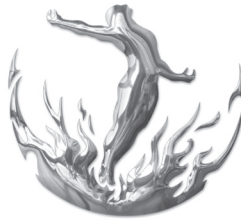


EMOTIONAL LITERACY

**Becoming Intimate with our Emotions and
Skillfully Working with & Expressing Them**

ROBERT AUGUSTUS MASTERS, Ph.D.



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1. INTRODUCTION

We're born feeling. We live feeling, and we die feeling. Even when we might assess ourselves as feeling nothing, there nevertheless is some kind of feeling — including the feeling of numbness — going on, however much it might be in the background. An emotion, and another emotion, and another, layer upon layer, pervading our flesh, minds, psyches.

But how well do we know our emotions? How much at home are we with them? Do we have difficulty controlling or expressing certain emotions? When fear, anger, shame, or sadness arise, what do we usually do? We may know our IQ, but do we know our EQ (emotional intelligence)?

Emotional illiteracy — or a lack of emotional sensitivity, understanding, and savvy — is largely rooted in the historical (and still commonplace) devaluing of emotion relative to cognition. Many of us still tend to view emotions as being lower or more primitive than reason, doing little more than clouding the skies of rational thought or muddying objectivity.

Thinking clearly is thus often associated with dispassion, or a muting of our emotions; moral decisions are allegedly best made when passion and feeling are either “safely” out of the picture, or kept functionally peripheral to the decision-making process, much like children excluded or kept at a distance from parental discussions.

Implicit in this attitude is the all-too-common identification of emotion with subjectivity — at least in the sense that subjectivity is a *failure* to be objective — an identification that may be justifiable if and when emotion *is* irrational or ego-centered, but not when it is rationally informed.

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We can be objective *and* emotional at the same time, as when a releasing of tears washes away an ossified or neurotically dug-in stance, leaving us not in a particular position, but rather aware *of* possible positions. As research shows, the openly felt, unrepressed presence of emotion can significantly contribute to mental and social skills.

The practice of distancing or dissociating ourselves from our emotions, including our darker or more uncomfortable emotions, can seriously disrupt our ability to think clearly and act with moral intelligence. Research indicates that an impairment in emotional capacity (as perhaps caused by damage to brain regions essential for emotional processing) can actually retard our ability to make sound decisions. Feelings are needed for making truly rational decisions. Without emotional intelligence (EQ), intellectual intelligence (IQ) means little.

To view emotions as lower or less reliable than reason also has serious gender implications, given that femaleness is commonly associated with getting emotional, and maleness with being rational. This is roughly paralleled by those views that claim that the neocortex, associated with rational thought, is “higher” than the phylogenetically older zones of the brain that supposedly “house” and deal with emotions — which implies that men, being supposedly more rational, are therefore more developed than women. “You’re being emotional!” remains much more of a putdown than “You’re being rational!”

Many factors must be taken into account in examining a particular emotion, not the least of which is the interrelatedness of the various emotions. Anger may be a defense against sadness, or sadness may be a defense against anger. Rage at its peak may suddenly metamorphose into joy. Surfacing sadness or anger might trigger shame, and surfacing shame might lead to sadness or anger. Mix together shame and fear, and you’ll probably get guilt. When anger and disgust mingle, contempt arises. And so on.

To become emotionally literate, we have to become intimate with our

emotions, knowing them from the inside, as well as knowing both our repressive and expressive tendencies regarding them.

As obvious as it may sound, we need to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. On the way, we must learn to find the balance between *containment* (as when our anger is about to turn into aggression) and *expression* (as when our held-in anger needs to be given emphatic voice). Healthy restraint and healthy uninhibitedness.

We need to learn how to regulate our emotions, how to directly express them, how to infuse such expression with awareness and compassion, how to ride, guide, and ultimately just be with our emotions.

Emotional illiteracy infects all too many relationships, regardless of how effectively it might be covered — or *compensated for* — by “rational” discourse (or let's-rise-above-it-all spiritual practices/beliefs). Despite the obvious presence of emotion in everyone, as well as the equally plain-to-see emotional difficulties or challenges many of us have, *emotional education* has yet to take a significant place in the public school system. It simply does not appear to be a priority for those in charge of educational — or, better, *schooling* — policy. Intellectual intelligence gets the lion's share of attention, with moral and emotional intelligence getting far too little focus.

During the start of couples' work when we ask men what they are feeling, many do something other than say what they are *actually* feeling: They may, for example, state that they “feel” that their partner is not understanding or hearing them, or that they “feel” that they are not getting enough sex or recognition or appreciation (which are statements about what they are *thinking*, not feeling!); or they may look away, and then say something inappropriately abstract, trying to keep the conversation from getting “emotional” or vulnerable; or they may wait in silence for more than a pregnant pause, trying to figure out what to say, until we probe further, at which point they often will state that they are feeling nothing, or that they don't know what they are feeling.

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And so on. The very question “What are you feeling?” thus becomes an occasion for saying anything but what is *actually* being felt.

By contrast, when we ask women during the start of couples’ work what they are feeling, the majority are quick to directly, and usually quite expressively, articulate their emotional state. Of course, what they may actually *do* with their emotional state is another story (generally no more flattering than what their partner is doing with his), but the very fact that they generally recognize what they are feeling and can usually get that across with sufficient accuracy puts them, with few exceptions, far ahead of their partners when it comes to sharing what’s occurring emotionally.

Some men, having realized their partner’s more developed emotional literacy, honor her for it and are inspired by her example to develop the same capacity in themselves. Other men, more me-centered and feeling less positive about their partner’s superior emotional literacy, invest much of their energy in finding fault with her delivery, trying to turn the focus back on her, doing what they can to corral the conversation into a more “civilized” or “reasonable” discussion, *head-lined* by disembodied rationality and the “safety” it provides for his egoity.

So long as we equate being emotional with being female, and being rational with being male, we are not available for true intimacy. We need to divest emotionality and rationality of any fixed gender associations, and realize, right to our marrow, that emotion and rationality work best when they work *together*.

In intimate relationship it is essential that we, male or female, can clearly state what we are feeling *as we are feeling it*. What we are then conveying is *data*, rather than opinion (“I’m feeling angry” or “I feel sad” are not opinions, but facts, whereas “I feel you’re not there for me” or “I feel like you don’t see me” are not facts, or even feelings, but opinions). Couples stuck in dead-end arguments and power struggles usually go back and forth with emotionally-charged opinions, sparring over who’s right or

who's to blame or who's the screwed-up one (or the *more* screwed-up one). What is being felt then is not being simply and directly shared, but instead used to amplify or arm a particular position.

The first step is to identify what you are feeling. If you are feeling sad, simply notice that, without getting caught up in the details or accompanying dramatics. If you are feeling a mix of emotions, and it's not clear what's in the mix, simply notice the mix.

If you are not sure what you are feeling, ask yourself, as simply as possible: Am I feeling sad? Am I feeling angry? Am I feeling happy? Am I feeling unhappy? Am I feeling angry? Am I feeling excited? Am I feeling afraid? Am I feeling uncomfortable? And so on — the odds are that you'll get some kind of instant response to each question, usually in the form of a yes, no, or maybe.

If after this, you still are not sure what you're feeling, look a bit deeper, and notice your general feeling tone, even if it is numbness. If you are convinced that you don't know what you are feeling, start by noticing your most obvious bodily sensations, such as tightness in your shoulders, tension in your belly, or whatever breathing pattern is occurring, and so forth, and note that you are indeed experiencing these.

All you have to do is place your attention on whatever it is that you are feeling; often what this means is withdrawing your attention from your thinking processes. There's nothing to figure out here, no need to ask your mind what you're feeling (as many do when they look away and take a long time to answer the question of what it is that they are feeling).

The second step is to directly say what you are feeling. No tangents, no drama, no shoulds. Just the bare facts. At first, you might feel disconnected from what you are saying, as when announcing in a flat or bland tone that you feel angry, but sooner or later, you'll be able to say what you're feeling in a way that conveys, at least to some degree, the felt experience of such feeling. Your facial muscles, tone, posture, and verbal emphases

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will make it clear that you are feeling angry as you state that you are indeed angry.

The third step is to make sure the other is really hearing what you are saying. This means not only that he or she is registering the facticity of what you are saying, but are also registering it at a feeling level (which means experiencing it not just from the neck up!). Many of us don't take the time to do this, pushing the cultivation of empathy into a background position in the dynamics of our interchanges. However, without some empathetic attunement, our dialogue with an intimate other can quickly degenerate into an energy-draining argument, a deadening withdrawal, or a heart-eroding stalemate.

So say what you are feeling, and if you are on the receiving end, let it in, until you can clearly feel it (whether or not you agree with all of the content or storyline), as if you are in your partner's skin. This may not always feel good, but it keeps us from staying holed up in our egoic strongholds.

The fourth step is to get into the details without losing touch. The key here is to make continuing to feel (or experientially resonate with) the other more important than whether you disagree or not with their content. Make your connection with each other *primary*, and the working out of relevant details *secondary*.

