



*Section One, Lesson Two:
The Gifts of Sensitivity and Anxiety*

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The Initiation of Relationship Anxiety

We're tested in many ways in this life. At each transition, each tenuous juncture where the familiar lifestyle, identity, thought processes or feelings fall away, we're offered an opportunity to face our small mind - our ego, programmed, fear-based self - and learn ways to bring compassion and curiosity to our inner world. In indigenous cultures, the male adolescent members are often initiated into manhood by venturing into the forest to face their physical and mental fears in solitude. Women are tested through the initiation of pregnancy, childbirth, and new motherhood. Marriages are tested when the build-up of unmet needs, fears or expectations - realistic or otherwise - reach a breaking point.

But it seems that the most common way that the modern mind is tested is through the onslaught of anxiety and panic. We can cruise through our lives for years, comfortably stuffing anything into the shadow spaces of our souls, but eventually the soul reaches capacity and the anxiety spills up and out into consciousness. This is when people find me, and it's most often around the excruciating initiation of relationship anxiety.

Relationship anxiety generally manifests in two ways, either of which can occur at any point in the relationship, from early on or years into marriage. The first brand of relationship anxiety occurs in a defining moment when the thought, "Do I love my partner enough or at all?" enters the person's mind. Prior to this thought, the person describes their relationship as "wonderful, loving, everything I've ever wanted, amazing love between us, and pretty much perfect." They often had a long honeymoon period and a very healthy relationship. The early stages of this type of relationship anxiety are characterized by the desperate need to "get back

the feelings," as the loss of the in-loveness feels like their heart has been cut out of their chest.

The second type of relationship anxiety occurs more gradually and may have even been present in the very early stages of the relationship. This type of anxiety is characterized by pervasive feelings of doubt, lack of attraction, the sense that you're really "just friends" and you're only staying in the relationship because you're too scared to be alone. This can be particularly disconcerting because, in a culture that exalts the in-love feelings as the sole indicator that you're with the "right" partner, the lack of those feelings in the beginning stages can easily spell doubt and doom (until you learn better).

The bottom line, the through-line between these two forms of relationship anxiety, is that anxiety is anxiety; it doesn't matter when or where it hits or even how it began. What matters is how you address it once it's here.

In either case (and if your anxiety falls somewhere between these two examples this applies to you as well; the ego is perpetually attempting to convince you that you're an exception :)), living with anxiety often plummets people into what is referred to as the "dark night of the soul." (More on this later in this section.) This is when everything familiar falls away and you're invited (or dragged) to let go of aspects of yourself that aren't serving you, die several deaths, and eventually emerge into a new, more compassionate, wiser version of yourself. You can resist the call. You can numb the pain. Or you can walk through the center of the fear-storm and surrender to the most transformational ride of your life.

The key defining factor between those who "pass" the test of relationship anxiety and move on to experience real love and sustaining joy in their relationships and

those who don't is the deep desire to learn about and address the fear. There are those who remain committed to the belief that they wouldn't be struggling so much with a different partner, which is really another way of abdicating responsibility for their fear-based and wounded self (more on this in the lesson on Projection). There are those who desperately want someone to fix it for them, some perfect therapist, psychic, or healer who will give them the answers and lift them out of their suffering. Again, this is another way a person remains a victim to their fear and refuses the call to become a fear-warrior.

And then there are those who take on the challenge. There are hundreds of fear-warriors on my e-course forum, women and men who are ready to attend to their inner worlds with complete responsibility and, in some cases, even a sense of adventure. Since you're here reading this, you've already taken the first step toward becoming a fear-warrior. Congratulations. This is no small feat as it requires jumping over some fear hurdles just to join a course like this.

Here's a recent post from an e-course member who is meeting the call (quoted with permission):

I was doing what my therapist told me not to do (good thing I never listen) and googling all sorts of crap 'what is love', 'I don't love my fiancé', 'falling out of love' etc, and stumbled upon one of Sheryl's blogs. I am, and always will be, grateful. I prayed the other night and thanked god for not granting me the wish 'Please take it away'. What I got instead was the means to take it away myself, meaning that I'll never be at sea again. I am my own saviour (with a little help from Sheryl) and that is the greatest gift I could receive. I saw a friend last night, a fellow 'crazy loon' as we call ourselves. She was amazed at the difference in me. I seemed calmer, in control, happier, more sure. Not sure of how much I love him, not sure

that I'm making the right choice, even. But sure that this is the loving choice. More sure that I know what love is. More sure that I have it within my power to change, and not be buffered by the winds of emotion. I've still got a loooooong way to go, but I know that I can get there. I accept the challenge – bring it on!

This is what it takes: the recognition that you, and you alone, can attend to your suffering, be your own savior, and the commitment to show up every day, several times a day, listening to what you're telling yourself, tuning in to how it makes you feel, and making a choice to ride compassion into the truth of loving thoughts. I'm thinking about several of my clients who engaged in similar levels of commitment and devotion to their inner work, sometimes dialoguing every hour to attend to the fear-based thoughts, stand up to them, make room for them, and replace them with the truth. If this isn't our modern day initiation process, I don't know what is. It's hard, yes. It's supposed to be hard. That's the definition of initiation.

Like all initiations, when we're in the thick swamp of fear and anxiety we have many, many moments where we feel like we can't go on. This is normal and it is the time to take a deep breath, sound the alarm to your circle of support (for many people on my e-course the forum is the only place they feel safe enough to talk about the depth of their anxiety surrounding their relationship and, as such, becomes their lifeline in the early stages), and then find the courage and strength to keep going. Often it's knowing that others have made it through and are now happily committed to their partners that provides this courage and strength. When we're enduring dark night of the soul, we need to know two things: that we're not alone and that there will be a light once we emerge through the dark forest.

The ego will, of course, try everything in its power to convince you to leave. The entire function of the ego/small mind is to avoid emotional risk at all costs and to protect you from the possibility of pain. There is nothing in our lives that creates more risk of emotional pain than intimate relationships with other human beings, and it's for this reason that the ego makes such a valiant effort to convince you to run. Just when your fear-warrior makes the commitment to face this battle, you'll often hear statements like, "You're only staying because you're too scared to be alone" or "You're not leaving because you're too scared to hurt him." Or, if the wedding plans are in motion, "You're staying because it's too hard to disappoint too many people." And if you Google about your thoughts (which I HIGHLY recommend you DO NOT), you'll find plenty of support on the side of the ego. Our culture generally doesn't understand relationship anxiety and adheres staunchly to the "doubt means don't" philosophy.

