

Coming Home

BY

Jacqueline Wener

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Counselling

City University of Seattle

2017

APPROVED BY

Bruce Hardy, PhD, RCC, Advisor, Counselling Psychology Faculty

Chris Kinman, MA, RCC, PhD (Candidate), Faculty Reader, Counselling

Psychology Faculty

Division of Arts and Sciences

Coming Home:

An Autoethnography on Acceptance, Embodiment and Compassionate Awakening.

Jacqueline Wener

City University of Seattle

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DEDICATION

For My Village



*“We must be willing to let go of the life we planned  
so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”*

*~Joseph Campbell*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who have inspired me to write and finally complete this thesis. First, I would like to thank my students and my clients. You have shown me the courage to be vulnerable, the willingness to grow, and the power of community to elevate. You have humbled me with your grace, and have called me deeper and deeper into fulfilling my purpose. To my mentors, who have spanned decades of my life, thank you for seeing me, and for calling me to step into my power with patience and loving kindness. I would like to thank my parents and my sisters for loving me always and for encouraging me to follow my passion and trust myself. Thank you to my three beautiful children, Jonah, Laylah, and Jude, for being my greatest teachers. You have inspired me to grow, to stretch, and to surrender, so that you can know yourselves in your magnificence. I would not be the person I am today without you. Finally, to my dearest friends, thank-you for being my soul –sisters, my cheer leading squad and for always reminding me of who I am, especially when I forgot. You, dear ones, have carried me through the darkness, and have helped to guide me home. I am so deeply grateful to have you in my life, and promise to show up for you always.

### NOTES ON STYLE

This work uses the APA style format. However, an exception has been made to typical block quotation format with respect to the author's personal diary entries. These entries have been formatted in italics to differentiate them from the main text.

## ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon my own lived experience as well as the work of Joseph Campbell to articulate a way of understanding the human journey. It provides an autoethnographic account of my experience with attachment, somatic work and the practice of self-compassion to articulate my process of awaking to my deep inner wisdom. By sharing my narrative of becoming, and linking it to the collective human experience, I hope to orient clients to the teacher within their own bodies, and offer a compassionate hand to guide them home.

## Prologue

The danger is greatest when the finish line is in sight. At this point, resistance knows we're about to beat it. It hits the panic button. It marshals one last assault and slams us with everything its got (Pressfield, S., 2012).

### *Diary Entry 1 - Resistance*

*For weeks I have been uneasy in my body. My throat is full, thick and murky. There is a heaviness in my chest. I'm anxious inside, and unsettled. My whole abdomen feels congested and my bowels have stopped working properly. My body is fighting something so strongly that it has actually created a dam to shut off the flow of movement and I find myself frozen in fear. This is a familiar feeling. I've visited this place many times before.*

*Weeks ago, I found myself doing everything I could to avoid the feelings I was experiencing. I kept myself busy and self-medicated with alcohol when the discomfort grew too strong for me to handle. I became aware as I have many times in the past that avoidance could very well become a full time job and a way of life; a numbed out, half asleep way of being in the world.*

*As the weeks progressed my feelings of discomfort grew to be so unbearable, that even self-medicating began to fail. The still quiet voice inside of me has grown stronger than my resistance. It has been poking and prodding me every morning at 3:00 am. "Get up and work it out on the mat, she says. Your body isn't turning on*

*you. She's trying to communicate. Stop trying to out-run your feelings. They are steering you in the direction of truth. Go inside, and take care of yourself; body, mind and spirit, you know it's the only way thru. So, I finally paid heed to the voice and committed to a very particular Kundalini yoga practice. This practice combines Nabhi Kriya, a kriya that is designed to connect a person with their center, and core strength with Kantha Padma Kriya, a series designed to open up the throat and allow the essence of one's identity to be communicated with the world (Bhajan, 2007). It's time for me to feel safe enough in my body, and connected enough to the earth to speak from my soul, from deep in my bones.*

*You see, I have a piece of writing to share, and I find myself scared. I know what I have to say is important by the sheer force of resistance I am meeting with as I put pen to paper. It's time to do something different. I have touched freedom, and I don't want to live in exile any longer. It's time to share my story. I take a deep breath and I sink into my body. As I breathe deeply into my bones I beckon the wise woman inside of me, to come alongside the fearful child. She places her hand on the child's navel, and whispers the words "allow, trust, surrender." The child places her own hand on her heart and as she does so, she relaxes; she feels her throat release and with the release comes a song.*

*I'm singing this song, it's time it was sung*

*I've been putting it off for a while,*

*But it's harder by now, 'cause the truth is so clear*

*That I cry when I'm seeing you smile.*

*(Waits, 1973, track 4).*



## Introduction

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it, or fade it, or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own; if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself. If you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul. If you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty even when it is not pretty every day.

And if you can source your own life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand at the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, 'Yes.'

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have.

I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone and do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the centre of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments. (The Invitation, Oriah Mountain Dreamer, 2000)

This manuscript is an invitation to embark on a journey of self- acceptance. It is with an open heart and an out-stretched hand that I invite you to take a walk with me. I must warn you. The journey we are headed on is both extraordinary and very ordinary. It has no beginning and no end. There is no perfect package, and pretty bow to tie it up perfectly. The territory being covered is imperfect. It is deeply personal, vulnerable, raw, and exposed. It reflects my own unique experience but in doing so, connects with the collective human experience that has been churning since the beginning of time. There is no backpack for fancy supplies, no tool belt and no gizmos to get us through. This is a deep and powerful journey of self- discovery. It is done naked, and calls on the body, and the mind to release the masks, to listen deeply and to awaken to the soul's beckoning call to become fully alive and awake.

This journey is both deeply personal and eerily universal. It is my story, my mother's story, my grandmother's story, and the story of every ordinary hero. This journey has but one

direction, homeward. It is inspired by the soul's call to be honored, to awaken and step into life fully alive and awake.

My personal experience of marriage and its eventual dissolution serves as the catalyst for the most profound opening, learning and growth that I have ever had the privilege of living and it plays a central role in this narrative of becoming. I use the word living here because I walk with my experience everyday and am humbled by it. It is alive in me and impacts the way I relate to myself, to my family, to my community, to my students and to my clients. I have been learning to walk with grace through darkness, trusting deeply in the knowing that darkness gives birth to light.

My process hasn't always been elegant but it has allowed me to step into life fully and has helped me to find deep resonance, alignment and peace at the level of my soul.

In this paper, my own lived experience and the work of Joseph Campbell will be used to articulate a way of understanding the human journey. I intend to draw on my experiences with attachment, somatic work and the practice of self-compassion to articulate my process of awakening to, and connecting with my own deep inner wisdom and wholeness. I will link these insights to relevant scholarly literature and explore them in a wider therapeutic context. The process of writing an autoethnography is a deeply embodied experience. Using this format and sharing my reflections throughout, will help me to clearly form and articulate my personal theory and approach to counselling and benefit my therapeutic work with clients. I'm hopeful that this piece of work will highlight the significance of understanding the costs that come with our inherent need for attachment, the power of somatic work, and the need for self-compassion in guiding client's through their own ordinary yet extraordinary journeys.

Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey first published in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) is the thread that holds this document together. It connects my lived experience with the collective human experience. Campbell breaks down the hero's journey into three parts each with distinct stages. I will be using his framework as a way of understanding, holding and conceptualizing my journey. My hope is that in doing so, you the reader will come to understand your own journey in a framework that creates a container for your experience.

This autoethnography is split into three parts. Each part explores key aspects of Campbell's hero's journey within the scope of my experience and development. The first section looks at Campbell's concept of separation. I highlight the paradox of attachment theory and look deeply at the pain caused by separation from or denial of one's true self. My own journey will be used as the platform through which this topic will be addressed. The second section addresses the main components of Campbell's hero's journey: the call, the departure and the initiation. In addition it will demonstrate the power of somatic practices to bypass the mind and connect us with a direct experience of our inner wisdom. My experience with the powerful technology of Kundalini yoga will be discussed in this section. In the third section, we will examine the part of Campbell's journey commonly referred to as the return and how the practice of self-compassion is integral to re-incorporating ones self with acceptance. This paper concludes by looking at how all of this living and learning has impacted me as a counselor and how I will carry my new awareness into practice with my clients. Here, more specifically, we will look at how incorporating attachment theory, somatic practices and self compassion into the therapeutic setting can help to facilitate the process of awakening client's to their own deep wisdom and trust in themselves.