This is far more efficient than trying to deal with such details when you are not sufficiently connected with each other. This also is when it's very easy to get injuriously reactive. If things get sticky, go back to steps one and two, and stay with them for a while. One minute of sharing what's going on emotionally, without bringing in the corresponding details, prevents overwhelm (or emotional flooding), and can significantly shift the energetics of what's happening.

If you are getting really worked up, resist the temptation to get up on a soapbox or to turn the exchange into a courtroom drama, and instead

stay with what you are *feeling* (while acknowledging the difference, if any, between your presenting feeling and your underlying feeling — our show of anger, for example, may be covering our hurt). If this is too intense for you — or for the other — you might, *with* his or her permission, *very briefly* indulge in a clearly-boundaried rant (a conscious temper tantrum), or take a break, or stop talking altogether, and go more deeply into your core feeling. It's important, of course, to have prior agreements regarding such options — don't make them up in the middle of a heated or upsetting exchange!

Notice which emotion or emotions you are least comfortable with, and start taking your attention *toward and into* them — however slightly or slowly — even though your aversion to them will be pulling at you to move in the opposite direction. Study them as closely as you can, getting intimate with them to the point where their arising is no longer such a concern for you, nor a threat to your relationships, but rather just one more opportunity to deepen both your self-knowledge and your relationships. Your darker or “negative” emotions are *not* the problem; your aversion to them is.

And notice when an emotion is *secondary* to another emotion.

For example, anger often kicks in when sadness is starting to surface, especially in men. When you are telling another what you are feeling, you may begin by stating the obvious — e.g., “I'm angry” — but while doing this, pay attention to how *open* you actually are. If you're tight or closed-off, the odds are high that you're feeling *another* emotion and that you also are reluctant to share it, or even to admit that it's there. You might begin here by stating that you are having a difficult time saying what's going on emotionally, besides being angry. Maybe there's some sadness, some hurt, some shame. We may have difficulty being vulnerable and nondefensive in difficult exchanges with another, finding it easier to be angry than to directly show our hurt.

For all four of the steps described above, being vulnerable — that is,

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being transparent and open — is immensely helpful, because it keeps an emotionally honest resonance going between us and the other, along with an amplified receptivity that invites more in-depth disclosure and sharing.

About being open: This doesn't mean that we're necessarily happy and open-hearted, but rather that we remain aware of and receptive to what is occurring. An honest sharing of one's fear, devoid of any self-protection, can bring a couple very close. In fact, the more we openly expose and share the emotional states (and their historical roots) that we are most afraid to share, the deeper our connection will be.

Emotional literacy is the heart of emotional intelligence (which includes emotional awareness, empathy, expressive competency, interpersonal savvy, and other related feeling-centered or feeling-including qualities which influence our ability to succeed in dealing with the demands and pressures of life). Without sufficiently developed emotional intelligence, we easily tend to overrely on other kinds of intelligence, especially the intellectual.

Just as we can raise our IQ, so too can we raise our EQ (emotional intelligence). And how? Through various practices which address the weaker areas of our emotional life. If we score low in empathy, we are not necessarily sentenced to remain there. A little study of empathy, combined with some empathy-generating practices (visualizing ourselves in another's position, learning to listen wholeheartedly to another, doing fitting meditative practices, etcetera), will deepen our capacity for empathy.

If we have trouble reading the emotional weather of our relationship, practising what was described earlier in this chapter (the four steps to emotional literacy) will help us develop a keener sense of what's going on emotionally. This, by the way, requires no lowering of IQ, no intellectual slumming, no shunning of rationality, no triumphant summations of "You're in your head!" In fact, as our EQ goes up, our

IQ may also go up, if only because we're now bringing more of us to whatever's before us.

An increased IQ may not mean an increased MQ (moral intelligence), but an increased EQ may well mean an increased MQ, simply because the more in touch we are with the emotional terrain of our intimate other — including having increased empathy for them — the more likely we are to want to treat them better.

And, as we take this further, extending our empathy and feeling for others to more and more beings, the more we start to understand, in a very visceral and obvious sense, that what we do to another we do to ourselves.

It takes a certain cognitive ability even to consider getting into someone else's skin or shoes (the capacity for empathy is present within 24 hours after birth, but it is not a *chosen* empathy), as well as to recognize that we are indeed doing so (without such recognition, empathy easily can become a negative force, swamping or overwhelming us with another's emotional state), but empathy nevertheless remains primarily a feeling-based undertaking. (Emotion itself blends feeling, cognition, and various social factors.)

If I get lost in your emotional state, then I am going to be of no more use to you than if I were to remain cut off from your emotional state. So part of the challenge during our relational difficulties is to get close enough to our significant others to openly feel *their* state, while separating it from *our* state — and also while keeping enough space between us for focusing purposes.

Another factor to consider here is boundaries. Robert Frost famously said that good fences make good neighbours; in the same spirit, we could say that good boundaries make good connections, and furthermore, keep the integrity of the relationship alive and well.

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Letting go of or dissolving our boundaries so as to include the other is not the same as *expanding* our boundaries to include the other.

In openly sharing and exploring our emotions with another (and vice versa) — which means not only talking about and fittingly expressing them, but also being upfront about our operational context for such expression — we create, and in a sense are also created by, a vibrantly alive “we-space.”

Through such multileveled communion, such passionately participatory interconnection, such transparent mutuality, such deeply shared aliveness, we only deepen and enrich our intimacy.

We exist through relationship, and the more emotionally literate we are, the deeper and happier our relationships — and therefore we — will be.

2. SHAME

Shame may be the emotion for which we have the most aversion. In a famous poll that asked what one was most afraid of, dying (as I recall) came in third or fourth, with speaking in public atop the list (speaking in public while naked was not on the list). *Mortifying*. The fear of making a fool of oneself, the fear of being humiliated, the fear of feeling full-out shame. Ultra-negative exposure.

Though shame itself is not fear, we fear it.

We may blend — and also *blanch* — shame with fear, thereby whipping up some guilt (see the next chapter for more on guilt), or we may push it into the background, letting other emotions take center stage.

For example, if we are in a situation that triggers shame in us, we may get angry to such a convincing degree that we genuinely believe that we are *only* angry, whether our anger is directed at another or at ourself. In either case, our anger — especially if it is allowed to mutate into *aggression* — distracts us from our shame.

Shame typically plunges us into a nastily gripping, darkly burning sense of being seriously flawed in the eyes of a convincingly critical audience, whether outer or inner. And not only does shame *expose* us — or at least our actions — as defective, but also emphatically deflates us in the face of such exposure, regardless of however much it heats us up.

Unlike fear and anger, shame readies us not for action, but for on-the-spot shrinkage or collapse — not necessarily full collapse, but enough to strongly *interrupt* us, to stop us in our tracks or pin us to the spot.

Shame has the power to impede what until a moment ago had been

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enjoyable, or at least interesting. Its signs typically are: a sudden loss of muscle tone in the neck and upper torso, so that the head slumps forward and the chest caves in; a downcasting of the eyes; an increase in the skin temperature of the face, which usually produces blushing; and a brief but intense period of confusion and disorganization.

The slump, droop, and sag of shame shows up at an early age. More than a few adults look as though they are permanently shamed — and how surprising is this, given how pervasively shaming modern culture tends to be?

It is interesting to note that shame reduces our coordination, which gives us a perhaps timely time-out or separation from our current circumstance or task, while at the same time highlighting our failure, thereby leaving us in a position where we cannot help but contrast where we were before shame kicked in and where we now are.

This contrast, at best, sobers us, so that we become less conceited, less full of ourselves, less immune to remorse, less caught up in overpursuing pleasure (and less prone to indulging in that commonplace pride that is but everted shame).

Just as disgust curbs hunger, shame curbs positive feeling.

But where disgust is a kind of “off-switch” for hunger when certain substances (like food that is going bad) or situations (like unappealing behavior) are in too-close quarters with us, shame simply reduces our level of interest in situations where just about everything else is still operating in the context of amplifying our interest. This has survival benefits, protecting us from getting too attached to maximizing our pleasures, especially when it’s not safe or socially appropriate to thus indulge.

However, in its toxic forms, shame simply crushes us, making us feel like disappearing or even killing ourselves — hence *mortification*.

Shame, whether healthy or unhealthy, *shrinks* us. The commonplace labelling of psychiatrists as “shrinks” may have some of its origin in the near-inherent shame — and accompanying self-shrinkage — so many have felt when going for psychiatric help.

Probably the most neglected emotion in psychotherapy and spiritual practice is shame, even though at the same time it may be the primary emotional force animating our neuroses and spiritual ambition.

The more defective we take ourselves to be — as signalled by the presence of shame — the more driven we are likely to be to seek some sort of compensatory solution, be it narcissistic behavior, aggression, people-pleasing, withdrawal (shyness, depression, dissociation, metaphysical or spiritual escapism), hyperrationality, psychic numbing, self-deprecation, excessive interest in sexual possibility, and so on.

But let us not be too hard on shame! Without the capacity for shame, we would be devoid of conscience.

The morality of shame — and I’m speaking here of healthy shame — is responsibility. On the other hand, the morality of guilt — unhealthy shame, shame polluted with fear — is blame.

