



# HOW TO FACE A TRIAL

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# 01: LEAN INTO IT

*I have a sign that hangs in my office on the wall that clients face during their sessions. It has just one word on it: BRAVE.*

To be brave is to face and endure pain with courage. It does not mean we are not afraid. It means that we know there is something greater than our fear. That “something” is the possibility of transformation. Pain, crisis and trial always hold the capacity for new life to be birthed in and through us. This is an active process, a pilgrimage to our true self and our most authentic connection with Christ.

One of the bravest and wisest things we can do in the midst of a trial is to discover, acknowledge and feel our feelings. Our emotions can offer us gifts such as empowerment, connection and discernment. We may not want to feel our feelings when we are in pain. We fear they will cause even more pain. And yet, we can have confidence in their ability to communicate important information to us. We might imagine our emotions as “little messengers” who have come to share something of note. We can listen to the messages with kindness, compassion and curiosity and then, more fully informed, determine what course of action to take.

I first heard the term “radical inner hospitality” from author, Christine Valters Paintner. She explains, “We are each a multitude of differing energies and personalities. We contain parts that feel tender and ashamed, alongside the courageous and fierce, the joyful and giddy. It often feels easier to simply push the voices away, but it is exhausting. A lot of our inner conflict comes from our stubborn refusal to make space for the multiplicity we contain.....You are a multitude. Welcome in all of you” (2016,p.xv-xiv).The welcoming she is referring to is essentially extending a curious and compassionate presence to our many parts. Painter names some of our parts- the inner judge, the inner warrior, the inner lover, the inner orphan etc. She says, “Hospitality is key. Welcoming in the stranger, even if that stranger is me, or at least parts of me” (2016, p.xv-xvi).

As I have studied these ideas further, through the writings of Paintner, Richard Schwartz, Mary Steege and others, my worldview has shifted. My prior worldview was that feelings can't be trusted, they can “lead us astray” and we must turn away from emotion to be able to turn towards “truth.” The idea of inner hospitality truly is radical. Each part of me is a gift, a guide. It has something to teach me. When I am connected to my true self and to the Holy Spirit I am able to get to know these parts without being afraid of them and without shunning them.

# 01

I once heard someone say that when we ignore our feelings, they don't go away- they just "go into the basement and lift weights and come out stronger." Amusing imagery, but true. How might our emotions come out stronger if not acknowledged? Perhaps through depression, confusion, anxiety, insomnia, stomach aches etc. Our emotions and thoughts need to be attended to. Next time you noticed a strong emotion surfacing (perhaps shame, anger, grief etc.) what would it be like to imagine it as a guest knocking on your door and bearing an important message for you?

What would it be like to invite that feeling/part of you in and listen closely to its message, without needing to critique, analyze or "fix" it? But rather, just noticing and perceiving the wisdom or needs that are presented. Your true self, with the help of the Holy Spirit, can serve as that wise and observing Innkeeper that offers safety and respite for a weary, conflicted or joyful part of you.



# 01

For me, this gives fresh meaning to the scripture, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” *Matthew 11:28-30, New Internation Version*. Jesus is the perfect example of this gracious Innkeeper and He can help us offer this radical inner hospitality to ourselves. You might decide to practice this. For a moment, imagine you have been travelling on a long journey. Your journey has been rich and fulfilling, but at times, also challenging and painful. You are now at a point in the journey where you have slowed to a place of reflection and realize that all your experiences have led to a mix of many powerful emotions- such as gratitude, fear, determination, loneliness and hope. Feeling a bit weary, you decide to stay the night at an inn. Upon reaching the inn, you see a sign above the front door that reads, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and

I will give you rest.” Matthew 11:28-30

Below that, a smaller sign reads, “ALL PARTS WELCOME.” Intrigued, you knock on the door.

The Innkeeper greets you and ushers you into a space of warmth and light. You find yourself breathing a bit deeper and notice you are feeling welcomed, safe, and calm. The Innkeeper invites you to relax in a large, comfortable chair and prepares you a cup of tea. While doing so, the Innkeeper asks about your journey. Though you just met the Innkeeper you feel at ease in sharing about experiences. As you share about the trials and victories of your experiences, and the many emotions you are having, you note that the Innkeeper offers a calm, compassionate presence.

# 01

The Innkeeper is genuinely curious to know your stories. You share openly and deeply about the challenges, losses, triumphs, and accomplishments you have experienced on your journey. And you are met with kindness, grace, and comfort. After a time of sharing and reflecting, you have a sense of connection with the Innkeeper and more clarity about your journey. You have a growing sense of confidence and an awareness of the courage it truly took to make this journey. You also have a great appreciation for this Inn and its Keeper. For here, you were able to reveal your thoughts and feelings and they were all welcome.



