



On Healing

vol. 1: Advice for Being Human

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Addiction Is Just an Adaptation

Healthy people aren't addicted.

The thought appeared like a headlight on a dark road: irritating, blinding, and painfully illuminating. I was having a smoke break outside a friend's home when, like a sharp laugh from the back of my brain bubbling up through my consciousness, I found myself thinking, *Healthy people aren't addicted.*

I hadn't thought of myself as much of an addict. I thought of myself as a smoker. I thought of myself as a pretty emotionally healthy person, on the whole, what with my stable, loving parents, my self-awareness, my authentic communication and relationships, and my active practice of dissolving the worst of my socialization. I'm not lost in spiraling addiction meant to soothe the pain of unhealed childhood trauma. I just smoke cigarettes. Compulsively. Almost a pack a day. Even when I'm sick. No matter what.

And yet the thought has kept nagging me: *Healthy people aren't addicted.*

Try as I might to talk myself out of the seriousness of my dependence on nicotine, it is a legitimate and harmful addiction. Try as I might to normalize my behavior, the ubiquity of smoking doesn't stop it from being an addiction. And try as I might to tell myself that the thought "healthy

people aren't addicted" is judgmental drivel, I can't stop my certainty that it was and is true.

If I am addicted, and I am, then something in my psyche is damaged and is using nicotine to soothe the pain of its unmet needs.

Let me be clear: I feel no contempt for addicts. Addiction is not a sin—it's an adaptation. Many of us become addicted to survive, usually in the face of physical or emotional pain and trauma. Addiction is a whirlpool we get caught in trying to clean our wounds in the wrong water. The act of soothing the pain was necessary to our survival, and so we kept doing it. There is no evil in that—it just is, and it's sad.

I also think the term "healthy" is used too often as a stand-in for some kind of moral goodness. We've come to worship clean eating and physical fitness as though these are the greatest tests of character and anyone who falls short of perfect health is worthy of scorn and derision. "Health" as we know it is deeply commercialized, classist, judgmental, misunderstood, and just plain annoying in its mainstream incarnation.

When I say that healthy people aren't addicted, what I mean is that addiction lives in the places where we are unhealed, where it perpetuates and exacerbates the damage. Addiction is a warped adaptation to some chronic pain or injury. It is the opposite of healing. From opioids to fossil fuels, we are a society consumed with addiction, continuously trying to fill the void and only ever

expanding it. An addiction so often begins as simple self-medication, or even prescribed medication, to alleviate pain, that explodes into a wildfire in the psyche, sacrificing everything to its burn until the addiction is all that's left. Addiction becomes its own injury to heal.

For so long, I believed I was doing the work I needed to do within myself to dig into awareness, to process, to heal and grow. I was doing it all, and I was doing it right. I felt like I couldn't do anymore, to the point where I started to believe that any interpersonal pain that arose in my life could only be the fault of others. *I'm healed, I'm healed, I'm healed.*

But I was smoking a pack a day, deeply addicted, unable to get through an afternoon without the release of stepping outside to reset and escape, knowing that healthy people, generally, aren't addicted. Smoking is a crutch, and there is some injury causing me to lean on it.

I heard somewhere that the truth of addiction is that it's fundamentally an inability to sit alone, by yourself, in an empty room. When confronted with emptiness and nothingness, the void must be filled with something, and that something can become compulsive to the point of destructiveness.

I heard somewhere else that addiction is fundamentally about isolation, and is remedied with authentic connection. It is our experience of disconnection, alienation, and loneliness that causes us to become

addicts, with genuine love and connection as the only real antidotes.

This past weekend, I smoked what I hope will prove to be my last cigarette. It's been four days and my resolve is already being tested, but so far, it's held up. It never has before.

With each passing craving that goes unmet, the lump in my throat grows. The tightness in my chest squeezes harder. As I write this through the agonizing emptiness of withdrawal, I'm forced to start feeling through the places in my psyche the addiction has been masking these past few years.

What I keep thinking about now is how to reconcile those two understandings of addiction: the inability to sit alone in an empty room, and the lack of connection.

What I've realized is that they are both still symptoms, and symptoms of the same root cause: a lack of connection to myself. When sitting alone in an empty room brings up feelings of isolation, alienation, and a lack of connection, that is the kingdom where addiction can reign.

Funnily enough, just before I decided to quit smoking, I'd been starting to crave a shift in my experience. After a string of fast-paced and intense romances that ultimately led to heartbreak, it had been dawning on me that the depth of connection I truly needed to counteract the crushing loneliness I always seemed to feel would not be found in a relationship. After several years of traveling,

moving, and short-term living situations, I started to realize that the feeling of belonging I've been seeking will not arise from a physical place.

What I've actually been craving is the ability to sit alone, by myself, in an empty room and feel whole, feel connected, feel love, feel belonging, feel home.

From cigarettes to Facebook, from traveling to sex, my compulsions have only ever been attempts to fill in a vast and hollow void. Every behavior done compulsively (and therefore, unconsciously), from the socially tolerable to the obviously destructive, arose to avoid the pain of sitting alone with myself in an empty room and feeling profoundly alienated.

Here, in the midst of the anxiety and misery of withdrawal, with a weight in my stomach and my fingers unable to stop fidgeting and my brain aware of precisely how short of a walk it is to the nearest gas station and a pack of turquoise American Spirits, I'm taking a moment to breathe. To ease off the crutch and sit with the pain of not feeling at home in myself, and commit to this journey back to wholeness.

This process will not be pretty, and it will not be easy. Giving up my addiction is one difficult and necessary step along the path to healing.

In realizing I've gotten lost, I'm on my way to being found again. I want a fucking cigarette, but more than that, I want to, someday, be able to sit with myself in an empty room and know that I can never be alone as long as I am with

myself. To know that no matter where I am, I am one with myself, and I am home.

Will Puke for Power

I was thirteen years old the first time I stuck my fingers down my throat. I'd just started high school then, Bush was still the president and I'd never been kissed before. By fourteen, it was an everyday ritual. I'd slink off to the bathroom after meals, tie up my hair, bend down as if in prayer, suck my abdomen back towards my spine and out it all would come. All my little sins cleaned out in one satisfying waterfall. On the good days, I didn't even need to use my fingers. My body just knew what to do.

My bulimia never felt much like a disease. I wasn't born with it. I didn't catch it. There was no medication a doctor could put me on to just clear it up; when they tried, it didn't work. In college I wrote a poem about bulimia. I wrote, "They call it nervosa, but nervous never felt so safe." See, a disease doesn't make you feel like that; by definition of a *dis-ease*, you cannot be *at ease* with it. Bulimia, though, it felt like going home.

Bingeing held all the exhilaration of an open road. It was the freedom to let loose, the promise that life was full of beauty and possibility and I could indulge in all of it as much as I wanted to. I never had to say No. Purging was the warm hand patting my back saying, "See? You've got this. You're in control." Looking at the pulverized ghost of a meal swirl away down the toilet bowl, tears streaming from

my eyes, I'd swell with a sense of pride. I did it. I won. I had my cake and ate it too, and still I wouldn't get fat.

I always saw bulimia less like a disorder than an addiction. I got high from it. I felt safe in it. Like all addictions, it was a utilitarian means of meeting some deep emotional need I couldn't get met. I don't much like the way we've started medicalizing addiction into terms like "alcohol use disorder." It turns the focus in the wrong direction. It makes us look at the object of addiction, when addiction lives in the relationship. No addiction can be understood without knowing the unholy intimacy between an addict and her fix.

I've been addicted to many things, but I've only ever had one addiction. As a teen, I loved bulimia. In my twenties, I loved cigarettes. Either way, the love was just the same. I was devoted to bulimia. I followed it faithfully and obeyed it like a servant. The root of the word addict is the Latin *addictus*, which means a debt slave. An *addictus* is bound to his creditor, enslaved to him until his debt is paid.

When lecturing about addiction, physician and addiction scholar Dr. Gabor Maté never asks audiences what they've been addicted to. He asks instead, "What did your addiction give you?" Was it a sense of control, self-esteem or relief from pain? Did it make life feel worth living? Did it allow you to experience fearlessness or freedom? Did it just make the shit stop? From this perspective, it doesn't matter if the addiction is heroin or gambling, alcohol or CrossFit. The object of the addiction varies, but whatever it

is, it's used to meet a deep need that seems perpetually insatiable. The debt slavery of the addict is ubiquitous.