Guilt masquerades as conscience, but shame awakens or reawakens conscience. Conscience is simply the activated presence of our innate moral sense, its core of compassion arising from a mix of empathy and shame-informed — but not shame-dominated — contemplation. Moral intelligence.

What a shame it is that we so easily treat shame shamefully, even as we assign a negative connotation to being shameless! So, so much of what we do is just a strategy to avoid or minimize shame. So much shame about shame!

The key to working with shame is to meet it with compassion. This

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gives shame room to breathe, room to openly be itself without fear of being looked down upon.

Also, we need to differentiate shame from the fear, anger, hurt, or disgust that may arise from and camouflage it. Does the felt presence of shame drive us into compensatory emotional activity? What do we tend to do emotionally when shame is catalyzed in us? Addressing these and related questions is an essential aspect of working with shame.

Shame is painfully imbued with self-consciousness (which is a misnomer, since when we're self-conscious, we're not so much conscious of our self as we are of the other[s] apparently watching us). Becoming conscious of our self-consciousness — that is, allowing it to be the *object* rather than the *subject* of our attention — when we are in shame's grip allows us to examine our shame with at least some degree of healthy detachment.

Better yet, let's bring our shame into our heart, letting its heat branch and flush through us, while granting its message, however dark or misshapen, an audience in chambers of compassionate clarity.

Only diseased shame seeks or makes a virtue out of vengeance. Such shame, steeped in humiliation, narrows its capacity for satisfaction to the machinations of revenge; an eye-for-an-eye morality is its warcry.

If we are sufficiently shamed or humiliated, we are, in many cases, culturally sanctioned to feel justified in pursuing some kind of revenge, as is so lavishly illustrated by cinematic hero after cinematic hero enduring being shamed and then going after the villains, and the more violently the better — after all, don't the bastards deserve it? On the other hand, healthy shame aims not for vengeance against our offending others, but rather for forgiveness — not premature, shallow, token, or politically correct forgiveness, but forgiveness nonetheless, regardless of whatever consequences are deemed appropriate.

Let us cease shaming ourselves for having shame.

Our aversion to feeling shame (and staying with such feeling) is so strong that most of the time our shame unfolds not as itself, but instead as aggression, withdrawal, hypercriticalness, sexual obsessiveness, excessive pride, workaholism, elitism, submissiveness, narcissicism, exaggerated competitiveness, and so on — these may appear to be very different than shame (and have an investment in appearing thus), but shame is at their root.

Shame which is not dealt with — shame that is not acknowledged, not openly felt, not directly shared, not fittingly worked with — will pollute whatever relationship in which it arises. This means that we need to know our history with shame in detail and inside out, and be able to recognize it for what it is *while* it is occurring. It is, for example, very, very easy to shame others and not realize that we are doing so — we may even, however inadvertently, shame them for their “oversensitivity” to our original shame-inducing comments and behavior. And on it goes.

When first realizing the role that shame has played in their lives, many are astonished at how pervasive, deep-cutting, and *influential* that role has been; it is as if they have discovered a lost continent of themselves, initially submerged or deeply shrouded in fog, and then illuminated by the spirit of exploration brought to it.

Shame is probably our most hidden emotion. Bringing it out of the shadows is a deeply healing undertaking, a journey that, sooner or later, we must take if we are to truly live.

When we have become intimate with our shame, we don't let it mutate into aggression or relational disengagement, confessing it as it arises, recognizing that it is simply the herald of conscience.

3. GUILT

Guilt is little more than frozen shame, shame that has been infused with fear, manifesting as the *self-punishing* sensation of having violated some sort of contract or moral agreement.

Where shame *exposes* us, guilt *splits* us — and compensates itself for this by *continuing* to engage in whatever “bad” activity supposedly is its “can’t-help-myself” reason for existing

As such, guilt means we get to stay stuck. And *small*.

And how does guilt *split* us? It is inherently self-divisive: One aspect of us, fixatedly childish and irresponsible, does whatever it is that triggers our guilt, in conjunction with another aspect of us, fixatedly parental and authoritarian, which righteously punishes the doer of the supposed crime or misdemeanor.

The relationship between these two — basically a nastily stalemated endogenous child/parent conflict — is the essence of guilt. One hand grabbing for the candy, the other wielding a parental whip.

At the same time, however, guilt is something that *we* are doing to ourselves, something that *we* are superimposing on ourselves, something that can be counted on to keep us divided, disempowered, stuck, and exploitable.

Guilt means, among other things, that we get to *again* do whatever it is that seemingly “makes” us feel guilty — we permit ourselves to do it over and over again, even as we simultaneously punish ourselves for such transgression.

We may complain about — and even broadcast — the abuse we are suffering from our own hand and our self-incrimination, but that very punishment, if sufficiently severe, significantly *lessens* the probability of “outside” punishment (after all, who wants to beat on us when we are already doing such a good job of beating on ourselves?), while ensuring — and perhaps even, at least to some degree, *legitimizing* — our continued participation (as “victims,” of course!) in what we “shouldn’t” be doing.

(An example: We put ourselves down with such intensity — such self-flagellation — for watching violent porn that we not only lessen the odds of others getting on our case for watching such stuff, but also, through absorbing the very pain of our self-denigration, feel as if we’ve “wiped the slate clean” and are therefore justified in “treating” ourselves to once again watching violent porn.)

Guilt remains — and makes sure that it remains! — irresponsible, making impotent, self-sabotaging, or already-doomed efforts at responsibility, which it consistently confuses with blame. Its central mantra/excuse is “*I’m trying.*”

(“Trying” — which features the intentionality not of us, but only of a *piece* of us — carries within itself a largely unacknowledged *oppositional* intention.)

Guilt means that we get to stay small, “safely” tucked away from truly taking charge of our lives. Guilt all but ensures that we won’t — and won’t have to — grow up.

Guilt’s prevailing reality is that of toxically simplistic right and wrong. Its moral stance is stubbornly *prerational*, dutifully skewered by the ossified finger of self-blame, self-denigration, self-castigation — anything to keep us pinned down.

The self-accusations of guilt are in the “spirit” of the other-accusations

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of resentment; where guilt is an amalgam of shame and fear, resentment is an amalgam of shame and aggression. In fact, one could describe resentment — especially in its globally hypercritical stance and underbelly of toxic impotence — as everted guilt.

Resentment is all about dragging others down; guilt is about dragging *ourselves* down, nailing ourselves with enough condemnation to all but guarantee our domicile in guilt, thereby stranding ourselves from any significant intimacy with responsibility and love.

Healthy shame does not take long to flush the entire system. Instead of continuing to contract us (which it does initially), healthy shame sooner or later unknots and expands us — we blush, our blood flows more freely, our body warms up, enriched with an admittedly uncomfortable yet nevertheless enlivening passion.

As such, the whole body is then simply just a confession of consciously *felt* responsibility for what has happened. There is a powerful, deep-rooted impetus to coming clean, letting go, and healing, a painful yet heartfelt resolution to grow.

But guilt, on the other hand, is not really interested in healing. The guilt-ridden and guilt-spurred have little energy for genuine growth — they are driven to “do it” (that is, the thing they feel guilty about doing) over and over again, and in order to justify “doing it” over and over again, they *have to* keep the threat of parental punishment hanging over them.

When we are stuck in guilt, we are basically just repeat offenders keeping ourselves behind bars, playing both prosecutor and accused, but without any genuine resolution, chronically resurrecting our courtroom drama and suffering the pains of once again fitting ourselves to its loveless script, while finding a “needed” (and perhaps even pleasurable) release through once again “doing it.” Here, not so far below the surface, there is such grief, such a paucity of self-compassion, such an agony of desperation and addiction.

Guilt is not only a refusal to love, but also a refusal to sanely parent ourselves. In our guilt, we childishly cling to — and react to — outside parental forces which we have deeply internalized.

By contrast, healthy shame provides fertile conditions for reconnecting with the parental authority that's native to us. (For example, we have just ridiculed our partner for not being smarter in a certain area and now, through our shame — our *openly felt* shame — over having done so, take full responsibility not only for what we've done, but also for facing and working through whatever drove us to behave in such a hurtful way in the first place.)

Shame can catalyze an environment in which genuine forgiveness can bloom; it is an opportunity to come clean and enter a truer scene. Guilt, however, works against the possibility of forgiveness.

Guilt is a flight from integrity, the very epitome of “divided we fall.” The guilt-ridden are usually easy to control and exploit, for most of their power is consumed by their internal warfare.

Guilt reduces God to the ultimate parent or punishment-wielding overseer, a fact exploited by more than a few religions (as exemplified by the inculcation of the doctrine of Original Sin).

Guilt fills churches and empties hearts.

Nevertheless, guilt is not just some kind of entity at which we can or should throw darts, or which we can exorcise or exterminate. It is something that *we are doing*, something that we may not want to see that we are doing.

The very disempowerment generated by guilt empowers us to persist in it.

Guilt is false conscience.

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So how to work with guilt? First of all, don't approach it with a closed heart or with moral righteousness — feeling guilty about (or shaming ourselves for) having guilt won't help!

Get in touch with the shame, fear, anger, and hurt that underlie guilt. Identify them, get detailed in your attentive survey and investigation of them, and do so as compassionately as you can. At the same time, do what you can to expand your energy, and do it as consciously as possible.

