Soul Wounds

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DEDICATION

For all the warrior women who dare to be in this beautiful human struggle with their whole hearts.
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INTRODUCTION


“Oh look, it’s Pocahontas,” Stacy’s asshole brother yelled as I walked up in my new moccasins. I’d gotten them on one of the few summer vacations I’d ever been on. My dad and stepmom had taken me to Chimney Rock in the North Carolina mountains, and I just knew that with those moccasins, I would go down in neighborhood history—the hide and go seek MVP. I was already the fastest girl at age twelve, and could beat out plenty of the boys, too, but soon, I’d also be the stealthiest. I imagined the other kids panting, looking confused as to how I could’ve made it back to base without so much as a leaf rustled.

And Stacy’s asshole brother would surely be unable to cut me down to insignificance if I had all that going for me. But as it was, he was more than able to make me feel stupid, with or without the moccasins. To be fair, it wasn’t just him. Every time I crossed the imaginary line between their summer home and my four seasons home, I felt a deep sense of being out of place. theirs was a house full of ease and Pepperidge Farm products; in my single parent home, we scraped by. I didn’t realize we were on the low end of middle class until I saw how the Archers lived.

We wouldn’t have been considered impoverished. Certainly, by comparison to many of the folks I grew up with, we were comfortable, but it was a precarious comfort, balanced on Granddad’s apparent wealth, which didn’t hold its shine much below the surface. He owned a small supermarket, and we got free groceries, but he had no retirement to speak of, having poured his money into the store and into its many impoverished
patrons. We all knew that if the store went down, Granddad would be in bad shape. It eventually did, and he was.

My parents divorced when I was two, and my newly single mom, clerical state employee, was determined to continue living her double income way of life, out of a combination of grit and motherly duty. Our socioeconomic status would be summed up as—"Yes, Candice takes dance classes, but her mother will cry every month when she writes the mortgage check with a shaky hand and a fearful heart." There would be no college fund, no vacations, and none of the extravagances that separate the struggling middle class from the comfortable upper class in both internal and external experiences of security. We’d always feel on the brink of disaster and financial ruin. Though mom never talked about this reality, I felt it keenly.

The Archers had nice, new clothes and boats, and were also able to send their kids to sailing camps. They had go-karts and stereos, but it wasn’t what they had so much as the absence of tension in their home that made me realize things were different for them. Nobody seemed fearful about getting a stain on their favorite shirt, because it could be replaced. Nobody was worried about breaking a toy, because they had ten others that were just as interesting. I felt a sense of scarcity dwelling beneath my mom’s valiant efforts to keep me in nice clothes and toys, felt shameful in the presence of those who experienced abundance. This recognition of a difference in resources slowly became a major part of my soul wound story, though it didn’t occur to me until I started writing this book that these seemingly meaningless experiences of comparison helped to originate a wound I would carry for many years. There was no single, defining moment in which my soul wound story of broken was set into motion. It was rather death by a thousand papercuts: a collection of individually insignificant experiences that festered together to become my narrative of not being enough.

“You don’t want to be like Briar, do you?” Stacy’s mom asked, not exactly playfully. I was apparently eating my goldfish in a way that was reminiscent of their border collie, Briar, one at a time out of the bag. I was mortified, wishing I could disappear and escape the disapproving stares.

“You should eat, THAT brownie,” Stacy’s cousin and new best friend urged as innocently as she was able. I simply stared, fearful of what would happen if I complied, but just as fearful of being told I was being a baby if I said no.

“You can’t play with our toys, they aren’t for you.” Stacy’s asshole brother singling me out again. Shame and that hot, about-to-cry feeling rose in my throat.
“Maybe if I had nicer clothes, or if my parents weren’t divorced and my stepmom so young...” The endless math of why I don’t belong here. With each jab, the soul wound story of broken became written deeper on my heart like a powerful spell, calling forth all manner of obstacles and hurts well into my adult life.

Soul wounds are the past emotional injuries that manifest pain-based identities. We take painful experiences and begin defining ourselves by the themes, seeing ourselves as victims, broken, or shameful. These soul wound stories limit us to small worlds, small dreams, and unfulfilling relationships. A soul wound can be a single, destructive experience or a gradual accumulation of seemingly unimportant hurts. An experience of extreme trauma, such as a rape, can manifest the same sort of soul wounds as a series of easily dismissed rejections by friends, family, or community.

On a spiritual level, whether an experience generates a soul wound reflects the work a soul needs to do to recognize and achieve its fullness. Without difficulty, it is impossible to understand success. Light cannot be grasped without darkness. The Kabbalah teaches that we each must face a personalized opponent, a set of circumstances or beliefs that we must overcome to actualize our highest self and purpose. Soul wounds are the signposts to the opponent, attempting to guide us to growth and healing. Whatever soul wound we can heal through compassionate wisdom becomes a source of light and love for our work in this world. You will never meet a person more full of light and love than someone who has healed a soul wound, and you won’t meet anyone more miserable than someone who’s living blindly in their soul wound story.

Broken has been a defining theme of my story—in relationships, work, and in my experience of myself and the world, I was driven by the conviction that there was something wrong with me, some unidentifiable source of damage that made me inferior and unlovable. In high school, I battled broken by excelling in academics, arts, and athletics. It seems such a shame that I was unable to enjoy the ease with which most things came to me because I was desperate to prove my worth. I barely have any concrete memories from the time because it was so packed full of extracurriculars, a seemingly constant transition from one activity to the next.

Fast forward to college—full ride to a public ivy, pre-med. Though my scholarship group was a band of bright and mostly middle-class misfits, one glance around campus, and it was clear—we were a minority. Parking lots full of BMWs and Volvos, graduation gifts from parents; hallways full of girls chatting about how their mothers and sisters had pledged Tri-Delta so they would be shoe ins; they didn’t just have things, they had social capital and implicit knowledge of systems my family had never been a part of.

When I got my first C in my entire academic history (chemistry), I knew I was a total failure. It all added up: I didn’t have the right clothes, the
right family, the right anything to be at this school, let alone become a
doctor. I abandoned pre-med and resigned myself to studying psychology,
but the ghost of broken would haunt me there, too. I sat in meetings with
my thesis advisor with the same hum of anxiety I imagine someone in
witness protection would feel, constantly waiting to be found out as the
poor kid, the one who eats goldfish like a dog, the one who has been
masquerading all this time as someone deserving of respect and belonging.

Fast forward to graduate school, when the broken story festered into a
full-blown depressive episode. The perfect storm of flawed genetics and
just enough difficulty to manifest a legitimate, clinical impairment. Whole
days lost, laying on the couch, feeling like my heart would implode from the
hopelessness. Rabid, angry thoughts would overtake me: “You’re stupid,
worthless, a bad daughter, and a piece of shit. You don’t even have
anything to be sad about—pathetic. Nobody could love you.” I would
finally pull myself into a rocking ball of barely human matter, whispering to
myself, “I want to go home, I want to go home.” Unable to bear the
assaults from my own mind, I felt there had to be some home that would
allow me safety and rest. I just had no idea where it was.

My broken story likely played a big role in my choice of profession,
but I don’t like to blame everything on pathology. I’m equally certain that
the field of counseling chose me for my own healing and so I could be a
healer for others. But broken certainly fueled my ongoing drive to get the
next certification, the next big job, learn the next skill. So many of my
“achievements” felt like desperate attempts to get some sort of reassurance
that I belonged somewhere, that I had a purpose, worth.

More than anything, broken showed up in my relationships with men.
To sum up, if they were damaged or unavailable, I was their biggest fan. A
serial monogamist, I moved from relationship to relationship, desperate for
proof that I was lovable. Unable to see myself as someone deserving of love
and kindness, I clung to men who reinforced that very way of seeing
myself. I felt I was at some sort of disadvantage to other women, one that
required me to work exceptionally hard to win someone’s love or work to
make someone capable of love in the first place. But of course, this is
backwards. Love is meant to be given to us freely, not earned only after
proving our worth on an emotional American Ninja Warrior course.

After the frightening experience of severe depression complete with
recurring suicidal thoughts and a series of depleting relationships, I
desperately carved a path towards sanity one tiny, seemingly meaningless
step at a time. Shreds of hope broke through with meds, martial arts, music,
and therapy—enough light to see there was a path toward healing but not
even enough clarity, yet, to illuminate the true foundation of my hurt: my broken
story.
Ripping up my wounded foundation required Seth—the wrecking ball of my Saturn’s return who I met in my late twenties. I’d been out of graduate school and working as a counselor for a couple of years when we met, and despite numerous red flags in the very beginning of our relationship, my soul wound urged me to continue like a woman possessed. Being in my late twenties and still grappling with an undiscovered soul wound, I was incredibly vulnerable to the fear that I would immediately be shipped to the island of old cat ladies if I wasn’t married by the time I was thirty. Handsome and superficially refined, Seth had opinions about Genesis pre and post Peter Gabriel, watched the Criterion Collection, and drank obscure, foreign beer, lots of it. Just below his dapper surface were layers of need and darkness. He was directionless in his career, often unemployed, and apt to spend the rent money on weed and booze. But my soul wound insisted that Seth just needed some help smoothing out the rough edges. After all, someone like me couldn’t expect some happy, healthy, available guy to just show up and have any interest in me.

Seth seemed to feed off the energy I’d pour into his betterment, alternating between rejecting rage and pitiful apologies. Eventually, it got scary; he would disappear around 9 at night, not answer his phone, then stagger in at 3 or 4 in the morning, sometimes pontificating about self-discoveries he had made. Other times, he’d be cold and looking for a fight. All those hours, I had been up, agonizing, my mouth dry with fear, feeling punched in the gut with worry. What if he didn’t come back this time? What if I’d driven him away with my impossible standards? What if he was in jail? When he would finally re-emerge from radio silence, I would confront him and be met with, “Well we can’t all be perfect like you.” I couldn’t have felt less perfect.

Over the course of our 4-year relationship, he would occasionally apologize and take breaks from drinking. The breaks became fewer and farther between. Once, he threatened to jump out of the car, in the middle of rush hour, if I didn’t drop him at the bar. Another time, he called while driving, wasted, telling me about what a terrible person he was but how it was also my fault he kept drinking. I just put too much pressure on him to figure out what he wanted to do, to go to counseling, to commit.

Then one day, I woke up. I was working at a methadone clinic with clients at all stages of addiction (ironic, I know) from 6 AM until 3 PM, while also seeing clients in my brand new private practice until 7 or 8 at night. I’d just gotten an acceptance letter from a doctoral program and would start in the fall. I had plans to leave the grueling and draining job at the clinic and grow my practice while working on my PhD. I was as close to the top of the world as I’d ever been, then Oprah decided she would simultaneously ruin and save my life. I caught an episode of Super Soul
Sunday at some point before our free cable subscription expired, and she was talking with a guest about how to know if you’ve found “the one.” The guest star said, “You know you’re with the right man if you would want a son just like him.” Oprah did her characteristic verbatim reflection just in case I didn’t catch it the first time—“a son just like him.” My blood ran cold, and I felt slightly nauseous. I would be terrified to have a son as difficult and capable of chaos as Seth.

A few days later, I found another beer can buried in the trash. I realized I would never have anything for myself—no joy, no success, no safety—if I stayed in this relationship. I told him it was the last time and left to spend the weekend back at home with my mom, feeling wrecked to my core. The universe must have sensed my vulnerability to the inertia of the relationship, because when I came back to our dingy little rental house, I knew he’d brought a woman there during my two-night absence. My makeup was stuffed in a drawer, pictures of him and I had been thrown in the trash, my purse and clothes had been shoved in a closet. I moved out the next week, the middle of June, and in that summer, I reclaimed my voice, rediscovered joy, and began the work of healing a soul wound that had been a lifetime in the making.

At first, I hurt harder and bigger than I ever had, feeling like a refugee in my tiny and drafty apartment. I prayed to a God I didn’t believe in and begged him to kill me. I didn’t eat. I wallowed in the ending of what I knew was my last chance at love. In the midst of the agony, I heard one of my methadone clinic clients’ words in my ear, “Just be still, sometimes the Lord just wants you to be still, girl.”

So, I tried being still. I meditated on my broken heart and asked it to tell me what it needed. And that small act of compassionate surrender was everything. I cried when my heart needed to cry, I watched as hurts so long past and so deeply buried arose and showed me how I had learned to see myself as a nobody who must work to be seen, to be loved, and to be valued. I let my heart break for the little girl who felt responsible for her mother’s happiness, abandoned by her father, and shunned by any group, including the Archers, where she would desperately seek belonging.

And in that allowing, a great space opened. I took one timid step at a time into that new space, started volunteering, and started my doctoral program. I found people who were more than willing to accept me, and I let them. I wrote songs, went on long walks, and somehow, this wound I had carried for so long began to heal. I found the beginnings of peace and got glimpses of relationships built on trust and authenticity rather than desperation and smallness. I learned my strength and resilience were in my willingness to show up to heartbreak with kindness. I started dating, and rather than making a wounded plea for acceptance, I made a conscious call for a partner. He showed up. I stopped settling and started asking,
unapologetically, for what I wanted and now knew I deserved. I found wholeness.

And so can you.

This book is an exploration of soul wounds: what they are, how we get them, and how to resolve the pain-based stories we tell ourselves to discover fullness and possibility. The client stories told here are just a handful of examples of how possible it is to heal our soul wounds and live openly and unapologetically as our truest selves. I’ll share exercises and activities that will move you through the three stages of healing a soul wound: awareness, compassion, and change.

Through awareness we acknowledge what is there. Those negative beliefs we’ve been taking for granted as fundamentally true (“I’m not good enough,” “I’ll never find happiness in love,” etc.) must be examined. We often think we’re aware of the programming we’re operating on, but how often do you look at the source code for the programs you run on the computer you use every day? Using the programming is not the same as examining it. You’ll learn to shift into the role of the observer using meditation, creating space to see the ways in which long buried, wound-based programming has been pushing you around.

Compassion isn’t just for saints and monks anymore. My Facebook news feed is covered with articles and blogs about how to be more compassionate with ourselves and others. Researchers of happiness and goal attainment have even jumped on the bandwagon and have learned that compassion is a required ingredient for lasting behavior change. Our soul wounds keep us stuck in negative assumptions and beliefs about ourselves and others. Compassion asks that we be generous and accepting of ourselves just as we are, which is, ironically, the key to growth. We can learn to be more compassionate with ourselves by taking care of our most basic needs on purpose. Feeding ourselves with the intention of nourishing our bodies, saying “no” to unreasonable requests with the intention of protecting our energy resources, and other seemingly small acts of self-compassion pave the way for a sea of change in our relationships with ourselves in which we come to deeply value our unique spirits and default to kindness rather than criticism.

Healing a soul wound requires a complete reorientation to reality—we have to change how we see ourselves, how we understand pain, and how we move through this world to escape the gravitational pull of wounded smallness. We’ll explore ways you can discover a new, compassionate dialogue with yourself and with others, as well as concrete ways to set effective boundaries in relationships that may currently seem draining and overpowering. We’ll examine what it means to experience difficulty and start to develop a healthy philosophy of the reality of pain. Rather than assuming that difficulty is punishment or doled out randomly and
heartlessly, we’ll test out the possibility that pain is fuel for growth, as long as it’s accompanied by a heaping dose of self-validation. We’re more likely to find the growth message in our suffering when we allow our hearts to break around the pain. We’ll also learn strategies for values-based living: a heart-felt alternative to being caught up in the cycle of pleasure seeking and pain avoidance.

This process may seem daunting, and it would be misleading to characterize it as a walk in the park. It isn’t. But this work is necessary if your goal is to live your most authentic, meaningful, and beautiful life. Think about how long you’ve been living in your soul wound story. Imagine yourself twenty or thirty years from now, looking back on this choice you made to dive into your hurts with eyes wide open. Imagine the possibilities that await you if you learned now, right now, how to speak your truth, how to manage difficulty with grace and compassion, and how to love yourself fully. One day lived in truth and love will be worth all the pain it took to get you to this place of willingness. So, let’s surrender together and begin this powerful work of healing.
1 WALKING WOUNDED

“The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections.” Judith Herman, M.D.

No soul wound forms in a vacuum but is rather the culmination of many causes and conditions, plenty of which are out of our control. The seeds of our wounds are planted in childhood. When a bad thing happens to a child, they have intense feelings that generate urges to take action. The behaviors that result from those urges are acted out in an environment that is somewhere on the spectrum of supportive to negligent. The feedback she gets for those behaviors helps determine the way she internalizes her experience, planting seeds for the beliefs she will carry into adulthood. These core beliefs subsequently impact the choices she makes, the relationships she seeks out, and are instrumental in creating the topography of her life. This blend of early experiences, behavior feedback loops, and core beliefs form the basic narrative of our stories. As therapist Holly Yates beautifully sums up, “The story is fundamental to how your behavior came to have meaning.” The stories we tell ourselves that are built on formative, painful childhood experiences become soul wounds.

Soul wounds can be grouped based on shared characteristics, behaviors, and beliefs. In my work with clients, most people fall into one of three categories in expressing their soul wounds: the victim, broken, or shameful. These are not clinical or diagnostic groups but are meant to be helpful guides in recognizing the unique ways you might be living in your wounded story.
Before discussing the details of how soul wounds manifest in our lives, let’s clear one thing up: you do not have to have a tragic childhood to be walking wounded. One notion many of my clients have in common is the belief that their hurt is invalid because there are others who’ve been through worse. I’ve heard this same narrative, spoken in earnest denial from people who have survived everything from being left too long at daycare when they were tots to extensive sexual abuse perpetrated by family members: “It could’ve been worse.” Unfortunately, there’s almost always a “worse” scenario, but the problem with this idea is not its lack of accuracy, but the lack of acceptance inherent in it. More often, when we say it could be worse, we really mean, “I can’t be upset about this because that would minimize someone else’s pain.” We don’t acknowledge the validity of our hurt and consequently ignore its source, increasing that pain’s ability to push us around and guide our choices.

While it is true not all negative or painful experiences reach the medically constructed level of “traumatic,” an event doesn’t have to be diagnosable to be significant. The real measure of impact is the degree to which we build beliefs about ourselves, others, and the world because of the experience. Soul wounds arise when a negative childhood experience becomes the basic theme of our core narratives—the ways we define ourselves, the treatment we anticipate in our relationships, whether we see the world as safe or dangerous.

Why do soul wounds develop in childhood when bad things can and will happen at any point in life? There are several aspects of childhood that make it a high-risk period for soul wounds. From a developmental perspective, children don’t have the same reasoning or emotional regulation abilities as adults. In early life, our experiences are filtered through concrete, self-centered perspectives; we see things as being all good or all bad, with minimal ability to consider a gray area and understand most experiences as extensions of ourselves. If mommy is upset, I must have done something wrong. If I did something wrong, I am bad.

Our early caregivers go a long way in helping us manage the inevitable disappointments that might otherwise result in sweeping negative judgments about ourselves. When caregivers respond with reassurance that everybody has negative emotions and model effective ways to deal with painful experiences, we gradually learn to make room for our faults, disappointments, and difficult feelings without making global assumptions about our worth. When caregivers are less able to help us through our first difficult emotions, we may start to internalize problematic beliefs about ourselves.

The beliefs we form about the world and ourselves because of our childhood experiences become the lens through which we interpret events that happen as we age. If we determine ourselves to be bad or broken and
see the world as a place that is frightening and unpredictable, we have incurred a soul wound that will mold our perspective and understanding of events to come and will influence the choices we make significantly. We live by our wounds until we become aware of their origins and develop the tools to live free of the harsh, painful stories they tell us about who we are and what we are worth.

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When Carol was eight years old, she broke up a drunken brawl between her mother and father. She can still see the blood on her shirt and remembers wondering whose it was. Through this and many other terrifying, alcohol-fueled experiences with her father, she came to fear unknown places and people, assuming what she didn’t know would most likely hurt her. She longed so much for safety that she married a man she knew she could trust but could never love—love was an intense emotion that she believed resulted in the sort of violence she saw erupt between her own parents.

Nari was the oldest daughter of Korean parents who had immigrated to the United States when she was four. Caught between the strict, achievement-based expectations of her parents and the carefree “find your own path” culture of her new home, Nari felt like a failure every time she followed her passion for writing instead of studying for class. Her desire to be accepted by her parents led her to medical school and major depression, despite a painful longing to be a food and travel writer.

June was an energetic child who loved exploring; her mother seemed put out by her constant presence and need for engagement. When June was five years old, she was playing in the coat section of a department store when she realized her mother was not there. After a few minutes of calling for her mother with no response, she became frantic, running to the front of the store, crying hysterically until a clerk called her mother over the intercom. Her mother was annoyed, and hurriedly pulled June out of the store. “You are embarrassing me!” she scolded, seemingly oblivious to June’s fear. As June got older, her sense of being an inconvenience translated into a strong aversion for any sort of confrontation. Even asking for a special order at a restaurant brought up such anxiety about being a burden, she would often eat food she didn’t even care for.

These are just a few examples of the often-hidden connections between the struggles we experience in our adult lives and childhood difficulties. Bad things happen, we build rules and expectations around those bad things, then those subconscious rules bias our perception for as long as they remain out of awareness. If I see the world as a dangerous place, I’ll avoid any risk; if I see myself as a disappointment, I’ll overachieve at the expense of my authentic self to gain acceptance; if I see myself as a
burden, I’ll pour myself out to earn love. If the connections between past childhood hurts and current core beliefs remain hidden, a sense of inevitability surrounds the events of our lives; we feel powerless to make meaningful changes, destined to encounter barriers and live lives that may be good enough, but seldom feel inspired and purposeful. Let’s look at the beliefs, behaviors, early experiences, and sociocultural factors that result in each type of soul wound.

**Experiences That Shape the Victim Wound**

Being a woman in this world can feel like an invitation to be marginalized, taken advantage of, and denied basic human rights. While intersectional identities of race, religion, and socioeconomic status can mitigate or worsen the lived experience of womanhood, it is safe to say that to be a woman of any type is hard. Statistics indicate that by virtue of identifying as a woman, we are more likely to be victims of crimes, interpersonal violence, or mental illness.

The word “victim” comes with significant cultural and political baggage. The idea of being a victim in White America, for example, is synonymous with being female, weak, whiny, helpless, and suggests making much ado about nothing. In this culture of rugged, male-dominated individualism, the victim is looked down upon and often judged as being responsible for whatever bad thing made them a victim in the first place. A glaring example of the bias against victims is evident in the criminal justice system’s approach to charging and trying accused rapists. Many survivors fail to report sexual assault based on the very legitimate fear that they’ll be put on trial along with their perpetrators; everything from intimate partner stats and drinking behavior to Facebook photos of parties from years past become fodder for defense attorneys determined to use the age-old trope “she was asking for it” as a primary litigation strategy.

From a soul wound perspective, the victim story arises from childhood experiences in which we feel at risk physically or emotionally. When our parents yell, leave us for extended periods of time, are violent with each other; when we are bullied at a young age by our peers or rejected harshly; or when we experience death or physical illness or injury, we develop the deep-seated belief that the world is a dangerous place that we are ill-equipped to navigate. Intense experiences of fear are a breeding ground for victim stories in which we view ourselves as small and helpless, and we start waiting for the other shoe to drop, hoping someone will rescue us at some point along the way.

One of the ways a soul wound manifests around early experiences of danger or uncertainty is in our locus of control, an idea that describes how we conceptualize our ability to impact the events of our lives. If we have an internal locus of control, developed through a combination of genetic
predisposition and compassionate, empowering caregiving in childhood, we experience difficulties and setbacks from a place of agency, believing we have some measure of control over how things turn out for us. An external locus of control sets us up to see ourselves as victims of factors that are outside of our ability to impact. Fear-inducing events early in life encourage an external locus of control, making it difficult for us to see our capacity to change our lives for the better. When outcomes are viewed as random and out of our control, we fall into the inaction of learned helplessness; assuming our choices and actions are meaningless.

There are certainly some levels of loss, violence, and fear that would tax even the healthiest and most well-adjusted of children, which is why some people can come from solid families of origin but still develop a victim soul wound. Experiences that meet the clinical definition of a traumatic experience for preschool-aged children that can happen in the happiest of families include witnessing car accidents, undergoing invasive medical procedures, and even dog bites. Such experiences can lead to intrusive thoughts of the event, withdrawal from loved ones, nightmares, and extreme temper tantrums.

Unfortunately, if the primary trauma weren’t enough, children incur added negative consequences for acting out their pain, particularly if their caregivers are unaware that their children have been exposed to trauma. Problematic behaviors such as yelling, hitting, and biting are punished rather than processed, leaving children feeling not only their trauma-related emotions of helpless anger, but now judging their feelings as bad or wrong based on the feedback they get. We begin to see how the prevailing message for these children is that even the people we want to trust the most can be sources of pain and rejection.

**Victim Belief Systems**

What happens when we internalize beliefs about what it means to be a victim or when we legitimately feel powerless in the face of early loss or harm? We simultaneously feel powerless and pathetic, helpless to make meaningful changes in our lives while also feeling utterly responsible for being stuck. Feeling stuck in a victim role is characterized by the following core beliefs:

"*How I feel is wholly dependent upon what is happening to me.*"

One of the most common thought errors I see in clients is called emotional reasoning. When we see our emotions as being completely caused by external circumstances, we get stuck in patterns of reactivity. If I feel sad, emotional reasoning says that something bad must have happened, and it doesn’t take much effort to scan our experience for something negative that might explain a feeling of sadness, even if it isn’t directly
connected to the sadness we feel in the moment. Emotional reasoning makes us victims of our own internal experiences, our compass swinging wildly based on whatever emotion is arising in the moment. We follow suit with our behavior, making choices to decrease bad feelings by impacting whatever our emotion says is the problem in a given moment. If I feel sad and, in that sadness, remember a time when my spouse hurt my feelings, I may lash out at him even though the event has long past.

Emotions are basic in terms of their function; they are meant to help us respond quickly to possible threats and engage in behaviors that are good for survival. Just like a fire alarm can be pulled in the absence of an actual fire, emotions can be triggered with little to no apparent relevant cause. To gain mastery of our emotions and step out of the victim story, we have to learn how to respond to emotion that is justified and let go of any unjustified emotion, recognizing we don’t have to believe everything we think. The skill of discernment that we cultivate through meditation will help us to know the difference between emotions that are sending legitimate signals about the present, versus those that are bubbling up from the past.

“My ability to tolerate emotion is limited.”

Victims not only feel that the outside world is scary, but they also learn to be fearful of their internal worlds as well. Emotions can be intense and jarring for anyone, but for those with victim stories, negative emotion can seem to threaten annihilation. A feeling like fear that arises with major physical changes (increased heartbeat, sweating, and rapid breathing) can seem like it will literally kill us, while deep sadness can leave us feeling that we will go completely crazy with pain. If we’re also programmed with core beliefs about being frail, incapable, and helpless, then we’re even more susceptible to developing fear of negative emotions and any experience that might trigger them.

The truth we must learn as we move out of our victim wound is that there is no internal phenomenon bigger than our ability to experience it. Just like you couldn’t blow up a balloon that is bigger than your bedroom from within your bedroom, emotion, a product of mind, can’t be bigger than the mind that makes it. To manage the big feelings, we also need to build mastery of skills that help us to develop equanimity—a quality of being connected to stillness even in the midst of emotional chaos.

“I deserve better because of all I give to others.”

You may deserve better, but it isn’t because of anything you’re doing. As victims, we learn that love is a commodity you have to work for rather than a state of being to be given and received unconditionally. We get to this place of servitude if one of the behaviors we develop to help us manage
our negative experiences is caretaking. Mariah attempted to mitigate the negative impact of her mother’s harsh criticism by becoming an emotional caretaker. She learned to walk on eggshells, withhold her feelings and opinions, and be a shoulder for her mother to cry on, all to protect herself from the pain of her mother’s ongoing rejections. Her efforts to soothe and nurture her mother were born of her reaction to her mother’s inconsistent love and affection and were therefore marked by scarcity and need.

If we learn to associate taking care of others with a decrease in negative feedback or even an increase in positive feedback, we can become trapped in the damaging cycle of giving more than we receive in the hopes that our efforts will be rewarded with love and acceptance. The unavoidable consequence of giving beyond our willingness is to feel resentful. We don’t realize that every ounce of energy we give with resentment is another brick in the wall between us and the love we crave. Resentment is the enemy of connection and the direct consequence of giving time, energy, and emotional space unwillingly or to avoid guilt.

The victim has to learn to experience their worth and wholeness as untouchable qualities that no external circumstance can add to or subtract from. Love is not in short supply once we recognize ourselves as an infinite source. The recognition of unconditional worth allows us to set more effective boundaries in relationships and give openly without expectation. Most importantly, we become capable of feeling the love that others have for us, no longer bound to a service-based way of seeing our value to others.

**Emotional and Behavioral Consequences**

The beliefs listed above naturally generate intense negative emotion. The following feelings are most likely to arise along with beliefs based in victimhood:

- Resentment: a form of anger that arises when we feel we have been treated unfairly or get less than we give.
- Guilt: a type of sadness that results when we feel responsible for harm caused to another being.
- Helplessness: a mixture of sadness and anger we feel when there is a problem that seems urgent but that we don’t know how to impact.

If you feel your relationships with yourself and others are driven more by resentment, guilt, and helplessness than by love and acceptance, you may have a victim soul wound pushing you around. It’s important to recognize that all feelings are endemic to the human experience. There’s no emotion you can feel that is inherently wrong or bad, but when we don’t fully understand our emotional experience, intense negative feelings can lead us
to make choices in the service of decreasing pain, often at the expense of living lives that feel empowered and meaningful.

Amy felt that her main function as a mother was to prevent her children from feeling pain. Anytime they cried, expressed frustration, or dissatisfaction, she would swoop in to make it better. She didn’t realize that a driving force behind her rescuing behavior was her own low tolerance for negative emotion, born of her childhood with an emotional explosive mother. An exhausting feedback loop developed when her children were young and intensified as they became teenagers—the kids learned that tantrums got them what they wanted, and Amy would comply with their demands to avoid the discomfort of seeing her kids upset. Amy felt more like a slave to her kids than an empowered parent, growing more disconnected and resentful over the years.

The emotions of resentment, guilt, and helplessness can push us into problematic behavior patterns of sacrifice, overscheduling, and poor boundary setting. Unfortunately, these behaviors are strongly reinforced by society. We learn love is best expressed through sacrifice, and overscheduling is required to be successful. Women in particular are taught to see boundary setting as an act of disconnection or even aggression. In reality, sacrifice is obligation, or guilt-based giving, and is transactional rather than connecting; the message is, “If I do this for you, I should get something in return, even if all I get is the recognition of how much I sacrificed.” Giving from a place of love comes with a sense of fullness; giving from sacrifice leaves us hungry.

Overscheduling is a manifestation of the belief we must meet everyone else’s needs before we can meet our own. Sometimes, this is an expression of sacrifice (“See how busy I am taking care of everyone so selflessly? I haven’t even showered this month, I’m so busy!”). Overscheduling can also be motivated by the core belief that my needs aren’t as important as everyone else’s. From an emotional standpoint, overscheduling can also serve the purpose of keeping us distracted from painful feelings we would rather avoid. We’re like sharks, staying in constant motion out of fear of death. Regardless of the underlying cause, overscheduling keeps us stuck in a victim story because we are never still long enough to see our hurt clearly. We bounce from one crisis to the next, putting out and starting fires, mistaking constant activity for the work of self-improvement and fulfillment.

Boundaries are the building blocks of relationships. Brené Brown brilliantly defines boundaries as the difference between what is okay and what is not okay. We have to teach people where these lines are for us but are often given ineffective tools to do so. As victims, we learn boundary setting shows a lack of love. Many victims grew up in enmeshed homes, where any disagreement, discord, or expression of difference was perceived
as a rejection. It makes sense that, as adults, victims find themselves in relationships with people who walk all over them; they were taught setting boundaries is harmful. When we inevitably find ourselves in a situation in which a boundary is needed, meaning we need to say “no” or ask for something, victims default to shelving their own needs and acting in the service of what they think the other person wants. This inauthenticity is not only damaging for the individual, but for the relationship, since no relationship can thrive if any member is not showing up as a whole person—wants, needs, and all.

Experiences That Shape the Broken Wound

Another byproduct of many Western, but particularly American, cultures is the belief that morality is the sole predictor of happiness. If you aren’t happy or if bad things have happened to you, American culture teaches that you must have done something wrong. Poverty beliefs are a prime example—we’ve all heard people complain that unemployment and the financial struggles that go along with it are the result of laziness and entitlement, because after all, Craigslist is full of ads looking for workers. We tend to distill complex social problems into bite-sized belief systems that go something like “good people have good things,” “bad people don’t have good things,” and “hard work leads to success, no matter what your starting point.” These ideas are great for bumper stickers, but they don’t hold water when we are trying to understand and make meaning of painful realities like homelessness and joblessness.

Morality-based views of success are a breeding ground for the broken soul wound. If my early experiences of difficulty are internalized as the result of my failings alone, it’s no shock that I start to see myself as the primary cause of any discomfort I feel. Specific situations that plant seeds for the broken soul wound include being ridiculed, judged, or told you were wrong for having feelings as a young person. If you’ve ever met a toddler, you know no problem is too small to send them into an emotional tailspin. As frustrating as a tantrum in the middle of Target may be for a parent, it’s probably even worse for the child. Contacting painful emotions is something most adults struggle to do, so of course children, who have minimal experience with emotion and next to no metacognitive skills to deal with them, become quickly overwhelmed. When parents respond to outbursts of emotion, positive or negative, with harsh judgment, punishment, or denial, children begin to interpret their emotional reactions as being dysfunctional.

No parent is required to tolerate violent or disrespectful behavior, but we do have a responsibility to make room for our children’s feelings and to help them understand their emotions are natural, transient, and important messengers about wants and needs. One problematic approach to educating
our children about emotions is the “there’s no need to feel that way” approach. When children have irrational fears or become angry about something a parent judges to be unimportant, caregivers can unintentionally send the message that since the cause for the feeling is not valid, the feeling should not be validated. Children eventually start to wonder what is wrong with them because they keep having “incorrect” feelings, setting the stage for a broken soul wound.

The broken wound can also develop around being punished for things outside of your control. Lindsay’s mom blamed her for her divorce from her husband who was unfaithful. At a young age, Lindsay realized her father was lying about where he was going on weekends; he didn’t have nearly as many work trips as he’d led the family to believe, and when Lindsay told her mother, she responded with anger at Lindsay. When Lindsay expressed sadness and guilt for making her mother angry, her mother became cold and detached. Her mother was projecting her own helplessness and heartbreak around the affair she had long suspected onto her daughter, who had zero culpability in the matter. As a result, Lindsay started to withhold feelings of sadness, anger, and hopelessness that arose as her parents started a messy divorce process, believing her feelings were not accurate or important.

The easiest cause to miss in the development of any soul wound is problematic modeling. If you can look back at your early experiences with caregivers and feel you were well supported and nurtured yet still don’t feel at home in your own life, it’s possible that your parents taught you about brokenness in their treatment of themselves, rather than through their treatment of you.

Tara’s parents were loving, present, fun, and supportive in all the right ways, but Tara grew up with a terribly harsh inner critic driving her harder and harder toward success. She was baffled by the fact that she was so hard on herself despite having parents who were very accepting of her best efforts, regardless of the outcomes she attained. Her father, however, was as much of an overachiever as Tara and could often be heard muttering to himself about how stupid he was for missing a calculation in his work as an engineer. Tara’s father had given her a gift of acceptance he had not been able to give himself, and as a result, he planted seeds of brokenness despite being a loving parent.

**Broken Belief Systems**

The broken wound leads us to believe there’s something deeply and irreparably wrong with us. We perceive ourselves to have missed some memo about how to be an effective, worthy person, or to have been built without some crucial psychological component; we then blame this imaginary deficit when something bad happens. As a result, we interpret
any difficulty through the lens of brokenness. The natural obstacles to success, the expected disconnections that arise in relationships, and any other struggle that might just be a regular part of life’s ups and downs are seen through the broken wound as evidence of how screwed up we are. Let’s look more closely at broken beliefs.

“My flaws are evidence that there is something deeply wrong with me.”

