

Introduction

A woman sat down in my office, sighed, and said, “I don’t know what to do about my marriage. My husband keeps having affairs. We’ve been in couples therapy, but it hasn’t done any good. He feels guilty, or at least that’s what he says. But every time he promises to be faithful, he gets involved with another woman. I should leave, but it’s easier to stay in the marriage than to divorce.”

“He promises to be faithful but then gets involved with other women?” I replied.

“Yes.”

“Would it be fair to say that you stay with the man who promises and try to forget the man who has affairs?”

“But I can’t forget!”

“You can’t forget the facts, but it sounds like you have been marrying his promises.”

“That’s harsh!”

“It’s not my intent to be harsh. Have your husband’s affairs been harsh to your wish for faithfulness?”

“Yes.”

“And if you believe his words instead of his deeds, will believing his words be hard on you?”

“I see what you mean.”

“If I see you hurting yourself, ignoring a behavior you need to see, do I have your permission to point that out so we can bring your suffering to an end?”

“When you put it that way, it makes sense. But we don’t sleep together anymore.”

“I understand you don’t sleep with *him* anymore. But since you are still with him,” I paused, “is it possible you are living with his *lies*?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “How do I leave him?”

“You don’t need to. The *faithful* husband already left. Would you like me to help you stop waiting for him to come back?”

This woman hoped her faith would make her husband faithful, but it didn’t. Why did she lie to herself? Why do *all of us* lie to ourselves? It’s easier to embrace our wish than what is here. As the woman’s therapist, I wouldn’t find out in this session why she embraced her husband’s lies. And I might not find out why in the next session either, since meanings unfold over time.

No matter how much we learn about someone, that person will always be a mystery. So if a person is a mystery, psychotherapy is a mystery meeting a mystery.

Why do we go to therapists? With the decline of traditional religions, we increasingly turn to healers to get help, end our suffering, and find meaning in life. Therapy for many has become a secular confessional. While wanting to change internally, we ask others to help us avoid change by validating us, fixing us, or advising us on how to change others. Therapists, drawn by a calling to heal, may correct our logic, listen while we say what comes to mind, or offer insights, but while each of these is an essential ingredient in therapy, none by itself is therapy.

A therapeutic relationship cannot be merely a method, a technique, or an act done *to* us. To heal we must be devoted to discovering the truths we avoid. And we avoid them through the lies we tell each other and ourselves. We don’t need advice. We need to delve underneath the lies to find what we have been looking for.

We don't need to be fixed. We may think we need to fix ourselves, but often we are trying to fix our fantasies instead, the broken illusions, shattered self-images, and distorted ideas creating our suffering. Only by letting go of the false can we experience the real. Then we can accept ourselves and rediscover the vitality we lost through our lies.

A wise therapist does not simply talk about our thinking. Therapy is not a head-to-head relationship. A wise therapist does not sit silently while we prattle on, engage in chitchat, or say what comes to mind no matter what. If saying what came to mind mended people, saloons would long ago have healed humanity. A wise therapist does not rely on insight alone, for an insight from the head will not heal the pain in our hearts. How does healing happen?

The therapist invites us to experience who we are under the words, the excuses, and the explanations. We embrace our inner life (our urges, thoughts, and feelings) and the outer world, hidden from us by the lies we have believed about others and ourselves. And by facing what we have been hiding from, we go through the inner challenge known as healing.

If knowledge is the food of the soul, as Plato claimed, then healing happens when we bear what we avoid so knowledge can arise. Pills, shots, and electroshock are not substitutes for the living relationship that therapy can be. This book shows how facing what we avoid can heal us. The examples drawn from my practice present people struggling with the problems everyone has, using the excuses everyone uses, and demonstrate how, together with the therapist, people can bear the unbearable to face what they formerly feared.

Through a series of vignettes we will explore this encounter between two people where a patient heals through a heart-to-heart

meeting with a therapist. Although patients may ask for advice and repeat clichés, they long for who they are buried beneath their suffering. What is the knowledge they seek? These days when the concept of truth is often discarded, why do people keep seeking the truth in this embrace known as psychotherapy?



Something Is Wrong

All of us have experienced and been flooded by the pain of life. Overwhelmed by the truth, we avoid it through lies we tell ourselves, lies we don't even recognize, lies we never intend to tell. Sadly, these lies, which may have initially saved our lives, over time become our worst enemies, causing more suffering.