What debt enslaved me to bulimia?

I was twenty when I stopped puking. The habit seemed to wither out and die all on its own, but in retrospect, it fell away as other aspects of my life began to rise. I'd started writing again. I'd fallen in love with anarchist philosophy. I'd lived abroad in Port-au-Prince and found a sense of freedom. My life seemed like it had a direction that belonged to me, like I stood at the start of an open road and I was free to run.

By then, my debt was paid. The need was being met elsewhere, for freedom and excitement, for comfort and control. I stopped puking like I stopped playing with dolls as a child. I don't know why. It had been everything, a whole world of my own, until other things began to catch my eye and one day, it was done.

But still, the creditor was not done with me. In the eight years since I quit bulimia, my relationships with food and with my body have still not been healthy. Food was still my favorite comfort, the first friend I went to whenever things got hard. I could connect better to a bar of chocolate than I could to most people, feel more at home and less judged in its presence than I could just by myself.

The mirror was still a fair-weather friend, catty and judgmental and waiting for any opportunity to stick the knife in. Until, one summer, it decided to let me into the

club. Some sweet spot combination of traveling, dietary changes and chain smoking had led to me dropping nearly twenty pounds over two years. All of the sudden, the mirror was my best friend. Some days I'd just stand in front of it and stare at my body, turning it slightly this way and that, marveling at how miraculous I looked.

For most of the past three years, I've finally had the body I've always wanted — at least, in terms of looks. It's been as exhilarating and gratifying as I'd always hoped it would be. On hot summer days, men stop their cars and stare as I walk by. Men order me drinks at the bar and tell the waitress to tell me I'm beautiful. I'm friendlier to people and they're much friendlier back. I feel confident. I feel at ease. I feel beautiful.

And still, the creditor is not done with me.

Because when I quit smoking, I ate. My perfectly taught stomach grew soft, and my confidence softened like cardboard in the rain. I'd grown so use to the high of feeling hot that the minute it was gone, I was on the floor again. In time I got my body back, and with it my mojo, and then I was soaring high on beauty and confidence again. Then I got sick for a while and I couldn't exercise much. Then I was back on the floor.

It's not bingeing or purging, not anymore, but there's still an addiction rollercoaster slamming me up and down. I'm high or I'm horrible. There is no in between. I may have

stopped puking, but I have not quit the addiction. My debt remains unpaid.

So what debt keeps me enslaved?

It's different now, the debt I owe. The debt I pay to beauty is not the same debt that I paid to the toilet bowl, though it has a similar root. It took a lot of digging, but here I have the answer: I crave looking good because I crave power. I crave the attention and the safety of being liked by everyone, especially the boys.

I fear getting fat, not because there is anything wrong with being fat, but because I fear that if men don't think I'm fuckable, I'll be invisible and powerless. When you're beautiful, people automatically assume that you're an angel. Your fuck-ups are cute. Your anger is sexy. Your problems are interesting and aesthetic and everyone wants to help you solve them.

If you're not, if you're anywhere below the top shelf ranging from pretty cute to ugly, you don't get that perpetual get-out-of-jail free card. You don't get any special perks. Maybe, here and there, you do — but you can't depend on them. I finally got my special perks and I am terrified of letting them go.

And so I beg with my creditor to please not send me back. Not to the world where I'm halfway forgettable to a room full of people. Let me stay forever in this Eden where I have the power and safety of beauty. Let the high last forever. Let it last, let it last. Don't cast me out, not yet.

On the bad days, I want to put my fingers down my throat. My partner loves my body, even when it's soft, but that still is not enough for me to pay my debts. I've quit all of my toxic habits and my body's getting healthy, day by day, but still it's not enough. I got off social media. I hardly ever shop for clothes. I try to focus on my health more than my looks.

I think it's getting better, bit by bit, but it's a long, hard road out of Hell.

I wonder when I'll stop craving the power. I wonder who I'll be when I feel safe. I wonder what it's like to feel so fully comfortable, so completely at ease, that there is no more debt to pay. This urge make and pay these emotional debts — this is our great disease.

In my more Buddhist moments, I see the debts for what they are: they're all just hollow phantoms, making hungry ghosts of us all. It doesn't matter if it's power or money, beauty or control. It could be financial security, career success, the perfect family. It could be heroin or cocaine, gambling or sex. It could be anything, any debt we believe we have to pay before we can be satisfied. It takes practice to remember that every last one of them is made up.

Until we really live that, though —until I'm able to sustain the lived understanding that these debts are all illusions — I'll continue to be an *addictus*. One great shell game, swapping addictions in and out. Bulimia gives way to cigarettes gives way to beauty gives way to something else.

I know it will continue, on and on and on, until the day when I can sit alone in an empty room and feel no war against it.

I'm learning how to find ease with myself and my surroundings. I'm learning how to really love my body, how to listen to it and care for it. I've started seeing food as sustenance or art, and nothing more. I'm learning to wage peace with it all. It's an uphill battle against a whole civilization where everything is some kind of war and no one is every good enough to win it.

I know now, though, that peace is the only way to stop seeking power. I know now that if I say I am not good enough, not safe enough, not free enough, then I've constructed a world full of creditors eager to enslave me. I know that only I can set myself free.

Last night, I lied awake imagining myself aging into cultural invisibility. I imagined losing my beauty, my youth, how the eyes would pass over me like a part of the furniture. I imagined impressing no one, attracting no attention, ruling over nothing. The fear clenched around my stomach like a fist. *No — I won't go back there.* Tighter, imagining faces laughing at my attempts to be beautiful, frowning with surprise and pity that I'd think myself anything special. The fear gripped tighter, so tight I thought I would puke.

And then, I didn't. Instead, I laughed, because my body felt light like a bird. I felt built to take flight up from crowd to where you couldn't hear the noise anymore. Up in silence

to the place with no mirrors. Irish goodbye all the games. I laughed because I felt the freedom of invisibility, and for a moment, my debt was paid.

Why We Play the Victim

There are exactly two reasons why a person views themselves as “the victim” in their own life story:

Reason One: They’re Ego-driven, immature, sniveling cowards who cannot take responsibility for themselves or how their thoughts and actions are shaping their circumstances. If only they’d do a Law of Attraction meditation, read *The Secret*, get off of the couch and go to 6 AM Vinyasa Flow, they’d quickly learn they have complete control over their reality and all of this victimhood nonsense is a coping mechanism for their Ego. But not you, Brenda — you are fully in control of your life, Brenda. You are not a victim.

Reason Two: They’re actual victims who aren’t in control of their circumstances. They’ve genuinely been dealt a tougher hand by the crapshoot incarnation lottery. Decisions over which they had no control caused some parts of life to be much harder for them than they might be for you. Big or small, most of their pain directly stems from capitalism, racism, sexism, childhood trauma, etc., and there’s absolutely no hope for their lives because they have no agency whatsoever to shape society at large or change

what happened to them, so we might as well lie down and wait for climate change to kill us all, Brenda.

Look, Brenda: Both of these attitudes towards victimhood are bullshit, because both of them are true.

We are all subject to forces beyond our control, many of which have the power to profoundly shape our own lived experiences. We are also the primary curators (if not outright creators) of our lived experiences, and we too have the power to profoundly shape our own lived experiences. At any given moment, both statements are true.

This does not mean that, in any given circumstance, both statements will be equally helpful to someone's feelings.

Let's play a game:

Your friend Brenda just got fired. Her landlord wants to raise her rent. Her grandma is terminally ill. Her dog just ran away. And worst of all, her boyfriend wants to move to Portland.

Which of the following responses will help Brenda cope with the situation?

Option A: I'm so sorry for you, Brenda. I don't understand how this can all be happening to you. You don't deserve

this. It's so unfair. I mean getting fired was bad enough, and now Portland? I don't know how you deal with it. I wish the universe would cut you a break; you've dealt with enough!

Option B: I can't wait to see how you turn this around, Brenda. You're so strong, I know you'll pull through. You have so much power to make your life the life you want it to be. You take action against that landlord and organize your neighbors into a tenant's union! You've got the power to make something awesome out of all of this!

The answer is, obviously, that both responses are obnoxious and Brenda has every right to punch you for trying either one verbatim. But the point is, which direction Brenda should be encouraged to go right now depends entirely on where Brenda is right now.

