

Excerpted with permission from "Everyday Soul"
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Chapter Two

Making Grace out of Life's Disturbances

The value of human life lies in the fact of suffering, for where there is no *suffering* ... there can be no power of attaining spiritual experience ...
Unless we agree to suffer we cannot be free from suffering.

-D. T. SUZUKI

WHILE I WAS a graduate student in clinical psychology my life was interrupted by the disturbing arrival of anxiety attacks. When the attack would sneak up on me, I would have to stop whatever I was doing. If I were driving a car, I would have to pull over to the side of the road and wait until it passed. There were times I would have to run out of the classroom because of the loss of equilibrium the anxiety brought. Sometimes these panic episodes were so intense I feared I was having a heart attack.

No matter what book I read about anxiety, it didn't help. Whether I read Carl Jung or Karen Horsey, it kept me more aware of the existence of anxiety in my life, and this tended to make it more present. Even thinking or talking about it could make me anxious. My experience with therapists was essentially the same as reading self-help and professional books. Although they might provide a moment of relief during the sessions when the therapists took over worrying about it, they more often than not brought me deeper into the mesmerizing spell that the disturbance held over my life.

I was fortunate to come across the work of the radical psychiatrist R. D. Laing, who embraced the disturbances of life as an opportunity for personal development and growth. In the spirit of his approach I decided to become a student of my symptom, to learn from it, and be guided by the way it was opening a new world of consciousness I had never experienced before.

I readied myself to make a study of this whirling inner experience, observe its vibrations, the quality of its tingliness and dizziness, assess its duration, tempo, and rhythms, become aware of how it alters my visual, auditory, and tactile experiences, pay attention to whether it was localized on any particular parts of my body, and note how it affected my heart, body temperature, and gastrointestinal system. I waited to explore the next entry into anxious consciousness. In this preparation I shifted my relationship with anxiety to becoming more curious about it rather than fearing it as I had before. I never had another anxiety attack. In this encounter with anxiety, I learned one of the greatest secrets of life. Changing your relationship to a symptom is the key to transforming it into a graceful outcome. Understanding the cause of your symptom, distress, problem, confusion, difficulty, discomfort, or disease does not necessarily change anything. In fact, a deeper plunge into understanding your symptom often gives it too much attention and

contributes to its becoming bigger than life. You become drawn into making it more real and powerful than it actually need be and concretizing it as a deeply engrained part of your life.

One of the biggest traps we fall into is that we look for the origins of what we find disturbing as if it were a medical disease rather than an emotional state of dis-ease. Even the choice to give a disturbing experience a pathological name, like "symptom" or "problem," takes us further into a dark and immobilizing view of our condition and situation. When we pathologize our life, we become like an architect who designs a psychological structure for imprisoning our potential to move forward. As a victim of a symptom, it naturally follows that we will be dominated by a fear of the condition returning. What we fail to see is how the power of a symptom derives from the way we feed our fear of it. We fail to trust life and the processes it uses to teach and guide us.

The way out involves no particular understanding of your past or present situation, but a chaotic in how you relate to it. In my own personal encounter with anxiety, I moved from a terrified fear to a mobilized curiosity, and that was enough to take away the potency of its powerful grip. There are endless ways of relating to the disturbances that enter our life. However, any response that sets us up to conquer and eradicate the problem may paradoxically make it more present and discomforting. Any way of relating to the symptom that brings forth more imaginative and resourceful responses will not only loosen its grip but may very well result in gracing the quality of our life.

The mistake we make with discomforting experience is that we try to beat it rather than join it. We go to war with our discomfort, first giving it a name, that justifies our going into psychological or medical warfare with it. The main reason people are in trouble and end up going to a therapist is that they have already been doing psychology with their life and have spent weeks, months, and even longer trying to fight their symptom. The last thing needed is an escalation of this warfare with one's inner life.

Everyday soul is about fully attending to what is present and finding a way to resourcefully relate to it so as to bring forth a graceful outcome, even when this involves the most difficult and painful circumstances. Everything in life is a teacher with a lesson that is perfectly made for you during the time in which it is received. We are never given more than we can bear. Grace, the divine presence and generosity of spirit, befalls those whose hands are open to receive it. The work of spirit is toward making graceful outcomes and blessing all that we receive in life. It steps away from seeing problems that need to be solved and difficulties that must be surmounted. Spirituality embraces all of life, its upsides and downsides and does so with the serenity and calmness of a still but powerful compassion for the whole of creation.

The Alchemy of Change

A soulful approach to life does not fight the disturbances that come to you. It invites you to find a way to transform them into grace. The legendary psychotherapist Milton H. Erickson mastered this way of utilizing symptoms. He once treated a twenty-two-year-old man who had been biting his nails since he was four. He originally bit them until they bled, hoping it would get him out of having to practice the piano, but his mother made him practice anyway. He then grew up to flunk out of two medical schools and finally saw Milton Erickson at the insistence of his father. Rather than ask, "Why do

you think you're biting our nails" or "How do you feel when you bite them," Erickson suggested he let one nail grow long so he could enjoy the pleasure of chewing on a long, juicy one. The man grew the nail long but refused to bite it. He then grew all his nails, stopped biting them, began playing the organ as a hobby, and completed law school.

