Section One, Lesson Three: Dark Night of the Soul
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What is Dark Night of the Soul?

If we’re lucky, we all come to a time when life as we’ve known it falls away and an invitation to birth a new way of living and being with ourselves, with others and in the world is born. I say “if we’re lucky” because I’ve seen both personally and professionally - in my own life, with my friends, and with my clients - that when we are plunged into the depths of dark night of the soul, the life that is birthed on the other side is infinitely richer, more meaningful, and more aligned with our true selves than it was before we tumbled.

Here’s how Elizabeth Lesser explains dark night of the soul in her book, “Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow” (I do NOT recommend this book while suffering from relationship anxiety):

“The transformational journey is a voyage with a hundred different names: the Odyssey, the Grail quest, the great initiation, the death and rebirth process, the supreme battle, the dark night to the soul, the hero’s journey. All of these names describe the process of surrendering to a time of great difficulty, allowing the pain to break us open, and then being reborn - stronger, wiser, and kinder. Every religion includes in its texts stories of descent and rebirth. From Jonah in the whale to Jesus on the cross, and from the Hindu hero Arjuna on the battlefield to the prince Siddhartha losing everything to become the Buddha, the great ones have gone before us on this journey. When Bill Moyers asked Joseph Campbell about the hero’s journey, Campbell said, “A legendary hero is usually the founder of something - the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion, the founder of a city, the founder of a new way of life.”

“In response, Moyers asked, “But doesn’t that leave all the rest of us ordinary mortals back onshore?”
“I don’t think there is any such thing as an ordinary mortal,” Campbell answered. “I always feel uncomfortable when people speak about ordinary mortals because I’ve never met an ordinary man, woman, or child… You might say that the founder of a life - your life or mine - if we live our own lives, instead of imitating everybody else’s life - comes from this quest as well.”

“I have my own name for the quest. I call it the Phoenix Process - in honor of the mythic bird with the golden plumage whose story has been told throughout the ages. The Egyptians called the bird the Phoenix and believed that every five hundred years he renewed his quest for his true self. Knowing that a new way could only be found with the death of his worn-out habits, defenses, and beliefs, the Phoenix built a pyre of cinnamon and myrrh, sat in the flames, and burned to death. Then he rose from the ashes as a new being - a fusion of who he had been before and who he had become. A new bird, yet ever more himself; changed, and at the same time the eternal Phoenix…

“You and I are the Phoenix. We too can reproduce ourselves from the shattered pieces of a difficult time. Our lives ask us to die and to be reborn every time we confront change - change within ourselves and change in our world. When we descend all the way to the bottom of a loss, and dwell patiently, with an open heart, in the darkness and pain, we can bring back up with us the sweetness of life and the exhilaration of inner growth. When there is nothing left to lose, we find the true self - the self that is whole, the self that is enough, the self that no longer looks to others for definition, or completion - or anything but companionship on the journey.
“This is the way to live a meaningful and hopeful life - a life or real happiness and inner peace. This is the Phoenix Process.

“To start a fire you need a spark - an ember, or a match, or the steady and stressful rubbing of one object over another. Once the fire is ignited, you need a different sort of heat to turn the flames of adversity into the wisdom of the Phoenix Process. We all experience change and loss throughout our lives - through big and dramatic life-quakes and in smaller, more habitual ways. It takes work to use a crisis and stress as vehicles for transformation.” (pp. 55-56)

That’s what your relationship anxiety and intrusive thoughts are offering you: an opportunity to transform yourself. You may not know what needs transformation, but if you dive into this work, you will discover treasure boxes full of gems that you didn’t even know were there.

It’s not easy getting through a dark night. As Lesser says, it requires work to alchemize the stress of the challenges into the gold of transformation. For birthing ourselves anew requires nothing less than an ego-death, a willingness to die to a layer of the beliefs, habits, and actions that are no longer serving us. And who wants to die? Nobody and nothing. Death is terrifying on every level: metaphorically, psychologically and literally (more on the fear of death in Section 2). And I would say it’s probably scarier for those who fall on the anxious-sensitive-creative spectrum because their awareness of death, change, and loss is more acute. So we hear the call, we feel the death of self happening, and yet we claw against it in a frantic fight to hold onto what’s known and familiar.

