



On Healing

vol. 2: Advice for Transcendence

Anna Mercury

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Meet Your (Real) Needs

A few months ago, I replaced cigarettes with rock music. These days, when I get in the car or go for a walk and I'm feeling a little low, I throw on some aviators, blast Dorothy or All Them Witches and let the waves of electric badassery wash over me until my nerves are sufficiently cooled. That's what cigarettes always did for me: they cooled me off. They gave me this cloud of protection from vulnerability. If I felt stressed or emotional or claustrophobic, I could go outside, light a cigarette and wall myself off from the world behind a hazy barrier that left me feeling, well... cool.

There's a song I've been listening to a lot called "[The Marriage of Coyote Woman](#)," because it feels just like smoking a cigarette. The sound of the music curls around me in charcoal gray wisps, with a dry, sleek ruggedness I can only describe as the musical equivalent of a light blue American Spirit. But more than the song itself, listening to it makes me feel protected, wrapped up in a cloud of that same dry, sleek ruggedness. I feel cool. I feel less vulnerable, less exposed, more protected.

This isn't just about music, of course. The [ability of wearing sunglasses to create a sense of power is well-documented](#). Wearing certain clothes can make us feel confident or vulnerable, professional or relaxed, secure or embarrassed. The view of Yosemite Valley tends to inspire a rather different emotional response than, say, a Walmart parking

lot on Long Island. Certain foods might not do much to physically nourish us, but they remind us of childhood or a tropical vacation or a holiday. As mammals, we live by [conditioned](#) associations. We tend to like and seek out the things we associate with happiness, safety, connection or enjoyment, and avoid those we associate with less-desirable emotions.

Many of our problems arise when we start pursuing the things we associate with positive feelings, regardless of whether or not they still produce positive feelings. This blurring of the line between what we associate, and what we associate it with, is arguably the main source of suffering in our lives. This act of confusion produces cravings for certain things and the corresponding belief that we need those things in order to experience satisfaction.

The truth is, what we actually need is only ever a state of being, either physical or emotional.

If you are too cold, you do not need a blanket, or a campfire, or a heater, or the sun. You need warmth. You need to be in a state of experiencing more warmth. If you are too isolated, you do not need a girlfriend, or a night out, or a kitten. You need connection. You need to be in a state of experiencing more connection. Even the need for a particular vitamin is a need for a state of being; holding a bottle of Vitamin D supplements in your hand won't help you if you're deficient. You need to be in the state of having adequate Vitamin D in your body.

Depending on the need, we might be more or less able to see it clearly for what it is. For instance, when it comes to cold, or hunger, or the need to pee, I'd wager most of us are more adept at understanding those needs directly as physical states. I may prefer a sanitary toilet, but if I'm on a long drive and there aren't any of those around, I'll squat in the woods no problem.

We tend to be less adept at this when it comes to more emotional needs, like respect, self-worth, belonging, connection or trust. For example, how many of us have found ourselves miserable because our need for love and connection wasn't being met by the one specific person we had in mind? How many of us have stayed in jobs we hate because the paycheck gave us a sense of self-worth? How many of us have denied our authentic selves to conform for a sense of belonging?

Everything we do, we do to meet our needs. The problem comes in when we think that what we're doing is the need, rather than a strategy to meet it.

The second Noble Truth of Buddhism typically gets explained as, "The root cause of suffering is desire." The original words are *dukkha* (suffering, anguish, unsatisfactoriness) and *tanhā* (thirst, longing, craving), so a more precise explanation would be something like, "The root cause of the anguish of never being satisfied is craving." Craving is what you do when you have an addiction. To me, it is simply the act of believing that the strategy you use to meet your need is the need itself.

When we understand that our needs are simply states of being, they become far easier to meet. Rather than limit ourselves to one or a few options to meet our needs, once we understand what state it is that we actually need to be in, we can open ourselves to far more possible paths to get there. Likewise, when the strategy we have chosen to meet our needs is harmful to us, understanding what we actually need can help us find healthier strategies.

Coming to this understanding is not always easy, because it's so alien to how most of us typically go through life, but it is a very simple process. The spiritual teacher Teal Swan says, "To heal is to experience the opposite." From a biological perspective, understanding need as a state of being, this becomes obvious: when we are too far to one side of our ideal state of homeostasis, we need to move in the opposite direction to reach homeostasis. So, whatever state of being you find yourself in that feels "bad" tells you that you need to move towards the opposite state of being in order to feel "good."

Simply put: What kind of bad do you feel? What's the opposite of that feeling? You now know what you need. Now, come up with as many strategies as you can to meet that need, focusing on strategies that are healthy for you and your community, and that you can take action on now. It really is simple. Again: just because it's simple does not mean it's easy.

This practice can be difficult first because we typically have several needs at a given time. We might be feeling bored,

hungry, lonely and worthless all at once, and so, we might think going out to dinner with a cute new date is the only way to meet all of our needs. But what if we ate a sandwich, did an interesting activity, called a friend and learned a new skill instead? Then, we might feel full and nourished, inspired, connected and worthy too.

The second thing that inhibits us from meeting our needs is our conditioning: we are used to certain patterns of behavior, certain ways of framing problems, certain thought habits, and so we may not notice that there are other ways to meet our needs. We may not even be able to notice what our needs are. The process of dislodging yourself from unconscious, conditioned patterns of thinking and behaving does not typically happen overnight. It can take years (some yogis would say lifetimes), but making the commitment to chip away at it, bit by bit, to come to greater consciousness is probably the single best thing you can do for yourself.

Finally, some of our associations come along with physical withdrawal symptoms, from the kinds of relationships to substances we'd scientifically diagnose as addiction. In quitting smoking, or alcohol, or heroin — the process is going to be difficult and physically painful. However, the physical withdrawals for most addictions pass quickly, in a matter of weeks at most. It's the psychological craving — the emotional state that we used to meet with that habit continuing to go unmet— that's what reels us back in.

What I know from experience is that nicotine withdrawals are tough, but the worst is really over after a few days. After two weeks, any craving left is psychological, and from there, the emotional needs that smoking was meeting for me can be understood, assessed, and met. The truth is, I never needed a cigarette; I just needed to feel safe and confident. So it's out with the American Spirits, in with the sunglasses and rock n' roll.

No matter what our addiction, no matter how little it looks to us like an addiction, this pattern holds true: the less we fixate on the specific things we crave, the easier our needs are to satisfy. The act of freeing ourselves from addictive relationships to ideas or forms — it's also an act of reaching homeostasis, moving us away from states of powerlessness and suffering and towards states of satisfaction, agency, consciousness, abundance and flow.

Whatever our craving, we're all in recovery, taking it one step at a time. It's not easy, but it is simple.

Moving from Suffering to Satisfaction

This is very simple. Simple does not mean easy.

Understanding Your Needs

All living beings seek to satisfy their needs.

A need is only ever a state of being, either physical or psychological. A living being understands and meets its needs by experiencing what state it is currently in, and moving towards the opposite state (for example, if it is too cold, it needs more warmth.)

As humans, we often confuse what we need with a tool or strategy we use to meet that need. For example, when we are too cold, and we need more warmth, we could meet that need with a blanket, a jacket, a fire, a heater, exercising, drinking hot water, and so on.

We often experience suffering because we equate what we need with a thing we use to meet that need. When we cannot have that one particular thing, we experience suffering: our need is unmet and we feel powerless to meet it.

Disentangling the Need from the Method You Use to Meet It

The second noble truth of Buddhism is typically described as, “desire is the cause of suffering.” A more accurate description of it would be something like, “craving is the cause of the anguish of never being able to be satisfied.”

Craving, in my view, is what happens when you equate a strategy you use to meet your need with the need itself. You start to believe you need that thing, that one path, as though your need could not be met through any other means. The path is only ever just a path. If the path is blocked, you can reach your destination far more easily by choosing a different path.

The mind gets attached to certain methods or tools for meeting our needs because doing so makes it think it's safer. When the mind can conceptualize the path, it can perceive that there is a path, and the world seems less scary. The problem is, of course, that this exact process clouds the mind from seeing needs clearly and makes us less safe, because it starts to limit our paths to getting our needs met.

A need is only ever a state of being, either physiological or psychological.

Embracing Multiple Methods

The more we focus on what we need, and give ourselves over to accepting many possible strategies to meet it, the

easier the need will be to meet. The less we attach ourselves to certain strategies, the more likely it is that our needs will be met.

Sometimes, we grow attached to certain strategies because we have been conditioned to believe that those strategies are the only method of meeting our needs, or the only we have available. This pattern of conditioning comes up frequently, and can be responded to by remembering that a need is only ever a state of being.

Sometimes, we grow attached to certain tools or strategies because we have multiple needs at once, and we can only think of one method of satisfying them all. Then, we suffer if we cannot use that method. Rather than continue trying for the method we cannot use, we can instead pause, and assess what all of our needs are, individually. Then, we can meet each and all of them, either individually or in combination, through other means.

