

FURIES!

The Struggle for Growth

⋮

There's but three

FURIES found in spacious hell

But in a great man's breast

Three thousand dwell

COLE BITTING

Furies!
The Struggle For Growth

By Cole Bitting

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Every morning, I let Cheese and Eli out of their crate. My big dogs jump straight up. They really want to jump on me but don't want a hard knee to the gut. The labs leap in the air, head and shoulders rising above my 6-foot-tall body.

They leap. They leap. They wag their whole body, push me with their noses, and try to sit. They are desperate to sit like gentledogs, but have no footing on wood floor. Eli's otter tail wags so hard, he falls over, wriggles around, gets up and pushes me with his cold nose.

They stare into my eyes.

Then I know, I pick up their poop because every morning they show me awe.

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Disclosures & Acknowledgements

THINGS TO KNOW

- I add Amazon affiliate links when I discuss books and music. Please use them.
- The narrator and characters in this story are fictional. Any resemblance to the author, his family or friends is caused by lack of creativity.
- Portions of this material were first presented as essay on my blog - Fable (www.goodfables.com).

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

- Liam, Owen and Eliot, my sons and teachers,
- Connie Jones, compassion and steady influence,
- Jeffrey Penn May, friendship and craftsmanship,
- @littlefluffycat (Lydia Ondrusek) and @MarjieKnudsen, generosity and helpfulness,
- @elissastein for boldness (and the bold cover, too), and
- Antonio Damasio and Jonathan Haidt, inspiration and guiding influence.

FOLLOW ALONG

I explore the topics of recovering from distress, resilience, well-being and personal growth at my website - [Fable \(www.goodfables.com\)](http://www.goodfables.com). I post three types of work there. Longer form essays reflect my thoughts on self-development, resilience and well-being. 'Musings' discuss of ideas from current peer-reviewed

articles and topical books often about psychology and neuroscience. I try to make the essays more accessible and the musings more technical.

The third category of posts is 'Curated Links.' The web is overrun by hundreds of daily posts on self-development, psychology, peer review studies, discussions of new books. These articles cover a wide variety of subjects from quitting smoking, to the effectiveness of medication, to grieving, to bi-polar to mindfulness to spirituality, infinity and beyond. What's good? With 'Curated Link,' I identify and link to interesting articles on subjects related to my website.

You can follow me:

- Subscribe to my [e-mail update](#) (updated once a day only on the days I add new materials to Fable).
- Subscribe to my [RSS feed](#)
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HELP EACH OTHER

The first significant step in a healing process is to recognize a very specific duality: me, on the one hand, and my pain, on the other. Pain is painful. Our instinct is to turn away from it and have it go away. To take care of our wounds is a conscious choice. To turn away is reactive.

Your friend hates work because of an obnoxious boss and says, "It's awful because my boss does this, and does that, and does this other thing... and the other day, he did this and that and this other thing..." Your friend is not focused on his pain. He is focused on the story of his boss (and perhaps feeling sorry for himself).

You listen and listen and stifle the desire to say, "Enough about the boss!" Your instinct was right: Stop with the story and focus

on the pain. What do you want your friend to do? Do you want your friend to jump straight to a solution such as “get new job?” Would you want your friend to find a new job as an act of desperation?

Furies! is a book about our agonizing emotional wounds. It's not a “how-to” book. It's an introduction.

You know you well enough. You know the stories of your suffering well enough. But do you know your pain? The raw, un-storied pain? These are our Furies, and we cannot stand to look at them or acknowledge them.

Furies! is a way of saying:

'Me,' meet 'my pain.'

'My pain,' meet 'me.'

Genuine acknowledgement is the first significant step to feeling better.

Support Fable and my on-going writing. Two great things you can do: First, subscribe to the [e-mail list](#) or [RSS feed](#), and second, introduce my writing and website others. Both actions are tremendously helpful. If you want to do more, buy *Furies!* or just donate. I am also available to write guest posts for blogs, to speak and to coach people in the midst of a life crisis.

Perspective

PEANUT BUTTER

My son struggles to open a jar of peanut butter. He re-grips it and twists. He tries again. He wraps the jar in a dish towel, squeezes the top until his knuckles pale and twists with all his might.

I see his jaw clench, his triceps, biceps and forearms bulge, and his head shake with strain and effort. Youth has such power. He bangs the jar on the marble counter. I worry for the glass. He picks up the knife and whacks the top. Whack! Whack! Whack! I cower with each blow.

Blood drains from his face as he wrenches at the jar. His hands are slick with sweat. He cannot hold his grip.

"You're abusing the peanut butter," I say. "It has feelings too, you know."

He hands me the jar.

First he used his innate skill, then he used his knowledge, and now he uses his father. These are three major domains of living - Achievement, Social Relationships and Knowledge (ASK). They correspond to the sense of ourselves, others, the wide world - do, bond, know - material resources, social resources, informational resources - *I can, I care, I understand*.¹

Developments in neuroscience suggest each domain has distinct systems for the associated emotions. Psychology suggests an autonomous person has three basic psychological needs - competence (achievement), relatedness (social relationships), and

understanding (knowledge). The major domains of morality and society are the ethics of autonomy (achievement), community (social relationships) and spirituality (knowledge).²

Most self-help style advice easily falls into these three domains - [*Getting Things Done*](#), [*How To Win Friends And Influence People*](#), [Google](#). In fact, self-help as a category would represent aspirations associated with knowledge.

Steven Pinker, in [*The Blank Slate*](#), breaks down the politics of de-natured man by focusing on three flawed theories - the blank slate, the noble savage, and the ghost in the machine - which correspond to the ethics of autonomy, community and spirituality.

In a sense, we ASK every day. What do we ask for?

Is my son hurt by his failure? I wonder. What would happen if I tell him “I can’t,” or worse, “Don’t bother me.” How would he handle it?

I know well enough of coping skills. For example, my son could find better tools, more help, or even learn how to bang the knife at an angle to the lid.

He could decide to have a bowl of cereal. He could walk away, deny his hunger, think nothing more of this failed effort and pick a fight with his brother.

What about helplessness skills? What if I dismiss him by saying, “You need to learn to be self reliant.” Would he decide to strain with the peanut butter jar day-after-day until he grows stronger? Would he google *how to open a tight lid*? Would he cultivate brawny friends expected to help in a pinch?

These examples represent one type of helplessness skill, finding external resources and solutions. They are forms of active coping. But do they demonstrate resilience? Or are these efforts only to compensate for the pain of weakness, isolation and ignorance?

Is resilience nothing more than compulsive achievement? Is mindfulness nothing more than a determination not to be emotional? Is happiness nothing more than an optimistic outlook? What about internal skills? The answer would be found in the way pity relates to compassion.