PART I:  
SEPARATION

### The Paradox of Attachment

We are each a unique expression of nature and her beauty. According to the yogic perspective of the east, we are each “born divine,” and have the ability at any moment, to awaken to our true potential (Cope, 2001). We come into being from a universal consciousness, a oneness, connected to the majesty that exists in everything. To embody this idea, one has just to hold a newborn child. As newborns, we just are. We inhale the world around us, and we receive the world completely through our senses. As newborns: we are, we see, we welcome, we connect, we allow ourselves to be nurtured, and we let go without restraint. We freely express ourselves when we need something. When our needs are not met, we do whatever we have to, to make sure that they are: we cry, we scream, we urinate, we defecate, we vomit and we tantrum. We make sure that we are seen, that we are heard and that we matter because our very survival depends on it.

We are born incredibly vulnerable to our environment and are completely dependent on the presence of a reliable adult for survival. These needs are not limited to food, water and shelter. Babies also require love, touch and connection and can fail to thrive or survive without them. In her early work, Mary Ainsworth demonstrated the power of a sensitive and attuned adult to create a secure base from which a child could go explore and experience the world and his/her working models of it. Her research supported the idea that children without this security were somehow relationally handicapped both with themselves and others (Bretherton, 1992). After all, it is the bond to the primary caregiver that sets the stage for all future relationships (Hammonds, 2012)

The research on attachment theory is prolific and has pervaded the field of psychology, touching children and adults alike in understanding brain function, development, mental, and emotional health, relationships, and addictions (Mate, 2010). The research suggests that our psycho-spiritual wellbeing as adults is deeply correlated with the presence of healthy attachment during childhood. What appears to be missing, from the research I have explored, is what we give up in order to secure attachment.

As newborns grow into toddlers and young children they are taught to look outside the self in order to know the self. In general, children are taught to distrust the inner knowing that comes from being connected to a deeper consciousness. Carl Jung refers to this process as object referral: a definition of the self through objects, which includes people, possessions, titles, situations and accomplishments (Chopra, 1996). According to Carl Rogers (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007), as we become conscious of the self as a separate entity, we develop a deep-seated desire for positive regard and love. Our separation from the whole, or the oneness, that connects us infuses us with fear and a deep need to be connected. Connection is our nature. We have just to look to nature to be reminded of this. “The ocean never ceases being ocean. The wave is absolutely, completely ocean-curved ocean. Nothing more. Nothing less” (Kober, May 5, 2013, para. 5). In other words, a wave is never just a wave, rather it is an expression of the ocean as a whole. As a separate self, children become so vulnerable to their environments that their value and sense of worth can become conditioned by the experience of others and the experience of their experience of us. This often overrides our intrinsic need to self-actualize, or to live our truth with authenticity (Rogers, 1959).

As children, most of us are taught to follow orders; whether we believe and trust in them is irrelevant. We are taught to conform, both in thinking and in our way of being. We are

taught to break things down, to see the world as a sum of its parts rather than as an entity unto itself. We are taught to see what's wrong with things (Kober, 2013). And after all this training, we are released into the world and told we must succeed in relationship, in career and in health. We set out in the world ill equipped; we were never taught to be present in the moment or to connect with our own truth, we were never taught that we were an expression of love. So we look outside and determine our value by comparing ourselves to each other, by judging each other, and by belittling one another. We buy in to a lesser version of ourselves, and make ourselves small, and hold others in restraints. As a society, we are more committed to disparaging ourselves, than we are to re-remembering that we are perfect and whole exactly as we are and that nothing is missing. We forget the abundance that surrounds us and lives inside of us.

All of this results in deep suffering because at our core we become disconnected from our true nature, and from the beauty that is our essential being (Cope, 2001). In other words, our instinct to attach ensures our survival. According to Mary Hammond's (2012) research, healthy attachment patterns in childhood can even help to mitigate mental health issues, like depression and anxiety later in life. All the while however, it leads us to abandon a huge part of who we are in order to ensure continued proximity, connection and positive regard from a significant other. Almaas (1996) suggests that this loss of connection from ourselves and our love of self is the greatest calamity we face. Eckhart Tolle suggests that a loss of connection to essence is, in fact, at the root of our primordial pain as human beings (Tolle, 2005). Gabor Mate suggests that when we lose connection with ourselves we create a gaping unbearable hole that we try to fill with anything and everything because the pain of separation exceeds our ability to cope (Mate, G. 2013).

I suggest that it is at the juncture of our attempts as children to secure attachment that we begin a most momentous journey designed to re-in-corporate that which we rejected about ourselves as children in order to secure love. The moment we deny an essential part of ourselves marks the beginning of a lifelong journey to recover the very piece we banished into the dark woods (Hollis, 2005). Our wholeness is dependent on our ability to embrace that which we have rejected and thrown into the shadows. Peace can and will only truly be ours when we re-incorporate our darkness it into our conscious awareness. According to Jung,

Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so that is continually subjected to modifications. But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected. (Jung, 1970, p. 131).

What we resist controls us. When we can surrender to our darkness we also open ourselves fully to our light. By accepting both polarities we can lean in, find the middle ground, and connect with all the other perfectly imperfect human beings that walk the planet with us.

This journey homeward can take many forms and can lead to many places, some beautiful, and some terrifying. It is often circuitous and the adventure of a lifetime. Either way, it appears that we are hard-wired not only to attach to another but also to eventually succeed at coming home to ourselves.

Joseph Campbell refers to this adventure of being fully alive, as the Hero's Journey. This initial rejection of self can be understood in Campbell's framework as the pain of separation. This pain is insidious because it often underlies the majority of our existence. As

will be illustrated by my experience, there is an inherent human tendency to build our working models of the world around the Hero's Journey framework. The false self that lives to meet others expectations take center stage (Hollis, 2005). This pattern of playing it safe, and wanting to fit in continues until ultimately, the desire to perpetuate the pattern dissipates; we hit a wall, and this safety measure no longer works.

### No More Diaper, No More Bottle, No More Baby

How does this early rejection of self, in favor of securing love play out on the stage of life? What does it actually look like? Too often we read things that make sense conceptually but are difficult to translate into an embodied experience or understanding. Here is the beginning of my story, as I understand it today.

From the moment I was conceived I was adored. My mother wanted nothing more from life than to have a child and I was her first. I have been told that we spent all of our time together connected, singing, dancing, reading and playing. She wanted for nothing because she had me, and I needed nothing because I had her. Her love breathed life into me. My father was trying to build a business and was rarely around, but we didn't seem to mind at the time because my mother and I had created our own little bubble.

When I was 18 months old, my mother was taken away from me. She was seven months pregnant and her placenta had folded. My little sister was not being fed and risked severe brain damage. She was placed on bed-rest in hospital, and when I was brought to her my behavior was agitated. My mother became depressed and did not want me to see her that way, and so for the next two months I was moved weekly between my maternal and paternal grandmothers, returning home to my father on the weekends.

My mother returned home from the hospital at 9 months pregnant, assured that my sister

was ok and would live. For the next month she gave me every ounce of love she had and I received her hungrily with an open heart and open arms. It seemed that everything was ok, and that somehow I had been untouched by the trauma of her departure. And then she left again, to deliver my sister. When she returned home to introduce us she was met with words that she has never forgotten; words that bring shivers to my spine when I hear them. At twenty-one and a half months I greeted my mother with the words, “No more bottle, no more diaper no more baby.” I had toilet trained myself, weaned myself from the bottle and was no longer sleeping in a crib. I was a big girl now and no one needed to worry about me needing anything. Needing wasn’t safe because what would happen if it disappeared again in an instant. If I held it together and I was capable maybe my father would love me enough to stick around and I could depend on his presence.

