

As I read I realised that I had never really referred to this topic on my site and considered how this might perhaps be due to the fact that it is a taboo subject, so I kind of mulled this over in my mind for a while. Anyway once I had decided on which books I was going to recycle I closed the box, but did not put it back on the shelf because I felt that I might return to it. Then, in the evening I listened to Tom Jefferson discuss his new book: ***The Way of Rest: Finding the Courage to Hold Everything in Love***, with Tami Simons (from *Insights at the Edge, Sounds True* podcast). He teaches ‘a form of total acceptance—a dismantling of the armor of the heart so that we can live vibrantly in the here and now’. Among many other things he discusses how to also explore or approach suicidal thinking and the wish to die from a place of total acceptance, which was different from the strictly cognitive behavioural paradigm I had relied on to tackle the question in my *Cognitive Behavioural Approaches to Counseling* end of course exam in 2011. Jeff Foster discusses the notion or practice of resting with our every moment experience, in other words, staying with whatever arises in a curious, non-judgmental way and finding the courage to be with it and to allow ourselves to feel not only the joy and pleasure, but also the pain, the shame, the anger, the fear, the grief, even the hatred, instead of pushing all this out of sight. He talked about observing all that arises, ‘the good and the bad’, the happy and the sad, to observe and stay with our thoughts, sensations and emotions in order to reclaim our aliveness and free ourselves from being stuck in the past or in our constant worry about the future. As he puts it ‘learning to abide in discomfort is a difficult but necessary step to achieving true rest’. He mentions that in today’s culture we don’t allow discomfort and pain; instead we are all running away from ourselves, chasing the next thing, becoming addicted to all sorts of things and more and more distracted. I suppose most of us can relate to this to some extent. In the video at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PllGY76nZvg&feature=youtu.be&utm\\_source=Mindsight+Institute+Master](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PllGY76nZvg&feature=youtu.be&utm_source=Mindsight+Institute+Master), in which Jack Kornfield discusses his book ***No Time Like the Present: Finding Freedom, Love, and Joy Right Where You Are*** with Dan Siegel, he says that we live in a society that promotes us to not feel and also promotes things that keep us busy and distracted, because if we feel and are more present we would be saying no to the establishment and to eating or buying things that are detrimental to our health, etc; so, the culture would rather we keep busy and not pay too much attention to what’s going on. To me it seems like there is a cultural imperative to push everything unpleasant or difficult or remotely unacceptable under the carpet, to refrain from facing or speaking our truths, discerning injustices, exploring the meaning of being human, acknowledging our similarities and diversity, our sorrows, longings and true desires. Distractions and addictions, whether that is food, alcohol or other substances, smoking, shopping and consuming, being hooked on our mobiles or other appliances, anything we do to keep the difficult stuff out of sight and to stay numb, are useful strategies and quite profitable I might add. Unfortunately, no matter what we do, as long as we keep running away from truths, all the stuff we are pushing away is still accumulating in our basement, garage or backyard. Our body never forgets and what we don’t heal and release will eventually take its toll; symptoms will try to get our attention and eventually the parts of ourself that we have abandoned will present us with the bill. The more distracted we’ve been and the more unfinished business we have left unattended the greater the impact at some later point in our lives. In the talk above Jack Kornfield mentions that unfinished business of the

heart that we've been too busy to see or feel, running around (I can certainly relate to that), can open the door to a lot of sorrow, but can also become an invitation to life with all its beauty and an ocean of tears.