HOW WE PRACTICE; HOW WE ARE PRACTICED ON

Spinoza [writes]: “*Pity, in a man who lives according to the guidance of reason, is evil of itself and useless,*” from which “it follows that a man who lives according to the dictates of reason, strives, as far as he can, not to be touched by pity.” What Spinoza is saying here goes to the heart of the matter.

Pity is a sadness (born of our imitation of or our identification with the sadness of others)[ital. mine], whereas, in fact, it is joy that is good and reason that is just: love and generosity, not pity, should drive us to help our fellowmen.

Pity is not necessary. At least not for the wise man, which is to say, for the person who lives “under the sole guidance of reason,” as Spinoza repeatedly says. This pure acceptance of truth, this love without sadness, this lightness, this serene and joyful generosity, aren’t these the very hallmarks of wisdom? But who among us is wise?

- André Comte-Sponville,³

[A Small Treatise On The Great Virtues](#), p 107.

Bad things happen to good people. They are unable to control the events and are rendered helpless. They are sad more for themselves than for their loss. They struggle to accommodate violations to their core beliefs and self-concepts and suffer trauma. If we see the suffering, how do we respond? If we have no response, we turn away. We are at least apathetic, indifferent to our empathy, or perhaps somewhat psychopathic, without empathy.

If we respond with rage, we turn against. We demand that others stop suffering and atone for the pain they cause us. We hold them in contempt. We are mad at their madness. We are cruel, egotistic and perhaps narcissistic. Rage at helplessness is the negation of empathy.

What if we turn towards the victim and also towards our own empathy?

Pity and compassion are behaviors and emotions evoked by the suffering of others. The difference between the two is the way we practice our response. If we respond with sadness, we risk offering only pity. If instead, we respond with generosity and love (joy in a sense), then we offer compassion. Do we respond to their helplessness with helplessness or with caring action? Do we respond with rigid prescription or empathic coaching? With egotistic defense or with unguarded attunement?

We can offer pity to individuals, families, groups, cities, societies, etc. We can only offer compassion to one person at a time. For compassion to be compassion, the person suffering must feel felt and we must suffer with them. If we defend against our internal experience of their pain, we compromise our practice of compassion.

And what if we defend against our own emotional pain?

Bad things do happen. When we cannot control events. We fail, disappoint, err. Some of our crises become trauma.

Chris Brewin et al.:⁴

Trauma generally involves a violation of basic assumptions [knowledge] connected with survival as a member [achievement] of a social group [social relationships]. These include assumptions (not necessarily conscious ones) about personal **invulnerability from death or disease [achievement], status in a social hierarchy**

[social relationships], the ability to meet internal moral standards and achieve major life goals [achievement], the continued availability and reliability of attachment figures [social relationships], and the existence of an orderly relation between actions and outcomes [knowledge].

A traumatic event is a violation of primal assumptions - a knowledge wound. It overwhelms our life-concepts: self-concept, concepts of others, and our understanding of the world. It's a kind of existential terror, like awe in a way.

Awe is a knowledge emotion (as are curiosity, wonder, foolishness or cluelessness) and tremendously potent. Awe is a positive emotion, and terror is its negative counterpart. These emotions weaken our attachments to our life-concepts and our sense of self. They force us to open up (or shut down):

Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt define prototypical awe:⁵

Prototypical awe involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast... Since [experiences of awe] make the self feel small, powerless and confused, they also often involve feelings of enlightenment and even rebirth, when mental structures expand to accommodate truths never before known. We stress that awe involves a *need* for accommodation, which may or may not be satisfied. **The success of one's attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds).**

Through the emotions of awe and terror, life practices on us and challenges us to change. Trauma - "a violation of primal assumptions" - can look like a failure to accommodate when an event - a terrible, awesome event - occurs. If we cannot accommodate the new, we must preserve the old. We defend against our helplessness and failure.

For some, it's as if failure never happened, or at least it caused fleeting moments of pain. If we are apathetic to our own suffering,

how can we learn? For some, failure provokes rage. You hate your own pain. Self anger is the pathway to active self-destruction. Most often, we accept failure as defeat and feel sad, perhaps profoundly sad.

Sadness is normal and healthy: It mediates the process of abandoning old assumptions and integrating new information into our life-concepts. If we are unprepared to change, we distort the nature of our sadness. We feel sad for ourselves and not for our loss.

With self-sadness, self-compassion is not practicable. We wallow in self-pity:

- “I can’t do anything right,” [do]
- “No one should love me,” [bond]
- “God has abandoned me.” [know]

How do we help the pitied? We tell them what to do so they will stop both their suffering and ours.

What of self-pity? We command ourselves to become more better, more nicer and more smarter. We demand the redemption of grand accomplishment, so our self-pity can be masked by the admiration of others. Imagine these New Year’s resolutions,

- “I will get a higher paying job,”
- “I will spend more time with the kids,”
- “I will meditate, pray, and attend church religiously.”

Fury for our passion and pity for our suffering, here we find cause for our grand ambitions.

We develop grand ambitions in defense. We cultivate purpose when we are attuned to our selves. Ambition focuses on outcome; purpose on process. Reaction to pain is easy; quiet attunement is hard. Most of our significant plans and aspirations reflect the combination of these qualities. The greater the defense, the grander the ambition.

Furies!

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT PASSION

This book is about what drives us, about these highly adaptive *passions*, about these wounds grown from helplessness. The opening quote names them: *Furies!*

When fear becomes anxiety, desire gives way to greed, or annoyance turns to anger, anger to hatred, friendship to envy, love to obsession, or pleasure to addiction, our emotions start working against us. *Mental health is maintained by emotional hygiene*[ital. mine], and mental problems to a large extent, reflect a breakdown of emotional order. Emotions can have both useful and pathological consequences.

Joseph LeDoux ⁶

[The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life](#), p 20.

The word *passion* is derived from Latin **pati** ‘**suffer.**’ How many of our passions arise from suffering? For example,

- I exercise daily [because of the contempt others have for obesity].
- I never fight [because I fear anger will destroy my relationships].
- I am getting a PhD [because I worry others think I don’t know what I’m talking about].

These examples show our devotion to one passion (“a thing arousing enthusiasm”) might control or compensate for another (“a barely controlled emotion”). Our wounds develop our strengths, yet our strengths cannot heal our wounds. We focus on external accomplishment not our internal well-being.

After years of striving, on the one hand, and neglecting on the other, how do we feel? Do we feel like however much we succeed we are not satisfied? Like however much we connect with others we are subdued by lurking shame? Like for all our material success, we are spiritually hollow and brittle?

