

Self-Care During Dark Times¹

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Not in her goals, but in her transitions woman is great.
Not in his goals, but in his transitions man is great.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is no birth of consciousness without pain.
—C.G. Jung

In many ways, psychosynthesis is self-care. It is both learning to care for yourself and allowing your Self to care for you. It is both learning how to consciously do the things that build confidence and trust in yourself, things that are nurturing, self-affirming, and self-clarifying, and at the same time letting go to the love and guidance of a deeper Self and to the healing forces of the universe.

The psychosynthesis perspective brings a great deal to the on-going task of learning how to attend to ourselves with both wisdom and kindness. In writing this paper, my first intention was to set out some of the tools and principles of psychosynthesis for individuals engaged in their own self-care. I thought of it as a manual on psychological hygiene, something in the psychological domain comparable to what in the health field is called preventive health care or education for wellness.

Yet, as I looked at the lives of my clients, many of whom were going through very difficult times, and also at my own life, for I too was in a major transition, I began to wonder if the paper I had first imagined was not, in fact, a little “too healthy.” Would it really speak to the depth of the struggles I was seeing around me? I realized then, that in order to be truly useful, my paper would have to go beyond the self-care of ordinary days and address directly the deep distress and disorientation that seems to be an inevitable part of the journey through “dark times.”

I knew then that I wanted to add to my understanding of self-care by thinking and reading about journeys through darkness. I wanted to reread the passages in the Bible about being in the wilderness. I wanted to remember the “night-sea journey” that Carl Jung speaks of, Roberto Assagioli’s writing on “Self-realization and Psychological Disturbances,” and “the dark night of the soul” of St. John of the Cross. What were these difficult crossings? Why did they come? Where were they leading? How did one survive them? Did they bring rewards, or only pain?

Rather than the more familiar word “transition,” I purposely chose the words “dark times” to describe these periods in a person’s life. “Transition” definitely implies crossing

over to somewhere else. “Dark times” does not necessarily imply this. We know, in fact, that some people do not make it to the other side. I think that the nature of these difficult periods is that when you are really in them, you are not absolutely sure they are transitions. You are not always sure that this darkness is going somewhere, that there really will be a light at the end of the tunnel, or that maybe you are not crazy, or sick, or completely falling apart. It is hard to care for oneself during the depth of that kind of emptiness and disorientation, but we need to learn.

I mention this now, for although I will talk about what the psychosynthesis perspective brings to self-care, I feel there also needs to be the recognition of an undercurrent that is like the voice of a chorus of doubt saying again and again, “And yet the nature of dark times is to doubt that things will work out.” If you are really in that darkness, it may be comforting to hear someone say, “Crisis equals dangerous opportunity,” or similarly, to know that crisis in psychosynthesis is always thought of as the breaking of something old and constricting, leading to something greater, to a higher level of integration and a more inclusive identity. But these words don't make much difference in the midst of a deep crisis. They may bring some relief for a moment, but I think there is often a sense in this kind of shift that this time these reassurances are not really true for you.

So as I talk about the principles and gifts of psychosynthesis to self-care, remember also the presence of the chorus of doubt which says again and again: “But maybe this is not true for me this time.”

Personal and Global Dark Times

As I looked more closely at the task I had chosen, I saw there were two kinds of darkness I wanted to address: personal and global. Personal dark times are those crises related to loss of any kind, the death of a loved one, family or friend, a crisis of illness, or crises related to jobs or relationships. Sometimes, they are crises that the culture has named, like leave-taking from one's family, or crises at midlife or old age. Other times, they are without a name and unrelated to any outer event; yet, they represent profound shifts within the person, affecting both the inner and outer life.

What about global dark times? It seems to me that on the global level there is a darkness greater than that in any individual life, greater than that in any personal transition. I think the most powerful fact of all, and one that is now known to most of us, is that humanity has the power to destroy itself with nuclear weapons in minutes—a fact that if faced cannot help but throw us into crisis. This alone would be enough. This alone is enough. But at the same time, we can also list other facts such as teenage suicide, divorce, violence against women, violence against children, violence against men, hunger and poverty. We may not know many of these facts, but if we face even some of them as sensitive and caring individuals it is hard not to see that we are in a global dark time that is affecting us all. We are in a transition, and we do not know for certain if we will make it through. We are being asked to know more of ourselves. We are being asked to respond to the world in new ways.

It is not that this is the only dark time that the world has faced; there have been many others—floods, plagues, slavery, great wars, other dark times that somehow the world has

survived. But surely we do not need to listen to the news for very long to know that we face such a time today.

So we have both personal and global dark times, and I would like to point to their interrelatedness, for certainly the personal dark times that I and many of my clients have been experiencing are part of the global situation as well. Perhaps, too, what so many are experiencing in their personal lives is a mirror of what is changing on a larger level, each level affecting the other very deeply.

My paper speaks primarily to the personal, but I wanted to mention the global because this is such an important context for many of us. I also think that if we look carefully enough at the ways in which we move through personal dark times, we may find ways to help us through the global dark times.

Psychosynthesis and Self-Care

Throughout the paper, I will be speaking about psychosynthesis more implicitly than explicitly, but before I begin to do that I would like to share a few of the basic principles that underlie what I am trying to say about self-care during dark times.