We seek help, thinking we are wrong when our lies are wrong. We wonder if we are broken when our lies are breaking, allowing our feelings to emerge. Running away from our feelings, we tell ourselves more lies that create more suffering.

What if what is “wrong” in us points to what is right? What if we need to stop running and turn around to embrace what we have feared? Facing the truths of our lives not only sheds light on what causes our suffering but also gives us the strength to face those truths.

In this section, we will see how the therapist helps us look at what our symptoms point to: the pain that is too much to bear alone. By looking under the lies and finding the feelings and truths underneath, we return to who we are and what is real.

Therapy as Journey or the End of Journeying?

When we avoid what we need to face, we suffer the symptoms that bring us to therapy. We can bear the pain of life, but our psychological suffering can be unbearable. Perhaps we lost a dream, a loved one, or even the hope that we could be loved. Sigmund Freud called psychotherapy a “cure through love,”¹ a phrase that has generated commentary as vast and varied as the human heart. Yet at a recent conference a speaker referred to therapy not as love but as a technology for change. Has therapy become a technique? What about the relationship? Are we people or objects to be manipulated?

In an era when suffering is reduced to chemicals in the brain, wrong thoughts, or bad genes, the heart calls out to us. We are not buckets to be filled with medications but people who yearn to connect to our inner life, other people, and life itself. We reach out not for a pill to avoid reality but for a hand to hold as we face reality.

Healing takes place between two people who learn by living together and are linked by their mutual struggles when facing the facts of life, loss, and death. None of us are wizards with all the answers. Both patient and therapist are always learning to live and bear the questions of life.

For instance, when I applied to train as a therapist, the analyst who interviewed me asked if I had been in therapy. I answered, “Yes.”

“Why did you enter therapy?”

“I was a mess.”

I didn’t need a technique but a person to help me face the pain of my life. As a child, I had endured too much to bear alone. Lost in my suffering as an adult, blind to its cause, I needed a guide to take my hand, enter the dark forest of the unknown, and sit with me while I sat with myself. By doing so, I could let go of the

defenses causing my suffering and sense the wisdom in myself that I had sought in others.

I started what I thought was the journey of psychotherapy. But if it's a journey, where do we go? We go nowhere. In fact, we *stop* going. We stop running from this moment. We can spend an entire lifetime running from ourselves to an obscure objective called cure, recovery, or enlightenment. Yet we need not seek anything because our feelings, our anxiety, the lies we tell ourselves, even the truths we avoid—everything is here.

A woman worried about her forty-year-old son who had autism, became ill, and had to live with her for several weeks until he returned to his group home. She said, "I was so angry with him. He crossed the street without looking and was almost hit by a bus! I yelled at him, 'I need you to be normal! I need you to be healthy!'"

"You need your autistic son to be normal."

"Yes."

"You need him to be *not him*."

"He's got to change."

"A son whose autism has not changed in forty years has to change. Is that true?"

"No. I guess not."

"We wish our anger could un-autism him, but it doesn't, does it?"

"No, it doesn't."

"He keeps being autistic. You have been waiting forty years for a normal son to appear instead of the autistic son you have. I understand. Who wouldn't? Shall we hold the funeral for the normal son you never had and never will?"

She bent over and sobbed.

The reason I reminded the mother of what she had been denying was not to cause her pain but to bring her relief, relief from an

illusion that had tortured her for forty years. By facing the facts of her life with her, I showed her that she could face them too. As she let go of her unreal son, she embraced the real son she had.

Can she learn to see things as they are? Can she let her son be autistic? Notice that the truth can be neither given nor received. The therapist can only point toward the truth that is present within the patient. Insight does not come from the therapist's lips but from the patient's heart.

Once the mother acknowledged her wish, she saw what she could now live with: her son as he was. The absence of her fantasy became the space in which her son appeared. When she saw that what she wanted was not real, how to live with her real son became self-evident. Interestingly, the more she faced the truth, the less she suffered from her lie.

Her ability to have fantasies did not die. She merely woke up from the dream her fantasies created. Unable to free her from her wish, I could only help her see that the real son she resisted existed anyway. And her nonautistic son never existed, except in her dreams. In letting go, she surrendered her attachment to the wish for a normal son. The wish would arise again, but she could observe rather than cling to it and return to loving the son she had.

We wait for what is not present rather than be present to what is. Once this woman was present to her son and woke up from her wish, she could say, "My God! I am you. *I* need to become normal. *I* need to look both ways when the bus of reality rushes toward me."