There was an institutionalized patient in a Midwestern psychiatric institution diagnosed as psychotic. He was given this label because the mental-health professionals didn't know how else to understand a man who stood all day making a back-and-forth movement with his arms and hands, uttering only: "I am Jesus Christ."

A visiting consultant said to him, "I hear you're Jesus and that you're a carpenter. It looks like you're missing a saw. Let me see what we can do about that." He then arranged to place a saw in the man's hands and to have someone hold lumber so that the man's arm movements now became the action of sawing wood. As a carpenter who was once missing a saw, he was now engaged in resourceful conduct. This patient began making a bookcase and eventually was discharged from the hospital, pursuing a career as a cabinetmaker.

In a similar fashion, the psychotherapist R. D. Laing was introduced to a young woman who had been diagnosed as a catatonic schizophrenic, meaning she would go into frozen postures for long periods of time. When he met her, he said, "I hear you have a talent for being still." He then persuaded her to use this ability to get a job as a model posing in an art studio. The same behavior that others used to impoverish the meaning of her life was transformed into a profitable resource, helping move her life toward a successful future.

"Use what you have to work with" not only applies to coaching a sports team but directs how we can most gracefully play the game of life.

Constructing Your Reality

The biologist John Lilly recorded the word 'cogitate' on a tape over and over again: cogitate, cogitate, cogitate, cogitate... After several moments of listening to this tape, people began hearing other words. At a conference of the American Society of Linguistics, Lilly played the tape, and the group heard some 2,361 different words and word combinations: agitate; arbitrate; artistry; back and forth; candidate; can't you stay; catch a tape; conscious state; count to ten; Cape Cod, you say; cut a steak; got a date; got to take; gurgitate; marmalade ...

What we perceive is a consequence of how we participate in perceiving. With respect to Lilly's experiment, a person's report of what is heard reveals more about how the observer is observing than what is actually on the tape. For instance, when played to neurophysiologists, the most frequently heard word was "computate," whereas for therapists working in mental hospitals the most frequently heard word was "tragedy." Lilly remarked that when he presents the tape to an audience with which he hasn't achieved a good rapport, he himself hears "stop the tape."

Life itself is like an endless tape that repeats the same sound. What we hear, see, and feel are therefore statements about our participation in life rather than any objective representation of what is really happening to us. We are not passive recipients of life but active constructors of our experience. When we see problems, trauma, and shortcomings, we are acting in such a way as to bring forth that realization through a self-fulfilling

prophecy. Spirituality invites us to act in such a way as to bring forth the spiritual gifts of healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, blessings, and peace.

When a person tells me that they have "depression" I usually ask them who told them so or what it is that makes them believe this is the case. They eventually respond with simple descriptions of their difficulties such as, "I have trouble getting up in the morning," "I don't know whether I can keep a job," "I worry too much about my kids," or "I feel heavy and slow." When I shift to these specifics of their day-to-day lives, I find that it is easier to come up with some fresh ideas that might be useful, whereas a focus on an abstract concept like "depression," is less resourceful. It tends to explain why their life is miserable without giving a clue what might be done differently.

We are too often stuck in seeing the world in only one way and forget that we can be led to different viewings. A wealthy oil baron once commissioned Picasso to paint a portrait of his wife. When the work was completed, the baron was shocked to see the image that had been created. "Why that looks nothing like my wife! You should have painted her the way she really is!" Picasso took a deep breath and said, "I'm not sure what that would be." Without hesitation, the oil baron pulled out his wallet and removed a photograph of his wife saying, "There, you see, this is a picture of how she really is!" Picasso, bending over, looked at it and replied, "She is rather small and flat, isn't she?"

The great spiritual traditions have always taught that much of what we hold as true objective reality is but an illusion created by the hand that serves the eye beholding it. Drawing the world in terms of pathology sets us up to be held down in the darkness, unable to see the spiritual resources that surround us. I am not suggesting that people suffer only because they see themselves as suffering. What I'm saying is that there are many ways to relate to our suffering.

We do not need to be less compassionate about suffering but become more compassionate and hopeful about the ways in which suffering can be a spiritual teacher. This is the awareness that psychology too often forgets. Seeing the psychopathologies of everyday life as conditions of spiritual dis-ease moves us to a higher ground where we may relate to them in a more transformative way.

Each of us goes through the day proving to ourselves that life is exactly as we believe it to be. We punctuate the endless "cogitates" in such a way that we hear what we believe must be present. In this way, our beliefs are always kept true, even when they are not. For instance, if you rigorously demand that your spouse be more loving to you, then you may not believe that the forthcoming overtures of kindness are authentic. You may snap back with words like, "You're only giving me flowers because I asked you to, not because you really want to!" or "If you loved really loved me, I wouldn't have to question it." If you truly believe you are not loved, nothing anyone else does can prove otherwise.

Everyday life is sprinkled with vicious circles that keep us locked into nonresourceful conduct. For deeply engrained pessimists, no data can shift them away from their darkened outlook. If it's sunny, they'll say, "But it won't last, or "It reminds me of how much I miss the sun whenever it rains." It is possible to release virtuous circles into our performance of everyday life. We can choose to enjoy the sun when it comes out. To such a person, both rain and sunshine are embraced and celebrated, evil and good are accepted as teachers, and sickness and health are understood as guides to life.