It can be extremely helpful to contextualize the depth of your struggle so that you can anchor yourself into where you are now — dying to old beliefs, pain,
expectations, etc. — and orient toward where you are going. For if we don’t know that this pain and hard work will result in a more meaningful and beautiful life, what’s the point? A dark night of the soul is a transition like any other, which means we must remember that the death of the autumn stage leads us into the liminality of winter and then into the rebirth of spring (more on this in the next article). Holding on to this context can serve as a lifeline when we’re pulled into the tumultuous stage of letting go, and can facilitate our process of letting go.

What is it that is no longer serving you at this juncture in your life? Why has the anxiety about your relationship pushed you into so much pain that you’re here, reaching out for help, trying to pick your way to stable ground? You will hear me say this many times throughout this course: there is a message embedded inside your anxiety. In fact, there is probably more than one. Chances are high that this isn’t the first time in your life that you’ve struggled with anxiety, depression, or low self-worth. Chances are high that you’re someone who fears change and death, who comes from a family of sensitive, over-thinkers whose sensitivity has morphed into anxiety. Living with these thought-patterns and behaviors is no longer serving you, and it’s time release them, attend to and let go of the old pain, and step into a new way of living your life that will bring you more acceptance and, thus, serenity.

This will all become more clear as you work your way through the course. For now, remind yourself that there is a purpose to all of this. You aren’t being singled out or punished. If fact, your anxiety and your plunge into dark night are gifts - as every single person interviewed for this course mentions in their story. It’s hard to see it now, but I promise you you will see it one day soon. As Rumi writes: “The wound is the place where the light enters you.” In other words, we must crack open so that the light can find us. You are being cracked open now.
The remaining articles in this section will help you embrace the gifts of dark night of the soul. This means understanding transitions, learning to embrace your anxiety, moving toward your fear, recognizing the times when your unconscious speaks most clearly (first thing in the morning or in the middle of the night), and offering you lifelines so that you can open to the grace that is longing to guide you toward greater healing and wholeness.
An Overview of Transitions

Since you’re likely in a dark night of the soul, which is a transition from brokenness to healing, it’s helpful to arm yourself with a context for transitions. This will also help you understand yourself and bring compassion to the other transitions in your life that you may have struggled with (because remember that sensitives often struggle with change of all kinds).

Whether moving to a new city or having a baby, changing careers or going through a break-up, transitions are a part of life. While in the midst of change, even if the change is toward something joyous and positive like a wedding or moving into your dream house, it is normal and healthy to feel:

- grief/heartbreak
- confused
- angry/enraged
- disoriented
- scared/terrified
- numb
- lonely
- vulnerable

What most people lack around transitions is basic information that could help them to contextualize these emotions, make sense of them, and move through them effectively. Culturally, we focus on the externals of a transition – planning a wedding, buying the car seat, packing the boxes – to the exclusion of the inner realm. While the externals are important, when we bypass working consciously with the emotions activated during transition, we decrease our chances of adjusting to the new life as cleanly and gracefully as possible. This can have
long-term negative consequences not only during the transition at hand but for our lives in general.

Every transition involves passing through three phases:

• **Letting Go** – During which we separate from the old life, grieve the losses, express and explore fears and expectations about the new life. In the context of a dark night of the soul, this stage is about letting go of thought-patterns, expectations, fantasies, habits, and defense mechanisms that are no longer serving you.

• **In-between or Liminal** – During which we’re in the liminal (limbo) zone of transition – detached from the old life and mindsets but not yet established in the new one – a highly uncomfortable place characterized by feeling numb, disoriented, depressed, and out of control. Regarding relationship anxiety, this is often experienced when you begin to let go of your beliefs around love and romance but haven’t quite settled into the new way of thinking.

• **Rebirth** – In which we embrace the new life, identity, and way of thinking, and feel confident, comfortable, and excited about the possibilities of growth that a new beginning holds.

You can see these stages visually depicted through the “Seasons of Transitions” diagram that I’ve included on the next page.

Everyone goes through multiple life changes each year - and even each day - that, with simple information and consciousness, could be transformed from stressful and depleting events to life-affirming and transformational times. We habitually think of transitions as “hard” or “negative”, but what most people fail to recognize is that embedded in these predictable life-cycle occurrences are opportunities that invite us to spiral into our fears and grief so that we heal at
deeper levels each time. Instead of powering through transitions as quickly as possible, we would benefit greatly by embracing them as the gifts that they are.

From a psychological perspective, every transition is an opportunity for growth. As we learn how to let go into the ‘groundlessness’ that defines the in-between stage of transition between the end of the old life and beginning of the new, we move into a more effortless alignment with life. Life is ever-changing, and when we approach transitions consciously and with the intention of growth, we eventually learn how to accept this truth with grace.