The downside of feeling empowered is that it's easy to also feel at fault for one's situation. After all, if we have the power to change our situation, that means that if our situation continues to be painful, we are (at least in part) responsible for making it so. We may have the power, but we also have the responsibility.

The upside of feeling disempowered is that it's easy to also feel innocent of one's own pain and absolved from causing it. After all, if we have no power to change our situation, that means that if our situation continues to be painful, at least it isn't our fault, so we don't have to add guilt on top

of this. We may not have the power, but at least we don't have the responsibility.

A harmonious human psyche, like a harmonious human body, is one in equilibrium. Whenever we have feelings and needs, we are out of equilibrium, and we pursue the meeting of our needs to put us back in equilibrium. Feeling hunger? Eating food moves us towards equilibrium. Feeling shame? Experiencing unconditional acceptance moves us towards equilibrium. We are constantly moving in the direction of equilibrium, then getting knocked out of it again, then moving once more in the direction of balance. This is, as they say, "life."

Naturally, the direction we must move in to reach equilibrium depends entirely on where we start in relation to equilibrium.

When it comes to questions of agency, victimhood, and responsibility, the truth is always both. We are, in some ways, powerful, and in other ways, powerless. We are the creators of our own experience, just like everyone else, and their experiences tend to bump into ours from time to time and thus change our experience, and vice versa.

Within, Without, Within, Without

This is where I tend to differ from some strictly "spiritual" thinkers, especially those who have a resolute view that we create our own reality. Yes, we do create our own reality, but our reality also creates us. Our reality includes all kinds of structures and systems that shape our experiences,

structures and systems that we did not consciously create or consent to be conditioned by, and over which we alone cannot exercise total control.

Maybe we do fully create our realities, but if that process of creation is not wholly conscious, who, really is doing the creating? Not our conscious selves. We can exercise as little control over our unconscious selves as we can over forces outside of us. Until such a time as we apply our direct attention to understanding how those forces shape us and work to change them, we are powerless relative to them.

You can chalk up the root of your poverty to an unconscious resistance to abundance all you want, but if the source of that resistance remains forever unconscious, you might as well call it Capitalism.

In sum:

Yes, it's all in your head.

External reality is all in your head too.

Your head is also all in external reality.

Like an infinite loop of Russian dolls.

Where you position yourself within the loop changes what it looks like to you, but ultimately, it's always still the same loop containing everything and nothing.

Everything is you.

Nothing is under control.

Don't panic.

The point is — which story you tell yourself depends on what you're lacking. If you're lacking power, and you need a feeling of empowerment, acting as though you're the creator of your own reality will move you in the direction of equilibrium. If you're stuck in guilt and shame, and you need a feeling of absolution, acting as though you're the victim of external circumstances will move you in the direction of equilibrium.

Victimhood: It's About Time

What if I told you that you are both able to change your situation, but you can never stop it from having been what it was?

The “negative” aspects of the victim / change agent dichotomy come from a misunderstanding of time and responsibility. You can always change your situation. You can never go back in time and stop your situation from becoming what it now is. Your situation happened because it happened. An infinity of variables went into creating a universe of circumstances so that your situation happened the way it did. It's also entirely possible that linear time doesn't exist, the past is a constructed memory, the future is a constructed fantasy, and all that exists is Now.

We mix up responsibility with fault. Responsibility means nothing more or less than “ability to respond.”

Whether or not time exists, you cannot be responsible in the past. You have no ability to respond in the past. You can only respond Now. Right now, you have the ability to respond to your circumstances. Nothing you do now can change what happened then that led you to Now.

You-in-the-past is always a victim.

There’s nothing you-in-the-present can do to change the past.

Right here, now, you do have the ability to respond to your situation. You may not be able to fully stop some massive mental or emotional pain, but you can always choose how to respond and shift something in your experience, or your thoughts, or your actions.

Sitting around heartbroken? Not anymore! Now you can be heartbroken while standing on one foot. You can be heartbroken while eating a carrot. You have that ability.

It may seem trite, but taking small responsibilities can go on to teach us greater responsibility and increase our ability to respond, like the ability to shift our thought patterns, to change our habitual behaviors, and ultimately create for ourselves completely different life outcomes. All possible circumstances we face in the future come from what we do right now in the present.

The only time you can be responsible is Now.

What do you do with Now?

Well, the question is, where do you need to go? What side of equilibrium are you stuck on? Too much guilt or too much powerlessness? Too much self-blame for the past or too much disempowerment about the future?

You are a victim, in the sense of a powerless object of external forces, in every single moment but one: this one. In this moment, the only thing you can do is respond to your circumstances. You have the ability to respond. You are responsible. You are creating change.

Your response is just that: a response. What feeling are you responding to? What need are you trying to meet?

It's a compass, not a map.

I Am Responsible for Rape Culture Too

Content warning: this essay discusses sexual assault and rape culture in detail. If these are traumatic topics for you, please be mindful of your emotional safety needs and don't read to your own detriment.

Rape culture — or the societal trend of trivializing sexual assault and tacitly encouraging sexual violence, especially by men against women — works like any culture. It's runs like a current in a river. It moves us in a direction, teaches us how to swim, and we swim in it blindly until we notice it. Then, we notice that it's everywhere.

If you haven't noticed yet, rape culture is everywhere. It's seeped into our politics and media. It's running rampant through our offices and schools. Have you noticed that most rape scenes in film and television are shot from the perspective of the rapist? This trivialization of sexual assault, the repeated excuses made for rapists, the view of sexual assault as scandal rather than violence, and the perpetual blaming of women for being raped are all so ubiquitous, it's enough to make all of our blood boil into oblivion.

The root and impact of all of this are the same: women are seen as objects, and our needs, wants, feelings and boundaries are not understood as worthy of respect on

their own. Rape culture is one of many cultural currents that condition hierarchy, dehumanization and disconnection. In all of these currents, the lower identity on the hierarchy is not treated with full personhood by society.

All those -isms and -phobias work like this. Each looks different, with different victims and perpetrators cast in each, but all of them follow the same pattern of hierarchy and dehumanization. All of them make our society sick. Now, standing together on the precipice of extinction, we ask again and again: how do we even begin to heal from such a deep disease?

Like many women around the world, I am thrilled and hopeful about the impact of the #MeToo movement. As an assault survivor myself, I think it's extremely important that we start building greater consciousness and accountability when it comes to rape culture, and I think the, "Stop teaching women to avoid being raped. Teach men not to rape." narrative is the change we've long been needing. We all live in rape culture, but men are not powerless victims of it. They have the ability to choose how they will respond. Whether or not they choose to rape is not up to us; it's up to them.

For me, it's easy not to rape anybody. It's easy and obvious to listen to other people's cues, to check in with their comfort and ensure they're feeling safe. I was raised as a woman, so I was conditioned to be empathetic and relational. The goal for my gender in society was taught to

me as “the hero’s love interest and/or mother,” meaning that matters of love, relationships and emotional care-giving had to become important parts of my identity.

When you’ve learned to be relational, you pay attention to the subtle cues. When you’ve learned not to be, you don’t. When you’ve learned to empathize, you care. When you’ve learned to dehumanize, you exploit. This is why patriarchy and rape culture are so inextricable from each other: rape culture would be impossible without the ingrained dehumanization of women.

Rape is a chosen act of violence, exploitation and dehumanization. Anyone who rapes could choose not to. What defines rape *culture* is the broader social current that excuses, trivializes and enables the violation of sexual boundaries, especially of women’s sexual boundaries by men. The culture lives in the subtleties, in the conditioning and the responses, making up the sweeping chorus of supporting roles to the act of rape itself.

I am no stranger to these roles. When I study my own conditioning, I see how I was not taught to set and hold my own boundaries, and how neither men nor other women made space in society for me to practice being firm about them. That led to me minimizing my own needs, bending my boundaries and trivializing my own experiences of sexual harm.

Holding our boundaries first requires consciousness about what our boundaries are. This alone already forces a

personal reckoning with the conditioning that's taught women to be obedient and compliant with our objectification. We are raised being conditioned at once to give men what they want from us, and to avoid being too sexual. It's no wonder that so many of us, like myself, grow up not fully understanding what we want in sexual encounters, even less so how to advocate for it, and even less how to respond when our advocacy falls on deaf ears.

I know about that one intimately.

