

From Tragedy to Transformation: Finding the Gifts in Crisis

TRAGEDY

“How strange that the nature of life is change, yet the nature of human beings is to resist change. And how ironic that the difficult times we fear might ruin us are the very ones that break us open and help us blossom into what we were meant to be.” Elizabeth Lesser

It’s been said that change is the only constant. Life altering, transformational events are inevitable. At some point, everyone will experience a catalytic event that seems to throw their life off-course. Our lives are always on-course for greater things, but they can certainly feel off-course at the time. We feel lost and our identity may be threatened. We’re thrust out of our routine, out of the life we had grown accustomed to, and are forced to reinvent some piece of our world. Although the pain, shock, and sense of loss that typically accompanies these events do eventually fade, we’re never the same person we were before the event.

If you are in the midst of a transformational event, a “crisis” if you will, welcome to this chapter. Just reading this is a good sign! Facing your pain is the first step to receiving the gifts a crisis can bring. I want you to remember that literally everyone experiences crisis in one way or another. This Quest is the subject of countless fables and fairy tales, works of literature, Hollywood movies, and rock and roll ballads. It is metamorphosis – the journey back to wholeness after a transformational life event.

There is no right or wrong way to feel, think, or experience your journey and there is no possible way to *not* get through it. But learning to identify and examine your thoughts can make the journey quicker, less painful, and lead to a fuller experience. Ultimately, the experience you have is exactly the experience you are meant to have. Whatever challenges you face are exactly the teachers you need.

I use the term ‘crisis’ in this chapter but as you will come to see, ‘blessing’ or ‘opportunity’ would be more appropriate. As painful as they are, I believe these episodes in our lives are nothing short of miracles – they are gurus from which we can learn more about ourselves and live a happier, fuller life than we ever could without them.

This chapter will outline a process for making peace with and finding meaning in crisis. I’ll illustrate with examples from my own life and the lives of two clients*: Danielle, dealing the loss of her dream job, and Maureen, faced with a debilitating illness. The process described here can be applied to any stressful life event, so you’ll learn valuable tools you can apply to your own life to make peace with any situation and walk away with greater perspective. The steps to making it through crisis which will be discussed are:

- Accept the reality of where you are and learn to distinguish suffering caused by actual events from suffering caused by the stories we tell ourselves about the event.
- Once we’ve grieved the actual loss and identified the self-imposed pain, we can examine those limiting beliefs and choose thoughts that better serve us.

- There comes a point after the transformational event when you are ready to accept the mission of change you've been given. I will show you how powerful questions can help you open the gifts of crisis more quickly.

PAIN

“The only way out is through” –Robert Frost

Life after a crisis is never the same as it was before. Sometimes this is true in a very obvious way, like after the death of a spouse or the loss of a job, and sometimes it's true in a more subtle way, like in the case of a medical diagnosis that requires a change in lifestyle, or the end of a meaningful relationship. In either case, change is often accompanied by a sense of loss for what was or what could have been.

It is valuable to determine whether suffering is caused by the actual catalytic event or from our own stories about the event. From Dr. Stephen Hayes' *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, clean pain is a direct effect of the event itself--it's the result of a very real loss. Dirty pain, on the other hand, is not directly due to the event but to the thoughts and the meaning we assign to what is happening. We may experience clean pain when our physical symptoms flare up or when our ex comes to pick up his belongings. Dirty pain, on the other hand, results from the thoughts we play over and over in our minds. For example, when my client Danielle's company restructured and she lost her dream job as an advertising executive, much of the sadness over the loss she experienced was clean pain. Danielle's belief that, "I'll never find another job as good as the one I lost," and her tendency to equate being unemployed with being hungry and homeless caused dirty pain. When another client, Maureen, was diagnosed with a painful and debilitating intestinal disease, her physical symptoms were clean pain. Maureen's projecting into the future about the possible state of her life and her health down the road was dirty pain. In other words, dirty pain includes the painful thoughts we have about reality, whereas clean pain involves our actual reaction to reality. Dirty pain, very biased and very optional, is responsible for the vast majority of our suffering.