This is not an easy task. Transitions require no less than the willingness to die (symbolically), to sit in the uncomfortable void, and to be reborn. Who would willingly embrace this task? For some of us, we have no choice. Transitions seem to pull us into the underworld and create such fear, pain, confusion, and disorientation that we must seek help. While in the throes of the challenge, this may seem unfair and we may be plagued with questions like, “Why do others seem so blissfully happy in their relationship? Why do others move to a new city effortlessly when I feel terrified? How come she was able to re-marry so easily after her break-up when my heart is broken and I still have dreams about my ex?”

Yet when we finally emerge from the pain, we see that the struggle was well worth it - as every single one of the stories at the end of this course reveals. For to enter into the death-void-rebirth cycle is to embark on the hero’s/heroine’s journey. And when the heroine returns from her voyage, she carries the boons — or jewels — of her travels. One of the great boons is that she knows, at a deeper layer of consciousness, that there can be no light without entering the darkness, and that with each descent into her darkness, the light shines ever more brightly. He knows that next time he is pulled into the darkness — which most likely will occur in the midst of his next major transition — he will be able to navigate the
journey more gracefully. She trusts that, even as she cries and rages, she is exactly where she needs to be.
SEASONS OF TRANSITIONS

FALL EQUINOX
September 21st

AUTUMN
Stage: Separation
Feeling: Grief
Mood: Melancholy
Color: Red
Action: Letting Go
Moon: Waning
Life Stage: Midlife

WINTER
Stage: Liminal
Feeling: Calm
Mood: Stillness
Color: White
Action: Reflection
Moon: New
Life Stage: Wise Elder

SUMMER
Stage: Full Bloom
Feeling: Joyous
Mood: Alive
Color: Gold
Action: Celebration
Moon: Full
Life Stage: Young Adulthood

SPRING
Stage: Rebirth
Feeling: Restless Anticipation
Mood: Hope
Color: Green
Action: Discovery
Moon: Waxing
Life Stage: Childhood

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Anxiety: A Doorway to the Underworld

We live in a culture that chases the light, and this fact alone can make it difficult to surrender to dark night of the soul. We worship the happy face and plaster on smiles when we venture into the world. Smiley babies statistically receive more praise than fussy babies, and bubbly teens garner the attention. In a culture that upholds the extrovert ideal as the pinnacle of personality types, we absorb the message early in life that if we're prone to more of a melancholic temperament there must be something wrong. Keep it light, we learn. Keep it peppy, we hear. Sweep away the messy, unraveled, chaotic, loud, dirty parts of life and of ourselves. Sweep them into the dark.

We sweep them away and try to move on with life as planned, but our unconscious desire for wholeness has other ideas. Just when we think we have everything together, we find ourselves bolting awake at the 3 or 4 am witching hour - that time when the veil between the worlds is thinnest - with the physical manifestations of anxiety making our hearts dance the two-step in double time. Anxiety takes our breath away and commands that we listen. We can medicate and anesthetize the symptoms away, of course, but that does nothing to chip away at the outer layers until we arrive at the gemstone of wisdom that lives inside.

This gem will be different for everyone, as there is no one-size-fits-all formula for healing from anxiety. But the work begins with a willingness to becoming curious about the anxiety instead of numbing it away. And by becoming curious I don't mean that you take it at face value; anxiety rarely arrives with a clear message but rather speaks in symbols and metaphors, the language of the unconscious.
Thus, the initial thought — whether "What if I don't love my partner?" or "What if I'm gay?" — is the attention getter; it's your inner self sounding the alarm bell. It's all of the parts of you that you swept into the basement of your psyche — the messy, dark parts that struggle with uncertainty — clamoring for your attention. It's become overcrowded down there and it's time they come out. If you take the thought at face value, you're missing the opportunity completely.

This is why anxiety is a gift: It opens the doorway to parts of ourselves that we've sequestered to the basement, the parts that we've deemed unworthy, messy, unacceptable, dark. When you turn to face those parts of you with courage, compassion, and curiosity without giving them all of the power, you've taken great strides in establishing your loving self — as opposed to your fear-based ego — in the helm of your mind. Then the real work of unraveling your defenses and arriving at the center of your vulnerable heart begins.