Because the night I was raped, the man who raped me did not understand he was doing anything wrong. Thankfully, the situation wasn't what I'd call violent, or even particularly traumatic for me. I know all about trivialization too — the need I still feel to tell you, *it wasn't that bad*. The guilt I feel at claiming the word "rape" when it didn't look like what I was told violence looks like. But I said No and he did it anyway and that turned the act from sex to rape.

To him, I was naked and in bed and I liked him. My firm No's were just for show, right? That was what he thought. I know because he was authentically confused when, after several long moments of feeling shocked and frozen, my emotions jolted back to life and I pushed him off of me. I know because he didn't apologize. He didn't apologize when I told him the next day that I didn't want to see him again. Years later, when I found his email address and sent him an essay I wrote about that night, and he still didn't apologize.

It is unequivocally not my fault that he ignored my words and violated my boundaries. But in his mind, somehow he authentically did not understand that he was doing something wrong. That is rape culture. That is why the “culture” aspect is so toxic. It works like a current, and the obliviousness it conditions pulls us into the riptide. All of us.

Because that night — it didn’t end there. He was responsible for violating me, but he wasn’t the one who told me not to fight him off. He didn’t tell me not to scream and shout and shove him out of my apartment onto the street. He didn’t make me stand up calmly and walk to the bathroom. He didn’t frown at my reflection in the mirror and try to shrug off what had happened. He didn’t make me walk back to bed, try continue the date as if nothing had gone awry and mentally coerce myself into thinking I did want to have sex with him.

I did that. That is rape culture, too.

He assaulted me, and I responded by trivializing my own assault. He violated me, and I responded by trying to make myself want it. Rape culture guided us both. It guides us all. That’s what makes it a culture.

Throughout my life, I’ve been taught time and time again not to hold my boundaries. I’ve been told to question my needs, act sweetly towards bad men, stay with a toxic partner or try to see things from his perspective. The people who taught me that the most — they weren’t men. They were other women. They were women who didn’t

believe that they themselves could say No, women who hated their anger, women who were friends with those men and didn't want to let the pesky business of abusive behavior disrupt their relationships.

And I absorbed the lesson: I ought not to disrupt the men with my anger either.

Because that night— that was not the only night. That was just the night when I verbally said No. A dozen other nights with a dozen other men, I said Yes or I said nothing. I still didn't want it. I couldn't be sure what wanting even meant. In the mornings, I hated it all the more because I felt like I'd done it to myself. I felt like I'd violated myself. I blamed myself.

Deep down, though, I knew that it wasn't my fault. I knew I never meant to hurt myself. I was confused and conditioned, and I didn't know how to respond. I didn't know how to hold my own boundaries when they were put to the test. My walls were flimsy as curtains, and ignorant men walked right on in where they weren't wanted. They came and they left, and I just took it.

In time, I learned not to blame myself. Instead I blamed the men. I blamed the men and hated them.

It's true that the men bore responsibility for ignoring my signs of discomfort and disinterest. And yet, in my rush to blame them, I ignored a deeper reality: that for me, casting them as the guilty party was less an objective verdict than it

was a defense mechanism against my own feelings of shame and pain. If it wasn't my fault, it must be theirs.

I never questioned the assumption that anyone had to be guilty.

If I was innocent and they were guilty, I could do nothing but hope for the best. I was a victim and they were the perpetrators. My only option was to pray that someday I'd get a good one. And so I kept on capitulating, in all kinds of ways, and I kept on hating the men I capitulated to. It went on and on and on until, for a time, I hated everyone and everything— myself most of all.

But in that rock-bottom place of total loathing, something strange began to happen. In the absence of hope, I found a new kind of strength. I already hated myself, I already hated my life and the world I lived in, so questioning myself and the role I've played in negative patterns stopped feeling scary.

What I learned was that, in those murky encounters when consent was not clear, just blaming men did me a disservice. Calling myself a victim of culture did nothing to help me change the pattern for myself. Calling myself a victim made me powerless.

From there, I started asking the question, "How did I contribute to this, too?" I asked it of myself without judgment. How did I contribute to this, why did I contribute to it, and how could I change going forward? Not just to rape culture, but to all of my pain, all the conditioning I

lived by, all the cultural narcissism and insanity I drank in like water.

I stopped judging my experience like a trial, stopped trying to rule on innocence and guilt, and started looking only at what was happening. I looked at the actions themselves. I did not blame myself, but I did look at how my own behavior contributed to bad situations. In studying my patterns directly, I became capable of understanding and changing the actions that built them.

I stopped viewing myself as powerless in an insatiably unfair world, and started noticing the power I do have. Then, I started enacting that power. It was a slow, hiccuping process, and I'm still a novice at it, but it's a year and a half later and I sure as hell don't hate myself anymore. I don't hate my life anymore. I don't hate men. I don't even hate society.

Because that night — I can't do anything about it now. It's in the past. I can only learn from it and let it change what I do today. Today, if I ask the question, "Who bears responsibility for rape culture?" the only honest answer I can give is: me, too.

In stepping into my responsibility, I don't feel like a victim or a villain. I just feel like a person, a whole human, standing here now with the power that this culture's dehumanization had convinced me to scrape off myself. Rape culture exists, but I don't feel like I live completely at

its mercy anymore. I feel empowered, in my small way, to change it.

Undoing any toxic conditioning is about practicing greater consciousness. I don't want to live locked in victim-villain dichotomy stories that don't allow me room to grow. I contribute to the culture I live in, and I bear responsibility for how I choose to engage with it. Having the ability to respond does not mean I am at fault. There is nothing that makes our trauma our fault. It is possible that I am guiltless, and that I still perpetuate behaviors I can change to help build a better world.

I cannot wait for anyone else to make the world what I want it to be, nor do I believe that I can change it all on my own. No one can. Just as I am not a victim, there are no heroes in this story either. No government can legislate away rape culture. No company can market it out of our minds. No person can give us permission to honor and defend our boundaries. It takes all of us to change all of us.

If I want to change this world, I do that by taking all the responsibility I can get, wherever I can find it. I wield my ability to respond in order to change what's possible. I use it to build a culture of personal and collective empowerment, one crafted by and for our authentic needs. I work towards building a culture of full embodied humans and consensual, conscious action, and I keep learning more every day.

I think, that's what takes back the power that rape culture tries to deny us. That's what levels the hierarchy, what moves us from dehumanization into connection. That's what helps us heal.

Why Addiction Isn't About the Substance

I have a confession to make: I'm just not into festivals. To be honest, I'm not that into psychedelics either. I know, I seem like exactly the kind of person who would be, but there you have it. I've had powerful and miraculous experiences on psychedelics in the past, but they're not something I enjoy or use much anymore. In fact, I have a bit of a bias against regular psychedelic use. It's the same bias I have against chronic festival-going, or regular indulgence in anything that potentially alters our experience. I just don't think it's healthy.

Festivals, like acid trips, are potent experiences. They offer those who engage in them a dramatic, fast, and ultimately short-lived change from everyday living. Potent substances and experiences can be powerfully healing when used sparingly and in right relationship with one's wellbeing. By this I mean that the changes they make to you get integrated into your everyday experience, and you stop relying on the potent substance to instigate the change.

Now, I am certainly not a doctor or a psychologist. I am simply a person who is actively healing from numerous addictions, noticing how the same cycle has played out for me again and again. As a result of those observations, I am of the opinion that any highly potent experience just can't be good for us all the time. If we think it is, we might be

unhealthily dependent on it. An unhealthy dependency is also known as an addiction.

Contemporary science (and at an even more glacial pace, public policy) is steadily catching onto the notion that addiction is not a personal shortcoming. It is not a sin, but a perfectly natural response to trauma. If physician and addiction researcher Dr. Gabor Maté is to be believed, the state of fear produced by early experiences of trauma creates a lifelong pattern of feeling insatiable lack. That constant feeling of lack, of things not being enough as they are now, emerges into a compulsive and detrimental craving for certain substances or behaviors.

Of course, Dr. Maté is not the first or only person to notice this pattern in human behavior. Centuries earlier (if legends are to be believed), an Indian prince named Siddhartha harkened onto the same basic concept and lo, Buddhism was born. The foundational premises of Buddhism, also known as the Four Noble Truths, are as follows: 1) Life is the perpetual pain of insatiable lack. 2) The root cause of that perpetual pain is craving. 3) The cure for the pain is the cessation of craving. 4) You can stop craving by following the Buddha's 12-Step Program, only let's call it the Eightfold Path. The point of it is: get into right relationship with everything.

