



## **THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF SUFFERING**

**By: Donald Phelps, Ph.D.**

**Presented at:  
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**2015 NACSW CONFERENCE**  
**THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF SUFFERING**

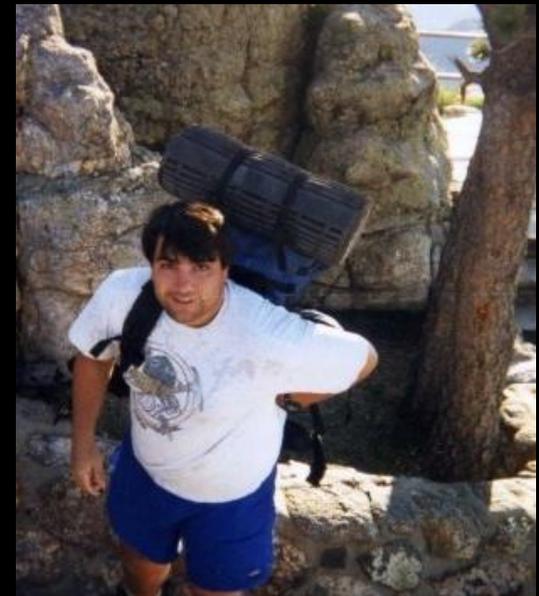
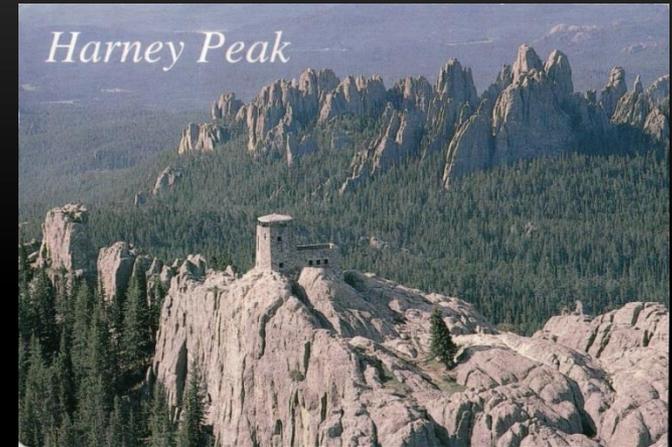
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**November 13, 2015**

*“And the time came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” Anais Nin*

*“Pain insists on being attended to., God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” --The Problem of Pain, C.S. Lewis*

# WHY THIS? WHO CARES?

- My mother's death in 1993 and the dark place it brought me to. What lessons am I to learn? Why was there such a shift for me internally and spiritually?
- It occurred to me that I was meeting clients in some of the darkest moments of their lives, and that they too were going through this change process.
- If I could learn to be more comfortable, awake and open during my moments of crises and transition, it may help me:
  - Strengthen my faith and
  - Learn, grow and develop
  - Be more compassionate and facilitate others through their pain



# WHAT I WILL AND WILL NOT BE COVERING TODAY

- What today's session is not about: "Why is there suffering?", Theodicy.
- I believe that suffering is a universal aspect of our human existence. There are plenty of examples of suffering in the Bible. There are many examples of people who have been transformed by their suffering. We are molded and refined by the process.
- There are many types of suffering (physical, psychological, social and spiritual).
- Me and powerpoints (way too much on slides)
- Citations on slides

Christianity does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, but it does provide deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair

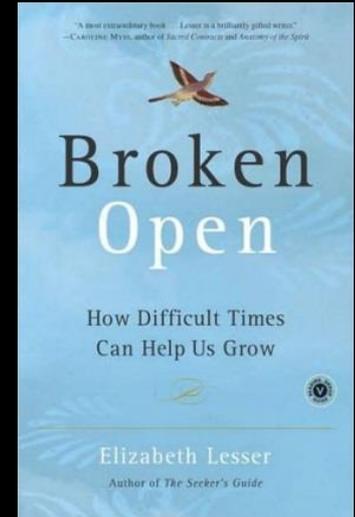
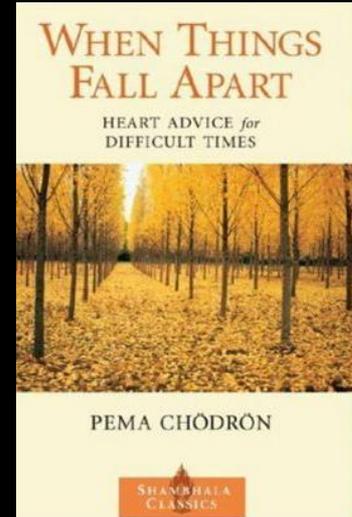
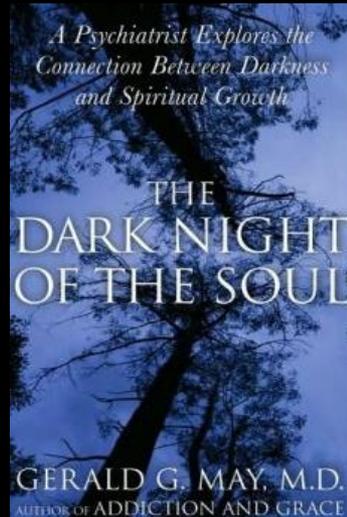
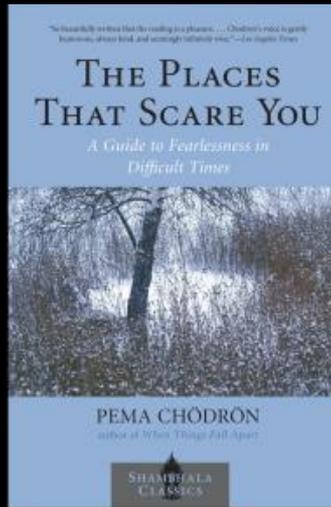
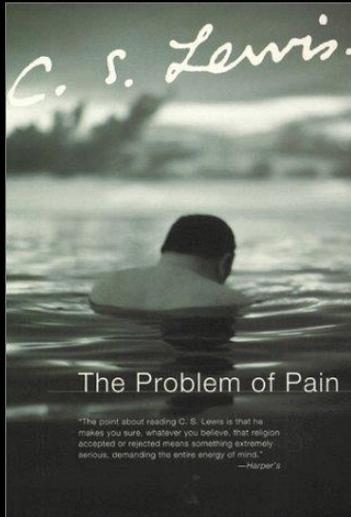
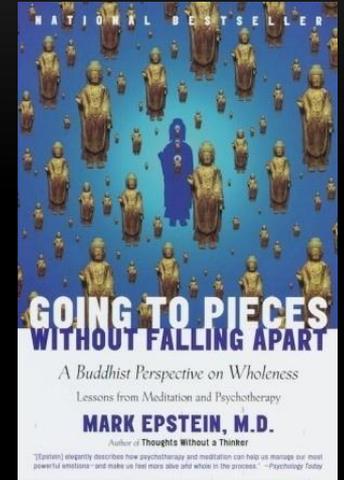
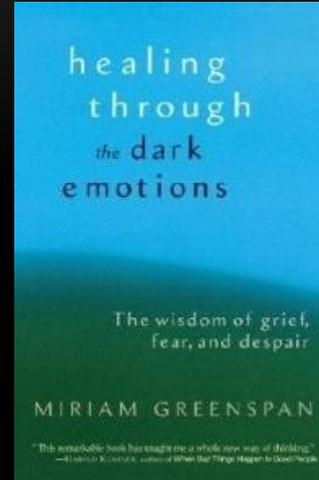
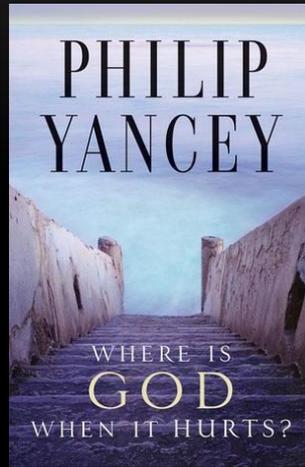
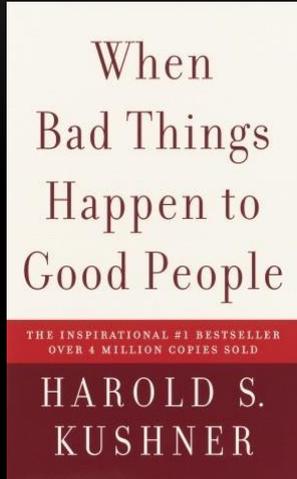
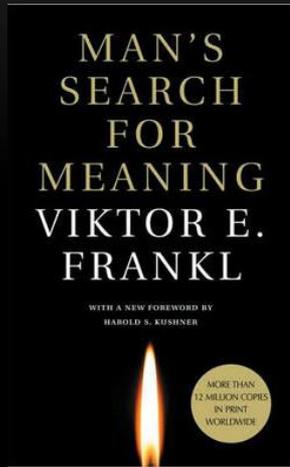
— *Timothy Keller* —