Along these lines, Rabbi Tirzah Firestone shared the following in her Yom Kippur sermon:

Let me tell you a story from the Baal Shem Tov’s youth: Long before he was recognized as Magus and spiritual healer, he was hired as a simple melamed, a teacher for the children of a small village. The Jewish lease-holder welcomed him to town and explained to him that he had only one cottage for him. One that was inhabited by impure spirits. The Besht said: No worries. And as soon as he was alone in the house, he proceeded to assign the demons to the attic. When they started to laugh at him, he stood his ground and scolded them. They got very quiet and went to their assigned place.
Why this story? Because it exemplifies what our lineage teaches about the unavoidable demons we encounter along the path.

Let me say this clearly: Any one who truly gives themselves over to the path of transformation will encounter demons... By demons I mean: those internal mind-states that scoff and laugh at us, that demean and belittle us, that compare us to others and shame us, that cloud us in despair, pollute us with guilt at our failings, and, oh, did I forget to mention that scare the pants off of us?

If any of the above "demons" feel in the slightest bit familiar to you, you may be interested to know what our lineage teaches about how to approach them. Notice that the holy Baal Shem does not vanquish, harm, or even banish the demons in his house. He simply assigns them their proper place, a place where they will cause no harm.

Why is the Besht so tolerant? He speaks to them like children yet these dark forces-- often put under the general heading of yetzer hara--are serious internal entities that can unhinge lives, as many therapists (and clients) in the room can attest.

Our natural tendency — one that is strongly reinforced by prior Jewish tradition — is to conquer these forces, to overcome them through opposition. Doesn’t the Talmud teach: Aizehu gibor? HaKovesh et yitzro, Who is the hero? The one who conquers his dark nature! (Pirkei Avot 4:1) We Jews have a long history of self-mortification; surmounting our nature through struggle. But the Besht and the lineage that followed him taught a different philosophy altogether.
That word kovesh, normally translated as conquer, also means: To pickle. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook taught that you don’t vanquish your demons, you pickle them. You work with them, you preserve them, you put them in vinegar long enough for their true flavors to emerge.

The Baal Shem Tov agreed. He said: You don’t oppose, you embrace. You don’t resist, that only gives a thing energy; you transform it with your attention. And if that doesn’t work, you get out of the way.

In other words: Let go of opposition. Feel compassion and care. This is the great paradox that Carl Jung and Carl Rogers and many others spoke of: "When we accept ourselves just as we are, then change begins."

One of the central principles in Lurianic kabbalah, quoted often in Hassidut says: Eyn naitakin dinim el b'shorasham. You can’t fix or sweeten a problem unless you get to the root of it. It won’t work to bi-pass, freeze, mash, blast, or medicate it away. Ultimately, we must see it, and meet it and face it with acceptance and awareness and in doing so, their darkness becomes illuminated, their bitterness is sweetened.

This is not unlike Jesus’ teaching: Resist not evil. And also similar to the Buddha’s teaching: With a boundless heart hold yourself and all beings. Like the Baal Shem’s, these philosophies give us a road map for the path. Don’t veer away when things get uncomfortable or scare you. Take the road leading toward the fear. When you feel "something is wrong with me," soothe it, don’t run from it.

"Don't veer away when things get uncomfortable or scare you." This is at the heart of my work with anxiety, and at the heart of many spiritual traditions that are
being celebrated today. It's the hardest work you'll ever do, but if you're going to heal from anxiety and liberate the self that's hidden in the eaves, you must follow the symptoms down the basement stairs or up into the attic and get to know what you find there. Welcome it, as best you can, and ask what wisdom it wishes to teach you.
Turn to Face Your Fear

Just as we want to run from pain and anxiety, most of us spend our lives running from fear. We run from the bear chasing us in the dream. We run from the vague sense of discomfort that seems to follow us on a day spent alone, in silence, away from the distractions of crowds and noise. We run from the things that scare us most, whether it be flying, public speaking, or intimate relationships.

It's natural to run from fear, of course. It's pure instinct to run from the wild animals and places that lurk in the underbrush of consciousness. We could say it's the most primal instinct of all species to hide or run in the face of fear. But, interestingly, it seems that one of the paths to emotional freedom is facing the inner landscapes that scares us most.

When I attended a dream workshop with Jeremy Taylor, one of the most fascinating elements discussed was how our unconscious — through the gift of our dream life — encourages us to turn to face our fears. One woman shared an archetypal dream about a bear chasing her, and the group, most of whom were well-versed in dreamwork, encouraged her to engage in an active imagination dialogue with the bear and ask what it wants. "What is it that you want to share with me?" or "How can I help you?" are important questions to ask the "scary" figures in our dreams. The overriding and ego-paradoxical philosophy is that when we stop running from the figures and instead turn to face them we realize that they are actually here to help us.