In the months that followed, my mother showered me with love and affection. Sadly, however, I had already disconnected from needing and had become self-reliant; my ‘play it safe’ pattern had taken root. At twenty-one and a half months old I interpreted needing as weak and un-loveable and put it into the shadows. I told myself that as long as I was strong, and capable, I would be worthy of love, and no one would ever abandon me. What my young self failed to see, or understand, was that I had abandoned myself.

### *Diary Entry 2 – The Pain of Separation*

*I find myself in the car driving aimlessly. I’m filled with angst and I don’t know what to do with it anymore. My body is screaming, my heart is aching and my soul feels like it is slowly dying. I want to run away, to be apart from myself, but there is no escape, I can’t run. Intuitively, I know that this is one of those moments in life where I have to sit with my pain. I’ve*

*been trying to out run it and it's catching up with me. I keep looking outside for answers, as if there is someone "out there;" a course an expert, some teaching that knows what I need deep in my bones, deep in my soul. And I keep coming back to me...and me hurts.*

*I look at my reflection in the rear view mirror and all I see are eyes that are flat and lifeless looking back at me. My face looks puffy and swollen. I feel like I have a peach pit sitting in my throat and the feeling makes me want to scream and cry. It fills me with anxiety. My heart is racing. I can't swallow my life anymore. I'm choking.*

*I pull over, exit the car and fall to my knees. I weep for what feels like an eternity and then I rise and begin what I know is going to be a long walk and dialogue in the forest.*

*"What is wrong with you," the judge inside asks? "You have everything you ever dreamed of. You are healthy, you are married and you have a beautiful home. You have two children and a third on the way. Suck it up. How incredibly spoiled you are, what more could you ask for?"*

*I know that it's all a lie. It's a sham, an illusion. It all looks pretty from the outside but it feels empty and barren. There is something lifeless about this 'perfect life.'*

*My body has been screaming for well over a decade. My throat and the area around my womb are blocked. I can feel it and people that work with energy can see it. And yet, do I get curious and ask what my beloved messenger is trying to share with me? No, I just try to fix it, quiet it, and mute its screams. I know intuitively that my body is begging to be heard and to be understood. My soul is trying to speak to me through my physical body. "I'm listening dammit." Just tell me what to do already, what am I not seeing?"*

*"Oh, I am so afraid to look. What if I come undone? What if it all comes crashing down on me?"*

*I hear my voice beginning to hush myself with the same shhhing sound I use to calm my kids. My body relaxes, my breathing deepens and my world as I have created it begins to come into focus before my eyes. The landscape isn't pretty or full of wonder like my current surroundings. It's built around a core wound with fear sitting in the very center. Memories of my life begin to flood my consciousness, as if my body, mind and soul were waiting for the invitation to be heard, and maybe even understood.*

### Separation: Sleep Walking, Living, And Half Alive

As I grew up, I took on the persona of the good-girl. I did everything I was supposed to, I worked hard, played nicely and took care of everybody. My self-worth and self-concept were directly tied to whether or not I believed I was liked and accepted, and no one had more power to credit or discredit me than my father. My behavior at this time was exemplary; I was striving to be more than just a good child. When I look back at videos of me from that time, I shudder. You can almost always hear me calling to my dad, "Look at me, look at me." I was desperate to be seen, and to be accepted, I was calling to everyone to acknowledge me. Thinking back, I ache for that little girl, as I can see my own soul calling on me to open my eyes to acknowledge, to attend, to care for and to accept myself.

Friendship was simple. I was the best friend anyone could ever have. I was always there to help, and the rock people leaned upon to prop themselves up. I had lots of people in my life and appeared to be very popular but was deeply disconnected from my own needs and feelings. I didn't allow myself to be really vulnerable and always felt like I was floating on the outside, never totally engaged, fully secure or whole.

My mom struggled with profound illness throughout my teenage years. I was incredibly sensitive to what was going on, I could feel her in my body. I took care of my sisters, and

helped care for my father. When it came time for me to leave to go to university, I decided instead to stay in Montreal and care for my family. I was the good girl, the one you could depend on to do all the right things. Looking back I actually wonder if I would have had an identity crisis if I had left. After all, my entire self-concept was built around ignoring my needs by pleasing, and caring for others.

My studies all led me toward the helping professions. I found myself drawn to disciplines where I could help people to come home to themselves. I didn't realize that somehow without knowing it, I was trying desperately to find the tools, and the know how to make my own way home.

When it came to creating a home I chose, all be it unconsciously, a man who was struggling with his own darkness. His challenges were louder and bigger than my own and so, my pattern of care giving could continue, as could my lifetime avoidance of attending to myself. We had three beautiful children, and I can still remember my first pregnancy and the incredible feeling of allowing myself to be nurtured and loved for the first time, after all, I needed to direct all the energy I could to my son, and it had to come thru me to get to him. About six months after my first child was born, I felt a very deep sense of melancholy. I sought out support and will never forget the words reflected back to me. "The feelings you are experiencing are too big to wrap your head around, because you are feeling the pain of every woman who has ever birthed a child. You are no longer the center of your own universe." The sad truth was that I hadn't been at the center of my universe since I was under twenty-one months old. This moment will forever remain etched in my consciousness because somehow I connected with the universality of human shared experience. I no longer felt alone. In some strange way I knew that the beating of my heart was connected to everyone else's, and that my

suffering was a shared experience. The burden no longer felt so heavy.

I loved my husband and my children but something deep inside of me began to stir. I felt trapped and weighted. My nature was so light and I was drowning in his pain and his darkness; crumbling under the pressure of everyone's needs. The sparkle in my eye, which was my beacon, became flat and lifeless. My body started to scream. I felt like I was being choked and I was convinced that I had a mass of some kind in my throat because my energy was so congested. Western medicine negated my experience. My training in Chinese medicine and my intuition told me something very different. I knew that if I didn't do something to shift my life that I was slowly going to die. My mother learned that lesson, wasn't that enough for the both of us. It was time for me to break a pattern, not repeat it.

PART II  
THE HERO'S JOURNEY

The Call to Adventure - Awake My Body - Awake My Soul

“I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the Astonishing  
Light of your own Being!”

(Hafiz from Goodreads)

Our bodies are incredibly wise and dependable. When we feel disconnected from our spirit, when our emotional landscape is raw, and defenses are down, the body and its physical form is always there to guide us gently (Cobb, 2008). The body speaks clearly, and with deep honesty, it does not pretend, convolute or confuse. While our minds and our egos are busy working to grow impressions of our own worthiness and disprove impressions of our worthlessness the body grows restless and unstable (Cope, 2001). It starts talking back quietly at first, and gently calls us to remember who we are meant to be in this world. If we do not stop and listen to our bodies’ wisdom, cries get louder and begin to shake the mental and emotional, physical and spiritual worlds, with deafening power (Kurtz, 1990). The body is our ally; it is a physical expression of our conscience. It calls us back to truth when we have gone astray, and demands that we honor its messages. It is our compass, and offers us all of the navigation tools we need to come home in the form of sensations.

Psychopathology can be understood as the body / mind / spirit’s revolt against the lies, the limiting beliefs, and the conditions that suffocate our essential nature. This is not that far off from Roger’s conception that the core of psychopathology lies in the incongruity between one’s concept of self and one’s full experience of self (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). The body’s natural tendency is always toward love, toward balance and optimal health. ‘Dis-ease,’ arises when we are out of alignment with our true nature. The body’s elegant intelligence manifests internal imbalance with symptoms; signals that beg us to pay attention and come

home to our essence. We are often so disconnected from ourselves that we respond to the warning much like we would if we turned the engine light off in the car. Turning the light off doesn't make the problem go away, it just gets buried deeper and we develop holding patterns in our bodies that block the natural flow of energy within us. Reich (1972) proposed that when these lived experiences become embodied, that we become both physically and psychologically armored to protect ourselves. The longer we ignore our bodies messages and accept the lies we tell ourselves (Thurman, 2003), the more we are reduced and diminished, the more embedded the beliefs become, and the thicker the armor gets. Our masks become our individual and collective identities. We posture, we pretend, we hide, and we become prisoners of our fears. We wonder why we don't feel seen, or heard. We wonder why we feel like we don't matter. Our bodies, minds and spirits carry the weight of negativity of scarcity of competition (Chopra, 1996) and we become prisoners within the confines of our physical bodies, living our lives constrained by the external voices we have empowered to define us.