Sometimes, the attachment we feel to a certain tool or strategy is important to us, too. For example, we may feel attached to a certain person who meets our needs for connection, security and validation. If relying on this relationship to meet our needs repeatedly creates suffering, but we don't want to give up all relationship with the person, we need only give up attachment to the relationship meeting those specific needs. We can seek other means of finding connection, security and validation, and allow the relationship to transform to meet different needs.

Ending the Illusion of Conflicting Goals

Our cravings often bring us into conflict with others. When we have the ability to exert control over others, we typically use it to force them to follow certain strategies we think will meet our (own) needs. We often do this regardless of whether or not this strategy will meet their needs.

When these strategies cause others not to have their needs met, they experience suffering.

We like having, or thinking we have, the ability to dominate the world around us, because we believe doing so will help us to get our needs met. We often fear that not dominating the world around us will mean that our needs won't be met, and we'll suffer as a result.

What we have when we dominate the world around us is not, actually, an increased ability to get our needs met. What we have is simply an increased ability to force a certain method for meeting needs on others. This actually limits us, as well as others, from having our needs met as fully, quickly and efficiently as possible.

We actually don't have to dominate the world in order to have our needs met, because our needs are only ever states of being, and they can be met through multiple methods. The more open we are to a variety of possible

strategies to meet our needs, the easier it is to find a strategy that meets our needs without forcing behavior in anyone else.

As a result, when we engage with others, we can come together with the shared goal: finding strategies that meet each and all of our needs without anyone having to suffer in the process. Rather than manufacture a competition between each of our proposed methods of meeting needs, we can all refocus on the needs themselves, and collaborate towards a common goal of everyone's needs being satisfied.

Experiencing Safety and Freedom

When our needs are easier to meet, we are all safer. The better able we each are to get our needs met, the less cause we all have to hurt one another in order to get our needs met, and the safer we all are from harm. The more we work together to meet all of our needs, the more satisfying all of our lives become.

At the moment, most people don't really live like this. Most people, myself included, still experience suffering at our needs going unmet, get fixated on certain methods of meeting our needs, and end up in conflict with others over incompatible strategies to meet needs.

We can begin to disentangle ourselves from all of this, by remembering that our needs are only ever states of being, figure out what those states are, and open ourselves to accept more methods by which our needs can be met.

How to Begin

I cannot pretend that anything will change overnight just because you've now read this article, but I can offer some advice on how to start shifting your experience towards embodying this, if you want to:

Step 1: Start easy. This is a practice of changing your habits. Like strengthening a muscle, start the process of disentangling needs from strategies with need in your life that seem easy to detach from the strategies you use to meet them. Start with situations that seem manageable, or obvious, or minor. Build up your strength over time. Do not try to tackle all of your attachments to strategies at once. This takes time.

Step 2: Commit. Treat this like quitting an addiction: whatever aspect of your life you choose to start with, commit to seeing it differently. Remind yourself of it as often as you can, every day: a need is only ever a state of being. Make living according to that thought your top priority, or at least, a top priority.

Step 3: Embrace discomfort. When you crave something, don't act upon that craving. This is very uncomfortable at first. Anyone who has ever quit smoking knows the feeling exactly: you want to do something, you just sit there instead, it's wildly uncomfortable, and that's okay. It won't be uncomfortable forever. Just sit with the discomfort, rather than run from it reactively by giving into your craving. It will go away faster.

Step 4: Practice. Remaining conscious that your needs are states of being, and opening up yourself to multiple paths to get there, is a pretty deep shift in habits. Making the shift takes practice. It takes time and repetition, missteps and returns to the path, again and again. Even if this practice is not easy, it is simple. The more you practice, the easier it gets.

The Art of Emotional Alchemy

This is a guide to silver linings from a person who chases rainclouds. I'm that friend everyone tries to talk out of feeling things. Yes, we should all know that "*Just don't let it bother you!*" is the most irritating and unhelpful advice on the planet, but trust me — if you met me, you'd really want to tell me the same. Everything gets under my skin — from arguments to strangers to moments to microaggressions to men — no matter how small the event, I have a tendency to feel deeply and react strongly.

I think we're too quick to presume that reactivity is a problem. Certainly, too much emotional sensitivity and volatility can become dangerous, and I understand why we usually think reactivity needs to be managed and smoothed out. I also understand why we like avoiding pain. My emotional sensitivity and inability to put up self-preservation boundaries have led me to a lot of otherwise-avoidable pain, but also to phenomenal growth, and to learning how to grow from pain.

Emotional sensitivity is both disease and super-power. Being sensitive to emotional stimuli, including feeling "unnecessary" pain, can catalyze deeply necessary growth where before there would have only been stagnation and repeated patterns. Sensitivity and reactivity have made me a practiced emotional *alchemist*: I'm a master of turning

the bullshit in my life into a goldmine of lessons for being a better, happier and healthier person.

This emotional alchemy — turning pain into growth — is something we're just expected to know how to do. We're told we'll find the silver lining or the light at the end of the tunnel, but no one tells us how. Is there a particular way of looking at a cloud that makes its lining shimmer?

I actually think there is. So, without further ado, I'd like to propose Mercury's Laws of Emotional Alchemy:

First Law: Everyone else shows you yourself.

Second Law: The more you feel, the more you stand to gain.

Third Law: Everything becomes fertile ground for growth once you decide that it is.

Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Hell is other people." I say, "Hell can be transmuted into heaven." For an alchemist, every moment of pain is an opportunity to transmute into the highest growth and ascension.

First Law: Everyone else shows you yourself.

Have you ever looked into a fun-house mirror? Admired the way a simple shift in glass, light and angle could reflect an entirely different version of yourself back to you? What we marvel at is never the mirror itself — the mirrors are just angled glass. We're interested in the alternate versions of *us* that can be called into existence through them. It's the self-exploration that excites us.

Like the angles of fun-house mirrors, the different ways other people's actions catalyze us to act depend on when and where and how and why their actions touch us. Others' actions teach you about them, but all you actually learn about is you.

We often don't immediately see our own reflection as a reflection. We typically mistake the reflection for the mirror — that is to say, we mistake our responses to other people as the truth of who they are. We see what someone else did as an autonomous act over which they had control, not our responses as autonomous acts over which we had control.

The truth is that we are both knee-jerk reactors *and* conscious agents of our responses— depending on circumstance. In either case, it is only through stepping back and looking at our responses that we see what it was within us that was triggered by others' actions. Yes, another's action was the trigger, but we were the gun. The one without the other would have had no impact.

Without something that is *not* you, you could never know *you*. Without light, you would never know darkness, for the essence of the two lives in their distinction from one another. Understanding one requires experiencing its opposite. In the act of contrasting something with what it isn't, we find out what it is.

Second Law: The more you feel, the more you stand to gain.

Contrasting creates knowledge. *More* contrast can create *more* knowledge. For example, the colder you are, the more opportunity you have to move towards warmth. The lonelier you are, the more opportunity you have to move towards connection. The more victimized you feel, the more opportunity you have to move towards agency. The guiltier you feel, the more opportunity you have to move towards absolution.

In every moment of pain is an opportunity for growth towards whatever lack caused that pain. Just as every relationship teaches you about yourself, every moment of pain teaches what you need in order to get out of that pain. But... you have to feel the pain first.

When you care about something, it impacts you. You internalize it, it sinks in, it integrates into your experience. If you don't care, or allow yourself to care, then there will be no impact. It is from this truth that we get that classic Eleanor Roosevelt quote, "*No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.*" If another's action doesn't trigger a response within you, then, well... it won't trigger a response.

The more we care about a person, as all that they are distinct from us, the more we care about ourselves in response to them. The more we care about anything, the

more it impacts us. The more we are impacted, the more we stand to learn about ourselves.

To care about another person is to grow immeasurably strong by becoming vulnerable. In allowing something to impact you, you allow yourself the opportunity to strengthen.

Third Law: Everything becomes fertile ground for growth once you decide that it is.

Pain is always pointless until it points you somewhere. Nothing has meaning until it means something to you. Everything is unnecessary until you need it.

How do you turn pain into an opportunity for growth? You just decide that it is, and let the *how* work itself out. The point of all the pain will be found in the very process of growing from pain. If you predetermined the *how*, you wouldn't be learning anything. The pain is perfectly capable of teaching you all about the growth it will bring. You don't need to tell it how.

What creates the space for growth is never the action itself, but the response we have to it. It is how we let ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, internalize an action that determines how the action affects us. We learn depending on how we take the hit — whether we roll or collapse or fracture or retaliate or ignore it. Growth always comes from within, blooming from the impact scars where we let what is outside of us touch us.

Emotional alchemy, like all learned habits, gets faster and easier with time. Like all practices, it's advisable to start by playing scales, starting simple and small, and letting the muscle strengthen — so to speak.