As a psychosynthesist, I assume the existence of a natural process of growth within the individual. I also assume that the process unfolds in a certain direction. It tries to move from conflict to integration, from partiality to a greater and greater wholeness.

I also assume that the process of growth necessarily goes through some very difficult times. As well as times of integration and harmony, there are also times of disorientation, of falling apart, of struggle, of darkness, of crisis. In Assagioli's words, "The process of self-realization is a long and arduous journey with many critical stages." Another way of saying this is that, at times, the process is transformational and this includes both the falling apart of old known ways of being and the coming together and reforming of new more evolved ways of being.

I also assume the existence of will and the possibility for us to discover as individuals that we are not helpless victims tossed about like boats without rudders in an unpredictable sea. We do have will and choice. We can learn to direct our attention. We can choose to strengthen adaptive patterns of behavior as well as to withdraw energy from those which are no longer working. This is not to say that we can always control what is happening to us, but we have a choice about the attitude we bring to the events of our lives.

I also assume a principle in psychosynthesis, often hard to remember in dark times, and that is that *there is help for us, both inner and outer help*. (And now, if you hear the chorus of doubt, "But in dark times I doubt all this," you will know the true reality of how it feels when you are living this.)

In psychosynthesis, what is the nature of this help? I think it can best be described by talking about the existence of what Roberto Assagioli called the superconscious, a realm of meaning, of wisdom, of higher values, of new more integrative patterns. Sometimes, we know of its existence through those moments that Abraham Maslow called peak experiences when we somehow transcend our normal way of being. The superconscious holds new

patterns for us. It can be the source of our new future, or of what is emerging. In Assagioli's words, which point even beyond the superconscious to the Self, "The real you knows all about it, knows the future, will guide you," and yet again I hear the inner doubter saying, "but the nature of dark times is to doubt all this," and I think that is true. However, if we go back to the principle of there being inner and outer help for us, this help could come in many forms. For example, it might come in a dream, or in a dialogue with an inner image of wisdom, such as a wise old man, woman or child. These tools have been written about and are indeed central to psychosynthesis. Now, however, I want to speak particularly about the outer help, because I think that sometimes those of us with inner tools get so involved with them that we forget the mirroring of the outer world and the gifts that it too is trying to offer us. This kind of help can be surprising, and very unexpected.

What is the nature of this outer help? Sometimes you open a book and it says the very thing you needed to hear. Or sometimes, a bird flying overhead brings the tears you have been holding back for weeks. Sometimes, the face of a child in a supermarket reconnects you to your love, even though all your trying and all your worrying have been making that love unavailable. It is that kind of experience I am talking about. In saying there is help for us, I am not just saying something about the psyche; I am saying something about the nature of the world we live in.

I want to tell you about a personal experience which happened to me, which I am still marveling at, and which deepened the faith of even the strongest doubter inside me. I was feeling terrible, having moved to a new town where I did not know anyone. It was one of those times when I could not remember anything about psychosynthesis or healing or health. I was wondering how I would find my way. I decided I would go to the health food store to buy some brown rice and vegetables with the hope that being in that lovely store might help me feel better. However, if there were a "friendly universe," there was no way it could have found me; I was so sealed off from it. I did my shopping, still feeling very disconnected from myself and the people around me in the store. As I went out the door, I noticed a journal; I think it was a yoga journal, and on the cover there was an article listed called "Parenting in the Nuclear Age." Since that topic interested me, I decided to buy it. I brought it home and put it on my desk. One afternoon, a few days later, I opened it up to read the article, and in reading along, I suddenly came to a part that said, "Then a soft-spoken mother of two named Anne Yeomans said ..." and there was a quote from a talk I had given on this very topic in San Francisco. What was amazing to me was that the article quoted the one sentence that I wanted to say most of all. It was the one sentence that I thought when I wrote that short talk, "Do I dare say this?" So I said it, and someone heard it, and someone wrote it down, and it came back to me in Concord, Massachusetts, 3,000 miles away, six months later, at a time when I didn't know I was looking for it. You can't tell me that what we call the outer world doesn't want to help! Yet most of us live as if this were not true.

This reminds me of the wonderful story, which may be familiar to many of you, but it is worth retelling, the story by Hugh Prather in Gerald Jampolsky's book, *Love is Letting Go of Fear*.² He tells the story of a man who comes to heaven and talks to God about his life . . . and he says to God, "Thanks for all the times you helped me," and looking down on the sands of the world, he sees the places where there are four footprints, where he and God walked together, but in remembering his most difficult times, he looks and sees only two footprints.

He says to God, "Where were you then when I needed you, for I see only my own footprints in the sand?" And God answers, "Oh, that is when I carried you." I suppose that moment in the health food store was one of those times when God was carrying me, although moments before I would have sworn that I was walking alone. This is a picture of the help there is for us; it is also a picture of the nature of our doubt.

I would now like to suggest a short exercise:

Think for a moment of a "dark time" in your life. It may be something you have already been through or something you are in now. Take a moment to feel what that time is or was like for you. See if you can remember when it began. When was the first time you began to recognize it as a dark time? Then see yourself being in it. What was or is that like? And now, if it is over, see yourself coming out of it. How did you feel? How did you recognize you were beginning to feel better? If it is not over, imagine how coming out of it might be.