Learning to distinguish clean pain from dirty pain after a crisis can be a giant step toward accepting what is and experiencing relief from suffering. Although the difference may seem clear in the examples above, in the midst of suffering the difference between what is real and what is perceived can be quite fuzzy. The ability to notice our thoughts from the standpoint of a neutral (if not compassionate) observer is critical. To this end, it's helpful to begin a mindfulness practice where we practice non-judgmentally observing our thoughts. I teach my clients to be the connoisseurs of themselves, acting like objective researchers studying a new species. Non-judgment is the key – they are watching their thoughts with pure curiosity, not believing them or taking them as truth. The fact is, our thoughts are not always true. They're often more akin to habits, habitual patterns of neurons that tend to fire together. When you can detach and notice your thoughts as they occur – rather than remaining wrapped up in believing them – you can easily see where your suffering is based on the event and where it's based on your thoughts about it.

How do we heal clean pain? Good old fashioned grieving. In grieving a loss, we let emotion wash over us, we bathe in it, take it in, and we slowly begin to heal. As Robert Frost said, “The only way out is through” and that’s exactly what we need to do during the grieving process – go through to the other side. On the other side of pain is peace. Danielle needed to grieve the loss of her former career. Aside from her fear-based thoughts about the future and her overly romanticized memories of the past – which were causing her dirty pain – there was a real loss she could identify, sit with, accept it, and feel it all the way through. She grieved her identity as an advertising executive with her former firm and the rift in the friendships she had formed with co-workers. Through grieving, she was able to accept change and let go of her former identity. Through grieving these things and watching her thoughts, she began to see her dirty pain, too.

INQUIRY

“The only time we suffer is when we believe a thought that argues with reality.” Byron Katie

Danielle had grieved her real losses and was left with a gaggle of dirty pain. “Yeah, I miss my old life and my colleagues and I can sit with that and let it heal. But I still have these persistent thoughts that the heyday of my career is over. I’ll never have it as good as I had it with the firm. I was so happy there and now it’s just gone. And that’s just fear about my career status – what about my real survival? I do need to find more work soon or I could be in real financial trouble. What do I do with all of these beliefs?” My response: Question them.

Once you’ve identified the persistent thoughts that cause suffering, examine them one by one. We can choose to inquire into the truth of our thoughts and beliefs rather than automatically taking them as truth. The Work of Byron Katie is the best tool there is for questioning painful beliefs. The Work is a process of inquiry in which we shine a bright light on a hurtful belief and really examine the truth of that statement. The goal of The Work is not necessarily to have us give up or disbelieve our thoughts, but to find the reality and truth of the situation for ourselves.

Because The Work is described elsewhere in this book, I won’t go into a detailed description of the four questions and turnaround statement that are the bedrock of the process. Instead, I’ll use examples from work with Danielle and Maureen to highlight the power of this method for dealing with dirty pain.

Maureen was in her mid 40s, a married mother of four college-aged kids. Throughout her life, Maureen was always the person in charge. She was an extremely responsible, organized person who excelled at making plans, researching options, and pulling everything together in her own life and the lives of her family members. Before her illness, Maureen said her best quality was her ability to be in control and get things done. She was a person who emphasized action and results over relaxation and self-care. Maureen believed that anything optional she did for herself was selfish and overly indulgent, so most of her time was spent accomplishing things for others.

After a particularly stressful period while managing the remodel of her home, nursing her son through surgery and rehabilitation, and helping her husband find new

work, Maureen developed a host of debilitating gastrointestinal problems. She was hospitalized for over two weeks which forced her to face her biggest fear – being bed-ridden and unable to take care of everything at home. Maureen finally had to admit that she did not have control over her body or her life at that moment.