For a world so often caught up in pain-avoidance, where care is called a disease to catch and vulnerability is viewed like a death sentence, to enshrine the importance of feeling pain and growing from it is a much-needed shift. This does not mean that everyone should immediately go feel more pain — simply that pain does not always need to be avoided. It can be harnessed, and transmuted.

Ultimately, the question is one of balance. Which side of a healthy equilibrium do you find yourself on? Now that you're on that side, which direction do you need to lean in to reach a healthy equilibrium? If you find yourself collapsing due to over-impact, this is a chance to grow through putting up boundaries and building resolution. If you find yourself stagnating, this is a chance to open yourself to vulnerability and possible pain, and grow from it.

Unfortunately, there is no map to navigating this balance. Fortunately, there is a compass, and that compass is your experience itself. Unpleasant experiences guide you. In experiencing pain, and in understanding it, we come to know its opposite. Like a sunflower towards the sun, we know to grow that way.

How to Break Out of Harmful Cycles

To really understand what conscious awakening is all about, it can be helpful to understand something called “category mistakes.” A category mistake is a kind of logical fallacy wherein a quality is applied to something that cannot possibly possess it, for example, “The Queen of England is on Saturday” or “Purple is drunk.” The thing and its supposed quality are in wholly different categories, so to relate them in this way is nonsensical, signifying a mistake in understanding what the thing is.

What spiritual awakening teaches us is that most of our attempts to improve our lives are fragile and fruitless because every step of the way, we’re making category mistakes. Learning to recognize reality and act in accordance with its actual laws are what lead to real and lasting shifts in our experience. Nothing else works.

If you’ve delved into spiritual stuff much, you’re probably familiar with Plato’s allegory of the cave. The unconscious mind is wholly preoccupied in the drama playing out between the shadows on the cave wall, while the awakened mind sees its own hand in producing the shadow puppets. This is why the spiritual answer to a material question will not exist within the parameters of the material plane.

When you ask your inner knowing for advice on a particular life situation, you’ll likely get an answer that feels unrelated

and unsatisfying to your Ego. The divine answer to a question like, “Should I break up with him?” might be, “Go to sleep.” Asking, “Am I on the right trajectory in my career?” might receive an answer like, “Cultivate your own inner joy and peace, and do whatever you happen to do from there.”

Spiritual awakening teaches you the difference between what you think you need and what you actually need, and how these are of wholly different categories. You do not need your happiness to come in any particular form; you need the experience of happiness. That’s it. Whatever you do in an experience of happiness is what makes you happy.

Your higher self calls on you to find happiness regardless of what happens externally, because the reality outside the proverbial cave has no awareness whatsoever of the shadows on the wall. All it can experience is how beholding those shadows makes you feel.

The infuriating lesson any spiritual seeker learns over and over again is that your mind is always what’s creating all the drama. Material reality has no meaning on its own. Anything could be happening in your material reality, but it’s your interpretation of its meaning that determines your response to it.

Awakening is realizing this: your mind is always mediating your experience of everything. Changing negative external circumstances into positive ones, and changing your interpretation of negative circumstances so that you view

them as positive ones, have exactly the same impact on your happiness. Your higher self doesn't care which one you choose; it just wants you to be happy.

Believing that certain external conditions must be met in order for you to feel happy, peaceful, content or loving forfeits the only power you always have. That's what keeps you stuck in unconscious cycles. Understanding that you possess the ability to be happy and loving regardless of what happens in your external environment, and practicing the cultivation of a positive internal environment every day, is what actualizes your ability to rise above the current.

If you're trying to manifest abundance in your life by fixating on having a million dollars in your bank account, you're stuck in unconscious cycles. If you're trying to manifest love in your life by getting your crush to like you back, you're stuck in unconscious cycles. If you're trying to manifest freedom and autonomy in your life by overthrowing the reigning political establishment, you're stuck in unconscious cycles. If you believe your well-being to be dependent on the acquiescence of anything external, you are not embodying your consciousness. Oh — and, judging yourself negatively for investing in material reality and repeating unconscious cycles is yet another unconscious cycle to be stuck in.

The imaginary laws of the Ego are built on a logic of desires and reactions: what goes up must come down. The bad is punished and the good is rewarded, because this is how things should be. Why? Because we said so. As anyone

who's ever tried to change the world knows, reality doesn't abide by our concepts of goodness at all. Reality doesn't give a rat's ass what you think it should be.

The unconscious mind thinks certain things *should* happen and certain things *shouldn't* — fixated on these ideas to the detriment of what is or isn't actually happening. “*This should be*” and “*that shouldn't be*” are your own made-up judgments. They're shadow puppets on the cave wall. The desire to manifest better outcomes for your shadow puppets is not something the Universe can respond to; it simply has no idea what you're talking about. The only way out of the reactivity and repetition is to focus on a wholly different category of experience.

The Universe does not comprehend form. It only comprehends your energy, how you experience the forms around you. What you see around you always mirrors your energy. Whether we can “manifest” physical events, or if we just have the ability to change our minds about events that happen, doesn't really matter. The point is that your conscious experience reflects the energy you give. That's just how living works.

Any judgment you have about how things “*should*” work beyond that is a shadow puppet the Universe has no awareness of whatsoever. The Universe can't tell what “*should*” be happening; it can only respond to what is happening in your experience, and your experience is determined by your state of mind. Spiritual ascension is the continuous practice of realizing this, again and again and

again, and returning your mind to align with the reality above the phantom concepts you hold dear.

Is it fair? Nope. Our minds' concepts of fairness are shadow puppets. Mistaking them for the laws of existence is a category mistake. We're playing a qualitatively different game here. Concepts are like dreams, and we're here to wake up.

Because the Universe responds to energy, the way to break out of repetitive patterns is to give what you want to receive.

This breaks the game of waiting for external reality to acquiesce to what you want in order for you to feel happiness. When you give what you want, you lay claim to agency over your experience and your happiness. You're not selective about when and to whom and under which circumstances you give it, because to be selective is to be a servant to shadow puppets. Your actions are still determined by them, rather than by you. To be an empowered agent, capable of creating your own life, you can't let yourself be hoodwinked by the power of what you, yourself, made up.

If you want love, give it. Give love everywhere you can. Release your artificial concepts of where love is supposed to come from, and notice it being given back all around you. Maybe your crush doesn't like you back, but maybe your roommate is cooking you dinner.

If you want abundance, give it. Give sustenance and care to the world around you. Release your fixation on how abundance is supposed to show up in your life, and notice it all around you. Maybe you didn't get that promotion, but maybe you have enough food in your garden to eat for the next week.

If you want freedom, be free. You can't control what anyone else will do, but freedom has nothing to do with control. Make your own decisions when and where you can, and don't spend all your time fixated on the things you can't choose. Be vigilant with yourself when you start slipping into patterns of believing others must give your freedom to you. When you do this, you deny yourself opportunities to be freer.

Give what you want to receive. That's it.

The trick is that what you want to receive is always an experience. The material specifics of how that experience enters your life are meaningless shadow puppets, and being dependent on which shadow puppets you get keeps you trapped in unconscious cycles of powerlessness. If you want to break out of them, then give up on the material details, and focus on giving the energy you want to receive.

Your happiness doesn't care how you found it. When you're happy, do you think to yourself, *"God I'm so bummed out that my happiness today was caused by the beautiful weather instead of a friendly dog"*? No. You're just happy.

The act of judging that you must break out of your unconscious patterns or else you're a bad person who isn't worthy of love or abundance or joy is an unconscious pattern. Must you do this? Should you do this? Are you a bad person if you don't do this? Those are nonsensical questions to which the Universe has no ability to respond, and none of these are the subject of this article.

If you want to break out of unconscious repetition and become of conscious how to create your own experience, then give what you want to receive. That's it. It is infuriatingly, dizzyingly simple.

Spiritual practice is about learning how to cultivate your own peace and joy, regardless of what else is going on. Real power is not found in bending the world to your whims; it's found in cultivating the ability to love no matter what the world does.

What to Do with Uncertainty

This morning, I walked into a café and started talking with the baristas. Somehow, two minutes of chat took us from “What do you want to drink?” to envisioning dystopian futures. Another recession is coming, Trump will get reelected or stage a coup, hurricanes and fires and floods will get worse, opioids and Nazis are everywhere, maybe there will be a revolution, maybe we’ll go extinct. This is the new America.

This isn’t the first time I’ve had this conversation.

A week ago, at a café, the same thing happened. Two minutes went from ordering a latte to a 17-year-old at the table next to me talking about how all the seniors in their high school live in fear of school shootings and feel hopeless for the future. At bars and restaurants, with friends and family, from California to Vermont, I keep having conversations about the end of the world, about death and anxiety, about fear, about change, about uncertainty for the future.

My ex-boyfriend wanted to buy a house in the Bay Area. I couldn’t fathom it. A friend tried to talk me into doing a PhD. I can’t wrap my head around it. Long-term commitments? Houses and careers and children and plans?

What do these even mean anymore? What good are any plans when the world is falling apart, like... right now?

