heart*, conveys why this is so pivotal:

"Language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning, and self-awareness. Having access to the right words can open up entire universes. When we don't have the language to talk about what we're experiencing, our ability to make sense of what's happening

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<sup>20</sup> Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, 41.



and share it with others is severely limited. Without accurate language, we struggle to get the help we need, we don't always regulate or manage our emotions and experiences in a way that allows us to move through them productively, and our self-awareness is diminished. Language shows us that naming an experience doesn't give the experience more power, it gives us the power of understanding and meaning."<sup>21</sup>

I cannot overstate the impact therapy has had on my life, and obtaining language for my experiences is one of the major reasons. I have been with my current therapist for four years. We have gone on an incredible journey together. He has spoken the words to me that others in my life were unwilling or unable to do. In doing so, he has helped me encapsulate my major challenges to inner healing. There have been a lot of logjams cleared up in his office.

Putting language to my experiences has also enabled me to see that I am not alone or flawed. Language exists for what I have faced because others have experienced similar situations. It is vital that we have at least one person to share our struggles with. A therapist serves that purpose, while also offering us perspective on what often ends up skewing our vision.

### Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction has some similarities to therapy. It also involves someone walking with us through difficult wounds and dilemmas. There are some important distinctions, however.

Barbara Brown Taylor expressed, "We go to counselors when we want help getting out of caves. We go to directors when we are ready to be led further in."<sup>22</sup>

Therapy seeks to help give us relief so we can move forward with our lives, which is clearly a tremendous blessing. There comes a time, however, when one needs more than relief, when one needs to go deeper into the cave to see what truth has been concealed.

This requires a level of discomfort that we are not always ready for. When we are, however, we need someone who has explored their own caves to walk with us. They cannot fix anything, but they can help us hear what the voice of the divine is speaking to us.

There have been deep lies embedded within my soul that I could only face with the help of a spiritual director. There is a dying process to the inner journey. We must die to who we thought we were in order to discover the depth of who we are, and how intimately connected we are to the divine. This takes time, and a willingness to sit with the pains as long as we must. A spiritual director will hold that space for you, refusing to settle for a quick resolution that will sabotage the process.

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<sup>21</sup> Brown, *Anatomy of the Heart*, xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 129..

## Sleep

Sleep seems like it should be an easy thing to control. Unfortunately, some of us face issues with our quality of sleep. We have trouble falling asleep, or we wake up frequently throughout the night. For others of us, we just have a difficult time getting enough rest. Our lives are so busy, and we often have trouble carving out an adequate amount of time to recharge at night.

A while back I went to visit my doctor because I was experiencing chronic fatigue. I felt like I was getting a decent amount of sleep. Looking back, I was just fooling myself. Most nights it was more like five hours.

What was keeping me from getting enough sleep? I was busy, but most of the activity was of my own doing. I was always looking for more ways to be productive.

I was sure, however, that something was just wrong with my body. I had heard that thyroid issues could cause fatigue, and I knew my Grandmother had dealt with thyroid issues. So I went into the visit ensuring the doctor that I knew what the problem was.

“Well, we can run blood tests and see if anything comes up,” he informed me. “If they come back all clear, though, it probably means you just need more sleep.”

I just dismissed the idea. I had lots of things I wanted to do, and I knew of many other people who could get by on little sleep.

A few days later I received the results of all the blood tests. Everything was clear.

Here's the silly thing: I was mad! I was mad about being healthy! Why? Because I was addicted to productivity. In my woundedness I was convinced that I was only as valuable as what I could achieve.

I didn't have a choice now. I had to sleep more. Magically, I started to feel much better. Imagine that.

As my spiritual director pointed out, “Your true self and exhaustion do not mix. You simply cannot be your most genuine self if you are exhausted.”

## Exercise

Our bodies are intimately tied to our emotional and spiritual health. When our bodies feel sluggish and run-down, it impacts the rest of our being.

In the society that we live in, it is easily tempting to see medicine as the magic cure for ailments that are caused by neglecting our bodies. I am not disregarding the power of medicine by any means. I take two medications myself for depression, and I am extremely thankful for them. However, there is so much we can do for our bodies just by taking care of them.

Clearly, exercise has immense benefits on our physical health. It gives us more energy and helps our bodies regulate themselves more effectively. It also has a significant impact on our mental and emotional health. It can relieve stress. It helps reduce anxiety and depression. It increases oxygen and neurotransmitters in the brain. It can also increase neuroplasticity, which is a significant factor in our ability to cope and heal from trauma.

We are integrated beings. Our hearts, bodies, and minds are intimately impacted by each other. Thus, taking care of our bodies is vital for the inner journey.