The first few months after Maureen went home from the hospital were challenging. She felt completely robbed of her sense of control. Maureen found herself uncomfortable relying on others. Frequent doctor visits took over her schedule, and sometimes even her body was out of her control. There was a lot of emotional pain associated with her perceived loss of control. An important first step was separating the clean pain and the dirty pain. Maureen began to mindfully watch her thoughts and learned to not identify with them or instantly believe or act upon them. She compassionately noticed the habitual ways her brain fired in different circumstances and just let the thoughts go. This practice not only showed Maureen that she was something beyond her frenzied thoughts and actions – she was a wise soul inside a busy body and she was capable of observing the whole busy mess that used to be her life. This practice also helped her relax and spend time in the present, not bothered by to-do lists or plans for the future.

Maureen spent some time grieving the loss of her old way of life. As she sat through the clean pain, the dirty pain began to rise. “This is who I am, the person who does everything. Without that, I don’t know who I am;” “I need to be in control or things will never get done;” “Life will be much more difficult if I am unable to keep things in line.” We inquired into these thoughts one by one. For example, because Maureen had almost always gotten things done, she came to realize that she really couldn’t know that it’s absolutely true that if she’s *not* in control, things will not get done. In fact, when she searched for examples of the opposite, she found them. She saw that when she was in the hospital, her family pitched in and took care of themselves. Although this certainly didn’t eradicate her long-held belief, this realization opened a window of hope – the possibility that maybe her belief was not always true.

Maureen considered the next question in *The Work*, “How do you feel or react when you believe that thought?” After some deep inquiry into her own emotional and behavioral patterns she identified several reactions to the thought, “I need to be in control or things will never get done.” Physically, her muscles became tense and she felt some adrenaline surge throughout her body, preparing her for the tasks at hand. Not surprisingly, she reported feeling most of the physical sensation in her stomach area – exactly where her medical issues had their center. Maureen realized that the thought was closely followed by other, similar thoughts about what it meant if she did not have things under control. In terms of behaviors, she would begin to make lists and experience something she called “tunnel-vision” where she became so focused on getting the task done that she became oblivious to the people around her. Maureen was shocked at how much impact this single thought had on her body and the way she behaved.

When Maureen considered the final question in the process, “Who would you be without this thought?” she really became conscious of the impact of this belief on her life. Without the ability to think, “I need to be in control or things will never get done,” Maureen felt free, like the self-imposed shackles she had fastened around herself had been released. She could imagine how she might react with much more easiness and peace in so many situations in her life. She would not wake up in the middle of the night

reciting her to-do list for the next day. She would not experience that awful feeling in her stomach. By looking for the truth of her situation, Maureen discovered a more peaceful way to think.

Next, we took the statement and turned it around to its opposite. Rather than, “I need to be in control or things will never get done,” we looked at the statement, “I need to give up control or things will never get done.” Maureen could immediately see some truth in this when she thought about her recent stint in the hospital and on bed rest at home. When she gave up control in those situations, albeit involuntarily, things did get done. Also, Maureen knew that if she didn’t learn to give up control and live life with more ease and relaxation she was bound to suffer another health setback due to stress, again leaving her unable to get things done.

TRANSFORMATION

"The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." Winston Churchill

Coaches ask a lot of questions. We believe that the answers are always available inside the client, although they may often feel buried and unrecognizable. Powerful questions are one tool a client can use to dig up the answers they’re looking for.

After someone has grieved their losses and has identified and dissolved some of their dirty pain, they may be ready to consider the deeper lessons in the crisis. A powerful tool for uncovering those lessons is the question, “How is this situation perfect?”

Looking for the perfection in the situation shifts your focus so that you begin to consider the potential gifts in the crisis. To be clear, the word “perfect” does not imply that you would choose the situation if you were able to choose; it doesn’t mean you are happy with the outcome or that you are necessarily glad it came about (although after grief subsides and a new perspective is taken, people are often very grateful the crisis occurred). The timing of this question is crucial – it would be simply cruel to ask a client how the death of their spouse or deterioration of their health was perfect too soon after the event. But when appropriate, asking how the situation is perfect is essentially asking, “How did this crisis teach you what you most needed to learn?” If you had to imagine that this situation was placed in your path specifically to benefit you in some way, what would that look like? Thinking about the circumstances in this way opens you to a completely new, previously inaccessible way of thinking.