I don’t know anyone who’s particularly thrilled to acknowledge their character flaws, but being human means having some traits and behaviors that are unpleasant or unseemly. Carl Jung and many of his successors have developed entire therapeutic theories and practices around how critical it is to acknowledge and integrate the darker aspects of our nature (also called “the shadow”) rather than push negative pieces of ourselves into shame closets. The broken soul wound generates the belief that any recognition of imperfection would be disastrous, resulting in abandonment and failure. Rather than allowing ourselves to be fully human, with both positive and negative qualities, we become paralyzed when shadow characteristics and experiences such as anger, laziness, entitlement, greed, or apathy naturally arise. Any darkness is seen as evidence of total badness.

Kate reached a boiling point after another excruciating day in a job that was unfulfilling, a weekend of chaos with her three children, and a dinner her husband had made that he knew she didn’t like. She unleashed her anger at her husband, blaming his lack of effort for their financial struggles and expressing regret at having married him in the first place. After she recounted her blow up in therapy, she immediately dropped her gaze in shame and said, “I know I’m a terrible person.” Kate’s broken wound didn’t allow her to see herself or anyone else in her life in a balanced way; just as she had judged her husband as a total loser in a moment of disappointment, she subsequently judged herself as a heartless harpy for lashing out. While guilt is an important and reasonable response when we hurt another person, the broken wound goes global with any mistake we make and counts it as evidence that we are inherently dysfunctional and toxic.

“My experiences have damaged me in irreparable ways that require me to work harder for love than others.”

Many who live with a broken soul wound have experienced some painful, likely traumatic event that has generated a sense of shame and self-blame. In the wake of such hurt, we see ourselves as damaged goods who are lucky to get kindness rather than fundamentally deserving of it. As a result, the broken wound pushes us to seek shelter in low-yield relationships and to work significantly harder than our friends, family, and partners to
preserve whatever crumbs of connection we can squeeze out of people who, likely, weren’t good for us in the first place.

The tendency to blame oneself is a hallmark feature of trauma and is related to the need to regain a sense of control after a frightening or harmful experience. If I am to blame for my parent’s divorce, the sexual assault, the death of my sibling, then I at least don’t have to feel I am a victim of a chaotic, terrible world, even if that certainty comes at the cost of feeling like a whole and worthy human. While I may feel slightly less fearful in this space of blame, I come to see myself as inherently bad and less deserving of love. This belief in our badness is blinding, irrational, and in some ways, self-centered, given we often see ourselves as exceptions to rules we apply to everyone else. We offer understanding and compassion to anyone else who has been through trauma similar to our own, but when we look at our own histories, our broken wound only generates more shame and blame.

Emotional and Behavioral Consequences

Living with a broken wound can keep us caught up in a seemingly endless cycle of seeking fullness from a place of desperate emptiness. Rather than fulfillment, we find fleeting pleasure in people and things that, in the long term, serve to reinforce our sense of dysfunction. The most common emotional experiences generated by the broken wound are:

- **Worthlessness**: The natural consequence of believing we are damaged goods. Worthlessness hurts, literally—we can feel it deep in our chest as an aching, heaviness or in the gut as a solid mass of hurt.

- **Emptiness**: This hollowed out feeling arises when we see ourselves as not just damaged, but as missing something fundamental to being a good, healthy person. Emptiness can vacillate between a listless, depressed energy and a manic, desperate urge to fill the silence we feel inside.

- **Loneliness**: This feeling is often experienced as a type of sadness that connects directly to our belief that we are not enough. Sometimes loneliness is meant to point us to a need for connection; when experienced through the lens of a soul wound, loneliness reinforces our sense that the only way we can feel worthy or valued is through others.

The feeling of worthlessness can lead us directly into perfectionism—a set of behaviors that keeps us on the treadmill of success. We pursue success as a proxy for happiness and wholeness and are blind to the reality that no matter what we accomplish, we always find some next step we have to take before we are allowed to rest, celebrate, or experience ourselves as good enough. Perfectionism can be tricky; often, we are engaging in
obsessive, achievement-based behavior, all while thinking we’re open to being “good enough.” Even our self-help work can be driven by a secret perfectionism—we say we’re working to be more accepting of ourselves by going to therapy, starting yoga, or taking up a new hobby, all while running on the old programming that makes us hypercritical of our efforts and oblivious to the need for stillness even during growth.

Loneliness urges us toward connection, but when we add worthlessness and emptiness to the mix, we have a recipe for settling in relationships. We settle for crumbs of love, justify poor treatment from partners, and mold ourselves around the expectations we think our partners have of us, all in the service of our brokenness. Probably one of the most frustrating experiences for folks with a broken wound is the apparently endless cycle of messy, sometimes abusive love relationships that keep them wondering what everyone else is doing that they can find healthy, well-adjusted partners. Patterns of dysfunctional relationships only serve to reinforce the belief that we must be damaged in some way.

Not only do we settle for relationships that are not a good fit for us when we see ourselves as broken, but we engage in day-to-day acts of settling that disconnect us from our basic rights to having feelings, opinions, and beliefs separate from our partners. A broken wound can keep us stuck in a way of being best summed up as “I don’t know, what do you want?” We constantly defer our wants and needs to accommodate our partner’s, whether choosing what to have for dinner, what movie to watch, or even whether we have children.

The broken soul wound also creates an intense vulnerability to self-medication in all its forms—food, shopping, substances, sex, self-improvement, you name it. The emptiness that arises around our harsh judgment of ourselves pushes us to compulsively seek out pleasure. Unfortunately, pleasure in the moment can often come with some devastating, long-term consequences, particularly when we seek pleasure to feel whole. In moments of intense difficulty, we disregard the potential negatives of medicating pain with pleasure and can find ourselves in a cycle of addiction that is very difficult to break. When addiction takes hold in a physiological way, we’ll get our fix at any cost, often abandoning our values and strengthening our belief that we are unworthy in the process.

Experiences That Shape the Shame Wound

Stigma, stereotypes, and prejudices are inherent parts of any society. Natural selection is a powerful force molding our behavior in the service of survival, which for humans, requires community. Unfortunately, we are programmed to see community as a function of similarity, and differences, no matter how superficial, are instinctually viewed as threatening. Luckily, we humans have a capacity for conscious decision making that allows us to
move beyond our programming, but as a collective, we have built our social and cultural worlds around some toxic othering practices, such as racism, ableism, and sexism, just to name a few.

The natural consequence of living in societies where “othering” occurs (which is to say, any human society) is shame. Whenever something about our inner or outer selves does not meet the often-implicit rules for belonging, we fear being pushed to the margins and put the unacceptable part of ourselves into hiding as best we can. Shame is meant to help us maintain belonging to groups in the interest of survival—if my limp makes me a liability to my hunting group, then I’d be better served if I hid my ailment rather than risk being left behind to starve. Shame is the mechanism that urges me to hide any difference that might put me at odds with groups that matter to me. Fast forward a few thousand years, and we still lean on primitive, unnecessary judgments about who is to be included and who will be shunned despite having complex, robust systems of interconnectedness that benefit from diversity.

The fear of being found out is pervasive in the shame soul wound. We fear being discovered as frauds, guilty of pretending to be good, whole people. The shame wound leaves us feeling that we are imposters in our own lives, and we are consumed with the belief that if anyone ever really knew us, they would reject us totally. This deep-seated shame arises when we are forced into the secret keeper role early in life or forced to hide negative aspects of ourselves or our families to prevent being ostracized and judged. The most common experiences that teach us to hide tend to involve violence, addiction, and mental illness.

Claire was a teacher’s dream: bright, kind, and energetic in a way that seemed to motivate her classmates to do and be better. No one ever would have suspected her home life was full of disorder and chaos had she not started to lose so much weight before her sophomore year of high school. It took a whole year of concerned questions from teachers and school counselors for her to finally concede that she was drowning—her older brother had bipolar disorder and had attempted suicide that summer, all while her mother drank herself into oblivion to avoid dealing with the daily struggle of keeping her son from harming himself and her husband, Claire’s father, from driving them to financial ruin with his gambling habit.

Addiction and mental illness are incredibly stigmatized in Western culture and are viewed as evidence of weak character. It’s no wonder that so many families try desperately to keep their “crazy” relatives under wraps and deep-seated addictions are minimized to preserve appearances. When children get caught up in the stigma, they can take ownership of keeping the family secrets in ways that become toxic for them. They learn to lie, withhold, and become star performers to distract from the painful realities at home. Many children are instructed explicitly not to talk about daddy’s
drinking or mommy’s depression, which sends the message that problems are shameful, and that seeking help is not an option.

Domestic violence breeds shame as a mechanism of survival. One of the best ways to escalate a violent relationship is to go public with it. Abusers have an almost preternatural awareness of their partners’ intentions to leave or seek help, and often become even more violent when they believe the relationship is at risk of ending.

Leigh Ann had the appearance of a frightened rabbit, unable to sit without fidgeting, constantly looking toward the door, the window, or her phone to make sure it was off in our sessions. Her fear was understandable, given that her husband of two years had amped up his angry demonstrations in the past few months, graduating from unpredictable wall punching outbursts to communicating death threats and pushing Leigh Ann down the stairs. In all my years working with survivors of domestic violence, I was never more fearful that a client would not make her appointment because she had been harmed or killed.

Leigh Ann had written off her husband’s controlling behavior for years when they were dating as evidence that he cared. She learned in therapy that her openness to being controlled was connected to her childhood experiences of watching her father pace the floor when her mother had not come home at exactly 5:20, which allowed her seven minutes to get to her car and thirteen minutes to make the drive home. Leigh Ann would hide in her room, watching the pictures shake on her wall as her father cursed and smashed his way through his fits of rage. In addition to learning that love is communicated through control, she’d also learned that violence is a shameful secret—she initially started therapy to manage her anxiety, and it had taken several months of trust building and continued questions about her relationship for her to admit, as if in confessional, that her husband was “not always nice to her.”

Shame Belief Systems

Shame generates dark beliefs about the content and quality of our hearts and souls. Secrets about violence, mental illness, and addiction fester into notions that we’re somehow responsible for the pain of those we protect with our secrecy. We come to see ourselves as rotten to the core and inherently bad, beliefs that keep us stuck in painful ways of being that may even resemble the childhoods we so desperately wanted to escape. Here are just a few of the beliefs that drive us in our shame wounds.

“If people really knew me, they would reject me/be disgusted by me/laugh at me.”

If shame is doing its dirty—albeit biologically-intended—job, it generates the fear that we will be rejected if some problematic aspect of our
being or behavior is made public. When the shame wound is running the show, we buy into the belief that our relationships, social standing, and very survival are constantly on the brink of ruin. We develop a harsh inner critic devoted to pointing out all the ways we are making it obvious that we come from broken homes, impoverished backgrounds, or crazy families.

What’s most heartbreaking about the belief that we will be rejected if we allow our whole stories to show up in our lives and relationships is we don’t just fear the details getting out, but we assume our negative experiences directly communicate some truth about our core badness. We stay consumed with shameful silence and dedicate immense amounts of energy to covering up stories that are not ours to feel guilty about or shameful of in the first place. Leigh Ann’s father and husband were the perpetrators of her story and yet she felt compelled to minimize their violent behavior because she felt responsible for instigating it with her wants and needs. Shame is a poison that makes it impossible for us to experience joy with our whole hearts because we experience so little of our True Selves authentically and openly.

“I deserve the negative things that happen to me.”

A direct consequence of the belief in our badness is the subsequent belief that any difficulty that comes our way is the result of our badness. We decide that we can expect to not get the jobs we apply for, to meet awful partners, and to stay dissatisfied with life in general because that’s what we have coming to us. Shame wounds narrow our field of vision to see only those options that are consistent with how we view ourselves—limited, inherently flawed, and destined for mediocrity. Even if our shame wounds push us to be overachievers, we view any success we attain as the result of luck, often missing opportunities for fulfillment and greatness because we feel we don’t deserve real happiness.

The notion of deserving may not resonate with everyone who has a shame wound; we may understand our difficulties in a more superficial way, particularly when we’re unaware of our wounds. The subtler the wound, the more insidious the beliefs often are. For some, we blame fate, the universe, or God for the difficulties we endure, all while believing we somehow got a greater measure of pain than most. This comparative tendency leaves open the question of why? If I perceive my struggle to be harder than most of the people I see, why is that? When we dare to ask this question, we’re thrust straight into the heart of our wounds and likely emerge tearful and helpless, realizing we have spent our lives up to this point believing that bad things happen to us because we are bad.

Intellectually, we can recognize that while we have all committed our share of transgressions here and there, most of us don’t register any deeds worthy of the level of shame we feel. But when we dive into our shame
SOUL WOUNDS

wound, the gravitational pull of our perceived badness can feel so huge that it is beyond description. I often ask clients at some point in the work, “If we were to do surgery on you right now, where would we find the bad part?” While it’s obvious there is no bad part that makes us deserving of difficulty, it can certainly feel like there is a tangible, immovable space holding our shame and secrets.

Emotional and Behavioral Consequences

Shame and embarrassment are the obvious emotional aspects of the shame soul wound. Hopelessness and self-doubt are equally dangerous companions, perpetuating choices that are short-sighted and deny us the experience of living joyfully.

- **Shame**: Experienced as a form of sadness that often has an anxious edge to it. We’re sad that we see ourselves as being bad, all while feeling fearful others will see us as bad as well.
- **Hopelessness**: A feeling characterized by sadness that insists the way things are is the way things have always been and will always be. Hopelessness pulls us away from the present moment and selectively uses stories from the past to draw conclusions about the future.
- **Self-doubt**: Most frequently experienced as anxiety that arises around our abilities and worth. This feeling is characterized by being frozen when a decision or action is needed due to a lack of trust in our capacity to make good choices.

Living with a shame wound creates an ongoing inner conflict between our natural desire for connection and our conditioned fear of being seen. This ambivalence can result in pushing loved ones away, particularly when the shame wound senses the possibility of real intimacy. Nothing activates a shame wound more than a bid for authentic connection from a loved one. When we find ourselves in relationships that have healthy features, it’s not uncommon for those with a shame wound to feel a compulsive need to blow it up in a pre-emptive “you can’t fire me, I quit” capacity. We assume being our full selves with someone will result in their inevitable rejection of us, so we pull away from or test relationships that are otherwise functional to avoid the pain of loss.

Some of the more common methods of pushing others away include becoming cold and distant, focusing on the other person’s faults, assuming the worst about the other person’s intentions, and picking fights. Jane was a master at reading between the lines. So many of her arguments with her husband happened in the subtext of what was said and done, that I often had no idea what she was mad at him about. She began to realize she looked for faults and abuses whenever her husband tried to make a request for her to change a behavior, such as putting her phone down when they
talked over dinner. Her relationship with her husband had become more distant because of both her inability to be present and her angry avoidance of confrontation. Jane’s father had taught her that mistakes were not an option, becoming irrationally angry whenever she was unable to produce up to his standards. What seemed like an arrogant refusal to acknowledge her mistakes, was an act of avoidance meant to mitigate her intense shame for disappointing her husband.

Lying is another common occurrence when we carry shame wounds. Shame compels us to conceal, and that often requires deceit. Here again, acting in shame reinforces shame, since we often feel bad when we lie to people; the lies we tell to cover our perceived weaknesses only serve to perpetuate the notion that there is something morally wrong with us. Donna had constructed an entirely false life for herself over her twitter feed, full of excursions to exotic places, various mishaps, and steamy affairs. She felt immense shame for lying about her life but felt that no one would ever befriend her if they knew she really lived with her parents and was so plagued by anxiety that she could barely leave her house. For Donna, her shame was internalized based on her parents’ strict punishment of childhood behaviors resulting from undiagnosed and untreated Borderline Personality Disorder. She’d learned the best way to mitigate the shame she felt at home was to be incredibly interesting to the outside world, no matter how outlandish her stories became.

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Whether we experience ourselves as victims, broken, or shameful, the process by which we remain stuck in unfulfilling life stories is the same—something bad happens when we are young, we develop a narrative about why, and that narrative emphasizes our weakness or badness as the primary cause of our struggles. We then lather, rinse, and repeat, applying the story globally and finding ourselves living through our soul wounds. The truth we are called to awaken is that no single story can ever sum us up. The relationships that keep us feeling small, the jobs that barely pay our bills and starve our souls are all buildings constructed on a shoddy foundation of wounded beliefs. But we can rebuild.
“You might not be the you that you think you are.” Alan Watts

We have to know what we’re working toward and that the goal is attainable in order to have any motivation to change. Soul wounds convince us to see ourselves as small, insignificant things, lacking worth and purpose. Life is a lonely struggle when we experience everything through our soul wounds, and it’s next to impossible to conceive of any alternative when our stories feel so true.

I was in my car, about to go into a coffee shop that had been an anchor point through more emotional milestones than I can count. I’d even worked there for a brief stint during one of the roughest periods of my life while I was in graduate school. But that day, I was popping in for a chocolate croissant, tired but content, knowing my almost one-year-old was happily playing at home with my dear husband. A song popped up on my playlist that I hadn’t heard in years, one I had written and recorded myself not long after I’d started dating Seth, at which point the relationship had already been a source of some of the highest highs and lowest lows I’d ever experienced.

My breath caught in my chest as I listened to the heartache pouring in on the sound waves, the lyrics betraying how isolated and broken I felt to my very core. Without realizing it, I had put my hand on my heart and said out loud, “Oh girl, you were hurting so much.” The compassion I felt was both gut wrenching and a beautiful reminder of how far I’d come. While the pain and helplessness I heard in my song felt familiar, it no longer felt like a reality. That’s what True Self is like—tender when the nerves of old wounds are touched, but strong, kind, and unafraid.
To connect to True Self, we have to recognize that the internal map we use to know who we are is in need of drastic revision. We might see ourselves as a layered being, with the outside layers being the way we present ourselves to the world; maybe we even seem confident and competent on the surface, but at the core, we see a dark space full of doubt, pain, and shadow. If we were to have an accurate representation of our inner space, we would see that the darkness and emptiness that feels so fundamental to our being is no more far reaching or deeply rooted than the bright, shiny version of ourselves we show the world. The clear majority of our core is filled with light, joyful energy, but we have to dig beneath the surface of our most excruciating wounds to get to it.

To say we as humans are primarily full of light and love couldn’t be farther from the living truth for most of us. I can completely relate to the frustration and annoyance we feel when some yoga-pants wearing guru with a perma-smile insists we’re all “one” with the universe and beautifully complete. Our understandable suspicion of such a bold proclamation is the product of a lack of useful description of what it looks like to be full of light and of our soul wound’s hold on our perception. We need concrete indicators of what all this goodness looks like when it manifests in our lives.

True Self shows up in how we think and what we do. Think of your True Self as an alternative operating system to your current model, your soul wound. When we disconnect the story of our wounds from our sense of truth, we make room for the True Self to run the show. We feel less compelled to act on the beliefs born of our wounds and have room to replace problematic behaviors with beneficial ones.

One of the most noticeable shifts of perspective that happens when we connect with the True Self is the decision to embrace difficulty rather than run from it. True Self shows us that suffering happens for us, not just to us. The wounded self fears any source of negativity because it’s filled to the brim with negativity already. The True Self exists in expansiveness and knows that pain, loss, frustration, and all manner of other aversive experiences happen within the infinite space of being. We decide we have room for intense difficulty, which gives us the ability to take a unique perspective on pain—we are able to find lessons for growth and fullness, even in the most trying of circumstances.

Janie had been trying to get pregnant for almost two years. Now in her late thirties, she felt she was racing against her own personal doomsday clock as doctors said her chances of a natural conception were declining exponentially each year. She’d often say in sessions that she felt she was living someone else’s life, that this couldn’t possibly be happening to her. While the fear and longing, she felt for having a child were incredibly valid, her perception that her struggle to get pregnant was happening to her was a major source of her suffering. Her soul wound had convinced her that she
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had to earn her worth and happiness through self-sacrifice and service to others, and it didn’t compute after a lifetime of dedicating herself to those in need that she wouldn’t have earned the reward of a pregnancy she so deeply wanted.

As we will learn in Chapter 4, we don’t get very far by forcing ourselves to find some bigger meaning in our suffering without honoring and accepting the pain of suffering first. Janie had to learn to offer herself kindness and nurture herself through the agony of wanting a child she seemingly could not conceive. After she was able to comfort herself, she recognized the lessons available to her in her struggle: she learned to put down the guilt and martyrdom that drove her to overwork, overcontrol, and make it impossible for her to enjoy any activity that wasn’t about serving someone else. It’s an incredible leap of faith to shift from fear to openness around heartbreaking situations like being unable to conceive, but the leap is ultimately rewarded by a feeling of peace and purpose.

When we risk listening to the True Self’s insistence that no problem arises without the potential for meaning and growth, we quickly find suffering is only wasted if we see it as pointless. You may already have examples of losses, painful changes, or difficult relationships that, with enough distance, began to register as necessary to some aspect of your development. We don’t typically have to walk back in time very far from a positive change to find the painful circumstances that fueled our willingness to evolve.

For the cynics, or so-called “realists,” out there, your knee-jerk reaction might be to suggest that connecting positive events to negative starting points is arbitrary and therefore meaningless. You’re not wrong from a strictly logical standpoint, but logic alone is hardly a sound compass for a purposeful, joyful life. And logic is often the sheep’s clothing of defensive pessimism—a joy thief that convinces us wanting anything too much guarantees we won’t get it, and we’re better off tempering our desires so we don’t suffer a devastating let-down when we don’t get what we want.

Rather than asking if a way of seeing the world is true in a universally undisputable sense, we can check out whether our way of seeing the world is effective—does viewing difficulty as meaningless at best and punishment at worst help you live a more fulfilling life, or does this view impede happiness? If it’s safe to say there won’t be some ethereal being waiting by your deathbed to tell you your way of understanding the causes of suffering was right, why not choose a philosophy that allows you to live and love fully?

We can decide to look for the lessons in our pain: lessons that teach us where we need to be kinder to ourselves, more accepting, or more understanding. The decision to make meaning out of suffering is a vital first step toward finding the lesson and dismantling the deeply ingrained
programming of our soul wounds that defaults to interpreting all difficulty
as a sign of how powerless or less than we are. Shifting our
conceptualization of difficulty in this way allows us to make choices that
serve our wholeness rather than choices that serve our wound-based
narratives.

When I see my abusive relationship with a partner as a call to stand up
for my worth rather than evidence of my stupidity, naiveté, and brokenness,
I’m instantly more willing to set healthy boundaries with loved ones. When
I decide my miscarriage was necessary to help me recognize the ways I
overwork myself to earn love, I become capable of establishing more
manageable expectations for myself. We can’t make lasting changes that
serve our wholeness when we assume our experiences are the result of our
damage or from randomness. The radical assumption of meaning is our
most potent catalyst for growth.

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Living from you True Self requires a shift from the track of scarcity to
abundance. Our wounds tell us that resources such as acceptance, love,
kindness, and respect are in short supply, and only those with the best
resumés can tap into those resources at will. True Self deeply knows the
wellspring of unconditional positive regard is endless and internal. I’ve had
countless clients roll their eyes when I tell them that to experience love
from others, they first have to love themselves. And I roll my eyes right
along with them because the saying is so hackneyed, its truth has been lost.
But when we break it down, we can’t experience love from others if it’s not
consistent with the way we love ourselves; we are programmed to hone in
on experiences that are consistent with our way of seeing things and to
reject perspectives that conflict with our default mode. If I believe good
things to be scarce, I’m shutting myself down to the possibility of
abundance because I won’t see it even if it’s right under my nose.

Carla was stuck in a dead-end relationship of the Carrie Fisher-sort in
When Harry Met Sally (one of those “he’s never going to leave her, is he?”
types of relationships). For several years, she’d been on the on-again-off-
again treadmill with a woman who was separated but not yet divorced, and
who was also not out to any of her friends or family as gay. The agony of
Carla’s stuckness hit her hard in one session after a particularly barbed fight
with her would-be partner, in which her partner had said condescendingly,
“I know there’s someone out there for me, and for you, too.”

And yet, for Carla, this wasn’t the end. She had become so used to
settling for scraps in her relationships, it didn’t register to her that this
might need to be a breaking point. She’d lowered her standards so
significantly to accommodate the meager commitment she got from her
partner, that she would give her gold stars for not canceling dinner plans or
for telling her friends she didn’t need to be set up on dates because she wasn’t lonely. Carla’s soul wound had her chained to this relationship, largely due to her belief that her partner was something of a unicorn in terms of her attractiveness, accomplishments, and intelligence, and that Carla would be setting herself up for failure to look for someone who brought compatible relationship skills to the table in addition to a great resumé.

Carla had learned about scarcity growing up gay and closeted in the Baptist church. The messages about her sexuality were clear—she was different, and different was abhorred by God. In this environment, of course she came to believe being accepted and loved authentically is the exception rather than the rule. As a result, she found herself in relationships that didn’t deliver and taught herself she had to work harder than her partners to earn whatever love or commitment she was able to wrangle out of distant or toxic lovers. As Carla healed the sense of brokenness that fueled her scarcity mindset, the possibility she would find a loving partner started to seem more realistic.

It absolutely feels dangerous to imagine there is enough goodness to go around when we’ve spent a lifetime believing otherwise. We can feel foolish and fear the disappointment we’ll feel if we’re wrong will crush whatever hope we managed to hang onto. Rather than trusting feeling on this one, we have to try an alternative perspective. We can’t see what we don’t believe exists. Belief in the abundance of love, gratitude, compassion, all these joyful ways of being that stand in such stark contrast to our negative self-judgment, opens us to reality that we have all that joy-fuel in our hearts already.

A perceived lack of worth often accompanies the anxiety-laden experience of scarcity. True Self knows we are inherently worthy. Our wounded selves see worth as an outcome of luck or hard work. Western societal messages about success compel us to see worth as a function of achievement and achievement as a result of hard work alone. Our working formula insists that in order to be happy, we have to be successful, when the inverse is closer to the truth—how could we ever enjoy the benefits of success (whatever that means to you) if we don’t experience ourselves as worthy of the fruits of our labor?

I wish I could pinpoint the exact moment, if there was such a moment, when I realized worth was no longer an object of pursuit. For one, it would be a great example for the book, but more importantly, it would be such a rewarding memory to reflect on given how awful it felt to be working for worth with every ounce of my being for so long. I’m keenly aware of the ease of being that has replaced a constant striving for value. Rather than moving through the world feeling like I have a hole in my heart and hungrily grasping at anything that might fill it, I’m more deliberate
about what I give my time and attention to and choose my endeavors based more on want than need. It’s a much more pleasant experience to pick from the menu at a nice restaurant when you’re pleasantly hungry than when you’re aching with starvation and afraid of making a choice that won’t fill you up.

Think of the last choice you made with your worth in mind. Perhaps you didn’t feel you looked good enough in those skinny jeans to buy them, even though they were just the right color and on sale. Maybe a more drastic decision comes to mind, such as avoiding applying for graduate school because you fear you aren’t smart enough or disciplined enough to succeed. Now imagine what it would be like to drain all the juice out of the powerful thoughts and emotions that accompanied your self-doubt, so much so that questions of your worth barely registered in your consciousness.

Feel the difference? The spaciousness that arises around assuming we have inherent worth, rather than worth that was earned, allows us to connect more deeply to our unique expressions of joy and purpose. Buying skinny jeans is never going to be life changing, but if you value aesthetics, getting out of your own way to buy them means you access more value-consistent joy. Going to graduate school could be an expression of values such as curiosity, contribution, or creativity just to name a few, but you aren’t going to experience the reward of pursuing those values fully if you’re spending energy doubting whether you deserve to be on a purposeful path of your heart-felt design. Allowing your True Self, rather than your wounded past, to be the herald of your worth means you get to write your story in a way that expresses your fullness to the world, beautifully and exponentially.

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What was the last thought you had? Was it a worry, a memory, a plan, an assessment, a self-rebuke? If your last thought was steeped in criticism, sadness, anger, or fear, then you’re likely running on the default mode of a soul wound. True Self lives in the present, fully and non-judgmentally. Let’s qualify the moving parts of that statement. For our purposes, being present describes the capability to notice what is happening in any given moment and to sort out the difference between thinking and experiencing. We will build the concrete skills for recognizing the differences in Chapter 3. Our soul wounds generate a never-ending newsfeed of negative judgment about who we are and what we are capable of that is experienced as fact.

True Self recognizes that most of the content in the feed is fake news and uses those thoughts that reflect a legitimate negative truth to make meaningful changes. The mechanism of this shift is present moment awareness. Showing up as the observer to our thoughts and other internal
experiences helps us to develop the sort of discernment that allows us to separate the wheat from the chaff of our mental activity. You don't have to get rid of all your negative thoughts to experience freedom from them. Being aware of what judgment looks like when it shows up is a powerful tool for getting unhooked from the cycle of reactive, judgment-based behavior.

It's one of the most rewarding experiences ever to feel jealous of a client's progress. That was the case with Selena, who would win the award for "Most Present" in a landslide. She came to counseling after a series of massive changes upended her life as she knew it. She developed a debilitating autoimmune condition none of her doctors could diagnose and quickly found mobility, concentration, and daily functioning declining rapidly. Her husband of five years hadn't signed up to care for a disabled wife so soon into their lives together, and after a year of illness, fighting, and disconnection, he left. When Selena thought it couldn't get any worse, she had to quit her job as a teacher, one that had given her a sense of identity, accomplishment, and meaning.

Selena encountered the most damaging soul wound voices during this time of loss. Raised by a toxic mother and checked out father, she'd deeply internalized a sense of worthlessness and unlovability. She hadn't realized how impactful these beliefs about herself had been in pushing her to overachieve, but she quickly recognized the connection when she started to practice meditation. After just a few weeks of meditating, watching her thoughts, memories, feelings, and judgments arise and fall away, she was able to see her internal experiences as a set of layers arising in her awareness, discerning some thoughts as being very close and threatening and others as more distant and vague. Her process was so visual and crisp, I couldn't help but marvel at her, open-mouthed, as she described relating to her thoughts in this way.

What Selena gained through being mindful of her thinking was a deeper connection to her True Self. She started to recognize those thoughts and urges that arose from a place of wholeness and was able to say "no" to the noise of her soul wound. She realized she hadn't actually loved teaching but had rather loved the praise and respect she got for being so good at it. Selena even dared to consider putting time and energy into her true passion, painting, and soon was filling canvas after canvas with effortless, joyful dedication.

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True Self has the same features no matter who you are, though the way you express that True Self will be unique to you. Similarly, the path to connecting with True Self will be different depending on the flavor of soul wound you must heal in order to get there. The work required is the same,
but the shape of the barrier to be overcome will depend on whether you identify as a victim, broken, or shameful. “Wound work” encompasses the beliefs you’ll have to let go of, the behaviors you’ll have to change, and the truths you’ll have to integrate to find peace, empowerment, and purpose.

**Victim Wound Work**

For the victim, the wound work requires learning to say “no,” prioritizing your own needs along with the needs of others and cultivating a different relationship with giving. The victim soul wound generates a lot of angst around letting people down and setting boundaries, which most often results in people-pleasing behavior. True Self knows you have just as much of a right to claim space as anyone else and one of the most powerful ways to do that is to use your *no*. The victim fears the anger, rejection, or disappointment others will feel if she doesn’t acquiesce to every need presented to her. The result of people-pleasing is, ironically, disconnection—giving away time and energy to people when we don’t want to or don’t have it to give results in resentment, which is toxic for relationships.

Learning to say “no” means acknowledging that time and energy are finite resources and that we have to count ourselves on the roster of those who get to use those resources. Saying “no” to requests, added responsibilities, and bids for emotional support feels like a betrayal for the victim, so she frequently denies the reality of her own limits in the service of servitude. The victim has to learn her “no” is not an act of war or betrayal and to start acting in trust that her relationships can tolerate her showing up as a whole person, one with limits and needs that will only get met if she puts them out into the world.

The real trick for the victim is to prevent the inertia of *no* from dragging her to the other end of the spectrum of reaction, going from passive (maybe passive aggressive) to outright aggressive. Setting boundaries around our time and energy can be intoxicating and can sometimes push on the nerves of our resentment and anger. The great news is there are actual concrete steps for asking for what you want and for saying “no” effectively in such a way that you don’t damage meaningful relationships with the force of your refusal. We’ll talk more about those in Chapter 5.

The natural consequence of eradicating *no* from your vocabulary as the victim soul wound develops and deepens is an inability to prioritize your own needs. Since time and energy are limited, if we give everything we have to everybody else, we don’t have much, if anything, left over for ourselves. “Put your own oxygen mask on first,” is so much more than an air travel rule—it’s a message from the True Self about healing. The victim has difficulty acknowledging her needs but also strongly resists making
room for her needs in relationships. The default mode is to (often begrudgingly) make everyone else’s needs the focus of her energy and to collapse in guilt and shame when her unreplenished emotional and physical resources inevitably become depleted.

Cathryn’s lifelong victim internal narrative became a harsh external reality when she developed a relationship with a man who would eventually become terrifyingly violent. After three months of intense courtship, moving in together, and spending every waking minute in each other’s company, either physically or via text message, Cathryn’s fairytale romance started to take a turn. The texts that had initially seemed like loving concern about her safety became more intrusive and controlling. Her partner’s beseeching requests that she spend more time with him became increasingly insistent and demanding. She eventually had to run for her life, jumping out of a window after being punched in the face and stomach repeatedly. Apparently, she’d stayed at her book club meeting for too long, which was obvious evidence of her infidelity.

After having been separated from her abuser and in therapy for almost a year, she burst into tears standing in the cookie aisle of the grocery store one day. She realized she could pick whatever cookie she wanted without fear of being told she only thinks of herself or being scolded for buying trash that was going to make her fat and unattractive. While her abusive relationship had turned choosing a snack into a life or death situation, she recognized that the roots of being unable to put her own wants and needs first had been planted long before her abuser entered the picture. She chose double chocolate chip cookies that day in the grocery store and savors every opportunity she has to put herself first.

True Self wants you to know that taking care of yourself is not selfish. It’s neither useful nor sustainable to measure how much you care for someone by how much you’re willing to sacrifice your wellbeing for them. Prioritizing yourself doesn’t mean you go from giving everything to giving nothing; in fact, you’re far more likely to be able to demonstrate love to your people if you’re not drinking from an empty cup. The wound work of the victim around prioritizing self is to recognize those beliefs that keep her seeing herself as unimportant, while embracing the reality of fluctuating energy. If I’m completely depleted, I can’t give effectively no matter how big the need. Shifting perception in this way opens us up to behavior changes where we actively choose to put ourselves on our own calendars rather than hoping self-care will just happen if we watch enough inspirational TED talks about how important self-care is.

The victim wound craves appreciation as a proxy for safety and validation. Since her early experiences taught her the world is not a safe place and she’s not a powerful contributor to her own destiny, she seeks to gain protection from pain, rejection, and abandonment by over-giving in
her relationships. But soul wound giving is marked by resentment, making it more transactional than spontaneous and connecting. Resentment arises whenever we allow someone to cross a boundary. When it comes to resentment from giving too much, the boundary that has been violated is one of expectation—some (likely) unspoken expectation of reciprocation has not been met, leaving the victim feeling familiar emotions of powerlessness and rejection.

True Self doesn’t seek proof of worth, validation, or safety from others because it has all that going on for it already. When we give from True Self, we give in a no-strings-attached way, opening us to the joy of full-hearted generosity. Where the victim wound urges us to focus on the outcome, what we hope the person will do or say in return, True Self is all about the process of giving to others. For the victim to break the cycle of conditional giving, she has to recognize her inherent power, agency, and worth, then decide how and when to give of herself based on her values and available resources, rather than guilt, obligation, or thirst for acknowledgment.

**Broken Wound Work**

The broken wound teaches us we are damaged goods, lucky to get whatever love, success, or pleasure we can scrounge up. As a result, we see all negative experiences as evidence of our brokenness, leaving no room for a reality of suffering that is totally independent of us. True Self is willing to lean into the truth of suffering and recognizes that difficulty is just a part of being human. From this accepting vantage point, difficulty becomes a challenge to be overcome, accompanied by a lesson to be learned, rather than further proof of how terrible we are.