Do not let yourself automatically bounce between the childish and parental sides of guilt — recognize that neither one is *you*, but are in fact just *polarized personifications* of guilt's script.

Instead of identifying with either one, sit where you can compassionately hold both and know, right to your marrow, that you are neither.

See and feel them as clouds, and be their sky. Literally. Introduce them. Unmask them, bridge them, bring them together without taking either side, letting their mutual rainburst be your cry.

Thus do we let go of the whip, and also of the morality of blame. Thus do we shift from guilt to shame to freedom.

4. ANGER

It is easy to trash anger.

After all, when it “possesses” us, are we not more prone to violence, ill will, and lovelessness? And, even if we can successfully counteract such “possession,” we have, it seems, only curbed the beast — it still paces behind its bars, fanged and all too eager to do damage, while we play vigilant zookeeper. Or, less commonly, we may romanticize anger, rationalizing our “natural” urges to uninhibitedly express it, in the name of emotional de-suppression and honesty.

In both cases, however, anger is treated as though it were no more than an indwelling entity or mass, a *thing* either to be muzzled or set loose. Enthusiasts of “cooling down” and their “getting it out of our system” counterparts snipe at each other, citing — and making moral real estate out of — the dangers of either letting anger out or keeping it in. But there is much, much more to working with anger, as we shall see.

There is nothing inherently wrong with anger. Anger is not necessarily a problem, a hindrance, a sign of negativity or spiritual slippage, an avoidance of something “deeper,” nor a demonstration of unlove. It is our *use* of our anger that is the real issue.

Do we blame our anger for clouding or befuddling our reason — playing victim to our passions being one of our oldest alibis — or do we assume responsibility for what we *do* with it? Do we turn our anger into a weapon, hiding our hurt behind its righteously “pumped-up” front, fueling and legitimizing our defensiveness with it, or do we instead keep it as transparent and permeable as possible, remaining non-blaming and *vulnerable* even as we allow it as full or penetrating a passion as fits the situation? Do we use our anger to get even, to score points, to

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overpower or outdebate, or do we use it to deepen or resuscitate our intimacy with our partner, to compassionately flame through pretense, emotional deadwood, and life-negating investments?

It's easy, in the name of angerphobia, to reject, crush, incarcerate, bad-mouth, or otherwise *violate* our anger, allowing it so few life-enhancing outlets that it — like an animal kept too long in a cage — usually behaves badly when finally released, thereby confirming our suspicions that it is indeed in need of much the same treatment as a savage beast that has somehow found its way into our house.

It is also easy, though less common, to glorify anger, with equally harmful results. Exhorting the inhibited to “get into their anger” may just lead to a forced anger, an anger of performance, an anger that leads not to healing insight, but rather to an overreliance on simplistic (and possibly aggression-reinforcing) cathartic procedures.

It is, however, not so easy to cultivate intimacy with our anger. Getting close to its heat, its flames, its redly engorged intensity, without losing touch with our basic sanity, asks much of us.

But if we do not ask — and ultimately *demand* — this of ourselves, we will surely miss *knowing* not only the heat of anger's fire, but also its *light*. As much as anger can injuriously burn, it can also illuminate — it all depends on what kind of relationship with anger we choose to cultivate.

Anger is an aroused, often heated state which combines (1) a compellingly felt sense of being wronged (hence the *moral* quality of most anger), and (2) a counteracting, *potentially* energizing feeling of power.

Can we identify anger — which is not a *single* emotion, but instead a family of related emotions, ranging from annoyance to rage — through the observed presence of particular behaviors? Not necessarily. We can display *none* of the behaviors supposedly characteristic of anger, and

still *be* angry. Instead of pounding the table or cursing the idiot who has dared to cut us off in traffic, we may instead in our anger try even harder to please our partner, or smilingly withhold a piece of information that we know would help our partner. So can we — or others — recognize our anger through observing our behavior? Not necessarily!

Similarly, can we identify anger through the observed presence of particular feelings? Two emotions — like envy and resentment — may feel very similar, having much the same physiological characteristics, yet they do differ. We discriminate between emotions by attuning, however unknowingly, to the *context* of the situation.

Because bodily sensations are usually so obviously involved in emotion, we may confuse them with emotion itself. *There is, however, more to emotion than just the feeling of it.* Anger is an attitude, not just a feeling. We evaluate emotion, but not feeling — we may speak of our anger as “justified” or “unjustified,” but would we speak of our feeling like vomiting as “justified” or “unjustified”?

Also, we can cease *being* angry, and yet still *feel* the very same feelings that a moment ago we identified as anger.

For example, I am raging at you for scratching my newly bought car, and suddenly I find out from a deeply trustworthy friend that you are in fact *completely* innocent of doing so, and I am now no longer angry at you. My evaluation of the situation has radically and almost instantaneously changed, yet the very feelings which I was experiencing just a moment ago — pounding heart, facial flushing, shoulders knotting, hands ready to strike — are still clearly present, having diminished only slightly.

So can I now call these feelings *angry* feelings? No, because their *evaluative* framework — or *emotional* basis — has changed.

Anger, contrary to popular opinion, is not necessarily the same as *aggression*. Aggression involves some form of attack, whereas anger may

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or may not. Aggression is devoid of compassion and vulnerability, but anger, however fiery its delivery might be or might have to be, *can* be part of an act of caring and vulnerability. Nevertheless, anger in general remains all but synonymous with aggression.

Aggression is not so much an outcome of anger, as an *avoidance* of it and its underlying feelings of woundedness and vulnerability. Recognizing this is essential for relational depth and maturity.

Viewing anger as aggression — or as the cause of aggression — gives us an excuse to classify it as a “lower” or “primitive” emotion. Or something far from spiritual. But anger is far from “primitive,” though what we *do* with it may be far from civilized!

Rejected anger easily mutates into aggression, whether active or passive, other-directed or inner-directed. Thus does a means of communication become a means of weaponry.

Anger assigned to do injury, however subtly, is not really anger, but *hostility*. Anger that masks its own hurt and vulnerability is not really anger, but hardheartedness or hatred in the making, seeking not power *with*, but power *over*.

However, there is a potential healing here: to *reverse* the equation, to convert aggression, hostility, hatred, and every other diseased offspring of mishandled anger *back into* anger.

This conversion, however, does not mean eviscerating or drugging the energy of such negative states, but rather liberating it from its life-negating viewpoints, so that its intensity and passion can coexist with a caring, significantly awakened attention. In this sense, the world needs not less anger, but *more*. Especially anger coming from the heart.

Violence — the brass knuckles of abused wounds — ignores, tramples or dynamites personal boundaries, but anger, in many cases, *protects* or

guards such boundaries, at best resolutely exposing and illuminating (or perhaps even flaming through) barriers to intimacy or integrity, *without* abusing those who are maintaining such barriers. Anger that burns cleanly leaves no smoldering pockets of resentment or ill-will.

Violence is *not* a result of anger, but is an abuse or *violation* of anger.

Working with Anger: Four Approaches

The four approaches to working with anger introduced below provide a framework not only capable of making sense out of the diverse, complex, and enormous amount of material concerning anger, but also sufficiently inclusive to cover both personal *and* transpersonal considerations of anger.

(1) **Anger-In** refers to strategies favoring the restraining and redirection of the energies characteristic of raw anger. Not surprisingly, advocates of this approach emphasize the importance of *not* directly expressing anger. Self-control, subduing and recontextualizing our anger — these are the cornerstones of anger-in. Anger-in “experts” tend to equate the expressing of anger with “venting,” a lack of self-control, violence, and aggression. Anger-in practices teach us not only to identify those perceptions and interpretations that catalyze anger, but also relaxation and cooling-off techniques. Reinterpreting supposed provocations is essential to anger-in; such reappraisal reduces the probability of anger being openly expressed by removing or at least shrinking the perception of being under attack.

Though anger-in may make too much of a virtue out of controlling, managing, and non-angrily “expressing” anger, it does make a strong case for learning to step back from anger so that its more extreme or irrational impulses can be reconsidered or given more contextual space. Nevertheless, anger-in has a difficult question before it: How successful can a way of working with anger be that does not include openly expressing the actual feelings of anger? Would we, by analogy,

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consider a grief therapy to be successful that did not include the actual expression of grief?

(2) **Anger-Out** refers to approaches that emphasize the importance of directly and fully expressing the energies and intentions of anger. At the very core of anger-out theory and work is the notion of catharsis, which remains a controversial topic in therapeutic practice, despite evidence that incorporating catharsis in anger-management work makes it more effective.

Advocates of anger-out say that suppressed anger is not healthy — better to bring it to the surface (or “dig it up”) and release/express it, they claim. As appealing and apparently medically sound as such “down-to-earth” logic may be, it can tend to overemphasize a merely *physical* approach to anger, as if anger was just something to discharge or eliminate from the body. The emotional-release work that characterizes anger-out practices can range from enthused licence to blindly cut loose (or irresponsibly “act out” anger) to profoundly healing, integration-promoting release and illumination.