First thing this morning, I had reformatted the wrong hard-drive, blowing my iTunes library all to hell. The last seven hours were a computer nightmare, without food, without a bathroom break, and finally with a migraine headache. I needed to eat. I walked into the kitchen, ready to break something.

I watched my son struggle with the peanut butter jar and wondered if he felt like I did - frustrated beyond any justifiable reason.

No. I have worked with computers for years. My frustration is a kind of attachment trauma. Computers are probably just Harlow monkey experiments on a global scale.

Imagine you are working on the computer and your hard drive starts clicking, the screen freezes and then the only moving thing is the mouse cursor. Imagine waiting for an important e-mail, but the internet is down for no reason. What if you decide to call tech support and their first question is some version of - "is your computer / printer / router / monitor turned on?" I feel rage in these moments. Why? Because I cannot fix the problem, I can't get someone to help, and it makes no damn sense!

How should we describe our experience in such moments? People feel more harm from loss than reward from an equal gain. Aren't we better off looking for the blessing, the benefit, the reward, the silver-lining, and avoiding the recognition of loss? We try to spin our story of the experience. We hope to create some emotional gain and limit possible harm. Modern pop-psych, aspirational descriptions do so:

- The computer problem is just a challenge to overcome.
- The internet chat boards are very helpful with computer troubles.
- In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter.

We split off the painful qualities of adverse events. What if we use realistic terms such as "victim" or "helpless?" We feel unnerved. We rebel against the label "victim" even as we feel self-pity. We grasp for affirmative terms, such as "resource" or "capacity."

If we don't know where we hurt, how can we care for ourselves? Our hurt is where the Furies are, and that is where we work.

GET THEE TO A NUNNERY

It was about 14 and 15 years ago. I was 60 years old, just a kid with a crazy dream. Since then I have taken a lot of prozac, paxil, welbutrin, effexor, ritalin, focalin. I've also studied deeply in the philosophies and the religions, but cheerfulness kept breaking through. What I want to tell you something that I think will not be easily contradicted. There ain't no cure for love.

- Leonard Cohen
"Ain't No Cure For Love (Live)" from
[Leonard Cohen Live In London](#)

When I feel helpless, I want to hide out in a remote mountain-top monastery. One of my favorite contemporary artists, Leonard Cohen, did just that. Now he is an ordained Zen monk. Do I have a genuine yearning or just the desire to flee my troubles?

In some ways, we all romanticize the idea of joining a monastery, but many who do join have given up on life. We all crave isolation at times, free of the trouble of others, but overlook the terrible feelings of loneliness. We fantasize about having the equanimity of a monk but ignore the devotion it requires. We use most our time to accomplish and manage our responsibilities. If we all gave

up on achievement and lived a monastic life instead, our species would fail.

Our desire for “equanimity” reveals a hidden desire to control our suffering. We push away our helplessness through denial, avoidance, repression, projection and all those other psyche words for tools of emotional defense. We want to escape or control our Furies. We seek to dominate or withdraw.

Three Furies - supernatural personifications of the anger of the dead - haunt mythology. *Tisiphone* punishes for acts of murder, the ultimate means to eliminate obstacles for achievement. *Megaera* avenges for betrayal of social relationships, particularly infidelity. *Alecto* embodies moral outrage and distrust, and threatens to preemptively subjugate possible threats.

One Fury for each domain of emotion and motivation - achievement, social relationships and knowledge. More to the point, one Fury for each archetypal expression of helplessness:

- I am unable.
- I am unworthy.
- I am ignorant.

Each expression is easy to write and to read. Yet recollections which embody these words evoke acute emotional distress:

- I let my dog get run over!
- I was fired!
- I should have known she was going to walk out!

The contrast between ease and difficulty highlights one of the defining qualities of our Furies. We split traumatic events into tellable accounts and unbearable experiences, into Faerie Tales

and Fury Nightmares. We utter external explanations and struggle with internal suffering.

Our Furies become the secretive antagonists in our personal drama, with a vital essence and mind of their own. They behave with the qualities of agency, ownership and perspective. We become the foil to their complex nature. And in scary ways, they acquire consciousness at our expense, acting with more creativity, as we become more rigidly defended.

Defensiveness makes life a chore with fewer opportunities to be engaged with who we are. Even these moments of joy become bitter-sweet because as much as we relish them we recognize their persistent absence. We have have crippled our innate resilience. We desire some manifest force to anneal our brokenness:

- Live in the NOW unafflicted by past injury,
- Love others purely and they will love you in return,
- Abandon the physical you, the damaged psyche, and experience rapture.

These aspirations represent the deification of avoidance.

"DEEPLY DIDN'T CARE"

I was always attracted to the military, the monastery, the orderly, the rituals, the regimes, the regimens. Situations where the structure of life was very clear and very determined like in a Zen Center or Monastery...

So [Zen Master Roshi] sent me up [to Mount Baldy]. It was full winter. And I began to live out there, but I couldn't take it up there. It was much too severe. There was Roshi who was Japanese and the head monk was German. And I thought this was the revenge of World War II because they had a bunch of Americans up there walking in sandals through the snow and beaten in the zendo with sticks. And I thought this is really not the place for me. I ran away.

But there was something about Roshi that I remembered. So several months later, I came back again, and then I began to study with him and practice with him...

If Roshi had been a professor of physics in Heidelberg, I would have learned German and moved to Heidelberg. I just felt there was something Roshi had to show me... Roshi happens to be a Zen master and a Zen monk. As he said to me in one of our first personal encounters, he said, "I not Japanese, you not Jewish..."

He became a part of my life and a deep friend, in the real sense of friendship. Someone who really cares or didn't care - I'm not sure which it is - or deeply didn't care about who I was and therefore who I was began to wither. And the less I was of who I was, the better I felt.

- Leonard Cohen ⁷

[Leonard Cohen I'm Your Man](#)

Our human nature is complex. It provides us with a way to cope with adversity and heal its consequences. We have within our nature the capacity to grow from suffering and struggle, and to live with a durable sense of well-being.

To author our own providence, we can open up and confront our Furies. Maybe it's better said: We can sit while Furies confront our defenses with their terrible, awesome force, open us up, and propel healthy change. Our defenses are a form of caring, so to lower them we might need to say, "We deeply didn't care."

Like any good healer, we should understand the wounds, their causes, their natural course and the best ways to dress and heal them. We give our bodies time to heal, and if we are able to sit with our Furies, we can give those wounds time to heal, too.

This book is more about understanding Furies than developing "strategies" or "solutions" for dealing with them. In many important, neurobiologically significant ways, sitting is healing.

WHICH CAME FIRST, THE PEANUT OR THE BUTTER?