While True Self recognizes itself as whole and basically good, that doesn’t mean it’s arrogant and unwilling to find fault with itself. The difference between fault finding in the True Self and the wounded self is acceptance. The broken wound convinces us that any flaw or mistake is evidence of our total badness. The “baby with the bathwater” way of experiencing our faults makes it impossible to make meaningful changes in a loving way. True Self can allow the dark and the light to dwell in the same being without fear of the bad overruling the good.

The natural consequence of this willingness to be a whole person, not a perfect person, is we are more open to taking chances on ourselves in the service of our joy and purpose. If we aren’t living in abject terror of being found out as not smart enough, not successful enough, or otherwise not okay enough, we get up and dance even if we look foolish, apply for jobs we find interesting rather than make lateral moves to avoid risk, and most importantly, we open ourselves to the pain and joy of love without holding
back. Through acceptance of our faults and weaknesses, we gain power to improve as well as wisdom to make the most of our vulnerabilities.

**Shame Wound Work**

Shame casts a dark shadow on our sense of goodness, leading us to believe we’re bad people with stories best left untold. True Self is a seeker and knower of truth and does not allow us to hold onto responsibility for painful events when that burden is not ours to bear. It’s not uncommon for people with shame wounds to have heartbreaking experiences of being abused and exploited as children. One of the enraging methods abusers use to both entice their victims and keep them quiet is a process called “grooming,” where the victim is slowly desensitized to increasingly invasive, inappropriate treatment, then made to feel guilty for any experience of pleasure or demonstration of willing participation. Situations that involved secret keeping or oversharing by parents put children in a similar position of shouldering unjustified guilt; a pattern we recreate throughout life by taking ownership of the behaviors and feelings of others.

Tasha’s mother was incredibly controlling as a result of untreated Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Tasha learned to walk on eggshells around her mother and became hypersensitive to any indication that her mother was dissatisfied, which would inevitably result in harsh criticism and punishment of Tasha and her sisters. As an adult, Tasha felt so responsible for other people’s well-being that she would blame herself irrationally for any harm that came to anyone, even strangers. Passing a car accident would trigger intense guilt as Tasha would imagine all the ways she could have prevented it had she just been driving faster, slower, more aggressively, or less aggressively. Realizing her wound-based pattern of taking responsibility for events that she could not possibly have changed helped her to put down unjustified guilt.

True Self is not always a gentle guru sitting calmly and happily in our heart space—sometimes it’s a ruthless protector with guns blazing and swords drawn, demanding justice. Anger has a place in recovery and wholeness, and the energy of anger can be essential when someone with a shame wound is putting down her burden of unjustified guilt toward her abusers. Just like forest fires clear out the old to make way for the new, True Self uses the furnace of our anger to abolish shame, leaving fertile ground for growth and wellness. While this transfer of responsibility to the actual perpetrators can involve confrontation, a lion-hearted True Self doesn’t instigate additional harm in the interest of burning it all down. For most, transformation is internal and neither requires nor lends itself well to a face-to-face with a perpetrator.

True Self is not without a sense of irony, as evidenced by the need for forgiveness in addition to assigning blame appropriately. Once we use the
force of anger or sadness or whatever alchemical fuel is needed to hand
over a responsibility we’ve been carrying for too long, we have to leave our
hearts open to the healing power of forgiveness in order to really move
forward. True Self doesn’t hold a grudge because it doesn’t feel the sense of
frailty that encourages grudge holding in the first place. We hold onto past
hurt and its attendant shame to protect ourselves from the same pain
occurring again. True Self knows forgiveness is not an act of resignation or
condoning but of intentional dedication to the healing power of letting go.

Forgiveness is an act of self-care that embodies the principles of
healing from the soul wound—awareness, acceptance, and change. We
build awareness of the negative impact of carrying responsibility for our
past hurts, lean into accepting the painful reality we have co-created by
carrying the burden for so long, and actively carve a new path for ourselves
through the process of forgiveness. We might consider forgiveness as the
actions associated with the belief “Yes, you did this to me, and yet, I’m still
okay.” We’re not called to jump into the deep end of saint-like compassion
for those that harmed us, just to acknowledge we made it out anyway and
the hurts we experienced were not our faults.

Shame drives us to hide not only the stories of our pain, but of our
strengths and uniqueness as well. We can be so convinced we are imposters
in our own lives that we forget how to be authentic in even the simplest of
ways. Our deepest fear is that we will be found out by making a wrong
move pointing directly back to our shameful pasts. We see all these
imaginary threads connecting our choices and voices to the abusive,
alcoholic, uneducated, poor, or marginalized communities we grew up in
and cringe at the judgment and rejection we know await us when we are
truly seen. We cloak ourselves in inauthenticity, hoping to protect our
hearts from the pain of rejection.

Taylor grew up poor, like most everyone else in her small town in the
deep South. She always felt she’d walked away from a plane crash by getting
into a prestigious college and knew it would be just a matter of time before
someone realized she didn’t belong there. She carried the deepest shame
around her Alabama accent, fearing her leisurely drawl would be seen as a
sign of incompetence and low intelligence. As she processed the pain of
growing up poor with a wheelchair-bound mother, who was the laughing
stock of Taylor’s elementary school cohort because of her disability, Taylor
realized that her voice was longing for freedom. She slowly abandoned the
carefully crafted non-accent she had adopted and let her true voice ring out,
forging a deeper connection to her True Self through her willingness to be
seen (and heard) as she truly was.

We learn to be inauthentic to manage our shame in any number of
ways, from the way we dress, to the jobs we pursue, to the preferences we
share with others. True Self delights in our uniqueness, no matter how
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weird or banal, recognizing no constellation of likes, dislikes, personality quirks, or physical features sums us up. We are free to express our individuality without becoming slaves to it by being overly attached to any particular “I am” statement. True Self authenticity holds any self-definition loosely, which gives us room to enjoy the expression of it.

A theme of True Self is fearlessness. Just as True Self doesn’t fear the vulnerability of forgiving, it doesn’t worry about the reactions it will get when it shows itself fully. When we’re connected to the inherent wholeness of the True Self, so many features of moving through life and love become easier because we don’t have fear clogging up the flow. Of course, we’re still capable of experiencing fear, but we cut the cords connecting our fear to our sense of self, allowing us to watch the storm rage on top of the lake while staying connected to the tranquil stillness below.

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If you’re thinking these transformations sound like a lot of work, you aren’t wrong, but I would encourage you to consider how much work you’re already devoting to maintaining your soul wound while trying to stay afloat. In the immortal words of Jimmy Dugan, “It’s supposed to be hard...the hard is what makes it great.” And in all honesty, some aspects of this process are harder than others, and there’s no predicting what your personal areas of struggle or ease might be. But if you commit yourself to living a life centered in your True Self, change is inevitable.

Awareness, compassion, and change are the three keys to moving out of our soul wound stories and into our True Selves. Awareness is a process of opening our eyes to the ways our early hurts connect to our current struggles. Soul wounds have the tendency to make us think we’re seeing the present, when we’re really reliving or recreating the past. With intentional awareness, we begin to see the man behind the curtain, recognizing the powerful stories that distort our present experiences of ourselves and our relationships to fit the mold created by our wounded beliefs.

Susan held herself to impossible standards at work, always staying later than anyone else and volunteering for any new project that came along regardless of how tired and burnt out she was. She developed awareness of her internal mechanism for overachievement through a meditation practice and was startled to hear not her voice, but her mother’s voice berating her into overworking herself. Her mother had been a doctor and had needed the motivation of a harsh inner critic to help her succeed in a cutthroat, male-dominated field. Her daughter, Susan, a sensitive, creative type, had wilted and withdrawn when her mother applied the same logic to her daughter’s academic achievement. The more Susan meditated, the clearer it became that she could choose to listen to old programming or to write a
new script for herself. Awareness shines the light on the path so that True Self can start leading the way.

Compassion is about learning to treat ourselves and others with care and kindness. This may sound straightforward or like something you’ve already mastered, particularly if you have a victim wound and are used to taking care of other people. The trick of compassion is learning to take care of self and others in a balanced way rather than swinging back and forth between self-indulgence and abnegation. Compassion also requires alignment of behavior and intention such that we work to truly want good things for ourselves and others as we actively contribute to making those wishes realities.

One of the first acts of compassion we will learn to indulge is self-nurturance. When we learn to offer ourselves understanding and sincere support in times of difficulty, we short circuit a main power source of the soul wound—our negative self-judgment and harsh inner critic. You already know how to be nice to yourself, you just don’t know how to convince yourself that your kindness is truer than your criticism. We will apply our awareness skills by noticing our tendency to victimize ourselves with our inner dialogues, then we’ll practice soothing ourselves as we would a friend or a small child.

Once we have a good understanding of how to be compassionate with ourselves, we extend our practice to others. True Self compassion may not look terribly different from soul wound over-giving, but it will certainly feel different. A sassy Buddhist nun, Venerable Robina, once said in a talk on happiness, “If you feel sad when you are being compassionate, you aren’t doing it right.” We often connect compassion with sacrifice or with pity when it’s designed to be an expression of hope and joy. We’ll learn how to access the joyful aspects of compassion, which serve to both lift us up and disengage from the inherently self-centered narrative of the soul wound. We’ll be able to give for the sole sake of helping someone else without any ulterior motives.

Finally, we’ll make some strategic and concrete changes to our philosophy of living and our behavior in our relationships with others. It’s a little misleading to save the section on change for last because the whole process is one of change, but I’ve found that the most radical shifts happen for folks when they change their basic understanding of concepts like suffering and start to engage in active boundary setting and truth telling behaviors in their relationships. The last aspect of change will be to act in the service of values rather than emotion, so we’ll explore what really matters to you, so you can pursue the callings of your True Self rather than continue hiding from your awesomeness.
3 AWARENESS

“To a large extent, we confuse our ideas about things for the experience itself.”
Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield

“If you don’t know your own mind, your misconceptions will prevent you from seeing reality.”
Lama Yeshe

We spend most of our lives moving mindlessly to the beat of our soul wound drum. The same relationships, frustrations, and dissatisfactions pervades our lives until something jolts us into a meta perspective. Maybe we hear a significant other utter the very words that used to crush us when our parents said them. Maybe we catch a glimpse of how much worse things could get if we don’t make a change; we see a friend suffering even harsher consequences from the same choices we continue to make. Whatever the circumstance, awareness takes us out of our narrow soul wound stories just long enough for us to consider the possibility that there could be a better way.

Awareness is a state of clarity that allows us to move from the role of protagonist to author in the story book of our lives. We may have a match head’s worth of awareness or a transcendent beam illuminating a whole picture, but whatever amount of awareness we’re able to cultivate gives us that much more power to impact our trajectories. Where we would ordinarily stay reactive and fearful in our relationships, awareness allows us to choose patience and confidence. When our soul wound stories tell us that change is not possible, awareness allows us to recognize that judgments
about ourselves are not the same as facts. We can’t fix what we can’t see, so awareness is a critical and powerful step toward healing.

Light is a powerful metaphor for awareness. So often, we avoid journeying to the spaces of our wounds for fear that whatever is lurking there is more powerful than we are. We don’t realize that the only thing more powerful than the pain that lingers is the healing light of awareness. The only thing the shadow truly fears is the light that would consume it. For as bold and unbelievable as it may sound, watching our judgments and wound-based beliefs rather than buying into them fully, unconsciously, immediately changes the way we experience those negative beliefs. Awareness drags the mysterious monster of our pain out of the closet and allows us to relate to it compassionately rather than avoid it fearfully.

Realizing the power of awareness is meant to embolden us to lean in. The goal of awareness is not to obliterate our pain, but to nurture it. I watched the obscure cartoon *The Last Unicorn* about 3.7 million times when I was a kid, and I still revisit it from time to time when I need to recapture a feeling of magic. At one point in the movie, a sorceress has cast a spell on a bunch of worn out circus animals to make them appear to be fantastic, mythical beasts. She puts them on display, and people beg her to take their money, so they can feel connected to something other-worldly. Our soul wound stories are a lot like the magical creatures in Mommy Fortuna’s carnival; if you look close enough, you realize that what appears so threatening is really a wounded animal crying out for help. At the core of our deepest, most intimidating wounds are toothless lions made terrible by tricks of a fearful ego.

The most practical tool we have for building awareness is our own attention. In fact, attention to negative, soul wound-consistent thoughts is one of the main ways we got stuck in the first place. Turning our attention to the process of thinking, judging, feeling, and experiencing takes us out of the movie and puts us in the theater, a space that allows us to recognize we are not our thoughts and that we can choose which thoughts we act on. But how can we connect with this big picture way of seeing ourselves and the world? If my soul wound story has sounded like the absolute truth for as long as I can remember, how can I possibly believe otherwise? Answer: meditation.

Meditation has been around for at least 3,500 years in the Buddhist tradition and has not-so-distant cousins in many of the major religions. In Christian traditions, some have referred to prayer as talking to God and meditation as the act of listening for His answer. In Buddhism, meditation is a practice designed for taming the monkey mind, so practitioners may become more deeply connected to the truth of impermanence and be less pushed around by attachment and delusions about happiness. Through the
process of meditation and following other precepts of the Buddha, like the Eightfold Path, practitioners cultivate equanimity and clarity.

Early psychologists such as Freud and Carl Jung helped to spark Western interest in contemplative traditions such as Buddhism, which has resulted in a growing body of research on the impact of meditation on everything from chronic pain to addiction recovery. The data all seem to support the benefit of meditation in improving stress reactions, increasing well-being, and even honing attention and concentration. Multiple studies have found that meditation can have a direct impact on increasing self-compassion, a potentially more useful internal construct than self-confidence or self-esteem. Improving self-compassion requires that we be accepting of ourselves as we are, rather than emphasize only our successes and positive qualities. Meditation creates the space for us to contact our perfectly flawed selves and ditch the judgments that perpetuate wasted efforts at being perfect.

What exactly is meditation? According to Shinzen Young, an American mindfulness teacher and neuroscience research consultant, meditation is a three-pronged practice of focus, precision, and surrender. We focus on an object such as the breath, an image, or our own thoughts and feelings without judgment. The absence of judgment creates a precision of awareness where we aren’t adding fluff about how an object is good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, but rather observe it objectively and openly. Surrender is the powerful choice to say “yes” to whatever shows up, no matter how much we might want to turn away or make it different.

Robert Wright, author of *Why Buddhism Is True*, aptly describes meditation as a “radical rebellion against the agenda of natural selection.” If natural selection sets the highest bar for behavior at “survive and procreate,” meditation opens the door for us to experience ourselves as whole and deeply connected to joy. Our neural programming pushes us to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, convincing us that pain is intolerable and pleasure is our sole purpose for existing. Meditation allows us to connect with a more expansive truth—pleasure is nice, and pain is difficult, but joy is found in recognizing we are bigger than both.

Our brains are trained to attend to things that are hardest to be objective about; since emotion is one of the most powerful motivators of behavior, it makes sense we would focus on stimuli that arouse big emotions more than we would on experiences that seem neutral. As a result, the negative emotions that arise around our soul wound stories act like a magnet for our attention. We sink deeper and deeper into beliefs that we are broken, crazy, or unworthy the more we attend to them, and we attend to these beliefs more because of the pain they generate. Meditation helps us break this cycle through concentration and mindfulness. By increasing our capacity to attend to a given object, like critical self-
judgment, without distraction, we enhance our ability to see it clearly. Mindfulness is a state of observing an object, anything in the realm of experience, with pure objectivity. We become capable of seeing thoughts and beliefs, no matter how deeply held or believable they are, as being mental formations rather than ultimate, concrete truths.

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Most of my clients fall into one of three categories when it comes to meditation—they’ve never tried it but have heard of it; they’ve tried it at the end of a yoga class and found it to be an incredibly relaxing nap; or they’ve tried it in earnest and report that it didn’t work. Needless to say, I’m used to a tough crowd when it comes to getting people on board with meditation. For those who have never tried it or have slept through it, I count myself lucky and start with the basics. For those who have been disappointed by outcomes, I start by checking out problematic assumptions they might have about how meditation is supposed to work.

I most often hear, “I tried to meditate, but I just couldn’t turn my brain off.” When I first started meditating, I experienced frustration built on the same flawed assumption—I expected I would sit cross legged, close my eyes, and go to some space of empty-minded bliss. I thought meditation was only working if I wasn’t thinking, but luckily, I was steered in the right direction by a local meditation teacher. He pointed out that we actually need to get distracted to hone our attention; the practice, he said, is in coming back from distraction. Meditation in no way requires that you stop thinking to be effective. When we start meditating, our only goal is to notice whatever arises and to bring our attention back to the breath whenever we get caught up in thinking. The more you practice meditation, the more space you’ll begin to find between the thoughts, but to start, you only have to set your intention to be aware.

The natural consequence of tuning into the mind’s chatter is we begin to notice how messy our minds are. I remember being stunned by some of the harsh, critical thoughts that would arise in my early meditation practice. It’s understandable that when we hear our hurtful inner dialogues with clarity, our first reaction might be to cut and run. The negativity we’ll encounter is what makes this practice of healing a warrior’s task; it takes great willingness to lean into pain, but this willingness arises naturally when we recognize that running away from it just delays healing.

If diving right into your darkest, most damaging thoughts sounds awful, the good news is you don’t have to start at the deep end. Pema Chödrön once said in a talk on why she meditates that the point of meditation is not to be comfortable, but it also isn’t to be uncomfortable. We can develop a strong meditation practice starting with mindfulness of experiences that are neutral or even positive and move from there into the
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more difficult work. For all you overachievers, we can’t benefit from work that is outside our zone of proximal development, which is that space between our current comfort zone and extreme change where we’re pushing ourselves, but not so hard that we set ourselves up to abandon the work.

**Mindfulness of the Body**

The easiest place to start developing your meditation practice is at the physical level. We can hone our basic concentration and mindfulness skills by paying attention to the rise and fall of the breath, input from our five senses, the sensation of blood moving through our bodies, and even by noticing uncomfortable sensations like tension or physical pain. Speaking of pain, many of my clients have chronic pain conditions such as fibromyalgia or arthritis, which understandably makes the idea of noticing their bodies seem about as palatable as sitting in a closet full of bees. Start where you are—if your body is a source of extreme discomfort for you, you may want to focus just on your breath rather than use the full body awareness skills we’ll be exploring in this section. Bringing your awareness to any object will help you strengthen your concentration and help you be more mindful.

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of meditating, let’s consider factors that can increase the likelihood that you’ll stick with this practice. First, you’ll need ten minutes per day that you can set aside for meditating. Consider the following questions when deciding when you’ll meditate:

- When are you most motivated and energized? Are you a morning person or a night owl? Does your energy tank midday, or do you find you get a second wind in the late afternoon? Being intentional about when you meditate means considering not just when you have ten minutes available, but when you have ten *quality* minutes at your disposal.

- When can you reasonably unplug? This can be a tricky question because many of us are so caught up in the grind that we have difficulty recognizing how self-imposed our productivity standards are. I like to ask clients, “When during the day can you be unavailable for ten minutes without anyone dying?” Unless you’re the only ER doctor in your entire county, the likelihood that you don’t have ten minutes to give yourself is slim. Soul wounds will try to convince us that we have to be in constant motion to prove ourselves or to avoid dealing with whatever pain we suspect is lurking in the stillness. Not buying into the manifestations of this urgent need to stay busy is an important step in carving out time for meditation. But there are also legitimate roles we fill and responsibilities we hold, so if you know you’re most likely to get called into a meeting or asked to help your kids with homework
between 3 and 5 every day, that’s not the best target time for starting a new practice.

- What are you most likely to tell yourself to put this off? One of my favorite Dialectical Behavior Therapy skills is “cope ahead.” We can get the jump on our own self-sabotage by recognizing the ways we tend to stall. My personal favorite procrastination line is “I’ve worked so hard already today, I should do something fun, not something that is more work!” I’ve snacked my way through many an episode of Bones in the service of “rewarding” myself only to feel less competent and more ill at ease than I did before my binge. We all have our favorite ways of delaying change and growth.

Onto the meditation! You need ten minutes, a relatively quiet space, and a comfortable seat. You don’t need fancy cushions, mantras, incense, or a guru to make it happen. You can close your eyes to help with focus, or you can leave them open if you’d rather. If you have a timer app on your phone, turn all notifications off and set your timer for ten minutes. Now breathe deeply in through your nose and out through your mouth. After a few deep breaths, let your breath settle into its own pattern, moving in and out, as you pay attention to the sensation of the breath. When you have a good reference point (tip of the nose, rise and fall of the belly or chest, for example) then count your out breaths all the way to ten, and start over. Keep counting out breaths until your timer goes off. When you get distracted, just notice that you were pulled away and come back either where you left off or starting over.

If this is your first foray into meditating, practice mindfulness of breathing for one week before moving on to the next step—awareness of tension and relaxation. If this is old news for you, practice it for a few days to remind yourself that the basics are critical and can always be learned anew at a deeper level.

**Awareness of Tension and Relaxation**

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a staple of many therapeutic trauma recovery protocols. It’s essentially the process of intentionally tensing and relaxing muscles throughout the body such that the body learns the difference between tension and relaxation. If you’ve ever finished watching a scary movie and wondered why your neck hurt so badly, you’ve experienced the capacity for the body to hold onto tension without us being consciously aware of it. I prefer a slight twist on progressive muscle relaxation that skips the tension part and goes straight for the relaxing release.

I recommend checking out the app *Insight Timer* for this practice. It’s a free app that has thousands of guided meditations you can sort by keyword, length of meditation, and popularity. Sorting by “body scan” will
get you a host of options to try that will connect you to the process of showing up to your body with curious attention.

If you’re a beginner to meditation, spend five to seven days on the body. The time spent deepening your awareness of your physical experience will build your capacity for attention and will also help you be more open to and less judgmental of any negative sensations that arise.

Before moving on to mindfulness of thinking, take some time and reflect on your experience of meditating. How did it differ from your expectations? Were certain practices harder or easier than others? Write a message of congratulations and encouragement for this major accomplishment of starting a meditation practice!

**Mindfulness of Thinking**

Now that you have a sense of what this meditation business is all about, let’s turn our newly honed concentration to our monkey minds. The very fact we can think about thinking is solid evidence that we are not our thoughts, so if you’re doubtful about your capacity to develop this level of awareness, take heart. No matter how long you’ve been stuck in the loop of your soul wound narrative, your True Self will be just as convincing a narrator and guide when you start to tune into it.

Becoming mindful of thinking requires that we know what thinking is. If that sounds a little insulting, consider the last thought you had. I’ll wait. Not sure? That’s because we’re so used to thinking that we don’t know when we’re doing it anymore. Just like you would forget about the annoying hum of the fluorescent light in your office if you heard it for nine to ten hours every day, our thoughts hum tirelessly in the background until we become oblivious (though not unimpacted) by their presence.

Thoughts can fall into the following categories: remembering, planning, and describing. We’re also running a parallel program of judgment whenever we remember, plan, or describe. Depending on whether we are in a positive, negative, or neutral space while thinking, we’ll assign a corresponding judgment (good/bad, fair/unfair, or pleasant/unpleasant) to whatever we’re remembering, planning, or describing. Judgments are the flavor of our thoughts; some are sour and unpleasant, others tantalizing and delicious. While remembering or planning are obvious in terms of content, describing bears a little more fleshing out. Describing is when we use language to say what something is or what something isn’t. It can be a neutral process (“that is a chair”), but most often, it involves some form of judgment about whether we feel the object is good or bad (“that is an ugly chair”).

Thought check: take a moment to notice the next three thoughts that pop into your mind. Are they memories, plans, or descriptions? What judgments are they infused with? What is your general state of mind—
positive, negative, or neutral? Congratulations, you were just mindful of your thoughts! Making your thoughts an object of meditation will be a longer version of what you just did.

Just as you did for mindfulness of your breath and body sensations, all you need to get started is ten minutes and some quiet. I like to take two to three minutes at the start of a thought meditation to center on my breath. You can use the standby of counting your breaths for a brief time or just notice breathing until you feel ready to turn your attention to thinking.

When you feel yourself settle into your seat, turn your eyes upward as if you’re going to watch your thoughts appear on a movie screen across your forehead. You won’t have to wait long for a thought to arise. When you notice a thought, give it a label (planning, remembering, or describing). Now notice the flavor of the thought by identifying any judgments that arise along with it.

**Mindfulness of Emotion**

Now that you have some familiarity with the flow of thinking through the mind, let’s see if we can bring some awareness to the intimidating beast that is emotion. I saved emotion for last in this series of mindfulness exercises because, for me, feelings are the thing I’m most likely to avoid. Our goal is to lean bravely into emotion so that we’re able to discern the relevant messages they may carry about healing. Even emotions that are unjustified such as shame for our upbringing or guilt that we can’t make our parents happy, are signposts on our journey back to True Self.

It’s possible to cultivate a less strained, even open and loving, relationship with our emotions, but we have to undo some damaging beliefs to get there and learn to see emotions as non-threatening (though often uncomfortable) internal experiences. Our soul wound stories inevitably include experiences where we were judged, rejected, or punished for demonstrating some emotion. Most of us weren’t encouraged to express the full range of emotion in healthy ways and became fearful, not only of the responses we would get for voicing our feelings, but of having feelings in the first place.

No one could blame us for being fearful of feelings even in the most nurturing of environments because some emotions can be truly hard to bear. Grief, sadness, and disappointment can cause us to feel as if we’re being swept away by tsunamis of energy and feeling, with little recourse beyond distraction to find a gulp of air. By becoming mindful of emotion, we learn to sit with even the most difficult feelings from a space of equanimity. We connect to being the space that holds emotion rather than seeing ourselves as the overboard sailor praying for a life raft in a sea of emotion.
Before we learn how to be mindful of emotion, take a moment to consider the emotions you’re most reluctant to feel. Is sadness the feeling you fear the most, or maybe anger? What do you imagine would happen if you let yourself experience this feeling in whatever form it tried to take? Stacy would catch herself just before the tears would spill over her lids. Like a well-practiced noir film actress, she could stop sadness from rising fully with surgical precision. She had developed a subconscious off switch after years of sexual abuse from her uncle that her mother had refused to accept, despite Stacy making multiple reports about her uncle’s behavior. She learned no one would validate her sadness, so she stopped validating her own. The result was a sense of fear that her sadness was so deep and dark that to allow any measure of it out would spell ruin; she might start crying and never be able to stop. Take a moment to be with your own fear. If the fear around a dreaded emotion is not that clear or well-articulated, just recognize the reality that there is sometimes a block to feeling certain emotions.

Emotions have many moving parts, most of which occur in the body. We know we’re feeling embarrassed when our faces flush hot, sad when our throats constrict, and eyes burn with tears, and anxious when our hearts quicken, and palms sweat. Emotions are designed to elicit quick reactions in situations when thinking things through might cause us to be in danger or to miss a good opportunity (natural selection at it again). The physical aspect of emotions is what makes them seem so threatening. Anything that can elicit bodily changes feels and is powerful, but we give far more power to feelings than they deserve by extending their reach; we imagine that feeling enough of a bad feeling might cause us harm. Ironically, the behaviors we engage in to eradicate bad feelings (eating, substance use, overworking, etc.) are far more likely to be damaging than the feelings themselves.

To become mindful of emotion, we turn our non-judgmental attention to our bodies, then we bust out the thesaurus. When anger arises, we notice the temperature of it, whether it comes with a pressure, a stinging sensation, constriction, or heaviness. We locate the center—is it in the chest, the gut, or somewhere else? We become scientists determined to break this seemingly impenetrable mass of feeling down into its smallest parts. One positive side effect of this reductive process is that the smaller moving parts of emotion are not nearly as intimidating as the emotion as a whole. Zen teacher Shinzen Young describes the process of being mindful of feelings as escaping into emotion versus our typical process of escaping away; highlighting the paradoxical relief we can feel when we sit in stillness with a feeling rather than actively work to make an emotion go away.

To become mindful of emotion, we start with the same tried and true process of sitting in a chair or on a cushion in a way that allows us to be
alert and present. Breathe intentionally for a few moments and allow yourself to settle into your body. Take a few breaths to notice any attention-grabbing sensations in the body, using the breath to become gently aware of sensations before letting them go.

Now set your intention to notice your emotion. You may immediately connect with some feeling or another, or you may notice only stillness or absence of feeling. If you try a few sitting periods with no feelings arising, reflect on recent experiences that have generated emotion for you just long enough to get the juices flowing. Then, let go of the story and attend to the physical experience of the feeling. Describe as many minute details of the physical presence of each feeling. Let go of any judgments that arise about the feeling such as “I can’t handle this” or “this is stupid.” Our thinking minds will try to fill any open space with judgment, and our job is to lovingly guide our attention back to the bodily experience of our feelings.

Don’t be surprised if painful memories and unpleasant sensations arise, particularly if you’re working on emotions that connect you directly to your soul wound. It’s more than okay to cry during meditation; remaining austere and unaffected is for monks and nuns. Do your best to release whatever tension may arise around painful emotions, checking in with your face, neck, shoulders, chest, hands, and gut every few moments to see if you’re constricting to avoid the difficulty.

Mindfulness of the Soul Wound

It’s not an uncommon experience for therapy clients to insist they had perfect home lives growing up only to find themselves neck-deep in anger at their parents after a few meditation periods and therapy sessions. If you connect with the beliefs and patterns associated with having a soul wound but come up short when you look for the source material, don’t worry—it’s in there somewhere. The most common barrier I’ve found to recognizing the painful origins of our soul wounds is the judgment “it could have been worse.” We dismiss difficulty that wouldn’t warrant a call to Child Protective Services as meaningless rather than acknowledging that big pain doesn’t have to come from horrific circumstances.

Sadly, for as many clients as I see who aren’t sure why they feel victimized, broken, or shameful, there are just as many who have had traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect that are the clear causes for their soul wound stories. Whether you have very specific and traumatic experiences or are foggy on how you came to be stuck with a soul wound, the work of awareness can help us gain deeper clarity.

I gravitate toward language-based processing tools like journaling when it comes to connecting to early pain. If you’re more visually inclined, feel free to substitute your preferred medium of expression for any of the exercises where I recommend writing out your thoughts or feelings. Do be
mindful of any tricks your thinking mind might play to encourage you to avoid really sitting with parts of your history that may seem too painful or aversive.

A note on trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—if you currently experience severe symptoms of trauma, including dissociation (feeling you’re out of your body and losing periods of time), suicidal thoughts, self-harm, flashbacks that make it difficult for you to function, or panic attacks that impede your ability to work, relate, or take care of yourself, please seek the advisement of a therapist before digging into painful memories using the strategies I’m about to outline. You’ll absolutely be able to benefit from this work, but you may need to ensure you have solid coping skills in place before you intentionally remember traumatic events.

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Soul wounds express themselves in our beliefs about who we are, how we can expect to be treated by others, and how we understand cause and effect. Let’s start by looking for wounding experiences that impact identity. You’ll need a journal (or other expressive medium) and, ideally, about thirty minutes to yourself for this activity.

Start by sitting comfortably and connecting with your breath. Allow thoughts to flow in and out of your consciousness without grasping onto anything. When you feel more settled in your breathing, ask yourself the following questions until some memory, belief, or emotion arises. When you feel an emotion arise, follow it back in time as far as your memory will allow.

What did my parents teach me about my abilities?
What did my parents teach me about my weaknesses?
When did I learn to see myself as a victim, broken, or shameful?
When do I first remember feeling different or damaged?

You may have flashes of images that are difficult to make out, clear, movie-like memories, or something in between. Whenever a prompt causes your breath to catch in your chest or tears to burn under your eyelids, you know you’re connecting with something that has a lot of emotional energy behind it. Stay with whatever emotion or memory arises for as long as you’re able to tolerate. Next, take a few minutes to journal about the experience. The less editing and second guessing you can do while recording your experience, the better. Journaling and creating without inhibition is a powerful act of self-acceptance that can be healing in and of itself.

If you were not able to connect some early experience that fills in the plot holes of your soul wound story, repeat the exercise once every two to three days for the next two weeks. If you still find nothing but a
Rockwellian childhood in your memory after two weeks, move on to the next prompt and return to this one later.

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Relationships are where our soul wounds can really rear their troubled heads. Many of my clients don’t realize they’re living out soul wound stories until they start to look at the patterns in their relational lives. Relationships are spaces of heightened vulnerability—to be in a relationship, we have to risk being seen as our whole selves, and the mere thought of having our flaws and struggles on display for another person sends our soul wounds into hyper drive.

To begin, let’s check out the ways your soul wound is showing up in your current relationships. It’ll help if you do separate exercises for different types of relationships—romantic, platonic, work, parental, etc. You’ll need twenty to thirty minutes to yourself and something to write with. Write out the following prompts and fill in the blanks for whichever ones trigger an immediate emotional reaction for you.

- The hardest thing about being in relationships is...
- I most often find myself in relationships with people who are...
- I want...from my relationship, but never seem to get it.
- The first five words that describe the state of my relationship with...
- are...
- I wish I would stop doing...when I am hurt or angry at...

Take a few moments to express the thoughts, feelings, judgments, and memories that arise around whichever prompts generate a big feeling. We want to bring the full force of our newly developed mindfulness superpower to whatever judgments might arise around our answers to the prompts above. We hold judgments about ourselves and others equally lightly because our perception of self and others will inevitably be distorted by the underlying programming of our soul wounds.

Now let’s look at how our current relational patterns are likely being driven by old experiences. First, we’ll look at what we learned about love from our caregivers, then we’ll explore messages we gleaned about conflict. If you were adopted, grew up in a single parent home, or were bounced around from caregiver to caregiver, some of these prompts may not seem to apply to you at first glance. If a question specifically asks about how your parents related to each other, consider the message you received from the caregivers you had, or the message implied in the absence of a trusted teacher.

Start with the breath and connect with the stillness beneath your thoughts and feelings. Enjoy this space for a few moments before engaging the visualization. Now see if you can recall an experience in which your parents taught you something about what it means to be loving. You might
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ask yourself the following questions to connect with one of these memories:

When did my parents show me love? How did I know they were being loving?
When did my parents show each other love? How did I know they were being loving?
When did I ask for love from my parents and have my needs met?
When did I ask for love from my parents and have my request rejected?
What did I learn about love from my parents’ reactions to my requests for connection?

When a memory arises around one or more of these prompts, imagine yourself as an adult watching the experience unfold through a two-way mirror. Feel yourself be present for the situation as both the experiencer (the child who is trying to connect) and as the observer (the adult who is watching without intervening). Notice as much as you can about the internal and external experience of your child and adult self. Take a few minutes to reflect and express your thoughts in your journal.

We will now turn our attention to the lessons our caregivers taught us about conflict. Our Western way of understanding relationships doesn’t leave much room for the inevitability of conflict and treats disagreements as events that can be avoided if only we were nicer, more accommodating, or less needy. Disconnection is fundamental to relationships, and while it can be a signpost to repair work that needs doing, disconnection doesn’t have to be regarded with fear and loathing. Our early relationships with caregivers, in addition to the conflict avoidance that seems to just be in the water, are often the spaces in which we develop our first deep-seated fear of disconnection.

We’ll start again by sitting quietly with the breath for a few moments. Check in with your body using the body scan technique from earlier in the chapter to notice any tension or attention-grabbing sensations arising in your body. When you feel present and grounded, try to recollect a time that your parents were in a space of disconnection. You may remember a painful argument, an actual separation, or some other point of conflict that was difficult for you to experience as a child. When that memory has taken form, again watch it unfold from behind the two-way mirror, noticing the energy that arises for your child self and your adult self. Ask yourself the following questions, pausing with each one to see what memories, thoughts, or feelings show up.

What are my parents teaching me about conflict?
What are my parents teaching me about anger?
What are my parents teaching me about boundaries?
Take some time to write your reactions down.
Now that we’ve looked both at patterns in our present relationships and lessons from our experiences with caregivers, let’s see if we can connect the dots. Some behavior patterns will obviously tie to what we learned from our parents. We will use the formula (lesson + action urge)*emotional multiplier = behavior to identify how you’re stuck in your relationships. For instance, Sadie came to fear her father’s angry outbursts because they were unpredictable and violent. In her current relationships, she’d become tearful whenever her partner would confront her about a problem because she’d learned that sadness and vulnerability defused her father’s intense anger. It’s natural to cry in response to sadness; it’s problematic and burdensome to our relationships if we can’t tolerate a request to put the dishes away without getting weepy. For Sadie, the lesson was “anger is violent,” the action urge that followed was “Make him stop!,” the emotional multiplier was fear, and the behavior manifested as tearfulness in response to confrontation.