Photos from: [www.azquotes.com](http://www.azquotes.com)

Charles Spurgeon

I am certain that I never did grow in grace one-half so much anywhere as I have upon the bed of pain.

# I STARTED READING AND STUDYING



# THE GIFT OF CRISIS, CHANGE AND TRANSITIONS

- **Developmental life crisis** are events in the normal flow of growth (e.g. birth of a child, graduation from college, midlife career change, or retirement).
- **Situational crises** are extraordinary events that an individual has no way of forecasting or controlling (e.g. death of a family member, chronic illness, natural disaster)
- **Existential crises** refer to the inner conflicts and anxieties that accompany important issues of purpose, responsibility, independence,, freedom, and commitment.

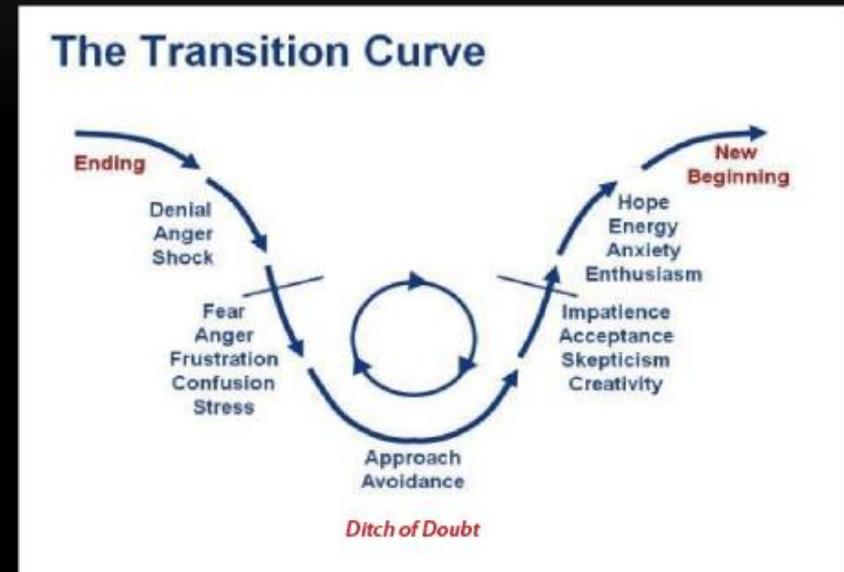


Photo from: [www.righttojoy.com](http://www.righttojoy.com)

# The Change and Transformation Process: A Spiritual Process

Finding external symbols  
for internal experiences

Holding environment:  
Trust vs. mistrust  
Safe vs. unsafe  
Predictable vs. chaotic

**Forces of dark and light**

**Anxiety**

**Safety**

**Emotional literacy**

**Old Identity**  
Safety in known,  
Fear, despair, suffering  
Control, manage, med. feelings  
Familiar behaviors  
Internal,/external discomfort  
“endings”

**Transition Zone**  
Role confusion,  
Misperceptions,  
Questioning,  
Exploration of  
values & beliefs,  
Protective factors (bio-  
psycho-social-cultural-  
spiritual),  
coping skills,  
resiliency,  
“neutral zone”  
Darkness and light