See, as you look at it, if you can get a sense of the shape of that dark time, both the entering into it, the being in it, and the coming out of it?

What kinds of things were and are helpful to you during this time? What was not helpful?

What is the one thing that someone could say or do which would support you the most?

Take a moment to answer that question and when you have it, see if you can find some way to give that support to yourself right now, either through words or through cultivating a new attitude toward this time. What is it like to give that kind of support to yourself? Does it tell you anything about what people need during dark times? Take a moment to make a few notes about your experience.

De-Structuring and Restructuring

In this section of the paper, I will focus on what I call the de-structuring and restructuring process. I want to acknowledge here my friend and teacher in San Francisco, the late Angeles Arriens. She was raised in the Basque culture where there is a much greater understanding and respect for this process than we have in the West. It was her teaching as well as my own work with myself that helped me to think about dark times in this way.

As I said earlier, there are times in the process of awakening that can be described as de-structuring—the undoing, the coming apart, or the "positive disintegration" of some of our familiar ways of knowing ourselves, and of relating to the world.

Restructuring is a concept with which we are much more familiar. It describes the time when we build again, when the structure is reformed. De-structuring is something we know much less about. It is not just unknown by us; it is feared by us. It is not even a word in the dictionary. When someone is in a period of de-structuring, we say they are falling apart or breaking down. There is a critical and derogatory attitude embedded in these words. Our language indicates a lot. We rarely think of these times with respect or as a necessary aspect of the total process of growth.

As a culture, we do not understand or respect de-structuring as an essential step in our personal and collective evolution. Yet, there is really no real restructuring without de-structuring. This idea is more understood in the ancient wisdom traditions of Asia and by what Angeles Arriens called the shamanistic cultures of the South (in contrast to the industrial nations of the North.) De-structuring and restructuring are interdependent and interrelated. This requires a profound new understanding for all of us. There is no new birth without the dying of the old. We need to teach and practice a new understanding that says de-structuring is essential and integral to true restructuring.

It has been said that America is a death-denying culture. And de-structuring is like dying at times; certainly it is a dying of certain ways of being and knowing ourselves, and of familiar patterns of managing our lives. We need to teach and demonstrate that so-called “falling apart” can be seen with fresh eyes. It is essential to the discovery and building of the new.

We need to know that the small deaths as well as the big ones are part of this journey, that life includes them. They are not bad, not to be feared, even though they can be frightening. We need to support our friends, our clients, and ourselves in the total process of growth. It is helpful to look at the de-structuring we see in nature. For example, autumn is the season of de-structuring.

As well as the period of de-structuring and restructuring, there is another part of the process which I want to address here. It was written about by William Bridges, in his very useful book, *Transitions*.³ He calls it the neutral zone. This is the time between endings and beginnings, “the time in-between,” a time I would describe as often empty and flat, the time in the winter when you are not at all sure there is going to be a spring, the time when you easily feel like the man in Hugh Prather’s story who asks, “Where were you God when I needed you?” It is a time when the feelings of being left and deserted are the strongest, a time when the old symbols and meanings often seem lifeless and without energy.

For the rest of the article I am going to address the issue of self-care in relationship to these three stages: self-care during de-structuring, during the in-between time, and during restructuring.

Before I begin this, I want to acknowledge that we are often very drawn to this kind of developmental sequence, for it gives us some sense of control and order. But in reality what I will be describing will rarely be so orderly nor are the edges between the three stages so sharp and clear. Just as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages of dying do not always come in the order that she has written of them, de-structuring, the in-between time, and restructuring are not always so clearly defined. They are much more cyclical and repetitive: some de-structuring, some in-between, some restructuring, some more in-between, and then, perhaps, more de-structuring. For the purposes of the paper, I will talk about them in a linear fashion; in reality, they are much more interpenetrating.

Self-Care During De-structuring

How do we learn to care for our selves in times of crisis, or profound transition, when life feels dark and without meaning?

One of the first things that must happen is the recognition that we are in a de-structuring period, when old ways are not working, where old symbols have lost their vitality and meaning. We are in a time when our usual habits and patterns of activity do not work quite as well as they used to, where things may feel awkward and uncomfortable. We are not at one with our lives the way we might have been even a month or two before. The first step in this process is simply recognizing it. This sounds easy, but our first impulse is to continue just as before, or maybe to push even harder.

Sometimes, there is an outer event which causes the disoriented feeling—a death, a move, an illness, the loss of a job, the break-up of a relationship. But sometimes there is nothing you can point to; there is simply the experience that something within us is different, is shifting. Often, it is a multi-faceted crisis with several things happening at once. In any case, it is a time for self-care.

The first step is recognition, recognizing that change is taking place. I think that recognizing it and then naming it, naming it “transition,” naming it “change,” naming it “grieving,” naming it perhaps even “de-structuring,” will help. Giving it a name gives some sense of control and even some sense of meaning at a time when we are losing both a certain kind of control and a certain kind of meaning. I remember someone sharing that during a time of change, when they were experiencing great anxiety and terror, they used to say to themselves, “I’m in a transition now.” Just quietly saying that seemed to have a calming effect. It seemed to help with the anxious feelings, and make the fearful places feel a little more secure. “Someone knows what’s happening. It’s a transition. I’m not out in the vastness all alone. Someone knows.”