### Awake My Soul

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom”

(Anais Nin from Goodreads)

It was a rainy, Tuesday night in November of 2011. I was exhausted, drained, wiped-out and lonely. My marriage was hitting rock bottom along with my husband's emotional state, and my three kids were sucking up every ounce of positive energy I had left in my reserves. I dragged myself kicking and screaming into a yoga studio hoping (and desperately needing) to find some peace and grounding inside my own body. I was so distracted that I walked into a class at the wrong studio and was bombarded with over one hundred people. I looked at my

watch to see if I could make it to the Hatha class I loved down the street and realized I was out of time. I felt uncomfortable, out of place and a little scared. What I didn't realize in that moment was that the class I was about to take was no ordinary yoga class. My life was about to be forever changed.

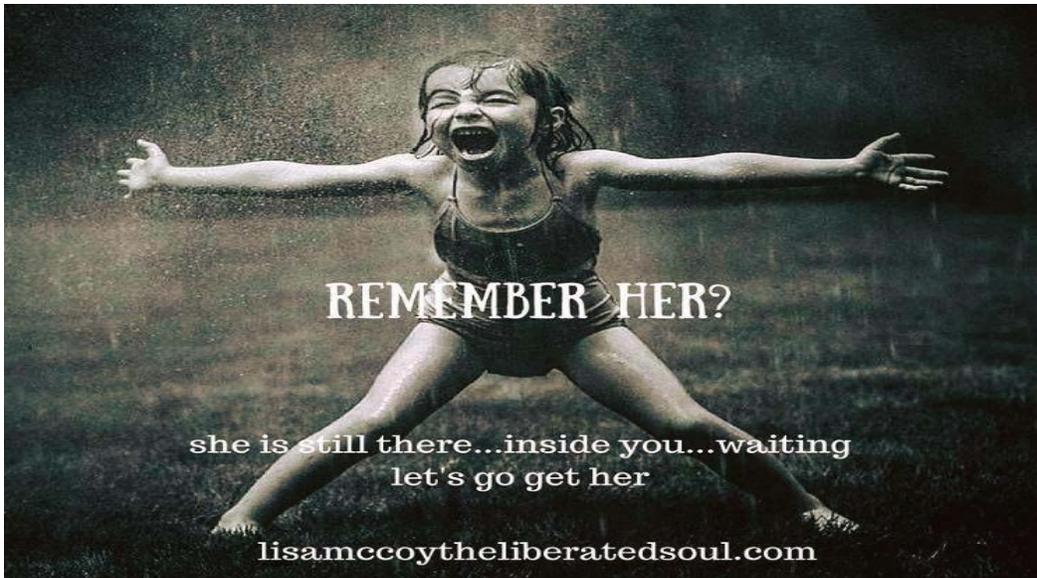
The teacher, Gloria, was the owner of Semperviva yoga studios, and the class was rooted in the Kundalini tradition. There were so many people in the room and every single one of them was smiling. The energy in the space was palpable and class hadn't even started. The teacher then asked us to rub our palms together, and inhale. Out of nowhere 100 people, in perfect tone, began to chant a mantra I had never heard before. My mind thought this whole thing was very odd and wanted to shut down the experience entirely. I could feel my mental resistance, and my judgment. At the same time my body was responding very differently. I could feel the resonance of the collective voice in my chest, and I liked what I felt, there was ease, an opening, and an invitation if you will. The teacher then took us through a number of exercises that combined breath work with chanting and movement. She played beautiful and soulful music throughout. I had never done a yoga class like this before. The combination of breath, mantra and movement, created a synergy in my body that was brand new to me, it felt like pure flow. Halfway through the class, the music changed abruptly. The soft voice of Snatam Kaur was replaced with Enrique Iglesias belting out his song, "I Like How It Feels." The whole room started to dance and the space filled with an energy that I can only equate to ecstasy. I started to move, I couldn't help it. I felt like the room was carrying me. I began to let go, and a smile filled my entire being. In that space, at that moment, I danced and I wept, as the little girl inside of me was shaken awake. The words of the song reverberated in my body as if they were speaking directly to me,

It's my time, it's my life, I can do what I like  
For the price of a smile, I got a ticket to ride  
So I keep living, 'cause it feels right  
And it's so nice, and I'd do it all again  
This time, it's forever, it gets better, and I, I, I like how it feels.  
(Iglesias, 2014, track 13).

As tears streamed down my face, I heard myself say, “Oh there you are.” In that moment I was unburdened, unscathed, untouched and perfect. I felt alive and awake and like all was right in the world. I had always dreamed of being able to dance with reckless abandon, and here I was in a room of 100 people living one of the most honest and raw moments of my life. It was as if I had just fully embraced my body my heart and my soul all at the same time. I felt at home in my body and I wanted more. Gloria unwittingly awoke my soul and in the words of Joseph Campbell called that me to adventure.

The first stage of the mythological journey – which we have designated the “call to adventure” – signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of society to a zone unknown (Campbell, 2008, p. 48).

I recently found this graphic that captures how I felt in the moment I experienced tapping into my true self (Hollis, 2008), after years of it lying dormant.



([lisamccoyletheliberatedsoul.com](http://lisamccoyletheliberatedsoul.com))

### Initiation - Follow, Charm, Bliss

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid forms...here he discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage (Campbell, 2008, p, 81).

And so began a beautiful, and painfully real journey home toward the center of me. I started going to Gloria's class five days a week. The movements unlocked the places in my body that were holding. With the physical release came an emotional release in the form of tears, anger, anxiety, depression, frustration and grief. My emotional landscape had changed. The canvas was transformed from shades of grey to the brightest and rawest hues of color. I felt everything and realized just how numbed out I had become to cope with a life that wasn't aligned or ok for me. I was fully alive and awake. No longer weighted by the waiting around for life to be different. Pounds of emotional weight began to fall off of me – I didn't need to hide behind them anymore because the pain was falling away.

I enrolled in teacher training at a studio dedicated to training Kundalini Research Institute certified Kundalini yoga teachers. I wanted to learn how to use this technology to help my clients unlock their own bodies so they could gain access to the well of wisdom that sat inside their hearts. I was inspired to guide people within themselves for the answers they were seeking, rather than look to some outside so called expert. Over the course of my studies, I learned that within each of us there sits a still quiet voice that knows exactly what we need in any given moment. All that is needed is to listen to the voice and frequency of our intuition, or the whisper of our soul. There are many ways to arrive at this place and for me Kundalini yoga was a most precious gift.

My practice gave me an embodied understanding of Yogi Bhjan's teachings. He was often heard saying, "Keep up and you will be kept up" (Bhajan, p.3). I learned that committing to show up for myself thru my practice everyday helped me to tap into and access a deep well of strength and power inside me. I learned to be disciplined and resilient in the face of resistance. I learned that grace manifests itself when we show up day after day to be with, listen to and honor our bodies. When we free the physical body we free the mind, and when we free the mind our soul has room to live its truth with ease. My own embodied experience of consistently working my body back into flow, created an opportunity, to access "deep wisdom, self-control, intuition and the use of the neutral mind" (Bhajan, p. 5).

It wasn't long after my foray into Kundalini yoga that I left my husband. It wasn't a decision or a choice but instead a deep knowing that came to me like a lighting bolt. I was walking over the Burrard Street Bridge and chanting. I stopped to admire the view and to breathe. A little voice inside my body spoke and said, "Enough, its time." I listened and took off my ring. With tears of relief I threw it into the ocean. It didn't hurt. I didn't suffer.

Looking back at that time I smile to myself, because it was the first time in my life that I put me first. I was living my mother's prayer, "Dear God, please allow me to be as selfish as I possibly can, so I can never blame another for that which I didn't do for myself." I was doing for me, honoring me, paying heed to my body.

My husband on the other hand fell apart. He was brought to his knees and shaken awake. He started exercising, reading, learning and exploring. He became healthier and more awake than I had ever known him and he wanted me back. He pursued me shamelessly and his zest for life and willingness to open and change eventually captured me.