I can't speak for everyone, but I think I can speak for enough people when I say, it feels like we're walking on water instead of land. Life swells beneath us and then drops, it rolls in and out, and everything beneath us keeps shifting. The groundedness we used to feel is evaporating into air. We're not quite in free-fall, but we're not exactly stable. *America Was Never That Great, It Isn't Now*. There is no return and the future is a clusterfuck.

More and more, the answers are turning into questions, and the question I'm left with is: *What do we do with all of this uncertainty?*

I feel myself try to cling — holding tight to any thread thrown my way as though it's as sturdy as rope. From relationships to work to study to cities, I keep seeking to embalm my life. *Give me something that lasts, something I can bet on*. I need to know the odds. I need answers, I need clarity, I need some ground to stand on so I can start moving again.

In the back of my mind, I know it's all just a story I tell so I can feel safe. In the back of my mind, I never feel safe. We're standing on water while the sea levels rise, and it's getting too deep to anchor anywhere.

For many of us, we anchor ourselves to roles. Our roles in work, in family, in community, in relationships. We play roles that do not always fit us because they are some kind

of ground to stand on. Boring Monday morning meetings that make us want to stab our eyes out with a pencil feel safer than free-fall. We stay in places we hate, in cities that grow too expensive or cruel, because staying is safer than starting over. We know where we stand, and no matter how much is thrown at us, at least we're standing somewhere.

But what happens when the show is over? When the mask falls away and we realize — this was just a story we told so we could feel safe?

For some of us, we anchor ourselves to ourselves. Our truths and our boundaries, our loves and our needs. We move through life based on feeling and joy, we follow our bliss, navigating by the compass etched into our souls no matter the odds. It unfolds, blooming and expanding out like tree branches and we climb to the edges and look out. I know this life — I live this life. At least, I did — until the compass stopped pointing anywhere.

Even ourselves are stories we tell, narratives we construct to feel safe.

There comes a time when you've sampled enough sweetness and realize that everywhere you go, the same sun shines on you and every night it sets. Every role you pick up or cast off, you're still you underneath. Every self you become will change in time. Every boundary is negotiable, every border is permeable, every story has its end. Everything you feel and are will change.

Everything is shifting, always. It is growing and decaying, born and living and dying then dead. Whatever you feel, you will eventually feel differently. Whoever you are, you will eventually be different. We have never been on steady ground. It doesn't work like that. Nothing is certain.

Sometimes, the stories we tell ourselves to pretend things are certain are strong enough to give us a sense of safety. More and more, they are not. American democracy is a story we tell, and a story that feels more like a fiction each day. The economy is a story we tell. True love is a story we tell. Life purpose is a story we tell. Our lives are stories we tell.

More and more I see that we react to the stories we tell about the world, not to the world itself. The glass is just a glass and there's water in it — whether you call it half empty or half full does not change what it is.

We have the power to tell stories, but some stories hit us so hard that we can only react to them as though they are the truth of what happened. Some thoughts are so nagging that we can't not have them, even though they are nothing but thoughts. We have power, and we don't have power.

We experience, we tell stories about it all, and sometimes the stories tell us. We are experiencers, and there is no certainty in what we will experience.

We are experiencing great uncertainty. What do we do with it?

We trust and we doubt and we trust and we doubt. We hope and we plan and we change. We endure until we can't anymore. We love until we don't anymore. We live until we die, and then we die, and then we're dead.

Death is a certainty. In the mean time, life is uncertain. These are questions and not answers.

How do you deal with that?

When Someone Says “You Create Your Own Suffering”

This essay is for people who don't understand each other. Specifically, it's for people who are going down a path towards seeing themselves as the cause of their own pain, and anyone else who feels pain about someone doing that. The lessons of this essay can be applied to any relationship where understanding and empathy have broken down, but they certainly don't have to be applied to anything. All of this is voluntary.

Introduction: So You Had A Bad Day

To start all this off, we need to talk about validation. My understanding of validation comes from dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT); it was one of the first things I learned in therapy, and it's the cornerstone of creating genuine understanding between people. Validation is the act, the active practice, of explaining to yourself (and perhaps the other person) why that person's experience is valid.

Why does their perspective make sense? Why do their feelings make sense? Why does their personal experience of the situation make sense for them to be experiencing?

Rather than judging whether or not someone's perspective, emotions and experience are right, you are understanding why they are valid.

Invalidation is essentially the pain of feeling like you live in like a different reality from someone else. It's like they're telling you, "Your feelings aren't okay. They're not allowed. You're not allowed to be feeling them. Your perspective is wrong, and you're not allowed to have it. Your experience of reality is incorrect." And it happens all the time, in major and minor ways.

For example, you know that feeling when you've just had a bad day? When in general, life might be totally fine, but today was just bad? And you tell a friend about all the things that went wrong today, and they say, "Oh come on, your life is great. Cheer up! You've got nothing to be upset about." They may say this with the kindest of intentions, just wanting to help you feel better, but it comes across as pretty damn unhelpful and invalidating. So you're left thinking: "I just told you all the things I've got to be upset about, and yes, I am perfectly aware that my life is otherwise fine, but at the moment, I'm feeling crappy about a crappy day. Is that not allowed?"

At best, their reaction doesn't help you feel better, and at worst, it's another reason to feel worse, because on top of your crappy day, you're now being invalidated about it.

Part 1: Two Guys Walk into an Old Catholic Lady

To understand why someone else's experience is valid, there are two places you can look. The first is in understanding that person's history: their particular past experiences, beliefs, traumas, treasures, and patterns. The second is in understanding that behavior and emotions always come from somewhere. In order for someone to be feeling what they are now, there had to have been something that caused it, or it wouldn't be happening. No emotion comes from nothing; emotions are responses.

For example, let's say Bill had an abusive mother who was Catholic. Later in life, Bill talks to an older woman who's Catholic, and experiences her as mean and judgmental, her overall demeanor as threatening. Bill's friend Kevin meets this same woman, behaving the same way in the same situation, and views her as perfectly nice. Kevin might not understand whatsoever why Bill would have the reaction he's having. To Kevin, Bill's perspective on this woman is downright wrong. But understanding Bill's history with his abusive Catholic mother might explain why he's having such a negative response to this Catholic woman now.

Regardless of whether or not this Catholic woman is actually nice, it makes perfect sense that Bill might be perceiving her as mean and threatening, because he's associating this current situation with past trauma. The feelings he's having right now, of fear or discomfort or

wanting to get away from this woman — these feelings make perfect sense. They're valid. And to add insult to injury, let's say that nobody believed Bill as a child when he told other people that his mother was hitting him. They told him that his experience of what was happening wasn't really happening. And now, Kevin, you're gonna say that his experience of this Catholic woman is invalid? Did you listen to her? She was clearly mean, and cruel, and scary. Do we even live in the same reality, Kevin?

In a way, no. Even though Bill and Kevin were in the same conversation with the same woman, they were in entirely different experiences of it. The particulars of the situation meant entirely different things to each of them, impacted them in entirely different ways, led to entirely different emotional experiences. Both of their experiences are valid.

In DBT, the next step after validation is to “check the facts.” After you validate someone, and their physiological and emotional response calms down, then you're supposed to look at what's really happening now without the cloud of reactive pain confusing it. I find that this approach can sometimes be unhelpful, because people, by and large, aren't great at telling the difference between fact and judgment.

The facts of the situation are: this Catholic woman exists and said stuff. The fact of the situation is not that she's nice, or that she's mean. She is, she acts. Those are the facts.

The judgments that those facts indicate that this woman is nice, or that she's mean — those are interpretations of the facts. They are perspectives to have on a situation whose meaning we can't say for certain. How do we know that the meaning isn't certain? Because we've already got two different people experiencing it in two different ways, giving it two entirely different meanings, both of which feel completely real to them.

Rather than try to determine which meaning is correct or better, we can say that they are both valid.

The question to ask Bill and Kevin (once they've both calmed down a bit) is this: Is there another possible perspective on the situation that can be valid too? Bill, can you understand why it is that Kevin views this woman as nice? Can you validate Kevin's experience and perspective? Can you see it, too, Bill?

Kevin, can you understand why it might be that Bill views this woman as mean and cruel? Kevin, can you understand Bill's perspective without judging it, even in your own mind, as wrong? If your view of Bill's perspective is, "Yeah, it makes sense that he misjudged this woman as mean because he's projecting his past trauma," then you're not really validating Bill's perspective, are you? Remember: the facts are just that the Catholic woman exists and says things. Your perspective is that she's nice. You're working on validating Bill's different perspective: actually understanding why it actually makes perfect sense. You can

come back to judging it later, but for now, we're just validating it. So, let's try again, shall we?

Part 2: If the Shoe Fits

Validation is ultimately an act of empathy. It is about stepping into someone else's shoes for a moment, trying to see the world through their eyes. Sometimes, stepping into someone else's shoes makes you reflect on your own shoes and want to change them. Sometimes, it's just an act of empathy with someone else, and you can carry on afterwards with having your own different perspective, saying, "Well, to each their own." Sometimes, stepping into someone else's shoes feels impossible, because how could you possibly want to wear those shoes? Even want to step into those shoes? Those shoes could never possibly fit! It's entirely possible that they don't, but have you ever tried them on to check?