Yet, at the same time, part of self-care during de-structuring is really dealing with not knowing what is happening to you. This makes us uncomfortable, and often frightened, and anxious. I remember a time when a client and I worked to find words to help her with this kind of experience. We finally came up with the following: “I don’t understand what is happening to me, but somewhere, it is known.” This accomplished two things: it both allowed her to accept what she didn’t understand, and it acknowledged that there was meaning and order in the universe, and that somewhere there existed a deeper part of herself that knew, even though that understanding was not available to her at that moment.

Another very prevalent feeling during de-structuring is that of shame and self-criticism. We often talk to ourselves in the following ways, “So I can’t even do the old things that I used to be able to do well. I get scared when I’m away from home. I can’t manage my job the way I used to. Small things that I could handle with ease seem difficult. I feel ashamed. I don’t want anyone to know this about me.” These are very common feelings. “I want to hide all this from others. People won’t understand, and they’ll be critical.” And it is true: often people are critical because they don’t understand, and it scares them.

However, our worst criticism undoubtedly comes from ourselves. I have found that I have been highly self-critical during times like this, when in fact just the opposite was needed. It is a time when one needs kindness toward oneself, when one needs self-nurturance and patience. It is a time when one needs to be held, comforted, and trusted.

The cultural habits of moving ahead, of pushing through, of not acknowledging de-structuring, of not allowing oneself to fall apart, are very strong in most of us. So there is a

need for re-learning here, and certainly one of the things that we can do as therapists for our clients, or for friends or family who are going through such a period, is remind them of that, and offer support.

Be someone who can be called in the night by a friend. I remember a woman who had an opportunity to do some work in Africa. She did not want to go because she was afraid that she would feel alone and fearful there, even though she had been there many times before and knew how to do well what was being asked of her. One of her friends said, "Look, if you get scared, I'll come and get you!" What a wonderful gift of friendship! Of course, it turned out not to be necessary; yet knowing that there was that kind of support and trust for her allowed her to go and have things work out well.

Relationship with friends is one of the things I would like to speak more about because in such a time we do not necessarily get from our friends what we need. We are vulnerable and we are opening in new ways, and some of our old defenses do not work, so we are especially sensitive to the responses of our friends. Since we are vulnerable, we are easily hurt during this time of transition. For some people, it becomes a time to look at who their friends are and to find new kinds of relationships that are more attuned to what is happening.

I am reminded of a man who had cancer, a really extroverted fellow who was always entertaining and having big parties in the summer. When he got cancer and knew that he had a limited time to live, he found that his level of vulnerability was very frightening to several of his friends and that many of the people he had entertained so royally in the summers no longer wanted to be with him. They could not handle the life and death issues that he was now dealing with every day. Yet, of course, he needed people very much; but what came out of this was a whole different group of friends, fewer, but more intimate. A new possibility of relationship emerged for him, a depth of intimacy that he had not known before in his life.

I think that at a time like this one really needs to be open to asking the following questions: "Who or what is my environment?" "Does it support me?" "If not, how can I change it so that it does?"

I think of Roberto Assagioli's ideas in the book, *The Act of Will*,⁴ on what he called *psychological breathing and feeding*. Does the environment that we draw around us support us during this time—the physical environment as well as the emotional, mental, and spiritual environments? This may well be a time for forming support groups, maybe even gathering together just a few friends that you know who have also felt something like this, or are at least respectful of this process. It is part of your self-care, and part of your self-healing to choose carefully the people who surround you.

Another part of the de-structuring process which I will just touch on briefly, though it could be a whole paper in itself, is the encounter with unknown parts of oneself. In de-structuring, we are often being asked to face and accept unknown and previously unacceptable parts of our nature. In fact, it is often because these parts are crying for attention that the crisis has come about. Consider the following:

— A man in his 30's, mentally identified, successful in the computer field, finds within himself a highly sensitive, vulnerable eight-year old boy. The inner boy is lonely and needed a friend. He needed to be included, integrated, and protected. The child, as he is befriended, brings a sense of beauty and wonder to the man.

- A woman in her 70's, competent, optimistic, positive for years, wakes one night in inconsolable grief, feeling, at last, the pain she has been denying so long. She feels that despite the efforts of her whole life, things have been difficult and there have been failures. She also knows that even though she wants so much for it to be otherwise, her children and grandchildren will suffer too. Not everything will be all right.
- A woman in her late 20's discovers fiery rage under a way of being that she had associated with doubt and insecurity, a rage that was asking to be accepted and transmuted into power, a rage against injustice in all forms.

The kings and queens and the wise men and women as well as inner demons and dragons often surface during a time like this. As we understand this, we can welcome them, and invite them in. They may appear through dreams, through new ways of behaving, through longings for new ways of living, or through an eruption of deep feelings. At first, these parts may look frightening. They must have been once, or we would not have pushed them away, but as we come to know them, and there is much in psychosynthesis about how to do this—how to deal with and welcome these disowned parts of ourselves—new relationships are possible. They bring gifts that add to our experience of who we are.