We’ll start with the last part of the equation, the behavior, because behavior is often an easier place to spot subtle inner experiences like beliefs and feelings. The last prompt in the list of questions about your current relationships was, “I wish I would stop doing...when I am hurt or angry at...” Using the formula above, the answer to this question represents some problematic action you take (such as yelling, withdrawing, accusing, belittling, etc.) that is a reaction to a combination of what’s happening in the moment with the other person and what you’ve learned about similar situations from caregiver relationships. It’s important to note that there are plenty of other factors that impact our response to any given situation, but we’re drastically simplifying the process of distillation to bring awareness to deep-seated patterns.

Consider a time that you recently engaged in your identified behavior. Walk back in time to the moments just before you decided to walk away, give in to a demand, etc. Consider the urge that showed up right before you made the choice to do something; you may notice an urge to run away, an urge to make someone listen to you, or an urge to punish. The urge can sometimes be as simple as “Make it stop!” The urge part of the equation will involve a verb, even if you end up choosing a different action in your actual behavior.

Now connect with the emotion that arose along with the action urge. The most common candidates are fear, anger, sadness, shame, and guilt. For Sadie, fear was the undeniable emotion that arose whenever her partner expressed dissatisfaction with her. This is called the emotional multiplier because it amplifies the intensity of any conflict. One of our best cues to a soul wound is having a feeling that seems disproportionate to a situation,
which points to the latent energy of our soul wound stories. When the sore spots get pushed by present events, the surge of emotion that arises makes it very difficult for us to alter the equation in the service of a more useful behavior. Awareness of the pattern immediately decreases the intensity of the emotional multiplier.

Finally, let’s fill in the “lesson” part of the equation by looking back on our answers to questions about what our parents taught us about love and conflict. Which experiences with your caregivers seem to line up with the reactions you have in current relationships? Look for examples of experiences with your parents that resulted in feelings similar to those that arise when conflict shows up in your current relationships. Play the story out by reading the equation like a sentence. For Sadie, her father taught her that anger is violent (lesson), which generated intense fear (emotional multiplier), triggering an urge to make it stop (action urge) when she felt confronted, and ultimately resulting in tearfulness that was a barrier to resolving her partner’s concerns (behavior).

Repeat this process for the behaviors are problematic in your relationships, allowing some time and space between sessions to notice any resistance or discomfort that arises in taking such a close look at your behavior. Resistance may show up as the urge to shift the blame. It takes two to tango, so of course we could likely identify aspects of our spouses’, friends’, and family members’ behaviors that contribute to the discord. Our best chance of making meaningful change starts with our own choices, however, and the warrior work is in holding ourselves accountable. Also, situations where the other person is clearly more at fault will not likely arouse as much soul wound energy in the first place.

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For our last leg of the awareness journey into our wounds, we’ll look at some of the foundational beliefs we build around early hurts that impact the way we see big picture mechanics, such as why bad things happen to good people and what it means to be successful. Soul wounds are deeply felt because of how pervasive their stories become. Like kudzu in a Southern summer, the vines of our wounds wrap around our beliefs about basic aspects of perception, distorting our way of understanding cause and effect. Our way of understanding basic aspects of experience, such as suffering, impacts the choices we make. I’ll often ask my clients who are stuck in a limiting belief, “If I were able to convince you that there were no doors or windows in this room, how likely do you think you would be to look for a way out?” By bringing awareness to the beliefs we build around our wounds, we have the option to decide whether these beliefs serve our True Selves or keep us stuck.
You may already have identified some of the ways your soul wounds impact the way you see the world; if not, we’ll specifically target a handful of the “big” questions that are most likely to result in problematic choices if our answers are based in a soul wound. Let’s explore why bad things happen and the concept of money—beliefs about these topics have major implications for our wellness given that so many of our decisions are made around how likely they are to reduce suffering or make us money.

The cause of suffering is the subject of every major religion because suffering is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Even if we were brought up in a non-religious home, we learned something about how suffering works from our caregivers, whether intentionally or not. Casual reflections about the news, such as “he never would’ve gotten shot if he hadn’t been at that night club for gays,” go a long way in shaping a child’s understanding of why bad things happen.

What did your parents teach you about bad things? Use your mindfulness tools to reflect on times you came to your parents with a painful experience. Perhaps you remember the first time you lost a pet, or a friend was cruel; the less control you had over the event the more information you will likely have gotten about how your parents felt about unpreventable, natural suffering. How did your parents attempt to console you? Were they open and accepting of your painful emotion or more critical, going for the “suck it up, buttercup” approach? If you were to see the same interaction as an adult, what would you take away as the underlying message in your parents’ response to difficulty?

Now think about a time that your parents experienced a painful loss, perhaps the death of their parents or the loss of a job or home. How did they handle the loss? Were they optimistic and focused on moving forward? Did they sink into a melancholy they couldn’t shake? Did they blame others or themselves? Did they seem oddly unaffected, rigidly carrying on as if nothing had happened? Consider any dissonance between the lessons your parents taught you overtly when you came to them with your suffering compared to the implicit lessons taught as they modeled their true beliefs in reaction to their own suffering.

Some of the problematic messages to be on the lookout for are as follows:

*Bad things happen to punish people for poor choices or low moral character.*

*Bad things are meaningless.*

*Suffering is completely out of our control to impact; we have to take whatever we get.*

*Life is mostly suffering and is consequently pointless.*

*Suffering happens to everyone, so we should all just get over it.*

*Being compassionate in the face of suffering will make you weak.*
If any of these messages feel familiar and show up in some of your memories of your parents, check out the ways these beliefs may be creating barriers to wellness in your adult life. Consider the last time you dealt with some painful loss or struggle—what was your inner dialogue like? Kind and nurturing? Harsh and dismissive? Whose voice was that? If your way of seeing that painful experience didn’t feel so “true,” is that what you would want to believe? What choices did you make after processing your difficulty through the lens of your soul wound?

We’ve all heard that one of the main issues leading to divorce is disagreement about money. I’ve found that conflicts that appear to be about money are almost never truly just about money alone. Just as money is meant to be a symbolic resource, it acts as a proxy for values such as security and freedom. When a couple has money disagreements, we’re really saying they have a values conflicts—we don’t want the money, we want what it stands for, which is different from person to person.

What has money meant to you as an adult? Has your story been more informed by an absence of money or an abundance? Do you often feel that everyone has a better handle on their finances than you do? Are you generous or miserly with your money? Is money a resource to be accumulated or a means to an end? In answering these questions, you may start to hone in on what money stands for in your life. Money could be a representation of success, moral character, intelligence, or a symbol for more negative constructs, such as greed and selfishness.

Take some time to journal about your experiences, judgments, and the feelings that arise around money and associated values. As you take stock, you’ll likely have insights into where some of those beliefs came from, recognizing the stamp of a soul wound belief whenever your answers seem familiar to your parents’ attitudes about money. Just as you did for your beliefs about suffering, explore how your money beliefs have helped or hindered you. What choices have you made in the service of your money beliefs that you wish you’d managed differently? What financial decisions have you made to avoid risk, maintain security, feel excitement or danger, or make some painful situation feel more tolerable?

Awareness is skill that deepens our connection to the True Self by unraveling the ways we’ve been taught to see ourselves as less than and separate. Soul wounds most often affect the way we see ourselves, our relationships, and broad constructs such as pain and money, but awareness might show us other ways our wounds manifest. The more we shine the light of awareness on our wounds, the more intricate a picture we’ll obtain of how our early childhood hurts have been urging us to make choices consistent with smallness and powerlessness.

Anytime we come into contact with a way of being that has felt involuntary or like an unchangeable aspect of who we are, we’ll encounter
some level of resistance to letting that way of being go. Each attempt to put down an unworkable pattern of thinking or behavior is experienced as a tiny death. Eckhart Tolle said that we needn’t look any further than our own judgments to see the process of rebirth in action; anytime we cling to a perception of ourselves that is based in pain, we are “reborn” into the same wounded identity we’ve come to accept as being the sum of who we are. In bringing awareness to our stories and seeing them as stories rather than ultimate, unchangeable truths, we invite a kind of death in, one that can feel like staring at the edge of a deep abyss and being asked to jump in.

Be gentle with yourself. As we will learn in the next chapter, awareness is a powerful tool for change, but it’s not all that is required. Know that your anxiety about letting go of old patterns is merely telling you that you don’t have all the tools you need yet to fully heal. Awareness is the comprehensive assessment of the wound and is meant to show us where we need to put the medicine. Our next step, compassion, is the curative balm.
4 COMPASSION

“It has to hurt if it is to heal.” *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende

We’re so much harder on ourselves than we are on others. One of my favorite therapy “tricks” is the friend prompt. When a client is berating themselves, giving full voice to their soul wound stories, I ask, “If you imagined you were listening to a friend tell your story right now, how would you respond to that friend?” This reframe typically jolts them out of their wound story for just a moment, long enough to realize they’re trash talking themselves in a way they would never speak to a friend. Becoming aware of our harsh inner dialogue allows us to try something different—compassion.

I’d just called Emily out for her intensely critical self-judgment about her affair with a male colleague. While she’d certainly engaged in behavior that was problematic and not consistent with her value to be faithful to her husband, defining herself as a “slut who has no self-control” was evidence of her wound-based tendency to write herself off as terrible after any mistake.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t say such terrible things about myself.” I could tell she felt her dialogue was more evidence of her failure.

“But it’s too late—you already had those thoughts and said those words, so unthinking them isn’t an option,” I said to her. I then asked her to connect with the hurt feeling that was underneath her nasty self-judgments, and to put her hand gently on the place where the feeling was rising in her body. The tension in her face and shoulders gently released, and her expression softened to one of sadness and empathy.

Emily, like so many of us, was willing to recognize that her inner critic was incredibly cruel and that it was necessary to replace those judgments with something else. But, also like most of us, her solution to the problem
of “bad thoughts” was “not those bad thoughts.” Positive affirmations often feel too untrue in moments of self-loathing to seem a viable alternative to our wound-based narratives. Instead, we tell ourselves not to think the thing that brings us pain, which strengthens the negative judgment. Any neural pathways we draw back to a painful self-judgment allows that thought to rent more space in our heads, even if we preface it with a “not” or end it with a “sike!”

The crucial step we miss in all these mental gymnastics to undermine our wounded inner critics is the compassionate pause in which we notice the painful emotion that arises with our negativity and to offer ourselves empathetic recognition. The perceived success of a counseling relationship between therapist and client is almost completely dependent upon the client’s experience of feeling the therapist has compassion for them. If the magic of therapy is compassion, imagine what it would be like to regularly offer yourself some.

What is compassion anyway? The Dalai Lama defines compassion as “a sense of concern that arises when we are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to see the suffering relieved.” We tend to approach our painful feelings as problems to be solved and attach all sorts of negative judgments about ourselves to those painful feelings. We show up to our inner struggles with frustration and impatience rather than concern, and as a result, we rush into change or helplessness without honoring our pain. Change without compassion often reinforces our wounds. We do things differently from a space of non-acceptance or self-criticism rather than allowing concern and kindness to help us make a shift. The concern we’re craving is that of the mother with a knitted brow who asks her child gently, “what happened?” as she bandages a scraped knee. Concern is gentle, interested, and doesn’t have an immediate change agenda.

Putting compassion into practice for ourselves requires that we target these damaging narratives that tend to run automatically and out of awareness. You may have noticed as you worked through the layers of awareness-building exercises that you naturally became more responsive to the hurt that arises with your negative self-talk. Often, we don’t offer ourselves compassion because we don’t realize we’re inflicting harm on ourselves. For those self-judgments that seem particularly true or accurate, awareness isn’t enough; we have to be intentional about connecting with the pain that is just beneath the surface of our unkind inner dialogue.
**Be the Friend You Need**

Let’s practice the friend technique I mentioned earlier. We’re often very skilled at offering support to friends when they’re struggling but become critical and harsh with ourselves in the face of the same kinds of hurts. Role playing exercises, like this one, help to strengthen neural pathways, making compassionate narratives more accessible than the typical, knee-jerk negative ones that show up when we’re hurting. Like my high school band teacher always said, “Practice makes permanent.”

Write down five judgments that arise when you’re frustrated, hurt, or disappointed. Examples of wound-based judgments might be, “You are a total failure, screw up, etc.” You might resort to name calling (stupid, naive, crazy, a terrible person, etc.). You may be shocked at how harsh you are with yourself. Now imagine a dear friend is sitting with you. It may help to put an empty chair in front of you to help you invest fully in the exercise. Imagine this friend telling you they think they’re horrible, useless, wastes of space, using whatever negative self-talk you hear in your own head.

Pause and allow your concern for your friend to arise in your heart. Let yourself feel fully the experience of being present with their self-loathing and judgment. Allow a half smile to cross your lips as you then allow the desire to ease their pain to show up with the concern. What would you say to that friend to be a support to them? Speak out loud to them, offering them kindness, understanding, and love. Know that what you say to that friend is what your heart is longing to hear. You are the best source of the medicine you need to feel whole. Take a moment to offer yourself the same words of nurturance, feeling the connection between you and this source of compassion.

It’s ok if this feels contrived at first. Know that any resistance you feel to accepting kindness from yourself or others is your soul wound’s way of trying to stay relevant. Compassion is like kryptonite for our wound-based identities, and they won’t go down without a fight. The nurturing voice you offer your friend in this exercise will start to feel more authentic the more you heal.

**Self-Care**

Another powerful source of compassion is self-care. Any action we take to soothe ourselves, to fill ourselves up, or to otherwise be kind to ourselves is an act of self-care. Our wounds are often strengthened by patterns of self-neglect such as putting everyone else’s needs first or withholding our needs to avoid rejection for being high maintenance. When we make choices intended to meet our basic physical, emotional, and True Self needs, we’re using compassion in action to defuse the soul wound stories that keep us in cycles of deprivation and punishment.
Good self-care has a few specific requirements: meet a clear need, arise from a positive intention for wellness, and be sustainable. We have to know the problem if we are to find a viable solution, so clarity of need is critical. Once we know where we need to offer ourselves compassion, a positive intention to do something kind for ourselves helps us to make choices that are impactful and nurturing rather than punishing. There’s a big difference between eating a salad to fuel our precious bodies compared to eating a salad because we are ashamed of our size. Finally, sustainability is key to ensuring the choices we make in the interest of self-care not only feel good, but don’t come with negative consequences down the road. It may feel great to have 3 glasses of wine every night as part of your relaxation protocol, but ongoing use of substances to feel better primes us for addiction. If all these criteria are met, we get a super boost of compassion for wound healing. If we miss the boat on one or more factors, our self-care won’t pack quite the same healing punch, but is still a meaningful step in the right direction.

Knowing the Need
For our self-care actions to be useful, they have to be a reasonable response to a clear need. If I’m hungry and make the choice to eat a balanced meal, I’ve successfully identified the need and met it in an effective way. If I’m thirsty and grab a bag of chips to handle that thirst, I’ve not accurately met my original need.

A great way of breaking down our areas of need is to use Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, a mainstay of psychologists and counselors for decades in the work of helping people connect with their True Selves, or in Maslow’s language, to self-actualize. Maslow determined that if we are to reach our highest states of being, in the style of highly successful folks like Albert Einstein, we have to address needs in five areas, starting with the most basic needs first. Physiological needs at the bottom of the pyramid, include food, water, rest, and warmth. Safety, or absence of violence or harm, forms the next level, followed by a sense of belonging or love needs. The next level includes self-esteem needs such as feeling successful and accomplished, while the top-level address needs of self-actualization, such as achieving full potential or utilizing creativity.

While Maslow’s model was originally intended to be seen as a stepwise process, life is far too intersectional and messy for us to move in such a linear fashion. It’s possible to work on multiple levels of need simultaneously, though if you’re struggling at an upper level, you might look for a need at a supporting level that needs attention. If you’re studying for a major exam to get a new certification but can’t concentrate because you haven’t fed yourself in eight hours, you would do better to take care of the
basic needs before leveling up. We’ll hold the hierarchical nature of the pyramid loosely as we explore meeting our needs with compassion.

Our soul wounds can make it difficult for us to discern the signals we’re getting from our bodies, minds, and True Selves, sometimes distorting the messages and other times, dampening signals below the level of awareness. Ask yourself the following questions to see which self-care level(s) need your attention.

**Physiological:**

*I have difficulty interpreting my body’s signals that I am hungry, tired, cold, or thirsty.*

*I often put off addressing my physical needs and push through indicators of hunger, fatigue, thirst, or other physical discomforts.*

If you answered “yes” to either of these questions, you may need to attend to your physiological needs more consistently. When our soul wounds hide our physical needs from us or convince us we are somehow capable of defying the requirements of our human bodies, we’re making it difficult to connect with our True Selves. To be effective emotionally, socially, and intellectually, we do well to establish a firm base of physical wellness.

It’s critical to note that physical wellness doesn’t require a certain level of ability or functioning. Stephen Hawking spent most of his adult life wheelchair bound due to paralysis caused by ALS, and no one would likely suggest that he could have been an even bigger genius had he been able to run a 5k. Wellness is a state of attention to physical needs as those needs present themselves, not a universal gold standard of appearance or ability. If you have an illness or disability, attending to your physical needs by taking medication as prescribed, following diet and exercise recommendations, and listening to your body’s cues to rest are as effective for soul wound healing as going to yoga three times per week might be for someone who is able-bodied.

**Meeting your physiological needs**

Make a list of the physical needs that you’re most likely to miss or ignore. Set a goal for yourself to attend to those needs at least once per day for the next week. You might set a reminder on your phone or write a note in your planner to check in with your physical experience and see what need may be craving attention. Pair the need with something that you’re already accomplishing regularly. If you always brush your teeth in the morning but struggle to drink enough water, try putting a water bottle by your toothbrush as a reminder to hydrate.
Safety:

*In my daily life, I feel fearful that I will be physically harmed at work, home, school, or in my relationships.*

*I take steps to protect myself from harm, such as carrying mace or a firearm, and am hyperaware of indicators of danger on a regular basis.*

Safety is a complicated level of need because it’s impacted by so many societal and psychological factors. For most women, safety is a relative term that typically involves feeling less unsafe in some situations than others, rather than achieving a sense of total and complete ease. Traumatic experiences such as sexual violence, harassment, and other forms of endangerment can make it difficult to feel safe and grounded even after the threat has passed. For those who live in unsafe environments currently, getting out of those spaces often requires resources that are difficult for many to access.

*Meeting your safety needs*

If you answered “yes” to either of the questions above, consider the ways you feel unsafe and strategies for getting help. Do you feel threatened by a coworker? Would HR be a useful resource for resolving the conflict? Perhaps you should start to look for another job would feel empowering. If your romantic relationship feels physically or emotionally unsafe, have you contacted local agencies that specialize in helping women get out of abusive relationships? While none of these scenarios are necessarily simple with an obvious or easy fix, the act of acknowledging that safety is lacking in some area of your life and may be keeping you stuck in your wound-based narrative is a compassionate act. Whenever we introduce compassion into a situation that feels immovable, we make it possible for a shift to occur.

Belonging and Love:

*My relationships are fulfilling, supportive, and a source of strength and wellbeing.*

*I have a sense of belonging to a group or community based on shared values.*

Brené Brown has built an empire around recognizing the need for belonging and love. Her teachings, inspired by her thorough social science research, all point to the necessity for connection with others. In my work with clients, I hear again and again how hard it is to make and keep friends once we’ve left the friendship cultivating spaces of high school and college. When we feel disconnected from others, lacking supportive friends or family, or untethered from communities that nurture our values, our best efforts to connect with True Self can seem hollow. If you answered “no” to either of the questions above, this indicates a need at the level of belonging that could use attention.
Meeting your needs of belonging and love

As we move up the hierarchy, the problems and, as a result, the solutions become more complicated. Consider the aspects of your identity you would most like to have in common with a friend or community. Perhaps you crave a group that has similar interests in the outdoors or would enjoy chatting about non-fiction with a book club. Whatever aspects of yourself you put in the closet, whether it’s your interest in art, your love of monster truck races, or your passion for vermiculture, think about what it would feel like to share your interest with another person and have their face brighten into a “me, too!” To find these True Self tribe members, you can check out the website meetup.com, a site that helps connect people who share common recreational, political, and lifestyle interests.

We’ll talk in more depth about maintaining existing relationships in the Chapter 5. For now, make a list of the characteristics, behaviors, or traits that you feel are missing from your current relationships and would help you feel more loved and valued if they were present. You may crave more physical affection, more frequent contact, less negativity, or less drama. Choose one problem and commit yourself to setting an example in your relationships for the change you’d like to see. If you want more contact, initiate more contact with one friend. If you want less negativity, lean into your own urge to gossip or complain and choose not to act on it. These shifts don’t have to be a complete overhaul of your relational behavior, but by committing to one manageable level of change, you’re teaching yourself that you deserve the sort of relationships you crave.

Self-Esteem:

I feel down on myself, unconvincing of my abilities or value most of the time.

I have few activities that give me a sense of competency or mastery.

The level of self-esteem is one that is severely impacted by our soul wounds. The negative narratives of our wounds most frequently have something to say about what we have to offer others (not much) and what we can expect for putting in effort (even less). Soul wounds cut us off from a sense of competence in one or more areas of life, making it difficult to feel confident and capable. If you answered “yes” to either of these questions, your self-esteem level needs attention.

Self-esteem, as conceptualized by Western psychology, is problematic from the space of resolving soul wounds and living in True Self. We often associate self-esteem with thinking the best of ourselves, focusing on our strengths and denying or minimizing our weaknesses. We don’t heal a soul wound by deciding we’re awesome in all the ways we thought we were terrible; rather, healing occurs when we love and accept ourselves fully,
recognizing our choice to act on the best parts of who we are without rejecting our shadows. Keep in mind as we explore ways to address self-esteem level needs that our goal is not an aggrandized sense of self, but open acceptance of ourselves as we are.

Meeting your needs of self esteem

In Dialectical Behavior Therapy, a sense of mastery is considered a base, physiological-level need. When it comes to identifying factors that contribute to negative emotion, feeling incompetent or out of control can be as detrimental to wellness as being physically ill or hungry. When we engage in activities that help us feel competent and capable, we nourish ourselves and increase the evidence against our soul wound stories that tell us we have nothing to offer. Self-esteem building activities can range from doing the laundry to writing a book, with the only requirement being that we feel a sense of accomplishment when we do it.

Make a list of wants and shoulds. Your “want” list will include activities you enjoy doing and that give you a sense of fullness, engagement, or achievement. Your “should” list will be comprised of tasks you might not light up at the thought of, but that you will be glad to have finished and contribute to your wellbeing in some meaningful way. Commit to doing one thing on each list per day unless there’s a major imbalance in your wants and shoulds. If you’ve been going heavy on the wants and have amassed a long list of shoulds, spend more time on the shoulds until they’re back in some sort of balance before moving to the want list.

Self-Actualization:

I feel a sense of purpose and meaning, spiritual connectedness, and awe regularly.

I feel free to engage my creativity and contribute joyfully to the world around me.

News flash: most of us will answer “no” to these questions, especially when we’re just starting the work of healing our soul wounds. The natural pinnacle of our wound work will be to open the self-actualization level of need, so it’s important to be patient with yourself. It can still be useful to consider the ways our True Self may be inviting us to open to joy and meaning even if we don’t feel we can take big steps toward self-actualization just yet. Maslow also described peak experiences, flashes of insight that could occur at any time in which we feel a deep sense of oneness or of being in the right place at the right time. Self-actualization may seem lofty, but it’s available to you no matter how many unmet needs you may have to sift through to get there.
Meeting your self-actualization needs

You’ve seen those people who just seem at ease no matter where they are. Sometimes, they’re famous gurus or successful entrepreneurs, and other times they’re strangers we pass on the street who captivate us with their relaxed aura of being completely okay. These folks have likely had peak experiences that woke them up to the reality of interconnectedness and to the truth of love. We can invite these experiences in meditation by focusing on sensations of aliveness and no-self, a Buddhist idea that we’re not as solid and concrete as our wound-based minds tell us we are.

Take ten to fifteen minutes for this meditation, beginning in a comfortable and alert position. Settle into your breathing and take a few moments to ground yourself in the sensations of your body, noticing tension, looseness, and any other experiences that draw your attention. Then focus your attention on your hands, noticing the warmth you feel there. You may be aware of a pulsing sensation as blood flows through your hands and fingers. Connect with the life you feel in these sensations and be still with the realization of this energy for several minutes.

Next, move your attention to your skin, feeling the connection between your skin and your clothes, your skin and the air, your skin and the chair, cushion, or floor. Allow yourself to experience the connection between the outer layer of “you” and the environment. Notice that you may lose the focus of the point where you begin and end, feeling the blending of the molecules of “you” and the molecules of your surroundings. Stay involved with this experience for several minutes.

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The more we attend to our basic needs, the more we subvert the message of our wounds that we don’t deserve comfort, kindness, and fulfillment. Each step we take to meet our needs more intentionally also opens the path for others to help us come into fullness and connection. We may start to notice people being more loving and collaborative with us as we take our wellness into our own hands. We may find that some relationships, jobs, or activities come to a natural end the more we nurture ourselves. Anything that falls away while we’re actively working to be kind to ourselves is making room for something new that is more consistent with our healthier understanding of ourselves as deserving and whole. The more energy we put into filling ourselves up, the more compassion we generate for ourselves and for others.
Compassion for the Inner Child

Now that we’ve learned skills for engaging our present moment experience of compassion by decreasing our negative self-judgment and meeting our basic needs with loving intentions, we must turn our attention to the core of our wounds: the inner child. When we have painful experiences early in life, the inner child can become trapped, unable to grow and heal, until we offer her the love and kindness she craves. The unresolved hurt from our early wounds live in this child, vulnerable and unprotected, begging for attention and nurturance. Her hurt is what manifests as our internal and external barriers to love, happiness, and worth.

We learn through the lens of our wounds that vulnerability, compassion, and understanding make us weak, but if you’ve ever seen a mother comforting her small child, you know that love and kindness are our greatest healers. When we offer compassion to the inner child, we fundamentally change the way we relate to ourselves, exchanging criticism for kindness and judgment for forgiveness. Engaging our wounded inner child with compassion releases us from the bonds of our wounds, allowing us to act in the service of our True Selves rather than be puppets to our pain.

I’ve used the following guided meditation with countless clients, and I’m continually amazed by how impactful even just one sitting period with this visualization can be. You’ll need fifteen to twenty minutes for the meditation and another fifteen to thirty minutes to allow yourself to regroup. This meditation is powerful and often brings up intense emotion, so if you’re in a particularly dark place in which you’re feeling suicidal or are having active trauma symptoms such as dissociation, flashbacks, or panic attacks, please consult a therapist before delving into this work.

Sit comfortably and notice your breath, feeling your connection to your seat and to the safety of this moment and this space. Now recall an experience from your childhood where you first learned to see yourself as a victim, broken, less than, bad, or unworthy. This may be an experience with your parents or caregivers, a sibling, or some other important person in your life. The memory of this experience may be very vivid or foggy—connect as precisely as you can to the sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations of the experience, creating as clear a mental picture of the experience as you can. What were you wearing? What does the room or environment look like? How is your child self feeling as the painful event occurs? What is she thinking?

As you play out the experience, imagine your adult self is watching the scene unfold. Your adult self sees this young child feeling alone, rejected, fearful, or shameful and is flooded with a sense of compassion. Allow yourself to feel the concern and desire for change arise in your body, filling
your heart with warmth. Feel yourself lean toward this young child, yearning to make it better.

Now freeze the scene in your mind and imagine walking toward the child. Only you and the child can interact at this point, and the painful scene falls away. How would you comfort this child? You might take her in your arms, stroke her hair, or hold her hand. What would you say to this child, who is feeling so hurt and alone? Take your time comforting her with the full compassion of your heart. Watch as this child accepts your comfort and begins to feel nurtured and supported. Take a step back from the child and look into her eyes. Tell her that you love her and that you will always be here for her.

Allow the image of yourself and the child to fade in your mind and take a few moments to connect with your breath and body. Notice the lingering sensations of compassion and any other internal experiences that arise.

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Offering the inner child our full-hearted compassion gives her permission to heal. Hurt that we deny or minimize festers into wound-based beliefs, fueling wound-based behavior. Pain that we meet with understanding and love becomes fertilizer for growth and wholeness. As we experiment with attending to our wounds, we may uncover all kinds of emotions, such as anger and resentment, that we’ve been stuffing down. Allow your feelings to rise and fall away, giving as little energy to telling yourself a story about these feelings as you can. Our feelings need to be seen and accepted, not explained in elaborate narratives. Practice the inner child meditation once per week for several weeks. You may have many memories of wounding experiences—it isn’t necessary to confront every single wounding incident to heal the underlying hurt. Listen to your intuition and offer compassion to your inner child as often as she calls for it.

Compassion for Others

Our wounds keep us in isolation, focused on our own suffering and fearing exposure to the suffering of others. We can feel as if we just don’t have the room to tolerate any more difficulty, and as a result, we withdraw into self-centered rumination. To nurture our way out of our wounded ways of being, we need to act in compassion for ourselves but also for others. Since our wounds can trap us in patterns of giving our time and energy that are based in negative beliefs about our worth, we save compassion for others for last. With clarified intentions and renewed connection with the True Self, we can deepen our own healing by giving
from a place of unconditional openness, enhancing our joy, and growing our love.

The center of Maslow’s hierarchy is belonging and connection. One of the ways we can foster connection is by being generous with our time and energy, giving to others in ways that fill us up, make us hopeful, and generate a sense of meaning and interconnectedness. We often experience giving to others as a box to be checked in order to be “good” people, missing the beauty and ease that is inherent in compassionate action. We might also give from a place of pity rather than compassion, turning the act of giving into something that feels heavy and dark. Pity keeps us separate from others by putting us in a position of superiority. We can only truly connect to another person by leaning into our shared humanity.

To give joyfully, we need to connect with our own personal style of compassion, finding those people, causes, and problems that we feel excited for rather than obligated to impact. With so many issues vying for our attention and action, it’s easy to fall into hopelessness and paralysis when applying ourselves compassionately. Gun control, racism, police violence, education disparities, homelessness, lack of access to affordable medical care—all these problems and more elbow for our attention and challenge us to step out of our comfort zones to make a meaningful impact on the world. Your job is to find a cause that pulls at your heart, stretches your comfort zone, then take measure of whether it’s a good fit for your unique brand of compassion. We may feel we’re acting from a place of privilege if we involve ourselves in a cause, only to find we feel more bogged down and hopeless the more we try to help. Energy wasted on guilt for the work you aren’t doing is energy that would be better directed toward compassionate action.

First, we identify a cause that matters, then we figure out how we might best serve the cause. Consider your love language—do you most appreciate kind words, acts of service, quality time, physical touch, or gifts? Whichever way of being loved resonates with you is a good starting point for finding the way you most want to give love. For example, I’m least interested in getting gifts, particularly money. When I contribute to a cause, I’m least likely to feel positively about throwing money at a charity, preferring instead to give my time in face-to-face interactions. If receiving gifts is a primary love language for you, then donating to a charity may be the most direct route to feeling the benefits of your compassionate action.

Consider a group or cause that you feel passionately about (e.g., racial justice, animals, ending homelessness, or environmental health). Using volunteermatch.org, find an activity that addresses your chosen cause. Commit to volunteering at least twice in the next thirty days. Next, journal about your experience. How did it feel to extend your time and energy to a cause that matters to you? Do you feel more connected, centered, and
enthusiastic, or less so? Notice any feelings of empowerment or competence that arise when you donate your energy to a cause. If you came away with mostly unpleasant feelings, consider a new cause until you find something that fits.

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Our final step in compassion for others is the work of daily kindness. It’s great to devote ourselves to service in big ways, but we can be just as impactful when we turn our attention to small acts of compassion, such as holding a door for someone, offering a word of encouragement. Our wounding experiences can train us to minimize very real efforts to make other people’s lives better, dampening the healing power of our compassionate action. If we don’t acknowledge the small kindness we offer to others as meaningful, but rather stay in our wound-based perspective that we owe others kindness to make up for what we lack, we miss the opportunity to feel the fullness of compassion.

You have likely been kind to someone in the last few days, whether by acknowledging a stranger with a nod, picking up the change the person in front of you dropped at the grocery store, or making a silly face at a baby on the street. Any interaction you’ve had that came from a place of warmheartedness is worth mentioning. Allow those experiences to arise in your mind and to bring with them the warmth of compassion that was built into them. Commit to intentionally being kind to one person per day, allowing yourself to be fully aware of the positive impact of your actions on yourself and others.

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Compassion, in its many forms, is a balm for our wounds. Compassionate thinking reduces our tendency to rewound ourselves with our own self-talk. Self-care teaches us to love ourselves by meeting our needs at all levels of experience. Offering kindness to others and finding our unique brand of compassionate action makes us beacons of light for others and lightning rods for the healing we crave for ourselves. From this space of self-love and acceptance, we can do the work of changing our thoughts, actions, and relationships to support a life suited for our luminous True Selves.
5 CHANGE

“In one who has abandoned every stratagem to protect or secure himself, vulnerability becomes radiant.” *On Becoming an Alchemist* by Catherine MacCoun

To dismantle the roots of our wound-based ways of being, we have to make changes to fundamental aspects of how we see ourselves and conduct ourselves in the world. The behaviors and beliefs we cling to in our unawareness are mostly about protection—we see ourselves as small, fragile, and insignificant and create walls and fences around our hearts to prevent more betrayal, neglect, and pain from befalling us. When we examine the beliefs, we hold about how the world works and why people are the way they are, it doesn’t take long to see how our protective measures disconnect us more effectively from love than from pain.

In this chapter, we’ll first examine the common wound-based beliefs we carry about difficulty and difficult people and will then learn concrete behaviors for healing in relationships. Finally, we’ll identify strategies for living in thrive mode rather than survival mode, substituting deeply held values for our typical motivators—pain avoidance and pleasure seeking.

*Change Your Worldview*

There’s a line in a Ben Folds song where he says “Go ahead—you can laugh all you want. But I got my philosophy, and I trust it like the ground.” In fact, maybe just put the book down and look that song up because it expresses the gravity with which we have to approach our understanding of pain and difficulty. You must have a philosophy, and mine is that pain exists for the purpose of growth. It’s not original, but it works. Having a way of understanding suffering, having a “why,” fundamentally changes the
way we experience difficulty and is a major step in the process of dismantling the soul wound’s hold on our perception.

Our soul wounds are constantly running programs in the background of our awareness, whispering to us about why difficulty arises. For the victim, pain is proof that the world is against us, while for the broken, pain supplies the evidence of our apparent incompleteness. These murmurings get in the way of us coming into a useful relationship with suffering, one that doesn’t reject the dark side of experience, but rather accepts pain as an inevitable consequence of being human. We hurt because we’re alive, not because we’re broken, have made bad choices, or are being punished. When we begin to see suffering as a natural part of existing, as natural as the sun rising and setting, we let go of the wound-generated layer of pain that arises when we struggle against reality.

You may not think you’re a philosopher with a well-developed system of rules for ascribing meaning to events, but you are. The problem is that your philosophy is currently running outside of your awareness and is likely being fueled by your soul wound. There is a bidirectional relationship between our worldview and our wound-based narrative, philosophies born of our unresolved hurt strengthen our wounds and vice versa. To reduce a major source of fuel for our wound programming, we need to rewrite our worldview to align with a more workable way of being.

Since soul wounds feed us stories that directly impact the ways we engage with the world, people in our lives, and with ourselves, our philosophical overhaul must address each of these areas. Our worldview consists of beliefs about the why and the how of experiences involving loss, struggle, and success to name just a few. Maybe you’ve had the thought, “of course it will rain today if I decide to walk to work.” You probably weren’t aware that underlying this thought is a wound-based worldview that insists wanting something is the best way to ensure you won’t get it.