I hold the jar of peanut butter my son handed to me, playing with its weight. It's funny how the oil separates, and the peanut butter become a gluey mess. Stirring it up is hard work.

When we switched to organic peanut butter, I tried to eat it without stirring and learned the hard way - once you start choking, it's hard to stop. You can't wash it down with water, but need the oil to loosen it up.

If I ignore my son's request for help, will he react with self-pity - *My father never helps me!* - or with understanding - *Dad's funny. Maybe he just doesn't want to lose the struggle with the separated peanut butter...*

I open the jar and hand it to my son. He will grow strong and smart. For him, a tight lid will become less of an obstacle in the future.

My son will thrive for the next twenty years. The power of biological, neurological and psychological change combined with a bounty of fresh experience will provide resources against all but the most traumatic hardships. He is programmed to grow over his wounds. Sometimes, we mistake innate growth for the psychological capacity of resilience.

For me, I won't get stronger. I might not get smarter. Over the next ten years, the opposite is more likely. Resilience becomes even more important to cultivate as I get well past my thirties. The maladaptive defenses I developed in my youth no longer serve me. In fact, it is fair to say they caused inconceivable damage. My growth no longer papers over my old failings. Without a greater devotion to LeDoux's notion of emotional hygiene, I might wither.

Our mind generates the first draft of our autobiography from the compulsion to make sense and feel in control, the sketchwork of initial recollections, and from the assumptions generated by our biases, dispositions, scripts, beliefs, schemas, our unchallengeable doubts and certainties - even our personality. How realistic can this draft be?

For most stressful events, we take time to process, fleshing out a realistic narrative and moving on. Our first draft might be chaotic, but the final draft shows resolution.

When we endure hardship without resolution, we stop drafting as soon as we can. Reliving the crisis only reminds us of failure and helplessness. We identify with the pleasant story designed to hide the pain. A part of our autobiography favors these tales of who we are not. We practice defense, not hygiene, and grow brittle.

Resilience is the counterpoint to helplessness just as our spirits are born of suffering. How many pious youth do you know? How many fully-grown folk are besotted by spiritual yearning?

Raw materials for these yearnings are the unresolved experiences hidden under our defenses. We extrapolate and see our world as capricious and hostile, and ourselves as weak, isolated and ignorant. We suffer in this wilderness and want salvation.

Is the passionate effort to slake such yearning yet another grand ambition and another opportunity for achievement? Does salve come from some external source of new ability, new community, or new spirituality?

Too often, we are engaged with who we are not. We aspire to be better and bury past pain. We strive to live up to our autobiography.

I think resiliency is an inner quality. It reflects our understanding of our own capacities. We develop this understanding when we

are engaged with who we are. Only then do we author an autobiography untainted by Faerie Tales.

Three Thousand Dwell

THE ANTAGONISTS OF OUR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Have you ever wondered what dramatic force drives your thoughts and choices? We know our protagonists well: the flow moments of engagement, the joy in the presences of others, the wonder of new knowledge, insight and wisdom.

What about the antagonists found in the shock of our dark moments? They may have not have faces, but they always cause pain. We turn away, avoid recognition and push them back into their crevasses of our unconscious mind. Too often, we deceive ourselves about emotional pain to enable effective action.

Furies are the subject of the Webster quote: *But in a great man's breast/ Three thousand dwell.* These dark thoughts surprise us during the day, assault us before sleep and haunt our dreams. Furies are an antagonistic force.

You cannot out-achieve Furies. You cannot rely on social distraction. You cannot render them immaterial through spiritual pursuits. No matter where you go, there they are.

A lost relationship is never far away. Just close your eyes and remember a person who you will never see, talk with, or be with again. When I recall an I-love-you I will never hear again, images run by:

You kissed me first and wrecked your car. Waiting In Vain is the best song ever. "Your clothes look better on the floor." Crying through Groundhog Day. "I own you." My first chocolate souffle. Where was my second chance?

James Pennebaker described his experience with this powerful antagonistic force:

After about a month of emotional isolation, I started writing about my deepest thoughts and feelings. I remember being drawn to the typewriter each afternoon for about a week, where I would spend anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour pounding on the keys. I initially wrote about our marriage but soon turned to my feelings about my parents, sexuality, career, and even death. Each day after writing, I felt fatigued and yet freer. By the end of the week, I noticed my depression lifting. For the first time in years - perhaps ever - I had a sense of meaning and direction. I fundamentally understood my deep love for my wife and the degree to which I needed her.

- James Pennebaker⁸

[Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions](#) p 30.

I imagine Pennebaker's story as a fable about the transformation of his Marriage Fury. Through this process, Pennebaker came to understand his Fury's message - "a sense of meaning and direction."

Lucky for us Pennebaker is a psychologist...

FURIES! DEFINED

Characteristics of a Fury:

1. A metaphor
2. An emotional wound
3. An ache in the breast
4. A dreaded memory
5. An unintegrated traumatic experience
6. A trauma object - ▼ object
7. A consequence of avoidance

8. An aspect of helplessness
9. Attachment or relationship sensitivities
10. Talent or ability sensitivities
11. Knowledge or spiritual sensitivities
12. A trigger of an inappropriate emotional reaction
(indicating hyper- or hypo- arousal)
13. A intrusive flashback, however short
14. The pain side of a split experience
15. A maladaptive reflex, disposition, script, belief or schema
16. A dramatic force in a story of personal suffering
17. The fear of annihilation

Some events are so stressful, our brains do not automatically integrate our emotional turmoil with the basic explanation of the event. We note an account, stifle the emotion, move on. Furies embody this neglected pain. The behavior is adaptive and normal.

For example, while giving a presentation, your coworker makes a harsh comment. You note the insult, stifle the rage and continue the presentation. Later, you reconstitute the event (*He said what?!?*), relive the experience (*He was such a jerk!*) and integrate the story (*Just what I expected. Thankfully, everybody ignores him.*).

We process. For the most part, our process is automatic and sufficient. We heal and do not suffer trauma. With higher stress events, we might need more safety, social support or time to work through the distress. (“Let me tell you about the jerk at work...”).

You’re fired!” My office door bangs against my bookshelf. A crystal ball falls off its pedestal, knocks against the wood, hits the floor and rolls away like a threatened mouse. I hang up on my wife.

I want to recite a litany of accomplishments - accounts opened, clients gained, millions of

revenue for which we both deserve compensation.

My boss pushes over several deal prizes. "You were talking to our competitor."

"They were talking to me." I shut my laptop and straighten papers.

He sits in a chair and puts his feet on my desk. "I have seen to it," he says. "You won't work there, and there is no way in hell you are working here."