Are you ready to learn and grow? Are you ready to rise to the immense challenge of learning effective ways of addressing your thoughts and meeting your fear with compassion? Are you ready to become a fear-warrior? If you're here, it's likely because you've received the call. When you recognize that this call is an invitation that will help you grow, you'll see it as the blessing that it is and find the courage to dive in, sit in the darkness, and eventually emerge as a closer version of the person you're meant to be.

I know it may seem impossible now, at the starting gates of your journey, to think of your anxiety and sensitivity as gifts, but when you listen the the stories in the last section of this course you'll see that every single person expresses true gratitude to their anxiety for initiating them into this journey of healing and self-discovery. They were exactly where you are now. They took my e-course and listened to the original stories I included in the first version and never imagined

that they would be one of those people telling their story one day. They never thought they would get through their anxiety and feel love and clarity. Some of them had struggled with doubt for several years. They all believed that they were the “worst-case scenario” and that this work didn’t apply to them. They thought they were a fraud for even being here. Sound familiar? You’re in the right place. And if you stay with this, do the work, and learn to bring patience and compassion to yourself, you too will look back on your anxious, empty days with a sense of gratitude.

The journey starts here: recognizing how you’re wired, and why it is that so many people seem to breeze through relationships without a moment’s anxiety while you’re suffering like you’ve never suffered before. It starts with recognizing the gift of your sensitivity, a quality that, before now, you’ve probably thought of as only a burden. And it starts with beginning to reorient your mindset to see anxiety as the gift, the messenger that it is. Welcome.

PART ONE: THE GIFT OF SENSITIVITY

The Highly Sensitive Person

I'll never forget the day I was walking down 24th Street in San Francisco and I saw a book called "[The Highly Sensitive Person](#)" by Elaine Aron sitting in the store window. The title stopped me in my tracks and I thought, "Someone actually wrote a book about me?" I went inside, read the jacket, bought it, and devoured it in two days. Finally, someone had scientifically explained why I had always felt different, more sensitive than other people, more attuned to subtleties and nuances, and more prone to anxiety. On the home page of her website she offers the following bullet points about being highly sensitive:

- **Your trait is normal.** It is found in 15 to 20% of the population - too many to be a disorder, but not enough to be well understood by the majority of those around you.
- **It is innate.** In fact, biologists have found it to be in most or all animals, from fruit flies and fish, to dogs, cats, horses, and primates. This trait reflects a certain type of survival strategy: being observant before acting. The brains of highly sensitive persons (HSPs) actually work a little differently than others' brains.
- **You are more aware than others of subtleties.** This is mainly because your brain reflects more deeply on the information it processes. So even if you wear glasses, for example, you see more than others by noticing more.
- **You are also more easily overwhelmed.** If you notice everything, you are naturally going to be overstimulated when things are too intense, complex, chaotic, or novel for a long time.

- **This trait is not a new discovery, but it has been misunderstood.** Because HSPs prefer to look before entering new situations, they are often called "shy." But shyness is learned, not innate. In fact, 30% of HSPs are extraverts. Shyness has also been called inhibitedness, fearfulness, or neuroticism. Some HSPs behave in these ways, but it is not innate to do so and not the basic trait.
- **Sensitivity is valued differently in different cultures.** In cultures where it is not valued, HSPs tend to have low self-esteem. They are told "don't be so sensitive" so that they feel abnormal.

Does this sound like you? If you've found your way to my work it's highly likely you're an HSP. I'm often asked by my clients who are struggling through a transition - or through life, "Why aren't other people having a hard time with their relationship?" My answer used to be something along the lines of, "Everyone responds to relationship differently." But more and more I'm finding that there's a profile for the person who is affected deeply by life's challenges and especially relationships. Included in this profile, alongside being a perfectionist and a high achiever, is being a highly sensitive person (which also includes having a hard time making decisions).

Highly sensitive people are also more attuned to every possible scenario and have active imaginations, which makes us more prone to anxiety. This trait probably served us well when we were living in the bush and needed to alert the tribe when we sensed a tiger around the next bend. For our modern-day lives however, attuning to every possible danger usually lands us in a wasp's nest of anxiety as our highly imaginative minds spiral out into the black hole of "what-if?" thinking. One of the learning curves is to distinguish between areas where we do

need to follow our instinct to acquire more information, and areas where we need to let go.

I've come to see other characteristics that define high sensitivity:

- * You have been prone to worry your whole life. (See exercises in this lessons).
- * One or both of your parents were worriers.
- * You struggled with separation anxiety as a child, (and possibly still do).
- * You are deeply attuned to change of all kinds: birthdays, the passage of time, and death.
- * You had a fear of death as a child (and likely still do).

If this sounds like you, I encourage you to spend some time on Elaine Aron's site and take her [self-test](#). The more you understand yourself and the context in which you're struggling, the more easily you'll accept what's normal and be able to approach yourself with the compassion you need to move from anxiety to clarity and joy.

And if this doesn't sound like you, don't worry; that doesn't mean you're in the wrong place! Many people don't immediately identify as an HSP, but that doesn't mean they aren't one. And others truly aren't highly sensitive, but that doesn't mean that work doesn't apply. Remember, your ego will try to poke holes in this course all the way through to convince you that the real problem isn't that you're highly sensitive, or that you're not even dealing with anxiety, but that you're just in the wrong relationship. Keep a close eye out for this voice which masquerades closely as truth as the more you listen to it the more it will keep you stuck. (If there are true red-flag issues in your relationship, then your anxiety is a sign that

you need to pause and take stock. To read about red-flags go to lesson six of this section.)

As you read through the following articles, all of which focus on a particular aspect of the highly sensitive personality type, note which elements you identify with. The more you can embrace and name your sensitivity, the more readily you'll be able to see it as the gift that it is instead of the burden that it feels like.

I also want you to notice that it's NOT the *overly* sensitive person or the *too* sensitive person, as highly sensitive people were often called as kids. It's *highly* sensitive, which means that you're acutely aware of your inner and outer world in a way that others are not and that your nervous system registers stimulation with greater sensitivity. The word *overly* carries a judgmental overtone (we wouldn't call someone overly intelligent), while the word *highly* acknowledges the gift inherent in sensitivity.