We become well by relating to what is here; we become ill by relating to our fantasies. The therapist stops us from running away from ourselves so we can rest in reality. Remaining in this moment, we feel our feelings, which always reach out to us through anxiety. Anxiety, strangely enough, invites us to dive inside to the places

from which we always run, the places we are afraid to descend into and explore.

In effect, therapists always give the same message: “What you run from is where you need to rest. What you fear you need to face. What you ignore you need to hear.”

But we have learned not to listen. We live a life on the run, never realizing we are running away from our feelings and what provokes them. We never learn to experience the difference between who we are and how we try to seem. To stop running, we need a partner to help us sit, bear, and feel. For what was unbearable when alone becomes bearable when shared.

This bearing and sharing is not a technique but the mutual embrace of our inner and outer lives: what is happening. And what is this sharing and listening but love? Once this woman embraced her son’s autism, she was able to love him, no longer asking him to be what he could never be: the nonautistic child. To heal, together we must embrace the formerly unbearable: reality and our feelings about it.

The Unbearable

“Jon, Jon!” my sister screamed. Two and a half years old, she stood in the baby crib by the window where my one-and-a-half-year-old brother, caught in the curtain cords, was strangling to death. I jumped out of bed, ran to the crib, climbed in, and tried to help her hold him up while his legs flailed. Squirming and kicking, he was too heavy. We kept trying and trying to lift him up to get his neck out of the cords, but we couldn’t. I raced to the kitchen to get help. The baby-sitter screamed out the window over the sink to my mom out back, “Florene!” My next memory is of my mother frantically

giving my brother mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Minutes later, as he lay dead on the brown rag rug with a green oxygen tank next to him, a neighbor took me by the hand to her house until after the funeral. I never saw him again.

Life. Death. Guilt over my brother's death. Five years old, I already faced questions I could not fathom.

Yet I am not alone. All those who seek healing had to bear a pain that they couldn't bear by themselves. One patient's mother attempted to drown her. A man's father beat him so brutally that his back and buttocks were striped black and blue. Another woman's psychotic mother stripped her clothes off in the middle of an intersection and, standing naked, preached to the passing cars. Our brothers, our sisters, in pain.

Everyone who needs healing has a story of heartbreak, loss, and feelings so painful that we can't finish our journey. To finish this journey, we seek a person to help us go the rest of the way.

Healing

In therapy we discover that we heal through relating, for the wounds that occurred in relationships must be healed *in* a relationship, a relationship where the therapist doesn't talk *at* us but *with* us. She wants to find out who we are underneath the words, ideas, and fantasies. When she asks for our feelings, not our beliefs, she invites us to a different relationship, another world. She doesn't tell us to shut up, get over it, or forget it but becomes the doorway of acceptance through which our feelings may enter. The therapist reveals to us the depths we feared and supports us while we bear them.

Rather than chat about the outer world, she asks about our *inner* world, the feelings, urges, and desires we have dismissed. She

points out the ways we hide from others and especially how we hide from ourselves. Then she encourages us to come out of hiding. “You are the most important person you will ever meet,” she says. “Why not be on good terms with yourself?”

To be on good terms with ourselves, we must learn to listen to who we are under the words, the excuses, and the explanations we use. In the next example, a woman began her therapy not by telling me her problem but by describing her trip to the hairdresser and dermatologist.

I asked, “If we leave your dermatologist to the side, what is the problem you would like me to help you with?”

“My former therapist said I was traumatized as a child.”

“And you? What do *you* want to work on?”

“There are so many things. It’s hard to pick one.”

“If you are specific, what do you want me to help you with?”

“Let me tell you about my childhood, and maybe that will help you.”

“Before we go to your history, what is the problem?”

She sighed and confessed, “I’m not comfortable getting into that yet.”

“You want my help but are not comfortable telling me your problem. If we don’t know the problem, what will happen?”

“I won’t get help.”

“Could this pattern of wanting help and not letting yourself get it be a problem you would like me to help you with?”

Her lips quivered, her eyes brimming with tears.

The therapist has no interest in a patient’s facade of being in control because this partial version of herself that she passes off as the whole is the wall hiding the real person she is afraid to be. As the therapist points out the ways the patient hides, and she sees

them too, she finally stops hiding. Naked without her defenses, she cannot pretend she is “fine,” her facade having fallen.