### The Call Refused

Often in actual life we encounter the dull case of the call unanswered: for it is always possible to turn the ear to other interests. Refusal of the summons converts the adventure to its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless  
(Campbell, 2008, p. 49).

What I knew then, but couldn't admit to myself was that I was refusing the call to adventure and embracing the false promise of safety, security and love. The canvas of my life was to become gray again if only for a while. Things returned back to the status quo very quickly, as my husband fell back asleep once he was safe again in my arms. I slowly put back on the weight I had lost to protect and armor myself. My body grew very angry with me. I had defied her messages, and her trust. The constriction in my throat returned with a vengeance. I became irritable, and short tempered. I couldn't breathe and I pretended to not

know why. I felt trapped again, in the confines of my husband's darkness and the walls were caving in.

Not all who hesitate are lost. So it is that the predicament following an obstinate refusal of the call proves to be the occasion of a providential revelation of some unsuspected principle of release (Campbell, 2008, p.53)

“Our intrinsic tendency to know ourselves as divine will not be tempered” (M.T. Kelly, 2013). At any time in our lives, when the dissonance between our inherent potential and who we are being in the world is big enough, we break down because of a deep seeded need to break open. “Our soul's purpose will come knocking on our door—insisting on genuine prosperity, relationships and joyful wellbeing, and will turn our lives upside down in order to achieve it” (M.T. Kelly, 2013). And that is exactly what happened.

For a seed to achieve its greatest expression it must come completely undone.

The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would like complete destruction.

(Cynthia Occeci, from Goodreads).

### *Diary Entry 3 – Apotheosis - She Came Undone to Finally Come Together*

*On September 1<sup>st</sup> of 2014, I took my husband to a clinic in Whistler in search of medication for a terrible migraine. We left the clinic in an ambulance headed for VGH a few hours later. Within two days, my husband and the father of my three children was rolled in for surgery for a massive, grapefruit sized, brain tumor. I was alone with him, our family was on the east coast and our friends were helping to care for our kids. I rolled him into the operating room, scared, raw and afraid. I kissed him goodbye and as the doors closed, I heard myself*

*whisper, “Is this finally my way out?” Hearing my own voice, I gasped and held my breath for what felt like an eternity. I fell to my knees as tears streamed down my face and pooled on the floor. I knew there was no going back from this moment, no amount of rationalizing or pretending, could ever have me deny my truth again. It was like being hit in the head with a sledgehammer. My marriage was over, and I Jacqueline Wener, the consummate ‘people pleaser’ was to become the bitch that left her husband with a brain tumor.*

*He recovered from surgery beautifully and I nursed him back to health, knowing deep within my being that it was only a matter of time before he would notice that I was no longer there. Within the month and with little warning, his health started to decline. An infection was found, and he began having seizures. He came out of his second surgery with a loss of mobility and feeling in his left hand and arm. His lip drooped, and his speech was affected. He was decimated and entered a very dark depression. One day, I brought lunch up to our bedroom, a space I no longer wanted to occupy as the heaviness and darkness of his experience was so thick and palpable that I couldn’t breathe inside. He asked me directly, “Where is my wife? I have a nurse and a caregiver, but where is the woman who truly loves me?”*

*I sat on the bed with him, and with tears rolling down my face I told him the truth, that I had checked out long before, and that he had a friend who would see him thru all of this but that our marriage was over. As I sat and talked to him, I watched his heart break. His emotions were so raw, his tears and anger so real. I sat there present, witnessing all of it but somehow detached from his suffering. I had spoken a truth that was so real and so raw; a truth I knew would hurt him, but deep inside I also knew it would finally free me. In that moment, I just let go, and I trusted my inner wisdom to guide me. I knew in my heart that everything would eventually be ok, no matter what.*

## She Let Go

She let go. Without a thought or a word, she let go.

She let go of the fear. She let go of the judgments. She let go of the confluence of opinions swarming around her head. She let go of the committee of indecision within her. She let go of all the 'right' reasons. Wholly and completely, without hesitation or worry, she just let go.

She didn't ask anyone for advice. She didn't read a book on how to let go. She didn't search the scriptures. She just let go. She let go of all of the memories that held her back. She let go of all of the anxiety that kept her from moving forward. She let go of the planning and all of the calculations about how to do it just right.

She didn't promise to let go. She didn't journal about it. She didn't write the projected date in her Day-Timer. She made no public announcement and put no ad in the paper. She didn't check the weather report or read her daily horoscope. She just let go.

She didn't analyze whether she should let go. She didn't call her friends to discuss the matter. She didn't do a five-step Spiritual Mind Treatment. She didn't call the prayer line. She didn't utter one word. She just let go. No one was around when it happened. There was no applause or congratulations. No one thanked her or praised her. No one noticed a thing. Like a leaf falling from a tree, she just let go.

There was no effort. There was no struggle. It wasn't good and it wasn't bad. It was what it was, and it is just that.

In the space of letting go, she let it all be. A small smile came over her face. A light breeze blew through her. And the sun and the moon shone forevermore

(Reverend Safire Rose, from Elephant Journal).

Life became very difficult for us. I did the best I could to shelter our children from the intensity of it all and to just meet them with love. I succeeded most of the time, but was a colossal failure at others. The warrior in me grew very strong as the judgments of others flew at me like bullets in a firing squad. Every time I wanted to fall apart or break down a still quiet voice would whisper to me, *'Keep your head up and you will be kept up, grace doesn't always look elegant.'* I paid heed to the wise voice and surrendered to it. Everything that I had learned over the last few years felt like divine intervention, like somehow the universe was preparing me to "stand in the center of the fire and not shrink back" (Oriah Mountain Dreamer, 2000). My practice and its teachings had afforded me the tools I needed to be disciplined, committed and to make my way through this incredibly challenging experience. I had arrived. I heard the call. I honored myself. I made very difficult decisions. I broke old patterns. I was free, so why couldn't I breathe? What I wasn't yet able to see or grasp was that the warrior had found her place on the grand stage of this journey for her last hurrah. She had fought hard to survive, to hold it all together, and to make it look just right for her kids and the world around her. She was admired for her strength and her ability to be super woman. Even her father acknowledged her unrelenting capacity. After all, she was as capable as they come, no one could have carried her family thru the trials and tribulations they had faced with more honor or fortitude than she had. And yet, deep within my body a level of unrest was gnawing at me. What I couldn't yet digest was that to truly find my way home, I would need to soften, let the warrior go and melt

into myself with gentleness, with love and compassion. My journey homeward wasn't over, but had only really just begun.

PART III  
THE RETURN

## The Return to Love

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

(Eliot, T.S., 1942).

Now that all that all the upheaval in my life had quieted and the dust began to settle, I began to feel. My lifetime coping mechanism of numbing was revealing itself to me as the giant iceberg began to thaw and feelings flooded my body. I woke up in the middle of the night filled with terror as I heard myself say, “Oh my God it’s coming, everyone said it would, and yet somehow I figured I was better than this. Oh My God, its happening, I’m going to have a nervous breakdown, oh no, everything is going to fall apart.” I could hear my heart racing, and feel my face getting hot and my palms sweating. I was scared, really scared, and then reality hit. “You are alone,” I heard myself say, “And you are responsible for three kids, you don’t have the luxury of a nervous breakdown.” The quiet voice inside my heart, the one beneath the panic, spoke gently and said, “It’s time to get some help honey, you can’t do this alone.”

I found myself a therapist, a necessity, that at the time I could only see as an indulgence. I was drawn to her because she had lived thru similar experiences to mine and because she was deeply connected in her work and her person to Eastern philosophies. She invited all of me into the room with her gentleness and like magic ALL of me began to thaw into what seemed like an endless puddle of tears. She accepted me, and met my self-judgments with compassion, which seemed to both validate them and disempower them at the same time. Her presence and her words softened something in me. She held my hand as I stumbled down a path she knew in the recesses of her own soul. She championed me as I took risks and gave me her hand when I fell

down. She read me poetry that felt like it was written just for me. John O' Donohue's words still whisper in my ears as I think back on the time I spent with her.