**Soul Wound Worldview: Events Are Random and Meaningless**

One of the most problematic ways of understanding the natural flow of ups and downs is to view difficulty as random, meaningless, or as punishment. We can deal more effectively with the downs by recognizing the law of cause and effect, accepting the truth of suffering, and surrendering to the fertilizing effect of difficulty on personal growth.

Cause and effect is the most scientifically satisfying, so we will start there. To embrace cause and effect, we acknowledge dependent arising, which is to say that nothing comes from nothing. Every situation is the culmination of myriad factors that arose in just the right way for things to turn out as they did. Stephen Hawking describes the creation of the universe in a way that illustrates dependent arising, likening the causes and conditions for the start of it all to a billion oven knobs with a billion
settings on each that had to be set in just the right way for the Big Bang to have happened.

In the Big Bang of individual experience, everything that happens is the result of contributing factors, some of which are in our control and others that are not. By recognizing the role of cause and effect in experiences that we might ordinarily ascribe to random terribleness, we make room to discover the variables that we can change for a better future outcome and develop acceptance around what already has happened.

When we imagine our lives to be random and meaningless, we’re choosing to ignore the powerful energy connecting us to life. Without acknowledging the interconnectedness of phenomena, we can’t hope to sustain the energy needed to make meaningful changes in the service of healing our wounds and living in True Self. If we don’t see ourselves making changes that can impacting future events, we will operate as we always have when discomfort naturally arises.

*Thought Seed*

“Nothing is random, all phenomena are interconnected.”

To rewrite our programming that has taught us to see struggle as random and meaningless, we plant a new seed. If you’re doubting the power of one sentence to dramatically impact your life, go back to the section on awareness and see if you don’t notice a few incredibly damaging thoughts that have been the theme of your soul wounded life so far. If something as simple as “I make bad choices,” or “Nobody will ever love me,” has the capacity to shape our expectations and choices, then it is only fair to give a more positive theme a chance to impact our lives.

*How to Make the Shift*

There’s nothing like practice to rewrite soul wound programming. Start with a situation that has happened recently that was mildly to moderately uncomfortable—like forgetting a friend’s birthday; a costly, unexpected car repair; or another annoying situation. Consider factors that contributed to the situation, including things you could control, things that you couldn’t control, and even factors that seem unrelated. For example, if you suddenly found yourself needing a new car starter, you might acknowledge factors that were out of your control such as the weather contributing to deciding to take your car into work rather than walk. Factors in your control might have been that you put off your last regularly scheduled service because you were too busy dealing with end of the school year obligations with your kids. The goal is to open yourself to the possibility of interconnectedness, even though you’ll never be able to see all the contributing factors.
What was in your control? How can you take steps to avoid a similarly annoying outcome by owning your part and making meaningful changes? Practice offering acceptance to those factors that you couldn’t control. Whenever you feel yourself being pulled on by feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, practice intentionally finding the causes making sure to address as many of the controllable as uncontrollable aspects of your situation.

**Soul Wound Worldview: Suffering Happens Because You’re Doing Something Wrong**

The Buddha realized the path to enlightenment after forty days and nights in meditation. He translated his realization into what would become the foundational teaching of Buddhism: the four noble truths. The first truth is the truth of suffering. The Buddha was so emphatic that we should get this concept, suffering is a natural reality, the first thing he did after attaining enlightenment was teach the truth of suffering. He didn’t go to the 2500 BC version of Disneyland, he didn’t call his mom—he taught the truth of suffering.

Cynics read this to mean that life is pain, which is neither completely wrong nor completely right. Being alive comes with certain costs. We’ll all experience the pain of loss, discomfort, and death no matter how much sunscreen we wear or how many vegetables we eat. Suffering is an unavoidable part of the human condition, but we rail against it as if we could somehow choose to experience nothing but pleasantness. Our lack of acceptance of the natural presence of our suffering is yet another source of—you guessed it—suffering. Focusing on the philosophy that life is suffering cuts us off from the equally valid good parts of life, such as love, beauty, and connectedness. We do better to lean into the middle path, life contains suffering.

But how do we make sense of the unavoidable reality that shit happens without violating our first philosophy that asserts we can impact our lives for the better, subsequently reducing suffering, if we make meaningful changes? Doesn’t our first rule imply that suffering can be avoided if we try hard? Yes and no. Since we’re using natural phenomena as a way of understanding the truth of suffering, let’s think about a thunderstorm. There’s nothing we can do to prevent thunderstorms, but we can decide to stay inside, watch the weather to time our departure and avoid the rain, or if you’re really old school, you might take your shower and make any landline calls before the storm hits, so you don’t get electrocuted. We can mitigate the impact of suffering even if we can’t make it disappear altogether.

We can take steps to decrease our exposure to some difficulties, but we must realize that attempts to avoid all suffering are unfeasible and, ultimately, not helpful. A lack of suffering means we’ve separated ourselves
from what it is to truly live. For the suffering we can’t avoid, we can decide if it’s accomplished some sort of purpose for our growth and development. Accepting the truth of suffering doesn’t mean surrendering our ability to impact our lives in meaningful ways, but it does allow us to put down the needless effort we pour into eradicating suffering completely.

**Thought Seed**

*“Suffering is as real and unavoidable as the rain”*

Accepting the reality of suffering will result in some level of healing. Energy that we once gave to all kinds of mental math designed to help us figure out how to stop the suffering we have and to buffer against any additional suffering will naturally flow into the work of connecting with the True Self. Becoming objective and accepting observers of difficulties as they arise creates room for us to deal more effectively with our hurt feelings, our imbalanced, draining lifestyles, and any other source of struggle that may show up.

**How to Make the Shift**

To water this thought seed, notice when you’re interpreting a negative situation as evidence of your bad luck, your stupidity, naïveté, or brokenness. What happens when you substitute your wound-based reasoning with the idea that difficulty is natural? Once you’ve embraced the truth of difficulty, then check out the other contributing factors, including your own behavior, without going global with what your mistake must say about you as a whole person. Assume the role of scientist by trying to connect as many dots as possible with minimal judgment.

**Soul Wound Worldview: Suffering Is Useless**

Our last worldview shift takes a bold leap into explaining the “why” of suffering. Soul wounds personalize and demonize suffering, convincing us that relationship failures, job dissatisfaction, and even cellulite happen to us either for no reason or as a direct result of being damaged. True Self calls us to explore the alternative: suffering happens for us. If we didn’t encounter difficulty, we would have no reason to grow.

Soul wounds tell us all kinds of stories about the why of suffering, most of which just reinforce smallness, ineffectiveness, or unworthiness. The radical shift we can make is to assume painful circumstances contain potent fertilizer for learning and changing in ways that connect us more deeply to our True Selves. You don’t have to believe that your cancer diagnosis, your divorce, or your narcissistic boss were intended to be a lesson from the universe that you have no say in. That would just be trading one brand of passivity for another. We step fully into our author roles by
deciding there’s a message for growth available in every painful situation and we get to decide what that message is for us.

Take a moment to reflect on a negative experience you had in the last few years, something far enough removed that it doesn’t bring up incredibly intense emotion. Now walk forward in your memory from that painful event, and you’ll likely find a positive situation that arose that couldn’t have happened had the painful experience not come to pass.

Maybe the positive shift that occurred as the result of your difficulty happened in a passive way. Even though you weren’t actively looking for a way to grow from the struggle, you found your way to a better situation without connecting all the dots. Imagine the juice you’d get if you looked for a path from pain to growth on purpose. This is another great example of how powerful it can be to set our thought dials to “workable” rather than “scientifically proven to be true.” No one could demonstrate that losing your last job directly contributed to you learning how to rock climb, but the act of creating meaning opens us up to suffering. It’s through openness to suffering that we cultivate resilience and a deep sense of equanimity that helps us ride out the inevitable storms of life.

When we decide our struggles have meaning and that within that meaning is a lesson about how we can live in closer alignment with the True Self, we divert incredible energy away from self-pity, helplessness, and other forms of non-acceptance and channel it directly toward the things that matter to us.

Thought Seed

“I connect to my True Self by finding the message in my struggle.”

Willingness to find meaning in suffering serves the dual purpose of easing our tension around difficulty and fueling our growth. Seeking a message in difficulty makes us more open to accepting the reality of struggle, while denying any purpose for pain keeps us stuck in loops of avoidance. Our wounds push us to avoid difficulty, so any action we take in the service of avoidance strengthens our wound-based programming. A sincere desire to learn from pain connects us to the soft heart of the True Self that wants nothing but the best for us, but also recognizes difficulty is normal.

How to Make the Shift

The real trick of watering this thought seed is timing. When we’ve just experienced a big loss or set back, our first job is to nurture ourselves through the hurt. Because the pain of sadness, embarrassment, and other negative emotions is inherently difficult to be still with, we might be inclined to rush the process of being compassionately open to our pain in an effort to dampen it. Finding the message comes after we honor the hurt.
The message in the struggle will relate directly to some aspect of ourselves we’re rejecting, a perspective that has outstayed its welcome, or may be part of the pruning process to make room for new growth. If we’re rejecting our tendency to be fearful, we may have a falling out with a dear friend who’s anxious and overly cautious. If we’ve been trying to make a project work that reinforces our current status in the company, we may continue to encounter barriers until we recognize our attention should be on something bigger or more interesting. When we’re being called to a new phase of life but are clinging to relationships that keep us stuck in an old way of being, those relationships might fall away to make room for what is to come.

Side note: the message in our struggle will not add to our pain if it’s coming from the True Self. Beliefs such as “bad things always happen to me” or “the more I try, the harder I fail” are wound-based thoughts. If a belief makes us want to stay small, reinforces our self-doubt, or hardens our hearts against love and possibility, then we need to change the station. True Self might be sending us a difficult message about a change we need to make, but the lesson won’t be about how awful we are or how terrible life is—it will help us act in the service of joy, meaningful relationships, or our values.

Beliefs about People

Now that we’ve worked on our way of understanding the “why” and “how” of suffering, let’s check out another area in need of a philosophical reboot: our beliefs about how and why other people are the way they are. We hold beliefs about how people work that either serve our ability to be open, loving, and connected or help us to construct barriers out of fear of harm or rejection. These beliefs can be the most deeply ingrained from our early wounding experiences since the source of our wounds are most often people. To rewrite these beliefs, we have to be willing to sit with the raw vulnerability that arises when we put down a major perceived source of protection from pain—our distrust, low expectations, and other wound-based beliefs about people.

The negative assumptions we subconsciously cling to as being indisputably true—that people are inherently bad, seek us out because we’re weak, or that generosity and altruism are nothing but flukes or means to an end—are directly related to our early experiences of being rejected, neglected, or victimized. These fearful beliefs are designed to give us a sense of safety and control, theoretically protecting us from the type of experiences that gave rise to the beliefs in the first place.

Our goal is to loosen the grip our soul wounds have on our perceptions of other people. We move from being instinctually suspicious to being compassionately open, connecting to our strength and resilience in
the process. That being said, people can royally suck, so we’ll also discuss setting boundaries so our new-found faith in humanity doesn’t translate into doormat syndrome.

Thought Seed

“Everyone is doing the best they can.”

Generosity of spirit, or assuming people are doing the best they can in any given moment, ties directly to our first worldview that everything is connected. Circumstances arise due to causes and conditions, and human behavior is no different. When people are harsh or careless, their behavior is the natural culmination of internal and external experiences, not the least of which is a lack of awareness of why they’re behaving in a given way. Since most of us aren’t conscious of how causes and conditions come together to trigger big feelings, don’t know what to do when these feelings arise, and are functioning on pleasure-seeking programming, that means a lot of people are walking around like loaded hurt guns without even knowing it.

Compassion is the natural consequence of assuming people are doing the best they can with what they have to work with in any given moment. Who hasn’t thought, “If I knew how to do better, I would”? There’s a depressing helplessness that surrounds acts of mindless harm. Believing people would surely do better if they could help us strip off the armor that makes it difficult to be kind and forgiving of ourselves and others.

How to Make the Shift

Use the mantra “everyone is doing the best they can” in situations where you can’t reasonably confront a person about their behavior. We’ll level up to the work of being more generous with people we know and love (or loathe) after gaining some groundwork in lower stake situations. My favorite place to practice is in traffic. You’re never going to see the jerk that cut you off ever again, so offer him/her some compassionate understanding by repeating your mantra and mindfully putting down your rage. You’ll be giving yourself the gift of peace where you’d ordinarily stoke the fires of anger that inevitably contribute to our own mindless actions.

Thought Seed

“I am most triggered to negative judgment and aversion by aspects of others that I cannot accept about myself.”

If you’ve ever had the experience of deeply despising someone without a particularly good reason or found yourself getting irrationally angry with the same person for objectively small offenses, you’ve encountered the mirror function of relationships. We’re most powerfully triggered to anger and criticism by traits and patterns that we’re reluctant to see in ourselves.
That which we don’t see in ourselves goes unintegrated and unaccepted, festering into wound-based projection and blame that is disconnecting and isolating.

Confronting the mirror and seeing our aversion for what it is, a finger pointing directly at our own distasteful ways of being, is at best humbling and at worst, intensely embarrassing. When clients vent their frustration about the friends who never call them back, how pathetic their mothers are for not taking charge of their own wellbeing, or how obnoxious their coworker is who tries so hard to impress the boss, I often ask, “What characteristics do those folks have that maybe you’re reluctant to acknowledge in yourself?” It hits most of my clients right in the old ego, causing everything from physical cringing to urges to walk out of therapy.

It’s hard to be confronted with how imperfect we are, especially when we’ve learned that so much seems to be riding on appearing to be perfect, but acceptance of imperfection is part of the path to healing. In that way, people are like living, breathing doses of that nasty pink antibiotic everyone had to take at some point when they were kids. We’re forced to take our medicine when the people who aggravate us show us some trait or behavior we detest about ourselves. Nobody likes to take medicine, but the result is positive—we see clearly the ways we’re acting in our wounds and have an opportunity to nurture the rejected part of ourselves back to wholeness.

It’s important to emphasize that not every negative reaction we have to other people is pointing to some unintegrated shadow part of ourselves. We naturally respond negatively when people make choices that harm us directly. If someone kicks you in the shin, your anger isn’t necessarily evidence that you secretly want to kick people but is rather a reasonable emotional response to harm. The people who are pointing to our wounds by emulating unaccepted parts of ourselves will trigger anger, frustration, and disgust that seem more intense than necessary and keep us ruminating about the things we dislike about the other person.

**How to Make the Shift**

Make a list of the people you can’t think about without rolling your eyes, the ones who really make your jaw tight and send you into judgment mode. What characteristics do these people embody that are triggering for you? Perhaps they’re caricatures of aspects of yourself that you feel make you weak or less than, such as vulnerability, a need for approval, or the drive for success. Ask yourself, if I could trust myself to have these feelings or traits and not act on them in ways that are problematic, would I feel such a dire need to eradicate my perceived weakness from my idea of myself? If I knew I could have negative traits and positive traits and still be worthy, good, and whole, would I need to reject these aspects in others when I see them? Our aversion is trying to protect us but is running on wound-based
programming that makes perfection a prerequisite for self-acceptance. If you embrace the acceptance, the aversion will naturally diminish.

*Thought Seed*

“I attract people who will teach me something about my wound and how to heal.”

Of all the relationships and experiences that serve to shine the spotlight on our wounds, romantic relationships are like the molecular particle microscopes at CERN. Self-knowledge takes vulnerability and intimacy, so we often make major breakthroughs in our wound-based thinking when we look for patterns in those relationships that are meant to be characterized by closeness. Karen had to learn how to buy into her worth without a purely external source; every romantic relationship she had until her mid-thirties was abusive at worst, neglectful at best. Her partners were mirroring her lack of self-acceptance in their treatment of her. Deva’s wound told her she had to work harder to earn love than others, a belief that was confirmed time and again by her cold and withdrawn partners. When we’re unaware of our wounds, we take the patterns we discover in our relationships as evidence that our wound-based identities must be true—“I must be broken if every partner confirms that.” Awareness of our wound-based beliefs illuminates the connection between our relationships with ourselves and the partners we attract.

The reality is that relationships are mirrors for the way we see ourselves. Rather than reflecting the ultimate truth of who we are, they show us who we think we are. This is the exact opposite of what we hope will happen, which is that we’ll find someone who will perform a *Beauty and the Beast* style miracle and see us as perfect and wonderful despite our imagined emotional fur and horns. We seek the acceptance we refuse to offer ourselves from outside sources, believing we’ll only be able to love ourselves when someone shows us how to do it first.

That’s not to say we have to be in a state of psychological perfection with no evidence of a soul wound before we can have healthy relationships. It’s possible to have emotionally corrective experiences in romantic relationships that propel us toward healing. In my experience, these relationships don’t show up when we’re in total unawareness of our wound programming, though. And this makes sense—what good would it do us to have someone ready to love and accept us if we would reject their kindness as delusional? We have to create just enough cracks in our soul wound stories for an alternative image of ourselves to seep in along with a partner’s love for us.

We attract partners who help magnify the impact of any unresolved soul wound stories. If I see myself as a broken, I’ll attract a partner who points out all my flaws and offers little positive reinforcement. If I feel I’m
unworthy of love, I’ll find a partner who makes me work feverishly for every shred of connection, appreciation, and commitment I get. A caveat here is anyone can meet a jerk who treats them poorly, but if you keep meeting the same jerk, (i.e., feeling the familiar feelings of less-than, helpless, and worthless), then your wound may be running your mate search.

It’s hard for this not to sound like victim blaming. The reality for so many women is their partners aren’t just a bad fit or interpersonally unskilled—they’re outright physically and emotionally abusive. While we have to adamantly assign the responsibility for abusive behavior to the abusers and not the survivors, there’s still important work to be done around the long-standing, wound-based beliefs that might make us even more vulnerable to the systemic and culturally sanctioned problem of intimate partner violence. As with any wound healing process, compassion, not judgement, is key.

_How to Make the Shift_

Think about your most formative romantic relationships—the ones that left a mark on how you saw yourself and your beliefs about love. Focus on those relationships that generated intense emotion, regardless of how old you were or how long they lasted. Of those relationships, which ones reinforced some aspect of your victim story, brokenness, or shame? What might your wound have wanted from those relationships that you didn’t recognize at the time (e.g., approval, proof of worth, or evidence of your lovability)? Whatever behavior or trait you saw in your partner, take the opposite of that, and you likely have an answer for what your wounded heart was craving. If your partner was noncommittal, you were likely craving proof of your lovability; partners who are critical point to a need for acceptance; partners who are cold or dismissive may indicate a need for emotional validation.

If you’re currently in a relationship that points to aspects of your wound that need tending, the work you do to recognize your wholeness will push that relationship either to grow with you or fall away. We will learn strategies in the next section for showing up to our relationships in True Self by holding boundaries and asking effectively for what we want and need. Interpersonal effectiveness is a manifestation of and fertilizer for self-love. If a partner can’t handle you acting in a way that is consistent with how you want to love yourself, then that partner will find his/her way to your past, opening the door for a partner who is at or above your level of willingness to love yourself.
SOUL WOUNDS

Change Your Relationships

Close relationships are our best, and often most frustrating, teachers. In my own experience and in the stories I hear from clients, there’s no bigger challenge (or fuel for) to our wound work than our parents and romantic partners. They seem to know just how to push the buttons we’re trying so valiantly to diffuse, which we can see through wisdom as a gift. Whenever I tell clients their conflict is a gift, I honor how lame that sounds by making a vomit face. Each time a parent or spouse engages in behavior that activates old soul wound patterns, we’re being called to level up, forging a deeper connection to ourselves in the process.

You may be thinking, “But my soul wound doesn’t have anything to do with romance—my parents were the biggest source of pain for me, so why do I have so much difficulty with my partners?” Pain is pain, and love is love—the beliefs we carry about ourselves from soul wounding experiences generalize far beyond the context in which those wounds first occurred. Our parents teach us about love in all forms, both in their treatment of us and in how they model romantic love with each other. Even single parents are teaching about romantic love in the absence of it. We don’t have to get hung up on parental love versus sexual attraction versus friendship—ultimately, all of these forms of love are about how we connect to ourselves and each other.

Love is experienced to the degree we are willing to be seen. The more we hide, the less we love. Soul wounds generate layer upon layer of behavior intended to keep us in the shadows for fear of rejection or harm, like saying “yes” when we don’t want to or failing to ask for what we want or need. Naturally, these wounds and their associated behaviors flare up the closer we get to others. As we risk being seen, fear and doubt show up to coax us back into smallness. True Self doesn’t require instant perfection to thrive; we can baby step our way into authenticity by showing up fully in lower-risk, less connected relationships while using the mastery and confidence we build there to fuel our growth in tougher relationships. To gain mastery, we need a new way of claiming our space in relationships, and the good news is there are skills for that.

Just Say No

How many times have you said “yes” in the interest of being agreeable, pleasant, not rocking the boat, or to avoid feeling guilty for disappointing someone? As women, we’re taught that our primary value lies in being nice, not in taking up the reasonable space of personhood with our right to say “no.” The unintended consequence of all this yes-manning is that any time and energy we give inauthentically or from a place of helplessness further strengthens our wound-based stories.
Effectively using your “no” requires attending to two main factors: priority and delivery. In Dialectical Behavior Therapy, we learn we can have three main priorities in interpersonal interactions—an objective, a relationship, or self-respect. Based on our priorities, we can more effectively identify a style of delivering our “no” that will best meet our goal. If we have an objective priority, we’re more driven by concrete concerns, such as not having the time, not having the ability, not having interest, etc. An objective “no” is one that focuses on the facts, for example, “I won’t take on that new client account this week because I’ll be on vacation.”

**How to Do It**

The following instructions are derived from Marsha Linehan’s work, and more detailed information can be found in her book, *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*. Don’t be put off by the diagnosis in the title—you don’t have to have Borderline Personality Disorder to benefit from the skills.

Describe the situation: Stick to the facts—observable, measurable facts.

Express: Communicate your feelings, judgments, and assessments.

Assert: Say “no” and clearly articulate what you are saying “no” to.

Reinforce: What is in it for the other person to go along with your “no?”

**Building Bridges**

When a relationship is our priority, we use a soft “no,” which emphasizes the impact our “no” might have on the other person. A relational priority requires that we attend to the emotional and connection costs associated with saying “no.” We validate the difficulty or disappointment the other person might feel as a result of our refusal, spending more time making room for the other person’s feelings than making a case for why our “no” is justified. If we’re choosing downtime versus attending a concert previously planned with a friend, we do more for ourselves and for our relationships by validating her disappointment than by emphasizing how tired we are after an exhausting week at work.

**How to Do It**

Identify and validate: Be clear about your perception of how the other person might feel. If the feeling seems justified, say so (“I would feel disappointed too if I were in your place.”). If the feeling does not seem justified, acknowledge it, but don’t own it. If a friend asked you an hour before landing for you to pick them up at the airport and is then enraged when you say “no,” their anger is not justified. Since the friend wasn’t skillful or planful in making their request, they contributed to the causes
and conditions that will lead them to need an Uber rather than a free ride home. In such cases, we can validate the feeling, which basically just means name the feeling out loud, without inserting our usual apologies or jumping into fix it mode for a problem we did not cause. We can tune into whether a feeling is justified by asking our True Selves how we would feel if the tables were turned. True Self is going to respond from a place of wisdom, weighing facts and feelings, parsing through contributing factors, and ultimately offering a verdict that is fair and balanced.

Briefly explain: Give an authentic reason for saying “no,” but don’t dwell on a sob story or on how little control you have over your time and energy. Restore the emotional bank account balance: Offer an alternative, a contingency plan, or a rain check to put some funds back in the emotional bank account.

**Maintaining Self-Respect**

When self-respect is our priority, we use our “no” firmly and with our full voice. Self-respect as a priority means that whether the person is able to hear our “no” and understand our perspective, we will hold the line. When a coworker, who frequently oversteps your boundaries asks you stay late in her stead because you’re the only single person on staff, your “no” will be delivered calmly but clearly, and you’ll also point out that your free time isn’t worth any less because you aren’t partnered. Often, the self-respect priority rises in the face of unfairness or in situations where we’re being asked to sell ourselves out to keep the peace.

Saying “no” is imperative to maintaining healthy relationships with others and with ourselves. The wound-based fear that arises around our “no” is that we will be rejected or punished if we don’t conform to the expectations of others. Inherent in the resistance to saying “no” is non-acceptance of ourselves—we fail to see we have more to offer than being agreeable and that we deserve more than tolerance in exchange for obedience.

**How to Do It**

Don’t apologize—nothing undermines self-respect like apologizing for having an opinion. You don’t have to be sorry for saying “no” to unfair requests.

Articulate your values—express how saying “no” to the request is consistent with your values.

Stay in strength—a powerful “no” doesn’t have to be anger-fueled or aggressive. In fact, aggression, name calling, yelling, and making sweeping judgments to communicate a “no” undermines self-respect. Allow your strength to show in your clear and precise language.
Asking for What You Want

Our wounds tell us that taking up too much space puts relationships in peril. There is some truth in this: certainly, if we’re asking for more than we give on a regular basis, we risk burning people out. But we often take this to the extreme by putting our wants and needs on the shelf, which ultimately leaves us feeling unfulfilled and unseen in our relationships. We might also be convinced that mind reading is the best measure of connection, and don’t ask for what we want on principle that if someone really cares, they’ll know what we want. Both styles of withholding our wants from others tend to point to a fear of rejection that requires opposite action to defuse. Rather than withhold, we need to find skillful ways of making our needs known and to give those we care about an opportunity to be kind to us.

There are a few factors to consider when asking for what we want that can be addressed by asking ourselves the following questions: Is my request fair to the other person and to the relationship? Am I asking for something I would willingly give? Am I compromising self-respect by asking? Is my request clear? These questions help us ensure our request is centered in True Self rather than bound up in our wound-based needs, which can ultimately push people away.

Fairness is a communication of respect. Making requests from a place of consideration of another’s rights makes it even more likely the person will be agreeable, but also keeps the relational bank account in balance. Our wounds distort our sense of fairness, often because we’re used to getting so little from our personal relationships. As a result, we can set unreasonably low or high expectations for how others should treat us. Specific types of unfair requests include asking someone to feel differently or change their preferences to suit ours, asking a person to act against their values, or requesting someone take responsibility for our emotional experience. Requests based in fairness include asking for behavior changes when someone’s behavior causes us harm or difficulty or asking for someone to meet us halfway when we’ve already put in some effort.

Our wounds can push us to ask for more than we’re willing to give to feel deserving or loveable. When we only make requests of others that we would gladly comply with ourselves, we open ourselves to connection-building humility that’s not available in our wound-based experience. If I would like for my partner to be more affectionate, I might ask myself if I’ve demonstrated a willingness to be more affectionate. If I plan to make a demand without having laid the groundwork with my own behavior, not only am I less likely to get what I want, but I’m likely to trigger resentment in my partner, who may feel I’m asking for more than I give.

For those with a victim soul wound, maintaining self-respect requires asking for only those things that we cannot reasonably do for ourselves. If I ask my friend to hand me a glass of water that’s clearly closer to me than it
is to her, I reinforce my own feelings of incompetence and put a strain on my relationship with her. Our wounds often want people to prove their love for us and push us to test relationships by making requests we’re better suited to meet ourselves. It may seem romantic to be saved from the dragon by the gallant knight in shining armor and as good as it feels to be rescued, the downside is that we strengthen our self-image as someone who needs rescuing. Rather than pulling out our hankies and fainting, perhaps we can sharpen our own swords in those situations.

Broken and shame wounds make us fearful of asking for help or change leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of feeling isolated and unsupported. To overcome these wounds, we must learn to soften our hearts in full view of our partners, families, and friends and risk having needs openly. Many folks with broken and shame wounds end up compromising their self-respect by waiting until they’re at the point of break down before making bids for change or help. If we’ve been smelling smoke for hours, but don’t call the fire department until we’re frantically dodging falling, flaming beams, not only did we miss an opportunity to get help before the situation got out of hand, but we failed to see that it’s possible to ask for help calmly and confidently.

When I’ve assessed that my request is fair, then I’m willing to give as much or more than I get. If I’ve identified a legitimate need for assistance, I must ask clearly. Obviously, some requests have more emotion tied up in them than others, making it harder to be vulnerable and straightforward. Planning for difficult requests is a key to success. Start with an unedited version of what you want to say ideally on paper to help with reflection. When you’ve purged the emotion-laden request, look through your words to find the specific behavior you want a person to change: what concrete thing do you want this person to do more or less of? If someone asked you to make this change, would you know how to make the request actionable? If not, then describe it more clearly; if so, then you’re ready to ask.

A final note about making requests is to check your defensiveness at the door. Soul wounds teach us the world is primed to tell us no, and as a result, we may go into requests in an overly passive way or with guns blazing. Neither way of communicating our needs is typically the best route. Assertive communication is built on a foundation of trust that we can express ourselves without dramatics and be heard. While our early experiences may have taught us that only the person who is bleeding profusely gets attention, taking a crisis-style or defensive stance to our requests decreases the likelihood our need will be met with goodwill and responsiveness.

What does your True Self want, and how are you going to ask for it?
Change Your MO

The last step on our change journey asks us to shift from considering what we do toward a more intentional how. Our wounds tell us we are what we do, that our primary source of love and acceptance is in what we can do or be for others. While efforts made in the service of True Self can result in some incredible achievements, hitching our worth wagon to outcomes denies the opportunity to be blissfully in process, living in a values-based way rather than in achievement-based desperation. We can define how we want to be by identifying the values that we most want to emulate in various areas of our lives, then choosing a course of action consistent with those values.

Making values-based choices means we stop making choices just to avoid pain or to feel pleasant. As we’ve learned, difficulty is an unavoidable part of life, and pleasure is fleeting, so we might as well commit ourselves to living in a meaningful way—one defined by values such as honesty, kindness, or adventure, if those resonate. Committing to values means we’re willing to weather the ups and downs inherent in life and act in ways that show the world and ourselves what we’re truly made of.

Our wounds convince us to make choices about how we dress, who we love, and how we work and play based on unfulfilled needs. It isn’t uncommon for us to make choices that reflect our parents’ values in an effort to gain the love and acceptance we crave from them. We might swing in the opposite direction, vowing to be completely unlike our parents, though this doesn’t necessarily connect us to True Self since “not my parents,” isn’t an actionable value.

The best indicator that we aren’t acting in our values is a sense of drudgery or apathy about our lives. If some area of your life feels particularly listless even when things are going objectively well, you may be acting in a values-inconsistent way. I really wanted to love camping—the sort of woman I thought I needed to be in order to attract a decent man would be willing to forego showers and other creature comforts for the sake of adventure. When I finally leaned into the reality that I detest camping, I simultaneously defused a wound-based belief about who I was supposed to be to deserve love and opened myself up to activities that were more values-consistent. I ended up trading camping and hiking groups for a martial arts group, which was one of the most rewarding and fulfilling parts of my life for many years. I learned that I wanted adventure and physicality in my life, just not in the Great Outdoors.

How do we uncover the values that mean the most to us? My favorite activity for deciding which values most resonate with us is the “what would Oprah do?” prompt. You can choose anyone you admire that may exemplify traits you wish you had. What exactly draws you to this person? Do you envy their take-charge attitude or wish you could be more carefree
like they are? Perhaps you admire their willingness to fail and keep trying. The aspects you respect in another person point directly to the values you may hold most dear, such as self-assurance, optimism, spontaneity, or perseverance. Once you have a handle on the values that matter, it becomes easier to make choices that are values-consistent.

To solidify your connection with your values, make the following list: Relationships (romantic, friends, family), career, community, wellbeing, personal growth, recreation, citizenship, spirituality. Think about the values you want to live by and write one action you can take in each realm in the service of your values. If you want to be about gratitude in your relationships, what would a grateful person do to strengthen a bond? If you want to live by the value of adventure, what would an adventurous person do to expand their recreational experiences? No one’s saying you have to go skydiving or base jumping to prove you’re adventurous, but there are likely experiences you’ve denied yourself due to fear that aren’t as scary as you might believe.

Another strategy for identifying values is to think of how you want to be eulogized. What kind of person do you want to be remembered as (e.g., kind, brave, committed)? While this may seem morbid, recognizing we don’t have all the time in the world can jumpstart our motivation to change. Buddhist monks and nuns spend a tremendous amount of time meditating on their own deaths as a path to enlightenment. As almost anyone who has had a near death experience will tell you, facing mortality can quickly strip away the unnecessary and allow what is important to become glaringly obvious. If you were at the end of your life, what sort of impact would you want to know you made on the people you loved or on the world? What choices or changes would you need to make now in order to live in the values you treasure the most?

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Our wounds make us believe we’re meaningless blips on a radar screen full of brighter, shining objects, but True Self knows we can change the world with our willingness to be our whole, best selves. Living by our values helps us remove the veils through which we see and allow ourselves to be seen by the world. By shifting our MO to be about our values, we heal our own sense of disempowered smallness and become beacons of hope and strength for others.
6 VICTIM TO WARRIOR

“How indeed could the myth of Cinderella not keep all its validity? Everything still encourages the young girl to expect fortune and happiness from some Prince Charming rather than to attempt by herself their difficult and uncertain conquest.” *The Second Sex* by Simone DeBeauvoir

We come into this world completely vulnerable, dependent on the care and kindness of our families of origin. It’s no small miracle that we’re able to survive the fragility of infancy and early childhood in the best of circumstances, let alone in those cases when our early caregivers let us down.

When we’re handed the painful circumstances of abuse, neglect, or major loss during our early development, this can manifest in the victim soul wound. Even experiences that don’t reach the clinical level of trauma can create a victim soul wound, such as having parents who don’t show love in our preferred way or who have vastly different personalities than we do. At the heart of the victim story is a fear of harm, abandonment, or death. Early experiences that compromise safety become internalized as beliefs that the world is a dark and scary place (which is reductive, but not untrue) and that we’re ill-equipped to manage that difficulty (which is patently false).

Rather than being guided to the truth of our resilience and inherent goodness, we have to pour energy into surviving rather than thriving. We feel helpless, small, and often learn that the best way to ensure safety is to become invisible. Sadly, we often become invisible even to ourselves, wandering as adults from one need-based relationship to the next,
constantly compromising our wants and needs to satisfy others to the point that we lose touch with our most basic preferences.

The plot line will be different based on our own personal experiences, but the basics are the same. The victim is disempowered to smallness. She’s learned the world is an unsafe place and she’s a helpless recipient of whatever crumbs she’s offered by others. She may feel the conflict of viewing herself as worthless while at the same time feeling her value isn’t recognized by others. She may vacillate between burying emotion and erupting in anger, depression, or anxiety.

The victim soul wound story is characterized by the following problematic beliefs:

- How I feel is wholly dependent upon what is happening to me.
- Emotion is the direct consequence of events that happen outside of me.
- My ability to tolerate emotion is limited.
- Negative emotions are harmful.
- I deserve better because of all I give to others.
- Love is earned and is only meaningful from outside sources.

When we get locked into a victim soul wound story, our work is to learn about the bravery of self-nurturance, the strength of vulnerability, and truth of our expansiveness. Victimhood is about smallness; truth is about recognizing our value in the face of our fears, stepping out of our smallness and into our true expansiveness. The soul work of the those with a victim wound is to offer compassion to the inner child that continues to live in fear, then stand firmly in her adulthood by owning her voice, holding firm and loving boundaries, and caring as much for herself as she does for others.

**Willow**

The divorce, not unlike the marriage, was wreaking havoc on Willow’s ability to function. She started most days with some mix of apathy and dread as she fought to continue parenting her adult son with severe depression, complete her work responsibilities in a fast-paced research institution, and make time to be with her older sister, who was recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It’s this chaotic combination of depression and anxiety that manifests within us, making us feel we’re going to come out of our skin—hot, manic energy with nowhere to go in a body that’s too worn out to care. Willow was watching as the brittle walls of her life were dealt blow after blow by the wrecking ball that had been the past year: divorce, her son’s suicide attempt, and her sister’s terminal cancer.

It didn’t matter which problem was demanding her attention, the feeling of powerlessness was always the same. Willow was carrying the
weight of her family’s happiness on her shoulders, blaming herself day in and out for her husband’s dissatisfaction, her son’s crippling depression, and even, to some extent, her sister’s illness, which she felt she should have been able to anticipate given her background in healthcare. All this discord was happening as she was scrambling to make ends meet financially by eliminating haircuts and trips to McDonald’s from the budget, while her ex took fancy vacations and blamed her (not her significantly reduced, post-divorce household income) for her struggles. She constantly felt victimized by her own life.