(3) **Mindfully Held Anger** refers to approaches in which anger is consciously contained, not emotionally expressed, and meditatively attended to, with a key intention being neither to suppress anger nor act it out. In its emphasis on neither repressing nor acting out emotion, this approach appears to offer a solution to the anger-in/anger-out dichotomy. In being wakefully present with our anger, thereby closely witnessing the actual *process* of it (in its feeling, cognitive, perceptual, and social dimensions), we also bear witness, at least to some degree, to the very “I” who is busy being angry. That is, our perspective shifts from how angry we feel to *who it is* who feels it. We then take good care of our anger, cradling it much like we would an upset child.

At its best, the mindful holding of anger is not so much a containment of anger as a deliberately *intimate* embracing and investigation of it, a willingness to stay with our anger without outwardly expressing it.

Through such loving alertness, anger can be transformed into the energy of understanding and compassion. However, this practice carries its own dangers — as suggested by the more negative connotations of the term “holding” — especially when it is engaged in prematurely or in order to flee or suppress anger, as when we are not so much sitting *with* our anger as *on* it.

(4) **Heart-Anger** refers to approaches in which openly expressed anger and compassion consciously and beneficially coexist. Put together the virtues of anger-in, anger-out, and mindfully held anger — healthy rationality and restraint, emotional openness and authenticity, meditative openness and compassion — and minimize the difficulties associated with each, and heart-anger emerges.

Heart-anger is anchored both in full-blooded aliveness and in clear caring for the other. As fierce as it sometimes can be (or has to be), heart-anger is but the emissary of wrathful compassion. Here, the expression of anger is not necessarily rethought or kept to oneself, nor always given free rein, but rather is deliberately infused with wakeful, investigative attention, without any requisite dilution or non-expression of its passion. It is “clean” anger, incisive, non-blaming, mindful, contextually sensitive, heated yet illuminating — rooted in both the personal and the transpersonal.

As such, it could be called *soul-centered* anger (by *soul*, I mean that depth of individuality in which egoity is clearly and functionally peripheral to Being). Such anger has a broad enough sense of human suffering to embrace a radically inclusive morality; it possesses sufficient faith in Life to persist in its fierce caring; and it has the guts to carry all this out.

If all that was necessary was that it shine, heart-anger surely would, but it knows that it often must also burn. And, because of this, it knows that it must also weep.

Getting Closer to Anger

Anger is moral fire. Whether it is destructive or constructive is in our hands. And our hearts. In the fiery care of clean anger, passion and compassion coexist, as do heat and light. We need to respect our anger, to cease viewing it as a problem, spiritual hindrance, or something beneath us, so that it might serve our well-being.

Neither to repress nor to indulge in our anger is far from easy, asking, among other things, that we meet it with genuine caring. Anger that is denied compassion easily becomes anger that is delivered, however indirectly, without compassion.

But how to bring compassion to anger? First of all, we need to approach it without aversion, which means becoming more *intimate* with whatever aversion we might have toward anger. The degree of caring with which we approach our anger is the degree of caring with which we can infuse the anger we give to others.

Anger that does not violate — this is the fiery face of compassion, the wrathful shout of the awakening heart.

The exploration of anger ought not to be the occupation of just a few. Not to explore anger, not to be intimate with it, is a dangerous choice, leaving us cut off from the very forcefulness and energetic underlining that may *already* be enlisted in the service of aggression, hatred, and mean-spiritedness. Not to know our anger is to keep ourselves in the dark, and in danger of being violent instead of simply angry.

At its best, anger — heart-including, open-bellied, open-throated, and so, so passionately *alive* — cannot help but support love and integrity, for it is then deeply connected to need, to vulnerability, to bareness of soul. It is then but *relational fire*, helping to both clear and light our way into an ever deeper intimacy, an intimacy that ultimately includes all that we are.

The fiery intensity at the heart of anger asks not for smothering, spiritual rehabilitation, nor mere discharge, but rather for a mindful embrace that does not necessarily require any dilution of passion, any lowering of the heat, nor any muting of the essential voice in the flames.

Bringing our anger into our heart is not only an act of love for ourselves, but for all beings, since such a practice increases the odds that we will not let our anger mutate into aggressiveness, hostility, and hatred, but rather into compassion-centered activity.

In no longer abandoning or destructively harnessing our anger, we move a step closer to being and standing up for the very love that we most desire from others.

Anger *can* be love — may we permit it to be so.

Gender and Anger in Intimacy

The disempowerment of women has, among other things, meant the suppression and devaluation of their anger. Where male anger, despite anger's supposedly "lower" origins, has in many circumstances — war, contact sports, vigilante heroics — often been viewed as healthy, morally justified, or even ennobling, female anger has generally been viewed far less favorably, as illustrated by our less-than-flattering labels for angry women. He's assertive, hotheaded, pissed off, just letting off some steam, taking care of business; she, on the other hand, is just a nag or bitch.

Thus have anger-in or anger-suppressing practices tended to be more expected of women than of men. Anger is culturally held as less legitimate an expression for women than for men. The result is that for many women anger is largely unavailable as a *resource*.

A woman marooned from her own anger is likely going to have a harder time maintaining healthy boundaries; she may feel more helpless, more fearful, more prone to despair and depression. When her anger cannot

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be depressed — that is, kept or *pressed* down — its energies may be routed into resentment or bitterness. And what a pity this is, given that anger can be, including in its fieriness, a form of *caring*. In my work I have often seen a woman's rage — full-out, clean rage — cut through the cognitive muddling of her partner or other men, waking them up to what they're actually doing.

For anger to be a resource in relationship requires not only that it be permitted its innate vulnerability, but that it also be valued, and valued equally, in both women and men. So long as female anger is treated as something less worthy of respect than male anger, relational approaches to anger will remain superficial or unproductive.

Anger asks not for domestication, but for an *honoring* of its wildness, a receptive, suitably expressive outlet for its elemental, primally alive nature. Unfortunately, the wildness in men often tends to be either crushed or channeled into mere savagery (however sophisticated), and the wildness in women just as often tends to be smothered, reduced to various forms of nagging, or trivialized as mere bitchiness.

Women have been much more subject to domestication and niceness implants than have men, and yet I have observed again and again that heart-anger usually comes more readily to women than to men. A possible reason for this is that women generally are more willing to bring some caring into their anger, whereas men are typically more prone to converting their anger into aggression.

There is more to this, however. The active/dynamic (or going-toward) capacity commonly attributed to men, in contrast to the corresponding passive/receptive (or taking-in) capacity commonly attributed to women, may have some truth in certain areas, but not very much at all when it comes to psychological/emotional life. Much of marriage counselling deals with the far more active roles that women generally take — for better or for worse — with regard to the interior life of their relationship. Thus it is no surprise that women would tend to be more accessible

to heart-anger, since they are, in general, already more inclined toward both caring and taking an active or even challenging role in the arena of psychological/emotional communication.

A woman's impassioned and resolute shaking up of the relational status quo — disturbing her partner's complacency, disembodied rationality, or supposed expertise — can be a potent awakening agent. And vice versa. Anger and love can exist at the same time in a mature relationship!

Imagine a new image: The warrior of intimacy, female or male, who can give anger with full-blooded yet compassionate and vulnerable intensity, and who can also receive anger — not absorbing or swallowing it, nor playing martyred target for it, but simply responding to it nondefensively, letting it in not like an invader but like a *guest*.

Expressing and Receiving Anger

Brian and Tina are at a stalemate. Both are articulate and insightful, yet they are stuck. Their knowledge — both are therapists — does not seem to be making any difference. He wants more commitment from her, she wants less pressure from him, and both are unhappy. She says she feels guilty about her lack of commitment to being with him, so we talk about her guilt and its roots, but still there is little life in the room.

They are both clearly angry and very much under control — firmly in position, armed in their attempted openness, trying to be non-combative in their combativeness. The stage is set.

“Face each other,” I say, “and keep eye contact.” Tina briefly raises her hands slightly, palms out, smiles, and delivers some more dead-end insight. “Do that again with your hands,” I say, “and breathe deeper.” She grins. I see a flash of shame. Her hands are sliding up and down the outside of her thighs. “What do your hands want to do?” I ask her.

In an instant, her hands are on Brian's knees, pushing him back. Immediately, she

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pulls back, smiling, changing the subject. I ask her what she's feeling as she smiles, and she says that she's angry, and that she's withdrawing from him. Tension fills the room. We briefly talk about how easily she puts herself down for not wanting to be closer to him; even to directly give him her anger would be, she says, a kind of giving in. And so on. Brian is hurt, but still present.

"Let's try a different tack," I suggest. "Tina, I want you to express your anger to Brian as fully as possible, but without any words." She no longer can smile. I have her hold her a pillow between her hands, to be squeezed as hard as she can. A half minute or so passes. I can see and feel her rage, but she is silent. I ask her where she is most tense, and she says her throat and jaw.

Suddenly, she leans forward, screaming at him, her sounds deep and powerful; she is clearly not acting. Brian now looks much more awake — and caring. Tina is full-blooded in what she is allowing, and is simultaneously very vulnerable. Tears mix with her rage. Less than a minute later, I have her interlock hands with him while she bites down on a towel that I pull on; this loosens her jaw and neck. For a minute or so, she pushes against him, biting very hard, her eyes pure fury and hurt. Then I have her let go of the towel and his hands. Silence, and a deeper silence.