For the past several years, I have met monthly with a Spiritual Director. Christian Spiritual Direction is the ancient practice of listening with another for the voice and movement of God in one's life. It offers companionship in the most important, intimate area of one's life, exploring the inner landscape where one receives and responds to the God who is Love. In this process, it is my goal to be listening for God's intentions for my life. At times, my Spiritual Director has been like the Innkeeper for me along my journey. She provides space for me to lean into the myriad of feelings, questions, and ideas I have and greets them with compassion and curiosity.

# 01

I can recall a time when I was faced with a particularly challenging staff situation and I brought that to my Spiritual Director, Rene. She was attuned to me as I shared my fears, self-doubt, and confusion about how to navigate this ordeal. Gently and lovingly she listened to my concerns and with compassionate inquiry would ask me where I was finding Jesus in this trial. She did not claim to have the “right” answers for me or assign judgement to my feelings- she accepted me and engaged me in wonder.

In order to voice our feelings, we need a language to do so. There are many adjectives and descriptives for our emotions. Chip Dodd, founder of Sage Hill and author of Voice of the Heart, identifies eight healthy core emotions that give us insight. He shares that:

Anger is the emotion that tells you are feeling other emotions and the emotion that empowers you to stand up for what you believe to be true.

Fear is the emotion that lets you know you are in danger and triggers your fight or flight response.

Hurt is our ability to love someone and be disappointed by them.

Sadness tells you that you honor, value, or respect someone or something and that you feel a sense of loss when it is missing.

Loneliness is your ability to be connected to someone or some group and not be able to connect for whatever reason.

Shame is the emotion that tells you that you should or should not be doing something.

Guilt is your internal barometer of right and wrong. It tells you when you have done something wrong based on your values and beliefs.

Glad is feeling a sense of joy, peace, and happiness about some thing or someone (2014).

# 01

We might consider a daily “check-in” with our emotions, naming which of the above eight we are experiencing at a given time. Being able to access and acknowledge our feelings is empowering and transformative. It helps us speak our needs and truth.

To offer another perspective on this, therapist and author Tina Gilbertson, LPC, in her book *Constructive Wallowing: How to Beat Bad Feelings By Letting Yourself Have Them*, says “You can let feelings ‘go’ by feeling them fully. Once they’re felt, they can leave” (2014, p.129). Gilbertson presents the T-R-U-T-H technique, which helps readers allow and accept our feelings and actually feel them.

These aren’t sequential steps. Rather, she notes, they happen at the same time. As such, she suggests thinking of these “steps” as parts of a process. When doing this exercise Gilbertson suggests having a comfortable place to sit or lie down, a box of tissues, and one or several pillows.





# 01

## **T: Tell yourself the situation.**

Gilbertson suggests sticking to the facts *without* judging them.

## **R: Realize what you're feeling.**

Focus on what you're feeling right now, in this moment. Whatever you're feeling is perfectly OK. As Gilbertson says, "There's no need to make sure your emotions are 'correct' given the situation" (2014, p.121).

## **U: Uncover self-criticism.**

"We criticize ourselves to make ourselves better people," writes Gilbertson. But this criticism only makes us feel worse. "And then we criticize ourselves again for feeling bad! It's a negative feedback loop" (2014, p.122). Self-criticism sabotages our healing, and it encourages us to hide the truth from ourselves. Self-criticism also leads to anxiety and depression and is an ineffective motivator.

## **T: Try to understand yourself.**

According to Gilbertson, "Instead of evaluating your feelings as good or bad, or yourself as good or bad for having the feelings you do, put your brain to work on understanding yourself" (2014, p.121).

Consider why you might be feeling the way you're feeling. She shares this examples: "I've been hurt in just that way before. He poked a tender spot in me ... No wonder I feel hurt" (2014, p. 123).

## **H: Have the feeling.**

Sit with your feelings. Cry. Punch those pillows. Talk to yourself using kind words. "As you experience your true feelings, let them matter to you as if you were your own dear friend" (2014, p. 124).

You might not feel better immediately after doing this technique. Or you might, but then a few hours or days later, you might feel worse. This is natural, according to Gilbertson. She likens it to kicking up dust. "Things don't settle back down right away." And, as Gilbertson says throughout the book, remember that whatever feelings you're feeling, "it's OK" (p.124).

Leaning in to our emotions can feel scary, especially when we are facing a storm, but the rewards are rich and lasting.