Awaken to the mystery of being here □ and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

Receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon.

Respond to the call of your gift and the courage to □ follow its path.

Let the flame of anger free you of all falsity.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.

May anxiety never linger about you.

May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of □ soul.

Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek □ no attention.

Be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven □ around the heart of wonder.

(For Presence □ O'Donohue, John, 2008).

My therapist gave me hope. As I sit here and I take in my own writing, I'm struck by the impression she left on me. She did very little, said very little really, and yet her presence, seemed to be giving me permission, to come into my own being. In her presence, I could feel myself sinking fully into my body. I felt things I didn't like. I felt weak and needy, I felt scared and lost. The people-pleasing identity that I had always depended on like a compass, had been traded in, but I didn't know what for yet. The bow I had always used to wrap my experience up perfectly was lost forever as my masks of protection fell away. She beckoned

me to be gentle with myself, and to receive all of me with love. She tried to teach me about self-compassion, sharing the work of her teacher Pema Chodron with me. And this is where we hit what I like to refer to now as the proverbial brick wall. No matter what she said, my mind could not integrate the words self and compassion together and believe me, she tried.

Interestingly, so had three other teachers of mine throughout the years, but they were also met with a brick wall or what I have come to understand now as my little iceberg, and blind-spot. I stopped seeing her, having gone as far as I was able to at the time. In Campbell's hero's journey, this time in my life could be understood as the refusal to return. I didn't know how to own the learning, or the wisdom that was meant to become the very fabric of my offering to the world. I was incredibly grateful to my therapist for what I had learned and was awakened to both my confusion and intrigue on the subject of self-compassion.

My natural inclination was to study the topic, but not for me of course. I immersed myself in researching self-compassion to help benefit my clients and my students. I knew somehow that this work was deeply important for healing and growth to occur. I just wasn't quite ready to own it as my own. As I studied the work of Neff, Germer, Chodron and Chopra and shared it with my clients, my students and my friends, I watched beautiful transformations unfold before my eyes. It became so clear to me through witnessing these openings, how hungry we all are to be whole. The parts of ourselves that we relegated to the shadows for the purposes of self-preservation as young children are the very parts of ourselves that are longing so deeply for acceptance. As I created space for those around me to meet their core wounding with tenderness and fierce gentleness, masks began to fall away as truth began to show itself. The most sacred of spaces were created; spaces where people were meeting themselves with love and acceptance. The teachers in my clients, my students and my friends began to awaken

to their own deepest wisdom as darkness was transformed into light. I was mesmerized, and humbled bearing witness to the beauty that was rising out of the ashes of pain. We often teach what we most need to learn; what we are hungry for, this was no exception. Self-compassion was something I had been starving for. I masked it beautifully to most, even to myself. My teachers always knew better, but it was my own my own students growth that called me home one day.

*Diary Entry 4 – Compassionate Awakening – Re-incorporation*

*I sit down at my big table to write a little. I have a client coming in 45 minutes and want to make use of every moment I can to get this thesis done. I can't focus, the fullness and constriction in my neck feels unbearable. I've been up every night for the last few weeks, at 2:30 am, plagued with anxiety. I'm not naturally an anxious person, but then again no one really is.*

*The experience of being in my body has been so unpleasant, that I want to exorcise it from the very fabric of my very being. A wise whisper inside reminds that the only way out is through, and that this is exactly where I need to be. All of my vices seem to have melted away. I'm not over-eating, drinking, smoking or staying up late and watching TV. I'm not gossiping or consorting with my friends, or wasting time on my I-phone. I'm getting out of bed every night and using my practice to move this thru my body. Hours of yoga and meditating and I'm still here. It seems there is no escaping this feeling. My body is screaming. I wrap a scarf around my neck; I don't want to be exposed. I don't want anyone to see what I don't yet understand. I feel tears begin to well up in my eyes. I stiffen, "No" I tell myself, "This isn't the time. You need to get your thesis done. Enough already, Jacqueline get it together." One of my best friend's calls and I answer knowing that I can't mask my state of desperation. Her*

*words meet my heart like subtle alchemy, so simple and yet so incredibly profound. She says, “You are pure grace, my friend. As you sit there in pieces, coming apart at the seams, all I see is your light.” I scoff and tell her that all I see is a puddle of tears. “My sweet beautiful friend,” she said, “Grace isn’t always elegant. It shines when we are real, and my dear in this moment, you are as real as day.” Her words will forever be etched in my heart-mind, for they transcended the human plain and spoke directly to my soul.*

*I take what feels like the deepest breath I have ever breathed, and the wise whisper grabs hold of my attention once again. The judge is quieted, my chest softens, tears begin to flow, and I am brought to my knees. I sob uncontrollably and notice that I have wrapped my arms around myself each hand tenderly holding the opposite shoulder and I rock myself as I cry. I hear all of my studying and teaching come back to me, but this time, it’s not about discipline, commitment or grit. I’m parenting myself, holding myself steady and creating a container for feelings that would have completely uprooted me at another time. I hear my own adaptation of Kristen Neff’s (2011, p. 119) words:*

- 1- Oh, Jacqueline, this is a moment of deep suffering*
- 2- You are not alone honey. Suffering is a part of every person’s journey*
- 3- Be gentle with yourself in this moment, its ok to crumble.*
- 4- Meet yourself with all the love and compassion you so freely give away. Heal, heal, heal.*

*I rock myself on the floor. I know that I am cracking open. It feels good to let go, to breathe, and to trust that somehow this is exactly where I am meant to be right now. My body has finally spoken so loudly and so clearly, that the very foundation of my armoring is shaken. The armor falls to the floor and shatters like glass refracting in the light. “I’m listening,” I hear*

*myself say. “Shhhhhhhh I’ve got you, your ok, just cry, let it go.” I rock on the floor for a few minutes, meeting myself exactly where I am. The pain passes like a wave. I feel peaceful and grounded, empty and yet somehow whole, as if for the first time. I know I have just done something huge at a cellular level and yet so very subtle that no one on the outside would ever know that on the inside I had been completely transformed.*

### Self -Compassion: The Elixir

“And I said to my body. Softly. ‘I want to be your friend.’ It took a long breath.

And replied, ‘I have been waiting my whole life for this.’”

(Nayyirah Waheed from Goodreads)

From this moment forward self-compassion became a daily practice. I didn’t try it on, make an effort or will myself to do it, it just happened. I had worked hard at cultivating my witness consciousness throughout the years and my observer had grown very strong. I started meeting myself with understanding and love, instead of judgment and self-criticism. Neff refers to this as self-kindness and identifies it as the first component of her model of self-compassion (Neff, 2011). I stopped needing to have it all together and started to express how I really felt for the first time. It seemed I was in deep conversation with myself everyday, and the more I deepened my own conversation the more deeply I connected and accepted those around me. Part of Neff’s model of self-compassion requires that we recognize our common humanity (Neff, 2011). What she means by this is that suffering is universal and that rather than having it separate us from each other and breed shame, we can use it to connect and engage one another with empathy. It seems that part of our need for independence exists so that we can hide our suffering from ourselves and from each other. Interestingly, when we meet all parts of ourselves with gentleness we invite everyone’s pain into the room to be transformed. Marianne

Williamson in her book, *A Return to Love*, speaks to this beautifully, “And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear our presence automatically liberates others” (Williamson, 1992). Self-compassion serves as an invitation that grows authentic, heart-centered community. Mindfulness is an essential part of this type of community and happens to be the final component of Neff’s model. With mindfulness, we come alongside what is, and allow what shows up to be, without trying to hide or fix it. We simply allow, and in our allowing we create space for all of us to exist. Rumi’s poem *The Guest House* speaks to this idea beautifully,

This being human is a guest house. □

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, □ some momentary awareness comes □ as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all! □

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, □ who violently sweep your house □ empty of its furniture, □ still, treat each guest honorably. □

He may be clearing you out □ for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice. Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent □ as a guide from beyond.

(Jalāl, -D. R., & Barks, C., 1997).