Jeremy Taylor shares a man's fascinating dream in his book, "The Wisdom of Your Dreams", that illustrates this point quite poignantly. In this recurring dream the man is being chased by a fiery dragon, and in a moment of lucidity he turns
around and demands to know why the dragon is terrorizing him. The dragon telepathically responds, "I am your smoking addiction!" Taylor shares the dreamer's description:

In that moment of lucid realization, the dragon suddenly seems to change. It doesn't really look any different, but its 'expression' seems to change. It begins to look winsome, almost charming - 'Puff the Magic Dragon' - more like a big, old familiar, friendly family dog than a menacing, deadly fire-breather. My lucidity allows me to look even more closely at the 'transformed' monster, and I see clearly that there is a nasty, sticky brown slime covering its entire body, and that noxious smoke is oozing and sputtering from every orifice, even from around its eyes, and from under and between its scales. I smell this awful, rancid, repulsive odor coming from it. My revulsion returns, and in the dream I look at it and say with all my heart, 'Get away from me! I no longer want you in my life!'

When he awakened, Alex was amazed to discover that he no longer craved the sensation of smoke in his lungs. Perhaps even more important, the desire for the instant and reliable 'companionship' that smoking had always given him was also gone. He has not smoked since the dream. (pp. 181-182; for the full description and analysis please read the book)

So we ask the question: Is our fear actually a helper in disguise? If you've ever turned to face your fear, you know that it's often through riding directly into the middle of the fear-storm that we grow the most; that, in fact, when we walk through fear we often have a direct, felt-sense of the divine. Since we are no longer sent into the middle of the forest alone for a vision quest, is fear, and especially panic, the modern spiritual warrior's training ground?
From what I can see the answer is yes. Which means that every moment of fear — especially our greatest fears — is an opportunity to heighten our capacity to love. Which means that every time we can walk through the portal of panic we discover a divine place on the other side.

If you’ve ever suffered from panic attacks you know how utterly terrifying they are, how they send us to the brink of feeling like we’re either going to die or go crazy. We then avoid the situation where the panic initially hit, thinking that by doing so, we can avoid the fear. But this only serves to increase the fear. Just like every other emotional state, fear ultimately wants to be known and seen. When we push it aside and avoid it, it slithers like an unwanted child into the darker recesses of psyche until it has no choice but to morph and re-emerge as anxiety, intrusive thoughts, or panic about another situation. The ego believes that we can package fear up and isolate it into one section of our lives. The unconscious has other plans.

At some point, usually when the fear grows big enough and interferes with our daily functioning, we are called to face our fears directly. This requires tremendous courage, for who in their right mind would actively seek out the wild beast in the darkest part of the forest? The light and inspiration is knowing that we must walk through the fear to arrive at love; there seems to be no other way. So we gather up our courage and resources of support and walk. Or the panic hits us and we have no choice but to face it. As Pema Chodron writes:

"Our challenge is to train in smiling at groundlessness, smiling at fear. I've had years of training at this because I get panic attacks. As anyone who has experienced panic attacks knows, that feeling of terror can arise out of nowhere. For me it often comes in the middle of the night, when I'm especially vulnerable."
But over the years I've trained myself to relax into that heart-stopping, mind-stopping feeling. My first reaction is always to gasp with fright. But Chogyam Trungpa used to gasp like that when we was describing how to recognize awakened mind. So now, whenever a panic attack comes and I gasp, I picture Chogyam Trungpa's face and think of him gasping as he talked about awakened mind. Then the energy of panic passes through me." (p. 93)

And then she writes:

"If you resist that panicky energy, even at an involuntary, unconscious level, the fear can last a long time. The way to work with it is to drop the story line and not pull back or buy into the idea, "This isn't okay," but instead to smile at the panic, smile at this dreadful, bottomless, gaping hole that's opening up in the pit of your stomach. When you can smile at fear, there's a shift: what you usually try to escape from becomes a vehicle for awakening you to your fundamental, primordial goodness, for awakening you to clear-mindedness, to a caring that holds nothing back." (p. 93)

On the other side of a panic is a softened heart. On the other side of resistance is an increased capacity to feel compassion. On the other side of fear is love. Every time we walk through panic with a smile we soften a layer of fear that has encrusted around our hearts. Panic is the portal to an almost ecstatic experience.