Centuries before that, in China, a mysterious writer named Lao Tzu penned a book about what life is like if one doesn't experience a chronic state of insatiable lack and instead lives in an experience of right relationship, and lo, Taoism

was born. Also, a lot of other people in India created a whole series of physical and metaphysical practices to unlatch individual perception from separation and lack, and instead yoke it to the ultimate reality of harmonious oneness; they called it Yoga. In ancient Greece and Egypt, they called it “transmutation” instead of “yoking” and the philosophy was called Alchemy. Later on, in Roman-occupied Palestine, a day laborer started teaching that when one doesn’t identify with the painful experience of insatiable lack, one can be infinitely loving and compassionate. Spoiler alert: that guy got nailed to a cross.

The point of all of these examples is to show that every spiritual path is about release from the universal cycle of addiction produced by identification with the self as separate from the rest of existence. That separation is so terrifying and painful that it is universally traumatic. It takes many forms, but its pattern and solution are always the same; whether you call it Ego death or trauma healing, the words are just descriptions.

From this perspective, we can see that, say, the compulsive pursuit of praise is fundamentally the same pattern as the compulsive pursuit of cocaine. While I’d guess that the former addiction is actually more prevalent and equally as damaging to the human psyche, I find it interesting that certain substances find themselves caught up in addictive relationships with us more often than others. For example, I don’t know anyone with a compulsive and detrimental addiction to broccoli.

This begs the question: why are so many people addicted to heroin, and so few addicted to broccoli? My hypothesis is that it comes back to potency. Heroin and other opioids are highly potent. That means they have a fast and dramatic impact on experience. The nutrients in broccoli help the body feel good long-term, when eaten in conjunction with other nutrient-rich foods, but more potent substances like heroin, cocaine, nicotine, sugar or alcohol make the body feel better immediately.

I think the problem with potent substances is not the substances themselves, but with the ease through which they can play the role of an addict's fixation. Sugar, when eaten sparingly in its natural form, is not detrimental to the body. Shamans conduct rituals with coca plants and tobacco that elevate the human experience in positive ways. The substances themselves aren't evil, and so outright prohibition of them is fundamentally misguided. We can easily understand that a compulsive addiction to sex, exercise or being liked by other people can be extremely detrimental to one's mind and body — but we know it's absurd to outright prohibit any of these activities.

When we look at addiction as though it is caused by certain substances, we miss the point and delay our healing. We might stamp out the addiction to smoking, but in its place, we might develop an addiction to sugar, or shopping, or CrossFit. Addiction is a natural response to trauma. That means that addiction will continue until the trauma is

healed. If the addiction can just be replaced with a different substance, then the root of an addiction is plainly not the substance. We're just a smart species, so we pick addictions that scratch our itch fast and hard.

It is clear that the problem lies not in the addicted human, but in the addiction cycle. I think likewise, the problem lies not in the addictive substance, but in the addiction relationship. When we are in pain, it is perfectly natural that we'd try to escape that pain as efficiently as possible. Using a potent substance, or engaging in a potent behavior, is a fast and efficient way to dramatically change an experience from pain to pleasure.

From this perspective, it becomes obvious that we are not craven sinners, submitting ourselves to the Devil of drugs or drinking and all that infernal stuff. In fact, we're just traumatized children grown into unhealed adults in a world that hasn't yet learned how to take care of itself. Our salvation from the addictive cycle will not be found in any substance — no, not even psychedelics. The end of the addiction cycle is the healing of the fundamental experience of trauma (also known as dislocation, separateness, or Ego, depending on who you ask). Psychedelics can play a role in that healing, but likewise, they are not the source of it. Anything used successfully to heal someone can be accurately said to heal people.

When we focus on trauma healing, we see the substances for what they are: pathways to experiences. When we aren't living in the chronic pain of insatiable lack, we don't

need such fast-and-furious pathways to feeling better. We already feel good, so we can take our time letting our behavior arise out of authentically right relationship.

When we feel emotionally full because we have healed, we don't have such insatiable hunger. We tend to find ourselves less inclined towards cocaine, and more inclined towards broccoli. We find ourselves less inclined towards winning and more inclined towards cooperating, less inclined towards control and more inclined towards empathy, less inclined towards violence and more inclined towards compassion. When we feel complete, treating ourselves and each other well follows as naturally as addiction follows trauma.

Psychedelic Use is a Tool, Not a Goal

Psychedelics are tools that can be helpful in accessing a certain kind of experience. That experience... well, today I'm going to call it "Union": universal connection; the lived experience of connecting to, and uniting with, the entirety of everything. That experience has been called *realization*, because it is understanding and actualizing your true essence. It's been called *enlightenment*, because it clarifies what was previously obscure to you. It's been called *consciousness*, because you become aware of your capacity to choose and create. You can call it whatever you want to; like psychedelics, the words are not the point.

Now, I am thrilled to see modern psychiatry start embracing psychedelics as the very useful, not very harmful tools for expansion that they are. I also know that Western science is much more fixated on forms than on experience, so I assume it's likely going to spend a while mistaking the source of healing as the means (the psychedelics), rather than correctly assessing it as the experience (Union).

Psychedelics can help us heal because they can help us access the experience of Union. Union *is* healing, because in the lived experience of unity with everything, it becomes real-ized that there is nothing to fear, no conflicting will that could frustrate one's own, no possibility of lack, and literally nothing but love. Love (taking something as a part

of yourself) is yet another word we can use to describe this same experience.

Like with every form, the mushrooms and the DMT are not the point. The point is the lived sensation of Union. Union can be accessed through tripping and through yoga and through justice and through Jesus. All of these are means, and each is but one of many means to the same end. Religious ceremony, meditation, kirtan, psychedelics, cognitive behavioral therapy — these all are tools. We can use them to build the experience, but they are not what we're trying to build.

Like with actual building, we typically need many tools to build well. You cannot build a house with a screwdriver alone. If all you have is a screwdriver, you won't be able to build a thing; you'll just be sitting there with a screwdriver. If you didn't know any better, you might mistake it for a house and try to live in it, which would probably leave you confused as to why the experience of it feels nothing like going home.

The point is — any one of these tools, when not understood correctly as a tool, can transform into something that hinders you from the experience of Union.

For example, to make an unscientific generalization, I've noticed that friends of mine who only or predominantly access Union through psychedelics seem to have an oddly ubiquitous obsession with conspiracy theories. Don't get me wrong — as an anarcho-communist in the United States

of Halliburtonia, I am well aware that many nefarious theories about the government turn out to be accurate. What I find interesting, though, is how I am feeling when I'm regularly thinking about them. There's a sense of disconnection in me, of fear, paranoia, anger, powerlessness and distrust that pervades my experience. I'm not experiencing Union at all — in fact, I'm feeling pretty awful — and [so I seek other means through which to feel better.](#)

I certainly don't know that there's any causality between heavy psychedelics use and a focus on pervasive fear about the powers that be, but there's enough of a correlation that I've noticed it. I've noticed that every pathway to the experience of Union, when fixated upon too much, starts leading me away from Union.

To make more unscientific generalizations, those I've met who primarily access spiritual experience through meditation or yoga don't seem to have the same paranoia about the government, but they also tend to be more judgmental of behaviors they see as "impure" in some way. Those who find Union in tranquility tend to think they're being pushed away from Union when they encounter revolutionary social justice movements. On the flip side, those who access Union through the feeling of collective liberation tend to think focusing on an individual experience of ending suffering is harmful. People who've found Union through Christianity tend to have their set of

material and moral hang-ups, and people who find it through Magick tend to have others.

No matter what tool we're used to using, we can end up hurting ourselves and others when we mistake the tool for the goal.

This isn't just about spiritual Union of course; [I've written a lot about how we make this mistake with just about all of our needs](#), all the time, and how this cycle causes and is the addiction relationship. Our needs are only ever states of being. Any form, thing, action, event, or practice is a tool or strategy we can use to meet our needs. These forms are never the need itself.

As anyone who travels knows, if we stay confined in one culture for our entire lives, [we often accept that culture's beliefs as the one and only truth. We mistake the subjective judgments of one culture for objective reality.](#) It is by having a diversity of experiences that we realize: most of what we thought was a fact was just an opinion, and reality has a wholly different character. Our opinions can then be chosen and assessed by how they impact our own experience, rather than by the erroneous notion that any of these judgments is the objective truth.