I mention both the positive and the negative aspects of ourselves because we often think that in a time like this we will only find out all the awful things. Those of us who have worked in a psychology with a transpersonal dimension know that we often fear our best parts even more than our worst. There is a terror that can be known in relationship to one's own wisdom, power and joy. Nelson Mandela has written about this.

I remember a client, a young woman, who told a story about driving in the evening to a therapy group. She was feeling alone and deeply discouraged, as if she were dying and would never find her way through this present difficulty. She began to imagine that Death, the reaper, was driving with her. It was terrifying, and then she spontaneously thought, if Death is here, why is there not also a life-affirming and positive figure? Then she imagined that there was also in the car a radiant figure of light that represented Christ. In that moment, she found that imagining the Christ figure near her was even more frightening than imagining the reaper.

We fear our best as well as our worst. Within the psychosynthesis literature, one is reminded of Frank Haronian's wonderful article, "The Repression of the Sublime,"⁵ and his exploration of this phenomena.

As de-structuring continues through recognizing, naming, and accepting this phase of the process, we begin to discover that we have choice about how we respond to it. This is a profound shift. In the beginning, it feels very much like this period has been thrust upon us. We kick and scream, protesting that things are not working and that we never wanted it this way. We experience it as profoundly unfair. Why me? Yet as recognition and acceptance occur, we can, in fact, begin to see that we do have a choice, not about what is happening necessarily, but about how we respond to it.

We are called to embrace the process that is happening within us and to realize that we have the choice to be interested in it, to record it in our journals, to paint it, to dance it, to be open to it, and ultimately to trust it.

Again, I hear the chorus of doubt saying, “And yet in the depths of dark times, one doubts all this,” and I agree. Yet there are moments when help appears, when a dream comes, when a stranger smiles, when a lone swan appears on the water, that we do feel supported in a way that strengthens our faith rather than our doubt.

Self-Care During the In-between Time

What is the nature of the in-between time, best described, I think, as the time when the old is not working anymore and the new is not yet here? If de-structuring is the fall, then the time in-between is the winter. It can be a time of great darkness and despair that tests one’s faith deeply. It is often experienced as a flatness, an emptiness, a time when one really doubts that there could ever be any light at the end of the tunnel.

Yet, again, as in de-structuring, naming it that, understanding that this is the way the creative process works, whether it be in the arts, or in the articles and papers we write, or in the ways we grow, naming it “the in-between time” can help a great deal.

How do we use this time once we recognize it? I think one of the best things that can be done is to use it as time to reassess values and priorities. For example, the exercise of answering the question, “If I had six months to live, how would I use them?” is a powerful way to clarify priorities. It could be that what comes as an answer to such an exercise is, “I don’t know.” If that is true, it is really worth knowing. To truly be with the experience of not knowing brings us to the edge of what is known. It is a profound place, and one we often avoid. I remember once hearing an Episcopal minister say in a sermon, “We are closest to God in the time we have just let go of an old understanding and before we have found the new.”

Another way I remember someone using this period was as a time to gather in what was important. He started thinking about his life and tried to remember the things that seemed most beautiful, most alive to him over the years, even though he felt quite out of touch with them at present. He thought about paintings in museums that he loved and books he had read, pictures and music that had inspired him, moments in time where he had felt most alive. In his journal, he began to collect these little vignettes from his life, feeling that at some level they must all be saying something that was related. He looked through his bookcase to see the books he had carried around with him all these years. What were the common themes? Was there a common thread that was now trying to come together? So he used this in-between time as a way of gathering what was most important to him, knowing that somehow the new would build on this and be connected to it.

It is certainly a time for questions, and not answers, learning to love the questions, learning to love the unsolved. Rilke says it so beautifully in *Letters to a Young Poet*, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to learn to love the questions themselves.”⁶

This is no easy task for someone who likes answers and control. It is also a time for continued nurturance, kindness, and patience toward oneself. It is a time for rest. Rest gives the psyche room to rearrange itself and respond to new energies and new patterns.

A beautiful image came from a client of mine who was feeling very alone. She was in her house one day, looking out the window. She remembered a big pine tree behind the house she had grown up in as a child, and she had a fantasy that if she could just rest in the branches of that huge pine tree, she would feel comforted, and so in her imagination she did just that. She curled up, let herself be very small, imagined that that great pine tree was embracing her, that she was nestled in one of the branches close to the trunk about two-thirds of the way up the tree. What therapist would have told a client, "Climb into the nearest tree in your imagination and let yourself be held by its branches?" Somehow, this kind of self-healing had come out of a moment of darkness, of surrender. A new idea had appeared, and it became something she did whenever she needed that level of comfort. She knew that that tree would always welcome her. Later, she came to know that as well as being the child, she was also the great pine tree that could hold her. But at first, what she most needed was to be the child being held.

Part of what I love about this story is that, spontaneously, this woman opened through her relationship to the tree to the caring and comfort that exists around us in the natural world. Yet my words are quite extraneous when you think of this woman held in the arms of the tree, feeling more at peace as she opened to this deep and quiet healing process.