As you walk through the fearful places that inhabit your own dark night of the soul, you will find that this is true. You will discover your runes and gems. You will live more and more time from your own softened heart. Your dark night may not be a dramatic experience; it may be something that has nipped at your heels for many years and is now demanding your full attention. However your suffering
manifests, I encourage you to trust that it’s here for your growth. It seems that this it is, indeed, through suffering that we grow the most. Once we stop resisting that, the healing channels open more readily and an element of the suffering abates. And this will help you find freedom, the light in the middle of the dark forest.
Morning Anxiety

We're all familiar with the term "morning sickness," yet few people discuss another common malady that affects many people: morning anxiety. My clients and e-course members who are struggling with anxiety — especially those in the depths of dark night of the soul — often describe waking up in the morning with knots in their stomach, unable to eat, dreading another day of facing their anxious mind. And the common question is: Why? Why does anxiety seem to hit hardest first thing in the morning?

Mornings are the liminal hour, the vulnerable time between night and day when we're in-between two states of consciousness: the unconscious, where dreams occur, and the conscious state of our daytime hours. A hallmark of the liminal zone is feeling vulnerable, out of control, disoriented, and uncertain. It's when the bedrocks of our familiar lives fall away and we're left floating around in the middle of the ocean without a compass or rudder.

Mornings are yin time, feminine consciousness where our normal defenses fall away and we're offered a portal into the soul. Mornings are soft, fluid, and round. In a healthier mental state, this softness gives rise to creative and spiritual openings and is often when lines of poetry or a new idea bubbles up from the dark, sacred world of psyche. The veils are lifted and we see things as they are.

When you're in an anxious state, this means that you're offered a window to see the anxiety without the normal distractions of your busy day. The message of anxiety — which may bang on the doors of your mind during your loud, busy day — now, in the quiet of morning, only has to tap lightly for you to listen. Since the habitual response to anxiety is to withdraw and run from it, the mainstream advice for morning anxiety is to get up and get moving. This is, of course, the
same message that most people receive about all of their uncomfortable, "negative" feelings: Get over it. Get up. Get moving. Exercise. Take a shower. Get going with your day.

As you now know, I hold a different perspective on morning anxiety: Recognize that there's a message to decode, find the courage to walk through the murky portal and explore the anxiety with curiosity. It can be scary, I know. You don't know what you'll find. You're scared that the anxiety is here to confirm your deepest fears. But that's never the case. Anxiety carries a message and it's here to teach you something important about yourself. If you try to ignore it, it will only follow you throughout your day in the form of intrusive thoughts and the corresponding physical symptoms. Since you can't escape it, you may as well embrace it.

That said, some people do find it helpful to get up, go for a run, take a shower, and then come back to explore the anxiety. With a clear body, they're able to enter the anxious cave with some light and strength. One woman on the e-course forum who struggled intensely with morning anxiety shared her routine, which started back in August 2012:

So my routine is this: I'm going to jump out of bed, into the shower... journal and then go for a 20-minute walk before work. Another girl who had severe anxiety on a separate issue did say that she found exercise first thing in the morning extremely helpful. Given it's finally getting warm here in Australia I'm hoping some nature will help me.

I'm starting to get anxious now that this will become 10 times worse when I'm actually married and living with my husband but I'm not going to 'not marry him'
because I have to deal with anxious thoughts. Again, they’re just thoughts. They mean nothing.

I’ll let you know how the new routine goes…

She got married in January 2013 and recently posted this update in response to a new member struggling with morning anxiety:

I can say as consolation that mornings are not at all like that for me. I don’t have those thoughts or feelings or balls of anxiety in the morning anymore. Instead, I wake up next to my husband and think, 'I don't want to go to work'. But that's my next challenge.

Back in my pre-marriage, pre-children days, I would wake up every morning and write down my dreams. For as far back as I can remember, in fact, a journal has sat on my bedside table, and before the dream could take flight and become lost in the sea of my day, I would write. Sometimes the dreams disturbed me, and when I was enduring the long, dark night of the soul in my twenties, the dreams were not dreams but nightmares. Still, I wrote. I wanted to know. I needed to understand. As scary as it was to re-live those nighttime terrors, my curiosity and fascination with the inner world superseded the fear. My willingness to walk into that territory birthed my work in the world and helped shape the woman I am today. What will your exploration of the anxiety that manifests so strongly in the mornings birth for you? You will find out as your walk the pathway of this course. You may already be learning now.