**New Identity**  
Scary,  
Hopeful,  
Awkward,  
New behaviors  
“new beginnings”

**Hope**

**Trust**

**Perceived Risk**

**Support**

Mentor, guide, helper,  
coach

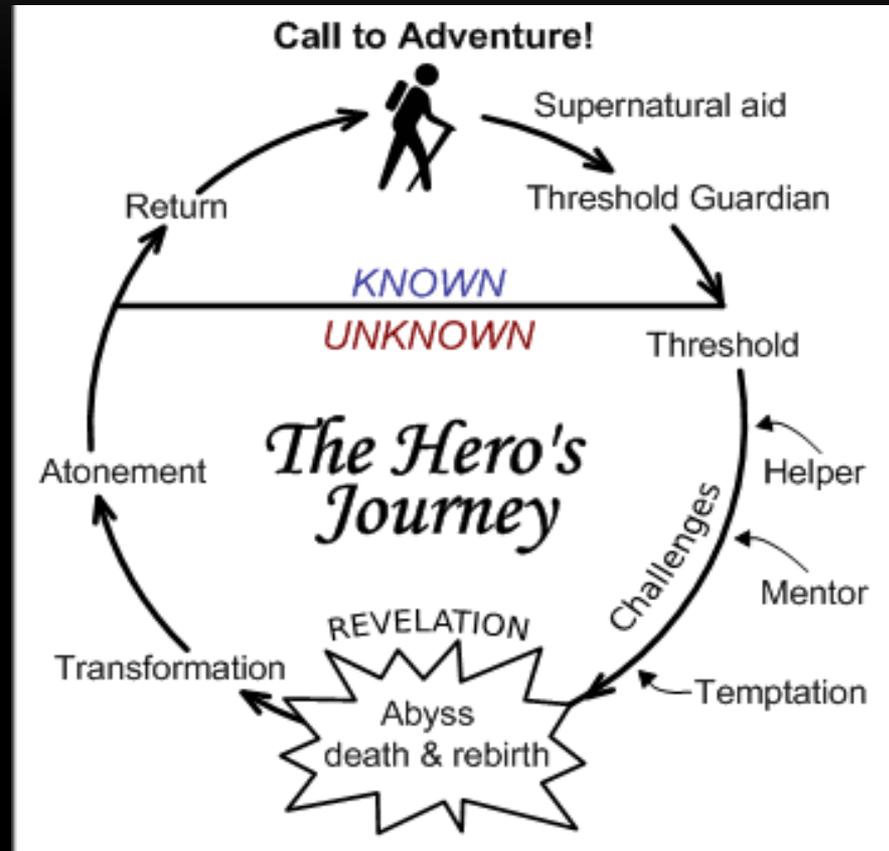
External vs. internal locus  
of control

**Wilderness, Desert, Dark Night of the Soul,  
Chrysalis**

# THE HERO'S JOURNEY & SPIRITUAL QUEST - JOSEPH CAMPBELL

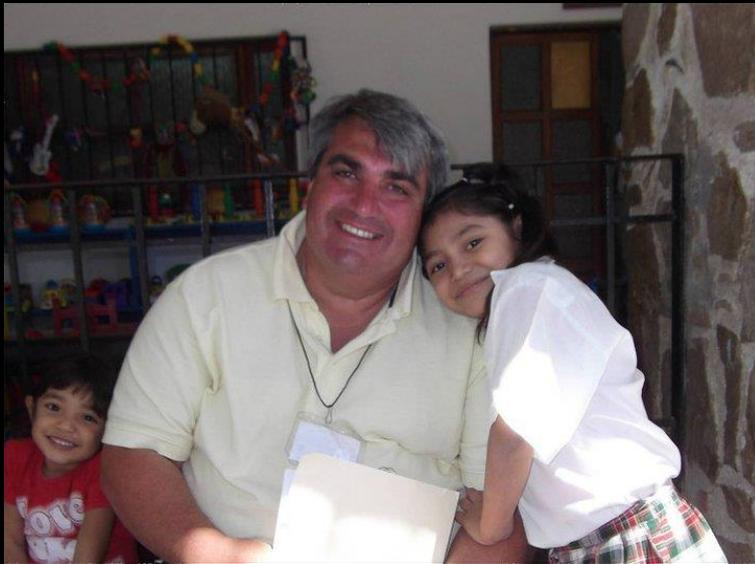
Some examples:

