

PAIN AND ALONENESS

by Donna Martin

... from Abuse and Abandonment

Through Pain and Aloneness

To Joy and Intimacy

Into Wholeness...

Loneliness is what we call aloneness when it doesn't feel good, when we suffer in it.

Pain is what we call sensation when it doesn't feel good, when we suffer in it.

The "up" side of aloneness, or solitude, feels good. Instead of the emptiness of loneliness, in solitude we feel fulfilled. Instead of isolated, we feel connected with self. In loneliness we question our existence. In solitude, we can just be.

When we're lonely, it is said, we are in bad company. In solitude, the company is fine. Being alone and enjoying it is nearly a lost art in our culture. In *Tantra for the West*, Marcus Allen writes, "To be alone is to tune into the sacred being of yourself."

The "up" side of sensation is aliveness. We feel connected with life. It is sensory, sensuous, sensual experiencing of Life. We know we exist.

To be in pain and not judge it or resist it is almost unknown in our culture. The focus of modern medicine has been to eliminate pain, and as a result, it has created unnecessary suffering.

The well-intentioned desire on the part of doctors, for example, to eliminate the pain of childbirth, has resulted in a whole generation that was born drugged... a drug generation that continues to medicate itself into an addictive haze.

We have drugs, mostly legal, that perpetuate the numbness. We have drugs, mostly illegal, that attempt to lift us out of the haze to re-experience the magical wonder of life... the wonder that is around us all the time.

Pain is a great teacher. It lets us know our limits and boundaries. It reminds us of our vulnerability.

Pain makes us feel exposed. Loneliness makes us feel invisible.

In loneliness, we question our existence, our humanity. There are no boundaries in extreme aloneness... and the insecurity of that becomes terrifying. The shift from the suffering of loneliness to the joy of aloneness comes with the rediscovery of who we are, our boundaries, our Self. Loneliness is a lack of connectedness and is transcended through reconnecting with our Self.

The shift from the suffering of pain to the joy of aliveness comes through a letting go of the resistance, an acceptance of and expansion into Life, a movement beyond our limits, a kind of surrender.

Holding onto, or holding back from pain or joy or any experience of life can create suffering. Natural childbirth or any other ecstatic sexual experience provides evidence that it is through surrender and release that we transcend pain.

The breath, too, teaches us about this paradox. The inhalation and the exhalation are both part of the cycles of the same breath, just as pain and aloneness are both part of the cycles of Life. Connecting and releasing, giving and receiving, coming back to Self and surrendering self, being human and divine, it is all the same.

Pain is a doorway from humanity to divinity, from limited to limitless. Aloneness is a doorway from nothingness to Self, from emptiness to fullness.

Aloneness can teach me: I Am.

Pain can teach me: I am That I Am.

Aloneness becomes suffering when the focus is out there — a longing for something missing — an illusion of incompleteness.

Pain becomes suffering when the focus is in here — a desire to be rid of something — an illusion of “disease”.

What’s “missing” in aloneness is the Self...

What wants to be released, in pain, is the Self.

When a person has been traumatized by abuse or abandonment, which are inevitable experiences of childhood, it can seem very hard to welcome pain or to enjoy aloneness.

Abuse can occur in many ways and in many degrees and is not necessarily traumatic. It is essentially an experience of too much closeness. Any amount of closeness of the

wrong type — physical battering, sexual assault etc. — is too much. For other types of closeness, what is all right for one person may be “too much” for another — tickling, teasing, hugging, or any kind of unwelcome attention, for example.

When there is too much closeness, the child would like to say, “Leave me alone!” If it is not possible to say this, or if it is expressed unsuccessfully, the experience may be traumatic.

A child may feel abused even when a parent has loving intentions, when there is no intent to abuse. It is the experience of too much closeness that constitutes abuse. The child’s boundaries feel violated.

Boundaries are the outlines and limits of the feeling self. They are related to the physical body but are not limited to it.

Boundaries can be violated without any physical contact whatsoever — by inappropriate questioning, looking, or other offending forms of attention.

When you were a child, do you remember feeling abused? Take some time to acknowledge the ways in which your boundaries felt violated... the times when you wanted someone to leave you alone.

Remembering this now, what feelings are you noticing?

Please notice now what is happening in your body?

You may wish to spend more time now writing, or talking, about your experience or simply noticing your present thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. Also focus on your breathing.

Abandonment, too, occurs in many ways and degrees. It is essentially the experience of not enough closeness. It may be physical, as when the parent is not there enough or leaves or dies. It can also be emotional, as when the parent is there physically but not emotionally available, as when the parent does not notice the child’s feelings, or contradicts the child’s feelings, or fails to protect the child in some way. It can occur regardless of the parent’s intent. Again, it is the perception of the child that matters. Abandonment becomes traumatic when it is perceived by the child as life-threatening.

Remember, when you were a child, times when you felt lonely, when you needed someone to be there for you in some way. Recall the ways you felt too alone. Now, as you’re remembering this, notice what your feelings are...

Please notice, too, whatever you are now experiencing in your body. What sensations seem to go with these memories and feelings? Where are they located? Spend some time just feeling this. Continue to breathe as you do this. What happens?

Life is just life. It is both pain and joy, aloneness, and connectedness. As children we, are naturally dependent, and this can create insecurity.

Children take their experiences personally. An insecure child experiences pain as abuse (“There’s something wrong with me.”) and aloneness as abandonment (“I’m worth nothing... I don’t count.”).