Forum quote gratefully printed with permission from the forum member.
The Witching Hour

I had a chuckle at myself a couple of months ago. I had been mentioning the 3-4 am witching hour — the time when many people wake up overtaken by panic or anxiety — in my blog posts, and then I found myself waking up at that hour myself. It had been a long time since I'd woken up at the witching hour, but in mid-December I woke up twice to find the clock begin with the number three: 3:47 then 3:17.

Instead of fighting it or judging it, I became curious. Instead of trying to will myself back to sleep, I followed the invitation of psyche and divined its wisdom. And then, as I always do to make sense of my experience, I wrote:

*It's 3:17. I don't fight it. I lie in the darkness for a while and become curious. I gently notice. I breathe. I sense a sadness in my heart. I breathe there. I notice that I'm hungry. I consider walking down to the kitchen for a "midnight" snack, but I'm cold and I don't want to leave the warmth of blankets.*

*More time passes. My hunger becomes more insistent. I feel a shimmer of joy as I walk down the stairs. The house is silent, a rare occurrence in a house with two boys. I stop on the stairs to take in the Christmas lights and the dark trees swaying outside. I move quietly, so as not to wake anyone up. My cat has followed me downstairs, and I smile at her: fellow creature of the night, sweet feminine nighttime wanderer, moon lover, living on natural time where night and day blend into one seamless circle of life. I get a snack, then carry it upstairs to huddle next to the heater vent, where I eat and drink a little.*
I feel safe in the darkness, huddled in the holiness of a cold December night. My senses are more acute at this hour; the food tastes "extra delicious", as my five year old would say, without any other distractions. I sit and eat and chew and swallow — a mini-mindfulness practice — and then notice a memory filtering up from body: waking up in the middle of the night in my first trimester of pregnancy with a hunger so ravenous I thought it would empty me from the inside, then eating banana-oat muffins with almond milk, my whole body singing in pleasure at this delicious combination of sweet with cold, the texture of muffin meeting the creamy liquid.

I wonder at the date — December 17 — and become curious: Was that the day I found out I was pregnant eleven years ago? I look back through my journal and find it was December 20th, 2003. Close. Yes. The body remembers. I feel another wave of sadness. I smile and I cry. I don’t need to know exactly why. I hold both feelings and trust in the non-linear language of psyche that can tolerate paradox and opposites. It’s all okay. I read through other old journal entries and a sadness so deep rises up in me. I cry harder. The treasure map of psyche has led me to a pain in my heart that needs attention, a pain that’s not always easy to access in the middle of a busy day.

I have to force myself to get back into bed. The night, the silence, the timelessness — it’s like a nutrient my body craves — and I could stay up for hours enveloped in this world, reading back on old journal entries and traveling down the pathways of memory and feeling. But my alarm bell in the form of a five-year old will wake me up bright and early, and I won’t be a patient mother tomorrow if I don’t get more sleep, so I whisper thank you to the darkness, the invisibles, the goddesses of night, the wisdom of psyche, and settle back in to bed.
Many years ago my 3 am awakenings did not feel so serene. As I mentioned in the previous article, there was a time when I was awakened by nightmares at 3 or 4 am, my whole body shaking and my soul screaming out. When I would resist, the panic would rise to tumultuous levels, my bones shaking like an earthquake. But at other times I was fascinated, for as long as I can remember I’ve been a follower of dreams. At the time I couldn’t decipher the messages, but I knew they were important, so I would faithfully pull myself out of bed and write them down. When the fascination — the compassionate curiosity — took over, I could walk through the anxiety and arrive at some serenity.

Curiosity is the key. Viewing your life as a treasure map and what we call symptoms — anxiety, depression, insomnia, somatic aches and illness — as cues and signals along the journey is what leads you to your own quiet, inarguable wisdom. Wisdom speaks to us all the time. We are, it seems, walking reservoirs of this timeless wisdom and creative wells asking for expression. Our anxiety and insomnia and depression are speaking in the only language they can.

Who might you meet in the middle of the night the next time you’re awakened at 3 am? What soul-self longs to lead you down the stairs or into the closet where your memories, dreams, and creativity dwell? There is a story waiting to be told. There is wisdom waiting to be divined. When you approach your life with curiosity, you will be guided into the spiral labyrinth that leads you into your true Self, the place where your self-trust and your own compass live.