Another guideline that has been helpful for people during the time in-between, when the old is not working and the new is not here yet, is the idea of taking just a day at a time. To do the next thing that needs to be done, but to do it very carefully, with attention and mindfulness. It is a time to put things in order, to get closets cleaned out, to answer old letters, the way people do before they die. One is getting ready for the change, getting ready for the transition, as well as reviewing what has been before. It is preparation, like cleaning things out, and making room for the new.

I found in my year of transition that doing things carefully took the form of more attention to some of the household chores, for example, peeling vegetables or washing dishes. They were things that I might have rushed through to get on to more "important" work. As I did these carefully, I began to notice the colors of the vegetables and feel their texture, and hear the water running on the plates that I was washing, as if all my senses had become heightened, through that slowing down. It was wonderful. In a strange way, even though the meaning of the future was not at all accessible to me, the very moment itself, became alive and deeply satisfying. I learned later when I became a student of the Vietnamese Monk Thich Nhat Hanh that this was called the practice of *mindfulness*.

Another thing I want to mention briefly, though it could again be the subject of a whole paper, is understanding and working with pain, both the grief of letting go and being lost and the anger that this is happening. When we slow down, when the old does not work and the new is not here, one can expect new levels of feeling to appear. They are often related to the emerging, unknown parts of ourselves or to unknown feelings that have not been safe to experience before. To be expected are outbursts of rage, deep sobbing, being moved by stories of suffering in the news, or feeling nausea at some of the terrible things happening in the world, or suddenly finding oneself in tears while driving down the highway or upon seeing a spring blossom. This level of feeling can be very confusing for someone who is not usually in touch with their emotions. Again, here is a place where as friends, therapists, and guides we can really give a lot of support. For if one is not used to this, our first response on

experiencing such depth of feeling is that something must be wrong with me. In the unfortunate words of our culture, “He or she *broke down*.”

Part of letting go of the old is grieving for it, mourning it, wishing it were still here. The process cannot go on without that pain. That is the sadness that brings the moisture which is needed for the new growth; that is the sadness that unlocks the hardened parts of our hearts.

And the rage is powerful too, rage at a loss, the rage about any violations that we have experienced, rage at injustice in the world that we have felt powerless to change. Expect all this. It will not all necessarily happen, but some of it will.

Along with these feelings, there are certainly moments of deep despair and emptiness, when the darkness is very dark, when one feels that maybe this will never pass, that maybe this idea of a time in-between is something some psychologist made up to make us all feel better. “In between what and what?” one might well ask.

I had an experience in the fall raking leaves. It was one of those times when I was taking one day at a time, and I didn’t have any idea where it was all leading. Suddenly, nothing made sense, the leaves, the raking, the house, the family, the cars going by, the town, the people—nothing made sense. It was frightening. At that moment, a dear friend showed up and we sat down together. I started talking, and I decided with her there I could let myself go even more deeply into my experience, terrifying as it was. It seemed as if that was the only thing to do, although I wasn’t at all sure it would go anywhere. It was like falling down a deep chasm and not being at all certain that there would be any light, or any relief. As I fell, I was weeping and saying, “I believed so much, I believed so much.”

I know now that I must have been letting go of a set of beliefs that had held my life together for some time. In the moment, of course, I did not understand that, nor would that kind of analysis have been the least bit useful. My friend’s questions, “What makes you happy? What brings you joy?” didn’t seem to help either. I no longer knew . . . I let go, because there was nothing else to do, and I let go with no assurance that I would find anything but darkness. Down, down I went, yet in the bottom of the deep chasm of blackness, there was an image of light. I could see a woman with light in her eyes and her hands, quietly walking through a hospital, offering kindness to people who were suffering. It was very simple and quiet. There were very few words. Who would have known she was there? Certainly not I. That’s my story, my personal story of letting go into the darkness. I’ve seen that same process with my clients. When we shortcut that kind of experience, we cut off something very deep.

This is also a time to learn about balance, the balance between mind and body, between pushing and resting, between effort and non-effort. You cannot say “rest” all the time, because there are times when resting is not what works. Nor can you say, “just keep going” because there are times when keeping going is not what is called for at all. I am not sure anyone can give you advice about that balance, except perhaps to say, “You seem off balance right now, what do you need?” We are rebalancing during such a time, since our old balance is shifting.

The time in-between is surely a time which challenges our faith. The tools of prayer and meditation, and being with those people who have faith in those practices can be very helpful. It may, in fact, be a time when those who have never considered prayer and

meditation, or asking for help or insight from a deeper level of themselves, may open to it quite spontaneously. As therapists and friends, we can be there to support this.

In summary of the time in-between, I would like to quote now from *The Wounded Woman* by Linda Leonard.⁷ She uses the metaphor of winter to describe what I have been calling “the time in-between.”

Soon it will be winter, the time for accepting the cold outside and going inside, the hibernation and patient waiting which cannot talk of victory, but which can hold through and endure the dark. Sometimes the stir of life is felt, but one never knows if the birth will succeed.

Here she seems to have a deep understanding of what I have been referring to as the chorus of doubt:

In winter one has to accept that not-knowing and affirm life without results, affirm life in and of itself, and then comes spring when life buds and small green shoots appear. It would seem that this season spring would be easiest to accept, but we know that suicide rates are high in spring. If one hasn't related properly to winter, if one has fought it and not really accepted the possibility of both birth and death, or if one has gone into it too deeply, forgetting the passage of seasons, then one may not be able to accept the new and fearing change will cling to depression and the old.