Both had complained of not having enough of a soul-connection, but now it is evident that they are plugged into a very real intimacy. He, unlike many men, did not pull back or "disappear" in the face of her raw anger. They are not through their difficulty, but are now in a place where they are far more capable of getting through it.

The expression of anger and the need to take action are not necessarily the same thing. The direct expression of anger-energy is simply an act of exposure, whereas the need to have events go this way or that has more to do with power and control.

Restricting anger expression to verbal combat only keeps it from being as healing a process as it could be if it were to also — under the right conditions! — to *safely include* the nonverbal expression of undisguised and uncensored anger (as illustrated in the vignette above).

When anger is “uncaged” in a suitable environment at the right time, it often will, after a minute or two of full-throated, full-bodied release, be accompanied by fitting words and phrasings that potently articulate the heart of the matter. Thus can skillfully steered anger-out become more than venting, more than a merely eliminative strategy, eventually mutating, to a significant degree, into heart-anger.

In a relatively awakened relationship, the actual intent of our anger can, at least some of the time, be safely verbalized, openly and specifically. At times — if there is enough trust, love, and mindfulness — the confession of such intent may need to be also physically expressed (as when anger is particularly intense, edgy, or gripping) through wringing a towel, pounding a pillow or sofa, or engaging in other similarly nondestructive expressions of such energy.

To expose our darker reactive intentions with clarity, vulnerability, and perhaps some degree of dramatic exaggeration, can be, even though it might appear otherwise, an act of love, providing an illuminating — and valuable — inside look at our uglier urges, soul-crushing habits, core wounds, and their attending anger.

Openly sharing what we are ashamed or afraid of in ourselves makes us not only more intimate with such qualities, but also with each other.

Even so, we may still go to great lengths to avoid exposing or sharing not only the more shameful or embarrassing imperatives of our anger, but also its *passion*. Getting righteous during our anger may be pointless, but no more so than submitting to our partner’s demands (tacit or not) that we: (1) not get openly angry; (2) spare them such raw intensity; (3) prove (through suffocating, sterilizing, or at least muting our anger) that we are loving; and (4) in short, let them in this particular situation remain in control, “safely” removed from the heat of our anger.

If we are on the receiving end of anger coming from our partner, particularly heated or wide-open anger, it may be very tempting to deny

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them significant access to us, even if their anger is being delivered cleanly. We may interrupt, deflect, minimize, or try to detour their intensity of feeling (and/or content), perhaps informing them that they are out of control or behaving irresponsibly, saying to them in so many words, “Can’t we do this another way?”

This apparently reasonable request, however appropriate it might be at times (as when the environment is not sufficiently supportive of an “uncivilized” exchange, or when anger is being abusively expressed), is usually an avoidance of anger, as well as a confession of not being intimate with our own anger. That is, if we don’t successfully defuse or mute our partner’s anger at us, it might catalyze our own anger into a more active form, and the more opposed we are to this, the more we will tend to oppose, obstruct, or sabotage our partner’s direct expression of anger.

We may even — without raising our voice, of course! — demand from them in the midst of their anger that they demonstrate that they do indeed love us. To do so may mean that they have to cease being angry (or at least *looking* angry), given that our prevailing model of love very likely does not include an angry-faced or wrathful love. If anger signals the end or absence of love for us — as it might have in our past — then we are going to have a strong investment in suppressing it, both in ourselves and in others, stranding ourselves from the realization that anger and love can both exist at the same time.

For anger to enhance intimacy, it needs to be met with nondefensive, empathetic listening (which does not necessarily mean that the partner listening should suppress his or her own anger!), listening in which agreement or disagreement with what is being said or conveyed remains *secondary* to our empathy and caring for the other. Such is the essence of receiving anger.

Rejecting our partner’s anger — not *aggression*, but *anger* — simply short-circuits it. This generally encourages the stockpiling of anger-energy

and frustration, along with a resulting pressure to find other outlets, such as the subtle cruelties of passive aggression.

Anger that is rejected, anger that is denied compassion, anger that is vilified or ostracized or declawed, is the very anger that corrodes and sabotages intimacy.

Sharing anger in an intimate relationship does not always have to remain a serious affair. Playfulness and healthy anger expression are not mutually exclusive. Skillful teasing in the midst of anger may in fact create *more* room for hearing what is really being said, testing the health and resiliency of our edges, keeping us fluid, even if our bones are brittle with age. Such teasing is the leavening of healthy criticism. It puts down our sweaty fretting and fussing without putting us down.

In the fierce heat of anger, a happy-to-be-alive feeling may sometimes emerge — especially when deep intimacy and trust are present. Some signs of anger may still linger, but there will also be a deep and natural empathy, plus a spaciousness which allows integrity to surface, tears to stream freely, humor to upstage righteousness, and love to shine bright.

When anger and love are permitted to coexist — as happens most commonly in being-centered relationships — intimacy cannot help but deepen.

Anger does not disappear as we awaken, and in fact may become even more fiery, but burns cleanly, serving the well-being of all involved.

5. FEAR

As simplistic as it may sound, fear often is just excitement in drag. If we are excited and then we contract, fear arises; if we are fearful and then expand, excitement arises. Same energy, different context.

Fear and anger are biochemically all but identical. Same adrenaline, different intention and directionality. When the fearful get angry, they are not afraid any more, but just angry. Not that getting angry is the solution for fearfulness — but the arising of anger can really *empower* us, in contrast to the arising of fear.

Fear comes in many forms — worry, anxiety, panic, paranoia, angst, terror, dread, doubt — but fundamentally is just apprehensive self-constriction, a contractile aversion that takes shape as a mildly to deeply unpleasant gripping feeling that announces, compellingly and viscerally: *I am not safe*; or *I am threatened*; or *I am in danger*.

This message — scrawled in our own blood — may often be impervious to cognitive intervention. Consider the following example: If we suffered a particularly difficult birth, with our vital signs having accelerated for a significant amount of time into zones of extreme danger — so that our biological *survival* was clearly at stake — we obviously didn't mentally reflect on our situation (our brain not being developmentally capable of doing so), but rather *automatically* reacted by “doing” whatever most quickly and effectively reduced the danger, like going neurologically limp or “depressing” our vital signs.

Later in life, when in the presence of danger (real or imagined), we may then not only get afraid, but may also revert, beyond any mental counter-effort, to what originally had “worked” to save our life — withdrawing, shutting down, turning off, getting depressed, whatever does the job.

Many relationships are ruined or kept in the shallows by such reversion (which is not always a result of birth trauma!) — the “depressing” of our vitals signs both “saves” and destroys us, making us all but incapable of sustained intimacy.

However it manifests, fear very easily undercuts our rationality. Fear that’s allowed to infiltrate our mind doesn’t waste any time generating thoughts that support and amplify it.

Animals get afraid — demonstrating the physiology and characteristic behaviors of fear — when *actual* danger is present and registers; the electrifying biochemistry of fear immediately enables them to flee or, less commonly, to freeze.

Humans, however, are usually far less practically inclined, at least after infancy, getting afraid not only in the present, but also projecting fearfulness into the past (as in guilt, which is shame injected with fear) and the future (as in worry or anxiety), generally keeping ourselves not only chronically afraid, but also overcommitted or enslaved to whatever most successfully keeps us sufficiently distanced from our fear.

Fear can be adaptive or maladaptive. The rush of fear we feel when we are getting too close to a precipice is useful, immediately alerting and readying us for needed action (like stepping back). Worry, on the other hand, is far from useful — when we permit it to gnaw at us, and to enlist our cognition in its service, we’re only keeping ourselves off track, bound up in a too narrowly framed view. Worry — which is but socially acceptable anxiety — keeps us spinning in a cranial cramp, until we leave for more life-giving territory (perhaps after having “worried our head off”).

To journey into, unguardedly feel, and directly relate *to* our fear (instead of *from* it) requires that our usual distancing strategies, cognitive and otherwise, be exposed and disarmed — assuming, of course, that it is timely to do so. Our fear can then be touched and known from the

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inside, and eventually divested of its power to shrink, misguide, or intimidate us.

Our smaller fears, unpleasant as they might be, are not usually very difficult to temporarily escape or sedate — we know what we are afraid of; we are perhaps even oddly comforted by its uncomfortable or edgy familiarity; and we know when to throw it a piece of meat and when not to. We know it well enough to know how to take the edge off it, through positive thinking, sex, food, drugs, intense exercise, electronic fixes, and other such distracting preoccupations — such strategies give us some sense of control, regardless of what they cost us.

That is, when our fear has a concrete, everyday object upon which to focus or fixate, we are on miserable yet dependably familiar ground, seemingly far from the quicksands of our deeper fears. Thus do we tend to prefer the burdened beasts of depression to the monsters of the deep.

And so thus do we tend to cling, however indirectly, to our everyday fearfulness, focusing on its mental content much more than the raw feeling itself. We then leave the nature of fear out of our inquiry, settling instead for explanations for why we are afraid. It's easy to use our reasoning powers to distance ourselves from our fearfulness, yet even from the loftiest and most seemingly safe neocortical towers we are not entirely out of the reach of our core fears.