That was a Fury, and I am still furious. I have been seeing this boss at bedtime for years. The nightly experience is the categorical opposite of counseling. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between appropriate anger and unresolved rage. Furies lurk. They wait until you have the capacity to attend to them. When you feel good is when they are likely to interrupt. After all, there is a difference between feeling good and being well.

If we want our normal state to reflect qualities of contentedness, well-being and joyful engagement, then Furies are a category of significant threat to this state. A part of us dismisses our Furies, and another is preoccupied with them. These defensive splits are both adaptive and fundamental to survival. Often we must cut off pain to pursue self-regulation and to develop needed resources.

Still, our body seeks resolution to the trauma and relief from its Furies. It has the innate capacity to integrate isolated traumatic experiences, particularly in the presence of others. We can develop our natural abilities to re-pair the matched elements of dismissal and preoccupation. Resolution of a traumatic experience improves self-regulation, develops resilience and reduces threats to our well-being.

In other words...

THINGS YOU AND I HAVE NEVER THOUGHT

You are busy with a favorite activity - writing, running, a morning discussion over coffee. A flash of disturbing imagery interrupts the flow. You drive the imagery out of your mind and return to what you were doing. That flash is a Fury.

You stew from a recent fight. Suddenly, you recall an old argument with your mother.

Let me tell you about that controlling bitch and how she controlled my life and made me feel such shame...

That memory is a Fury.

You missed a doctor's appointment - again. You spend \$150 on new calendars and time management software then spend two days off from work to set up a new system of detailed reminders.

I have this great system so I will never miss appointments or break promises...

A Fury put you to work.

You buy a fancy outfit before going to a holiday party.

I can't let people know I am broke at Christmas. I must appear joyful and look good.

The more dazzling you look, the less people will see your Furies, particularly you!

"It wasn't so bad, the car crash," you say, as you show your new Volvo to a friend. "I hit my head on the windshield. It cracked."

"Your head?"

“The windshield.” You push the skin on your forehead together.
“The doc says I’ll be pushing shards of glass out for a month. But you know, I’m OK.”

I have a Volvo. Maybe I should have gotten a Hummer. Then I might be able to drive by the crash site.

Wherever the pain and the terror lie lives a large Fury.

Each flash of imagery triggers sensations in the body. For example, if you imagine people ignoring you, you drop your shoulders, shrink into yourself and look pensive. If you imagine your poverty exposed to all your well-to-do friends, you take a step back in horror then frown with shame. If you have a flashback of another car careening into your driver’s side wheel-well, your face freezes in shock; every muscle tenses, your heart races and adrenaline courses through your body. In each example, your body manifests significant change as you react to the Fury.

Maybe your girlfriend says you are always on your computer. Or maybe your boyfriend says you always dismiss his efforts to help with your problems.

I’ll be alone. When I lie in the hospital, no one will come and visit.

A flock of Furies triggers panic...

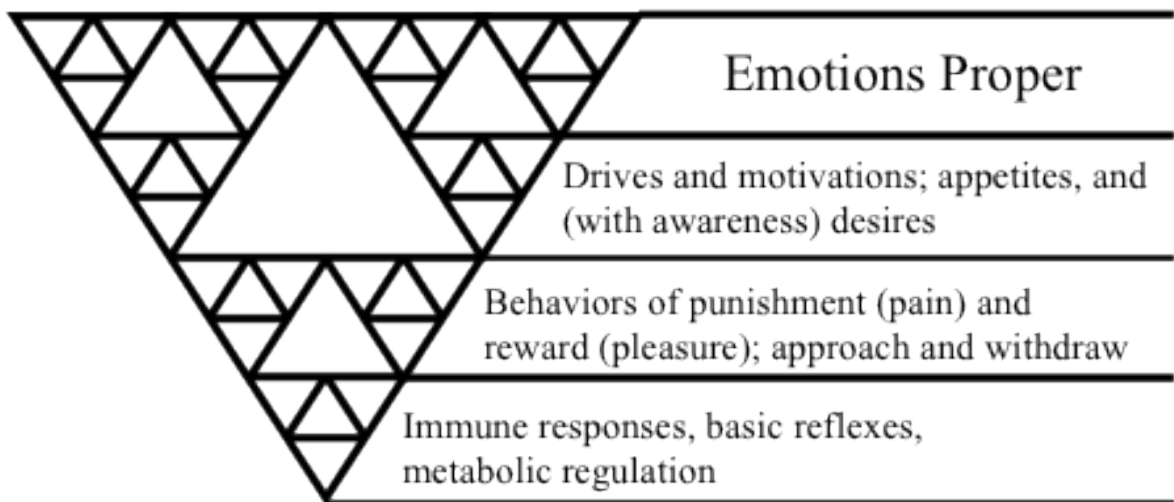
DON'T GET EMOTIONAL, YOU ALREADY ARE

Someone jumps out of the shadows and yells, “BOO!” What happens to your body?

Imagine yourself lying alone in the hospital without any expectation someone will visit. What happens to your body? Do you frown? Choke up? Does your body get cold and shiver? The imagery causes significant changes.

Emotions⁹ are physical events in an organism's body evoked by objects (either physical: a snake; or mental: the notion of snakes on a plane). These changes are homeostatic - reactions to the environment to maximize well being. They occur in all living cells.

At their most rudimentary level, these homeostatic reactions are metabolism or startle reflexes which animate movement away from or towards objects. These homeostatic reactions can become more complex and quite sophisticated, nested sequences and compositions of more basic reactions.¹⁰



For example, the combination of the homeostatic and startle reflexes generates behavior which keys searching for food when energy levels are low. We call this motivation “hunger.”

The highest level of emotions are emotions-proper, such as fear and anger, each a well-coordinated collection of homeostatic reactions. There is no single system for emotion in the brain. Each emotion evolved to address different challenges and is mediated by different combination of neural systems.

Charles Darwin found certain emotions are consistent across species.¹¹ Paul Ekman showed emotions are consistent across cultures.¹² In humans, joy, anger, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust and possibly contempt are considered the primary emotions - universal and with distinct systems in the brain. Social emotions

include sympathy, shame, gratitude, indignation etc. Knowledge emotions would include surprise, curiosity, wonder and awe.

Emotions promote survival and fitness. Creatures emote for the sake of their lives.

Feelings are the mental (internal) experience of physical (external) emotions. The manner in which emotions become feelings is an important key to understanding the development of consciousness.

The Gifts of Mind: Perspective

FIRST ORDER PERSPECTIVE

A group of angiosperms [flowering plants]... hit on a remarkably clever strategy: getting us to move and think for them. Now came edible grasses (such as wheat and corn) that incited humans to cut down vast forests to make more room for them...

Our grammar might teach us to divide the world into active subjects and passive objects, but in a coevolutionary relationship every subject has an object, every object a subject. That's why it makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees.