Self-Care During Restructuring

If we have lived through the breaking down of de-structuring and the doubting and waiting of the time-in-between, the process will take us naturally to restructuring. Here, as Linda Leonard implies, with the first buds of spring, there are signs that the future is beginning to exist again. One gets glimpses of a new life, of the growing warmth of the sun, of buds that will be flowering, of curled leaves that will uncurl. Hope begins to return. What are the guidelines for self-care during this time?

One thing to be aware of after going through such a difficult period is that it is very natural to be so delighted when the new begins to appear that one grasps for it, and holds on to it tightly. Yet it is important to go slowly, to stay open, and receive the new, but not to close on it too quickly, for it may be that what you are seeing is only one leaf of a larger branch, one part of a larger pattern.

Do not settle too soon on what the new direction will be, but use the signs instead as a time of trial and error, and of exploration. Test the waters; experiment; don't be afraid to make mistakes. This part of the process is like all the rest—a gradual one—though our tendency is, as always, to try to settle it too quickly.

It seems to be helpful to remember that we are allowing the working of a process that is deep inside us. We need to leave time to allow the new integration to take shape. It is a process that is deeper than our conscious mind can fathom. Something new is trying to reconstruct itself within us. We need to give it space and time. This does not mean waiting passively, but being awake and present to what is emerging.

I think the two polarities to be aware of are the need to be totally sure before acting, or the impulse to act quickly and grasp immediately for the new. Knowing our own propensities in these situations, we will know what to guard against.

On a practical level, this could be a time for reviewing the journaling that one has done during the transition. As the new direction begins to become clear, we may be able to see that there was an inherent order in the process even when we didn't realize it.

One of my clients, a man in his forties who was in a mid-life crisis, took one afternoon to reread his journal and was amazed to see that this time period, which had seemed so dark, so inchoate, so seemingly random, had a deep inner order. A thread had run throughout, yet in the moment, it had been impossible to see.

This kind of looking back strengthens one's faith in the wisdom of the psyche and in the process of growth, and gives one new strength to go through difficulties as well as to stand steadily by those who are going through something similar. It brings a faith based on life's experience that is much deeper than any theory or any model of the human psyche. I think it could be considered an aspect of mature wisdom.

Self-Care in the Global Context

This paper has been primarily focused on the process of transition for the individual, but I think as we understand this process and trust it more fully in ourselves, we can apply it to a larger transition, a larger change, that some say is happening today to all of humanity and to our planet earth. For surely, the signs of de-structuring are everywhere . . . and the signs of restructuring are few, though they do exist. But probably, we would be most accurate in saying that where we are as a whole is in the in-between time, where the old is no longer working, and the new is at best faint or perhaps not yet here. It is a time that tests one's faith. It is a time of fear, a time of knowing one's pain and outrage. It is a time of feeling one's despair.

If we look back to how we dealt with the time in-between in our personal crisis, what can we extrapolate that will be helpful for self-care during this global dark time?

For the individual, we said, it is a time to reassess values, to sort out priorities, to ask ourselves what is most important to us. Certainly, facing the possibility that we could destroy civilization as we know it through our own work has already forced many to ask what is important, and how much do we care about it.

It is a time for questions rather than answers. It is a time to guard against premature closure, oversimplified solutions, and systems which offer "the truth." It is a time to learn to balance effort and letting go, work and rest, trying and not trying, personal will and trust in a higher will. It is a time to do things carefully and with attention, not to be caught up in the adrenalin rush of over-activity and urgency, but to work steadily and carefully on the task-at-hand, which might be washing the dishes or putting a child to bed, or maybe re-editing a talk you gave a long time ago.

For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be, what is once well done is done forever. (Thoreau, later quoted by Gandhi)

It is a time for remembering the tall pine tree of our memory, and for knowing we can always climb into its branches and rest when we need to, thus opening ourselves to the deeper healing energies of the natural world of which we are a part. It is a time for knowing the limitations of our small mind and learning how to go beyond it, to turn inward, or upward as the case may be, and ask for help through meditation and prayer. We cannot do this alone.

It is a time to face the darkness, the winter in Linda Leonard's metaphor, the despair that Joanna Macy writes about, the grieving for the planet that Helen Caldecott spoke of. Allowing this brings us closer to our connection to all beings. For pain and sorrow exist in us because there is much suffering in the human family of which we are part. We feel it because we are related to all. It is a sign of our interdependence. It is the pathway to a greater love and a deeper healing.

This article was first written in 1984. It was updated in 2017 with an Author's Note and current biography added at that time. See following pages.

Author's Note, 2017

In 1983 there was an International Conference of Psychosynthesis in Toronto, Canada, and I was asked to give a keynote address on Psychosynthesis and Self-Care. I was 42 at the time and had been involved in Psychosynthesis since the early 1970's. Later the talk was edited into an article for a book of conference proceedings called, *Psychosynthesis in the Helping Professions: Now and for the Future* (1984). But what followed was truly a surprise. My article, "Self-Care During Dark Times," lived on long after the conference, and long after the publication of the book. It was copied and recopied and had an "underground" circulation that I was not even aware of at first.