This poem reminds us that there is no one part of ourselves that is any more welcome or valuable than any other. Self-compassion reminds us to greet each other and ourselves with unconditional love. In doing so, we quiet our threat - defense system and awaken our caregiving system, growing feelings of safety, peace and love (Neff 2011).

Research suggests that self-compassion breeds resiliency, motivation and overall feelings of wellbeing (Neff 2011). My own experience supports researchers findings. I also found that the more I practiced being compassionate with myself, the more nourished I felt, and the more able I was to take responsibility for what I needed and the way I met myself and the world. The blame game lost its power, and true personal ownership became possible. I could finally look in the mirror without shrinking back, because I accepted me, all of me or at least I was on the path to doing just that. I had found the elixir that I needed to finally come home to myself and with it I had found a path for serving my community.

When the HERO-QUEST has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds (Campbell, 2008, p. 167).

*Diary Entry 5 – Homecoming*

*It's September 2015, and just over a year since my life got turned inside out. I am sitting in my living room in Whistler, receiving words, love and care from sixteen of the most incredible women I have ever known. My father is also present. He wanted so badly to be a part of my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday weekend that he somehow inserted himself amongst a room full of*

women. We are sitting in a circle and I am presented with a box filled with gifts from the heart; letters, poems, photos and quotes from those present and those too far away to come in person. I am asked to read each letter, each poem and look through each album. As I completely take in what is presented to me, I am humbled and overwhelmed. Tears roll down my face as I look into the eyes of the people who have seen me through the dark woods and have welcomed me home. I have been broken and bruised, my masks have been peeled away, and my world has come completely apart. And yet, here I sit surrounded with love, healed and transformed. Everything is the same but it all looks completely different. My purpose is clear. I'm here, fully alive and awake connected and a part of a web that is so much bigger than me alone. My village...

I smile to myself and to the universe as I look into my father's eyes brimming with tears. How beautiful and perfect, that the man I thought I needed so badly to love, me to affirm me, and to make me feel worthy could bear witness to my own homecoming.

PART IV  
PRACTICAL  
APPLICATION

### Process is the Gift

I left my husband just over two years ago, and have been in the process of writing and living this autoethnography for almost as long. This process has been a gift. It has given me the ability to truly reflect on my experience and in so doing has awakened the witness in me. I have been able to completely immerse myself in my journey and be an observer of it simultaneously. I have been a student of my experience and at the same time I have become a teacher through it. The process of writing has transformed me. I have broken open. What you have read is the whole-hearted telling of who I am. According to Dr. Brene Brown (2010), this “whole-hearted” telling is the original definition of the word courage when it first came to the English language. As I said at the beginning, my story is both very ordinary and extraordinary. It reflects my own unique experiences but connects me with all the other “whole-hearted” heroes who have ever lived throughout time. These are people according to Brown (2010) who have the courage to be imperfect, and to live with self-compassion. People who are willing to let go of who they are supposed to be, to be who they are and connect authentically from that place. These people are raw, real and vulnerable. These people are my people. My journey has brought me back to my village and according to Campbell’s monomyth, my responsibility at this stage of the journey, is to share my learning so as to renew, reinvigorate and inspire my community (Campbell, 2008).

This is not the end of my story, but just a beginning. I have been playing with the lessons I have learned, and transforming them into practices that I can share. I am a beginner, and by no means do I have all the answers. My lived experiences have given me some insights, and I know I was meant to live them, to breathe them and to share them as part of my story and

my offering. This journey of being human is a dance. In the dance there is no separation, no polarity just flow and constant movement. In the dance, we move together, we respond to each other and adjust to each other's rhythm. The dance is ever-changing, there is nowhere to get to, no perfect move, no arriving, and no ultimate knowing. When one of us shifts even slightly, everything around us shifts as well. One perspective opens and the whole world reverberates. Life is a beautiful dance and when we engage whole-heartedly and respond to it with flexibility and fluidity our journey leads us home, even if the path is somewhat circuitous. This poem illustrates this beautifully.

I asked for Strength...

And God gave me difficulties to make me strong.

I asked for Wisdom...

And God gave me problems to solve.

I asked for prosperity...

And God gave me a brain and brawn to work.

I asked for Courage...

And God gave me obstacles to overcome.

I asked for Love...

And God gave me troubled people to help.

I asked for Favors...

And God gave me opportunities.

I received nothing I wanted...

But I received everything I needed

(Author unknown, Gurmukh, 2000, p. xxxix)

Some of the fruits of my journey as I understand them today include: the power of presence, the power of the body and somatic practice to calm the mind and awaken the wisdom inherent in all of us, and the importance of cultivating self-compassion. In the following pages I explore how each of these learning are applied to my therapeutic practice.

### The Power of Presence

As a therapist and a teacher, I feel a responsibility to show up completely and to tap into my own raw beauty with love, compassion, vulnerability and courage. In doing so, my presence can serve my clients and students as a gentle whisper, to step in to their own grace with loving-kindness. My role is not to push, to coax or to grasp, but rather to create a space of acceptance and belonging; a space that invites the whole person in front of me to emerge into being. When they arrive in the room, I greet them with acknowledgement, attention, affection and acceptance, my teacher Michael Talbot Kelly refers to this as the I See You Principle (M.Talbot Kelly, personal communication, March 2015) I validate all of them, especially the parts they have spent a lifetime hiding from. I listen deeply for the parts of them that have been relegated to the shadows and offer my hand to dance them back into the light. When we show up in our vulnerability, and are met with warmth and acceptance rather than judgment, there is little room for shame. We all have wounds, we all have armor, and we are all hiding in some way. I will often use self- disclosure here, and share the parts of me I spent a lifetime rejecting, parts of me like needing. Brene Brown (2010) taught me that the words “me too” are the most potent way to quiet shame and even the playing field in this journey of being human. We are afraid that being seen means being rejected, after all that is what we did to ourselves at a very young age. The truth however is that we are all dying to be seen, to be accepted and to be loved for exactly who we are. I think back to myself as a little girl, screaming to my daddy “look at

me, look at me.” In the words of Irish philosopher George Berkley “esse est percepi,” translated by James Hillman into, “to be seen is to become” (Hillman, 1997). What bigger gift can we give to another human being than to invite them into their wholeness, to accept them exactly as they are, and to reflect back to them their inherent beauty through eyes that really see them? The child no longer has to reject herself to be loved, but rather, learns through another that she is loveable exactly as she is. The trust that is required for, and forms through these interactions is incredible. While it looks on the outside like a bond is developing between a therapist and a client or a teacher and a student, the more essential bond is developing beneath the surface; a reintegration with one’s authentic nature or true-self.

### The Power of the Body

As people begin to explore their wounds, the emotions that surface can sometimes be overwhelming. Making sense of these feelings through talk-therapy or with the mind alone can be difficult. The body carries all of our unprocessed emotions in the form of tension and disease. Unlike the mind, the body isn’t full of story, just energy longing to be unleashed and brought back into flow. For this reason, I find that mindfulness practices like conscious breathing and body scanning, as well as somatic practices like Kundalini yoga, dancing and shaking are effective techniques for freeing the body.

In both my own practice and in my work with clients and students I begin with a few minutes of conscious breathing. I have found that doing so, brings a person into their body, calms them and gives them access to the information the body is longing to communicate.

Eckhart Tolle (2005) says,

Being aware of your breath forces you into the present moment - the key to all inner transformation. Whenever you are conscious of the breath, you are absolutely present.

You may also notice that you cannot think and be aware of your breathing. Conscious breathing stops your mind (p. 244).

I will usually follow a breathing exercise by guiding clients or students through a body scan. As I take them through various parts of the body I ask them to stop where they notice discomfort and simply bring their awareness to that area. I encourage them to be with, and allow what they are feeling rather than trying to hide or change it or fix it. I remind them that their bodies are wise and are simply communicating what is working for them and what isn't. In one on one session I might ask the client to speak from the sensation, to describe it and to bring it into the room. In this way, I work with clients to access the body's wisdom, reminding them that they are the experts of their own experience and that the answers lie inside. Sharon Salzberg speaks to this experience so eloquently:

Because the development of inner calm & energy happens completely within & isn't dependent on another person or a particular situation, we begin to feel a resourcefulness and independence that is quite beautiful—and a huge relief.