- Michael Pollan ¹³

[The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World](#), pp xx-xxi.

Pollan, in this brilliant book, wonders if we are really agents of our destiny or if we are manipulated into action by ever present, barely acknowledged emotions. He understands neuroscience: more than we care to recognize, we are the object and not the subject. The interplay of two distinct objects - a person and his stuff - creates mental experience, just as the interplay of angiosperms and humans created agriculture, the one invention essential to the development of civilization and culture.

A simple organism swims along and enters a patch of acidic water. It reacts and swims away. For a patch of food-rich water, it swims in and enjoys the bounty. The condition of the water changes the action of the organism. It's a one sentence story. Organism-as-it-was, object, organism-as-it-is: the primal first sentence. The sentence describes the experience of an event - the body change caused by the presence of an object.

From the very moment of life, the primal first sentence describes an organism in the world. Increasingly elaborate neural structures react with more elaborate, adaptive emotions. In the right context - the necessary central nervous system and brain - the one sentence story becomes a building block for mental life and consciousness.

A big, ugly bug flies at your head. You duck, flail your arms, and if you're like a certain friend, scream, "It was a big bug!"

Here's what happened. Your body was hanging out. A bug showed up and attacked. Your arms flailed. In other words, the bug changed your body. You acted out an emotion. You emoted for the sake of your life.

Our bodies are filled with the equivalent of thermostats for every conceivable system of internal regulation. Readings of "too hot" generate body changes much like the expansion of the thermostat spring turns on the air conditioner. The systems of our bodies respond whenever these meters range outside a prefigured comfort zone.

We can screech, pinch our skin, lick our dirty feet, frown for a long time, and spin around until we puke. Each action sets off some regulatory response. We cower, yelp, feel disgust, become sad, or throw up.

If each body-regulation system was a pixel on a screen, these systems would display an image of amazing size, complexity and color depth. The screen for this giant image is called a neural map.

When our body perceives an object, the neural-map image changes. This change represents an emotion. The more salient the object, the more significant the change in the imagery. But how do we have a mental experience of these neural, biochemical changes?

THE ELEMENTS OF ELEMENTAL EXPERIENCE

We have something like a sixth sensory “organ,” a sixth means of perception: We have a secondary mapping capability - a way to perceive what we are perceiving - which observes the changes to a small and varied portion of the comprehensive neural map of the body.¹⁴ It is the mental equivalent of a physical eye ball, optic nerve and associated brain systems. Like eyesight, this second mapping capability notices only a few things and sees only a small range of ‘color.’ It fixates on change, and is given to significant distortion and bias.

This second map records an ongoing sequence of body-state changes - emotions - from the point of view of the body. It’s like a mirror for a mirror. The second mirror/map reflects (with all its distortions and biases) a limited snapshot of the first map. This second map can then become an object, which like a bug, causes change to the body.

The feedback loop creates an audience for the *primal first story* composed of *primal first sentences*. The neural map generates an embodied response to the content of the second map, perpetuating the story long enough that elemental experience becomes the basis of consciousness. These two reflections are highly combinatorial and recursive, the necessary ingredients for infinite experience and infinite expression.

Symbols are a helpful representation of the primal first sentence:

1. ▲, pronounced “ba,” is the mental representation - neural map - of the body-object, the body proper, including the brain and all the associated neural and biochemical activity.
2. ▼, pronounced “da,” is the mental representation of an emotionally significant object, requiring attention. The mental representation is ephemeral, and is only present so long as it continues to alter the body proper. A flying bug is an object, so is cold temperature endured for a half hour. The thought of leg pain is an ephemeral object even though the leg pain itself is part of ▲.
3. ▲▼ is the event which will be experienced. The pairing of ▲ and ▼ will trigger an emotion. (“Ba da.”)
4. ▲¹▼¹▲² is the sentence for the experience of the event when the ephemeral-object changes the body object: body-as-it-was, object, body-as-it-is. (“Ba-one, da-one, ba-two.”)
5. ▲²-▲¹ or d▲ is body-change, an emotion, and
6. ▲▼▲, pronounced “ba-da-bing,” is a simplified form of ▲¹▼¹▲².

Your body is a physical object. A bug is a physical object. What about a thought? A thought is a physical event. Small thoughts, small changes. Big thoughts? Think about jumping out of a plane. As you imagine falling, watch your body. It undergoes physical change. If you stifle a reaction, your body changes in two regards, the natural reaction and the stifle action.

Consciousness arises from the objects in our lives. If you look again at the sentence ▲▼▲, you see two objects, the body-object and the ephemeral-object. Change either object and the experience changes. Mind creating experience is the product of this interplay.

We notice ephemeral-objects ▼ and live in, hardly aware of, the body-object ▲. Like fish not noticing water, we do not pay attention to our bodies unless something is amiss. So in a sense, ephemeral-objects R'Us.

No wonder we have over-identification problems: I am my car, my job, my family, my horrible story about a painful experience. In these examples, the emotional significance of an object is so great, it triggers a significant amount of our on-going mental experience. If such experience persists, it gains autobiographical quality.

ONE BODY, ONE MIND

The ▲▼▲ system describes the creation of moment-to-moment elements of experience. These sentences are in turn compiled into imagery of growing length and scale - primal stories. At a certain point, if the imagery persists long enough, we can say we have conscious awareness of specific moments in time.

Because these elements are composed with the body as the frame of reference, we instinctively make attributions of experience from the point of view of the body. Only from this stable body reference can we have the singular experience of mind.

For every person that you know, there is a body... Why should we not commonly find two or three persons in one body?.. Or why should not persons of great intellectual capacity and imagination inhabit two or three bodies?.. Why should there not be bodiless persons in our midst, you know, ghosts, spirits, weightless and colorless creatures?.. A mind is so closely shaped by the body and destined to serve it that only one mind could possibly arise in it. No body, never mind. For any body, never more than one mind.

Body-minded minds help save the body. When creatures like us appeared, which had bodies and conscious minds, they were, as Nietzsche would call them, “hybrids of plants and of ghosts,” the combination of a bounded, well-circumscribed, easily identifiable living object with a seemingly unbounded, internal, and difficult-to-localize mental animation.

- Antonio Damasio¹⁵

[The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness](#). pp 142-143.

Damasio wrote three books to describe how events in the body give rise to the mind, feelings, consciousness and the sense of self. It's groundbreaking work by a brilliant neuroscientist. He is a master of the trope: brain lesion A causes defect-in-self B. These patterns show how brain systems give rise to numerous aspects of the self. Neuropsychology goes so far as to report we have a brain system for nouns and a different one for verbs.