“How is this situation perfect?” is a valuable question regardless of your own spiritual views or your personal beliefs about fate, destiny, or things happening for a reason. Through the challenges in my own life and my desire to make sense of them, I’ve come to believe that everything does happen for a reason and that we come to this earth with things we’d like to learn and experience in our lifetime. In my early 20s, the personal lesson I most needed to learn was that I didn’t have to be perfect – I needed to learn how to give up the excessively high standards I set for myself. I had just moved out of state, hours away from my family and friends, to enter a prestigious doctorate program in psychology. A reasonable goal would have been to make it through the five years of graduate school having grown as a person and learned a lot. Never one to be reasonable when it came to my own goals and standards, I was determined to be the best graduate

student my program had ever seen, teaching and publishing more than anyone in the history of the program, all the while having an extremely full and active social life and contributing to the community. My behavior patterns reflected those goals and I was quickly stressed and exhausted. After a full year of an unbelievably busy schedule, my body let me know loud and clear that it had to end. I developed panic disorder and was having ten or more severe panic attacks every day. I became afraid to leave my apartment for fear of having an attack in public. I developed phobias about attending class (not to mention the classes I was teaching), exercising, driving, and being in groups of people. I lived alone and felt incapable of everyday tasks such as grocery shopping or making the two block trip to the library. The crisis forced me to slow down. It taught me to take care of myself, re-evaluate my standards, and listen to my body for what *felt* right rather than believing my thoughts about the person I needed to be. The two years I lived with panic attacks were my “dark night of the soul,” but they were also my greatest teacher. I wouldn’t trade those years for anything – they were the most direct and effective way of arriving at a place of peace and happiness where I can be truly kind to myself.

Since that time, I find that whatever I most need to learn shows up, often in the form of what appears to be a negative event. When I find myself lacking compassion -- BAM! -- There’s a difficult co-worker who can only be dealt with through extreme compassion. When I’m lacking patience -- POW! -- Here comes a traffic jam or some more serious situation that demands patience. As the famous Buddhist quote goes, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

So, my belief is that crisis teaches us lessons we could have never otherwise learned, or at least not in the same way, and adversity in itself bestows gifts of courage, determination, and strength we wouldn’t have otherwise experienced. If this information goes against your own personal beliefs, *always* defer to what feels right to you. When you bypass your conditioned thoughts, get quiet and listen for what feels right. That answer you hear *is* your right answer. Even if what feels right to you is that life is a series of random events and there is no larger purpose, you can still contemplate how the situation is perfect and find the gifts in crisis. Once the crisis has occurred, wishing it hadn’t or cursing the randomness or unfairness in the universe only adds to your suffering. Even if it doesn’t feel right to believe that the situation came into your life for a purpose, now that it has occurred there may be some lesson you can take from it. Again, that doesn’t automatically mean you’ll consider it a blessing. It doesn’t mean you’d choose it if you could, and it doesn’t disrespect the relationship that ended, the body that used to function perfectly, or the friend or family member who died. It just puts you back in a position of responsibility for your life and in a place where you can find something good in something tragic.

When she was ready, Danielle – laid off when her dream job as an advertising executive was eliminated – began considering how losing her job may have been perfectly designed and delivered by the universe for a greater purpose. She first acknowledged the ways in which she had compromised herself for her previous job and the ways in which it was less than perfect. Although she loved the firm, there were complicated office politics that prevented Danielle from speaking her mind at times. Most of time this was bearable and she felt that the benefits of the job outweighed this cost. But there were times when it was more of an issue and left Danielle feeling unacknowledged and unable to be truly authentic. These feelings were beginning to affect

her feelings about herself and the way she approached non-work related situations. Asking, “How is this situation perfect?” allowed Danielle to acknowledge some of the aspects of her job that were not perfect and helped with the overly romanticized view of the job she had when she first lost it.