When you were a child, feeling abandoned and alone (not enough closeness), what did you do? How did you deal with it?

As a child, when you felt abused (too much or inappropriate closeness), how did you cope with that?

As adults, we see what we expect from life. And we expect to get what we got in the past. We are programmed, not only to see what we learned to see, but mostly by how we learned to cope with trauma. The ways we coped became our survival skills.

Whether we experienced abuse or abandonment in childhood, or both, we survived it. Our coping strategies are linked with our survival.

As adults we will inevitably experience pain and aloneness... they are facts of life (as are joy and connectedness).

I remember early in my marriage when my husband came home one day and commented, “That cobweb up in the ceiling has been there for over a week.” Since I had been somewhat programmed to expect disapproval, what I heard him say was, “You are the world’s worst housekeeper. Not only do you not clean thoroughly, you don’t even notice what needs to be done!” No matter what his words or intent, I heard what I expected to hear. I could even hear such criticism in a mere look, with no words spoken.

The worst part of my programming then kicked in with the way I coped with what I heard. As a child, I had coped with unspoken (and perhaps unintended) criticism by withdrawing in silence to lick my wounds, resolving to try harder to please. So of course that’s what I did with my husband. Naturally, the harder I tried to please while still continually perceiving criticism, the more I failed to do anything well enough, at least in my own eyes. And the, more I withdrew to lick my wounds in silence, the less I communicated with him, and the more separate we became. As therapist Virginia

Satir said, regarding most of the adults she was seeing, “The problem is not the problem; the coping is the problem.”

Freedom from this cycle comes first of all from recognizing the programming that prevents me from seeing life as it is in each moment and keeps me seeing, instead, through the distorted lenses of the past. Secondly, I become free when I expand my coping options and grow beyond the coping style I developed as a child.

As children, we really had few options. When we felt hurt by the adults upon whom we depended for our life and love, we were essentially powerless.

Unfortunately, the memories of helplessness are attached to the feelings we had then (hurt, fear, anger) and we imagine, as adults in similar feeling situations, that we are, still helpless, limited to the coping options we had as children.

An important part of our recovery is to discover that as adults we are not so limited and helpless. This is a frightening thing to explore, because the coping style we had as children is what helped us to survive. To try something else is a great risk. Our feeling self, so connected with our “inner child”, is afraid of being abused or abandoned all over again.

The only way we can, as adults, risk further emotional abuse or abandonment is to realize that the resulting pain or aloneness is not devastating. This means reconnecting with our core self.

When I understand that I can experience pain and become bigger than it, or move through it, and that there is nothing wrong with who I am, then I can risk the possibility of emotional pain, such as disapproval, criticism, or rejection, and know that I’m okay.

When I know that I can welcome aloneness as a place of fulfillment and not emptiness, nurture myself, re-discover my self-worth, and “tune into the sacred being of myself” in that aloneness, then I can risk abandonment by another.

I am not lost in loneliness when I have myself and my sacred beingness, my spirituality. My aloneness, in that place, becomes all-oneness.

We don’t create our pain. Pain is a fact of life, as is joy. In *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran wrote,

“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.”

The more I can embrace pain in my life, the more I open to and welcome all that life has to offer... experiencing passionate aliveness.

I am also learning that the more I am fulfilled in my aloneness, the more capacity I have for intimacy... for oneness with another. If I am not complete in my aloneness, the more dependent (co-dependent) I am in my relationships... and my lost self stays lost.

Only from a place of all-oneness can I truly be connected with another while retaining my integrity.

The natural journey from childhood to adulthood is one from insecurity to security, from dependency to freedom. If we continue to look outside ourselves for the source of our security, we perpetuate our dependency.

Freedom comes with the development of inner security... not the security that comes from having things or from maintaining the status quo, but rather the security that Virginia Satir called “the freedom to move into the unknown”. This is freedom from our own conditioning, from the perception of life through the lenses of the past. These lenses keep life predictable. No matter how uncomfortable it is, we tend to feel more in control of what is predictable. Without the lenses of past programming, life becomes unpredictable... unknown... much more scary.

But when I’ve made peace with pain and with aloneness, I can move into the unknown with confidence. I am, and I’m okay, no matter what.

Mindfulness (Bodymindfulness) Exercise

Sit or lie down comfortably. If possible, read this over a few times and then close your eyes and turn your attention inward. Begin to notice any sensations in your head, your face. There’s no need to work at this or to make anything happen. This is not about checking or correcting or changing anything. This is just about noticing.

Notice your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your tongue, your jaw. Let your attention move down into your throat and neck, into your shoulders, down your arms and into your hands. Notice your chest and abdomen and any sensations inside the thoracic cavity. Notice your back.

Let your attention rest for a moment on your breath, on the flow of breath into and out of the body. Notice the pelvis and let your attention move down into the lower body, the legs, the feet.

After noticing one part of the body after another, allow the sense of the whole body to be present in your awareness. Just notice the general quality of your physical experience and any particular body parts or sensations that come to your attention.

Finally, come back to noticing your breathing and rest your attention here for a few moments before completing.

When you see yourself

and someone else

as one being,

When you know the most joyful day

and the most terrible night

as one moment, then

Awareness is alone with its Lord.

With repeated meditation practice

the expanse of

the visible universe with all its qualities

dissolves to nothing,

to where there is only health

and a great joy.

All teaching comes to this.

— Lalla

(Poems by Lalla translated by Coleman Barks in Naked Song.)