When we love people, we tend to want to understand where they're coming from, and want them to understand us. We typically want to make sense of them, and we want to make sense *to* them. We want to be able to relate to one another, have shared experiences, so that we don't live in the continuous pain of mutual invalidation.

Validation can be applied to any interpersonal conflict where there is no shared understanding. You do not have to apply it to anything. All of this is voluntary. There may be

conflicts in your life that just don't seem worth resolving, or perspectives that don't seem worth validating.

For example, to obey Godwin's law as we all seem to invariably do, I don't personally particularly want to spend my time empathizing with the perspectives of Nazis. However, if I were a therapist whose job was focused on de-radicalizing and rehabilitating white supremacists, you bet your ass I'd be doing that. Why? Because the only possible way someone is going to step into a shared reality with you is if they believe that it's possible for them to do so. The only reason they'd have to take that step is if they start thinking that your perspective might be better for them than the one they're currently having.

You can't really explain to someone how to get from where they are to where you are, let alone why they might want to, until you understand where they are. At least, you won't be able to explain it in a way they'll likely believe. And for good reason, because from their view, you clearly don't get where they are, you clearly don't understand their perspective, you clearly don't validate their experience, so how on earth would you be able to tell them that their experience can or should change?

What would you know about it? Why should they trust you?

Part 3: Becoming the Cause of Your Own Pain

Now that we've dug into validation and invalidation, trust and empathy, let's pivot back to what happens when someone's perspective on the world changes so dramatically that, to even entertain the idea of viewing it as a hypothetically valid perspective, feels invalidating to your own experience.

Particularly, today we're talking about when one person starts experiencing themselves as the cause of their own feeling, and another person doesn't experience that — when one person sees their mind as creating all of their own suffering, and another person sees suffering as happening to them from the outside.

To be clear: I am really not talking about any semantic difference between pain and suffering. I am talking about all of it: anger and grief, shame and loneliness, misery and stubbed toes, fear and trauma, lower back pain and cancer.

I also want to clarify that I am not debating any facts. I am not saying that the mind does, in fact, cause all pain and all happiness. I am not saying that pain and happiness do, in fact, happen to you from external causes. I am not debating facts. I ask that, just for the rest of this essay, you put aside determining which one of these is "right."

What we have here are two different perspectives.

We have one perspective that says: “I experienced pain and suffering and trauma at the hands of people and events in my environment. My pain is caused by those external circumstances. My pain is not my fault; it’s the fault of what happened to me. Yeah, sure, whatever, maybe I could have hypothetically done this or that differently, but that completely misses the point by pinning blame on me where it does not belong. I obviously didn’t know any better at the time, or I wouldn’t have ended up in an experience of trauma. You really think I’d cause trauma to myself willingly? Please stop blaming me for my own trauma; it’s bad enough as is having been a victim of it.”

Is this perspective valid? Of course it is. Listen to the damn perspective. You suffered pain and trauma, and it was not your fault. That’s completely valid. Of course you’d have that perspective. Of course your perspective is allowed. Of course you’d never bring that trauma upon yourself, and yes, it really is bad enough, and I would never add insult to injury by blaming you for it.

We have another perspective that says: “I’m experiencing myself causing my own pain and causing my own happiness. My perspective is changing from what it used to be. I used to experience pain and suffering as caused by people and situations beyond my control. What I experienced in the past hasn’t changed, it can’t be now... but what’s happening now is that I am finding myself able to make different choices. I can now think different thoughts, and notice that those thoughts change my

feelings. It does not seem at all like the external factors cause my pain... or, when it does, I notice that. I notice the patterns I fall into, and I can begin, here and there, to pull myself out of them. I have experienced releasing myself from emotional pain by changing my judgments. I have experienced releasing myself from physical pain by changing my judgments. None of this has anything to do with blame, or even with the past. It's a present, current experience I am having now."

Is this perspective valid, too?

Remember, the question is not, "Is this perspective correct?" We're not assessing if these are the facts. The question is, "Can you validate this perspective?" Even if you don't share the experience, can you understand that someone else is authentically experiencing it? Can you take, in good faith, that they are experiencing it for valid reasons? Truly, can you? Are you able to? There isn't a wrong answer here; it's an honest question.

Part 4: Oui, et...

Okay, rewind. Instead of talking about the experience "I cause my own pain," let's talk about the French. Specifically, the French language.

Now, I believe that the French language exists. I read about it as a child, and I heard people speaking it. Well... I'd

heard *of* people speaking it. I really wanted to learn French, so I put my mind to it, studied all the vocabulary, learned the grammar, and many years in, I made some strange gurgling sounds that sounded a bit like French. I tried them again. I said: *Je suis*. And I recognized it— oh my god! I just spoke French. I tried another sentence: *Je m'appelle Anna*. Ya, I think that was French too! It definitely is!

Day by day, I learned more French. Finally, after a lot of work, I was able to go through a whole morning in French. When the sun rose, I saw *le soleil*. I heard *les oiseaux* chirping in an *arbre* outside my *fenêtre*. When I spoke to myself, I spoke to *moi même*, and actually, I didn't speak; *j'ai parlé*. From a morning in French, it became a day, then a week. The more I practiced, the longer I could sustain it.

Now — can you speak French?

In the hypothetical “you” then yes: it is possible for a person to speak French. At least some people clearly have the capacity to learn French. Will all people learn French? Probably not. Does the fact that it is possible for a person to learn French mean that you personally can speak fluent French right now? Not on its own, no. Maybe you can speak French right now, but the simple fact that speaking French is a possibility does not alone make you able to do so right now.

I had certain experiences in my life that made learning French fairly easy for me, at least compared to some

people. I started learning it fairly young. I liked French stuff, so learning the language made me feel good. I had the great privilege to study French in high school and college, to travel to French-speaking countries and prioritize my French studies. There are people without my same privileges who have also learned French, and people with those privileges who haven't, but for me: I have privilege, and I speak French.

Are you a bad person if you don't speak French? Of course not. It's just a language, a way of labeling the world, describing experiences, speaking and acting differently. English, Spanish and Wolof are all languages too. I'm learning French because I prefer the way my life feels when I live it in French. I'd like to be a French teacher, to teach other people who want to learn French how to speak it.

Learning French is obviously not the only thing a person can do with their life. You can learn to fix cars or tend gardens, heal the sick or care for animals or do brain surgery or trade stocks or write books or sell drugs. These are all possible things a person can do in their life. Does the fact that I'm learning French right now have anything to do with what you do with your life?

I'm really asking: does it?

Part 5: Couldn'ta, Didn'ta, and Therefore Shouldn'ta, but Perhaps, Now, Could?

Let's get back to our two perspectives. In the first, someone has experienced pain that they did not cause. In the second, someone is experiencing that they personally have the power to cause or end their own pain. The second perspective does not actually make any judgments on the first. Nowhere in the second perspective has it been said that, if you don't share this perspective, you're evil and bad. You're not being blamed for your own suffering.

And yet — I really could understand why it might feel like you are. It makes sense to me that that might be your perspective on it, because in general, most people don't view "ending pain" the way we view "speaking French."

We typically view pain, and ending pain, with judgments in mind. We take certain perspectives on pain, for completely understandable reasons. We don't want pain. Pain sucks to experience. That's kinda what pain is, what makes pain *pain* — this experience of bad, unwanted, toxic, unhealthy, awful, horrible, maybe even traumatizing. A painful experience is, by definition, painful.

So if someone says, "Your mind creates pain, and can therefore stop pain," it makes perfect sense how that might translate as, "Your mind can stop pain, and therefore, should stop pain." It makes perfect sense that the statement, "You can end your pain with your mind"

might translate as, “You should end your pain with your mind.” In light of the way most people experience pain, the way we tend to view pain, the meaning we give to pain, the perspective we have on pain — it makes sense that we’d receive a declaration of ability about ending it as a judgement. That perspective is valid to me.

It also makes sense to me that someone could take it a step further, and turn the judgment into a self-worth judgment. If your mind should stop pain, and you can control your mind, then you should stop your pain, and you can, so if you’re not, then you’re doing something wrong, right?

This perspective is valid too. It makes perfect sense to me, in light of everything we know about how most people view pain. It truly is valid, and I’ve just validated it to prove that it can be validated.

Now, let’s check the facts. The statement is, “Your mind can stop pain,” not, “Your mind should stop pain,” and certainly not, “You can and should stop your own pain right now and if you don’t you’re bad.”

And yet — it makes perfect sense to me why the first statement would be interpreted as the second and the third. How could it not be? How could there possibly be any other way to take that? Pain feels bad. Feeling pain feels bad. Ending pain feels good. I want to feel good. Everyone wants to feel good. So don’t tell me that the reason I don’t feel good is that I’m doing something wrong here, because I’m not.