But to return to the issue of suicidal ideation or the wish to die, Jeff Foster talks about staying with this as well, like any other painful experience, staying with the doubts, the despair, the fear, the emotions, the longings and regrets, accepting the part of us that may wish to die. In staying with this we may discover that what this part of the self really desires is to end the pain or discomfort, to find a way out of the painful circumstances or to simply end the exhaustion, to rest. In staying with this experience with courage, non judgmental acceptance and compassion long enough we will probably also reach or observe the part of the self that wants to live and realise that the desire to die may actually be a strong desire to live in disguise. He believes that meditating on the thought 'I want to die' may allow deeper exploration of the self and uncover a deep longing to live, to be real and authentic and to stop living others' truths. He believes that treating our discomfort as a guest and allowing things to come up gives us the chance to deconstruct second hand ideas, another way of referring to conditioning. He claims that depression can be a call for awakening. So staying with the discomfort or difficult thoughts, emotions and even desires like wanting to die, may allow one to strip layers of conditioning and internalised toxic stuff from others, and shed the costumes of unworthiness and the hats and roles others have assigned us. Observing our thoughts and emotions from some distance prevents our getting caught up in them and even acting out on them and we gradually come to understand that they are transient and perhaps only one side of the same coin.

It seems that facing our fears and embracing the totality of our self and the seemingly conflicting aspects of the self allows for integration to take place. In some sense embracing our inner diversity is like augmenting our canvas and allowing for a bigger painting to be created. With practice and courage we can eventually stay with all opposites, for we all have parts or aspects of the self that feel fear and anger or boredom or despair, as well as, parts that feel engaged and interested and hopeful and optimistic. I use the word opposites, but these seemingly contrasting states may be like the two sides of the same coin. Sometimes suicidal ideation may be the result of our desire to live a richer, fuller and happier life. It may not be about not wanting to live, but more about wanting to end the pain or one's inability to compromise or reconcile with dire or painful circumstances or the result of one's inability to reach out for help or find their way out of the wood. So, the more we can stay with or meditate on difficult experiences or physical discomfort the more we can erase or heal the division and embrace the totality of our self, and as Dan Siegel and many others suggest the more integration there is within a system or between systems the greater the possibility of reaching states of equilibrium and well-being.

Moreover, the box of essays that I opened, a bit like Pandora's Box, opened the door to memories and actually took me back to my practicum experience in 2011. I had worked at an outreach programme, mostly with the elderly, on the island where I live, but I remember that several of my colleagues had decided to work answering emergency life line calls. At the time I had not found the idea appealing because I had felt inadequately prepared both in terms of knowledge

but also experience, for all my knowledge in this area was within a structured cognitive behavioural perspective, which would have provided extremely valuable and useful tools and strategies in therapy sessions where one could sign contracts, teach tools, create a coping plan, coping cards and a hope kit, work out helpful behavioural strategies, do interventions, such as, the relapse prevention task and process beliefs and self-destructive thoughts, but as I had judged at the time, might not have been applicable during a crisis phone call, where the person on the line could hang up any minute and when every minute and word counted and could make the difference either way. While reading my exam answer the following extract caught my attention: *within a cognitive perspective suicidal behaviour is conceptualized in terms of the automatic thoughts and beliefs (suicidal modes) that were activated prior to the client's suicidal attempt (Rudd et al, 2001, cited in Beck et al). In particular, for clients who have previously engaged in suicidal behaviour these modes become highly accessible in memory and require minimal triggering to be activated again. Therefore, it is important during assessment to ask clients to pay attention to the cognitions present during their suicidal attempt (Greenberger, cited in Freeman and Danillo, 1992). Identifying thought patterns, underlying beliefs and compensatory behavioural strategies, as well as, past experiences is an important part..... (Tonya Alexabdri, 2011)*