- Wizard of Oz
- Star Wars
- Lord of the Rings
- Chronicles of Narnia
- Harry Potter
- Lion King
- Finding Nemo
- The Matrix
- Tron
- Avatar
- Mulan



“Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed.” G.K. Chesterton

# LESSONS IN TRANSFORMATIONAL SUFFERING “CASA HOGAR LOS ANGELITOS” ORPHANAGE



“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.” - Kahlil Gibran

# SUFFERING AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

- Researchers interviewed people who had suffered traumatic life-events such as bereavement, serious illness, fires, combat and becoming refugees.
- They found that dealing with this trauma was often a powerful spur for personal development.
- It wasn't just a question of learning to cope with or adjust to negative situations; they actually gained some significant benefits from them. They called this post-traumatic growth.



Photo from: [www.trauma-informed.ca](http://www.trauma-informed.ca)

"After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you." 1 Peter 5:10

Photo from: [www.creativlei.com](http://www.creativlei.com)

# SUFFERING AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH (CONT.)

- People who had suffered traumatic life-events also experienced positive life changes.
- They gained a new inner strength and discovered skills and abilities they never knew they possessed.
- They became more confident and appreciative of life, particularly of the 'small things' that they used to take for granted (sense of gratitude).

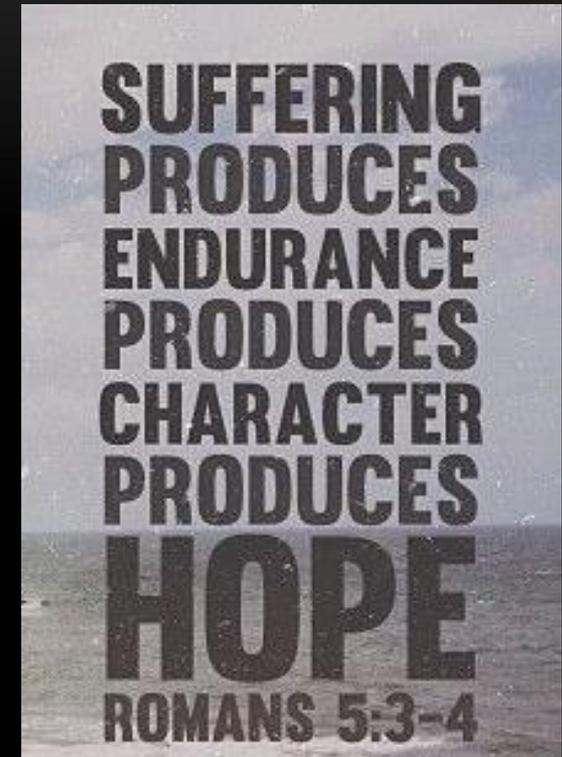


Photo from: [www.mustbelaura.com](http://www.mustbelaura.com)

# SUFFERING AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH (CONT.)

- They became more compassionate with the sufferings of others, and more comfortable with intimacy, so that they had deeper and more satisfying relationships.
- One of the most common changes was that they developed a more “spiritual” attitude to life.
- Their suffering led them to a deeper level of awareness and awakening.

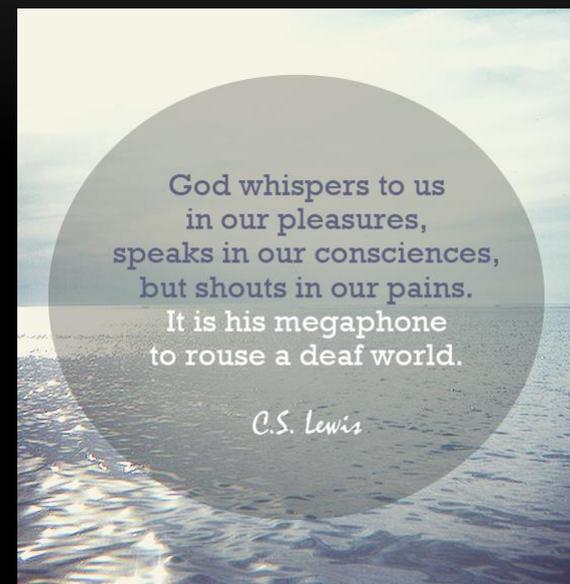


Photo from: [www.kevinhalloran.ne](http://www.kevinhalloran.ne)

# QUOTE: SUFFERING AND MEANING

Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Victor Frankl wrote in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*:

"For what matters above all is the attitude we take toward suffering, the attitude in which we take our suffering upon ourselves. Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way in the moment that it finds a meaning."