In my work with anxiety, I primarily see what I call the "anxious-sensitive" personality type, and it's evident to me that these people are among the most introspective, conscientious, kind people in the world. Sensitivity is the gift; it morphs into anxiety when the gift isn't honored, when it's judged or squashed or made fun of in any way. If sensitivity was celebrated in our culture, children would learn to channel their sensitivity into creativity and spirituality, and self-trust would remain intact. We will be discussing this more throughout this section. For now, see if you can start to gently shift your mindset from one of self-judgement to one of self-acceptance.

From Anxiety to Serenity

At the core of anxiety is a fear of change, the fear of the unknown, the fear of being out of control, and the need for certainty. And when you simmer down all of these fears to their core essence, we come face to face with the fear of death.

When I talk with my clients about the fear of death we discuss it in both the ultimate terms - the end of life - and the day-to-day deaths that occur in everyday life. For the more highly sensitive you are, the more highly sensitized you'll be to the passage of time, feeling a pang of sadness around birthdays, holidays, and even the end of a day. I'll never forget the day [my highly sensitive son](#) approached me while I was writing at my desk and said, "Mommy, I feel sad because the second we just had will never happen again." He was about seven years old. And this is not an unusual level of sensitivity; I see it in my clients every day as they describe the fear of loss and generalized worry that accompanied them through childhood.

What's the medicine? Learning to ride the currents in the river of change that inform life on earth instead of resisting them. If you struggle with anxiety, you're also a highly sensitive and creative person. Instead of labeling the anxiety as "bad" or slapping an additional diagnosis across your forehead, a more compassionate approach encourages you to see your anxiety as a gift with a message embedded in the symptoms. This means that instead of judging your sensitivity as a negative trait, you begin to see the whole package of who you are as a gift and recognize one simple truth: If you're going to get through this life with grace, you have to find the willingness and the courage to *feel your painful or uncomfortable feelings*. The only way out is through, as we say in the world of psychology.

The river of life is comprised of the ever-changing flow of feelings. When you resist the feelings, you're resisting life and you then fear life, which means you fear death in everyday life. Pema Chodron says it beautifully:

All anxiety, all dissatisfaction, all the reasons for hoping our experience could be different are rooted in our fear of death. Fear of death is always in the background... Trungpa Rinpoche once gave a public lecture titled 'Death in Everyday Life.' We are raised in a culture that fears death and hides it from us. Nevertheless, we experience it all the time. We experience it in the form of disappointment, in the form of things not working out. We experience it in the form of things always being in a process of change. When the day ends, when the second ends, when we breathe out, that's death in everyday life...

Can you imagine how different your life would be if, every time you felt that pang of loss or sadness, instead of judging it as "overly-sensitive" you moved toward it with kindness? If you simply put your hand on your heart and said to yourself, "It's okay to feel sad. Sadness is a part of life." something inside of you would relax and a small space would open up. A collection of those small spaces leads to a state of acceptance where you're in alignment with life.

We carry so many fears about feeling pain, fears that arise from not learning how to move toward pain with compassion as kids. We fear that if we feel it, it will never end. We fear that it will overwhelm us and we'll die or go crazy. We fear that feeling our pain is for "sissies," that pain is a sign of weakness. We try to "buck up and get over it," but it doesn't go away. It squashes down into the hidden places of the heart and morphs into anxiety or depression. We long for serenity, freedom from the torture chamber of anxiety, worry, and intrusive thoughts, but find that it's continually just out of reach.

This is one of the pathways to serenity: allowing yourself to move toward the uncomfortable places - "the places that scare you," as Pema Chodron says. It's a courageous path, especially as it flies in the face of everything you learned as a child and everything the culture upholds as desirable qualities (i.e., being "tough"), but true healing always involves the courage to shed the habitual beliefs and actions that are keeping you stuck so that you can embrace the person you are meant to be.

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Separation Anxiety and the Fear of Death

Many of those who fall on the anxious-sensitive-creative spectrum find their way to my work describe a common experience: they struggled with separation anxiety as a child. When a client shares with me that she dreaded going to school, hated the beginning of each new school year, couldn't bear going to sleep-away camp or even a friend's house for the night, and struggled with the transition into college, I look at her with a smile and say, "You're in the right place." Alongside struggling with perfectionism, having difficulty making decisions, and being more exquisitely attuned to the emotional tenor of life, separation anxiety is part of the profile of most people who struggle with the myriad manifestations of anxiety.

Far from being something to feel ashamed of, I see separation anxiety as evidence that my clients as children had a healthy attachment style and were aware of the deeper, existential nature of our life on this planet. Usually the separation anxiety includes a loving relationship with their parents and the fear that, if separated, they or their parents will die. This isn't always the case, (sometimes they describe an unhealthy relationship with primary caregivers), but for the most part my clients echo each other to a tee: *I was always scared of death. I still think about death every single day. I was terrified of my parents dying when I was kid. I'm still scared of them dying (especially my mom). I've always had a hard time with changes and transitions. I used to cry on my birthday because I was getting older.* From being a sign of dysfunction, these statements are evidence of our most primal attachment needs, as Sue Johnson writes in *Hold Me Tight*:

"The need for safe emotional connection to a few loved ones is wired in by millions of years of evolution... Love is the best survival mechanism there is, and to feel suddenly emotionally cut off... disconnected, is terrifying." (pp. 46-7)

The fear of becoming separated from one's tribe is a primal fear that extends back to the days when we lived in the forests or in the wild. For if a young child became separated from his mother - his source of food, his tether to emotional sustenance and comfort, the person that would keep him physically safe within her fold - he could die. Even though kids know that they won't physically die when separated from a safe caregiver, it still *feels* like death. For this reason, separation anxiety is one of the most heart-wrenching feelings a child can experience, as it cuts to the core of their sense of survival.