As I read these lines I thought that many of our critical, self sabotaging and debilitating thoughts and beliefs, or even our 'suicidal modes', as mentioned above, are internalised messages from our familial and broader environment, often during our formative years, and also the result of too many experiences of helplessness and hopelessness, so one could view the wish to die also as the result of unhealthy deeply ingrained conditioning, deeply rooted inner experiences of unworthiness and too many experiences of learnt helplessness. Tara Brach refers to this as *the trance of unworthiness*, which plagues us, especially in Western cultures, and Lisa Firestone believes that 'the most important battle you will fight is the one going on inside you - the real you versus your critical inner voice' (PsychAlive.com). Staying with the experience and allowing layer after layer to fall off may bring new insight related to the cognitions, the experiences and the contexts where the deep despair or sense of unworthiness was born. Even names of the people who have shamed us or have reinforced debilitating beliefs may pop up. Finding the courage to stay long enough with this painful inner experience or the courage to return to this material, a bit like returning to the crime scene, can potentially diffuse the potency of the experience or shift our perspective or state of being. Processing the cognitions alone and reframing will not be enough and one would have to stay with the physical sensations and emotions which will require deeper courage and perseverance. Revisiting some traumas and aches is required and learning to stay more and more in the present, reconnecting with our moment to moment experience, as far as humanly possible, and pausing more often to listen to what's going on inside instead of constantly turning outwards will need to become a way of being and it will probably take a lifetime. Also, our past lived experience will not change, cannot become undone or erased, but some past events can stop having that tight a grip on us. It's kind of like freeing oneself from the tight clutch of an octopus. The octopus may still be there, swimming in the depths of our mind, but it can no longer fold its tentacles around us squeezing our head, constricting our breath, restricting our movements, blurring our vision. Additionally, not shying away from painful material and discussing topics like

despair or suicide, which is a taboo subject in many communities, to the extent that in some cultures people who have committed suicide are refused a religious burial, which as a result can create stigma and further impact the family's suffering and grief, can bring about more acceptance and understanding of the full catastrophe of living and the whole spectrum of human emotional experience. Perhaps a more reasonable and helpful, not to mention, humane approach, could be to replace or shift cultural discourse and practices from shaming or even worse condemning to supporting people in dire conditions (consider dire poverty, unemployment, homelessness, marginalisation, exclusion practices, etc, etc) or even better to strive to prevent and not create these contexts in the first place. *'Research findings suggest that talking directly about suicide does not increase risk (Gould et al, 2005, cited in Granello, 2010). Shea further suggests that talking about suicide and death in a frank way can be a relief for clients because 'telling one's story in and of itself is curative' (Shea, 2002; Yalom, 1975, cited in Granello, 2010 – Tonya Alexandri, 2011).*

By the time I went to bed on Sunday I was thinking neither of the talk I had listened to during the evening nor the box I had opened in the morning; however, it seemed that I was not done with either experience. I woke up very early the next morning from a distressing dream in which I was sitting on the floor of this badly lit basement or garage going through the contents of a box, similar to the one I had been picking through the previous day. I had found my exam paper on suicide, but also memorabilia like old clothes, birthday cards and a letter from an aunt with instructions of some kind, when a huge black cat cast its shadow in the doorway sending terror down my spine. I think it was at this moment that I woke up and as I gradually woke up fully I realised that I was not an adult in the dream. Once I was fully awake and the fear had dissipated the cat image sort of shrank in my mind and took the form of an old Halloween's costume. So I thought about what I had read on dreams and how past experience surfaces since our censoring mechanisms are deactivated during sleep and also how the events of the day permeate our dreams. I had taken a photo of my black inquisitive kitty because I was amused by his activity on the window ledge: his fascination with his reflection in the window and his attraction to the smell of the basil plant.



Also, mama cat is black and so are two of her new somewhat scrawny kittens, so I had plenty of contact with black kitties during the previous day to possibly

explain the appearance of the brunette feline creature in my dream, but not the fear element. The creature in the dream seemed to be there to prevent me from reading the letter or revisiting something painful, similar to a guard preventing the entrance to forbidden territory. If I were to use psychology terms I could describe the cat as representing a barrier to my integrating past experiences. I thought about archetypes and our collective unconscious and cultural symbols of fear or censorship, but also about our personal associations and the enormous amounts of material held in our own bottomless individual unconscious, whether this material has to do with childhood experiences and others (people), fears, messages, just consider the rolls of film scenes we may have stored, acquired knowledge and all the meaning we have constructed of all this relying on our age and level of understanding or the clarity of mind we had each time. Therefore, instead of going back to sleep I started my morning meditation earlier than usual allowing my mind to rest on all this and sure enough deeper understanding took place, and another piece of the puzzle had found its place. It also felt as if my aunt's toxic instructions and messages had kind of dissipated; well, at least till the next dream. I finally smiled as I thought this whole process was a bit like letting the cat out of the box (Tonya Alexandri, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017)