In order to keep our judgments in right relationship with reality, and our minds in right relationship with our judgments, it can be helpful to regularly expose ourselves to a variety of perspectives, so that we don't attach too strongly to any one of them. When our vision is not

obscured by erroneously believing that a subjective perspective is objective reality, it's easier to keep objective reality in sight.

In fact, that very experience of sensing reality and having it in sight — that is the experience that heals. That is the experience that psychedelics, at their best, can give. They offer us a glimpse into that experience, but they are but one door through which to walk. Each door enters from a different perspective, and each can lead to experience at the center. Like the Bible or the Bhagavad Gita, like nature walks or spell-casting, like kirtan or kinhin or good ol' fashion prayer, psychedelics are a means we can use to help us experience Union.

As we embrace their power in the mainstream, let us remember their purpose: they are not the cause or the goal. Remembering that any means *is a means* gets easier when we allow many different means into our experience. This is why I think it is crucial to eat a diverse spiritual diet, so to speak — so that each and all of the means to healing can be remembered as means, and the cause and goal of healing can be correctly understood, and experienced by us all.

Each of these tools is a doorway, and the point of a doorway is to walk through it, not worship it. When we believe there is only one doorway to an experience, we so often mistake the doorway for the place it leads to. Let's not make that mistake this time around, and remember to keep ourselves open to a variety of doorways.

When you have multiple tools available, and you know how and when to use each of them, it gets much easier to build a house worth living in.

How Not to Burn Out

This past winter, I burned out. Boy, did I burn out.

I don't know if it was the pandemic, my unhealthy mind or one too many shitty Tinder dudes, but by Valentine's Day I was existentially toast. Burnt toast, to be exact, the kind you have to scrape the char off of to make it edible. I quit my job, left all my lefty organizations and spent months hiding in my aunt's spare bedroom, trying to find where all the life in me had gone.

I know I wasn't alone in this experience. Between all the ways the world is crumbling down and all the new fuckery it props itself back up with, it's no wonder we're living through a veritable burnout pandemic, too. We're a planet of people exhausted, dispirited and running out of reasons to keep trying. I read an article a while back that said that what we call burnout is often simply grief. Ours is a culture that doesn't accept grief, doesn't give us space and time to pause, listen to our negative emotions, and do the slow, hiccuping work of healing.

But we must heal. It's the most important thing we can do. So, this is an overview of what I've learned so far about how to do that healing.

First, it's important to remember that burnout is a symptom. It is indicative of an internal imbalance. When you are burnt-out, the relationship between you and your

environment has turned destructive to you, pulling you down to a bedrock of exhaustion and despondence. That relationship needs to change in order for you to return to a state of balance. Note that I didn't say, "The environment needs to change in order for you to find balance." The *relationship* is what needs to change. You can't always change your environment, but you can always change how you relate to it.

In order to keep your relationship with your environment healthy, or to realign it once its fallen out of balance and caused burnout, you must slow down long enough to assess how and why it dragged you off course. To do that, I'd recommend checking in with yourself about the following five things:

1. Over-saturation

If you've burned out, then the relationship between you and your environment is off-balance. As you would with a diet that's making you sick, the first thing to check is your levels of exposure to certain elements of your life. Do you simply have too much of the same people, activities or thought patterns?

For example, I know that for many community organizers, our fellow activists become our whole lives. The people we organize with are not only our best friends, they're our lovers, partners, roommates, coworkers, coparents, and so

on. Exhaustion and despondence can crop up in your life simply because one or a few people are playing too many roles for you. We all have different needs from the different roles in our lives. The same person or group can't play every role to meet your needs.

The same is true of over-exposure to certain actions or beliefs. Are you spending too much time and energy on one set of activities and neglecting your need for others? Are you repeating the same negative beliefs to yourself again and again without checking to find out if they're even true? How much time do you spend each day worrying, panicking or brooding? If your answer to that question was greater than zero, then your thoughts are contributing to the burnout. Your negative emotions are always valid, but that doesn't mean they're always necessary or helpful.

If you're burnt-out already, assess if your life is over-saturated with something and look for ways to decrease your exposure to it. Increase the time and energy you spend on other things. Even a small change can have a big impact.

2. Motivation

When we are burnt-out, we're often acting with unhealthy motivations. It's crucial to check in with yourself about why you are doing what you're doing.

There is a huge difference between being passionate about something because you love it and being passionate about it because it makes you angry. Threats to what we love make us understandably angry and afraid, but if we don't take the time to let our emotions pass through us before we react to them, our actions will be fearful and angry actions. Being motivated by love leads to a dramatically different experience than being motivated by anger.

It's important to notice the motivations in your feelings, not your thoughts. You might *think* you're working yourself to death because it's the right thing to do, but on the level of feeling, you're working too much because you're afraid of what might happen if you didn't. In this case, your emotional motivation is actually fear.

When we experience deep burnout, it's almost always a sign that we've been acting too much from a place of anger or fear. Internally, the reason why we're doing what we're doing is caused by one or more of these emotions, and our actions are spawned by what those emotions tell us to do. If we act in anger or in fear, we don't give ourselves any reason to stop being angry or fearful.

If the primary motivation for your actions is anger or fear, your relationship to life is going to be angry or fearful. It cannot be otherwise until your motivations change.

3. Misplaced responsibility

In my experience, burnout always signifies some misalignment of responsibility in our relationship to life. Either we're trying to take responsibility for something we cannot truly respond to, or we're abdicating or ignoring the responsibility we do have (usually it's both).

I find the word "responsibility" troubling, because it calls to mind associations with unrelated terms like "duty," "obligation," and "fault." A concept like duty or fault is just that: a concept. It only exists conceptually. You may have your beliefs about who has a duty to what, or who is at fault for what, but neither of these beliefs really has any bearing on what other people decide to do.

Responsibility, in its purest form, means nothing more or less than "ability to respond." When responsibility burns you out, it's because you are trying to respond to things that you authentically cannot change or control, or because you are using your mental energy to react with fear and anxiety to hypothetical problems that don't actually exist yet.

The solution is not to release all responsibility; that would be impossible, because you are always able to respond to some things in some ways. Rather, the solution is look at what abilities you actually have, and focus on responding well.

If you're burnt-out, you need to respond to that burnout by helping it heal in some way. If that's what you're spending your time and energy on, then you can't prioritize the other

fifteen things your reactivity tells you should be your responsibility right now. You simply can't respond to it all, so don't try to.

4. Bad faith

I draw a distinction between simple exhaustion, which is treated with rest, and what I'd call burnout. To me, burnout isn't just about being incapable of going on, but about not feeling motivated to do so. Burnout involves feeling despondent or dispirited, not just tired. While I think there's plenty of exhaustion that has nothing to do with bad faith, I've never seen or experienced a case of burnout that didn't.

To act in bad faith is to be deceitful about your motivations. If someone is acting in bad faith towards you, it means they are untrustworthy, duplicitous and unconcerned with your well-being. If you are taking someone in bad faith, you are assuming they are not acting with your best interests in mind. Regardless of whether or not others are actually acting in bad faith, the despondence of burnout typically arises when you come to believe that they are.

We all require rest to avoid exhaustion, but healing burnout involves the added step of rebuilding trust in a world that's currently causing you to feel like there's no point in trying. Rebuilding that trust requires changing your

belief that others, or the world at large, are acting in bad faith towards you.

Though it's been taught throughout history, from ancient philosophies and spiritual traditions to contemporary behavioral therapies, we tend to forget the crucial role of beliefs in determining feelings. It's easy to do; our emotions often feel like automatic responses to what happens in the outside world. But they aren't. Our emotions arise due to our beliefs about what's happening.

If we believe the world is inherently bad or indifferent to us, we give ourselves no reason to try and every reason to burn out. In order not to burn out, or to heal from burnout, it's helpful practice taking the world in good faith. The decision to assume positive intent is one we can always choose to make.

5. Lack of care

Burnout, like any wound or illness, is a sign that you need care. Sometimes, assessing your life carefully and making conscious changes to it isn't something you feel capable of right now. The weight of the burnout is too great, and for now, you just need to focus on rest and feeling better. Even with a thorough "diagnosis," preventing and treating burnout always requires care.