# 02: MOVEMENT & REST

## **Movement**

In high school I had an emergency appendectomy, during which they discovered endometriosis. This necessitated a seemingly simple additional laparoscopic surgery. Unfortunately, during that surgery the doctors burned a hole in another key organ. They did not realize it had happened until several days later, with my abdomen continuing to swell, they did several scans and discovered the error. They rushed me into another surgery, this one in the middle of the night. They made a nine inch incision down my stomach and cut through many of my abdominal muscles to make internal repairs and insert stints. They made four more incisions through which drainage tubes were placed. I remember waking the following day in an extraordinary amount of pain. I could hardly bear to use the remote on the side of the hospital bed to raise or lower the bed. The abdominal pain as well as the pain in my chest from remaining carbon dioxide from surgery was excruciating. That very morning a stern nurse entered my room and told me that I was to begin walking the halls with assistance. She explained that my body needed to move to be able to heal. I cried and clenched my teeth through those first trips down the hospital hallway. I could not stand upright enough to even see ahead. It was so hard to move after this physical trauma. I've since had three C-sections in giving birth to my three children and the recovery process is the similar. The sooner we can move after we've been hurt, the sooner we can heal. This does not just apply to physical injury but also to emotional wounds. Trauma can leave us feeling helpless. Our most basic human responses to crisis are to fight or flee. These are vital processes that *keep us moving*. Pain becomes trauma when we don't find a way to discharge the negative energy from an event where a fight, flight, or freeze response occurred. Bessel Van Der Kolk, renowned clinician and researcher in the area of post-traumatic stress, says that, "Immobilization is at the root of most trauma" (2015, p.86).

## 02 // MOVEMENT

The energy of our experiences gets locked up in our bodies and in our spirits. Without an intentional and adaptive process for release it becomes toxic and immobilizing. We may start experiencing anxiety, panic, flashbacks, hypervigilance, and other symptoms as a result. An excess of cortisol (the stress hormone) in the body can interfere with memory, can cause increased weight gain, raise blood pressure, increases the risk of depression, and a host of other negative things.

So, what are the implications of this when facing a trial, such as divorce, job loss, death of loved one, serious illness, etc.? There will be times when we can sense that our body is holding on to our stress. When hardship presses in on us, we can notice when we feel physically or emotionally “locked up,” weighed down, tense, or restless. For me, I am aware that my body is holding onto stress when I feel tension in my neck, back, and shoulders. I might also develop a headache and unknowingly start biting my nails. When we become aware of these sensations, we can have a plan for moving our bodies in a way that creates relief.

Movement is key element in a healing process. There are many ways to invite movement into our lives, including: acupuncture, massage, yoga, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy, dance, breathing practices, theatre (acting), walking, biking, martial arts, and even gardening.

Movement also occurs in the creative process. Creativity engages our soul and offers us a new way to view and approach our pain. Some creative opportunities might include jewelry making, collages, artful cooking, journaling, painting, coloring, vision boards and pottery/sculpture. Stirling Moss said, “Movement is tranquility.” While that may seem contradictory, we now understand that movement is key to our healing.

# 02 // REST

## Rest

In 2005, I co-founded a non-profit counseling center called The Refuge Center for Counseling. The early years held steep and winding learning curves. Like many non-profits, our infrastructure developed slowly and organically over time and so the first few years required that Jennifer (our other co-founder) and I wear many hats. We were the counselors that saw any and all clients that called for services. We cleaned the offices, made deposits, supervised interns, painted and decorated the offices, led board meetings, updated the website, wrote the grants...the list goes on. All of this at the same time that we were starting our families and had both navigated challenging pregnancies and deliveries. After several years, I began to feel a deep weariness. I noticed myself growing irritable, resentful, and fearful. The vision and optimism that previously carried me forward were buried under exhaustion. I felt like my loved ones were getting “the crumbs” from whatever I had left to give. I knew I needed to find a way to carve out some space for rest before I became an unhealthy force to the organization and my family. I decided to make a list of the things that made me feel most “alive” and connected. This included being in the mountains, prayer/meditation, yoga, reading poetry, sleeping until my mind and body felt ready to wake and rise, slowly drinking a cup of tea, and several other things that were about letting go of the need to produce and perform to instead rest and surrender. I took a 10 week sabbatical and gave myself the gift of each of these things. It was a time of Sabbath and God spoke a deep message of comfort to me in that time, “You are ENOUGH when you are STILL.” After this designated season of rest, I was able to re-engage in my role with The Refuge Center from a place of balance and clarity. Rest reminds us that we are valued and cherished even we can’t “earn” it. It is a chance to breathe, receive, and heal.

# 02 // REST

During trying times, rest is essential. Yet, when we are hurting, rest can be one of our greatest challenges. We may fear slowing down, dreading the possibility that emotions, questions or images may surface and overwhelm us beyond our ability to navigate them. We may feel that if we just keep busy enough, we will be able to distract ourselves from the pain.

Brother David Steindl-Rast reminds us, the Chinese pictograph for “busy” is composed of two characters: *heart* and *killing* (1990). Being perpetually in motion as a way to avoid our feelings actually ends up disconnecting us from the places in ourselves where we can access the most hope, compassion, and grace. Richard Rohr holds two things together beautifully when he says, “the two correctives of all spirituality are silence and service” (2014). Rest can happen in silence. Rest can happen in Sabbath practices.