Photo from : [www.viktorfrankl.org](http://www.viktorfrankl.org)

## QUOTE: SUFFERING AND MEANING (CONT.)

The Russian novelist Dostoevsky wrote:

"There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings. Our sufferings can be either obstacles or opportunities. The only difference is how we view them. Our experiences can be either stumbling blocks or stepping-stones on the path of life. The difference is how we use them. It is not our circumstances but how we react to them that matters. It is not what happens to us, but what we do with what happens that matters the most in life."

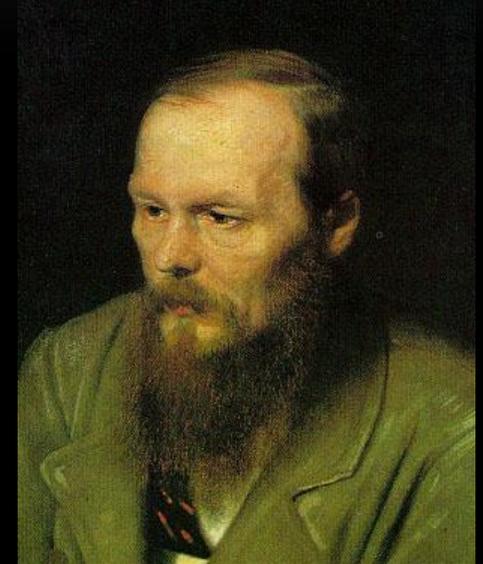


Photo from: [www.fdostoevsky.ru](http://www.fdostoevsky.ru)

# QUOTE: SUFFERING AND MEANING (CONT.)

In *Trauma and the Soul*, Donald Kalsched wrote:

“In those places where we are broken, we may be graced again with the experience of wholeness. But if this is to happen, we will have to permit ourselves to surrender to the broken places again, now surrounded by a thorn-bush of defenses, ready to shoot poison darts at us if we try. Sometimes our courage fails us and we are not up to the surrender. Then life’s tragedies are left to break us open once again, giving us a glimpse of the lost wholeness, however ambivalent we may be about it.”



Photo from:  
[sahrishiftikhar.wordpress.com](http://sahrishiftikhar.wordpress.com)

Kalsched, D. (2013). *Trauma and the soul: A psycho-spiritual approach to human development and its interruption*. Routledge: London

# DIFFICULT EMOTIONS AND SUFFERING

- Difficult and painful (vs. negative) emotions include anger, sadness, anxiety, grief, shame, fear, and discouragement.
- It's the nonproductive ways we react to these emotions that perpetuates most of our pain.
- Painful emotions are at the root of many of the psychological “disorders” of our time (depression, anxiety, addiction, violence, and emotional numbing).
- Instead of ‘turning away’ from pain we can learn to gently, slowly, mindfully and incrementally ‘turn towards’ or lean into the discomfort we’re experiencing.
- Ignoring difficult emotions only intensifies them.

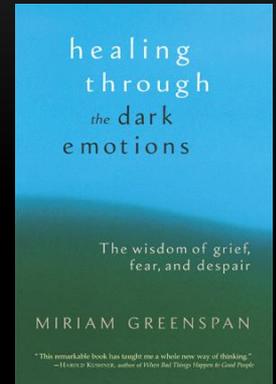


Photo from:  
[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

# SHINY, HAPPY PEOPLE

- Americans have an expectation that they should always strive for happiness. When something painful happens, we feel that we have failed at achieving “the good life”.
- Suffering is considered pathology by many and must be avoided at all cost. Christians often associate mental well-being with closeness to God. Anything less than that can be seen as a personal weakness.
- We are much better at inflicting hurt pain than feeling it.
- Richard Rohr, “If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.” We off-load pain, instead of embracing it.
- How are you? Fine or busy.