(Salzberg, 2010)

As a Kundalini yoga student I have had the privilege of feeling the power of my own body. I have used my body to release and unleash emotional tension that has been held deep within it and is no longer needed. Armor that once served a purpose to protect me has fallen away as I have become more and more willing to be unmasked and vulnerable.

As a Kundalini yoga teacher I have been graced with the opportunity to witness some of the most raw and beautiful moments in my life. I often invite students in class to shake, to dance and to let go of everything that stands in the way of them being who they are. As the music plays and the room begins to vibrate something magical happens. The deeper people

seem to go inside the more the room comes together. Tears well up, shouts form, sweat flies, the floor shakes, and each unique and beautiful being begins or continues their process of freeing themselves. There is nothing more humbling or beautiful than watching a young woman let go of all social constraints as she shakes her body free, or bearing witness to an elderly woman give herself permission to tap into her sensuality and move like a young maiden. I often sit in the front of the room and cry as I watch the raw beauty of humanity awakening before my eyes. This poem by Jewel Mathieson is the most raw and honest expression of the power of movement that I have ever read and it is the gift that I bear witness to when I teach.

We have come to be danced

Not the pretty dance

Not the pretty, pretty, pick me, pick me dance

But the claw our way back into the belly

Of the sacred, sensual animal dance

The unhinged, unplugged, cat is out of its box dance

The holding the precious moment in the palms

Of our hands and feet dance.

We have come to be danced

Not the jiffy booby, shake your booty for him dance

But the wring the sadness from our skin dance

The blow the chip off our shoulder dance.

The slap the apology from our posture dance.

We have come to be danced

Not the monkey see, monkey do dance  
One two dance like you  
One two three, dance like me dance  
but the grave robber, tomb stalker  
Tearing scabs and scars open dance  
The rub the rhythm raw against our soul dance.

We have come to be danced  
Not the nice, invisible, self-conscious shuffle  
But the matted hair flying, voodoo mama  
Shaman shakin' ancient bones dance  
The strip us from our casings, return our wings  
Sharpen our claws and tongues dance  
The shed dead cells and slip into  
The luminous skin of love dance.

We have come to be danced  
Not the hold our breath and wallow in the shallow end of the floor dance  
But the meeting of the trinity, the body breath and beat dance  
The shout hallelujah from the top of our thighs dance  
The mother may I?  
Yes you may take 10 giant leaps dance  
The olly olly oxen free free free dance

The everyone can come to our heaven dance.

We have come to be danced

Where the kingdoms collide

In the cathedral of flesh

To burn back into the light

To unravel, to play, to fly, to pray

To root in skin sanctuary

We have come to be danced

We have come (Mathieson, J., from Awakening Women).

### Self-Compassion

The power of presence and of somatic practices, serve to awaken us to our pain. The masks come off, and our vulnerability is unveiled. We learn to sit with and breathe with what is. We give room to it, allow it, lean into it and as we do we surrender and in so doing we let it go. Emotions are never meant to take up residence in our bodies. Rather, they are meant to flow through us, not define us. In this state of vulnerability, I have found that cultivating self-compassion is essential for healing to take place. For us to be able to draw that which we have relegated into the shadows back into the light we have to meet ourselves with intense gentleness. We must play the role of the compassionate parent to ourselves in order to heal the child inside. Imagine if every time we felt emotional or physical pain of any kind we put our hands on our hearts and met ourselves with these words, “Oh sweetheart in this moment you are suffering. You are not alone. I am right here, and so are all the other people who are struggling

too. Breathe, trust, surrender and remember to be kind to yourself in this moment.” These are some of the pieces of that Neff addresses in her book *The Model of Self-Compassion* (2011). These words have the power to transform our self-loathing into love. I have experienced it personally and have watched countless clients and students melt into their own hands as they receive themselves. This practice is so simple yet its impact is transformative. It has the power to take us from a place of separateness and isolation, which if you remember is where we started in Campbell’s journey, and return us home to our own divinity, to truth, to love.

*Diary Entry 6 – Re-Incorporation – The Offering*

*“I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not a person, I am not myself, I am a teacher.” “I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not a person, I am not myself, I am a teacher.” “I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not a person, I am not myself, I am a teacher.” I hear myself repeating the teacher’s creed handed down to us by Yogi Bhajan (Bhajan, 2007, p. 266), over and again, as I frantically try to find a way to ground myself. “It’s not working, what I am I going to do? I have to teach a yoga class in thirty minutes and over 25 people are depending on me to show up, and I mean **really** show up. How am I supposed to hold space with grace when I feel lost, helpless and frightened? What a sick joke this is. I can’t do this. My world is crumbling, I need a teacher I hear myself scream, I need a container, someone to hold me and make this all better. I have nothing to teach right now, nothing to offer, I’m empty. God please help me. I’m a mother and I can’t even protect my own child...how on earth am I supposed to give my students what they need? I pull into the studio shaking, with swollen and red eyes, evidence of a sleepless, tear-filled night. I try to gather myself but I am not able to.*

*The room is full, it's time to begin. I see my reflection in the mirror and my pain is crystal clear, no pretending this one away, especially not to this group. I take us through a breathing exercise called Sitali pranayama. I do it for me, under the guise of a warm-up, to reduce the level of panic in my body. The breath barely touches my emotional state. "I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not a person, I am not myself, I am a teacher." I try the teacher's creed one more time, but nothing changes. I have been taught to keep me out of my teachings, to be a vessel for divine wisdom, and to step out of the way. I take a deep breath, and ask everyone to open their eyes. No hiding for me, not today. I'm afraid. They are all about to see the most vulnerable me.*

*I sit in front of my students with tears streaming down my face. A voice from deep inside me begins to speak. "I have been repeating the creed Yogi Bhajan gave to us as teacher's to root us and ground us in the wisdom of the golden chain. But as I hear myself repeating these words, I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not a person, I am not myself, I am a teacher, all I can think to myself is what a bunch of bullshit. I am a woman, and last night I kicked my partner out of our home because his presence was triggering major trauma for my oldest son. I am a woman and my son's mental health is decompensating. I had to call the police on my ten year-old boy, because he became violent in response to his highly anxious state, and I needed him to know that violence wasn't the way. I am a woman, my heart is raw, and my whole life feels like a hot mess in this moment. And while I know, deep in my soul, that all is exactly as it is meant to be, I hurt, I'm afraid and I need support. I am a woman and today I think I am here to tell you that its ok to be where you are, to feel what you feel and to honor whatever is true for you in this moment. All of me is right here with you, and I invite all of you, your beauty, your pain, your successes and your disappointments, into the room today. I know that if we can*

*come together and hold space for one another to be exactly who we are, and where we are in this very moment then together we will create transform darkness into light.*

*My heart is racing, my voice sounds very familiar, but she is not all of me, because I am present witnessing her. She's brave and bold and totally and completely human. I am in awe watching her, aware that so many masks, so many layers have been released for her to speak the way she does. She has the courage to tell the story of her heart, to speak her truth. She is vulnerable and sounds so incredibly compassionate with herself.*

*Wow, I think to myself you have really grown. The lessons you have been sharing all these years with your clients and students along with the experiences you have weathered have transformed you. You've been teaching what you have most needed to learn and life has finally thrown you enough of a curve ball to crack you open to your own teachings. Now, my darling, live these teachings, breathe them and surrender. Remember your promise to lovingly and compassionately invite the darkness into the light. Radiate from your heart dear one and bring love to this world. Jai Jagdeesh's words play in the background, and even in the midst of chaos I know everything is perfect exactly as it is.*

Know you are loved

Rest in peace

Dream your sweet dreams

'Til your soul is released

Beloved Child

My heart is yours

Beloved Child

Go out and open doors

With your love

With your faith

With your compassion

With your grace

Oh, with your grace

Beloved Child

You are the light of the world

Beloved Child

Go out, spread light to the world

Be strong, be kind, be brave

Know your mind

know that you're are divine

Know that it's alright to be afraid. (In Dreams, Jagdeesh, 2013, track 8)

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