Self-care is not an indulgence; it's a requirement of being a responsible member of an interdependent species. If you don't provide care for yourself, you'll inevitably force others to care for you. We all require care from others (as mentioned, we're an interdependent species), but being incapable of giving care to ourselves tends to breed toxic relationships with our environment. When our relationship to our environment grows toxic, we burn out.

No matter what, a healthy relationship is rooted in reciprocal care. If you care for your environment, but do not receive care in return, the relationship will get imbalanced. If you expect care from your environment, but do not give care to yourself, the relationship will get imbalanced. All healing requires care: conscious, loving attention.

Ultimately, care is the answer to both preventing and treating burnout. When we don't pay conscious, loving attention to ourselves, our thoughts, our actions or our relationships, we burn out. In order to heal, we must make up for the care that was missing by paying more conscious, loving attention, in every way we can.

The Real Meaning of Positive Focus

So apparently, thinking positively is *super* good for us. Keeping a positive outlook on life and the future reduces stress and makes us happier, healthier, more loving people. If we stay positive, we raise our vibration, and then, through the magic of... crystals or something, good things will come our way. Think positive! #GoodVibesOnly

So, what do we do with this whole thing where the world is crappy and horrible a lot of the time?

I'd wager that most of you, like me, would love to always be happy and live lives completely filled with sources of positivity. I'd guess that most of you, like me, live in a world that seems to be absolutely bursting with situations that don't inspire much positivity. In some cases, trying to "Just be positive!" feels tantamount to gaslighting, repression, or complete denial of the reality of our lives.

Real positive focus is not about masking the truth of anything. Saying positive affirmations about things that do not authentically inspire positive feelings in you is just plain old lying to yourself. Distracting your conscious mind with happy thoughts might help in the short-term, but if you are not authentically finding your perspective shift, as though on its own, to greater positivity, you're not quite getting the full potential of positive focus.

Positive focus begins with picking out aspects of a situation you can authentically feel good about.

Doing so calls you to broaden your focus, to observe more of a situation you're in than you were previously and turn your attention where you might not have turned it otherwise. This calls you into greater presence. Rather than deny what's happening in an attempt to "stay positive" by force, you become more aware of what's actually going on.

Likewise, you shift our focus away from what *isn't* actually happening right now, and mitigate the mind's tendency to fixate on fears, fantasies, or limited views of the situation. Sometimes, the total experience isn't as terrible as the certain segment you're focused on, and the main source of your negative focus is something that isn't even happening to you right now.

This may seem doable when it comes to, say, missing your bus or getting into an argument, but what about the real horrors in the world? How on earth can we even justify focusing positively on those? I'm going to use a stark, and completely true, example to illustrate the point:

A few months ago, in fact only days after I vowed to practice positive focus in every aspect of my life, I read an article in *The Guardian* saying that doctors were performing forced hysterectomies on migrant women in ICE detention centers. It was a story so heinous and horrific that I nearly threw up reading it, and had to take a long moment to just

lie down and feel, energetically flattened by the weight of such incomprehensible cruelty and dehumanization.

How on earth could anyone find positivity in this situation? To even slap a false positive affirmation on it is sickening.

The subtitle of this essay is: only assess your own experience. My experience, in this situation, was not undergoing a forced hysterectomy in ICE detention. My experience was reading an article about this happening. In understanding *that* as my experience, rather than the subject of the article, I can find authentic positivity in the situation.

I am grateful to the whistleblower who leaked that this was happening to the public. I am grateful to the courageous women who got their horrific story out. I am grateful to the journalist who broke the story. I am grateful to the newspapers running and rerunning this story. I am grateful to the activists fighting against the inhumanity of criminalizing migration. I am grateful to all people who move and travel, who migrate even in the face of horrific repression, and remind us all that migration is our birthright as humans on this earth.

Let's broaden even more: while I read that article, I was at my mother's house, in the backyard, by the garden. I am grateful to my mother. I am grateful that she is healthy and happy. I am grateful for the health and happiness of my father. I am grateful to have been with family during much of the pandemic. I am grateful that, while I read that

article, I was sitting outside next to a garden I'd planted myself. I am grateful for sunlight and rain and cucumbers. I am grateful for how many people started planting gardens, sharing food, and engaging in mutual aid during this pandemic.

This may seem like a cop-out, but truly, it isn't. Rather, it's a valuable exercise in conscious curation of our perspective. Our perspective is always narrowed by our attention. We cannot put our attention on absolutely everything happening at once, even in an instant. Our attention cannot be on what we taste, what we smell, what we think, what we hear, what we feel, where we are, and what temperature it is in here all at once. Our attention is always selective.

We are at our happiest, kindest and most loving when we put our attention on what we embrace and celebrate in our present situation, and expend no energy passing judgment beyond that.

This does not mean we must embrace and celebrate the horrors of the world.

It means that we act to transform the world from an energy of loving it and bringing it into alignment with love. We need not act to change the world from a place of loathing it. We can act to build a future we want, rather than to avoid a future we don't. We can focus on solutions rather than fixate on problems, and in so doing, find solutions easier and faster to create.

Positive focus is not about the denial of a painful present. It is not about lying, pretending, or ignoring. It is about focusing on what we love, and no more than that — wasting no energy on fearing and loathing what we don't feel good about, so we have all the more energy to transform it.

You do not have to hate something to change it.

How to Be Emotionally Present

This is a quick and dirty guide to becoming more emotionally present. If you're not sure what to do with that term, for now just know that it means becoming more self-aware, more authentic, more expressive and more empathetic.

If you have any illusions that emotional absence and disconnection aren't serious issues, you need to look again at the root causes of most personal and societal ills. Between [suicides](#), [overdoses](#) and [murders](#) — [all of which would be impossible without emotional disconnection](#) — the epidemic of emotional disconnection killed half as many Americans as Covid-19 last year.

Before you go pinning any of that on specific mental illness diagnoses from the DSM-5, I invite you to name one mental illness that does not thrive in an experience of emotional disconnection, or that isn't profoundly ameliorated with repeated experiences of deep emotional connection and care. Often, I think the specific diagnoses can obscure the more universal root problem: we're traumatized by the cruelties, big and small, of growing up in a culture built on emotional disconnection, and now we're so emotionally disconnected from ourselves and each other that we can't heal.

Emotional disconnection is serious, and we all need to take it seriously.

Now, to improve your emotional connectivity and presence, there are all kinds of researchers and teachers you could learn from. There are countless techniques and skills to practice, not to mention the entire field of psychotherapy. The following suggestions are a few among thousands, and I encourage you to do your own research and experimentation, too. Different approaches to emotional presence will resonate with different people, and it takes time and continuous self-study to figure out what works best for you. Also, taking the time to do your own research helps you to cement the belief that becoming more emotionally present is important and worthy of sustained effort, which it is.

Without further ado, here are my top five tips for developing greater emotional presence:

Tip #5. Chart what you're feeling every morning. Then, journal about why you're feeling it.

Last year, I moved in with a friend who was going through a deep process of emotional transformation, and he was adamant about us circling our emotions on a laminated [feelings wheel](#) every morning. At first, I found the practice a bit campy, but I quickly came to love it. It was such a quick, simple reminder to check in with ourselves

and each other. It gave us all an easy way to understand each other's head-spaces, and it helped us be present with our own.

After circling my feelings, I'd go on to my other morning routine — journaling long-hand for three pages about what I was feeling and thinking, and why. Noticing that you feel “dismayed” or “powerful” today is good, but taking the time to understand where that feeling is coming from is better.

The first step to greater emotional presence with others is always greater emotional connection with ourselves. The more emotionally disconnected we are, the less we even know what we feel at any moment, and the more we need to prioritize and practice checking in with ourselves. Only when we know what we feel can we communicate it effectively to others.

Tip #4. Go to therapy.

I know you don't want to hear it, but I have to say it. Though I have my hang-ups with a lot of contemporary psychology, I absolutely think regularly talking to a therapist is an important part of learning emotional connection for those who are deeply disconnected. If you are not used to being vulnerable, authentic and expressive with yourself or those close to you, having a designated person you know you can talk to who can provide a safe

space for your vulnerability and offer helpful guidance can quite literally be the difference between life and death.

Again, figuring out what kind of therapy and which therapist work for you typically takes time and some trial and error. Personally, I'm a fan of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), because I think they balance internal self-awareness with concrete skills-building the best, but you'll find the approaches that are right for you.