Yet Damasio still feels the need to step back and make the singular point - one body, one mind. He acknowledges the ghost-sensation we all experience. It can also be found on Steven Pinker's list of innate intuitions:

- An intuitive version of biology... Its core intuition is that living things house a hidden essence that give them their form and power and drives their growth and body functions.
- An intuitive psychology, which we use to understand other people. Its core intuition is that other people are not objects or machines but are animated by the invisible entity we call the mind or the soul. Minds contain beliefs and desires and are the immediate cause of behavior.

- Steven Pinker¹⁶

[The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature](#), pp 219-221.

Damasio's ghost-sensation and Pinker's essences: These concepts seem so obvious and valid. Our innate sensibilities say so. Where

do we go when we reflect on these qualities? Up? Out? Are we elevated?

Jonathan Haidt:¹⁷

If elevation and admiration really do involve feelings of self-transcendence—a reduction in attention to the often all-consuming self and its goals—then a simple-minded prediction would be that these emotions dampen brain activity in regions that map and track the self and its bodily incarnation. But the findings of Immordino-Yang et al.¹⁸ suggest a much more interesting possibility: that brain areas related to interoceptive processing may be more active during self-transcendence.

Haidt acknowledges the more our ghost-sense takes us out of our body, the more our brain is grounded in body-awareness. The less we feel it's about our physical body, the more it seems to be about just that. To add to the circularity of this discussion, Haidt's citation references work by Damasio.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR MAKING

We can look at a the system of momentary experience ▲▼▲ as a system for conscious experience. The shift in perspective is justifiable because of the combinatorial qualities of ▲▼▲ and the constant presence and consistency of the body. This shift moves the ground from theoretical neuroscience to robust analytic metaphor.

In this more abstract sense, ▲▼▲ has another significant feature: Because my body changed, there is consequence to the object ▼, from the perspective of ▲. In the bug story, the consequence would read, “I dodged the bug.” In Pollan's story of agriculture:

We're prone to overestimate our own agency in nature. Many of the activities humans like to think they undertake for their own good purposes - inventing agriculture, outlawing certain plants, writing books in praise of others - are more contingencies as far as nature is concerned.

- Michael Pollan¹⁹

[The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World](#), pp xxi.

These consequence-sentences are like the sentences we commonly use to explain. We explain our contingent behavior as if we are the subject, the primal first person. Consequence-sentences are in the form: I have agency against object.

Remember the words “accept the things I cannot change” from the Serenity Prayer? Just as first-person perspective fuels over-identification, it also enlarges our sense of agency - the consequence of consequence-sentences. The problems caused by the feeling of too much agency are so large, we pray for God’s grace.

For example, a short story:

1. The beginning sentence: body, tiger, staring-body - $\blacktriangle^1 \blacktriangledown^1 \blacktriangle^2$. Consequence-sentence: “I noticed a tiger.”
2. The second sentence: alert-body, crouching-tiger, proud-body - $\blacktriangle^2 \blacktriangledown^2 \blacktriangle^3$. Consequence-sentence: “I stared down the tiger.”
3. The third sentence: proud-body, attacking-tiger, mauled-body - $\blacktriangle^3 \blacktriangledown^3 \blacktriangle^4$. Consequence sentence: “I greeted God.” This specific behavior was not particularly adaptive.

If instead, the body-object \blacktriangledown survived, it might say, “The damn tiger attacked me. So I ran.” This sentence acknowledges the agency of the tiger (tiger-attacked). Still, there is an implied consequence-sentence: “I fled tiger.”

THE SOCIO-EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY OF ▲▼▲

Extended consciousness is everything core consciousness is, only bigger and better, and it does nothing but grow across evolution and across a lifetime of experience in each individual... The range of knowledge that extended consciousness now allows you to access encompasses a large panorama. The self from which that large landscape is viewed is a robust concept in the true sense of the word. It is an autobiographical self.

-Antonio Damasio,²⁰

[The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness](#), p 196.

By stretching the panorama of ▲▼▲ from elemental experience to personal experience to human experience, we can have perspective on perspective. The history of society shows how we have come to care for and nurture our conscious self.

Many functions of the brain are organized into the body-object domain - ▲, and the ephemeral-object domain - ▼. Studies, conclusions and theories from neuroscience and psychology are grouped into concerns about body-objects or concerns about non-body-objects.

The study of body-objects is directed in part to the study of emotions, innate defenses, implicit or somatic memory, and so on. Methods of care might include yoga, physical therapy, body-based psychotherapy, etc. The study of the experience of the body reveals a tremendous amount about a person. Change the body, change the person.

The study of ephemeral-objects is directed in part to the study of perception, language and stories, explicit or procedural memory, and mental experience evoked by a continuous stream of ephemeral-objects. Psychology and many other ephemeral-object practices focus on our feelings, affects, thoughts, defenses, and so on - what it is to be us. So much (the experience of life) arises

from so little (ephemera). It's the study of the experience of the self. Change the stories, change the person.

Good talk is big business. Therapy, counseling, life coaching, and other similar services provide tremendous resources to clients. Talking to someone who knows how to listen generates a tremendous amount of self-regulation. It just feels good to be heard.

The panoramic sweep widens much further because consciousness is a combinatorial system. It makes ephemeral-objects out of sentences, out of paragraphs of sentences, and out of whole stories. It can look at ▲▼▲ as a system to be examined. It can witness.

From a microscopic view of ▲▼▲, witnessing shifts the focus to the body and the slivers of emotion that course through it moment after moment. This perspective, in a narrow sense, leads to notions of personal attunement and body awareness.

From a macroscopic view, when we examine the system of experience, we discover vastness. This perspective displays the sweep of all historic spiritual traditions. Good talk is big business. God talk is huge. Spending on religion dwarfs all spending on therapy, however broadly defined.

We can witness the system of experience without the presence of an ephemeral-object ▼, a perspective that might describe meditation and other contemplative traditions. This witness practice would touch on the idea of egolessness and on transcending consciousness. In a way, it is a practice of turning off consciousness.

To me, it is amazing that:

1. The body-object ▲, reveals a gateway to awareness and the vast history of body-wisdom,
2. The ephemeral-object ▼, reveals a gateway to the psyche, the self and the traditions of self-realization, and

3. The witness-perspective of ▲▼▲ reveals a gateway to attunement, spirituality and contemplative traditions.

▲▼▲ is what we want to understand. It is the system which creates consciousness. It is a framework to understand our Furies. It is a system to resolve trauma.

DAMAGED PERSPECTIVE

I remember the death of my last dog, Dickens. I unclasp his leash. He runs at the dog across the street. He screams when he is hit by a car. He flies and skips twenty yards down gravelly pavement. In the past, I had let Dickens off the leash with no consequence. He behaved and had no impulse to run into traffic. How could he behave this way? I should have known!