Willow had a relatively uneventful childhood by therapy standards. No physical or emotional abuse, no glaring instances of neglect, nothing that would immediately point to her present-day narrative of victimhood. Exploring Willow’s past, I saw nothing but rainbows and butterflies when she first started unpacking her family history. But soon, it became apparent that rainbows and butterflies were the problem. Her family had been so happy, there had been no room for any painful feelings, conflict, or discord, and when negative experiences naturally happened, the family’s implicit agreement was to put on a happy face and pretend everything was fine. Willow’s sense of victimhood stemmed from her family’s avoidance of pain. She learned she should stuff any painful emotion down, creating a pressure cooker effect; inevitably, all the internalized hurt, anger, sadness, and pain would boil over in debilitating depressive episodes starting in her college years. As an adult, whenever Willow experienced a painful emotion, she felt a sense of impending doom and panic, stemming from years of training that negative emotion is dangerous and shameful. The panic eventually congealed into hopelessness as Willow sank deeper into the dark reality of her seemingly unmanageable life.

We started working together when she was about to take the plunge and tell her husband she wanted to separate. There were a few initial sessions processing her ambivalence, which was largely driven by hopelessness. It wasn’t that she was unsure about whether she wanted to be with her husband anymore—the twenty-year relationship had been built on her tendency to bury emotion and had further taught her to subjugate her needs to the needs of her husband and son. The marriage had been a lesson in scarcity—there was never enough happiness to fill anyone up. She had poured herself out, and it had never been enough. Willow’s interactions with her husband were either cold and detached or raging power struggles. Despite her certainty that her marriage was beyond help, she couldn’t fathom that any change to her life would make her happier. Her victim story often whispered, “The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t,” and her world was surely full of devils.

Each situation Willow brought up in therapy seemed to bear a vast and heavy emotional load that didn’t fit the content. Once, she was
overwhelmed by her son’s seemingly disrespectful treatment of her sister. Her sister had just received her cancer diagnosis, and the prognosis was grim. Willow’s twenty-year-old son had just gotten out of the hospital himself after attempting to overdose on sleeping pills, and rather than spend time with his aunt during a visit, he isolated himself in his room and played video games. As Willow described the experience, I saw her body sink into the couch, her eyes set in the thousand-yard stare of hopelessness. Willow rated her hopelessness in that moment as a 9 out of 10, which she agreed seemed intense for the circumstances.

As we dug into the judgments that arose in her mind as her son made his gruff and unapologetic exit, we found that most of the emotional charge came from the thought, “Don’t show him you’re upset, he’ll try to kill himself again.” She admitted that the sense of needing to hide her feelings to preserve a loved one’s wellness felt very familiar, that she’d been doing that around her parents all her life. When she’d struggled with her own depression in college, she would make frequent trips home to visit, feeling completely empty by Sunday afternoon from the exertion of faking it. Chattering on about how great her classes were going and how many friends she was making, all while feeling she was being swallowed whole by darkness.

The natural consequence of pushing down feelings is they fester, grow, and eventually become an object of fear. What makes emotion so terrifying? Our physical bodies demonstrate fragility—we fall and scrape our knees, become ill, and feel time and age pulling us into less capable states of being. One fundamental error is in the assumption that our hearts are made of the same substance as our physical bodies. Our bodies participate in an ongoing conversation with our feeling minds, and the result is often confusing. When a wave of emotion rises, it sweeps the body along. Fear makes our hearts beat faster, disgust makes our jaws clench and our muscles recoil. Everything about our evolution tells us these physical changes are signs of a problem, illness, danger, or difficulty. So just as we would run screaming from a saber-toothed tiger, our primitive consciousness directs us to avoid what it sees as the source of physical discomfort: emotion. Every time we give into this urge to avoid emotion we unintentionally strengthen the belief that our survival depends on avoiding emotion with the same urgency we would avoid a hungry tiger.

The secondary consequence of avoiding negative emotion is an ongoing sense of smallness. Carl Jung wisely said, “That which we resist persists.” And it doesn’t just persist in its original form—feelings that we run from take on mammoth proportions, leaving us with an image of ourselves as small and weak in comparison. We set arbitrary quotas that reinforce the notion that we can only deal with so much—“If one more thing happens, I’m going to lose it.” The more we run from pain, the bigger
it becomes until we face it head on. The flip side of the avoidance coin is we also reinforce the notion that we’re incapable of handling whatever it is we’re resisting. I remember as a child trying to work up the nerve to slide down a fireman’s pole on the playground. Every time I’d approach the edge of the platform and countdown, “1, 2, 3!” my fear didn’t diminish the more I counted—it increased. The more we push a feeling away, the larger it becomes, and consequently, the less capable we feel of managing it effectively.

Many of us think we’re experts at addressing our feelings head on, and yet we still feel victimized by negative emotion. This tends to result from bad information about what it means to really process emotion. We equate ruminating on an issue with processing a difficult emotion. In reality, we do some of our best Olympic-qualifying sprinting away from emotion by talking ourselves to death about the circumstances that triggered it. We mistake thinking about feelings for feeling feelings. The only way over is through.

Willow was very familiar with thinking through her feelings. Thoroughly explaining pain, internalizing negative emotion, and becoming caught in the loop of replaying painful experiences over and over was her default process. When she finally took the terrifying plunge and asked her husband to move out, the space that had been filled with conflict was soon filled with racing, fearful thoughts that wouldn’t be quieted. She was narrating the fear and doubt, her constant companions in the days and weeks after her husband moved out, and she faced the reality of living on her own with a very depressed teenage son. I wanted Willow to connect with the raw feeling, to gain practice at sitting with her emotion without all the storytelling about who’s to blame, how awful everything is, and how it was pointless to want more from her life.

Willow was particularly annoyed with me by the third or fourth time I stopped her mid-sentence and asked her again to describe her emotion in her body.

“I feel like I can’t do this anymore, like I’d rather be in a hospital or rather just be dead. Like why can’t it be me that has cancer?” It was obvious her hopelessness felt deeply and unquestionably true—her tone was steeped equally in sadness and resignation, as if she had just read a devastating news headline aloud.

Despite her wholehearted belief that death was the only relief, I pressed on, “Tell me where that feeling shows up in your body.” I was insistent that we were going to make our way out of the story of this hopelessness and into the heart of the hurt. She eventually described the heavy, boundless darkness that would rise in her chest when her hopelessness was triggered. I asked her to put her hand where it hurt and to offer herself the sort of compassion she would offer to a small child in pain.
Her face softened, and the tears came more gently. There’s a purity about the sort of hurt that arises in the absence of a story. We create a wall between our hearts and our experiences when we talk ourselves to death about specifics rather than allowing the emotion to communicate to us physically and energetically. I saw the veil of her soul wound story lift the tiniest bit as she opened her eyes and took one of the first deep breaths of renewal I had seen in our five months of meeting.

Feelings are not the enemy. They’re useful expressions of knowledge and knowing that connect our True Selves to this physical world. We’ve been misled by our collective soul wound stories to believe emotions tell us the truth of the world. This is not so. Emotions tell us the truth of our inner world in reaction to the outer world. Anxiety, for example, doesn’t tell us that terrible things are going to happen—it tells us that, based on the conditions of the environment, we need comforting, more information, or assurance to manage those conditions effectively. When we’re caught up in a victim soul wound story, we see ourselves as fragile, and negative experiences, emotions, and judgments as weapons sent to wound us. We feel as victimized by our own feelings as we do by the world.

*How Willow Worked Toward True Self:*

Willow learned that feelings are to be felt; they are experiences to be had in the vast space of being. The victim wound teaches us we’re rowboats adrift on an endless, treacherous sea of emotion. In truth, we are the ocean, and emotions are the waves. They arise, some much bigger than others, but at no point does the presence of a wave threaten the existence of the ocean. By leaning into feelings, connecting with the present experience of emotion in the body, she learned her feelings weren’t arising to victimize her, but to communicate important messages about the need for change.

Her hopelessness was trying to alert her to the uselessness of her martyrdom; every time she sacrificed herself for her husband’s happiness, it seemed to backfire. Every time she compromised on her needs and wants to spare her son another disappointment, she felt her son become more ungrateful and dismissive. She’d been experiencing hopelessness as a truth rather than a signpost to change. Whenever hopelessness arose, rather than sitting with it compassionately, she let hopelessness become the narrator of her existence. Willow got lost in the story of hopelessness until she realized how to lean in. She decided to acknowledge feeling, be with it in her body, notice its story without taking the story and running, and offer the feeling kindness. From this more open place of acceptance, Willow was able to see that hopelessness was the persistent and patient messenger of the need for growth beyond her victim story.

By being present with the difficult feeling of hopelessness, Willow made room for accepting the fact that living based on the belief she was
small and helpless wasn’t working. No matter how long the story of victimhood had been playing out in her experience, staying a victim was no longer an option. Hopelessness showed her that the only options she had were giving up entirely or trying a new way of being, one that allowed her to prioritize her happiness, ask for what she wanted and needed, and teach others how to treat her by first treating herself well. Hopelessness was asking her to show up as a warrior.

It’s not uncommon for those who identify with the victim story to lose touch with even their most basic needs. When they come to therapy, they begin to realize that not only are they not eating and sleeping, but their cars need oil changes, they haven’t asked their boss for a raise in two years, they aren’t connected with their spiritual communities anymore, and they haven’t read a book since college even though that used to be their favorite way of taking care of themselves. Understandably, they can feel confused and overwhelmed about where to start.

Willow had to learn to take care of herself from the ground up, beginning with the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy: basic physical needs. She’d been so consumed with everyone else’s welfare for so long that she’d lost touch with basic needs like when to eat and sleep. As she became intentional in attending to her body’s needs, she gradually added higher level self-care activities, such as nurturing her friendships, biking, and running. Each choice to care for herself buffered her a little more against the gravitational pull of hopelessness. She didn’t immediately leap from feeling hopeless to hopeful; she was planting seeds of self-compassion that required time and nurturance to fully develop. By choosing her battles with her son, disengaging from power struggles with her ex-husband, and leaning into the anticipatory grief for her sister, she was connecting with the True Self, that core part of being that’s waiting to be revealed in the resolution of our past hurts. She continues to do the work of healing her soul wound and finding her voice. At our last check in, she was planning to run an Ironman race, which couldn’t be a better representation of her warrior spirit.

Every kindness we offer ourselves heals the aching soul wound, allowing the true you to shine through. The victim soul wound awaits compassion to reveal the warrior within.

Carlie

Not all alcoholic homes are the same, but the children that emerge from environments made toxic by addiction bear similar soul wounds. They see themselves as conscripted saviors, bound by obligation disguised as love, to keep their families from falling apart at the seams. “It’s like I’ve jumped in the water to save my mother from drowning, but she’s so terrified that she keeps pushing me under to save herself, and we both
drown.” Carlie’s mother was crippled by anxiety, a driving force of her alcoholism, with a deep need for validation that she sought from Carlie. Carlie’s soul wound story required she be the risk assessor, the protector, and the secret keeper in her relationships and that any energy that wasn’t in the service of protecting her mother from painful emotions was wasted and selfish.

Carlie became more and more of an emotional caretaker for her mother as she grew up. She developed a hyperawareness of her mother’s mood, able to register the subtillest changes in her mother’s footsteps or sighs as indicators of alcohol-fueled rage to come. She often reported feeling she was going to explode from all the uninvited emotional energy she picked up from those around her, her mother in particular. She had intense panic attacks characterized by the feeling every nerve was on high alert during periods of stress. She had the typical hyper-awareness of emotion that children of alcoholics develop to survive their chaotic environments, but she was empathic by nature to boot.

To tackle Carlie’s anxiety, we addressed setting good boundaries in her family relationships to create that delicate balance between values of belonging and safety. Her family relationships had taught her that being loved came at the expense of having a self—the safety we feel when we can give love from a space of individuality was foreign to her. She experienced love as being predicated on agreeing with and bending to the will of her mother. We explored the ways her negative self-talk, a manifestation of her victim soul wound, was tearing her down, not making her a better person.

All our work was built on a foundation of mindfulness practice, which helped Carlie develop that quiet space in her heart and mind to look compassionately at her wounds. The early work of creating a space for herself in her relationships and ultimately in her own heart, led us to a major source of strife: her career.

Soul wound stories tell reductive, untrue tales about who we are. While we incur these wounds in the context of relationships, healing can happen in other domains, such as career or community. We may be perplexed by ongoing barriers to advancement in our jobs, or we may be frustrated by groups where we seek belonging; all these experiences of adversity are likely pointing us back to a faulty, limited identity, predicated on a soul wound story.

When I started working with Carlie, she was in the long and arduous process of becoming an architect. Each step was beset with struggle. In school, the long hours were grueling, but even more draining was the loneliness. Despite her bright and engaging personality, she struggled to make connections, always feeling on the outside of the predominantly male cohort. The isolation continued as she encountered outright sexism in her first jobs after school. It became clear that her servant story was
manifesting as a powerful opponent in her career. Asked to get lunch and coffee for her male coworkers, weighed down by each “thank you, sweetheart,” she was doggedly determined to stay afloat in a field that seemed to be taking more from her than it was giving. She frequently felt devalued, taken advantage of, and overlooked because of the powerful intersection of the social and the personal. Social structures of sexism intersected with her personal experiences of being the emotional custodian of her family. She began to recognize the feelings and expectations she encountered at work as the same ones she experienced growing up with her mother.

Carlie was at a crossroads. She’d invested an incredible amount of time, effort, and money into becoming an architect, but it seemed every step she took was booby trapped to derail her completely. What was the message? Should she rethink her career path? Was it worth continuing in a field fraught with sexism and bureaucratic nonsense when her end goal was still hazy? Then she had a panic-inducing experience at one of her exams. She knew the exam was a particularly difficult one, having failed it once before, but she was also aware that she had to finish as quickly as possible, so she could go be with her husband, who was having an invasive back surgery that afternoon. She was early, as usual, and when the start time approached, the proctor told her the computers weren’t working and the test would be delayed. Thirty minutes passed with no progress. The proctor told her she would automatically fail the test if she left, and a wave of panic swept over her, a familiar sensation of drowning, weighed down by emotion that didn’t even feel like her own.

Whenever we have experiences in our daily lives that bring up powerful and familiar feelings, like this situation did for Carlie, we’re being called to witness our soul wounds as compassionate observers. We typically engage with these experiences as the protagonist, strengthening the hold our soul wound stories have on us with our internal monologue and the energetic power of nonacceptance. Carlie had been used to experiencing the narrative of catastrophe as if it were an ongoing reality. Her mind would flood with the words “terrible, can’t handle this, no no no!,” all of which were the song of her soul wound keeping her separate from the quiet truth of her resilience. Present difficulties arise with plot lines similar to those of our earliest hurts for us to step into our True Selves and offer those hurts the nurturance they need.

Carlie had become accustomed to feeling attacked when in a moment of need. Countless experiences of seeking comfort from her mother only to be turned away or minimized had coalesced in the soul wound story that insisted she was meant to give, but never receive. In this moment of crisis attempting to take her exam, she was being called to show up to her past hurt and be the hero she’d needed. The warrior that is the True Self has the
SOUL WOUNDS

capacity to be compassionate and loving; she recognizes the power of her inherent okay-ness, which cannot be shaken by circumstance. When we’re able to be kind, patient, and understanding with ourselves in times when we would typically fall back into our wounded, critical self-judgment, we become the creators of our lives rather than the victims of it.

Carlie had been practicing being more loving toward herself, primarily by ditching her negative self-talk around being “crazy” or “too much,” narratives that would arise whenever her anxiety was triggered intensely. She did plenty of self-care around her negative testing experience, and in that process, began having powerful, vivid memories of her childhood. She shared one memory in a session from a time when she was five or six. From her room, she heard her parents yelling at each other. She ventured out of her room tentatively in time to hear her mother say, “I should just kill myself.” The terror of that moment came back to her in the space of memory as she felt the gut-twisting fear that only children can really experience. When our parents are at risk, we’re ripped from the shelter of an otherwise safe world and forced to stare into the abyss of mortality, untethered. Most children will encounter the fear in innocuous situations, when mom or dad are late to pick them up from school, for example. For kids from alcoholic or abusive homes, the feeling is ever present, as is the knowledge that the people they love aren’t dependable and that losing a parent can become a devastating reality.

Her parents had been yelling, throwing whatever they could get their hands on at each other, and the destruction was visible as she peeked around the corner, terrified she was going to see her mother in the process of killing herself.

“Did you become an architect so you could build yourself a safe space?” I asked. There, in the peaceful office, in such stark contrast to the minefield of her memory, she cried for the child who had been fearful for her mother’s life time and again; she cried for the child who had been called on as a source of nurturance and soothing when she should have been the recipient. Carlie had been fighting to create a career that would offer security, the home she never had. Her soul wound self believed she was a servant destined to provide love, but never to receive it. As she honored this story from a place of compassion, she opened herself more and more to the safety she’d created in her healthy and loving relationship with her husband and in the kind and understanding relationship she was developing with herself. She realized that she’d been fighting for a career in architecture in a desperate quest for things she already had infinite amounts of: love and safety.

Carlie was absolutely meant to be an architect, but not one who was driven to succeed by fear. She’d spent so many years playing it safe by taking corporate jobs to build her resumé, but the more she reconnected
with her True Self through boundary setting and self-compassion, the more she realized she was built for risk and boldness. In our work together, we identified the pattern of servitude and worked to identify situations in which she could step out of her servant role and into her power. She began testing her voice, saying “no” to demeaning requests, and acting in the service of her True Self. Every boundary she set, every double standard she called out, connected her more firmly to her truth. Beginning with low risk situations to build her confidence, Carlie eventually felt so comfortable with her voice and so connected to her intuition that she left a particularly devaluing position to make the leap she had always dreamed of: starting her own business. Carlie soon began the process of building her own firm, creating the space she needed to nurture her creative and daring spirit. She realized the difficulties she’d been up against in her career and in her family relationships had been urging her to step into her power, not to martyr herself begging for scraps of love and success.

How Carlie Worked Toward True Self:

We often don’t realize how dismissive we’ve been of our hurts until we say them out loud. The power of therapy largely resides in the healing process of being seen. For Carlie, revisiting painful episodes from her family history helped her to reconnect with loss, fear, and anger as a compassionate observer. Where she’d previously dismissed her pain, told herself that things could have been worse, she found a space in therapy to be real about the wounds she suffered as a small child.

Most of us expect therapy to involve some measure of blaming our parents for how screwed up we are. The difference between a self-indulgent gripe session and meaningful soul wound work is all about intention. Complaining is about finger pointing; it’s externally focused. Healing remembrance goes within and allows us to hold our memories and unacknowledged emotion in a loving and non-judgmental way. It’s not uncommon for soul wound work to result not only in a sense of compassion for ourselves, but for those who hurt us as well.

Carlie could have spent years parsing through all the experiences with her family that taught her to stay small and serve, but that wasn’t necessary to resolve her wounds. Just as unattended injuries can fester, healing work can spread beyond its point of origin. Whenever Carlie would recount a painful experience from her adult life, I would ask her if the feeling or belief that arose around it was familiar. If she felt voiceless or powerless, where did she learn that? If she felt she was overreacting or being crazy, when had she first started to evaluate her feelings in this way? These questions led us back to key points in her soul wound story and showed us where the light of kindness and acceptance needed to be pointed. In hearing about how her father had once shot her mother with a BB gun in a drunken rage when she
was six, I was able to reflect my own sense of horror and sadness, which helped her look back on her six-year-old self with love and righteous, protective anger. Each time she remembered a painful memory, compassion arose more quickly and powerfully within Carlie. The compassionate, loving voice she was cultivating for her inner child started to arise in place of the critical voice that seemed to narrate her adult life.

The biggest challenge for Carlie was translating her new fullness into a new way of being in a relationship with her family. The value she placed on family made it difficult to imagine cutting them off completely, but their unhealthy behaviors were so ingrained that it was hard to imagine being in a healthy relationship with them. Carlie realized that a driving force in her continued smallness was guilt; to draw better boundaries, she would have to reassess her understanding of guilt.

In enmeshed, alcoholic families such as Carlie’s, guilt is a tool of connection. Carlie continued to engage with her mother as a servant to her mother’s anxiety and alcoholism largely to avoid feeling guilty. Her mother would blame Carlie for her distress if Carlie failed to comply with demands to be an emotional caregiver. In therapy, Carlie and I explored guilt as an emotion that can be justified or unjustified. Unjustified guilt arises when we are trained to take responsibility for things outside of our control such as other people’s feelings or problems. Carlie re-examined her guilt-driven caretaking behaviors and found that in most instances, she was acting on guilt that wasn’t justified. She hadn’t done anything wrong in choosing to go to a college several hours from her mother rather than one in her hometown. She hadn’t committed any crime by prioritizing her relationship with her husband over spending every weekend with her mother. And yet, Carlie had learned to interpret her mother’s hurt silence in reaction to her choices as evidence of wrongdoing, thus staying trapped in her servant role.

As Carlie began to check out her guilt before buying it wholesale, she became more adept at saying “no” when she wanted to and at saying “yes” with an open heart. She stopped acting as the sole custodian of many of her relationships, not just with family, and found this opened up energy to pursue activities and friendships that gave back to her. Carlie gave herself permission to not answer the phone every time her mother called and realized she could occasionally find some kernel of connection to her mother; the space that had been inhabited by guilt was now available for compassion.

Carlie still has to grieve for the loving mother she’ll never have, but she’s no longer a conscripted soldier in the battle for her mother’s wellness. She’ll continue to work toward finding peace and acceptance around how little her family has to offer by way of connection and nurturance. But the more Carlie has worked to connect with her True Self, the more she’s demonstrated the truth of abundance; where her servant story saw scarcity,
Carlie now sees herself as an infinite source of love and her life as an infinite source of possibility.

**Meditation on Keeping a Soft Heart**

We learn to fear our emotions, and to view fear as a weakness. As a result, we harden ourselves to painful emotions so we don’t have to feel weak or vulnerable. We must dismantle our incorrect belief about hardness being strength and vulnerability being weak by practicing going to the soft spots of our hurts. Meditation is a critical tool for healing the wounded story of hardness.

Meditation is the practice of knowing the mind. By being still, attentive to the breath, and taking a non-judgmental approach to whatever craziness might arise in our minds, we create an opportunity to step out of the movie and into the theater. Becoming a compassionate observer allows us space to make different choices such as the choice to be with painful feelings (be soft) or to close down (be hard).

You may want to set a timer for ten or fifteen minutes. Sit in a comfortable position, relaxed, but alert, and take a deep breath in through the nose, exhaling through the mouth. Notice your breath for a few cycles, allowing the breath to rise and fall without exerting any control over the process.

Now read the following statements out loud to yourself. If you feel resistance to any particular one, reread that statement. Repeat this 3-5 times:

*My emotions are messengers, here to help. I do not have to fear my feelings. I choose to be present with an open heart.*

Notice the places where you feel tension and tightness, maybe the chest, neck, face. Breathe into those spaces and repeat the phrase that most resonated with you, inviting softness and peace into those places of hardness and resistance. When the timer goes off, take a moment and thank yourself for your willingness to be present for your pain. Know that stillness is the space in which healing arises.
7 BROKEN TO WHOLE

“You see this goblet? For me, this glass is already broken. I enjoy it; I drink out of it. But when I put this glass on a shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’” Achaan Chaa

We learn to see ourselves as broken when we interpret early painful experiences as evidence that there is something wrong with us. It may be pain inflicted on us or witnessed from afar. Emotionally sensitive or empathic people are the most likely types to incur the broken soul wound because of experiences that might have minimal impact on less sensitive types. As emotional sponges, empaths are more likely to pick up on and internalize the emotional experiences around them—if they’re surrounded by struggle, their systems can get overloaded, resulting in the nagging sense that they’re damaged in some way.

Situations that can generate a broken soul wound include being judged and criticized for our preferences, goal-directed behaviors, and feelings. If aspects of our experience as basic as our likes and dislikes are made fun of or criticized, we quickly begin to assume there must be something wrong with us. When we try to learn new things and test out new skills, only to be met with all the ways we could have done it better, we develop a deep mistrust of our competence. Early experiences of emotion can be incredibly trying and even frightening for young children—when caregivers punish, minimize, or deny our feelings, we lose faith in our emotional compass. As a result, we seek external proof of our worth and abilities and become less connected to our intuitive, truest self.
The broken self is characterized by the following problematic beliefs:

- My flaws are evidence of there being something deeply wrong with me.
- My experiences have damaged me in irreparable ways.
- I have to work harder to earn love than others.
- I do not deserve an abundant life.
- I have to settle for relationships with people who will tolerate me.
- Bad things happen to me because I’m crazy/damaged/messed up/etc.
- I have to be perfect to get what I want.

Resolving the hurts that leave us feeling broken require that we actively participate in our wholeness by reorienting to our negative self-talk, shifting our expectations in our relationships, and compassionately embracing flaws. We begin saying no to our perfectionistic tendencies and as a direct result learn to see ourselves as worthy of love and happiness. The less we seek proof of our value in relationships, work, and other external circumstances, the more tuned in we become to the wellspring of joy available within.

**Dara**

Dara is a proverbial “old soul” in a young body. I would often lose sight of her youth in our sessions when hit with the wisdom of her words. Her mother’s life had become smaller and smaller over the years due to anxiety; she was unable to drive on her own and turned to Dara for emotional and daily living support. Dara had an adversarial relationship with her father, a recovering alcoholic who was often harsh and critical. Her home was not devoid of love, but the style of support she received from her parents was often mismatched with her needs, resulting in Dara’s overcompensation by growing up too fast.

Dara loved learning and had an expansive view of the world from an early age. She was aware of social injustice and felt a deep empathy, not only for those she loved, but also for the general suffering of the world. It was as if her soul had been en route to some well-meaning, progressive middle-class family, where energy could be poured into developing her abilities at cello and debate rather than into surviving paycheck to paycheck, but it had instead fallen off the train in a small, conservative Georgia coastal town. While her True Self seemed wildly out of place in her family, her wounded self had done the work of making sense of the dissonance by weaving a narrative of brokenness. The ill fit she felt in her family and her community became evidence not of her soul’s unique placement, but of her inability to belong anywhere.

Dara moved very quickly through many layers of her soul wound story, nimbly diving straight to the source of her sense of brokenness: the
many rejections she received from her father. She unpacked patterns in relationships where she became attracted to people who weren’t available, made herself vulnerable, and experienced rejection that ultimately served to reinforce her sense she was broken. She was so convinced she was damaged in irreparable ways, she never sought medical treatment for the clinical depression she’d been diagnosed with by multiple therapists. Despite repeated assurance her feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness were due in part to an organic depression, feeling bad was such an ingrained part of her daily life she felt it was pointless to attempt medical intervention to make it better. The more she explored her wound-based beliefs, the more willing she became to try medicating her depression, which resulted in profound changes in her energy level and mood.

Dara was worried about patterns. “Am I just doing the same thing over and over again?” Falling for unavailable people was the pattern in question, and it was a justifiable thread upon which to tug. She’s so young, though, that the idea of a pattern in romance feels a little absurd. But then you look in her eyes and hear the incredible insights coming out of her mouth, and any doubt that she’s experienced enough to know a pattern when she feels one falls away.

She and her boyfriend had broken up, but not really. They were navigating that difficult terrain between what we are as a couple and what we are as individuals, seeking the physical comforts of romantic intimacy even though the foundation for sustainable connection was lacking. She was describing a recent conversation with him that sounded like multiple other conversations she had brought to sessions. He was pulling away by not honoring commitments, being difficult to get on the phone, all the hallmarks of someone who’s meant to teach us about our worth. She was trying to convince him he could safely open himself to her love, that she wasn’t too dependent or weak, and that she wanted him to know more than anything what it felt to be loved.

“Do you feel like you’re making a hard sale on a cold call for why he should want to be with you?”

She laughed, “Yeah, a little.”

When we feel like we have to convince people we have something to offer in order for them to bother loving us, we strengthen the story of our brokenness. We see our less than-ness reflected back to us in a partner’s ambivalence or coldness and either, we buy into it and overcompensate by being more accommodating, or we start to argue with this limited way of being perceived. The truly magical thing about convincing someone we’re wonderful just the way we are is we might just start to believe it.

Negative emotions can color the filter, causing us to experience events, people, and situations as being fundamentally bad, something we can call emotional reasoning. We don’t know how to separate what’s happening
from how we feel about what’s happening. It’s a strange paradox to be fearful of feelings, so uncomfortable being present with them while allowing them to be the primary lens through which we experience our lives. So, if emotion isn’t what defines reality, what does? If how I feel about life isn’t essentially true, what is real? Love and connection.

We become unhappy when our stories develop in the direction of isolation. When we avoid connection in order to avoid the inevitable pain that comes with human relating, we cut ourselves off from our greatest resource for healing and wellness—our capacity to care for each other.

Dara got in touch with the healing power of connection when her father became ill. Being from a small town and of a mind and generation that didn’t live and die by WebMD, he shrugged off symptoms for several months. His decline was rapid and startling for his twenty-year-old daughter to watch. We’d worked intensely on identifying the ways her childhood interactions with her father had manifested in a storied self that was broken. Her relationships were always unequal, and she often felt burnt out, driven to withdrawal by oppressive and needy friends. These difficulties pointed to her wound-based narrative that told her worth and love were earned through tolerating poor treatment and tending to those in need. It had almost become a joke when we would uncover patterns of relating and familiar themes in self-talk—“Oh, that’s because of dad.”

He became confused, struggling with short-term memory within weeks of his positive biopsy. Dara was gifted with the wisdom to see everything that had come before with her dad didn’t require confrontation; her True Self knew that love and compassion were a quicker path to healing and resolution than argument. She knew she wanted to be present with him and care for him as best she could, and her True Self was ready to step up and see that love is always bigger than anger. When we begin to see how expansive we are, there’s less need to agonize over resolving every hurt. Our betrayals and disappointments become clouds passing in the endless sky of self.

When Dara’s father passed, she woke up at five in the morning and knew. He was gone. Her sadness rose up in her chest, but along with it came a type of peace; she knew he was no longer in pain and her heart could rejoice in that. She also knew she wouldn’t agonize over their struggles to stay connected to each other through the years. What had become obvious to her in those last few weeks with her father was that all their missteps had been taken toward one another. The work she’d done to resolve her sense of being broken at the hands of her parents had opened her to seeing her father as a person muddling through just like the rest of us and equally deserving of compassion.

Dara’s broken story taught her love is a scarce resource reserved for those who work for it. Love was a thing that was out in the world to be
earned, not a fundamental aspect of her being. Her father’s death and her willingness to leave a dysfunctional relationship showed her the truth of abundance. She’d been clinging to ways of being that served to reinforce her story rather than her being. Scarcity tells us to stick with what we have because there may not be anything better waiting, no matter how limiting or painful our current situation. Abundance asks that we let go of the fear that there’s not enough and step out on faith that there’s more than enough to go around. The key is to find the skillful way of being in abundance without abundance being co-opted by the storied self. We can feel something true being distorted by the storied self when we tow the party line no matter the nuances of a situation. Recognizing we’re in a relationship that depletes us and keeps us feeling small, asks for leaning into the unknown with faith in abundance. Not having enough money to pay the rent asks that we be strategic and planful, not put our last hundred bucks on red at the craps table. This is a distortion of the principle of abundance.

We walk a line on flat land very differently than we would walk that same line on the edge of a cliff. We’ve been taught that, emotionally, we’re cliff walking—we cling desperately to the side, to what we know and often mistakenly call “comfortable,” even though we know how to walk the line without falling. We lose perspective when we shut down to our pain. We forget we know how to walk and lose sight of the beauty around us in the service of our clinging.

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Emotions are useful tools for processing information. They’re necessary for survival. Just as we have a wounded self and a True Self, emotions have a similar dichotomy of apparent purpose and need. Emotions generate stories consistent with themselves while also carrying a message about what is needed to skillfully move through the emotion.

Emotions bear marks of being a more primitive structure in consciousness. They don’t ask directly for their needs, though the gap between the story and need can be narrowed the more we delve into our True Selves. It’s like an ongoing game of charades. Anxiety, for example, shows up flapping its arms to get us to guess that the plane is going down; meanwhile, what it really wants us to know is we need to reconnect to a sense of safety. Every step we take into our True Selves allows us to be more discerning of the actual need an emotion is pointing toward without getting caught up in the theatrics of the emotion’s story. We must stop getting locked into the story of every feeling. Emotions don’t tell us the truth because they don’t deal in truth. They tell us about a small piece of each experience. But these feelings, arising from our primal survival needs, pack a potent energetic punch, are easily triggered, and are even more easily reinforced by our behavior. Emotions are the driving force behind the
Buddhist principle of *shenpa* or craving which is not coincidentally our greatest source of suffering.

We have to make room for emotions, but not so much room that we mistake feeling for being. We have a True Self that’s bigger than any emotion we could feel, but we stay stuck in identifying with our emotional minds. Eckhart Tolle says he woke up when questioned who it was that felt so depressed. That question allowed him to connect to his True Self, rather than continue to cram his being into the always-too-small box of whatever feeling he was having.

That “coming out of your skin” feeling is trying to tell you you’re too big for whatever feeling or situation you’re allowing yourself to be minimized by. If you went to a store and tried on pants that were three sizes too small, you’d probably take them off sooner than you would lay on the floor, pulling and stretching, contorting and turning yourself blue in the face trying to get into them. So why do we stuff our whole selves into small feelings? Our wound-based narratives tell us that we *are* our feelings.

**How Dara Connected to True Self:**

Dara would often come to counseling smiling, her youthful voice and bright, funky clothes a convincing mask for the aching sadness that was often hidden even from her. “Just another transformative week!” she’d answer when I’d ask what she wanted to work on in her session. Dara was an expert at recognizing the patterns of her life and truly had transformative experiences in record quantities between sessions. Though she registered the intellectual aspects of the major changes and interactions that were popping up daily, she often felt disconnected from the emotion of those experiences.

When Dara’s father passed away, she knew. She awoke at the exact time that she would later learn he’d died, with the clear knowledge that he was gone. The awareness arose, but the grief would not. She knew she was sad, but she couldn’t seem to access the tears—except in her dreams. As the days turned to weeks, she began to have more vivid dreams of her father—some were happy dreams of reconnection, others were terrifying scenes of his death and her powerlessness to save him. In each dream, she was able to open herself to the incredible sadness, feeling her dream body wracked with sobs and, eventually, relief. But that relief wouldn’t seem to come to her in waking life.

“I know I need to cry today,” she offered when I pointed out that her cheerful demeanor didn’t match the gut-wrenching dream she’d just shared about seeing her father be shot.

“Let’s see if we can get at that sadness.”

Ever the willing participant, she obediently closed her eyes and settled into the couch as I led her through a heart opening meditation. Though
brief, and fairly simple, heart opening meditations can connect us to deep wells of emotion that we’ve been striving to keep contained and separate. It’s as if our hearts are eagerly waiting for an invitation to pour forth their truth, and with minimal effort, we break through the flimsy facade of hardness and reason to the tender heart beneath. I asked Dara to breathe into the space around her heart that she was holding onto so tightly, to connect with openness and safety, and soon, the tears came. With a few gentle reminders that she didn’t need to get caught up in judgments or assessments of her pain, she continued to sit bravely and compassionately with at least some of the grief she’d been pushing down.

The freedom that comes with being willing to sit with our broken hearts is immeasurable. Freedom from fear that we’ll start crying and never stop; freedom from judgment that only weak people allow space for sadness; and freedom from the need to thwart any and all negative emotion before it develops. Dara learned to allow her whole self to show up in her experience, strengthening her openness and self-compassion each time she checked in with her heart.

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Many of us will not have soul wounds arising from horrific experiences, and as a result, we may have to dig deeper to discover the situations that contributed to our soul wound stories. I call these “soul wound papercuts,” minimal when taken alone, but damaging when you keep getting cut in the same place over and over. A primary barrier to uncovering soul wound papercuts is comparison. When many of our friends and relatives have endured sexual assault, domestic violence, major disabilities, and losses, our tendency can be to minimize any pain that doesn’t seem to have front page significance. The wound that goes untended festers until it’s noticed.