Of course, in the United States, not everyone has the financial ability to see a therapist regularly. If you can afford it, it's an excellent use of money. If you can't, many therapeutic skills are free to learn online and you can still practice those on your own or in support groups. You could also ask some non-judgmental friends (with their explicit consent!) if they're willing to listen to you on a semi-regular about your feelings. If you do that, though, please remember that being your therapist is not your friend's job — it's a kindness they're offering to you, if and as they have capacity.

Tip #3. When you get defensive, ask yourself what it is you're defending. Then, say it.

If memory serves, this next tip comes from the spiritual teacher Teal Swan. We get defensive when we feel attacked. The problem is, we often feel attacked when

we're not really being threatened at all. The way someone close to us is speaking or behaving might trigger negative thoughts and emotions in us because it reminds us of past pain, and we tense up, close down, and go on the defense — regardless of whether there's any threat in the current moment whatsoever.

You know the feeling of defensiveness, and you know how much it sucks. Your face and body get tense. You feel that drop in your stomach. You feel an urge to get aggressive or passive-aggressive, to shout or act petty, and you have this thirst to conquer the other person and defend yourself from them. Can you remember feeling that way in a conversation? Pay attention to it.

Now, the next time you feel that way, notice it. Notice the sensation itself. Then, pause. If you're in a conversation with someone, ask for space and time for a moment. If you need to literally walk away from the interaction triggering your defenses, do so.

Whenever you notice yourself getting defensive, stop for long enough that you can ask and honestly answer the question, *"What am I defending?"*

What you're defending might be a negative thought about yourself. You might be defending a truth you don't want to admit, a painful memory you don't want to relive, or a feeling you wish you weren't having.

The thing is, when you get defensive, you feel attacked. That means you're in need of care and safety. If you keep

defending yourself, you deny yourself the opportunity to receive care and safety in the interaction with another person. Only if you stop defending yourself does anyone else have the opportunity to help you feel safe.

So, as hard as it is, as impossible as it sounds, when you figure out what it is that you're defending: take a deep breath, and say it. Say the thing that you're getting defensive in order to avoid. If you don't, the real emotional truth of the conversation will never be revealed, and the disconnection can only deepen.

Tip #2. Give what you want to receive.

This tip came from, of all places, an episode of *The Crown*. It's simple and utterly brilliant. I'll let the character of Princess Diana explain it for herself: "Anytime either of us feels like we're not getting what we need, we simply need to give that very thing to the other."

Give what you want to receive. This is not just a useful tool for conversations or intimate relationships — this is the key to connection with the whole world. When you feel like you're not getting what you need, give it. Reverse the process by which you're trained to think it must arise.

When you don't feel like you're getting enough compassion, give compassion. When you don't feel like you're getting enough care, give care. When you don't feel

like you're being understood, seek to understand. Every time you give what you want to receive, you increase how much of that thing there is in the dynamic. Giving compassion, care or understanding to others cannot reduce what you get. It can only increase the overall level of compassion, care and understanding in the connection.

This does not mean, "When your partner isn't giving what *they* want to receive, call them out on it." It means, give what *you* want to receive. Take responsibility only for your own behavior. Stop playing "Who's gonna capitulate first?" chicken about your emotional needs, and give what you want to receive.

Tip #1. Show, don't tell, your empathy and understanding.

This is my number one skill for *everyone* wishing to develop greater emotional connection in their relationships.

Emotional connection is about empathy. In order for both people in a relationship to experience empathy and being empathized with, the empathy needs to shine through in the interaction. Just telling someone "I understand" or "I empathize" does nothing to help them feel understood or empathized with. It also does nothing to help you understand them or empathize with them.

I'm sure you can picture it. You're having an argument with someone, and you're obviously hurt or emotionally enervated in some way by their actions. They tell you over

and over again, “I understand, I get it,” but their actions keep demonstrating that they do not understand or get it. On top of feeling upset, you’re now starting to feel almost gaslit. Why? Because they haven’t demonstrated their understanding. They might think they understand, but their actions are not the actions of someone who understands.

Fixing this pattern is very simple, though not always easy. If you want to demonstrate your understanding, you must show it, not tell it. In a conversation, you have to stop, listen to the other person, think about what they said, and then paraphrase to them it in your own words. Explain to them, in your own words, why it makes sense that they feel the way they do.

I repeat: listen to them thoroughly, think about what they said, and then explain it back to them in your own words, in as much detail as possible. If they’re pointing out a pattern of behavior, reflect on your own behavior and see if you can think of other examples of it. Then, say those examples aloud. Ask them if you’re understanding their feelings correctly. Be open to correction.

This applies to your relationship with yourself, too! Validate your own feelings when you have them. Explain to yourself why it makes sense that you feel the way you do.

Remember: as much as it might feel like an attack, listening to someone else’s perspective on your behavior is not an attack. Just because something feels painful for you right now does not mean it’s bad for you. It might hurt your self-

concept in the short-term, but humility and self-awareness will benefit you in the long-term.

Oh, and don't forget: you have to practice.

Going through every step on this list once over will not dramatically increase your emotional presence. This is a practice. That means, it takes time and repetition. It takes continuous, conscious practice like learning a language or an instrument. You're going to be bad at it at first, but keep going — you'll improve in due time, and every aspect of your life will be better for it.

Understanding Your Life's Purpose

When seeking to understand the purpose of our lives, we have a tendency to focus on the roles we want to inhabit. Are we to be doctors, lawyers, mechanics, masseuses? Parents, teachers, lovers, partners, friends? Are we intended to write the Next Great American Novel, or lead a social movement, or plant a world-changing permaculture garden?

From these understandings, we are eventually left asking: What is the purpose of our lives if we don't achieve these goals, or fill these roles? And perhaps the more terrifying question — what would be the purpose of our lives once we do?

I had one of those lightbulb moments last night reading *A Course in Miracles* that fundamentally shifted my understanding of purpose. For me, and I think for many others, my drive to find and accomplish my destiny and do my sacred work has been caught up in a kind of category mistake about purpose. I've been misunderstanding what purpose actually is. The *Course* beautifully sums up that mistake as the confusion of Creation with Making.

Whether or not you are a theist, you cannot deny that life has been created. I certainly did not say "created by the Abrahamic God" or "created by..." anything at all. To say "Life created itself" is equally as correct. Life exists, and therefore, was and is being created.

The *Course* distinguishes Creating from Making. To make something is to produce something for the purpose of supplying a lack. Making requires a belief that something is lacking in what is, and therefore, that something is needed to fill the void left by that lack. That which is made, rather than created, is not universally applicable or useful. Its meaning is defined by the role it occupies. Without that role, it is rendered meaningless. Whether we are talking about a sports car or a spork, or the entire industry of strategic public relations, made things are made to fill their roles.

But you are not a made thing. You were, and are, created.

To say what, exactly, creation is, like to describe realization or enlightenment, is to miss the point. All we can say about the Tao is that “The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.” When we define it, by which I mean — understand its meaning in contrast to other defined meanings, we lose the essence of it entirely. I know, that is the kind of sentence that feels like a deeply unsatisfying cop-out — until it is understood, and then it doesn’t anymore.

What matters here is not to define what your life’s purpose is from a perspective of creation, but to free yourself from the understanding of your life’s purpose from a perspective of making. Your life is not a made thing. Its purpose and its meaning do not come from a particular role, or role at all. You do not exist to supply a lack.

For me, I can only begin to truly grasp this understanding in the negative. I cannot tell you what you or I exist to do. To declare such a defined purpose would be to cast our lives into the realm of made things, where their meaning can only be judged by their ability to supply a particular lack. But this is not how creation works.

In what is created — in life — what a thing does arises organically from what it is, like a river winding its way to the sea: carving through rock for generations with no exerted effort, because that is just what rivers do, because that is just what rivers *are*. In an ecosystem, all fits together in intricate and indescribable patterns of purpose. We do not beat our heads against the wall seeking to declare the definitive purpose of a tree. It's a tree. It exists to be what it is, and in so doing, has a thousand purposes and none — because purpose, as we typically think of it, is all about “What role something was made to fill,” not the much more simple, “That something is.”

This, what I'm writing, is nothing more or less than an invitation: to begin looking at your life *not* as a made thing. You are not created to fill a role. You do not exist to supply a lack.

The second invitation here is to begin exploring. Beyond role, beyond codified purpose, beyond the realm of lacking and making, I invite you to explore: what else is here?