Some of my earliest and most vivid memories are of crawling out of bed and dragging my green cotton sleeping bag with big pink flowers outside my parents door, where I would lay it out on the maroon shag carpet (yes, it was the 70s), snuggle in with my German Shepherd guardian angel, and go back to sleep. I desperately needed to feel closer to them, for even the short distance between my bedroom and theirs felt like a yawning chasm against the dark silence of night. Heeding the dire warnings of the day, they didn't allow me to come into their room with them, so I settled for as close as I could get and spent the night in a narrow hallway pressed against their door. (Years later, my mother wept when she read *The Continuum Concept* by Jean Liedloff and realized that my need to be close and her instinct to pull me into bed with her were healthy.)

The ramifications for how insidiously this culture messes with mother-instincts is far-reaching and dire. For when a mother denies her instincts, a child's innate ability to trust her own innate needs is interrupted and instead turns into shame.

"What's wrong with me for not being able to be at the birthday party like everyone else?" the child assumes when she cries at the door, holding onto her mother's skirts and begging her not to leave. The mother may long to stay with the child until she feels safe, which may mean for the entire party, but the voice of the culture emanating through the projected judgement of the other mothers pierces her heart, and she walks away. Both mother and child are in agony, both denying what they know is needed: attachment and connection until the child feels safe enough to be on her own.

This doesn't apply to all children, of course. Many kids are just fine separating and joining the party or running off for the first day of school. But for those who aren't - the highly sensitive ones - we need to adopt a mindset that encourages parents to attune to the unique needs and rhythm of their child instead of following the herd. We need to stop telling parents that they're "coddling" their child when they stay closer for longer. We need to stop judging kids for being "too sensitive" and instead recognize that, for the highly sensitive child, being separated isn't just a minor incident, but literally feels like their organs are being turned inside out, the emptiness and loneliness are so great that it feels like death.

It makes sense, then, that this separation anxiety would be activated around major transitions as an adult, like going to college, starting a new job, moving, and getting married. What remains unhealed inside of us will release around similar events, so with each separation the original wound around separation is reactivated. The work is to learn to repair that sense of separation and disconnect by growing our own loving adult self, learning to connect to the invisible cosmic web that is beyond death, and, when possible, attach firmly to safe others.

It's not a parents' job to attend to that high need for contact every second of the day and night. One of the things I'm teaching my older son, now that he's ready to separate more but still feels the disconnect and loneliness, are tools and practices for connecting to his own source of guidance and comfort. I teach him visualizations and meaningful rituals that can help anchor him into the greater flow of life, the sense of oneness that lives inside and all around him. My husband and I have been *source* for him for many years, and we know we can't continue to be the only tether and anchor. So, over time, hopefully he will learn to anchor into the well of his own being.

We all must do this. We all must attend to the empty and scared places inside of us, the holes and wounds that we carry into adulthood by virtue of being sensitive souls whose needs weren't quite met. This isn't an exercise in blaming parents at all, for as I said, most of my clients who describe this experience of intense separation anxiety and fear of death had basically loving parents. Rather, it's a recognition that, even in the most healthy of homes, the culture that we live in fails to hold us in the bigger web: to teach us the skills and rituals that will tether us to a sense of oneness, to guide us to attend lovingly to our big feelings, and to encourage us to attach to healthy and loving others. Ultimately this is what needs to happen to repair the fear of death. It's no small task, but it's doable and necessary if we are to live in the fullness of life.

Social Anxiety or Introvert?

We live in a diagnosis-happy era. We diagnose kids in school who have a hard time sitting still and focusing as having attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). We diagnose people who struggle with intrusive thoughts as having obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). And we diagnose people who shy away from large groups or prefer their own quiet company as having social anxiety disorder.

Do you hear the common word in all of these diagnoses? It's disorder. Disorder, meaning something out of order. Disorder, meaning something is wrong. While a proper diagnosis is helpful when dealing with severe mental illness, for the vast majority of people receiving a diagnosis is confirmation that something is "wrong." And since most people already live with the sense [that there's something wrong or broken inside](#), an unnecessary diagnosis only serves to corroborate an already false belief.

We're now learning that in most cases where there's been a diagnosis, there's actually nothing wrong other than people being crammed into a system or way of being that is antithetical to who they naturally are.

For example, a kid who needs to move while learning can be called an "experiential learner" and moved into a classroom environment that honors his type of learning. Alternatively, he can be labeled, diagnosed and medicated, thereby disrupting and dishonoring his natural rhythm and learning type and communicating the belief that there's something wrong.

Likewise, someone who doesn't enjoy big groups and delights in their own company can be seen as an introvert, or they can be held up against the extroverted ideal of the culture, and diagnosed as having social anxiety disorder. When clients come to me and say, "I have OCD," my hair bristles. But when they say, "I get nervous in big groups; I think I have social anxiety," my entire being balks. I will then ask a few poignant questions:

1. Do you enjoy spending time with a close friend or a very small group of intimate friends? (Yes)
2. Do you enjoy your own company? (Yes)
3. Do you need time to recharge on your own, especially after spending time in a group? (Yes)
4. Do you do your best thinking by yourself? (Yes)
5. Do you enjoy shorter events out in the world? (Yes)

If this list describes you, there's nothing "wrong" with you. You're not disordered. You may not fit into the mainstream way, and you've likely spent a lifetime trying to contort yourself to fit into the mainstream way, but just because it's not your way doesn't mean there's anything wrong or disordered. You're an introvert. A beautiful, sensitive, thoughtful, analytical introvert. The only thing "wrong" is that you don't fit into the extroverted ideal of the culture.

Susan Cain describes the consequences of being an introvert living in a culture that reveres the extroverted ideal so beautifully in her book, [Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking](#). Here she says:

It makes sense that so many introverts hide even from themselves. We live in a value system of what I call the Extrovert Ideal — the omnipresent belief that the

ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight ... Introversion, along with its cousins sensitivity, seriousness and shyness, is now a second-class personality trait, somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology.

What would happen if we stopped trying to squeeze people into one definition of "normal" — the one-size-fits-all approach that expects everyone to love big parties, drinking, and sporting events? What would happen if we honored each person's individual rhythm around how they learn, play, speak, spend their time, and socialize? What would happen if we recognized that there are many ways to thrive in this world and many ways to function socially?

We would bring a big and much-needed dose of acceptance to at least a third to half of the population, and the world would be a very different place, indeed.