Photo from: <http://new-you.me>

Rohr, R. (2013). *Yes, and...: Daily meditations*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media. p. 251

Brown Taylor, B. (2014). *Learning to walk in the dark*. New York: HarperCollins Publisher.

# PAINTING WITH ALL OF THE COLORS

- As social workers, being fully present and truly listening to another's pain is a primary form of nurturance.
- We must help our clients expand the range of emotional colors on their palettes .
- We must be cautious not to go for the quick fix, trying to solve a problem with “three easy steps”.
- We must fully engage our life, as it is, with our whole hearts. We need to courageously be willing to listen to what the heart has to teach is and discover the heart's native intelligence.



Photo from  
[www.painting-techniques.net](http://www.painting-techniques.net)

# WHY WE AVOID DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

- Emotion phobia - we fear and devalue them our emotions because of the duality of reason versus emotion.
  - We seek out emotional intensity vicariously (reality shows) because when we are emotionally numb, we need a great deal of stimulation to feel something, anything.
  - So *emotional “pornography”* provides the stimulation.



Photo from:  
<http://uniconoclast.com>

Thomas, A., & Chess, S. (1977). *Temperament and development*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Ungar, M. & Lerner, R. (Eds.) (2008). Special Issue: Resilience and positive development across the life span. *Research in Human Development*, 5(3).

# WHY WE AVOID DIFFICULT EMOTIONS (CONT.)

- Temperament - level of emotional excitability or intensity (easy, difficult, slow to warm up), emotional sensitivity, pain tolerance.
- Emotional resiliency - the ability to steer through serious life challenges and find ways to bounce back and to thrive.
- Emotional literacy and emotional intelligence.
- Exposure to consistent, predictable and nurturing adults that promote creative expression and understand the language of the heart.

Thomas, A., & Chess, S. (1977). *Temperament and development*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Ungar, M. & Lerner, R. (Eds.) (2008). Special Issue: Resilience and positive development across the life span. *Research in Human Development*, 5(3).

Photo from: <http://uniconoclast.com>

# WHY WE AVOID DIFFICULT EMOTIONS (CONT.)

- Our emotional teachers - strengths and blind spots - Sometimes unconsciously and with good intentions, our caregivers did whatever they could to influence us to bury the feelings. “Get ahold of yourself.” “Boys don’t cry.” “Get a grip.” “Stay in charge.”
- Survival - Kids who grow up in toxic home environments learn three important survival skills (Don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel).



Photo from:  
<https://spellmancann.com>

# AVOIDING DIFFICULT EMOTIONS (CONT.)

- Emotional regulation and self soothing – healthy and unhealthy coping skills
- Role models, heroes, media, social expectations, cultural factors and gender stereotypes
- Fear of emotional flooding and becoming overwhelmed by our emotions.
- Coping skills - Overwhelming emotions often occur during painful turning points in our lives and we are rarely in shape (internal & external resources) for dealing with them without practice and mentoring.

Thompson, R. A. (1991). Emotional regulation and emotional development. *Educational Psychology Review*, 3(4), 269-307.

Whittle, R., Walker, M., Medd, W., & Mort, M. (2012). Flood of emotions: emotional work and long-term disaster recovery. *Emotion, space and society*, 5(1), 60-69.

# SO WE AVOID, MEDICATE, NUMB AND TRY TO CONTROL DIFFICULT FEELINGS.

- We may get short term relief through maladaptive coping skills but avoiding difficult emotions can actually triggers additional painful emotions, resulting in more increased emotional pain.