Dara’s broken story had largely arisen through negative experiences with her father, but she’d written off her experiences as relatively mild compared to the neglectful, drug addicted families her friends grew up in. She didn’t realize the significance of her father’s dismissiveness and criticism until she ended up in a particularly intense romantic relationship. As she became more invested in the partnership, she noticed her partner would send her mixed messages that became increasingly hurtful. In one instance, he would complain she wasn’t attentive enough, and a week later would need to take a break because he was feeling smothered by the attention he’d just asked for. Emotional whiplash became a constant companion.

When exploring Dara’s experience with these conflicting messages, she realized she’d felt caught in a similar push-pull dynamic with her father. He would accuse her of being distant for not spending time with him then
would ignore or criticize her when she did try to see him. The connection between her current relationship and her early experiences with her father was like turning a flood light onto her soul wound. She began to remember times when she would reluctantly turn to him for comfort when her stepfather was being harsh or cruel and would be met with blame for staying in her mother’s house rather than with him. She remembered other times when he would call her “stupid” or “lazy” often as a rebuttal to any opinions she expressed that he didn’t share. These painful rejections and dismissals became a story of how she couldn’t trust her own judgment, couldn’t ask for help because she was too bothersome, and wasn’t worth the time and energy it took to be compassionate. It was no wonder she found herself in a romantic relationship with someone who projected all his insecurities and confusion onto Dara. Her relationship was urging her to listen to the voice she’d become so distrusting of—her own.

As Dara opened her heart more to the feelings that were pushing to the surface only in dreams, she began to feel more confident in her evaluation of her relationship behaviors. She began trusting her choices and pushed back when her boyfriend insisted she was being clingy or distant. While she was capable of hearing her partner’s request for change without immediately becoming defensive, she began recognizing his criticisms as unjustified manifestations of his own hurt and confusion rather than direct communication about his legitimate needs. Within a few months, they broke up, and while Dara had to sit with the heartbreak, she was surprised to notice another feeling arise along with the hurt: freedom.

Our parents are our earliest teachers of how we see ourselves, how we understand love, and they help us set expectations for how others should treat us. When parents unwittingly teach us our feelings are silly or annoying, our opinions are naive and foolish, or that we owe them unwavering attention and sweetness, we’re very likely to expect the same treatment from our adult relationships. So, no, dating someone like your father doesn’t mean you’re secretly attracted to your father a la Freud’s Oedipal and Medea complexes, but it could mean that someone in your early days convinced you that you weren’t entitled to disagreement, emotional needs, or a separate personhood. Dating someone who reminds us of an early caregiver is a great gift of healing, as it can bring into awareness hurts we didn’t realize we’d been carrying. When we stand up for ourselves in adulthood against the same reductive, demanding behavior we experienced as children, we’re standing up for the little girls we once were, small and afraid.

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Lastly, Dara began realizing through her mindfulness practice that she held a lot of seemingly insignificant beliefs about herself that were just flat out false. We chipped away at the core narrative, which told her she was crazy and broken, by connecting the dots with her early experiences with her father and building compassion for the inner child that still yearned for acceptance and love from him. We frequently used meditation in session to get at emotion that was trying to remain hidden as well as to shine light on some of the processes that maintained her broken belief through her present-day choices and behaviors. An unintended side effect of her new meta perspective on her thoughts was a recognition that she’d constructed some rigid notions about who and how she was.

In one session, we’d been discussing self-care as a means of building compassion for herself, and she indicated she’d been focusing on improving her sleep and allowing herself to rest when needed, rather than push through the physical discomfort of fatigue to meet deadlines she’d imposed on herself.

“I had been telling myself that I shouldn’t take a nap because I nap all the time, but when I checked that out, I realized that I couldn’t legitimately remember the last time I took a nap!”

We began to uncover various other beliefs such as “I cry all the time” or “I always tell my friends about my problems,” that turned out to be, at best, extreme exaggerations and at worst, complete falsehoods. Dara’s inaccurate assessments of her behavior bred a resistance to acting on self-care urges. Rather than allow herself to express sadness or frustration by crying, she’d buy into her wounded assessment of herself as a crybaby and stuff her emotion down instead. When she longed for connection and validation from friends, she’d withdraw rather than reach out, believing her wound-based narrative that she was a constant burden. Her unmet needs perpetuated her pain, which further reinforced her experience of herself as broken.

As we pointed out more of these beliefs, she became more able to act in opposition to them—allowing emotion to rise and fall away and sharing more of her difficulties with friends who genuinely wanted to be supportive. Each action she took from a place of worth and wholeness further reinforced her connection to True Self and helped her heal the wounds from her relationship with her father.
Abigail

Abigail was staggering out of a cave, her eyes unused to the harsh light of day. Her seven-year marriage to a narcissist reached a tipping point when the violence she thought had been contained within her relationship with her husband spilled over to her five-year-old son. Her husband had grabbed him by the shoulders and shaken him, enraged the young boy hadn’t brushed his teeth by himself. After a decade of paralysis and numbing herself to the pain of daily degradation, coldness, and smallness, Abigail didn’t hesitate. She immediately got a restraining order and had him removed from the house, putting the wheels of separation in motion.

Instead of getting easier after the separation, life became a different kind of hard. Abigail continued to find herself shackled by the same controlling behavior she’d lived for years. Her ex jockeyed for more time with the kids, more control over their medical care, and was resistant to any attempts to compromise. On top of that, her son began acting out, angry their family was falling apart and placing the blame on Abigail.

She fell headlong into a familiar hopelessness. When had she ever been happy? How could she have been so foolish to think the path to fulfillment and maybe even love was available to her? She had always been too much and, as a result, not enough. Her big voice and big feelings had drawn criticism and rejection. Her memories were full of people leaning back in their seats in reaction to her and this had turned into her underlying narrative of brokenness, one that would drive her to seek her worth in relationships that turned out to be toxic and damaging.

It was hard to feel that she’d made the right choice by leaving when she still felt trapped by her ex-husband’s financial and custodial power. Each interaction with her ex stirred up her soul wound story. Maybe she really was as crazy and broken as he insisted. As is so often the case, the disparity between her actual experience and her ex’s interpretation of events reinforced her festering self-doubt. She doubted herself to the point of wondering if she’d imagined years of physical and emotional abuse. But she couldn’t deny the marks on her son.

We started our therapeutic work by uncovering the ways she was forfeiting her power in the service of her sense of brokenness. Every time she gave in to a demand from her ex in order to avoid his anger, she was inadvertently strengthening her soul wound story that she was powerless and fragile. As she set more boundaries, she began to connect with strength and anger. We often uncover rage when we’ve been living in a story of powerlessness. Abigail had to learn to stay present with her anger and communicate assertively so as not to undermine her self-respect by responding aggressively or retreating into passivity. While working on making empowered choices, she was also moving closer to natural points of resolution, such as mediation meetings, court dates, and the eventual
signing of the divorce decree, all of which served to help her close the painful chapter of her life that connected her so strongly to her abusive ex.

Abigail was almost unrecognizable after a year. She’d reconnected with her creative and funky sense of style, after years of feeling too unattractive to bother with her appearance. She was spending more time with friends and was working out regularly. She no longer had the pained look of someone held in a constant state of wincing, but rather exuded a growing light of confidence and even playful mischief. She was tentatively starting to embrace her formerly too big laugh and too big feelings as being just right. She dared to long for connection and risk making herself vulnerable in order to experience the love that had been so lacking in her marriage.

After a year of climbing out of the hole of her marriage, Abigail met someone and felt an instant connection. She rediscovered her capacity to feel passion in the absence of violence and shame. Just as she was starting to lean into the possibility that she could love again, she found out her new partner had rekindled a relationship with an ex while continuing to be intimate with her. Abigail was thrown into despair. She was put back in touch with the vulnerability of trust and the deep pain that arises when that trust is broken. Her soul wound story showed up to convert the pain of betrayal and loss to the fuel for its narrative—that she is worthless.

She loves deeply in a way she characterizes as desperate, her heart a bottomless pit aching with longing. This aching connects back to early life experiences that taught her to settle in her relationships. She learned to look to the subtext of people’s behavior for proof that they cared in the absence of clear, demonstrable evidence such as obvious kindness and commitment. Frequent moves to new towns as a child left her in a constant state of feeling like an outsider, she was abused for years in her marriage—these wounding experiences and many others became embedded in her soul wound story as evidence that she wasn’t deserving of kindness and loving connection. In addition to seeing herself as unfit to be loved, she had also reshaped her definition of love to fit her painful reality.

“Love is enslavement,” she said when processing the deep disappointment she felt when her romantic partner had failed to follow through on grand promises of leaving his current girlfriend and starting anew with Abigail. Yet, she craved the wholeness she imagined came from intimate partnership and nowhere else. She was trapped in ambivalence about her own value and the value of love all while being entangled in a relationship that was essentially an emotional slot machine. Hours spent putting in quarters and pulling the handle resulting in payoff once every thousand attempts—it doesn’t make logical sense, but for our neural reward centers, it’s the most addictive form of reinforcement. How was Abigail going to get off the rollercoaster of this relationship, and more importantly,
why was she on it in the first place? How much work was she going to have to do on herself to feel healthy?

Most of our sessions opened with her saying, “You’re going to think I’m a terrible, crazy person,” or “awful parent,” or some other deplorable creature.

“I have a pretty high threshold for what I consider to be crazy but go ahead.”

She’d had another intimate encounter with the unavailable lover and was beating herself up for continuing to wish, hope, and pray for their dalliances to be an indicator of his feelings for her, and, subsequently evidence of her worthiness to be loved. I grabbed my trusty whiteboard and started writing covertly, listing all the terrible judgments she was hurling at herself.

Pathetic.
Stupid.
Crazy.
Failure.

I stopped her and turned the board around. “These are all the things you’ve called yourself so far, and you’ve literally been here for three minutes.”

It was one of the rare pauses I’ve experienced in session with her. Her quick mind and penchant for verbalizing her emotions and experience filled each hour to the brim with incredibly rich content. But in this moment, she was still. I saw the light of empathy cross her face as she took in the degree of meanness she’d been inflicting on herself.

“You’re going to be stuck in this unsatisfying relationship, begging for crumbs, until you learn the lesson it’s been sent to teach you.” For as much as she had to learn that she was not the awful list of adjectives on the whiteboard, she also had to see that her worth was not going to be shown to her by someone or something out in the world. Her worth would remain invisible to her until she shined the light of her own awareness on it.

“You’re waiting for him to teach you about your worth—for him to care enough to change his behavior and be the nurturing and present partner you want. But how are you going to open yourself to love when you’re this mean to yourself?”

“He can’t possibly not care about me and say the kind of things he says, right?” Abigail simultaneously insisted and offered as a question, seemingly waiting for me to tell her how stupid she was being.

“You’re asking the wrong question. You’re right, he may very well care deeply for you, and ultimately, his feelings or lack thereof are not resulting in him being present for you.”

Her friends are telling her he’s just using her, that after each intimate encounter, he’s twisting his moustache and cackling maniacally to himself,
“I’ll soon have one more specimen to add to my jar of broken hearts!” For as much as we would like to put everyone conveniently in the box of good or bad, no one is that simple, even those who hurt us the most deeply with their inconsistency and apparent thoughtlessness. But, so what? Whether Abigail’s love interest was well-intentioned but misguided or a modern day silent movie villain leaving his hapless female victims to languish on the train tracks, the result for Abigail was the same—she was getting far less than she wanted and deserved.

Our soul wound stories justify the ongoing pursuit of relationships that require us to take up minimal emotional room because these relationships are consistent with the narrative of brokenness. When we see ourselves as damaged and everyone else as whole, we assume we’re going to have to work harder and settle for less than everyone else. The soul wound hungers for external validation, seeing itself as devoid of the love and nurturance it craves. Abigail’s brokenness story longed for someone or something outside of herself to show her she’s whole. But it’s like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. The more we put our wholeness in someone else’s hands, the farther away the promised land of the True Self appears.

Abigail’s on-again-off-again relationship with her new non-committal partner seemed to threaten the work she’d done to reclaim her voice and wholeness. But, as is typically the case when we get thrown a curve ball during powerful growth, we’re being called to level up in our willingness to heal and nurture ourselves. Abigail was making intentional choices to do things that fill her up like refinishing furniture and kickboxing. Her way of moving through difficult emotion had become so much more grounded and sophisticated—rather than defaulting to the story of being broken as the ultimate reason for any pain, she was picking through the minutia of emotional experience, recognizing the constellation of factors that coalesce into any given moment of difficulty, like hunger or tiredness. Yet some part of her wound was clearly still calling out for healing.

“When do you first remember being so harsh with yourself, particularly when it comes to relationships?”

“After the rape.”

She was fifteen. He was her first serious boyfriend. She said “no.” He forced himself on her anyway. This violent experience had left her in a fog of shame and confusion. Was this what love felt like? Was this how sex was supposed to go? At her core, she knew something very wrong had happened, but leaning into that truth was just as terrifying as pretending everything was fine. She told no one.

Abigail shared her experience tearfully, revisiting a hurt she’d convinced herself she was over, given that she’d done significant work to resolve the rape with other therapists. And to a large, extent she had
resolved the physiological aspect of that trauma. She no longer had
intrusive thoughts or nightmares, and overall, felt more at ease and less
fearful. But the wound remained. It became clear as she began sharing how
she had “stupidly” continued to see her boyfriend after the rape.

“Stupidly?” It sounds like you’re judging yourself for staying with
him.”

“Well, yeah! What kind of idiot stays with someone who would do that
to them?”

“Try this, ‘What kind of frightened child stays with someone they care
about when they feel too isolated to share what has happened to them?’”

She began to realize she wasn’t over the rape and that a major source
of her ongoing self judgement was echoing up from the center of this
untended hurt. To reconnect with her teenage self, the one who had been
so betrayed and hurt by someone she trusted and loved, she wrote a letter
to herself. It was heartbreakingly beautiful, coming to her with such speed
and clarity that she almost felt as if it wasn’t even her writing it. She
described the horrific event, the shame and loneliness that arose as she
remained hidden in her pain, and the way that pain eventually manifested as
an eating disorder, an attempt to stay small and hidden from the sadness
and anger she felt was lurking everywhere. Compassion flowed out of her
narrative as tears flowed down her cheeks.

In meditation, I asked her to imagine herself the day of the rape,
feeling completely isolated. Her adult self was the quiet, loving observer of
her child self as she wept in fear and pain. She then offered that hurt child
kindness, embracing her and telling her she wasn’t alone, she deserved
better, and she would find a way through this pain. Abigail showed up to
her teenage self as the nurturing mother she needed, beginning the process
of healing one of the most intense parts of her soul wound.

In the weeks and months that followed, Abigail gradually became
softer in her internal dialogue. Rather than bullying herself for being weak,
fragile, unhinged, and too much, she started to replace some of that
criticism with compassionate awareness. She asked herself what she needed
to meet her goals rather than beating herself up for struggling to get started.
The same wound-based narratives would inevitably arise, but she now had
enough distance from them to gently let them go in the service of a more
loving relationship with herself.

How Abigail Connected to True Self:

As therapy progressed, Abigail became actively engaged in the process
of connecting more deeply with her True Self and dismantling the
stranglehold of her wound-based story of brokenness. She began this
process by gaining emotional clarity and engaging in intentional self-care.
Emotional clarity is a state of being connected with the true purpose and experience of emotion rather than the story of a given feeling. Most of us aren’t taught much about our feelings beyond being able to recognize which one is which, and that’s if we’re lucky. The why and how of emotion are major missing links in our education that keep us stuck talking ourselves to death about feelings or attempting to avoid them altogether. Why do we feel? Short answer—to survive. How do we feel?—in context.

Emotions are a way that our bodies and minds come together to make decisions quickly. Our prehistoric brothers and sisters weren’t fast or strong enough to take on most predators, so we had to be able to get our bodies into fight, flight, or freeze mode readily. Enter fear. We perceive some sort of threat with our senses, which may be the only role our thinking mind plays directly in a fear-based reaction, and we feel fear. The emotion of fear causes our hearts to beat faster, pumping more oxygenated blood to our organs and limbs, getting us ready for action. Our metabolism increases to make more energy available to the body. We become hyper-focused, able to tune out extraneous stimuli that don’t relate to the survival needs of the moment, and quickly decide whether to fight, flee, or freeze.

Negative emotions tune us into unmet needs and help us to avoid danger. Pleasant emotions serve to reinforce behavior that helps with survival. Food makes us feel good because we need to eat to live; if eating felt bad, we wouldn’t do it. Same with sex, and even shopping to some extent, if we view shopping as an extension of gathering behavior. Pleasant emotions also help us tolerate the natural difficulty of being alive. Loss, death, illness, and physical discomfort make it hard to be a person sometimes, so positive emotions help keep our primitive selves engaged in the process of staying alive.

If this emotional process of swinging from pleasant to unpleasant survival instinct seems like a basic and pretty unfulfilling way of being, you’re right! Emotions are part of our earliest development, as evidenced by the location of emotion centers in the brain. The limbic system, a set of brain structures that work together to create the experience of emotion, is located at the core of our gray matter. Just as a tree’s rings grow out from the center as the tree ages, human brains evolved layers of neural networks on top of the limbic system over the course of our existence as a species. These core, most basic structures can be thought of as the lizard brain. They aren’t particularly fancy, and they’re nothing compared to the complex supercomputers found in the frontal cortex, where our abstract thinking and metacognition largely happen.

With this understanding of what emotions are meant to do for us, we can then explore each emotion as it arises in context. No experience happens in a vacuum, but intense emotions often try to convince us of just that; each feeling seeking to overpower and minimize any thought,
judgment, or experience that isn’t consistent with itself. But emotion is a result of causes and conditions just like any other experience we have internally or externally and is subject to being intensified or minimized by factors such as physical discomfort, social support, and use of emotion regulation skills. Think about an intense emotion you had recently, positive or negative. Connect with an image of where you were when you felt it, what you were doing, who you were with, what you’d been doing or thinking just before the emotion arose. All of this is context, and all those pieces impacted the emotion you experienced.

In one session with Abigail, she discussed how frustrated she was with her partner who was supposed to have spent time with her over the weekend but had failed to follow through. Despite the disappointment, she was more upset about having yelled at her children on Sunday in a state of overwhelming frustration. As a result of feeling completely frustrated with her son’s willfulness, she lashed out at him and subsequently felt tremendous guilt. The guilt told her she was a terrible mother, and her broken wound jumped on the bandwagon to say her behavior was just more evidence for how messed up she is. She was interacting with these feelings as if they were telling a true story about who she is as a woman and a mother is. There was no consideration of the fact that emotions aren’t a direct result of one thing happening but are impacted by a constellation of causes and conditions. The feeling of guilt was big and therefore felt true, so anything viewed through the lens of this convincing feeling was easy to buy into wholesale.

When I asked her to play back the experience as if she were writing a screenplay, she described how she was exhausted from being up most of the night nursing her youngest. She was also hungry because she’d forgotten to eat that day in all the hustle and bustle of taking her kids to activities. She described being annoyed with herself for not finishing several projects she’d added to her self-care list.

“And you didn’t hear from your friend about getting together after he told you he would see you this weekend.”

“I hadn’t thought about that. I just figured I felt so bad because my daughter was being difficult.”

All these factors made Abigail more vulnerable to intense negative emotion. The more intense the negative feeling, the more it reinforces our wounded programming if we listen to it without awareness. When we practice stepping back and examining the context of our biggest, baddest feelings, we see the truth our feelings are intended to convey without blindly feeding our wound-based narrative. We recognize emotion’s capacity for helping us respond to the world around us without allowing feelings to run the show. Knowing the what and how of emotion is a
powerful tool for connecting with True Self, because the part of consciousness that does the observing is the True Self.

Intentional self-care is an incredible tool for amplifying the voice of the True Self and can best be understood as doing yourself a kindness on purpose. Not by accident while you’re doing something else that you feel like you have to do, but on purpose, and with the wholehearted intention to be kind and gentle with yourself. Going back to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Abigail needed to build her self-care around the middle levels of the pyramid that address needs for self-esteem, belonging, intellectual stimulation, and community. As she became more comfortable experiencing difficult emotion without reacting to it, she made more room to consider ways she could attend to fulfillment at work and in her relationships with friends.

One of her biggest hurdles was deciding what to do about her job. She’d felt more and more that her boss, also a woman, was not responding well to her increased self-confidence and willingness to voice her opinion. It’s not uncommon to experience resistance to changes we’re making for the better from those who may have their own insecurities triggered by our growth. The resistance we encounter in others can also serve as a signpost toward people, places, and things that will allow room for our continued expansion and development.

Abigail had thought about looking for a different job for several months, but her soul wound story would inevitably show up and convince her that she was the problem, not her job. As that voice became less powerful, she started to consider the aspects of her current job that weren’t working for her and realized her primary need was to feel intellectually stimulated; she wanted to be challenged to learn new material and build new skills. When she started looking for work from this place of possibility, she quickly found a role that intrigued her and applied.

Her doubt showed up in force once she hit “send” on her application. But she very skillfully leaned into that doubt, recognizing it as evidence that she was trying something new, not as a prediction that she was doomed to fail. She got the job and quickly realized her True Self had been longing to shine in her work. Taking the risk to apply for a more challenging position was a powerful act of self-care; she recognized a need for more engaging and rewarding work and took concrete steps to make it a reality.

Abigail also did some transformative work on her relationships as she healed, engaging self-care at the level of community and belonging. Broken wounds often keep us separate from others, telling us we’re lacking, a burden, and not deserving of companionship. Despite her years in an isolating, abusive relationship, Abigail had managed to cultivate a few close friendships. She realized in her healing, however, that she’d created a self-fulfilling prophecy in her belief that she was “too much.” She was often so
focused on her own pain and struggle, that her story eclipsed the needs of her relationships. She was beginning to come to terms with over drafting the emotional bank account on some of her friendships when one of her friends confronted her for taking more than she was giving in their relationship.

I don’t know anyone who doesn’t get the urge to hide under a rock when they think about being confronted about a transgression by a friend. Some of us may not have the skills to manage direct confrontation and, as a result, allow our friendships to languish and die to avoid the discomfort of taking responsibility and making amends. Abigail felt particularly vulnerable to criticism early in our work; her tendency was to assume any error was evidence of her inherent badness. In relationships, this fear of making mistakes was even more pronounced, given she longed so deeply for connection.

As she realized her natural resilience, she became more willing to hear about ways she could do better without her wound taking over and condemning her to loneliness and failure forever. When one of her closest friends brusquely told her everything wasn’t about her, while she heard the voice of her wound telling her she was a terrible friend and human, she moved through that initial shame and was able to validate her friend’s feelings. She did the bold and brave work of owning her part and said she would work to make it better.

Abigail started making her relationships a priority with the clear intention of giving as much or more than she got. Her effort illustrates the critical difference between giving from wound-based lack versus fullness; when we give more than we get because we feel we have to in order to be accepted, we burn out. Giving from wholeness is a “cup runneth over” kind of giving—we recognize we don’t have to do anything to earn love and are then free to give love without fear of running out.

Abigail still experienced bouts of depression throughout our work, particularly during the winter months when so many people experience setbacks, most likely related to biological factors such as decreased sunlight. But even the dark times, which came fewer and farther between, were not as threatening. She broke away from her non-committal partner and met a man that helped her relearn trust, love, and acceptance. Her friendships continued to deepen and be sources of healing connection. She put committed effort into building a well-rounded life that involved nurturing her body with exercise, participating in her community through volunteer work, and showing up with her whole heart to her role as a mother.
Meditation on Judgment

Turning our mindful awareness to our judging minds can help us to stay grounded when negative, wound-based, self-talk threatens to suck us into smallness. While it can be jarring to encounter the harshness we unleash on ourselves internally, the light of awareness shows us that while our thoughts can be vicious, they’re also still just thoughts.

Sit comfortably and alertly, taking a few moments to connect with your breath. Take a few intentional, deep breaths, releasing any tension you notice in your body. As you notice your body relax, bring your awareness back to your breath, noticing the air flowing in and out of your nose.

Now spend the next ten to fifteen minutes noticing judgments as they arise. Judgments will include any assessment of value in which we label some aspect of ourselves or our experience as good or bad, fair or unfair, or pleasant or unpleasant. No matter how juicy the judgment, try to let go of each thought once you acknowledge that it is a judgment. Notice what it feels like to release thoughts that you might ordinarily get caught up in.
Shame is both an emotion and a way of being. We experience the emotion of shame when we’ve made a choice or engaged in a behavior that would put us at odds with a given group. In the case of the shame soul wound, we’ve been taught to take responsibility for some wrongdoing that wasn’t our fault, such as a sibling’s illness, a parent’s affair, or a caregiver’s addiction. We may also be made to feel ashamed about some aspect of our being, whether that be our bodies, our emotional reactions, or even our interests. We go into hiding from ourselves and the world based on a guilty verdict when we were wrongly accused.

When shame becomes a way of being, we no longer experience ourselves as integrated members of a given group, but rather as inherently undeserving of connection and belonging. Any mistake we make or negative feedback we receive further reinforces our experience of ourselves as being bad or “other.” Shame becomes the lens through which we see ourselves—always dirty, marred, and somehow different from everyone else. These soul wound stories keep us relegated to the basement of the opera house like the Phantom or confined to our towers like Quasimodo—longing for connection with the outside world but fearing it will always be beyond our reach.

Shame soul wound stories arise when we’re taught to keep secrets. Families with addiction, mental illness, violence, and perfectionism are breeding grounds for shame. The stigma around substance use disorders and mental illness show up as messages such as “we shouldn’t talk about..."
your dad’s drinking” or “your sister’s suicide attempt is really nobody else’s business.” In homes where domestic violence is present, abusers often issue terrifying threats to anyone who dares talk about what happens at home, insisting no one would believe a kid over an adult anyway. Perfectionism can lead to shame soul wounds as well, creating an environment in which anything less than A+ and first place finishes aren’t worth acknowledging. In perfectionistic homes, any negative feelings may be pushed aside, minimized, or chastised as unnecessary, resulting in shame when difficulty naturally arises.

One of the most potent origin points for shame soul wounds is being made an emotional accomplice. In families where a parent is having an extramarital affair, hiding substance use, molesting a family member, or is otherwise engaging in a behavior that is damaging to the family, trust, and safety, secrecy and dishonesty are constant companions. When a child becomes aware of the problematic behavior or is, in fact, the target of the behavior in the case of molestation, they’re asked to bear the weight of an adult’s poor choices, being called disloyal and risking rejection if they share the secret. This puts children in the toxic position of having to choose between the love that’s critical to their wellbeing and the intense dissonance that arises when we’re carrying shame for something we didn’t do.

Shame wounds keep us stuck on the basis of the following beliefs:

- I’m a bad person.
- I’m responsible for other people’s happiness, particularly those I’m closest to.
- There are aspects of my past, my personality, or my being I must keep to myself because I’ll be rejected if they’re made known.
- People can’t be trusted.

These beliefs create a real conflict for those with the shame wound; they have a natural need for love and connection but engage in behaviors that push others away because connection is accompanied by the risk of rejection. To heal this wound, we must learn to tolerate our vulnerability to rejection and gradually risk being seen by those we love. We must also put the responsibility for our early hurts where it belongs, making room to see ourselves as inherently whole and good.

**Leona**

I worked with Leona for nearly ten years off and on, beginning when her parents finally ended their conflict-ridden marriage when Leona was in her twenties. Even Leona was shocked by how fragile and lost the divorce left her feeling, despite the fact she’d been on her own since graduating high school. In our first round of work together, Leona confronted some of the anger that festered around her relationship with her father, a black man with a big voice and lust for life that made him ill-suited for the role of
dependable father. Leona’s mother, a white woman born and raised in the Jim Crow South, was deeply in love with her husband and felt bitter and irreparably heartbroken when she learned of the many affairs that had started when Leona was barely out of diapers. She was unable to conceal the pain of her betrayal and often leaned on Leona for emotional support.

Leona was fast talking and quick to judge. She made it very clear she felt this whole business of processing feelings and events of the past seemed juvenile and weak. But she was struggling, so she bit the bullet and started counseling. She knew the rage she’d been required to keep on a shelf to take care of her mother emotionally was starting to bubble up in her relationships in ways that left her feeling out of control. In those early years, we walked through feeling abandoned by her father and the pain of rejection she felt from her mother’s parents, who disapproved of their daughter’s biracial children. She did some incredibly difficult work to move through her experience of being sexually assaulted as a freshman in college, an experience that only served to deepen her sense of being marked for pain and loss.

As she healed one layer of wounding, deeper levels began to expose themselves, shining a light on the ways her relationships with her parents led her to hold herself to impossible standards and accept mistreatment from those she loved. She was a frequent victim of her own “shoulds,” specifically relating to how she should feel or should deal with disappointment. Unable to validate her own feelings, she sought validation from sources that were unable to give it to her, forcing her to either push harder (and sacrifice self-respect) or to confront the deep longing for acceptance that arose from her shame wound.

She was particularly vulnerable to overcompensating for her perceived lack of worth in her romantic relationships. Leona had been with the same man for several years, and despite having been briefly engaged, he was never as committed to her as she was to him. Leona would describe desperate attempts to get him to open up to her emotionally, to share his own pain, and to be responsive to her own struggles, but the more she pushed, no matter how skillfully, the more he shut down and rejected her bids for connection. Even after she moved out of state to start a new life, he would intermittently pop up, typically right when she thought she was recovering, and give her just enough hope to try again. Leona’s shame wound convinced her he was her one shot at happiness and it was just her lot to have to strive and strain for commitment and connection.

Fast forward several years, and Leona is back in my office while visiting home. She’d moved to Oregon a couple of years earlier and created a mostly peaceful existence for herself there when she got the phone call—“Your brother has cancer.” She was composed, but the hurt shone in her eyes as she shared the last interaction she had with her brother, Lee. She
visited him daily, and they took walks, though it often took quite a bit of cajoling on her part to get her brother to focus on anything other than his fear and hopelessness since his diagnosis. This day he was insistent he didn’t want to do anything, citing a list of symptoms that were untreatable, unbearable, and direct evidence his life was effectively over. Leona knew the doctor had told her brother that many of his symptoms were the result of his lifestyle and not related to his cancer diagnosis per the report of their aunt, who had gone to the appointment with her brother. Leona seemed self-conscious in session as she said, “I know I shouldn’t have, but I told him I knew the doctor had said he was fine to stay active.”

Leona had gently confronted him about his dramatization of his symptoms. He became angry. She describes Lee as having their grandfather’s voice, loud, deep, intended to create fearful space with its power. He told her he hated her and dismissed her to go back to Oregon. He said he was never visiting her. Leona was crushed, but per her many years of training as an emotional caretaker, she didn’t react, at least not until she got to my office.

“I know what you’re going to say—that’s just his stress talking, but you don’t know Lee, and that’s just how he is. He gets mad, he lashes out, and then we never talk about it again.”

“Actually, I was going to say that sounds heartbreaking and there’s no excuse for that kind of treatment.” Her composure slowly broke, and the tears rolled down her face. She’d been instructed in her early relationships with her parents that loving someone is about being a willing victim. Her family had taught her real love is about being a perpetrator when we’re angry and a whipping boy when our loved ones are angry. Love for her family was about showing up as our worst selves and knowing we’ll be tolerated. But she had a longing for being more than tolerated. She wanted to be accepted. Asking for her family members to acknowledge their wrongdoing resulted in being invalidated and told she was too sensitive. This became the narrative of her soul wound story, one cloaked in shame. She saw herself as being over the top and intensely emotional, and rather than these as traits she could lean into or step out of, she saw them as fundamental to her identity.

How many of us have mistaken tolerance for acceptance? We settle for not being kicked to the curb when what we truly want and deserve is unconditional love and acceptance. Our wounded selves can get all this confused. When we endure harshness, criticism, or abuse, we feel unloved. Then we decide that love must be the opposite of whatever we’re getting. If we get criticism, then love must be an absence of criticism. If we’re ignored, then love must be constant attention. These all-or-nothing ways of understanding loving behavior are inherently rigid. Where there is rigidity, there are inevitably problems. Specifically, we develop a hypersensitivity to
any perceived criticism that makes it difficult for us to be responsive to reasonable bids for change, even when they come from caring, healthy loved ones.

We need room in our hearts to hear about the ways we can do better. Being our best selves means committing to growth and change even though it can be incredibly difficult to hear about our faults from those we love. When we open ourselves to the whole dialectic of acceptance and change, we make room for the possibility of improving ourselves and thereby gaining access to true acceptance. Being in relationships that require us to tolerate toxicity and encourage us to stay small and shameful keeps the door closed to real acceptance.

Just as the idea of light is meaningless without an awareness of the dark, acceptance—that deep-down, loving recognition of our worth and personhood—requires that we really lean into our fallibility. That which is a source of shame for our storied-selves, our imperfection, is the fertilizer from which our most fulfilling acceptance can bloom.

Leona’s relationships had been trying to teach her about real love by showing her the absence of it. Her mother and brother didn’t have room to see themselves as imperfect, and as a result, when their imperfections showed up through anger, judgment, and criticism, they weren’t able to close the gap created by this pain with the necessary amends-making. Leona was being called to relationships that required she confront her own mistakes and allowed for her to confront the mistakes of those she loves. She was taking her first steps away from the emotional plane crash of her family and trying to let go of her wounded self’s desperate need for belonging to a family that couldn’t love her as a whole person. Rejecting our families as our primary source of belonging requires ditching one of our most ingrained “shoulds”—my family should be a source of nurturance and love. Family is meant to teach us how to nurture ourselves rather than be our only apparent source of love. Some of us, such as Leona, have to learn about love through its absence before we encounter its abundance.

How Leona Connected to True Self:

Leona recognized her shame wound was being perpetuated by constant, “shoulding”—telling herself what she should have done or how she should be rather than leaning into her painful past and putting the responsibility for her hurts where they belonged: with her parents. She also had to let go of survivor guilt, which was serving to keep her feeling she owed it to her family to stay as unhappy as they were rather than risk happiness that felt like a betrayal. Finally, she had to be willing to risk vulnerability with herself and others rather than protect herself from further shame by building emotional walls and setting up tests of honor and commitment that her loved ones would inevitably fail.
SOUL WOUNDS

*Should* is a powerful, often damaging word. We have the cognitive ability to conceptualize potential alternative outcomes to past events, but don’t recognize the judgment and futility inherent in that process. “Should” conveys judgment that something cannot be the way it is; when we “should” ourselves, we add the pain of uncorrectable criticism to what’s already difficult. Leona said “should” more than almost any other client I’ve had. Her early experience of telling her mother about her father’s affair had left her with an overactive sense of responsibility for the pain of others, one that arose in her constant evaluations of what she should have done or said to prevent some negative outcome.

The more we tested the accuracy and necessity of her should statements, the clearer it became to Leona that fixating on what she could have done differently to prevent bad outcomes was based more in her wound than reality. She became more willing to look at the myriad factors impacting an outcome and to relinquish some of the responsibility to others involved. She would correct herself in session anytime she said “should,” and acknowledged she was better able to make changes when she wasn’t carrying the full weight of everyone’s happiness all on her own.

As Leona put down her shame, she saw more clearly the pain her family had been in, particularly during the divorce. She was more willing to hold her parents accountable for their relationship failures and noticed that many of her efforts to emotionally support her mother and earn her father’s acceptance were born of guilt. She felt responsible for their divorce and happiness, which naturally translated to a sense of guilt anytime she had a chance to be happier than them. Graduating college, moving to a new state, finding supportive friends: all these events triggered a deep sense of guilt that would often result in some form of sabotaging behavior until she realized her guilt wasn’t justified. Leona slowly came to accept that her right to happiness was not enmeshed with her parents’ healing.

Leona’s most critical step in healing was realizing the strength in vulnerability. So often, she would be in session describing some major letdown she’d experienced with her on-again-off-again boyfriend or some unfair request her mother had made of her, without any display of emotion. When pressed to connect with the dissonance between her apparent feeling and her painful story, she would more often become angry and defensive, having become so used to having her feelings invalidated or minimized if she ever dared to show them.