There are a myriad of other ways that we can nurture ourselves. It can come through music, painting, or nature. It can come through play, or working with one's hands. The important thing is to find out what works for you and make it a priority in your life. It will pay immense dividends.



## Grounding

The path to self acceptance is really the path to presence. We want to get to a place where our whole being is present, knowing that we belong here and now.

Another good word for presence is reality. We sometimes need a reality check-in a good way. We need to be reminded of who we are, and what is going on around us. When we're stuck in a pessimistic or cynical cycle, we need to be reminded about the beauty that is present. When we have our rose-colored glasses on, we sometimes need to be reminded that there are flaws and pains present-and that they are somehow part of the big picture. That is what the mystics are trying to tell us-life is so great and vast that it can even include death.

Being present sounds so simple, and in a way it is. Perhaps its simplicity is what makes it also so incredibly difficult to put into practice.

We have something working against us in this endeavor: trauma, and the ensuing triggers. The trauma we endured was overwhelming. Our defense mechanisms were specifically designed to help us escape from that overwhelm. Every time we get triggered, we revert to those behaviors.

That begs the question: How do we know when we are triggered? For many of us, the ways that we respond when triggered might seem so mundane or so commonplace that we've never even thought to question if it was a coping strategy or not. As I mentioned, I grew up being a huge people pleaser. When I thought that I had failed to live up to someone's expectations, my body would tense up and I couldn't think straight. For so long, I simply thought that this was who I was.

We all have different ways of reacting to trauma reminders. Here is a list that Janina Fisher provides in her book, *Transforming the Living Legacy of Trauma*:

- Shaking, quivering
- Overwhelming emotions
- Difficulty breathing
- Body wants to collapse

- Feeling “possessed”
- Wanting to give up or die
- Wanting to hurt myself
- Wanting to drink or use drugs
- Knees knocking
- Going numb all over
- Sudden intense physical or emotional reactions
- Wanting to run away
- Teeth clenching
- Feels unbearable
- Terrified, panicky
- Hating myself
- Hating others
- Feeling rage
- Feeling overwhelming shame
- Emotions do not fit the situation
- Actions do not fit the situation
- Clenching or churning or pit in stomach<sup>23</sup>

Learning to identify the way you respond when triggered is a vital step in learning to be present. It is an ongoing growth process. When I was younger, it would often take me days or weeks to recognize that something had triggered me and sent me for a tailspin. Now, for the most part, I can recognize it in hours or even minutes. It has taken a lot of work, but it is completely worth it.

Of course, learning to recognize this is only part of the equation. We also need to find ways that work for us to move out of these trauma responses. These responses often involve our whole being-heart, mind, and body. As such, we need ways to help bring our whole being back to the present moment.

Janina Fisher speaks of “10% solutions,” meaning that most healthy coping mechanisms will not work every time, but instead will work about 10% of the time. Thus, it is important to have a number of tools available to use when you are triggered. Here are some that have helped me and others. I offer them only as suggestions and perhaps as jumping off points. Everyone is different, so don't pressure yourself into needing to use these if they don't work for you.

- Taking a walk.
- Listening to music.
- Deep breathing
- Yoga poses.
- Stretching.
- Hugs.
- Identifying what's in the room.
- Repeating a mantra.

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<sup>23</sup> Fisher, *Transforming the Living Legacy of Trauma*, 51.

The bottom line is that we need practices that will help us return to the here and now. This is where life, joy, peace, and love are.

Remember, however, the need to have compassion on yourself. There is a huge learning curve for all of us in this journey. I can easily get frustrated with myself when I get triggered or have to revisit an issue that I had addressed years prior. Even though I know it is unrealistic, I often get the notion that I won't have to struggle through these things anymore. My spiritual director has to remind me on many, many occasions, that she still faces these challenges even though she is years ahead of me. This journey is a death and resurrection pattern. The moment you think you have reached the pinnacle, another corner of your spirit will demand your attention. And the moment you think the darkness will overtake you, the light will begin to shine.

When we become present to what's around us and within us, we can then be a point of presence to others. We can be an aid to help others become grounded too. It is a beautiful turnaround.



## *Epilogue*

In ancient times, people were often terrified of the sea. What elicited much of their fear was the fact that they could not see into it and ascertain what it contained. In general, it was fear of the unknown.

A friend of mine is a scuba diver and instructor. As such, he has spent plenty of time in the water. I remarked once that I wasn't sure if I could ever handle going in the water as a scuba diver. The water frightens me as well.

He pointed out that being down in the water gives the diver a chance to see what is there. Instead of letting your imagination run wild about the many dangers that could be present, going into the water allows you to see what is actually there.

That is what the path to self acceptance is all about: going to the places within ourselves that frighten or even disturb us, and discovering the truth of what is really happening. Only then can we really accept each part of ourselves, and discover that there is much less to be afraid of than we thought. It is an endeavor worthy of your most ardent attention. Take courage, and dive deep.