Until we move toward our fear, we will be bound by it.

The key to working effectively with fear is to get *inside* it.

This means, among other things, that we need to have a clear knowledge of all the ways in which we have learned to get away from fear, so that when one of them shows up, we are capable of looking *at* it — rather than just through its eyes — and, to whatever degree, saying “no thanks.”

Getting inside fear means getting past its periphery, getting past its defining thoughts, getting past its propagandizing sentinels, getting past our *problematic* orientation to fear. Entering the dragon's cave.

Once we are within fear, under its skin, with our attention scanning our surroundings like a miner's headlamp, we can begin acquainting ourselves with its basic features, particularly those sensations and beliefs that together make it into a something we label "fear." The closer we get to it, the better we can see it.

However, we need to learn not to get close too quickly, not to move so fast that we can't keep digesting and integrating what we're experiencing. If we're entering something as intense as terror, we have to step very carefully. Taking on too much only increases our fear of fear.

So slowly and carefully we go, feeling our way in, remaining as aware as possible of our breathing, feelings, sensations, and intentions, keeping some connection with the "outside world," letting our Ariadne's thread of remembrance have some slack, but not so much that we forget to keep in palpable contact with it. In touch.

Asking certain questions of ourselves as we proceed can be very helpful: What sensations am I experiencing in my belly, my diaphragm, my throat, my upper back, my forehead, my hands? And how are these changing? What is their texture, tone, temperature, directionality, color, shape? And what kind of mental processes are going on as I do this? And to *whom* is all of this arising?

That is, we deliberately cultivate some curiosity as we make our way toward and into the den — we are on guard, but we are not all that solidly armored. It is also advantageous to view the storyline presented by your fear as just that, a *story* — treat it as you would a dream that you're beginning to suspect is indeed a dream.

Sometimes it may be useful to personify fear — and not only ours! — as

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a scared child, a very upset child, a child who is aching for our touch, our care, our love. As much as that child, that self-conscious locus of frightened vulnerability, may initially shrink from us, it is only for as long as we forget or avoid our compassion.

When we remain outside our fear, we remain trapped within it.

When we, however, consciously get inside our fear, it's as if it turns inside out. Getting inside our fear with wakeful attention and compassion actually *expands* our fear beyond itself. Once the contractedness at the center of fear ceases to be fueled, fear unravels, dissipates, and terminates its occupancy of us.

In entering our fear, we end our fear of it.

Through attending closely, caringly, and carefully to the particulars of our fear, we *decentralize* it, so that its intentions and viewpoint can no longer govern us. When the light goes on in the grottos of dread, then fear is little more than our case of mistaken identity having a bad day.

When we touch our fear with real caring, it de-tenses, de-compresses, usually quite quickly becoming something other than fear, something unburdened by fear's agendas or headlines. Fear met with an open heart does not usually take long to dissolve.

The key is to actively and decisively *disidentify* with our fear.

When we no longer feel as though we're constellated around our fear, then fear is no longer so fearful — it may still experientially resemble fear, but it doesn't have us so compellingly hooked. We may still be squirming, we might even still be frightened, but we *know* we're not really in as much trouble as our fear initially announced to us.

But sometimes fear can slam into us with such force, such shocking intensity, that we are left devastated. Rape, war, heavy accidents, a sudden

loss of sanity. Huge, huge blows. Even so, it is still possible to approach such trauma-centered fear — at the right pace and very, very carefully, with skilled help — and defuse it. Doing so means not just working at a mental level, nor simply relying on medication, but rather adopting an integral approach, working in fitting depth with our physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions.

In working with fear, it is also important to take into account *collective* fear. Ever since we became capable of destroying ourselves through nuclear means, our fear-level has skyrocketed, along with our fear-distractions (depression and self-numbing ranking high on the list). We know in our marrow that we feel threatened — at least on a physical level — regardless of how “successful” our compensatory strategies might appear to be.

As long as our desire to continue distracting ourselves from our suffering is stronger, or permitted to be more central, than our longing to be *truly* free, we will continue to be occupied — or *colonized* — by both fear and its “remedies” (not the least of which are the spiritually ambitious dreams and immortality aspirations of our me-centeredness).

Going to the core of fear deepens love and relational intimacy. In fact, it’s only through openly facing our fear that genuine fearlessness arises. In fear, we do not feel safe; but in ego-transcending love, we feel and are safe, being in intimate resonance with that which cannot be harmed or left.

Awareness doesn’t mind fear.

Nor does love.

6. DOUBT

Doubt is an inner questioning infused with uncertainty and, more often than not, enough agitation to make it a relatively unpleasant state. In an everyday sense, doubt is what happens mentally when we find ourselves stranded in ambiguity's darker carrels, trying to think our way out, stuck in cognitive traffic jams that catch us in their treads and flatten us as much as they fragment us.

Typical doubt is not much more than skepticism that, having lost its clarity and confidence, is bound up in worrisome shades of uncertainty. Anxiety may be lurking nearby, ready to be recruited, bringing more of an edge to doubt. Although doubt is not dread, it can become dread if sufficiently fed.

Doubt can manifest as avoidance, moral impotence, indecisiveness, existential fence-sitting, indulgence in ambiguity, cognitive obsessing, prevarication, and so on — and it can also, though much less often, manifest as a necessary questioning, a courageous inquiry that can both tolerate and investigate uncertainty. Doubt is no more “bad” than “certainty” is good.

There's everyday doubt, a self-contracted, often neurotic questioning injected with constricted feeling, zigzagging with myopic desperation through the presenting layers of uncertainty — and there's another doubt, a sober questioning that carries us beyond facile certainties and automated beliefs deep into the inherent insecurity and uncertainty of Life, inviting us to adopt a *nonproblematic* orientation toward it.

Everyday doubt is a collapse of heart that has gone to mind, an unhappy, unilluminated inquiry that's interested not in discovery or revelation, but only in persisting in repetitively touring its culs-de-sac. It puts an

abundance of energy into going nowhere, spinning its wheels until it is exhausted, leaving us asleep at the wheel.

Such doubt is the contracted and divided mind doing time in uncertainty's mental mazes, providing apparent justification for worry.

Whereas skepticism is a healthy, incisive, and often robust questioning, everyday doubt is an unhealthy, indecisive, and chronically anaemic questioning, a dead-end inquiry, a bottled-up questioning that is terrified of being uncorked.

When the energy of everyday doubt is allowed to mushroom in our headquarters, it tends to invade and stain whatever content is nearby, immediately framing it in a darkly questionable light.

Doubt is what the mind tends to do both when it is cut off from the vitality and openness and primal intentions of our depths, and when rationality itself just does not satisfy. And doubt presumes to have an overview, but in fact has none — it cannot even see itself, let alone accurately assess its environment.

Nevertheless, doubt is *not* an enemy. What matters is what we do with it. Do we identify with it? Do we give our power away to it? Do we allow it to enlarge? Do we believe in it? Do we make decisions based on it? Or do we illuminate it, outbreathe and outdance it, crashing its slumber-party with such resolute focus that it cannot help but dissolve into a more Life-giving form?

Trying to work with doubt through mental means only doesn't really work. The self-suppression that catalyzes and animates doubt must be seen, felt, and known from the deep inside. Our whole being must be eased, expanded, given permission to come alive. Our torso must be loosened, our limbs unfrozen, our heart reentered, our reach made both powerful and vulnerable, so that our entire anatomy is brought into supportive resonance with what-really-matters.

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Doubt your doubt, and then pour your undivided attention into whatever noncognitive openings have been generated by doing so.

When doubt does manage to infiltrate your mind, read its contents once-through as though they belonged to a supermarket tabloid, taking careful note of which headlines most easily snare your attention. Then immediately shift your attention, and shift it completely, to the *feeling* of your doubt, resisting the temptation to scoot back into your mind.

No matter how tempting it is to immerse yourself in what your doubt is telling you, shift your attention from whatever it is that you're doubting to the actual phenomenon of doubt itself. Feel into and through its tensions, its contracted tones, its positioning, its emotional qualities, its bodily ramifications and anatomical peculiarities; feel what it is doing to you, feel what it is doing to others near you, feel how it's staining your speech, vision, hearing, perception, posture, your very being..

The key is to actively and decisively *disidentify* with our doubt, while also allowing the surfacing and fitting expression of whatever feeling states are associated with it — fear, sadness, anger, shame, and so on.

Don't give your doubt a thought. Instead, give it your full attention. Go right to its core. Its dark heart is but the shell, the calcified chambering, of a love that effortlessly dissolves all fear and clears space for a deeper life.

7. SCHADENFREUDE

There's an emotion, a very common emotion, for which there's no word in English (other than perhaps the extremely obscure *epicaricacy*), an emotion that is all about taking pleasure in others' misfortune or suffering.

This may not be the kind of emotion that we readily admit to having, but who among us hasn't felt it, and sometimes also acted as if they were not feeling it?