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Travel Anxiety

In our culture that upholds the extrovert ideal as the pinnacle of a life fully lived, I often hear from clients who share that they often feel shame when they don't fit the mold. I hear from clients in their 20s who feel like they "should" enjoy going to parties and drinking alcohol; clients in their 30s who feel like they "should" have unequivocal clarity about wanting to have a child; and clients of all ages who fall into the belief that they "should" enjoy traveling.

While traveling can be exciting and eye-opening, it can also be quite grueling, especially for the highly sensitive and introverted temperaments. One of the hallmarks of highly sensitive people is having difficulty with change, and there are few experiences more disruptive than leaving the comfort zone of home, the familiarity of your bed and routines, the place where your roots extend down into the earth, and by extension, your soul finds rest. Highly sensitive people thrive when they know what to expect and struggle in the face of uncertainty. Travel can put this challenge right in your face.

If you're traveling across many time zones, you'll also be dealing with the often-unnerving experience of jet lag. Your physical self will be disrupted in all ways, food, exercise, and sleep all turned on their heads. The typical person can easily roll with the punches and find her/his flow. But for the highly sensitive person, these disruptions can create such disequilibrium inside that a state of anxiety often follows.

Traveling can also stir up old abandonment trauma. When you travel, you pull yourself out of your comfort zone and plop yourself into completely unfamiliar territory. As such, it can trigger visceral, preverbal reminders of early birth trauma,

sleep trauma, and separation anxiety. Who talks about this layer of travel? It's certainly not discussed in the guidebooks.

Similarly, if you're an introvert the common sightseeing model of "go go go" won't work for you. You need time every day to turn inward, time to be alone (if possible), time to be, to lie by the pool or curl up with a good book in your hotel room. I've noticed that alongside the more commonly understood temperaments of extroverts and introverts, there are also "do-ers" and "be-ers": people who enjoy being on the move and staying busy and those who prefer to sit in the grass and smell the flowers. Neither is worse or better than the other, but the challenges arise when you don't honor your rhythm and/or when you're partnered with someone with the opposite rhythm. And, as life is designed to help us grow our inferior functions, I've noticed that do-ers and be-ers often partner up. So the challenge with travel - and, at times, with a shared life - is to find that middle ground where your need to be is balanced by your partner's need to do.

A significant portion of the healing process is undoing the beliefs you absorbed regarding what defines worthiness. Well-meaning teachers and parents, in their attempt to create a well-oiled machine of school or family life, are quick to overlook a particular child's needs and rhythm because it causes an inconvenience to the whole. As a result, most kids are squished into a box that doesn't meet their needs and transmits the belief that they're not okay as they are. They're pushed into activities, sleep patterns, or social situations, a subtle form of trauma can occur. It's not the trauma of a car accident or an abusive parent, but it's a slow-building, daily trauma that, over the eighteen years of dependency, create a pervasive running commentary that says, "I'm not right in some way and my needs don't matter."

The good news is that this belief can be reversed and healed when you learn to show up for yourself as the loving inner parent that you never had. A loving inner parent slows down long enough to listen closely to feelings, thoughts, and needs. A loving inner parent takes time each day to listen carefully and watch closely for symptoms and signs that something is awry in their child - or in your inner self. So if you are traveling, be sure to take time both before the trip and during it to ask yourself what you'll need to feel safe on the trip. And keep in mind that travel isn't necessarily something to be avoided. In fact, like all transitions, when approached consciously and with a great deal of self-compassion, it can offer profound opportunities to heal.

Again, the path of self-acceptance doesn't mean that you avoid uncomfortable situations and only live within your comfort zone. It means that you push yourself slightly beyond your comfort zone and meet whatever you find there with love.

Absorbing Other People's Lives

One of the most common symptoms of relationship anxiety - and anxiety in general - is taking on others' stories as your own. You'll be moving along just fine in your relationship and then you'll hear about your friend's husband who cheated on her or another friend who developed a crush on her co-worker or someone else who developed a life-threatening illness and you'll spin out in a tizzy of, "What if that happens to me?" The next thing you know you're in a full-blown panic and then the protective projections start, where your defenses of, "I don't really love him." or "I'm not attracted enough." or "What if I die?" jut up to fortify your heart and try to keep you safe.

There are many root causes to the tendency to absorb other people's lives. Let's examine a few:

1. You're a highly sensitive person:

If you're a highly sensitive person - and the vast majority of people who find their way to my work tend to be on the sensitive-anxious spectrum - you are naturally wired to be more sponge-like than the average person. While someone else with a hardier temperament can hear a painful story and let it roll off her back, you are neurologically wired to take on other people's pain. Does this mean you're destined to a life of over-active empathy? No, but it does mean that you have to work very hard to recognize this tendency and then take the actions that will help you temper it, which means developing a stronger sense of self.

This is also why it's important to stay away from the news. You're too absorbent and, especially until you develop a stronger sense of Self and fill your well, you

will be too porous to fend off the negativity. It's also important that you guard your downtime and ask yourself if signing onto Facebook - a cesspool for comparing yourself to others - is a loving and nourishing action.

The quick-guide to breaking through and recovering from intrusive thoughts is to recognize that they are flares from your inner self inviting you to attend to the more vulnerable realm of feeling. So the question to ask that breaks through the hamster wheel of manic thought is, "What is this thought protecting me from feeling?" Even if you can't name the feeling, just placing your hand on your heart and inviting your attention to shift from your head to your body can help you create new neural pathways that will encourage you to connect to the underlying feeling. If you can then let yourself feel it and breathe into it, the thoughts will disintegrate even more.

2. You tend to externalize your sense of Self:

We are culturally conditioned to abdicate our intrinsic knowledge of our needs, preferences, and rhythms very early in life. We're told that "other people know better" and learn at a young age to distrust even basic needs, like when we're hungry or our natural sleep rhythm. We also learn to believe that our self-worth is a function of externals: looks, achievements, clothes, degrees, what your partner looks like, and how much money you make. When you believe that your sense of authority, agency, and self-worth resides in other people's hands, it's a natural extension to believe that their life is your life.

The antidote is to learn how to repair your damaged self-trust by embarking on a dedicated journey of self-discovery where you remember - or learn about for the first time - how you're naturally wired and begin to reconnect to your intrinsic

sense of self-worth. From there you will more effortlessly connect to the crystal compass of self-trust that allows you to make decisions and navigate your life according to your terms as opposed to comparing yourself to someone else's idea of what you "should" be doing or feeling or experiencing. When you re-wire your inner navigation systems you can hear a story about someone else's life and think, "Oh, that's their story; it doesn't have to be mine." You can also connect more readily to the underlying feeling that hearing the story evokes, thereby connecting on a heart level with compassion instead of usurping the story as yours.