You're right — you're not. You're not doing anything wrong.

But how can I say that, when I could end my pain right now? That's what we're talking about, right? The ability to just snap your fingers and not feel pain anymore? Anyone would want that ability. I wouldn't possibly keep myself in this pain, this suffering, this misery, this trauma, by choice. How dare you suggest I would. So how can it be possible that I cause my own pain?

I don't know. I've just been speaking French these days. I spent years studying French, and eventually, I started living in it. I know that's what I'm doing, because I studied it, I learned what it was— it's this language I'm speaking. I'm speaking it now. I learned because I had great teachers and a lot of practice. I had the privileges of great teachers and a lot of time to practice.

Part 6: Asdfilése Grammar and My Pet Bunny

Imagine you'd never heard of the French language. In fact, I'm not speaking French, I'm speaking Asdfilése. What, you haven't heard of it? You haven't heard of Asdfilése? It's this language I'm studying. Yes, it exists — I'm studying it. I've heard of people speaking it. I've spoken it. It's real.

So you want to know how to say "How are you" in Asdfilése? Well, it doesn't exactly work like that... see, in

Asdfilse, we define things by the energy of spaces between them. So in English you could say, "I stand beneath the tree," but in Asdfilse we'd talk about the experience of the space made between me and the tree which changes based on my relationship to it, so I guess the closest cognate might be... "*flibijboot Rarf raf Gersnuffins*"? But that doesn't really capture the essence of it, y'know?

I might sound to you like I'm insane — I'm delusional, crazy, hallucinating. You know... maybe I am. Maybe my perspective on this is a hallucination. We can take that as a metaphor, too.

The question is — what am I hallucinating, and how is that changing my experience? Well, let me tell you, I'm definitely not hallucinating that I'm being hunted by aliens who want to kill me every night. It's more like... I'm hallucinating that I have a Flemish giant bunny who sits on my shoulders and helps me be happy.

When people say mean things to me, my pet bunny nuzzles my face and I don't mind the mean things so much. I'm able to respond to the mean things by being nice now. When I see people in pain, I feel more able to care for them because I have my bunny by my side. All those things I was so afraid of? Well, I don't feel so afraid now, thanks to my bunny. All those hurtful things I did that I couldn't take responsibility for? I don't feel so much shame now, so now I can actually be accountable. All that pain of my past? It's healing. It's really, really healing. My bunny helped me.

Maybe my bunny is a hallucination. Maybe I'm crazy. But if the only impact my bunny is having is to make me healthier, happier, kinder, more compassionate, more peaceful, and more loving... well, what, exactly, is the problem with it?

Maybe the problem is that I believe my bunny is real when it's just a figment of my imagination. If I understood that it isn't actually real, then sure, I can go forth and enjoy adventures with my imaginary bunny, no harm done. But the thing is... the bunny power only works for me when I believe it is real. Maybe someday, I'll be able to call it imaginary without that limiting its power to positively impact my experience, but right now — I need the damn bunny, okay?

Is that okay? Is that okay *with you*?

For me, the problem with my bunny is that look you get in your eyes when I talk about it. The fear you have for me — Am I crazy? Am I going to hurt myself or others? The fear you have for you — Should you have a bunny? Are you bad and wrong for not having a bunny, for not speaking fluent Asdfilse, for not speaking French? The judgment in your eyes — that you must be bad. Or I must be bad. It must be my privilege. It must be your fault. How dare I invalidate your experience of not having a bunny?

And how dare I equate having an imaginary bunny and speaking a made up language to your real experience of real trauma?

I understand why you could feel that way. Your experience of pain at this, at that, at all of it, is perfectly valid. Your perspective makes sense. It even makes complete sense that a part of your perspective is, “This is the only perspective a person could possibly have.”

So yes, it is falsifying to that claim about objective reality, and therefore probably invalidating to your perspective when I say mine is actually different. I can imagine that would be painful, confusing, and maybe even capital-T Triggering to your very real and valid experiences of very real and valid trauma. I know. I really know how that feels; I’ve been triggered to. Capital-T, PTSD Triggered, too. I’ve felt pain and anger, powerlessness and guilt, shame and loneliness, eating disorders and bipolar disorder and so much lower back pain. It wasn’t long ago that I felt that way, too. I still feel like that sometimes, here and there. It’s happening less frequently, though. I feel much more able to stop it from happening.

Conclusion: Maybe We’re All Just Bad at This

Most people aren’t very practiced at explaining themselves while also empathizing with and validating other perspectives. The journey from judging everyone all the time to not judging anyone ever... let’s just say, that journey does not happen overnight. It happens in steps and

jumps, back steps and meandering paths, and most people haven't reached the end of the path yet. I know I haven't.

As a result, when some people talk about their experience of ending their own pain, they might do so in ways that are actively judgmental of you. They might be blaming you for your pain. They might think that your pain is your fault because you could be ending it. They might think that you're bad and wrong for not ending your suffering right now, in this minute, because they ended their pain. From their perspective, why the hell won't you do it?

Wow. I mean — look at them. This person who says they can end their own pain themselves — they are clearly in so much pain about this. They're seeing you in pain, when they think you don't have to be, and that's putting them in pain. They want to have the power to stop your pain, because it hurts them to see you in pain. They believe that ending your pain would end their pain, so they believe that they must end your pain.

What's actually happening for them is this: they want to get out of their own pain, but they feel powerless to do that, so they blame you for it. They want you to change so they don't have to feel so much pain. It's sad really, because if they really are so adept at stopping pain, then why don't they snap their fingers and get out of this one? They're taking their own feelings of powerlessness out on you, and they authentically believe right now that *their* pain is *your* fault. They think they can't get out of pain unless you do something that just isn't going to happen.

I know. It's infuriating, isn't it? Your feeling of fury at that judgment... it's valid. But hey, you've read this article now, so you know that their judgments aren't really about you; they're about them. From that perspective, maybe it's kind of tragic instead. They're so mad at themselves for feeling powerless, and so, they're pinning that all on you. It's so unfair, I know. The unfairness of it all is causing everyone involved such pain.

Right now, maybe you can't stop them from having that perspective. So, do you need to feel pain right now because that person feels pain? Their pain here blatantly is not your fault, so you'd be doing nothing wrong to leave it behind you. Do you want to leave it behind? Can you?

I don't know if there's anything I can say that will help you feel less pain about this right now, but we could try one more time:

We have two perspectives here.

In the first perspective, you are bad and wrong for not ending all of your pain. I'm truly crazy when I say it's possible to cause and end all pain, because it isn't, and also, you're terrible for not having the same crazy delusion that I do. In our own ways, we are both bad and wrong and invalid and awful, and there's no way to ever get out of this pain.

In the second perspective, your experience is completely and utterly valid. None of your pain is your fault. None of it was ever your fault. I'm just learning a different language,

and I'm happy about the language I'm learning. I'm happier because I'm learning it. I'm happy because life feels better when I speak this new language, because I have the power to make life feel better by speaking it. My learning this language is not a value judgment on you. You are valid. You are valued. I have a different perspective now; that's truly all.

Now, which of these perspectives causes you less pain?

How to Transmute Suffering

Unless you've already reached some eternal dynamic bliss state of perpetual Nirvana (if you have, how is it?), you likely suffer sometimes. You likely don't enjoy suffering — in fact, by definition, that's what makes it "suffering." Because you don't enjoy suffering, you probably want to minimize the amount you have to suffer. Right? Cool, me too. You've come to the right place.

While I cannot yet say from experience that suffering is curable (I'll have to take Buddha's word on that for now), I can tell you that it is healable. Its symptoms can be addressed at the root cause, and the cause can be transmuted into a source of joy and satisfaction, rather than pain and suffering.

Without further ado, here is a simple, but comprehensive, five step process for transmuting suffering:

Step One: Water — Feel and Allow Your Emotions

Our first step is about emotions, and learning to work with them rather than letting them work against us. Emotions flow like water flows. An emotion that is not flowing is merely waiting to, increasing in pressure until the time

comes that it causes an emotional burst like a busted water pipe.

To reduce suffering, you first let your emotions flow. That means: you feel your emotions. You allow yourself to feel them. You open yourself to them, rather than wall your experience off from them. You let them come in with no judgment.

This is easier said than done. Why? Because feeling negative emotions isn't exactly fun. It can be daunting, terrifying, at times even overwhelming. Still, like jumping into water, the longer you wait to jump, the scarier it seems. Take a deep breath, and take the plunge. Just let yourself feel awful, and do nothing. Your feelings are valid. Show them that they are valid by letting yourself feel them.

Please remember that feeling your feelings does not mean reacting to them. In fact, it means not reacting to them at all until they have been felt. Pause all actions until after you have let yourself simply experience the emotion, unhindered. Until you have fully allowed and felt the negative emotion, do not do anything to change your emotions. The only way out is through, which means that at first, the only way out is in.