When those who have done us harm or committed a crime are clearly suffering, we may feel justified in taking pleasure at their downfall and might even do so publicly, but at other times we may feel the same kind of pleasure when certain suffering others clearly have done nothing disturbing or harmful to us, in which case we ordinarily are not inclined to show our pleasure publicly or even privately (or even to admit it to ourselves).

German has a word for this emotion: *Schadenfreude*. This translates as harm-joy. Many other languages have a word for it, but not English. We have phrases that hover around or hint at it, phrases that convey some of the feeling of it, but without the overt pleasure, as if we're embarrassed to admit that it actually feels good.

For example, we may say, "he had it coming" or "I hope she suffers" or "it was just a matter of time before he fell" — these all perhaps hinting at a certain satisfaction we might feel upon seeing someone take a spill or go downhill, but not coming very close to indicating any real pleasure. But Schadenfreude with a stiff upper lip or impassive countenance is still Schadenfreude.

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Unjustified Schadenfreude may be our most ubiquitous guilty pleasure, more often than not springing (unlike arguably justified Schadenfreude) from envy, an envy that pleasantly dissipates (leaving only a dark stain in the backcorners of our psyche) when we spot the fall or demise of the envied other.

The tabloids on sale at most checkout counters provide an instant Schadenfreude high — movie stars without any makeup, movie stars messing up royally, movie stars down in the dump, their travails and photos inviting us to look upon them where they are not just like us, but worse. Their fall is *our* rise, leavening us with tiny bursts of satisfaction and secret yumminess, like a chocolate bar downed in the mid-afternoon whilst watching a soap opera. It's a vicarious shamefest; we're close to the shame, but not *that* close, so that we can see it and feel it without having it contract or shrink or expose us.

How quietly yet pointedly delicious it is to be on the other side of the glass. Someone else's fall amplifies the fact that we have not yet thus fallen; thus does Schadenfreude give us a little hit of immunity, which in itself provides a small but noticeable shot of pleasure. A cheap and easily accessible buzz.

Much of Schadenfreude's ancestry lies in the triumph we felt — and this goes back a *long* way — when the overcoming or downfall of others improved our lives in some way (and the better this felt, the more fully we'd participate in it). This can also be seen developmentally, when young children exult over getting something that another child clearly wants. Being higher up on the food chain can be a high, despite the cost.

As we get older and more cognitively sophisticated, our capacity for Schadenfreude deepens. Although we may still be driven by a certain core competitiveness and a corresponding envy, now we can bring in finer and finer distinctions as to what constitutes a fall in others, as well as dragging into the mix such potent ingredients as the ability to shame others. And if we ourselves can be shamed relatively easily, we may seek

to escape the raw feeling of such shame not only through attacking others — or ourselves — but also through honing our capacity for Schadenfreude.

Our sense of justice and our Schadenfreude leanings are directly related. If we feel that others have behaved unjustly, we're more likely to feel some Schadendfreude toward them than if we knew they had not thus behaved. The enormous coverage given celebrity failings is largely fed by a powerfully pervasive cultural Schadenfreude. In this, major “news” networks are simply the Jerry Springer Show in polite drag, pandering as they do to the very same appetites of “less civilized” broadcasts.

There are many shades of Schadenfreude, ranging from malicious delight to sweet revenge to eruditely smiling contempt, but all involve an absence of compassion, coupled with an us-versus-them mentality. As such, Schadenfreude works against forgiveness, and how could it not, given how it dehumanizes the offending or fallen other?

Also, in the sense that it is a spectator sport — just think of Romans packed into the amphitheater for a day of rousingly entertaining bloodshed — Schadenfreude keeps us *psychoemotionally* separate from the downfall that's providing us with pleasure. Thus does it disconnect us, even as it connects us to others who are also enjoying observing the same downfall.

Schadenfreude can be brought into clearer focus by examining its opposite, *mudita* (a Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist term), which basically means sympathetic/appreciative joy — the pleasure we take in others' successes and achievements.

Many of us know this emotion in its purest form through the joy we feel over our children's breakthroughs and triumphs, so long as we are not caught in living through their successes (which of course often means overemphasizing their doing well, thereby bringing unnecessary and often injurious pressure to them). Mudita has an open heart;

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Schadenfreude does not. Mudita does not lose touch with the humanity of others; Schadenfreude does.

So what can we do about our Schadenfreude? First of all, become sufficiently aware of it so that you can name it as soon as it arises in you. Then bring your full attention into the actual *feeling* of your Schadenfreude.

Notice the contraction in its expansiveness; notice its overlap with other emotions; notice its texture, color, directionality, depth, intensity, and so on. Study it closely, getting intimate with it to the point where its arising is just one more opportunity to deepen both your self-knowledge and your relationship with others. Instead of merely judging or dissociating from your Schadenfreude, have compassion for it and for the you who tends to indulge in it.

Everyone has some Schadenfreude; all we need do is see it for what it is, and not allow it to sit in the driver's seat. Don't worry about getting rid of it; rather, let it sit in the backseat, giving it some quality playtime with mudita.

8. GRIEF

We all have grief, however much we may mute or bypass its expression. It is what we feel when our heart registers a loss that is of considerable significance to us. There is grief over the death of a loved one, grief over missed opportunities, grief over damage suffered by someone else. It is intensely personal, even when it stretches us far beyond our usual selves.

Grief breaks the heart, however concretized its “casing” may be. The broken heart can go into endarkened contraction (a myopic shrinking or “going to pieces”) or it can go in a very different direction — if allowed to, grief doesn’t just break the heart, but *breaks it open*, ultimately breaking us open to unbroken Being.

Grief includes sadness, but is much more than just sadness. Its tears may burn, but sooner or later they also illuminate. In deep grief, we are stripped down to our feeling core, registering the bare facticity of suffering — and quite often not just ours — without any buffers.

We begin with “my” grief and may remain there, but sometimes this shifts to “our” grief as our rawness of heart radiates out compassionately, and then may shift even further to “the” grief, as we feel, to whatever degree, our collective/shared suffering and allow that feeling to pervade us — which doesn’t bring on more sorrow, but rather more love, love that remains itself even as it weeps. Huge heartache, huge hurt, huge opening — carrying us through the deepest sorrow into a spaciousness as naturally compassionate as it is vast. In such spaciousness, such exquisitely raw openness, there is, eventually, room for all.

A famous rabbi, when asked what could be done about the Mideast conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, said, “Both sides have to grieve

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together.” *Together*. The deepest grief is, however solitary its expression, a communal event. It touches all. Its hurt blows the cover off its sky, carrying us far beyond the dramatics of conventional sorrow.

Grief is a *passion*. Sadness is not a passion, nor is sorrow, but grief is.

Like other passions — rage, lust, ecstasy — grief has the power to overwhelm us, for better or for worse. Grief usually works best when it is uninhibited. So many want to hush it, to muzzle or mute it, perhaps so as to minimize any potential embarrassment — such suppression being quite common at funerals. Anyone who really wails, really lets it out, often tends to be looked upon as behaving poorly or inconsiderately. Not surprisingly, many of us end up doing therapy years after the fact, dealing with the grief that was not expressed, or expressed fully enough, back then.

Unleashed grief is not mere venting nor self-indulgence, but rather Life-energy on the healing/awakening loose, cutting new channels in the terrain of self, uprooting obsolete stands. Such a wild, wild storm it sometimes can be— such a dark yet luminous outpouring, such a radical ripping of the heart, such a deep dying into Life, birthing us and a truer us in its wake.

The de-suppression of anger often catalyzes an undamming of grief, of a feeling of loss sometimes so immense and deep that it can, eventually, embrace other losses — losses that belong to all of us — thereby making deeply significant links not only across space, but also through time. Thus do we move from the interiorized community of voices that make up “I” to the community at large, widening the circle of our reach, our love, our caring.

In such a panoramic intensity of heart-hurt, however agonizing it might be, there usually emerges some sense of a sobering ease, the ease of simply being — not being this, not being that, but simply Being. This is not the bliss of immunity-seeking, fear-fueled transcendence, nor that

resulting from any other flight from painful feeling, but rather is the natural joy of simply existing, equally at home with the high and the low, unable to be other than compassionate toward all.

Such is the prevailing condition of the heart that — though already bruised — is nonetheless sufficiently open to have room for all that we are, however dark or lowly or frightened. In grief, the heart is broken in the same way that a stream rushing down through a mountainside forest is broken — it's still cohesive spiritually, still unified in essence, its elemental dying only strengthening and affirming its fundamental aliveness, its rough-and-tumble course only furthering its dynamic yet utterly vulnerable surrender.

Where reactive sorrow just contracts and isolates us, unimpeded grief expands and connects us, grounding us in natural openness.

Grief can be just as spacious as it is earthy, existing as a deeply personal yet also significantly transcendent sense of loss pervaded by a more-than-intellectual recognition of the inevitable passing of all that arises.

As such, grief provides not only a bridge between the personal and transpersonal (with neither having a “higher” status than the other), but also between pain and love. That bridge awaits our step, our crossing.

Every loss must be felt right to the core
Or else there's an even greater loss
Sadness must leave its mind to become grief
Or else it'll just settle for repressive relief

So let the pain sweep through
And the even truer ache
And especially the bare need
The love beyond love
The pure heartbreak