For years—and it has been over thirty years now—I got calls from strangers who said, "I have this article, and I don't remember how I got it, maybe a friend gave it to me, and now I have another friend going through a hard time, and I want to give one to them." One said, "I can hardly read this, because it looks like it was copied so many times. Do you have a fresh copy?" Or a therapist, who had found me through the internet, would contact me and say, "I give this to my clients, but I need an original. I can barely read mine."

What I came to understand was that without knowing it, I had written something that would continue to be relevant to many people's lives as they went through difficult times. One day a woman came up to me at a wedding and said, "I've read your article, "Self Care During Dark Times." Do you know the book, *Descent to The Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women*⁸ by the Jungian analyst Sylvia Brinton Perera? It is what you have written about."

Again I was surprised, yet slowly began to see that by looking very closely at my own experience and that of my clients, I had written a psychological guide to what Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, and others like Sylvia Brinton Perera have called *the descent and return*, a powerful pattern of transformation within the psyche.

So is the paper still relevant? Yes, it definitely is.

As I write, it is October 2017. In this month, four major storms, three of them hurricanes, came ashore in this country, fires burned thousands of acres in California, mass shootings have become all too common. In Washington we see dishonesty, misogyny, political polarization, "fake news," and a total absence of mature leadership. Chaos reigns, and it is hard to find a steady place to stand, or adequate words for what is happening.

Joanna Macy, whom I quoted in the original paper, and who is still teaching and writing in her 80s, calls this time the "Great Unraveling." It would not be difficult to say we are in "Dark Times in America," and it affects us all. Yet, as I write again and again in the article, as things fall apart there is also room for the new to be born. I see evidence of this in many places, and it steadies my faith and gives me hope.

I take hope from the lives of my clients who are courageously facing themselves and the challenges of loss and disorientation that come in dark times. They are asking once again what really matters, and how can they each create lives that affirm and express what is most important to them. In the field of psychotherapy I see the new in the development of numbers of healing approaches to trauma, especially body-based, somatic oriented psychologies. I am comforted when I remember that meditation, mindfulness, and body/mind practices are available to the general public as never before.

I take great hope from a generation of young people leading the climate awareness movement worldwide. I take hope from The Women's March on January 21, 2017—the largest protest march in American history. It has given birth to unprecedented female-led activism. I take hope from the strength of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and a growing awareness among many people I know of our unearned white privileges. We are finally beginning to look at the presence of systemic racism in our country. I take hope from the power of the internet, which has been called by some “the nervous system of the planet.” As a European psychologist and colleague said to me recently, “with the internet we are now all neighbors.” It brings us communication and learning on a global level as never before in history, and of course brings problems and challenges as well as possibilities.

It is an extraordinary time we are living in. The earth is speaking. What are we each being asked to learn? The psyche within each of us is speaking as well, guiding us toward a stronger connection to our core Self, what some have called our Soul. Can we let the inner wisdom of the deepest places within us lead us to discover, and then take our place in the healing of this world?

Notes

¹ “Self-Care During Dark Times” was re-published in: Kuniholm, Jan (ed.), (2018) *Sharing Wellness, Psychosynthesis for Helping People: Theory and Applications, a Collection of Classic Articles*. Cheshire, MA. Cheshire Cat Books

² Jampolsky, Gerald G., (2010) *Love is Letting Go of Fear*. Berkeley, CA. Celestial Arts Publishing.

³ Bridges, William, (2004) *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Cambridge, MA. Da Capo Press.

⁴ Assagioli, Roberto, MD. (2010) *The Act of Will*. Amherst, MA. The Synthesis Center Press.

⁵ Haronian, Frank, PhD (1972) *The Repression of the Sublime*. New York. Psychosynthesis Research Foundation. Available as a download from The Synthesis Center at <http://www.synthesiscenter.org/PDFgallery.htm> download #0130.pdf

⁶ Rilke, Rainer Maria, (2012) *Letters to a Young Poet*. New York. Penguin Classics

⁷ Leonard, Linda, (1991) *The Wounded Woman: Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship*. Boulder, CO. Shambhala

⁸ Perera, Silvia Brinton, (1981) *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women*. Toronto: Inner City Books

Anne Eastman Yeomans, MA, LMHC is a psychotherapist in private practice in Shelburne Falls, MA. She has been a therapist and group facilitator for over forty years. In 1972 she studied in Florence, Italy with Roberto Assagioli, the founder of Psychosynthesis. Subsequently she was a teacher and trainer in Psychosynthesis for many years. The principles of Psychosynthesis continue to be the foundation that underlies all her work. She has also studied and trained in Gestalt therapy, Jungian dream work, women's spirituality, authentic movement, and meditation. The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh has been a very important teacher for her. Anne was one of the founders of The Women's Well in Concord, MA, (1994 to 2012), a center which was dedicated to circle work and to the healing and empowerment of women and girls (womenswell.org). She has facilitated countless women's circles in the US, and Canada, as well as in Europe and Russia. She has taught workshops on non-violence, reconciliation, and healing dialogue. In addition to her therapeutic work Anne is a poet, a gardener, a social activist, and a grandmother of five. She is married and has two grown sons. She lives in Colrain, Massachusetts.

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