When we experience a negative emotion, and we take immediate action to escape the emotion, we create addictive patterns and increase our own suffering. To reduce suffering, we must first resist the urge to react immediately, and instead allow our feelings to be felt.

Once we have opened ourselves to them, then we can begin to study them more thoroughly, but that self-study cannot occur from a place of repression, resistance or denial. Feeling the emotions must come first.

Step Two: Air — Question and Challenge Your Thoughts

Our second step is about thoughts and beliefs. Thoughts will appear and swirl and expand to fill the confines of whatever belief system they are given. Beliefs function kind of like an atmosphere, holding the thoughts in place, seemingly rigid but ultimately permeable. We often cannot perceive our belief systems because our thoughts appear too “cloudy,” so to speak.

Once we have allowed ourselves to feel our emotions (and only after!), we can begin to question the thoughts and beliefs that caused our emotions to swirl.

To do this, notice the thoughts you have about the situation. Notice that they are thoughts. Try thinking different thoughts about the situation, and see what happens to your emotions. Try thinking different thoughts about the situation, and notice which new perspectives you can easily believe, and which you can't.

Now that we've started parsing out the thoughts, we can begin to see the beliefs we have at play. What are those beliefs? Approach them with innocent curiosity. Is this

belief rigid, or flexible? Porous, or solid? Do I like it? Do I want to keep believing it? What would happen if I believed something else? What else could I believe? What other thoughts would I think if I believed something else? What is holding my belief in place?

Step Three: Fire — Uncover and Explore Your Opposing Desires

Our third step is about desires. Like light, when we focus our attention on something, we illuminate it into conscious awareness, and we cast a shadow on whatever it is we aren't focused on. In order to fully move through our suffering, we must turn the light of our attention to the parts of our experience that remain in the dark: ignored, repressed or denied. This is the step that often gets called "shadow work," or working with our unconscious mind.

This step in the process is where I most recommend seeking help from other people, both because they will likely be able to see aspects of you that you don't see, and because it is often the most challenging step, the "trial by fire." Seeking external support can be helpful and necessary to the process. Please be gentle with yourself through this whole process, but especially through this step.

After allowing our feelings, and exploring our thoughts and beliefs, we can begin to look at the oppositional forces that

are holding our current beliefs in place. Those forces are, quite plainly, energies pulling us in opposite directions. One of our desires conflicts with an equal and opposite desire, which we aren't always conscious that we have. By becoming aware that it is there, it ceases to be unconscious, and we can begin to study it.

Suffering arises when we are "pulled" in two contradictory directions: we want one thing, but we also want something else that pulls us elsewhere. By studying the illuminated desire, we immediately know a good deal about the shadowed desire: it is always a perfect mirror, in some ways identical and in some ways exactly the opposite.

Once we become aware that our desires are there, we can enact steps two and one in reverse. We begin by probing each desire with innocent curiosity, and without judgment. We ask questions. We come to understand them in our thoughts. Then, we look to the feelings underneath those thoughts.

What is it that we expect these desires to make us feel?
What are the actual needs underneath the wants?

By the end of this step, we have the lay of the land when it comes to our suffering. We know now what our suffering feels like. We know what we think about it, and what we believe. We know what desires we have, and what desires are in opposition. From this place, we can synthesize the two experiences into a combined set of needs, and begin to meet them.

Step Four: Earth — Take Steps to Meet Your Actual Needs

Our fourth step is all about practical steps. Like building in the material world, we now take the understanding we have built from the previous three steps and turn it into concrete changes to our experience. We now know the multiple desires we have at play that are creating internal conflict, and can take steps to meet the needs that lie beneath them.

What we need is only ever a state of being, either physical or emotional. Anything we think we need that is not a physical or emotional state of being is simply a strategy to reach our need. One of the main causes of suffering is equating a strategy to meet a need with the need itself.

When we understand our needs this simply, they become much easier to meet. It becomes obvious that we don't have to bulldoze one need in favor of another, nor do we have to compromise any of our needs. We can hold both needs as precious and broaden our awareness of possible strategies that meet them both.

From this place, of understanding what it is we actually need to experience, our actions need not create conflict. This is true of balancing conflicting needs within ourselves, and conflicts between our own needs and the needs with others. We can almost always find numerous strategies to meet our needs when we focus fully on the needs

themselves, rather than fixate on only certain strategies to meet them.

From this place, we can start taking actions to meet our needs, conscious of what we actually need rather than wedded to certain limited concepts of what we want. We've now shifted our actions in the world to be more conscious and harmonious, and healed a part of our own suffering.

The first time you go all the way through this process, it will likely feel triumphant... until you have to start the process over again with another aspect of your psyche. This is a practice. It's a process that gets faster and easier with time and repetition.

Bit by bit, we actually begin to chip away at our suffering, transmuting an experience of pain into an experience of acceptance, learning, knowledge and power.

Step Five: Spirit — Little by Little, Dis-identify from Concepts

Our final step is about release: the evaporation of the need to go through the suffering and transmutation process. The further we get into the transmutation process, the less we find ourselves fixating on oppositional desires, and the more we find ourselves experiencing harmonious needs.

Our identification with concepts begins to dissolve, and we begin to put ourselves in right relationship with our experience of life.

Rather than judge or repress our feelings, we understand that they must flow like water, and allow them to. Rather than believe all of our thoughts as though they were truth, we understand that they must be explored and looked at from new perspectives. Rather than act upon a desire unconsciously, we understand that desires are like trumpeters that alert us to what we actually need. Rather than repress, deny or bulldoze our needs, we understand that needs are only states of being, and we broaden our possible actions so that all of our needs can be met more seamlessly.

As we do this, our experience of life begins to shift from primarily perceiving forms, to primarily experiencing... experiences. What I mean is, by understanding ourselves, and treating different aspects of our decision-making process appropriately, we find ourselves fixating less on what we think we want, and understanding better what we actually need. We identify less with what we think we are, and understand better how we actually are. The oppositions within us synthesize into a more harmonious experience of living. Need arise to create satisfaction, and satisfaction arises to create need, and the whole process can be embraced and enjoyed, rather than becoming a source of suffering.

The End of Guilt

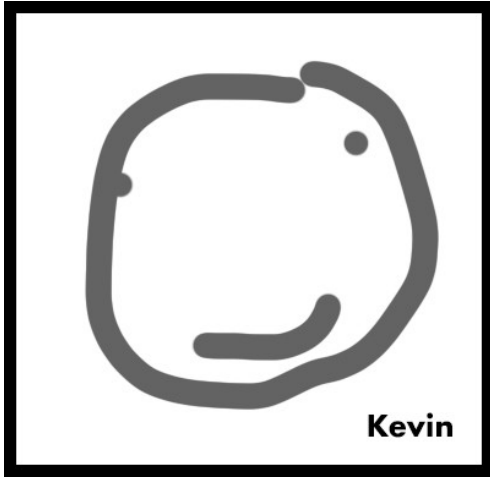
Being blamed for a problem is a painful experience. Blaming ourselves for a problem is also a painful experience. We sometimes seek acute respite from those pains by blaming someone else for our problems — though, doing that usually ends up with us feeling more pain. Why? Because we can't control other people; just because we blame them for the problem doesn't mean they'll fix it.

The only way to get out of this kind of pain is to stop casting blame altogether, and that's... easier said than done.

I am not writing this because I think casting blame is wrong. I am writing it because casting blame is painful. Just because something is painful doesn't mean it is objectively or morally wrong, but all the same, being in an experience of pain can often inhibit us from making something right. Beyond this, let's temporarily suspend our attachment to right and wrong for the duration of this essay.

One of the main reasons we don't release blame at other people is that we think that unless they are at fault, we must be at fault. The other person has to be wrong or bad or evil or sinful or something — because if they aren't, then we are. This all stems from the fallacy that, for something to be painful, it needs to be somebody's fault. Even though this is a fallacy, telling a wounded mind to just release all conception of fault or guilt has this tendency of not working whatsoever.

Fortunately, there is another way. Allow me to introduce Kevin:



This is Kevin. Kevin is the ultimate avatar of guilt.

Look at his stupid face. His eye is practically falling off of his head. He doesn't even have a nose. You can tell he's never had a thought in his life, certainly not one about your wellbeing. That face just screams the kind of blasé evil that isn't even aware of how evil it is. It is pure, unrepentant guilt.

Everything bad that has ever happened is Kevin's fault. That's the rule of Kevin, because Kevin is guilt itself.

Now, when you have a conflict that causes pain, you know who is truly to blame: Kevin. You're not at fault. The person you're in conflict with isn't at fault. The totality of the

Universe isn't at fault. It's Kevin's fault. Kevin is guilt incarnate.

Because Kevin is the only entity in the universe that can truly be guilty, you can send Kevin to jail. Out of the picture. Rot in hell, you vapid, noseless bastard. Be gone with you. With that, triumphant, you have solved the pain of the situation: Kevin, the very essence of guilt, is gone.