One of my favorite authors, Wayne Muller, wrote a book called Sabbath. In it, he teaches us much about rest. “The practice of Sabbath is like the practice of taking refuge...Jesus offered this same beautiful practice to his disciples. *Make your home in me*, he said, *as I make mine in you*. The kingdom is within you, he reminded them, alive and miraculous this very moment. I am with you always: When you come to rest you will feel me. You will remember who you are, that you are the light of the world” (2000, p.9). Rest helps us to remember who we are and who we are.

Muller also speaks about this process through the concept of dormancy. He says, “Dormancy allows plants and their seeds to develop stress-resistant annual resting periods. When adverse conditions such as cold or drought arise, the plant ceases to receive its cues from the external environment and focuses inward, *receiving its vital direction from ancient inner rhythms*. *Dormancy maximizes the seed’s strength* and hardiness making it less susceptible to climactic extremes. In a given season, this may diminish the yield, but it is a rhythm designed less for quick profit and more for an abundance over eternity...So, when we see Jesus withdraw from the press of the crowds and retreat to a place of rest, he is not simply taking a well-deserved break from his useful but exhausting ministry. He is honoring a deep spiritual need for a time dedicated not to accomplishment and growth, but to quiescence and rest” (2000, p.58). Rest offers us the gift of reconnecting to God and to ourselves. And often we are surprised to find more strength, creativity and resilience than we could have ever imagined.

# 03: SELF CARE/SELF COMPASSION

Suffering and hardship can be a breeding ground for negative beliefs about ourselves and our world to develop. We can easily find ourselves in destructive cycles that leave us feeling resentful and helpless. One of the most important things we can do for ourselves in this time is to develop skills and practices that move us towards self-care and self-compassion.

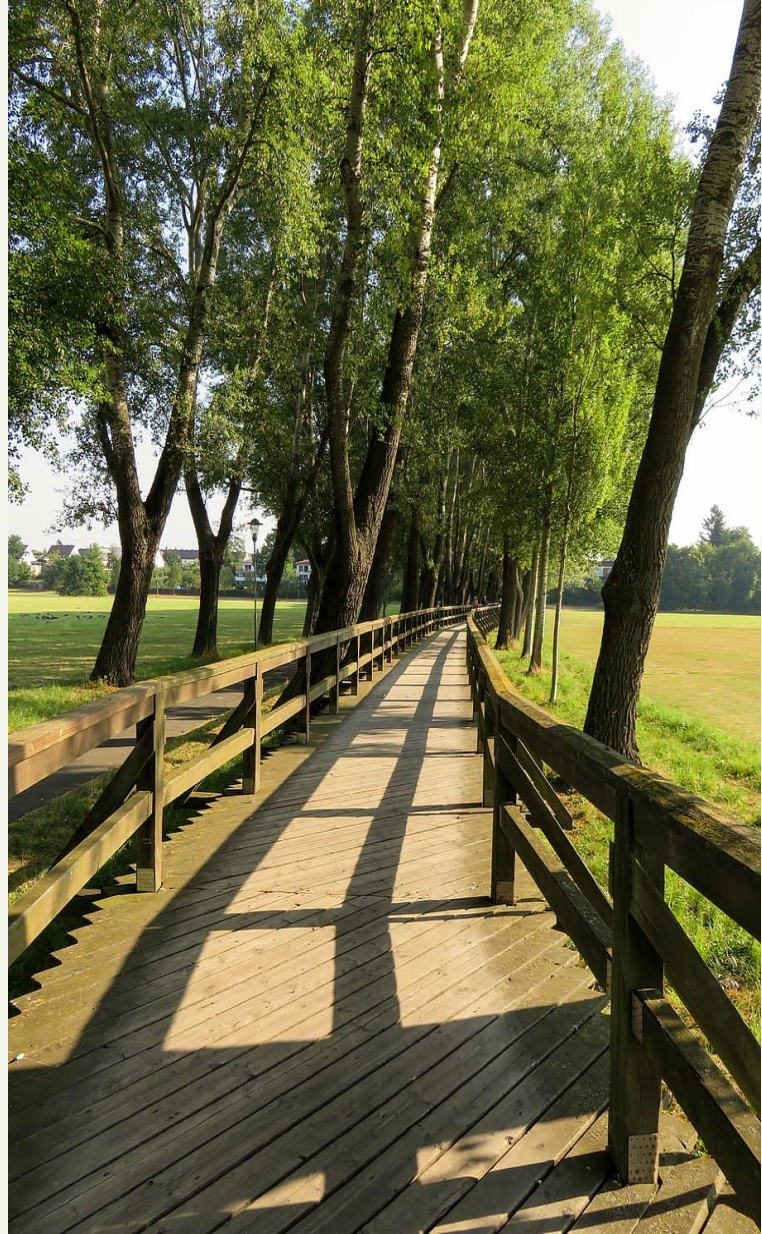
Dr. Kristen Neff, expert on the topic of self-compassion, says, “Having compassion for oneself is really no different than having compassion for others. Think about what the experience of compassion feels like. First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore that homeless person on the street, you can’t feel compassion for how difficult his or her experience is. Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others’ suffering so that your heart responds to their pain (the word compassion literally means to “suffer with”). When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity), it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience.

Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don’t like about yourself. Instead of just ignoring your pain with a “stiff upper lip” mentality, you stop to tell yourself “this is really difficult right now,” how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment? **Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect?”** (2019).

# 03

Giving yourself extra measures of grace, encouragement and comfort during a difficult season is vital to the healing process. Linda Bennett was one of our staff therapists at The Refuge Center for Counseling and also the Director of our Compassionate Care program. She was incredibly gifted at serving and nurturing others but in the summer of 2015, she was faced with the challenge of moving into a space where she needed to prioritize her own self-care. She shares a bit about that experience here:

*Summer of 2015 brought with it a new trial for me to face. A few months of coughing, chest pain, and growing fatigue resulted in the eventual diagnosis of cancer—Stage IV Adenocarcinoma—which had begun in my lungs and spread to my brain before being detected in late August.*



# 03

*It was a surprising diagnosis, given that I was active, healthy, and had never been a smoker. In fact, intent upon seeing my children grow up, I'd always been quite vigilant about screening for breast cancer, which took my mom's life when I was 15. But now, at the age of 46, with a new husband and four kids between us, I faced my own terminal diagnosis. That's the trial I face today--living with cancer, as well as I am able for as long as God allows.*

*I'm learning that living well with cancer requires me to have a deeper level of compassion and grace for myself. I make peace with my humanity almost daily as I'm made aware of limits to my energy level and physical strength and as odd, new symptoms of this disease or its treatment crop up. Sometimes those changes frustrate me, but, more and more, I find myself laughing--not in a mocking sort of way, but with lighthearted surrender and self-acceptance. Learning to love myself well—apart from any performance-based standards—is one of the very best gifts this trial has offered. In the season following my diagnosis, self-love, the love of my family, and the desire to be as well as possible for as long as possible led to a fresh commitment to extreme self-care. That required slowing down, often, and asking myself what I needed most. My list included: a ton of rest, good medical care, super healthy foods, time with God, and the support of people I love who loved me well. Being honest with myself about my needs and vulnerable with friends and family in sharing them was an important part of caring for myself and afforded countless opportunities to see those needs met in healthy, appropriate ways by God, myself, and trusted others. I continue to grow in my practice of self-care and am overwhelmed and humbled, still, by the love and care of friends and family and some very kind strangers--yet another very good gift of this trial.*



# 03

*Having compassion for myself and engaging in this level of self-care required me to step back from my work for a season and from commitments at my church--even though both were very fulfilling endeavors in my life. I'd heard it said years earlier that "the good is the enemy of the best." That truth resonated deeply within me and helped guide my choices during that season and today. I've become keenly aware of the reality that our time and energy and life and breath are limited resources, and that we must say "no" to some very good things in order to say "yes" to God's best for us every day. Guided by God's wisdom, self-compassion, and loving care for myself and others, my hope is that I will continue to grow in discernment of each day's good and its best and that I will learn to choose between them with purposeful intentionality. In doing so, may I steward wisely the life-breath I'm given each day—as well as I am able for as long as God allows--and may that be the most precious gift that comes from facing this trial.*

Linda ended up passing away on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016. Everyone that loved and knew her had an opportunity to witness her beauty as she took gentle, intentional steps to give herself compassion in a season where she could do the least but ended up being the most present and spiritually alive.



## 04: SHEDDING/SURRENDER/LETTING GO

There is a profound freedom that occurs when we can surrender to the idea that our storms allow us to receive and experience life in a richer way. Trials can shift our perspectives the way that an earthquake rocks our foundations. This process has the ability move us deeper into the more abundant life that Jesus teaches. Yet, it can be terrifying to surrender to this change process.

I can think of seasons in my life when my identity was closely tied to a certain institution, ideology or title. Inevitably, I would bump up against some tough feedback, a new perspective, or have a loss in a relationship and I would enter a period hard reflection. There was usually a part of me that would resist this invitation to transformation. There was so much uncertainty and I liked what was familiar to me.

Thomas Merton took note of those who fought against this current of surrender. “This is where so many holy people break down....As soon as they reach the point where they can no longer see the way and guide themselves by their own light, they refuse to go any further....It is in this darkness that we find true liberty. It is in this abandonment that we are made strong. This is the night that empties us” (2007, p.168).

What are we afforded the chance to be emptied of on this journey? The ideals, habits, attachments, and perceptions that no longer work. What we might have needed at one time in order to survive something, we find has now perhaps become burdensome and ineffective. Sue Monk Kidd, in her book, “When The Hearts Waits” talks about crisis and opportunity. She reflects that the word, “*crisis*” derives from the Greek words, “*krisis*” and “*krino*,” which mean “a separating.” She says, “The very root of the word implies that our crisis are times of severing from old ways and states of being. We need to ask ourselves what it is we’re being asked to separate from. What needs to be left behind?” (2006).