The therapist welcomes us as we are. One human meets another. The therapist embraces our thoughts, feelings, and anxiety, and we experience what we want and fear: being loved as we are. Although in fact, we never fear being loved. We fear the pain and grief that arise when love’s presence reveals its previous absence.

Our world of self-rejection and fear dissolves in this *mutual* embrace of our feelings. Why mutual? If the therapist accepts us as we are but we don’t, we perpetuate our secret self-rejection. Healing occurs only when we embrace ourselves too. This embrace starts with embracing our problem.

My patient’s reluctance to reveal her problem turned out to be a gift. Her fear of revealing her problem pointed to her fear of depending on me; it revealed her rejected longing for an embrace. Her depression said no to the life she was living, pointing to the yes she was afraid to be. I accepted the resistance she feared I would reject. In this mutual acceptance, the grief flows as a lie dissolves: the lie that we are not lovable.

Is Something Wrong with Me?

We often tell ourselves, “Something is wrong with me.” Let’s take a look at an example to see what that lie hides. A recovering cocaine addict, who heard voices telling her to use drugs, said, “I don’t know what it is, but something doesn’t feel right. I don’t know what right is, but this isn’t right.” Sometimes a sense of “wrongness” is a clue to what is trying to grow from within.

This woman had punished herself for years, believing she deserved only to suffer. Why? To support her drug habit, she

started to work as a prostitute. Not wanting her daughters to see this, she left them with their father, a former boyfriend. While on the streets, she learned that he had sexually abused their older daughter. She promptly took the girls back and filed charges, but the damage was done. She had chosen drugs over her daughters' safety.

Her previous therapists tried to remove her guilt, urging self-forgiveness, and she feared the same from me. "What I done was wrong! And ain't no one goin' to argue me out of it."

"You're right: you were wrong. You will feel this guilt until the day you die. No one can take away your guilt. And I have no right to try because this guilt is the healthiest part of you. Precisely because you love your daughters, you feel guilt. It's a sign of your love. Therapy can't do anything about that. But we can help you with this horrific self-punishment you have been inflicting upon yourself ever since. After all, your self-punishment does not help your daughter, does it?"

She suffered because she believed a lie about herself: "I deserve to suffer forever." What she thought was wrong with her was right, for her guilt pointed to her love. And when she finally embraced and bore her guilt, she felt her love for her daughters, her inner beauty. No longer needing to punish herself, she stopped abusing drugs and never went back to prostitution. Able to face the damage she had done, she began to work in a day-care center with children, symbolically repairing the damage she had done in the past.

She had been a prostitute. Could pretending to like a career that you don't like be a form of prostitution? A man, groomed for the family firm, became morose after working in the business. "I don't feel right," he said. "I shouldn't be depressed." In fact, his depression was right. Why? He was a skilled painter. His symptoms were

tidings from his inner life: leave the business and become an artist. He was depressed because he was living a lie. Once he left his lie and lived his truth, his depression disappeared.

Another woman didn't need to leave her career but to leave a lie she told herself. She asked, "Why am I anxious? My life is great. My children are grown. It makes no sense." Anxiety never makes sense until we face the facts and put them together.

She led the family business while her husband was perceived as the leader. When she set limits with staff, he often undermined her. When we explored her feelings toward him for sabotaging her, she reassured me, "I'm not angry," saying that she believed her anger was unspiritual. She denied that she was angry with her husband, but she blew up with the rest of her staff instead.

Her anxiety pointed to her anger, signaling her intent to become more honest with herself, her husband, and me. Anxiety is a sign of the unspoken. Soon she let go of her facade and set limits with him, asserting her leadership openly without hiding her capacity, what she had hidden for thirty years.

Perhaps this belief that something is wrong with ourselves means that we want to give birth to a more authentic life.

I'm Okay, but Something Is Wrong with You!

At times we say, "Something is wrong with me." At other times we assert, "Something is wrong with you!" We find fault with what is. "My wife shouldn't be late." "My husband *should* know what I want." We start "shoulding" on others. If they aren't the way we want them to be, we think they are wrong. Maybe other people aren't wrong but are midwives who pull us out of our womb of illusion. Could they be helping us give birth to ourselves?

A man outraged over his wife's affair roared, "She betrayed me. She was unfaithful. I can't believe she did this! This is horrible."