Now, without Kevin clouding up the picture with his guilty, faulty ways, you have some chance at actually resolving the conflict. The reparative, transformative, empathetic healing process can begin. You can see the loving intentions in your own actions. You can see the loving intentions in your counterpart's actions. You can begin to empathize, with yourself and with them, and create connection and communication out of what before had been a microcosm of war.

Instead of flinging guilt back and forth at one another like meatballs in a food fight, instead of casting it upon yourself or upon another like a magical curse, you can put guilt right where guilt belongs: on Kevin's stupid face. Really, it's Kevin's fault. Kevin is guilt itself. Your mind still has someone to blame, but it's not you, and it's not the person you're trying to resolve a conflict with.

It's just Kevin. Damn you, Kevin. It's all your fault. But now you, and whoever or whatever you find yourself in conflict with, can begin the process of healing.

Now, this is not to say that nothing is ever right or wrong. We are temporarily suspending our attachment to right and wrong, just for the duration of this essay, remember? Without right and wrong, and guilt or fault for doing wrong, the real essence of justice can be seen as healing. Injustice is a break, a wound, a fracture, causing pain like a broken bone. Without guilt, we see that injustice is mended with healing. There is no healing in vengeance. Healing is transformation through empathy and inclusion. Empathy is the act of truly understanding, inclusion the act of love.

I think it truly is possible to create reparative transformation without guilt, fault or blame — at least, not on any person. But Kevin isn't a person. Kevin is guilt incarnate.

So if you find yourself in a conflict, and you can't get out of the spiral of guilt and blame, powerlessness and shame, stick your foot out to catch yourself before you drown. Stick it out right onto Kevin's stupid face, and shove his guilty ass down so you can leverage yourself back up. It's really all guilt's fault.

The Ultimate Life Hack

What if only good things happened to you, and every event in your life just made it better? That's not as impossible as you might think.

From spiritual teachings to productivity hacks, from organization strategies to relationship advice, we are inundated with tips, tricks and practices aimed at making our lives better. At the end of the day, we all want to live well. We may each have wildly different ideas of what a good life looks like, but we share the common goal of wanting one.

What makes a life good or bad? More to the point, what makes anything good or bad? Think back to that age-old saying, "Is the glass half empty, or half full?" The wisdom of the saying has less to do with optimism or pessimism, and more to do with the power our minds have to shape how the world affects us. All that's actually there is a glass with some water in it. What you say about it does not change what it is, but it can entirely change how it impacts you, and what living feels like as a result.

What we experience in any situation is not what's happening, but how what's happening impacts us. We cannot experience the world outside of our own perceptions. What we too often fail to notice is the power our perceptions have to shape how we're impacted, and the power we have to shape our own perceptions. With

awareness, creativity and flexibility, we can start using this power to transmute just about anything into a way to make our lives better.

There are three steps to this process:

1. Change the situation.
2. If that doesn't work, change your perspective.
3. If that doesn't work, change your focus.

Step 1: Change the situation

Most of us are familiar with the first step: when we're stuck in a situation we don't want to be in, we put our thought, energy and action towards changing that situation, or at least trying to. We use our actions to turn the situation from something we perceive is "bad" to something we perceive is "good."

That's where our solutions-thinking usually stops. If we can change the situation into one where we feel better, we rejoice. If we can't, we typically feel frustrated or disappointed, disempowered or fearful, angry or upset. When this happens, we've usually gone too far into trying to change the situation. Like exercise, the lesson is: stop before you hurt yourself more.

While I'm certainly not casting any judgment on trying to change your circumstances, I do believe it's incredibly

important to hone the skills of changing your perspective and changing your focus as well. Building healthy muscles is about both strengthening them, and stretching them.

Step 2: Change your perspective

When we are in a situation we think of as “bad,” and we can’t change the circumstance, we can likewise put our energy towards changing our perspective on the situation. What if the situation were “good,” exactly as it is? What if the negative judgment we’d put on it were incorrect? Are there ways we can look at the situation differently, so that it becomes “a good thing?” Are there beliefs, thoughts or attachments to particular outcomes we’ve been fixated on that we could try changing or giving up, and just see what happens?

This step takes a kind of creativity and flexibility most of us aren’t used to practicing. Usually, we’re attached to certain strategies of meeting our needs. We are wedded to concepts of what a good life has to look like, or what being a good, happy or successful person entails. We are often more familiar with our thoughts about happiness than we are with the experience of happiness itself, so much so that we sometimes dedicate our whole lives to things that don’t make us feel like we’re living well. At the same time, we’ve likely all experienced events we thought were “bad” that

later turned out to be good for us, even if the only gain was that they caused us to learn, grow, shift or evolve.

Actively practicing the skill of changing our perspective makes it faster to get from the pain of experiencing something “bad” to the sense of satisfaction or gratitude of that “bad” situation transmuting into something good. The more we practice, the easier it gets.

Even if we can’t turn the totality of the situation into something we think is good, we can often still find some “good things” about the situation, which puts our focus more on what makes us happy. Which brings us to:

Step 3: Change your focus

When we can’t change a crappy situation, and we can’t get ourselves to look at the situation in a way that makes us feel better about it, sometimes the best thing we can do is just focus on something else for a while. It’s clear that whatever strategies we’re trying right now aren’t working. Rather than continuing to try things we know aren’t working, we can shift our attention away from the situation, take a breath, and come back to it later with a fresher perspective.

Think back to high school math tests, when you were told that if you didn’t know the answer to a question, you should skip it and move on to the next one, then come back

to it if you have time. Our subconscious minds can work on solutions while our conscious minds are doing something else.

Sometimes, the solution we need to a problem in our lives is staring us right in the face, but we're so conditioned to fixate on particular solutions that we don't even notice the other options available to us. Rather than fixating on a particular strategy, event, outcome or circumstance, we can step back and refocus on the goal, and broaden our understanding of strategies to get there.

If all three steps fail...

Sometimes, you just have to face the music and feel crappy. In fact, learning not to fear painful feelings is one of the most valuable strategies at your disposal. But, like all sentient life-forms, I prefer not to be in pain if I can avoid it, so going through the first three steps of this practice is helpful.

We all know, but often forget, that getting what we want is not the only way to live well. Sometimes, what we think we want ends up being terrible for us. I can't guarantee that your life will instantly get better if you try this approach to living well. What I can say with near certainty is that having more strategies at your disposal for making your experience of life better will make it far easier to live better. The more (strategies to achieve merriment), the merrier.

This is a very simple practice, but simple does not mean easy. The process of transmuting everything that happens to you into an asset gets misinterpreted, misused and complicated all over the place. To help focus the process as you're starting out, here are some last bits of guidance:

How this doesn't work:

1. Denial. You cannot start to make a situation feel better to you by pretending the situation isn't happening. Or, you can, but it'll catch up to you in the long run. You have to start from what's actually happening, but remember, what's happening is just that there's a glass with some water in it, so to speak. That the glass is half-empty or half-full is just your perspective.
2. Lying to yourself. Likewise, changing your perspective isn't about pretending you feel good about something you don't feel good about. It's about finding authentic goodness in the situation, often by radically shifting what you think you want, and letting go of thoughts, beliefs or ideas that are actually limiting your path to happiness.
3. Force and control. This should not become torturous. If trying to change your perspective feels like painful mental contortion, do not force yourself to do so. Likewise, this is not a tool to apply to anyone but yourself. If you find yourself using this tool to try to control other people, you're doing it wrong.

4. Attachment to particular ideas. This is kind of the whole point of Steps 2 and 3, but I still want to clarify: this “life hack” does not work to make everything you think you want happen to you. Rather, it invites you to be flexible about what you think you want, and allow in more of what you want by getting more creative about paths to happiness, and more strategic about your focus.

How this does work:

- Honesty about what’s happening. You have to start by recognizing what is: simply what’s happening. Denial, playing pretend or lying won’t help you. But “what’s happening” is only ever a sterile, cold fact, such as “The casserole is burnt,” not, “Dinner is ruined and I’m a failure.”
- Curiosity about your feelings. When you feel something strong in response to a situation, this is not a moment for judging yourself, shutting yourself down, or shaming yourself. Instead, it’s a moment to be inquisitive. Why did this situation bring up such strong positive or negative feelings? There are no wrong answers.
- Flexibility and creativity. Again, this is not a life hack to make everything you think you want happen to you, and I’d caution you against any tip or trick that says it can do that. Rather, it’s an invitation to find greater happiness and satisfaction, through being

more flexible in how we look at our lives, and more creative in how we act.

- Responsibility for yourself. This is a tool to apply to yourself, to your own thinking, decisions and actions. It is not a tool to control anyone, or a standard to judge anyone by. Changing your perspective is an invitation to change your perspective, not try to coerce anyone else into changing theirs.
- Practice. For many of us, approaching a painful situation with anything other than an attempt to change it is very, very different from what we're used to. Please be patient and kind with yourself. This takes practice, and more practice, and more practice. It gets faster and easier with time.