# 04

Poet and author Mark Nepo called this the “shedding process.” He says, “The way to stay close to the pulse of life is to change whatever has ceased to function in us. To shed whatever we are carrying that is no longer alive. To cast off our dead skin because dead skin can’t feel. Dead eyes can’t see. Dead ears can’t hear. And without feeling, there is no chance of wholeness.” He also says, “In essence, shedding opens us to self-transformation. Paradoxically, those of us who refuse such renewal will, sooner or later, be forced to undergo transformation anyway as a result of being broken or eroded by the world. Very often both occur at the same time: that is, we shed from within while being eroded from without” (2011, p.104).

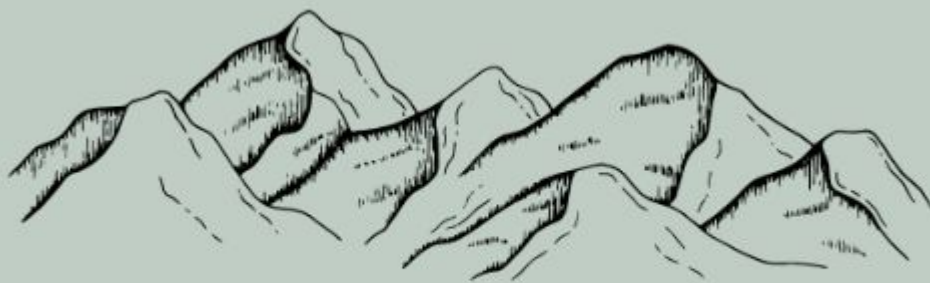
Trials are transformative when they can move us closer to what really matters. This requires sacrifice. The sacrifice allows us to, with intentionality and mindfulness, ask ourselves what is most valuable, most sacred in our lives and reframe our pain as an opportunity to create more space for that which matters most. The sacrifice is the process of sitting in the ashes of our loss and digging for our souls. In this, the phoenix process begins. Something in us is reborn, made new.

The alternative to this is clinging. Sue Monk Kidd says, “Clinging creates a shrinking within the soul, a shrinking of possibility and growth.” I saw a beautiful picture on Pinterest of a tree with the leaves beginning to fall. The caption on the picture read, “The trees are about to show us how lovely it is to let dead things go.”



# 04

Nature has so much to teach us about this process. The earth surrenders to the seasons- to the rhythm and cycle of release, stillness, blossoming and growth. Health, life and fruitfulness is to be found in trusting that with each new season we have an opportunity to **MORE FULLY BECOME**. This surrender, this sacrifice, this shedding- it is not a passive process. It is entirely intentional. Without an awareness of and commitment to the process, we may feel victimized by what is lost. But with a compassionate and wise attunement to the flow of the river of change we can embrace the grace to move closer to what really matters. And along the journey we can heed the wisdom of Rainer Maria Rilke, in Letters to a Young Poet, “Be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Love the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (1934).



# 05: FINDING SAFE PEOPLE TO BE VULNERABLE WITH

We heal and recover in the context of relationships. We need the company of safe people who can walk with us when we are hurting. Throughout our lives, we may not have been taught how to share feelings and needs and how to determine the right people to do that with. In the midst of hardship, we may feel especially fragile and tender and it is essential that we not only have people near us in these seasons but that they are trustworthy with our story. Bessel Van der Kolk says, ““You have to find someone who you can trust enough to accompany you, someone who can safely hold your feelings and help you listen to the painful messages....You need a guide who is not afraid of your terror and who can contain your darkest rage, someone who can safeguard the wholeness of you...” (2015, p.177). These kinds of friends and guides give us permission to tell the whole truth of ourselves and our experiences and their compassion and wisdom lead us towards healing. We instinctively know it is not safe to be vulnerable with those we cannot trust. Discernment is so key. But how do we know if we can trust them? Brene Brown, author and researcher who has started a global conversation on this topic, says “You share with people who have earned the right to hear your story. You share with people who can bear the weight of your story” (2015). These are people with whom we have established a foundation of confidence in their ability to respond with empathy, maintain confidentiality when necessary, honor the uniquely sacred experience of your story, and offer the gentle assurance of their presence. This is connection. It happens when we can feel seen, safe, secure, and soothed by another. These people in our lives might be called soul friends. They give us the gift of being able to be vulnerable and transparent without the fear of judgement.

# 05

What a gift when we have one or more soul friends in our life we can turn to in hard times. In these seasons we may also benefit from inviting others into our circle who can offer us understanding, care, and support. This may be a pastor, a professional counselor, a spiritual director, or a mentor. It is up to us to decide who we can entrust our story to and then to access the courage and wisdom to let them in. Courage does not mean we are not afraid, but rather, knowing that something is greater than the fear. In this case, we may fear being open and honest about our struggles, but we can trust that connecting with safe people will bear the fruit of hope. Having wisdom about what, when, and how to share is also essential.