It was horrible, but it was also a reality check. His wife's behavior woke him up from his dream that his marriage was fine. Although horrified by her affair, he began to see his careerism as his own furtive affair, his obsession with his job as a brush-off of her. As his marital mirage dissolved, he discovered how his dismissiveness killed her love.

"I told her to buy whatever she wanted," he snapped. "I even put a million into a charity account so that we could run it together. What did she want? I'm a busy man. I'm working up in Manhattan four days a week. I don't have time for all this at-home-dinner stuff. I bought that mansion over on P Street. I figured that would keep her busy."

This man did not love his wife. He loved *how he wanted her to be*. The first days after he learned of her affair, this man fumed in a constant state of outrage. "I told her she had to stop or we were over. She told me to stop yelling at her. I wasn't yelling; I told her I'd cut her off unless she dumped that son of a bitch."

He was shocked because his denial kept bumping into reality. Instead of his fantasy wife, his real wife kept turning up. Why would she object to his wish to control her? It seemed obvious to him—she should obey. For him, only one mind and desire existed. He could not understand why she wanted to abandon his castle. He did not realize that she felt not like a princess, but a prisoner. The moment we are stunned, we can either let the truth in or keep it out with our lies. In this man's case, he sneered, "She's just a selfish bitch. She never loved me. She only cares about herself. I kept trying to tell her what was wrong, but she wouldn't listen."

For him, his beliefs were profound insights. He assumed she didn't love him. His assumption, supposedly true, separated him from the facts. She longed for his love, but he loved his stories more than his wife.

These beliefs, called "projections," seem true because they are real: they are the realities we reject in ourselves and relocate in others. If we criticize ourselves, we imagine others criticize us. If we ignore ourselves, we imagine others ignore us. If we fail to care for ourselves, we believe people don't care for us. However, the persons we project upon can be the mirrors we look at to see, learn, and accept what we reject in ourselves.

From within our playpen, some people appear to be "wrong." We judge them, condemn them, and, mystified, claim we can't fathom them at all. Why? Because they don't conform to our stories about how we believe they *should* be: they should be like us, wanting what we want, doing what we do, and thinking how we think. We want people to be perfect, meaning perfect clones.

Was the wife selfish in her adultery, or was the husband selfish in his self-absorption? Was she a bitch, or was he a bastard? He never loved her. He loved the person *he wanted her to be*, the image he tried to bully her into becoming: the "right" version, according to him.

The phrase "You are wrong" really means, "I am frightened of the truth you evoke in me." As a colleague said, "The truth will heal you, but first it will hurt like hell." No wonder we accuse other people of having our faults.

Unable to face the truths in himself, this husband kept attributing his selfishness, his lack of love, and his betrayal to his wife. When we take back our accusations, we feel the pain of self-recognition.

What if "wrong" people are deported aspects of ourselves waiting to be reunited with us? What if the wife's love affair echoed

the husband's affair with work? Later, after his wife apologized for the affair, he continued to judge and condemn her; he was blind to her effort to reach out to him. Does his wish to judge rather than listen reveal that he loves judgment instead of her? If so, shouldn't she seek love elsewhere?

Even as she apologized, he continued judging her vulnerability, the vulnerability in himself that he detested and that the affair exposed. Imagine if we could say, "Oh supposedly 'wrong' person, thank you for permitting me to meet myself in you. I hate in you what I reject in myself." Instead, we push our flaws away onto others.

When therapists invite us to admit that we attribute our own flaws to others, we bear the pain of self-recognition. But when we peer into our mirror—the "wrong" person—and embrace him, that moment of embrace becomes a homecoming. The feelings "wrong" people stir up within us are the feelings we imagined were in them. We can continue to see others as "wrong" and refuse to face what is within us. Or we can allow people to return us to ourselves.

I Feel Broken

Coming home to reality sounds good but not when reality means losing a job, being fired, falling ill, getting divorced, or dying. In response to hardship, we often believe we are broken, crushed, or ruined. What breaks? What is crushed? What is ruined? Our illusions break. Our hopes are crushed. Our dreams are ruined. We look out the window and the world seems the same. We look within ourselves and see our shattered fantasies.

The breakdown of our fantasies can allow the truth to break through. We believe we are broken, blindsided by life, yet we are still here. So did we break, or did our self-image break? Did we

die, or did our dreams die? How hard it is to watch our cocoon of illusions collapse.