When processing her decision to go back to Oregon after the blow up with her brother, she contacted a hurt that wouldn’t be concealed by her typical stoicism. She began to cry for her brother and herself, feeling the hurt more fully and willingly than she typically did.

“What is wrong with me?” she asked desperately. “Why are my relationships so screwed up?”
“Your heart has been broken, and that’s supposed to hurt. Your pain isn’t evidence that you’re screwed up—it’s evidence that you love your family deeply.” Leona bravely allowed her heart to hear the truth of how much she cares and how much she’s been let down by her family, demonstrating to herself the real source of her resilience—her soft heart.

She continued to nurture herself by making room in her day to feel her emotions on purpose and without judgment. She went back to Oregon knowing her family relationships were still at loose ends and willing to accept the possibility that they wouldn’t be able to offer the acceptance she wanted. Leona focused instead on filling herself up by being successful in her work, which she loved, and dipping her toe into the dating world. She continues to heal and fill the space in her heart that had been dedicated to shame and self-doubt with self-compassion and hope.

Odessa

Odessa came to therapy the way like she was on the run from an attacker—nervous, asking for the blinds to be shut, and ensuring that no one else was within earshot in our first few sessions. She was what I lovingly call a “purse holder,” coming in, sitting on the edge of her seat, and holding her purse as if she’s waiting for a bus that is sure to come any minute and save her from the discomfort of sharing her story with a stranger. It was obvious she was torn between staying locked in her shame, silent and defensive, and risking the vulnerability of letting another hear her heartbreaking story.

Her brother had suggested she come to therapy. She was angry and hypercritical, and he felt this was likely related to their painful upbringing. The oldest of three siblings, Odessa had been thrust into the role of co-parent with her mother, who had all she could handle dealing with a physically and emotionally violent husband, unstable income, and three children. They were in and out of domestic violence shelters until Odessa was in high school, when her mother was finally able to leave her husband for good with the right help.

Unfortunately, Odessa’s difficulties were far from over when she and her family got away from her violent father. They were still impoverished, and Odessa was ruthlessly bullied from middle school on. She had no safety net—home was a place of instability, while school was a space of humiliation and loneliness. She began to dream of what it would be like to have been born to rich parents, sent to the best private schools, nurtured, loved, and safe. She plotted a way out of her painful circumstances and turned her incredible tenacity to the task of excelling academically. This drew more fire from her classmates, however, who then began bullying her for being a nerd in addition to being a dark-skinned black girl.
Her family’s struggle to escape the powerful chains of abuse planted in Odessa deep seeds of shame. She saw herself as a pariah who desperately hid her family’s history of violence and poverty for fear she would be seen as worthless. She concocted elaborate plans to escape her shame by marrying a rich and famous husband, going to an Ivy League school, or becoming a famous novelist. The only place she could find comfort as a young person was in a future that seemed out of reach. These fantasies followed her into adulthood, fueling her drive to move ahead in a competitive tech industry. While her efforts were rewarded at work, she remained single, defensively rejecting anyone that didn’t meet her high (most often external) standards for a partner.

When she started therapy, it became very clear how much of an impact her shame had on her as an adult. She was caught in a battle between her aspirations and her shame story in most areas of her life. She longed for a husband but felt she and any potential partner had to be perfect. She would cut herself down for not being successful, light-skinned, or young enough to attract the sort of husband she wanted while also criticizing the men who approached her for being beneath her. She was nothing if not consistent in applying her unreachable standards.

As our sessions continued, Odessa did the brave work of opening up, an act that was in direct conflict with her shame wound’s lifelong directive to stay hidden. The more we explored her present-day struggles to find a partner, the clearer it became that the desert of her romantic life was a direct consequence of her fear of ending up with a man like her father and the deeply held belief she was marked for dysfunctional relationships by her early experiences. Over the course of therapy, her list of requirements for potential partners shifted away from superficial characteristics toward more workable expectations, but one physical feature was not negotiable—she would not date a black man.

“When you think of dating a black man, what do you feel you are signing up for?” I asked in one session, very aware of my whiteness and wondering if this conversation was going to be productive.

“I think black men are more likely to devalue women, which I think is a function of their own insecurity. I can feel compassion for them, but I don’t want to get involved with someone who’s likely to disrespect me.”

“When you describe black men in this way, it sounds like you’re describing some very specific people, like the bullies you encountered in school and maybe even your father? Maybe you’re using blackness as a proxy for the causes and conditions that create men like the ones who have hurt you.”

Pain makes us create elaborate shortcuts between causes and conditions. In an effort to avoid further pain, we avoid anything that might remind us of the original hurt. When we get food poisoning from anchovies
and swear off canned fish, our life satisfaction may not take a huge hit, but when we write off whole groups of people to keep ourselves safe, we’re dramatically restricting our access to fulfilment. Odessa’s fear of black men was consistent with her early experiences, but her generalization of those experiences to all black men was serving to reinforce her defensiveness, creating one more barrier between her and the love she sought.

The more we unpacked Odessa’s resistance to dating black men, the more apparent it became she continued to feel vulnerable to reliving her mother’s life. Her rejection of black men was as much a function of fear as it was of her shame wound. She was convinced she would only be able to attract men who would be harmful, feeling her history of domestic violence had turned her into a lightning rod for losers and abusers. The dissonance between what she wanted and what she imagined she was capable of getting from her romantic relationships manifested in Odessa being her own worst enemy when it came to dating. She would put energy into creating dating website profiles, only to let messages languish in her inbox, or to spend hours responding angrily to men who’d messaged her who were not good for her.

Odessa seemed stuck on a hamster wheel in other areas of her life as well. She had a passion for writing but found it next to impossible to sit down and write. She could see the characters in great detail, knew their motives and their longings, but couldn’t get the world in her head onto the page. Her work life was also a place of struggle. She made one lateral move after another, seemingly unable to break into management despite years of hard work and positive feedback from supervisors. She was dissatisfied with her life in almost every way, unaware her story was being narrated by a painful wound of shame that convinced her that no one with a background like hers could dream of being happy unless she overcompensated with perfection.

**How Odessa Connected to True Self:**

Throughout Odessa’s journey in therapy, she dove incredibly deep into the waters of her past, confronting the shame that started with her father’s abusive relationship with her mother. She moved through shame to confront her anger and arrived in a space of hope, confidence, and knowing she was deserving of happiness and not to be held responsible for the sins of her father. She started to put down the long-held belief that healthy, loving relationships are not available to people with her kind of past, recognizing her power to undermine a major feature of intergenerational trauma: unexamined hurt. Her first breakthrough came in discovering the power of forgiveness.

For many months, Odessa could barely discuss her father, feeling intense shame and fear anytime we would broach the subject of her father’s
violent past. She found her way to confronting her experiences with him by first addressing the years of bullying she endured in school. Her motivation for personal growth was staggering, and I could hardly keep up with all the books and resources she found to expand her spiritual development and heal her wounds.

She began reading and learning more about forgiveness, and she suspected the understandable grudge she carried for her bullies and her father was a barrier to her growth and happiness. As we explored the hurt that likely drove her bullies to be cruel to her, she started to soften with compassion, internalizing the truth that the sort of violence she withstood from her classmates came from a place of pain. Odessa opened her heart to forgiveness by empathizing with the suffering she believed her bullies must have experienced to be capable of such cruelty.

Odessa’s willingness to step out of the protective shell of her anger for her bullies made it possible for her to gradually confront her past with her father. She began having vivid memories of instances of violence, recalling in each scenario her hyperawareness of her father’s footfalls, the sound of her mother’s body absorbing blow after blow, and the muffled screams. As she recalled one such experience during a guided imagery on compassion for her inner child, she wept noiselessly as she finally allowed herself to feel the sadness and fear she’d been transmuting into anger for most of her adult life.

The more compassion Odessa was able to offer herself, the more she realized she’d been carrying the burden of her father’s violence as an indicator of her worth. She withheld joy and connection from herself as a punishment for crimes she didn’t commit. It became clear that part of her healing would require giving the responsibility to her father. She hadn’t had any contact with him since her mother had taken Odessa and her siblings out of the house for the last time. She couldn’t even be sure he was alive, but she knew she had to tell him the impact his violence had on her and her family.

Her biggest fear was that she would try to confront him in person and he would deny any wrongdoing, invalidating her pain and reinforcing her shame in the process. She decided to write him a letter, outlining many of the memories she had of his abuse and describing the worthlessness she’d felt all her life as a result. She had a sense of knowing her healing depended upon this courageous act of confrontation. He might respond, or he might not, but regardless, she wouldn’t be kept in the shadows, making her father’s violence an ongoing part of her unhappiness any longer.

She cried with relief in our session after she sent the letter. She still had some fear surrounding the possibility that he might deny everything, but the fear was dwarfed by the expansiveness she felt—the heart space that had been dedicated to carrying her father’s burden had been freed up,
and the possibilities of filling that space with meaning and purpose were endless. Having honored the hurt of her inner child, Odessa found the strength of her inner voice and was ready to find the message of growth in her tragic upbringing.

As Odessa confronted her shame, she realized she was also incredibly fearful. It’s no wonder she would fear black men, violence, and rejection, given how intertwined those experiences had been for her growing up. But she began to see how clinging to her fear kept her separate from the things she most wanted in life: a rewarding career and a loving, supportive husband. She put countless hours into creating vision boards and checklists for how to make her dreams a reality but always felt thwarted, unable to make forward progress.

In one session, we were discussing her decision to join an online dating community, which she did reluctantly, feeling it was evidence of her desperation rather than her willingness to cast a wide net. It became clear she was spending more time responding to the men who messaged her that she did *not* want than she was putting into identifying men she did want. She was indignant that so many men who clearly didn’t meet her stated requirements would waste her time, not realizing she was wasting her own time by trying to make these men understand their trespass.

“Is there a chance you’re putting energy into these men you don’t want out of fear that you’ll never find someone who is right for you?” As we unpacked the reality that Odessa’s fear was driving the bus of her dating life (right off a cliff), she realized her father’s work was not yet done. She discovered an unnoticed wound-based story that any man she would attract would be like her father and that her work was to forgive her father to relinquish her fear. In offering her father compassion in the form of forgiveness, she would be accepting the reality of her past fully while also deciding she was strong enough, worthy enough, and whole enough to allow her pain to be a part of her story.

Odessa began taking meaningful steps toward finding a partner, being proactive rather than reactive, and felt a shift in her opinion of herself as a single woman. She stopped degrading herself for being too old, too flabby, and not successful enough to attract a mate, and began nurturing her wants and needs rather than overworking and overachieving. She began to see her body as a prized possession to be cared for and appreciated rather than a mass of imperfections. Choices that she used to avoid because she feared she would fail became easy to make—going to the gym, trying yoga, and improving her diet all started to feel like acts of self-love rather than self-loathing.

Then she started writing. Her shame wound had convinced her she didn’t deserve the happiness of pursuing her passion, and, moreover, would only be disappointed when the world rejected her efforts to be an author.
As she offered her wounds compassion and kindness, the barriers to writing (never having time, convincing herself she should be looking for jobs instead, and the endless stack of self-help books she had to read) began to seem less compelling than getting her story out. The more she wrote, the easier it became and the greater a source of inspiration and joy she found in her daily life. Odessa was no longer waiting to be perfect before she made herself happy.

**Meditation on Severing Bonds of Shame**

Shame creates threads of connection between us and those that harmed us, either with their violence or their secrets. We can facilitate the work of severing these threads using guided imagery. We imagine the person or people who taught us to be shameful and cut the threads of shame, fear, guilt, and anger that keep us stuck in problematic ways of thinking and being.

To begin, make sure that you have about thirty minutes of time to yourself. Find a quiet, private place where you can feel comfortable and safe. Close your eyes and ground yourself in your breath and in the moment. Scan your body for tension or resistance and gently invite release on the out breath.

Now imagine yourself in a peaceful meadow, taking a few moments to notice the flowers and plants, the comfortable breeze, and the sense of calm you feel in this space. Spend a few moments savoring this place.

As you feel immersed in calm and peacefulness, imagine the person who harmed you approaching from the far end of the meadow. Know in your heart that their best, highest self is here and that they mean you no harm. They’re here to help you let go and heal. They come just close enough for you to see their faces clearly.

You notice a thread is running between you and the other person. This thread is the symbol of your ongoing, pain-based connection to the other person. What’s the thread physically made of? Is it thin and delicate, or strong and thick? What is the thread energetically made of? Is it the energy of fear, guilt, or possibly anger? Allow your True Self to show the truth of your connection to the other person. Feel your heart swell with compassion for yourself as you begin to recognize the hurt you have carried for so long. Be still with this feeling of kindness for yourself for a few moments.

Imagine in your hand a pair of golden scissors. As you notice the weight of the scissors in your hand, connect with the realization that you have the power to let go of the hurt that has connected you to the other person for so long. You recognize your painful history is a part of you, but it doesn’t have to define your present. You can let go of your hurt, anger, and guilt and still be safe in the world. Reach up and lovingly cut the cord.
connecting you to the other person. As you disconnect yourself, watch as the other person gently smiles, and fades away.

Take a few moments to stay in a place of stillness, noticing whatever arises in the absence of your shame-based connection to the other person. It's not uncommon to feel relief, sadness, or confusion after severing energetic emotional ties in this way. Bring your heartfelt acceptance to your experience, taking as much time as you need to re-center and ground yourself.
“Cuong Nhu students should strive to improve themselves and their abilities in the martial arts in order to serve the people.”
First Code of Ethics, Cuong Nhu Martial Arts

So, you’ve healed your soul wounds—now what? Chances are, you’ve had thoughts about doing something “bigger” or “better” with your life. While our wounded egos are always telling us about how wonderful things could be if only we were more of this or less of that, there’s some grain of truth in the whispers of something better. The irony is that you’re already perfect for whatever it is you want to do, and the only thing getting in the way is your belief that you’re missing some crucial ingredient for success. You wouldn’t be the person you are if you weren’t completely capable of doing what you’re meant to do.

Here’s the catch: to know what you’re truly meant to do, you have to let go of all the notions your wound-based programming has been telling you about what it means to be great. We hold rigid ideas of success that revolve around money, prestige, beauty (a moving target in and of itself), and sacrifice built on a collective soul wound that believes we must constantly accumulate pleasure in order to feel whole. In the Talking Heads’ song, “Once in a Lifetime,” the line, “this is not my beautiful house, this is not my beautiful wife,” perfectly sums up the experience of waking up to a reality that’s not based on consumption and material things. In this state of wholeness on the other side of the wound, we’re challenged to recognize the “water flowing underground,” the deeper source of meaning and purpose that’s not defined by societal expectations. We’re called to live a joy-based life.
We find purpose when we follow joy rather than fear. Joy and pleasure are not the same. We’re programmed in our primal, lizard brains to follow pleasure, which is fleeting and based on sensory experiences. When we follow joy, we dig deeper than our senses and tap into being: that state of life that holds our sensory, emotional, and psychological experiences in its expansive awareness. On a concrete level, pleasure is outcome-based, while joy is process-focused. We know we’re following joy when reaching the destination is secondary to enjoying the ride.

The secondary benefit of following joy is the ripple effect. Whenever we serve joy, we’re making it that much easier for others to follow their joy. In a spiritual sense, we raise the energy level around us with our joy-based living and subsequently draw others into that higher state. On a practical level, anyone can relate to the difference they’ve felt interacting with someone who was in a good mood versus someone in a bad mood. The interactions we have from joy have a lingering impact on those around us, no matter how subtle we perceive that to be.

Joy is about service—whether indirectly, by spreading kindness with a smile, or more directly by impacting a specific problem such as hunger, housing, or equality. I emphasize the apparent difference between these two expressions of joy because our wound-based training puts more value on service as a problem-focused sacrifice; if we aren’t opening a soup kitchen or giving money to someone who’s homeless, our ego would say we’re not being of service. All joy-based living is service. If it feels like a sacrifice, then it’s not the best fit for you, no matter how much your ego would like for you to identify with being the sort of person who organizes protests and revolutions.

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For some, wound work immediately opens up a clear path to purposeful, joyful living. For many, myself included, we may still need a road map to actualizing our unique calling. Perhaps you have several ideas in mind for how you can live more actively in your values and aren’t sure which path to start down. You may be drawing a complete blank. Regardless, you can hone your awareness of your joy and more effectively be a force of good in the world when you have a plan.

In Cuong Nhu Martial Arts, one of the first philosophies we learn as white belts is the 5 Ps of an Achiever (perspective, patience, perseverance, pride in accomplishment, and practice until perfect). The last thing any white belt can imagine for themselves as they’re stumbling through kicks and katas is the possibility they will one day wear a black belt. The 5 Ps are meant to help students connect with the truth of progress, which is that you have to see it to be it and be prepared to overcome some obstacles along the way. What I’ve learned in the many years since first hearing this
philosophy is that the real achievement is in learning to be on the journey wholeheartedly, letting go of the outcome in favor of the process.

**Perspective**

Imagine you’re asked to go to a party, but you have no idea where it’s located, what time it will be starting, or even why the party is happening in the first place. It’s hard to get excited about this party, right? It’s even more difficult to imagine how in the world you’re ever going to make it if you’re lacking every detail that would be necessary to actually get there. We see our own futures with the same lack of clarity when we’re stuck in our soul wounds. Fear and doubt cloud our vision, making it next to impossible to make anything other than accidental progress toward foggy goals.

Perspective is the act of envisioning an outcome. While we ultimately won’t be focused on the outcome alone, we need to have a destination in mind to start the journey. We have to be willing to envision ourselves doing the things we love if we’re going to take steps to making those dreams realities. If you’re like me, you’ve had some contact with the idea of the Law of Attraction. I’ll tell you up front, I’m a big fan of *The Secret*, and at the same time, you’ll never see me sitting amongst a pile of magazines, scissors and glue stick in hand, trying to decoupage my dreams into reality. What works for me is a recognition of the logical connection between seeing, believing, and doing. If I see it in my mind, I can believe it, then I do the work that gets me there.

In order to effectively envision the joy-based life we’re designed for, we have to address the common barriers to clarity. Tara Brach, a teacher of mindfulness and Buddhist wisdom, shared a story in one of her teachings about a woman who would look out her window every day at her neighbor as she hung up her laundry. “Why does she always hang out dirty laundry?” she’d comment to her husband. “You’d think she could at least be bothered to wash it.” Her husband remained silent for months of his wife’s negative commentary. Then, one morning, she exclaimed, “Earl! She’s finally gotten her clothes clean!” To which Earl replied, without looking up from his paper, “No Ethel, I just washed the windows.”

Soul wounds keep us stuck behind dirty windows, looking out at the world and back at ourselves with negative judgment. These harsh, critical thoughts don’t just poison the present moment, but also make it next to impossible to see a brighter, more fulfilling future. From a neurological perspective, we’re built with a negative attributional bias, meaning we tend toward negative interpretations of even neutral stimuli. We see danger where there is none as a primitive protection against threats we might otherwise overlook. This bias then impacts the content of what arises in consciousness, filtering out the positive to ensure that whatever we’re actively thinking about is consistent with a negative charge. The more we
lean into negative thinking, the less able we are to visualize scenarios that would be positive. To see a future fit for our True Selves, we need to clean the windows of whatever fear and doubt might resurface as we work toward joy-based goals.

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Fear often arises as the “no” story we tell ourselves based on our soul wounds. I’ve worked through many different “no” stories from “you’ll never get a PhD” to “you’ll never find a loving partner,” and most ironically, “you’ll never write a book, let alone publish one.” These goals were always fine and dandy for someone else, but for someone who was damaged goods, such as myself, it was a fanciful waste of time to want such things. Little did I know, I was getting in my own way by believing my “no” story to be fundamentally true. When we see the world through “no,” we can’t see all the opportunities for moving toward our goals popping up all around us.

“No” can arise from many kinds of circumstances—our soul wound stories can tell us we don’t have what it takes to make a goal happen, or even if we do have the skills and abilities, we don’t deserve the happiness we imagine would accompany starting that company or traveling to a new place. We can also carry fear of being seen as our True Selves, fear that constructs elaborate consequences for stepping out of smallness and taking chances on ourselves.

Odessa was a goal attainment rock star. Once she worked through the shame she felt for growing up in an abusive household, she began finding more paths opening for her toward dreams she’d previously been too fearful to acknowledge, let alone work toward openly. She began experimenting with various philosophies and spiritual practices to connect her to her purpose. When she joined a group for creating vision boards, a tool for manifesting desires per the Law of Attraction, she felt an instant affinity and set to work on her own board. Soon, she started writing a book about the sex trafficking trade, a topic very close to her heart, and she began applying for increasingly competitive and rewarding jobs. She was no longer afraid of being seen, and the direct consequence of her new willingness was success that seemed to come easily.

One area that seemed to stay blocked for Odessa, however, was romantic relationships. She knew she wanted a partner, but whenever she tried to envision what he would be like, her mind would flood with memories of her father beating her mother, of walking down the street pulling her coat closer around her as menacing men would cat call at her, and of the emotionally dissatisfying experiences she had with the few men she’d dated seriously. Fear and anger were blocking her attempts to find a partner, even when she would go through the motions of making herself
available by joining dating sites or going to social events for singles. None
of the men who were messaging her online met her specifications regarding
age, and many of them sent her either form inquiries or lewd propositions.
Initially, she responded to each of them, blasting them for their lack of
consideration for what she stated she wants in a partner and subsequently
increasing her anger and doubt about her romantic prospects.

“You’re mixing up eggs, flour, and sugar, putting it in the oven, and
are acting surprised when you come out with a cake.”

I wasn’t too shocked to see the look of confusion on her face; Odessa
was a great critical thinker, and metaphors pulled her out of the concrete
world of her thinking mind.

“You’re putting your energy into everything you don’t want in a
partner and seem disillusioned and disappointed that the people who are
finding you aren’t what you want. Not to mention, you’re assuming a
mostly passive role by waiting for men to come to you rather than pursuing
what you want.”

That was when it became clearer that Odessa had not been able to take
the first step of perspective on her journey to find a partner. Fear, doubt,
and shame were still convincing her it was pointless to imagine a partner
that was loving, open minded, and would be a nurturing co-parent. She
couldn’t see it, so it wasn’t available to her. As we worked toward
developing active approaches to dating and cultivated the basic belief that
the kind of partner she wanted did exist and was available to her, she was
able to shift into optimism, shaking useless fear and doubt in the process.

You know now what to do with fear. You have the tools to sit back,
look at your fear, and determine whether it’s arising in the service of your
True Self or of your wound. We say “yes” to fear in the service of the True
Self, which will almost only arise when there is a literal physical danger to
be dealt with, and say “no,” gently and compassionately, to all other fear.
We can now see fear as a signpost to what’s coming next rather than a wall
between us and our goals.

**Fear as Friend—An Exercise in Perspective**

Grab a pen and some paper and sit in stillness for a few moments.
Contact your fear and hold it loosely. When does fear arise? In what
circumstances do you see yourself when fear shows up? What are you
doing? Who are you with? What are you building or creating? What are you
experiencing?

What are you risking? When you identify the perceived risks, you may
notice they’re related to rejection, lack of resources, and failure. Now,
image you couldn’t fail, that all the resources you needed were available
and that rejection weren’t painful.
Imagine yourself in the same experience with no fear. Allow your heart to fill with the joy, excitement, and energy of that experience. When doubt and fear try to interject, reconnect to the truth of fullness. Be still with this image for a few minutes.

From this space, where you assume your goal is possible, write down steps that would be required to make it a reality. If a step triggers fear and doubt, that’s only telling you you’re trying to cover too many steps at once—break that step down into multiple parts until you get to something that feels manageable. Our fear is meant to be instructive, not predictive.

Commit to one step each week for the next thirty days.

**Patience**

Vision is the first step and is an ongoing part of the process of moving toward people, places, and situations that will help us manifest the most good for ourselves and for others. Once we know where we would like to go, we have to start the work of putting one foot in front of the other to reach that destination. But nothing worth having comes quickly or easily. Patience and perseverance are different sides of the same coin. When a barrier arises, we’re being called to either be still (patience) or work to overcome (perseverance).

When it comes to living in True Self, everyone can do it, but many of us fall short when we encounter barriers. If we haven’t done our soul wound work, then we misinterpret the message of doubt and fear as predictive of eventual failure, so we give up to spare ourselves the heartache. Knowing that doubt and fear are signposts to the next step, we develop patience with obstacles, and recognize that each speed bump has a critical message for us.

Patience is a tool for staying connected to meaning and purpose and is essentially the ability to stay present when faced with being stuck. Since we’ve reconciled ourselves to the reality of difficulty, it makes sense we would also take every opportunity to cultivate the antidote to internalizing that difficulty as frustration and defeat: patience. Any sticking point we encounter when working toward our goals gives us a chance to recognize our inherent okayness regardless of our circumstances. Constant success and forward motion keeps us stuck in the chase for pleasure, driven by our primal reward centers in the brain. If we only experience progress and the satisfaction that goes with it, we’ll stay caught up in pleasure rather than joy. Joy transcends the feel-goods and feel-bads that come with the ups and downs of goal attainment, and patience is the exercise that keeps us aligned with joy in the face of adversity.

Stacia came to me when she was in her early thirties to work through residual trauma symptoms and beliefs that had followed her ever since she was raped as a freshman in college. She was a talented writer, photographer,
and graphic designer with a life bustling to the brim with work and raising her four children. She knew writing about her assault was deeply important, not just for her own healing, but as a function of her purpose in the world. She wanted to educate men in particular about the impact of sexual violence and be a force of preventative change.

She’d started on an article over a decade ago, and the few paragraphs she’d written seemed to follow her year after year like a specter, not only of the unfinished emotional business of her assault, but of her potential to grow beyond the impact of that trauma. After two years in therapy, she felt ready to confront the shame that had kept her quiet for so long and dedicated herself to finishing her piece. In the wee hours of the morning, she would bang out a few more sentences, tweak a few more words, and eventually decided she would send her work to a few of her journalism friends for input.

That’s when the waiting started. First, she waited for responses from her friends, agonizing over whether they would judge her for having been drinking the night of the assault, or whether they would believe her story at all given the gaps in memory she experienced. Stacia’s work during this fallow period was to learn to tolerate uncertainty rather than fill the space with her own negative judgment. We often would prefer a negative outcome to no outcome, and rush in with our defensive pessimism to protect ourselves from the discomfort of not knowing.

Stacia resisted urge after urge to bombard her friends with follow up texts and emails, and the more she made room for patience, the more tolerable the waiting became. After a few rounds of edits from colleagues, she finally heard not just that her work was polished and moving, but that one of her journalism contacts had pitched her story to a magazine that wanted to publish it. Patience gave her an opportunity to get in a healthier relationship with her own negative judgment and to lean into her shame in a way she couldn’t have done without taking the terrifying step of making her story public.

**Mindfulness on Patience**

To be skillful about patience, we have to know when it’s time to be still and when it’s time to act. First, sit in stillness for a few moments to connect with mindful awareness. Then, write out or say out loud where you are in the process of working toward your goal. The key is to describe rather than judge where you are, so focus on what you’ve done and what needs to be done from an objective standpoint. Is there anything you can reasonably do right now that would move you farther along? What do you have the urge to do, even if it would just mean spinning your wheels or taking action for the sake of feeling busy? Would you be better served by stillness or by movement from where you are right now?
If your answers reflect an actionable next step, move on to the next section on perseverance. If your answers suggest you’re in a waiting period, use the following meditation to cultivate the patience you need.

Sit comfortably, but alertly, and breathe fully into your body, turning your total awareness to the experience of breathing in and out. When you feel centered, repeat these affirmations for several minutes.

*In this moment, there is nothing to be done.*

*In this moment, there are no problems to be solved.*

*In this moment, I surrender my urge to move, and choose to be still.*

*In this moment, I surrender.*

Repeat this process whenever you feel yourself tensing up around waiting. Allow yourself the stillness and space for next step to arise. To hear our True Selves, we have to be willing to be quiet.

**Perseverance**

While some barriers are meant to teach us about patience, others are meant to help us mobilize and move past doubt and external obstacles. Perseverance is the quality of overcoming adversity and staying true to your path when challenges arise. It’s important to note that stubbornness can often be mistaken for perseverance, but there’s a key difference—awareness. Stubbornness is the cat that insists it will fit into the tiny shoebox, contorting to make it work despite how uncomfortable they obviously are. Stubbornness doesn’t allow awareness and is a function of the ego. The ego just wants to be right, no matter the cost, whereas True Self knows that staying flexible in terms of approach and expectations is not an indication of weakness or failure, but of resilience. Where stubbornness says, “Just keep doing the same thing until it works,” perseverance encourages creativity and a willingness to approach a problem from different angles.

We have to encounter obstacles to come into a complete understanding of our strength and into compassion for the struggles that others encounter. In my martial arts training, Master Robert would tell us that people who struggle in the beginning make the best teachers; when a student must execute a technique over and over to get it right, they naturally have a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the move. Similarly, when we encounter setbacks or failures, we develop a greater awareness of the intricacies of our resilience while at the same time becoming more equipped to support others through their own obstacles.

Obstacles can also help us reset our inner compass toward joy. If we’ve been working doggedly at a goal and keep getting derailed, we may investigate whether or not our chosen path is truly right for us. I was in private practice for at least four years before I stopped applying for jobs I thought were more lucrative or secure. I was specifically attached to the
idea of becoming a professor after finishing my PhD, and I submitted application after application for everything from adjunct community college openings to full professorships at major universities. Nothing ever came through, and initially, I felt dejected and judged, as if each form rejection was just another stamp in my passport to Imposterville.

Then I realized I wasn’t feeling rejection as strongly as I was feeling relief. At the same time, I was being turned down for teaching jobs, I was hearing horror stories from former professors, now friends, about the incredibly demanding, often asinine, workloads, and crumby pay. My repeated failed attempts were an indication that while my urge to teach was motivated by True Self, the way I was trying to do it wasn’t the best fit. Once I started to put energy into teaching in other ways, leading classes for clients and providing clinical supervision to new counselors, I felt a sense of buoyancy and joy that had been absent from every attempt at teaching at the collegiate level.

**Fail Beautifully**

We’ve all heard stories about people who triumphed over adversity in the eleventh hour, but rarely do we consider how these determination powerhouses were able to push through disappointment to find success. When we’re doing something we love and are focused on the process rather than the outcome, we naturally have more willingness to be disappointed when external circumstances don’t support forward movement. If the point is the doing instead of the finishing, we recognize the endpoint is arbitrary, and obstacles become part of the scenery rather than ultimate ends.

Google the following phrase: “People who failed before they succeeded.” Find a story that resonates with you. Write your own story of beautiful failure identifying the walls you’ve hit that have made you want to give up, the feelings and judgments that arose, and the words of support you wanted to hear that would make it seem possible to keep going or to shift toward a different goal. Take a moment and envision the hero of the story you found in your search offering you encouragement.

**Pride in Accomplishment**

Recognizing and celebrating successes as they arise is a critical form of reinforcement for continued effort. Pride in accomplishment is the step where we throw our lizard brains a bone and acknowledge the power of positive reinforcement in keeping us on track. Positive reinforcement for each small job well done in the service of a larger goal keeps the reward centers in our brains pumping out the dopamine that helps keep us engaged and focused. While we don’t want to live in the service of our reward centers, it doesn’t hurt to recognize we can benefit from oiling the basic neurocognitive machinery of goal attainment from time to time.
Marking our progress as it happens also helps keep us process focused. If we’re waiting to celebrate our accomplishment at an endpoint, we deny ourselves the joy that is available all along the way. All steps are critical to getting to a specific destination—why wait until the last stride to acknowledge you’ve been on the path all along? In fact, the first few steps toward a goal are often the most difficult and may deserve even more recognition than steps taken when we’re well in the swing of things.

“I don’t want to get too excited about this new job, or I’ll jinx it.” I’ve heard some version of this statement from most of my clients, and it seems to reflect a pervasive misunderstanding of how thoughts affect reality. Because of this thought error, we avoid celebrating accomplishments out of the belief that good feelings somehow bring about bad results. It’s a natural consequence of the flow of experience from good to bad, and bad back to good, along with our faulty assumption that the bad times are not natural or acceptable. We then see the good times that precede a bad time as the cause of the bad, which is an incredibly heartbreaking way to live. We rip ourselves away from joy every time we refuse to lean into the good times.

We might also resist giving ourselves a hard-earned pat on the back because we have our reinforcement schedules backwards. Many of us were exposed to criticism, punishment, and even physical violence as children when we broke the rules. Our parents reacted from the anger, sadness, or fear that arose in reaction to whatever we did or didn’t do, rather than being strategic about reducing the problematic behavior. Our collective wounded stories have blinded generations of caregivers to the most basic truth of reinforcement, which is that reward goes much farther than punishment in changing a behavior. Even if we’ve healed the wounds that arose from an upbringing with harsh disciplinarians, we may not be aware of the ineffectiveness of punishment and negative reinforcement in keeping us on track. If you want to encourage yourself to keep doing something that’s working, the last thing you should do is withhold praise and recognition from yourself.

Of the many barriers that might arise to effectively celebrating our successes, a misinterpretation of the idea of “pride” is significant. Pride may seem like an ego-based state that we would want to avoid, but in this case, we’re talking about a willingness to enjoy accomplishments, not just as a function of how great we are, but as a culmination of all the causes and conditions that got us to where we are. There’s room to acknowledge our strengths and abilities without mistakenly assuming we should get all the credit. Pride in accomplishment is essentially an activity in gratitude.
Intentional Gratitude

One of the best things about my old school, hand-written planner is it comes with a section called “Wins for the Week,” where I can reflect on even the smallest progress I’ve made each week. Set aside time every week to reflect on your work toward your goal. What have you learned so far about yourself? If you’re in a place of stillness or stuckness toward your goal, you may have difficulty connecting with the positive aspects of your growth. Before trying to force yourself into silver-lining mode, honor your feelings of disappointment, frustration, or doubt by bringing your awareness to those emotions. When you feel ready, see if points of growth and success start to arise alongside the disappointments. Sit with the gratitude that arises around where you are right now, connecting fully with the physical experience of being grateful and joyful.

Practice until Perfect—A Love Letter to the Warriors

You are perfectly whole and perfectly ready to live in a state of joy. Perfection is your practice once you become fully aware of all you are and all you have to give. No one else’s imaginary standards of beauty, success, or happiness can encapsulate the joy you are capable of or hold you back from the love and compassion you have to offer the world. Whatever fills you up is a perfect expression of your True Self; wherever you are in connecting with that fullness is the perfect place to be.

This journey is breathtakingly devastating and beautiful. In seeking to find healing for the hurts that have been paving your path for so long, you can’t help but be better for trying. Every step you’ve taken toward loving and nurturing yourself back to wellness is an expression of the perfection that is your True Self. You’ll lose sight of your True Self here and there as you encounter challenges and obstacles, but just as the sun doesn’t stop shining during the thunderstorm, your connection to True Self will not waiver even if your hope takes a hit. Hope is for nonbelievers. You’ve demonstrated your belief in yourself by picking up this book and any number of other books or projects or people or experiences in the service of feeling whole. Hope can come and go in the heart of a believer. She will not lose herself.

Love is what your life is for and about. Much of your life has been lived without a felt connection to the love that has to be found within before it can be found without. Every time you use your voice to lift yourself or someone else, every time you say “no” to a destructive pattern of thinking, every time you choose kindness over anger, every door you hold for a stranger, every peace offering you make to the darkest parts of your history, you uncover more of the truth of who you are.

And who you are is powerful, undeniably human, and ready to shine in this world. Unhealed pain is the barrier to brightness. Your healing
becomes a light that dispels your own darkness, and that of your fellow humans. In whatever way you shine, you dispel darkness whether that’s through public service, creativity, compassionate parenting, leadership, or stillness. You are ready, and you are the one you’ve been waiting for, the one we’ve all been waiting for. Go be your biggest, truest self and the world will rise to meet you.

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I try to find the silence
But the noise has taken hold
Seeking solace takes a toll
Am I healing?

Stillness speaks so softly
I make room for it to grow
Impatience burning low
Am I listening?

The weight of grace bends my knees
Tears wash my soul clean
Show a purpose, present but unseen
Am I shining?

I stand, speak loudly of this joy
My voice reclaimed
My spirit named
I am
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