The message will differ from person to person and from each stage in your life. Some of my clients talk about the witching hour as a time to connect deeply to spiritual guidance. Others are awakened by the telltale signs of anxiety: heart
pounding, chest constricted, mouth dry. Regardless of the tone of the hour, the messages are there, asking or even begging for you to listen. The listening begins by shifting from a mindset that asks, "What's wrong with me?" to one that trusts in your innate goodness and instead asks, "What is the message? What is it that psyche is wanting me to learn?" For the dreams and awakenings at the witching hour don't come from our conscious mind, and it's for this reason that they are like flecks of gold transmitted from our own wells of wisdom that live deep inside, beneath the layers of thought and mind. If you want to move forward out of the stuck places and into more light of awareness, it would behoove you to turn toward and listen instead of to judge and run. Every lesson in this course is designed to help you do just that: Turn toward yourself with compassionate curiosity. It's the way through.
The Mysterious Element of Healing

We're wired to heal. We're meant to touch down into and live from our place of wholeness. We are, in fact, already whole, and much of the healing process is about learning to reconnect to our intrinsic wholeness. We long to heal, to know joy and fulfillment on a daily basis, to settle into a place of inner solidity where we can weather life's storms with equanimity, and it's this longing that guides us to seek out people who may be able to light the way. If you're taking this course, it's because something inside of you is seeking relief from your anxiety or pain. That something is your innate desire to heal, the knowledge that life is meant to be more than this.

It's hard work, this healing business. And yet I've noticed a pattern in my clients who deeply commit to doing their inner work and learning about what it means to be loving to themselves: after a certain amount of journaling, crying, counseling, exercising, eating well, and mindfulness (yes, it's hard work!), an integration occurs and suddenly it's not quite so hard anymore. You will hear this in the stories in the last section as well.

Some of these clients — but certainly not all — carry religious and/or spiritual beliefs that include calling out in prayer to a divine source. So alongside the hard work, they have a prayer practice where they consciously and actively ask for help, where the working stops and they take their hands off the wheel for a moment. "Please help me," is often heard as a whisper or a scream when someone is in the agony of their own death experience, shedding the habits, beliefs, and behaviors that have grown like an encrusted coral of protection around their hearts but are no longer serving them. They work, they toil, they
suffer, and in those moments of truly open-hearted prayer, they surrender and let go.

They have then opened a space for something else to come and to tend to their broken heart. In Jungian psychology we call it the healing function of the psyche. A more scientific approach would refer to it as the integration of the mind. I like to think of it as grace.

By grace I mean an element outside of our conscious effort that assists our lives. I mean the breath between the tension, the moments when our eyes are opened to the utter beauty and perfection that inform the world and we know, deeply know in our bodies, that everything is okay. Suddenly the pain isn't quite so painful. We feel that something or someone else has arrived to share our burden. A poem emerges that fills us with the numinous. We listen to music in a stripped down place of rawness that invites us to receive the rhythm and melodies into every crevice of soul. We reach out in need to a friend and she actually answers the phone. A text of hope arrives just when the despair feels like too much to bear.

So there's "on-the-spot" grace that helps us over the bumps in the daily road, and then there's a broad-stroked grace that enters when a certain amount of work has been done.

For those who are uncomfortable with the word "grace", Daniel Siegel, M.D., offers a similar explanation from a brain, scientific perspective for this element of healing that enters after a certain amount of hard work has been done:
"A cascade of positive effects seems to emerge spontaneously when integration has been initiated. It's like the old physics idea of pushing a ball up a hill to get it rolling down the other side. It takes considerable effort and deliberate attention to move beyond the initial engrained, nonintegrated state — to push the ball up the hill. This is the intentional work of change. But ultimately the emerging mind takes its natural course toward integration, and the ball flows effortlessly down the valley of coherence. Integration is the mind's natural state."

Again, we are wired for wholeness and integration. Several decades ago Carl Jung said that every challenge and symptom are the soul inviting us toward our natural state of wholeness. Dr. Siegel's years of study of the brain's neuroplasticity now scientifically proves the same thing. I'm not sure it matters whether we're talking about soul or mind or the invisibles, the equation seems to be the same: Put in the hard work and something else will come to offer you a hand.

We are meant to heal. We are meant to feel balance and fulfillment. We are meant to live with a hum of rightness instead of the undercurrent of anxiety that pervades so many people's lives. If you're willing to do the work that you will learn throughout this course and climb up the steep mountain, a healing principle inside of you will assist you the rest of way until one day you realize that it's not so hard after all.

You will break free from relationship anxiety, and it will no longer hold a grip on you. In this space of freedom, you will access new wells of energy inside of you, places that were previously occupied by the incessant doubt that followed you everywhere. Without this focus eating up time and energy, you will birth a new
aspect of yourself. This is the gift of dark night of the soul. This is what will allow you to soar.