Consider, for example, a man who denied the severity of his wife's mental illness. He kept hoping for a normal wife who would accept help instead of his psychotic wife who rejected dozens of treatments. As his illusion tottered and before it crashed to the ground, he tried to push it back up: "Do you think she might benefit from body therapy?" he asked, allowing denial to triumph over experience. Thinking he was loyal to her, in fact, he had been loyal to his wish. His tears broke through, revealing his underlying reunion with the real.

As the author Jeff Foster says, "Breakdown can always point to the break-through of a deeper truth, since only that which is false in you can break down. Truth does not break. Some call this recognition 'waking up,' some call it 'self-realization.'"²

A woman hallucinated that her bedroom was moving. To make it stop, she banged her head against the wall. She cried; her hands were bloody from having clawed them. Her husband had left her. The world had moved, and she couldn't stop it. She redirected the rage toward the husband she loved onto her head and hands.

"I feel broken," she said. "I can't kill myself, because I have to stay alive for my daughter, Lora, but if she weren't here, I would. I'm broken into pieces." She imagined *she* was broken when her *illusions* were broken. She saw the walls moving, but life had moved, as it always does. Her fantasy that life stays the same—denial—crashed into reality, so her denial began to dissolve.

When facts kill our wishes, a few of us may seek to kill ourselves to wipe out the pain of the dying wish, what the suicide researcher Edwin Shneidman called "psychache."³ Experiencing

the living death of the dying dream, we may choose physical death to abort the painful birth known as grieving.

This woman believed she was dying, becoming more broken. But her illusions were collapsing, allowing for the possibility of what was really there to appear. We never break, although we imagine we are breaking. Our illusions break, and all our denial and all our demands cannot put our fantasies together again. And when our denial breaks, the grief and rage start to flow. In this outpouring, the fire of feelings doesn't burn us; it burns up our illusions.

Since we fear the loss of our illusions, we tell our friends stories about how we were wronged. These stories seem true because they are internally consistent, but they are actually false because of what they exclude: the rest of reality. The beauty of distortion is that by dismissing enough information, we can demonize anyone and turn a person into a cartoon, while treating a story like a fact.

Nothing like divorce triggers this urge to demonize. A man who had bullied his wife was enraged when she left him after several years of marital therapy. This woman, although flawed, had also been patient, loving, and devoted. Once she left him, he converted her through his imagination into a liar, a cheat, and a coward. He complained to anyone who listened, offering a well-honed litany of her flaws. Omitting many of her strengths, he described a virtuous woman who mysteriously turned into a witch. "Now I know who she really is. No one sees what I see. People see her good side, not the real her. She's so good at hiding it!" He called his friends, and recounted her imaginary crimes: "There's something you need to know."

When we, delighting in demonizing our "oppressors," parade a cartoon figure before friends or therapists, they can indulge us by joining our pity party, a masochistic fiesta⁴ where we sing our songs

of victimhood, bemoaning how life happened differently from our fantasies.

This man waited for his “victimizing” wife to change and thereby victimized himself. He imprisoned the only person he could change: himself. We believe that we are victims because we do not see how we victimize ourselves. Instead we blame others for what we do to ourselves, becoming blind to the real culprit.

The man who bullied his wife insisted that *she* had been a liar, a cheat, and a coward. Yet by acting as if he could bully her into becoming a clone, *he* lied to himself and to her. Further, by bullying her, he made love to an ideal image and thus rejected and cheated on his real wife. Bullying is always the mark of a coward, a person who so fears life that, rather than embrace it, he tries to bully it out of existence. When the husband’s illusion was broken, he tried to break his wife, so she broke out of his bubble.

The therapist must question our song of victimhood. Rather than concur with our caricatures, he invites us to embrace the facts we cast aside. When we face the facts instead of fixate on the fictions, we accept that our loved ones have good and bad traits just as we do. *We* have been victimizers too. Others hurt us and we have hurt others. We are tempted to claim that we are innocent victims, yet we are never faultless, blameless, or guiltless.

Embracing life on its own terms can be difficult. As we embrace life as it is, our illusions collapse. We need emotional courage to bear the pain without running, explaining, or justifying. In victimhood, we ask others to agree with our stories. We must drop the stories to see who we are underneath.

As we let go of our facades, we feel naked. As I helped one man face what he had avoided, he accused me: “You are trying to expose me!” I explained, “The good news is that I can’t. Only you can

expose yourself. I can ask questions, and you can expose yourself or not. The choice is yours: do *you* want to expose yourself to yourself so you're no longer going through life blind?"