My dear friend, Jenny Black, developed a metaphorical exercise that I have found to be invaluable in considering our emotional space and discerning who gets access to that. Several years back Jenny was trying to create a lesson about boundaries for a support group she ran. She came upon this quote from Anne Lamott in her book, *Bird by Bird*.

*“Every single one of us at birth is given an emotional acre all our own. As long as you don’t hurt anyone, you really get to do with your acre as you please. You can plant fruit trees or flowers or alphabetized rows of vegetables, or nothing at all. If you want your acre to look like a giant garage sale, or an auto-wrecking yard that’s what you get to do with it. There’s a fence around your acre, though, with a gate, and if people keep coming onto your land and sliming it or trying to get you to do what they think is right, you get to ask them to leave. And they have to go, because this is your acre” (1997, p. 16).*



# 05

Inspired by this quote, Jenny began to give her clients a homework assignment of describing their emotional acre. They created collages, drew pictures, and wrote poetry about their acres. She noted that some people had a big house on their acre. Some people had only gardens and playgrounds. Some people had an adorable white picket fence and others had barbed wire surrounding their acre. Some realized they had a tall impenetrable wall with no gate for anyone to enter and others did not have a boundary at all. Jenny explains that it is important to acknowledge that our acre does not just come into being. We don't wake up and begin creating it. There are seeds planted on our acre that we don't plant. They include the circumstances we are born into: the nurturing we received or did not receive in our childhood, the abuse we suffered, the messages we were told about life, God, and others (1997). Although other people impact our acre, no one else actually lives there. Those plants we did not plant are not another person's existence on our property. They are OUR thoughts, feelings, memories, beliefs, and responses to being in relationship with another person.

Jenny shares that at some point, our acre becomes our own. **We get to decide what we want and who we want to influence our acre.** We get to decide what to plant and what to uproot. We get to decide what that fence looks like. Our deepest love or rooted bitterness is our experience on our acre.

# 05

As we use this image to discern our needs, Jenny offers these questions for reflection:

- Is an acre the right amount of space for you? Too big? Too small?
- What is the first thing you see on your acre?
- What is the first thing others see?
- How do you want people to feel when they are visiting your acre?
- How do they feel? (ask them.)
- What do you want on your acre that is not there?
- What do you want off of your acre that is there?

In a season of pain or challenges, I might also add these additional questions for reflection:

- What kind of fence and gates do I need around my acre right now?
- Who has access to my acre right now and am I okay with that?
- What might I build or plant on my acre in honor of this season?
- Where can I go on my acre to feel safe and to reflect or rest?
- Where do I find God on my acre?





# 05

Allowing ourselves to be selective about who has access to our emotional world is not only reasonable, it is necessary. Drs. Henry Cloud and & John Townsend, in their book, *Safe People*, teach us how to recognize the traits of the kinds of people we might want to “invite onto the deepest sections of our acre” (2009, p. 46). They share that the best example of a safe person is found in Jesus. In him were found the three qualities of a safe person; *dwelling*, *grace* and *truth*. As John wrote: “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

## **Dwelling**

Dwelling refers to someone’s ability to connect with us. The Greek word used here means to “encamp” or “reside.” Safe people are able to “dwell in the flesh.” **They are able to connect in a way that we know that they are present with us.**

## **Grace**

The second safe quality that Jesus exemplifies is grace. Grace is “unmerited favor.” It means that someone is on our side; they are “for us.” Grace implies unconditional love and acceptance with no condemnation. Relationships in which people shame or condemn us are ultimately hurtful and do not produce growth. They require us to be different that we are in order to be accepted. Love that must be earned is basically useless. Grace does the opposite. It says that **you are accepted just like you are and that you will not be shamed or incur wrath for whatever you are experiencing.**

## **Truth**

The third quality that Jesus embodied for us was truth. Truth implies many things, but in relationships it implies **honesty, being real with one another, and living out the truth of God.** Many people believe that safe relationships are relationships that just give grace without confrontation, but ultimately these relationships can be destructive as well.