3. You had an enmeshed relationship with one of your primary caregivers growing up, most likely your mother:

For many people who take on others' lives as their own, the common theme can be traced back to an enmeshed relationship with their mother. This means that you likely had a mother who didn't have a full well of Self and so looked to you to fill it. Your pain became her pain; your joy was her joy. You were, in essence, her Self externalized into the body of you. For example, I've heard many stories about mothers who became sick for weeks when their daughters broke up with a boyfriend, reacting to their daughter's life as if it's happening to her. This may sound extreme, but it's just one example of the consequences of an enmeshed primary relationship. Later in life, you re-enact this template and take on other people's stories as yours.

The healing work is to learn how to fill your inner well of Self so that you know who you are *and* learn how to create a loving and solid boundary around yourself so that you don't absorb others' lives. With those two healing actions in place, you'll be able to hear a painful or scary story and respond from an empathic yet

unwaveringly clear place inside of you. You are solid inside: the waters of your inner well are deep, warm, and clear. You are connected to your body as a source of guidance and wisdom. You are like a cat in the wild, trusting her step and ready to explore with great curiosity all that this world has to offer. This is what it means to know yourself, love yourself, and trust yourself.

PART TWO: THE GIFT OF ANXIETY

From Anxiety to Creativity and Spirituality

My clients and course members are some of the wisest, most compassionate, creative, kind, and loving people with whom I've ever come into contact. They're interesting, intelligent, introspective, and curious. Are there any adjectives I've left out?! Oh, just one: they're also the most anxious.

It's an interesting paradox of life that opposites are often paired together: We cannot have daytime without night or light without darkness. Spring and summer cannot exist without autumn and winter. We cannot feel true joy without opening our hearts to pain, grief, and loss. And the multi-dimensional richness of human beings generally includes straddling the apparent opposites of the positive characteristics I've listed above with the darker territories of the human psyche.

And now I'm about to contradict myself: anxiety, instead of being a permanent state of psyche, is a doorway into deeper growth and expanded consciousness. In my younger years I used to believe that the angst-filled artist was an inevitable and unchanging fact; in other words, that true creativity didn't exist without suffering. I no longer ascribe to this limiting belief but instead see that creativity can be linked to emotional health and the ability to tap into a spiritual wellspring. Has beautiful art emerged from suffering? Yes. But perhaps those pieces of artwork were stepping stones along the route to health, necessary expressions of a stage of that artist's emotional growth and that as the artist's inner world evolved, the artwork would evolve as well.

Anxiety is not a fixed state but rather is closely linked to the creative and spiritual realms. Like two sides of the same coin, most anxious types learn, after uncovering self-limiting false beliefs and replacing them with the truth, that they can transpose their anxiety into creativity/spirituality. (I'm including creativity and spirituality as one unit as I believe they exist on a continuum as well.) Living with anxiety is like living in a hell-realm, but when you find the courage to discover the root causes of the anxiety, which are usually linked to false beliefs about self-worth, how safe it is to feel your feelings, and the truth about love, the anxiety's gifts are revealed.

I've never met a highly anxious person that wasn't also highly sensitive. It's for this reason that the following quote often comes to mind, not only in working with my clients but also in parenting my son and understanding myself and my closest loved ones.

“The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death. Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create -- so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, his very breath is cut off from him. He must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency he is not really alive unless he is creating.”

- Pearl S. Buck

What if, as a child, your intense sensitivity had been honored instead of squashed? What if you had had an emotional guide, someone to say, "It's okay to feel," and then taught you simple ways to manage the huge feelings that were

coursing through your body? What if you had been taught to express yourself fully, through tears, through art, through woodworking, through whatever passion wanted to be unleashed?

And that's a key component of inner healing work: to becoming the loving mother and father that you never had. (And this isn't about vilifying your parents; they did the best they could.) It's about holding that young, exquisitely sensitive child in your arms and saying, "It's okay to feel anything you need to feel." It's about being a loving guide and an emotional mentor *to yourself*, so that you teach your inner child that feelings are just feelings, they can't swallow you up or kill you, and that the difficult ones will pass just as the pleasant ones do.

The more I work with my clients the more I'm convinced that an aspect of anxiety stems from the young, terrified child who lives inside all of us screaming out for attention in the only way she or he knows how. Since she was never offered words to articulate her experience, her painful feelings mutate into a thought like, "What if I'm gay?" or "What if I abuse my child?" or "What if I don't love my partner enough?" or into addictions to food, alcohol, media, or drugs. It's often during transitions, when the defensive veils are softened to reveal the vulnerable and emotional places inside, that the latent anxiety rises to the surface. The scared child, feeling out of control, alone, and overwhelmed by the negative [running commentary](#) that you've been telling her/him for years, screams out through the body and stops eating, sleeping, and functioning.

And that's when the real work begins. That's when, in the darkest night you've ever known, you reach out for information, support, and guidance. That's when you learn, for the first time in your life, that real change only happens once you take full responsibility for your emotional well-being, which requires nothing short

of a fierce, daily commitment to exploring the false beliefs and negative thoughts that you're telling yourself from morning until night. That's when you peel back the layers of fantasy and realize that no one can save you, rescue you, or fix you; it's up to you and you alone to do the work that must be done to heal and find wholeness, fulfillment, and joy - possibly for the first time in your life.

I also incorporate a strong creative element into my work with clients. As I said, most highly anxious types are also highly creative and, given the right tools and encouragement, can utilize their creativity to assist in their healing process as they cross the bridge from anxiety to creativity.

If you're engaged in a creative project, remind yourself before you go to sleep and when you first wake up in the morning to focus on the project. You have more control over your thoughts than you think! You might not be able to control the first thought that enters your mind upon awakening (again, a time when the veils are lifted and a common time to experience anxiety), but you can control how you respond to the first thought and choose what your second thought will be. If you're not engaged in a creative project, choose a spiritual mantra or comforting passage to memorize as your anti-anxiety spiritual medication. When you practice this enough, it will become second nature, much like finding that you have a song stuck in your mind.