# NUMBING PAINFUL EMOTIONS

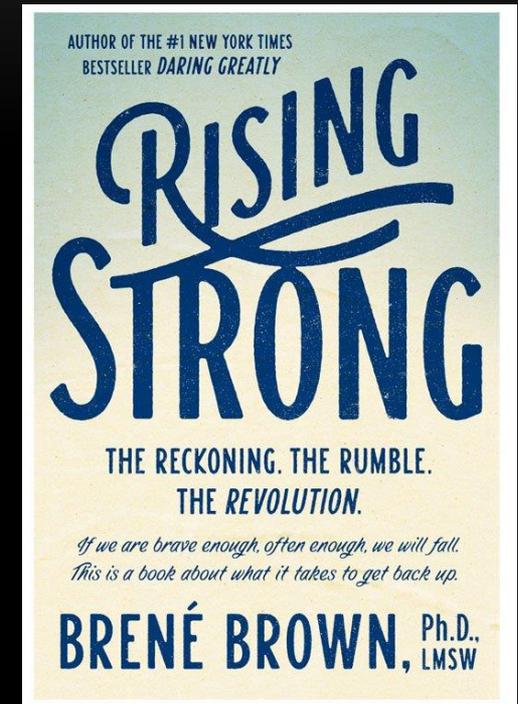
- Some of us have had the experience of feeling emotionally “frozen” or cut off from our feelings (walking dead).
- We numb through compulsive behavior (e.g. shop, eat, drink, work) or prescription medication.
- We numb with perfectionism and our need to control (if I can control everything than I won't feel so out of control).
- We take refuge in our false self and don't allow ourselves to be truly seen. We lack authenticity.



Photos from: <http://therawness.com>

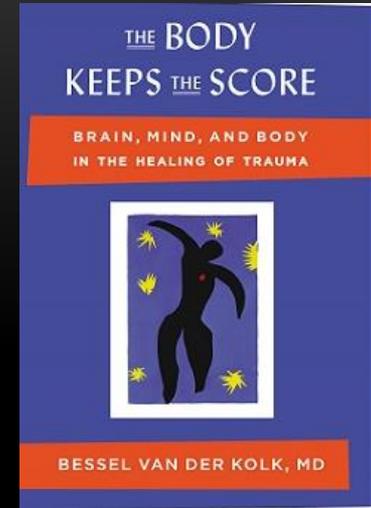
# THE PROBLEM WITH NUMBING PAINFUL EMOTIONS

- You can't selectively numb emotions. If you numb pain and sorrow, you will also numb your ability to experience joy and happiness.
- Difficult emotions have to be acknowledged and expressed, because these wounds can damage the roots from which love grows.



# WAYS WE DEAL WITH HURT

- Pushing the hurt down until one day it's all unleashed at once in a fit of rage or emotional flooding.
- Perpetually holding on to hurt until it begins to manifest in your body. The body keeps score, and it always wins.
- Stuck emotions put stress on the body. If we don't work through the emotion, it just sits in our bodies and contributes to ill health.
- Try to think our way through it. Rational thought trumps emotions and denies the transformative power of God.
- Our internal world – house metaphor

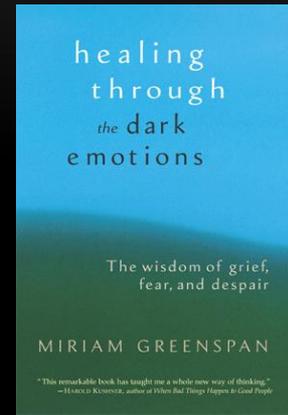


Brown, B. (2015). *Rising strong*. New York: Penguin Random House.

Van der Kolk, B.A. (2014) *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York: Penguin.

# LEARNING TO EXPERIENCE ALL EMOTIONS

- Miriam Greenspan wrote “It’s like learning to swim as a child, when the water is inviting but also frightening. If we want to swim, we must listen to our bodies. We must learn all the different movements—the arm stroke, the leg kick, the head motion, the synchronized breathing—and how to coordinate them. But in the end, it comes down to taking the risk and plunging in. Then, feeling our bodies in the water, we notice something wonderful that helps us overcome our fear: We are buoyed up! The water holds us up and carries us.”



# THREE BASIC SKILLS IN LEARNING TO GRACEFULLY WALK THROUGH SUFFERING

1. **Paying attention** - The mind, heart and spirit are engaged and mindfully focused on using difficult emotions for the purpose of healing.
2. **Befriending** - The way of non-action. When we don't turn away from pain, we open our hearts and are more able to connect to the best part of ourselves and others, because every human being knows pain.
3. **Radical acceptance** - In the way of action, we act not in order to distract ourselves from emotion but in order to use its energy with the intention of transformation. Instead of distracting or numbing habits, increase calming activities (meditation, therapy, creative pursuits, appropriate touch, exercise, yoga, nature, gardening, authentic conversation, listening to music).

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