# 05

Daniel Siegel is an expert on healthy relationships and attachment. Attachment is being positively bonded with another, in a way that allows us to relate to each other from a place of kindness and compassion. It is an essential foundation for a long-lasting relationship. His “4 S’s of attachment” offer us perspective on what our experience might be with a safe person in our life with whom we are able to share our story with authenticity and transparency. We are **Seen** by them— this is not just seeing with the eyes-it means they perceive us deeply and empathically. They are **Safe** —they avoid actions and responses that frighten or hurt us. We are **Soothed** by them-they help us deal with difficult emotions and situations. And we feel **Secure** with them— they help us develop an internalized sense of well-being (2016). The result of this is that we are able to accept that we are good, wanted, worthwhile, competent, and lovable. We can trust that our safe person appropriately responds to my needs and is sensitive, dependable, caring, and trustworthy. (

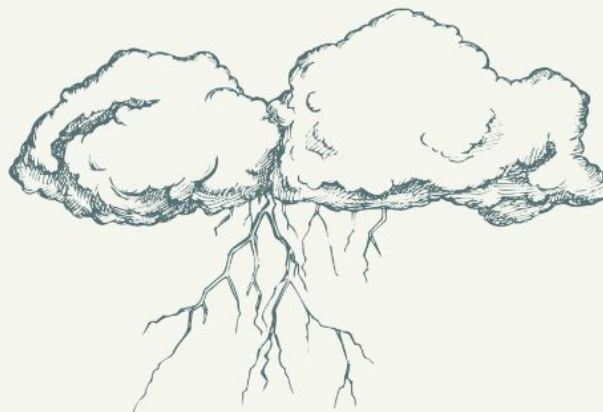
Connecting with safe people in an authentic ways grows us. When we *experience* feeling loved, accepted, and known, it increases our capacity for self-reflection and for giving and receiving grace. This is a deeply honoring intimacy. Inch by inch, we access more courage, strength, clarity, and confidence. A connection with a safe person allows us to follow our convictions and to be honest with ourselves and others. The person who is a friend to our soul is the person to whom we can entrust our pain.

# 05

## Grief Rituals

Storms and trials are bound to bring grief into our life. Their mere presence means something is likely to change or be lost. When someone we love passes away, we are accustomed to the ritual of holding a funeral service. This gives family and friends a chance to honor the life of their loved one, to share memories and stories, to cry and grieve together in community, and to provide tangible comfort (meals, flowers, cards etc.) However, we face so many other types of losses in our lifetime and we often do not slow down enough to honor them in such intentional ways. Did you know there are over 40 forms of loss? These can include death of a loved one, divorce, injury, dismissal from work, retirement, foreclosure, moving, changes in relationships, separation from a pet, children leaving home etc. All of these things can create internal and external storms in our lives.

Without any form of acknowledgement, the energy of these losses compounds in our bodies. We need ways to honor our losses and to express our grief energy. A ritual is can be any action done in a purposeful way. In this case, the purpose of the ritual is to keep us connected to the **meaning** of what we have loved, but has been lost in the storm.



# 05

Some examples of rituals can include:

- Lighting a candle and taking slow breaths while watching the flame, as you pause to honor what has changed or died, while also expressing gratitude for how much (it, they) meant to you.
- Writing a letter to or about your loss
- Creating a playlist of music that connects you to special memories and emotions of that person or experience
- Engaging in dance or creating a piece of art that tells the story of your loss.
- Looking through old photos and allowing yourself to feel the joy, sadness and any other emotion that comes up as you reminisce.
- Identifying a charity whose mission aligns with things you value and making meaningful contributions, as well as encouraging others to do the same, in the name or honor of the loved one.
- Choosing a place to plant a tree, flowers, or foods as a reminder of the beauty and nourishment this love brought to your life.
- Making a space in your home that holds special items (photos, letters, personal items from loved one etc.) and decorating it with candles, greenery, stones or flowers from nature, colorful cloths or other items and taking a moment for silence when passing or standing in front of this space.
- Writing down on paper or river stones what you feel ready to “release” or let go of. If on paper, lay it gently onto a fire and notice its transformation as it melts and becomes ash. If on river stones, lay them gently into a moving water source, like a creek or stream and note that over time, nature will scrub them clean.
- Meditation or guided imagery exercise can also be helpful.

# 05

In closing, practice this beautiful meditation from Elizabeth Lesser's book "Broken Open."

*Bring your awareness to focus on something in your life that is changing or ending or dying right now.*

*Breathe gently as you consider whatever transition is most significant right now in your life.*

*Note any feelings that arise—trepidation, excitement, resistance, anger, annoyance, or grief.*

*Every time your feelings get the better of you, become aware of your breathing.*

*Meet your troubled and contracted feelings with your calm and expansive breath.*

*Breathe, sigh, and stretch out on the river of change.*

*Remember times when you have resisted change in the past.*

*Regard how things turned out in the end—maybe not how you thought they would, or you wanted them to, but in the end, there you were.*

*Wiser, stronger, still alive.*

*Tip your hat to the poignancy of death or loss and the promise of rebirth and renewal. Smile.*

*Relax.*

*Allow yourself to break open.*

*Sit tall, with dignity and patience, watching your breath rise and fall, rise and fall.*

*Pray for the courage to welcome this new change with openness and wisdom.*

*Then open your eyes, go back into your life, and do what you have to do, but do it with grace, with hope, and with a lighter touch. (Lesser, 2010, p. 233).*



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