When I'm writing a blog post or creating an e-course, I'll fall asleep and wake up with ideas percolating up from my unconscious. It's some of the most invigorating and fulfilling times of my life. When I don't have an article or creative project on hand, I'll learn a new Hebrew prayer or song and before I know it, I'm waking up with beautiful music and ancient words soothing my soul. When I forget to do my spiritual homework, I'm prone to anxious thoughts just like most of you. But, after

years of hard work, I'm able to catch the first thought and change its course fairly quickly.

People who are prone to anxiety often stay busy as a way to distract themselves from the anxious thoughts. My clients will often say, "My anxiety is worse in the morning or on weekends when I don't have much to do. An idle mind is the Devil's playground." Yes, busyness does keep the anxiety at bay, but it doesn't address the problem at the root. You can only keep yourself busy for so long before the anxiety resurfaces. You address the root cause by noticing the fear-based thoughts and false beliefs that are creating the anxiety, then replacing them with the truth and the good medicine of creativity and spirituality. In other words, it's not just about filling up your brain and time with trivial distractions but filling your soul with an antidote that will act as a balm to the anxious soul. We will explore this in depth in the next section.

What would you be doing with your time and energy if you weren't a victim to your anxiety? Anxiety is an energy drain and it zaps the soul of life-force, creativity, and a spiritual serenity. And yet (here's the contradiction again!), when you dive into the dark forest of anxiety you discover that it can be a doorway into creativity and spirituality. The key is in unveiling your sources of a solace - a poem, a mantra, a spiritual text, a song - and remembering that you have the will power to transpose the negative frequency of anxiety into the high frequency of creativity and spirituality.

I'll end with a poem I wrote at the height of my anxiety many years ago. Poetry, both writing and reading it, has been my solace since I first broke through to the dark layers of my unconscious as a teenager. This poem blew through me during an anxiety attack and helped me find peace each time I recited it in my mind:

*Poetry dissolves anxiety--
it sets my mind adrift in formlessness and
reminds my soul of what is it meant to be.
Poetry lulls me in her sea crest and upon her wing,
she opens
this seamless world
this fluid world, where
phrases drop whole as if from
cloud or sky.
I do not ask why--
knowing that when I
slip under the surface of things
the blue-scarved language blows away the peril,
like a wind it casts aside uncertainty and brings me
mouth to mouth with angels,
where I find that I can breathe.*

What does your anxiety want to say? Imagine there's a mouth on the tip of your anxiety and invite it to open, speak, pray, move. Let's hear its song.

The Diamond Inside of Anxiety

For the vast majority, relationship anxiety hits like a force from the underworld and literally pulls them from their high functioning, day-to-day life with a rush of terror into a hell-realm. Where they were once happily walking forward toward a stable life, they're now fraught with so much anxiety that it inhibits their ability to eat, sleep, and properly function. They fervently wish that the anxiety would vanish, mistakenly assuming that it's a sign that they're in the wrong relationship and that the only solution is to leave. That's when they google "relationship anxiety" or "doubt in relationship" or "how do you know if you're in love" and find their way here.

The first, and most essential step, in working through the anxiety is reversing the longing for it to disappear and recognizing that there is great wisdom encased inside the shell of misery. This is obviously a challenging mental shift to make; no one wants to live with the demon of anxiety and it's understandable that you would want it to vanish. But without the willingness to explore its roots and depths, there can be no true healing.

For most people, this requires removing a strong mental block of fear that says, "If I explore the anxiety, I'll discover that I don't really want to be in this relationship and I'll have to leave this person that I love." So the first step is finding the courage to learn whatever it is that is meant to be learned, to find the willingness to take responsibility for your well-being, your fear, your pain, your joy.

It's a strange and counter-intuitive statement, but what all of my clients eventually learn is that there is great wisdom living inside the fear-based thoughts and obsessional questions. In order to access this wisdom, it can be helpful to view

yourself as a hero or heroine embarking on what Joseph Campbell called, "The Hero's Journey." Then you will find the willingness to descend into the darker regions of your psyche and hold a flashlight of truth on what you find there. And here's a nugget of reassurance to counteract the fear of looking inside: what you find will have nothing to do with your partner and everything to do with you. You'll find a storehouse of unshed grief, a soft place of vulnerability like the underbelly of a shy sea-creature, a river of fear, a warehouse of false beliefs about love, marriage, romance, and intimacy. As you learn to attend to your difficult feelings and replace the false beliefs with the truth, you'll find a level of serenity, empowerment and healing that you never knew was possible. The anxiety that you're experiencing about your relationship isn't new and likely isn't the first time you've felt anxious in your life. If you're like most people who find me, you've battled with anxiety/worry periodically or consistently your entire life. Now is your chance to heal it.

The magic of this deep level of soul work is uncovering what it is that your soul is attempting to communicate. The soul longs for wholeness, aliveness, and serenity, but it doesn't always know how to attain these yearnings. Instead of asking directly for more aliveness, for example, we tend to project the desire onto our partner in the form of the thought: "He's not interesting enough." If we become stuck on this thought and believe it's the truth, we miss the rich opportunity to mine for the diamond inside the anxiety.

In order to crack through the anxious barrier and arrive at the diamond hidden inside, it's helpful to understand which questions are pointing to which diamonds. To facilitate this process, I've grouped the most common questions according to their positive function.

The Longing for More Aliveness and Creativity arrives in the form of:

- I'm bored.
- He's not intellectual enough.
- She's not funny enough.
- He's not social enough.
- All we do is sit around and watch TV; won't that lead to a boring marriage?

The Need for a Spiritual Connection that Helps you Accept Uncertainty arrives in the form of:

- What if I'm making a mistake?
- What if our marriage ends?
- What if this anxiety is a sign that I'm making a mistake and if we get divorced I'll regret not listening to myself?
- What if there's someone better out there?

The Longing for a More Integrated Relationship with your Own Inner Parent/Wise Woman or Man arrives in the form of:

- I'm lonely.
- He/she should make me feel whole.
- I'm not happy (and therefore it's his/her fault).
- What if I'm not ready to get/be married?
- What if I jumped into this relationship too quickly after my last one ended?
- What if I'm only with him because I'm scared to be single?