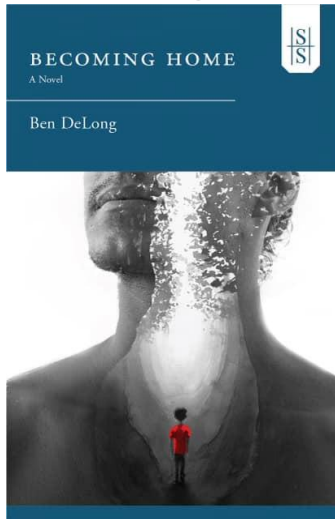
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# Books by Ben DeLong

## *Becoming Home*



*For years Bill has lived by himself in the woods with a dark figure haunting the perimeter of his land. When an enigmatic stranger appears and Bill's land becomes uninhabitable, he will be forced to follow the visitor into the one place he vowed never to go: the dark figure's territory.*

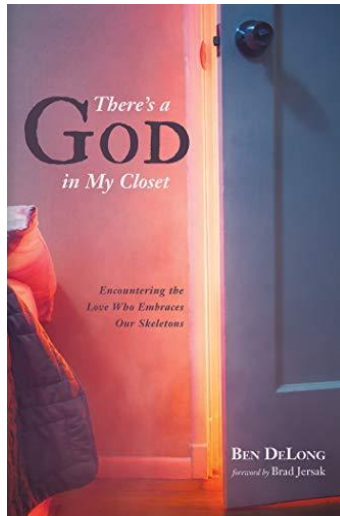
"I'm grateful for Ben DeLong's creative efforts to help people rethink their faith and rediscover parts of themselves that are so easily lost." - Brian D. McLaren, author of *Faith After Doubt*

"This novel is brilliantly layered and reminiscent of *The Shack*." - Tamara Ramirez, author of *The Fullness*

"Two engaging stories with a powerful, transformational message!"  
-Karl Forehand, author of *Being*, *The Teashop*, and *Apparent Faith*

"Author Ben DeLong weaves a beautiful tapestry of hope through the carnage of tragedy and pain...helping guide us from wounding and shame to a place of healing and learning to be comfortable in our own skin."-Jason Elam, *The Messy Spirituality Podcast*

# *There's a God In My Closet*



*Many have been taught to see God as a terrifying agent of wrath who spews anger at any sign of imperfection. At the same time, they've been taught that they are inherently flawed and devoid of goodness. Where does that leave us? For Ben DeLong, it left him hiding his skeletons from the monster he believed God to be. This proved to be a perfect recipe for anxiety, depression, and insecurity. But what if God accepts our skeletons? What if he actually embraces them in love? How would that change our outlook? For Ben, it changed everything. This book is about his journey to find what was always true: we are eternally embraced by God, skeletons and all, and he is never letting go.*

"God was no longer the monster in the closet, but the one who comes to the darkest and loneliest of our closets to hold and heal us. That's where this book is taking us. Enjoy the journey!"

--Brad Jersak, Author of *A More Christlike God*

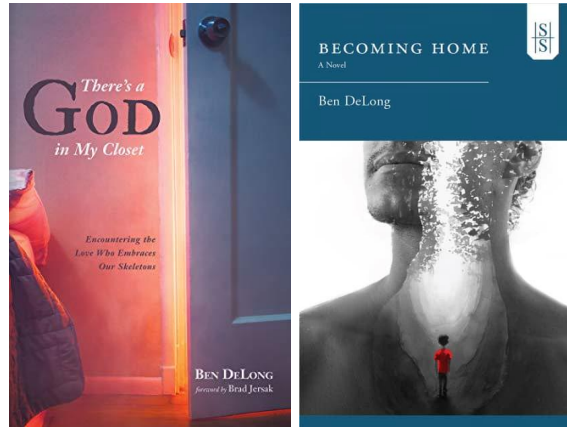
"We all leave childhood with some 'exit wounds' and internalize them as some form of 'I am not enough.' Since no one can shame us more deeply than those from whom we expect grace, our families and spiritual communities unknowingly and unintentionally can be deeply wounding. Ben's journey reminds us that God's healing grace is immeasurably greater than all our shame."

--Paul D. Fitzgerald & Susanna Fitzgerald, Founders of HeartConnexion Seminars

"Many of us go through painful periods of faith deconstruction. Some of us abandon the struggle, overwhelmed by the pain and disorientation, and settle for either a life of shallow faith or no faith at all. . . . DeLong reminds us that our weaknesses do not disqualify us. Rather, they birth in us a hard-won compassion and open us to receive the unexpected revelation of God's unconditional love and acceptance."

--Stephanie Lobdell, Author of *Signs of Life*

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