When he chose to expose his inner life, he discovered that we are always naked. Our facades are imaginary and invisible. We try to hide who we are, but others see us anyway. We can never be apart from reality except through the veil of our illusions. Without facades between us, we realize on the deepest levels that each of us struggles with feelings, lies, and longings.

What If Feelings Are Forms of Love?

What do we learn in therapy? The truth. How do we learn? By embracing it. Who is our teacher? This moment. To make sure we notice the truth, life sends us messages: anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, good and bad relationships: whatever is happening. When we have trouble embracing what life brings, we reach out for help. Or we procrastinate.

One young woman waited for the life she had to turn into the one she wanted. Angry because her boss refused to give her a promotion, she asked, "Do I have to accept this?"

"No. Life will wait until you are ready."

"I don't feel ready yet."

"How long would you like to wait?"

Waiting is the magic wand we hope will make life fit our fantasy, but our fantasies must change to fit what is here.

When we stop waiting for life to change, we change instead. Every crisis in life cracks our defenses and unlocks our feelings, revealing hidden dimensions in ourselves. And after bearing those hidden dimensions, we experience insights rising from within. When we dive inside, we experience ourselves more deeply and

find the wisdom for which we longed. Then we can choose whether to deny or embrace it.

This choice doesn't happen once in a lifetime but in every moment. In one session, I saw a man's tears, so I asked, "What are you feeling now?"

"I'm thinking of the time—"

"But now?"

"Yesterday I—"

"But the feeling?"

He burst into tears. "I remember when my father was dying, and everyone assumed he couldn't hear us, so they didn't talk to him. I sat next to him and told him about the party we had just attended. As I was talking to him, he reached out and patted me on the shoulder." Suddenly he realized that the father he hated had loved him.

His new insight came from his depths. Feelings reach up inside us that we fear will pull us down, and they will; they pull us into our depths, the source of all knowing. By descending into his grief, he experienced not only his father's love *but also his own love* for his father, the gift that he was for his father.

Bearing our emotions transforms us into a prism. As we refract the spectrum of feelings passing through us, a special form of light appears, the light known as insight.⁵ The man's insight about his father came not from his head but from his heart.

After we surrender our denial, our illusions fall off and the feelings rush in, allowing the person we are, whom we have yet to meet, to emerge. Feelings are forms of love, invitations to embrace what is, so the false can drop, revealing the real in you.

What Does Our Suffering Point Toward?

If every feeling is a form of love, what about feelings resulting from trauma? Imagine being flooded with anxiety. How could that be love?

A man was captured and tortured by terrorists who raped and killed his wife in front of him. Somehow he escaped, fled from his country, and became a refugee in a faraway land. Overwhelmed with multiple symptoms, he sought help.

Doctors tried many treatments and drugs to heal him from the effects of the traumas he suffered. Nothing helped until a therapist repeatedly asked what the anxiety pointed toward: “What feelings are causing this anxiety?” The refugee’s emotions continued to rise until the secret crossed his trembling lips.

After the horrible rape and murder of his wife, he escaped. But before he left his country, he had one more thing to do. Obsessed with revenge, this man who had been the hunted turned himself into a hunter. He found the killer, knocked him out, bound him, and skinned him alive.

The refugee’s anxiety pointed toward the trauma he suffered and the one he inflicted. By torturing the torturer, he became what he most hated. In turn, he was tortured by anxiety, guilt, and self-punishment—the price exacted by revenge.

Revenge is a form of magic. When we exact revenge, we pretend that we can get rid of our pain by putting it in other people. The husband did not pry the sorrow from his heart by pulling off the skin of the killer. Instead, he abdicated his humanity, which he skinned off himself that day.

Because he tortured the killer, he had to bear the guilt for the torture he inflicted and the pain, grief, and helplessness of watching

his wife suffer. By confiding his crime to a therapist, he faced his guilt over the acts of murder and torture *he* committed. He faced his grief—which he had tried to avoid through revenge—and, finally, reclaimed his humanity.

He hoped to rip the pain out of his own heart by ripping the skin off the killer. Like him, when we suffer from pain within ourselves, we might try to get rid of it by inflicting it on others. Yet try as we might to bypass the pain of life, we cannot. By definition, life always includes us: our grief, our rage, our guilt, and our illusions. Our suffering points toward the truths we fear to embrace inside ourselves.