The Soul's Need to Develop More Compassion, Tolerance, and Self-Love arrives in the form of:

- I'm not attracted to him.
- I can't stand the way he chews.

- I can't stand the way she laughs.
- He's not social enough.
- He's shorter than I am.
- He's not fit enough.

The Need to Develop of a Truthful Understanding of Love and Marriage arrives in the form of:

- What if I don't love him enough?
- What if something changes, we grow apart, and our marriage ends?
- I don't feel butterflies every time he walks in the door; that must mean there's something wrong.
- We only have sex ___ times a week/month.
- I don't miss him like crazy when he's away.
- I enjoy spending time on my own; shouldn't I want to spend every second with her?

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but I hope you can start to see my point. When you address the anxiety from this perspective and approach it every day with a curious mind, you will start to break through its shell and arrive at your kernels of wisdom.

Anxiety: A Portal to Serenity

On the other side of anxiety lives serenity. When you walk into the forest and face the fear-vines of your mind - swashbuckling at first then sitting down in the glade and simply watching - you eventually unfold into an open field. You cannot know this until you walk through it. Fear is the test. It's the revolving door. On one side is anxiety and on the other side is the peace and tranquility of your true nature.

It's difficult to realize when you're in the stronghold of anxiety that what lives on the other side is serenity. In fact, until you've walked through the revolving door of anxiety and greeted serenity on the other side, you don't realize that anxiety and serenity are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Just like darkness and light share a sector of psyche and grief and joy share a chamber of the heart, anxiety and serenity are twin experiences, meaning that the more you walk through the challenging twin the more you touch into the calm one.

What does this mean exactly? It means that there are pathways in the mind and heart that are connected. We call this a paradox in our culture: the puzzling experience of holding two conflicting emotions and realizing that in some inexplicable way they are interconnected. It's the dot of light within the yin and the dot of darkness within the yang. We could say that our entire existence on this plane is rooted in a desire for wholeness, and that this longing for wholeness informs most, if not all, aspects of our existence. The way to wholeness is in embracing the tension of opposites. We hold grief in one hand and joy in the other and open to a spaciousness inside that arises from this holding. We walk through the door of anxiety and open to a field of serenity.

If you're feeling trapped in the tangle of anxiety you're probably wondering... yes, but how? How do I untangle myself and walk through that magic door? You fight it and resist it and medicate it and still it plagues you. You ignore it and hate it and judge it and shame it and it grows bigger.

The key is to stop resisting. Stop fighting. Stop running from [the places that scare you](#). It's like the finger puzzle where you put one finger in each side and try to pull them out. The harder you pull, the more stuck your fingers become. Only when you relax can you release the stronghold.

Jeffrey Brantley talks about this principle at length in his book, [*Calming Your Anxiety Mind: How mindfulness and compassion can free you from anxiety, fear and panic*](#):

"There is a capacity inside each of us to be calm and stable. We are capable of containing even the most intense fear and anxiety. This capacity is not something you can think about and understand. It is a direct experience that is always available. It is not a destination but a way of being." (p. 7)

"This is where mindfulness practice is so important. When you practice mindfulness, you make the decision to stay present and examine your own unfolding inner experience. Attention is poured into your interior landscape. You turn toward fear and anxiety, toward thoughts and sensations as objects of your kind attention. You don't expect to fix anything as you pay attention this way. All that is asked is that you bring compassionate attention to what you are experiencing, moment by moment..."

"From this perspective of the mind-body interaction, now there is a break in your identification with the experience of anxiety - both the physical and cognitive aspect of it. Mindful attention breaks the cycle of thoughts fueling the fear system. It also gives the balancing activity, the relaxation response, a chance to activate. And by breaking the identification with the fearful thoughts, mindfulness support the natural capacity of the higher cortical centers to contextualize and interpret the situation correctly. They can do their usual job of turning down the fear system by acting on the amygdala." pp. 53-54

What he's saying here (and I'll be speaking in depth on mindfulness later in the course) is that when you develop a mindfulness practice, you grow your mental muscle that allows you to observe rather than get hooked into every thought and feeling that passes through consciousness, and through this observation you develop your capacity to witness. Once you're in your witness self, you're no longer fused with the fear and anxiety. This "break in identification" then calms your system and helps restore equilibrium.

The fear that lives in the body cannot be talked through or convinced. It's bigger than thought. If it originates in the body then it must be addressed in the body. And the more you fight it, the bigger it gets. When fear hits, adrenaline is released – a fear response. The antidote to the flood of fear is learning to activate a calming response, which is what mindfulness teaches. When you bring your loving attention to *what is* in the moment, the opposite chemical is released. It's all chemistry, really. And what I've noticed is that it's not only mindfulness but also connection to spirit in any form – music, nature, prayer, poetry – that activates the calming response.

A big part of the work for someone suffering from anxiety, panic and phobias is learning what activates their own calming response. And it's not about trying to avoid the fear by connecting to spirit; the fear cannot be avoided. One has to walk into the center of the fear with mindfulness and then connect to spirit.

And this is why anxiety is a portal to serenity: you walk through the darkness and arrive at light. And it's only by going through - not around or above or below - that you can touch into that space of light.

There's nothing easy about this. When you're in the throes of an anxiety or panic attack, it feels like you're going to die or go crazy (the two most common fears that show up in the midst of an attack). It requires great mental discipline not to get hooked into the thoughts, feelings, and sensations but to step back enough to observe and say,

"My throat is constricting. My mouth is dry. These are symptoms of fear but they're not going to kill me. I feel like I can't breathe. My chest is tight. More signs of fear. I'm scared. My body is in a fear response but if I can notice it then there's a part of me that's not it. I'm noticing my thoughts now. My thoughts say that I'm going to die. I can choose to hear that but I don't need to heed it. I can also focus on the warm blanket around me or the stars outside my window."

We no longer live in communities where we're invited to walk through rites of passages that challenge our fears. In lieu of this, I've often wondered if our psyches have created our own, self-induced opportunities to learn how to face fear, to initiate us into deeper levels of awareness and courage. In other words, we're not sent out into the dark forest alone to face the wild animals, but if you're been taken down by anxiety you're encountering the wild animals in the dark

forest of your own mind. It seems that much of our path in this life is to learn how to manage and master fear, which means walking through it until we arrive on the other side.