Danielle talked about how much she has learned about the advertising industry as a whole through the process of looking for new work. There were many changes in the field that she had been unaware of when she was insulated safely within her former firm. Visiting a variety of firms gave her a broader picture of the way she really wanted to shape and guide her career as an exec. By the end of our work together, Danielle had a long list of the ways in which she could see the loss of her job as perfect. Most of all, she was growing in ways she otherwise wouldn't have and she no longer felt she had to stifle part of who she was. Danielle also confided that she had been dating a great new guy who she really saw a future with. They met at a local job seekers' group she had joined where members gave each other feedback on their resumes and allowed them to practice their interview skills. This great new relationship was just one more “perfect” outcome of the situation she once thought of as a tragedy.

The process of finding meaning in crisis for Maureen took a little longer, but ultimately had an even greater payoff. Maureen's illness taught her many things. She learned that it was okay to give up trying to control things, that they found a way of working out whether she managed the process or not. When she managed the process and tried to hold everything together, her GI tract let her know by acting up, forcing her to take a step back and surrender control. She is learning to take care of herself and she is learning to value peace and faith in the universe over personal action and getting things done.

Maureen discovered that her illness was perfect because it moved her, by leaps and bounds, closer to her greatest wish for herself – inner peace and happiness. Could she have realized her wish without going through the illness? We'll never know. Maybe it would have taken longer or maybe the lesson would not have been as clear. Maureen doesn't believe she would be as peaceful or happy as she is today without the crisis. By meditating on how the situation was perfect, Maureen came to understand that her illness was the perfect teacher for the lessons she most had to learn.

I also love asking clients, “How will this crisis transform you?” Considering how you want to change for the better after the experience gives a feeling of great power. It frees you from identifying with the role of the victim. As Danielle said, “Losing my job was perfect because I learned so much about the advertising industry and the type of career I want to design for myself that I never would have learned at my old firm. I am transformed in that I am choosing to embrace the part of me that refuses to be or say anything other than what's authentically me. I'm choosing to blaze my own trail in this field rather than let someone else put me in a box.” Focusing on the positive changes in your life brings you to live in the present and begin dreaming about future possibilities. This begins the exciting process of “dreaming and scheming” – waking up to possibility after fighting to stay afloat in a pool of clean and dirty pain.

THE BEGINNING

“Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms, you would not see the beauty of their carvings” – Elizabeth Kubler Ross

By now, I hope the term ‘crisis’ sounds like a flagrant misnomer. It certainly feels like a crisis at the time. Challenging, sometimes tragic events are part of the human saga. By grieving the losses and dissolving dirty pain, you can begin to view these crises as gifts in strange wrapping paper.

I love helping clients see that it’s at their lowest point that they generate the energy to be catapulted to a higher place. Every act of spiritual growth or metamorphosis is preceded by a fall of one kind or another. It’s when people are broken open, grieving their losses and recognizing dirty pain all around them that they become more of the person they truly want to be. Whether the lesson they most need to learn is compassion, surrender, or patience, the adversity they experience is perfect in its ability to teach us the exact lessons we need in the best way possible. Elizabeth Kubler Ross said, “Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms, you would not see the beauty of their carvings.” The windstorms, or crises in our lives are necessary; they allow us to see beauty we wouldn’t otherwise see. These are the gifts of crisis.

*: The clients’ stories are used here with permission. In addition, their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Amy Johnson is a psychologist and certified coach who helps clients navigate life transitions and find meaning in their crises. Her coaching examines the thoughts that cause suffering and eliminates the fears that hold people back in life. Amy has a doctorate in psychology and bases her methods on the latest brain research. She offers individual and group coaching and frequently leads workshops and seminars near her home in Chicago. For more information, visit Amy at www.dramyjohnson.com

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