He yelps as I pick up his bloody body. He whimpers as I speed to the vet and smiles at me as the doctor pushes on the syringe filled with euthanizing drugs. I cry off and on for several days and soon become busy, too preoccupied with other commitments. I can't think about Dickens. I conflate my love with grief and sadness and regret. It is my fault. All these feelings feed on themselves and terrify.

Whenever anyone asks, "How am I doing?" I say, "It's sad what happened. But I'm OK." My statement is perfunctory, true only to the superficial facts. If I let the silence become awkward, the topic of conversation changes. I manage my own painful thoughts in a similar manner.

After several months, I cannot hide from my desire to adopt another dog. Before I can, I need to reconcile with Dickens. I believe he despises me.

I relearn the future isn't predictable. Choices have consequences which often are dramatically different than the quality of the choice. I have done other stupid things in the past and will do

stupid things in the future. Our bond endures as long as I remember Dickens for more than his death.

I cry as I spend hours looking through pictures. When I had suppressed thoughts about Dickens, I cut off the pleasure, too. The more I could remember his whole life, the more peace I had.

If a Fury is the traumatic consequence of a crisis, what is a crisis? What is trauma?²¹

B ody-as-it-was, running-dog, body-yelling:
▲¹▼¹▲². ▲▼▲ shows three equal sized triangles. Implicit in the diagram is the equivalence of ▲ and ▼. In other words, the body object can immediately process the ephemeral object. The event - ▲▼ - is resolvable in the moment. When Dickens ran off, nothing about the event was resolvable in the moment. That event was "bigger," quite dramatically so. In other words, the process requires several steps before the event is complete. A diagram might look like:



The story of the event might look like:



A four part story, a three part story, a two part story, the final sentence, done.

A crisis is any event requiring more than one step. It is possible the crisis resolution to happen so quickly, it occurs without conscious thought.

A "9 triangle" crisis:



This composite of ephemeral objects displays both the sense of more size and time.

FROM EVENT, TO CRISIS, TO TRAUMA

A car struck my dog. The event was an overwhelming crisis which required my complete engagement for a long time. During the crisis, I couldn't be lost in my own emotional pain at the expense of my dog's grave injuries. I had to get him into the car, drive and get the vet's help. Finally, I had to put him down.

I responded to the contingencies of the crisis, more so than the feeling evoked by my emotions. This behavior was a form of denial. It was highly functional and allowed me to do the best I could under the circumstances. I had to isolate the pain, limit exposure to it's memory and inhibit processing.

After I put my dog down, I didn't have the capacity to process the event. Instead, I left it unexamined. I couldn't address my own hurt. The crisis left me with trauma, and I suffered.

Even this delay can be healthy. It is reasonable to relive an experience in smaller pieces. We can only process what we have the capacity to process. Upsetting events take time to integrate. It's why ruminating is often a natural part of grieving.

To set the stage for delayed, multi-step processing, we maintain the event's split - the story we can tell and the experience we have to relive. We wait for a time free of demands and distractions to resolve this split.

To process and integrate an event is to literally re-pair these two parts. We pair the explanation with the emotional story, reliving

the event free of the requirements to act. We are no longer distracted by what we must do. We sit with the full sense of emotions, feelings and thought. We experience the full affect of the event.

In this sense, our body responses become different and more feelings laden. We don't stifle our fear, for example, but tremble with fright. We give the body time to let happen what needs to happen.

After processing all the story segments, we can tell the complete narrative, including how we were affected. When we recall the event, we reuse the resolution we created to first process the complete event. Our memories become easier to live with. We can abstract lessons from a crisis and integrate them into our autobiography.

Many crises cause wounds. My dog's death sure did. In the end, because the consequences were so severe, I couldn't re-pair my split and care for my own wounds. The split became my defense.

Any memory of my dog triggered a nightmare. I avoided the pain and kept to the appearance of normalcy. The story I told others - *It's sad what happened. But I'm OK.* - was wishful thinking.

The crisis of my dog's death transformed into personal trauma. A trauma object might look like:



, or - indigestible remnants of the original crisis object.

If we are unable to process these pieces, they live on as part of our unprocessed memory. They form the emotional core of our isolated, unre-paired experience, giving rise to a Fury.

THE MYTHOLOGY OF A CAPRICIOUS WORLD

This delay-stress-until-later behavior becomes maladaptive if we neglect the integration process. The event's core elements remain apart - the Fury and the Faerie Tale. These parts are likely associated with different systems and domains of the brain, and the dissociation can become more rigid in time.

We defend against the Fury and identify with the simple account. The process of identification transforms the perfunctory statement into a Faerie Tale. Originally, the bodies responded to the contingencies of the crisis, and now we won't let them respond to the crisis-proper. We fear the re-living of the event. The unresolved experience becomes a traumatic nightmare.²²

The organizing force of our Faerie Tales is not our life experience, or the wisdom gained, but the neglected pain - our Furies. If we accumulate Faerie Tales, we develop an increasingly detailed apparently-normal-self, the part unafflicted by the wounds, fears or humiliations.

This self mythology become part of our autobiography. If the Furies break down our defenses, this mythic self is shattered, creating a wound of overwhelming despair. We lost the comfort of our own mythology.

TRAUMA: PROCESS INTERRUPTUS


I was helpless when Dickens ran off. I could not react quickly enough to call him back, or stop the speeding car or heal his injuries. I could not stop him from dying.

After the crisis, I believed I wasn't worthy of my dog's love. I could not understand how a great dog deserved such horrid fate. I could not manage my own feelings or stop the memories. I efforted defense and refused resolution.

Trauma is helplessness: I wasn't able to, I wasn't worthy enough, I didn't know better. I failed to accomplish, to bond, or to understand. Event remnants embody these archetypal failures. The suffering animates these incarnations, giving heart to our Furies.

Each time I re-experienced the car slamming into my dog, the event proceeded from the beginning -



I followed my process until I hit the trauma-object -  - which stopped my process every time. It was a moment of pain great enough to overwhelm my body. I was unable to let what needed to happen, happen.

As I learned I would get stuck, I began to shut down the process at the brutal beginning -



. I denied the recurring crunch-of-bone Fury. I became more vigilant and anxious to a capricious world, never understanding why.

Before adopting a new dog, I opened up to this Fury. I accepted I had no control over the event, forgave myself, and learned again how random life can be.

As I worked through this process, the memory of Dickens grew as a source of joy. The moment of his death remained painful and sad. After honoring his memory and accepting the sadness, I had peace.

In other words, I can tell the complete narrative of the accident - how it changed my life and made me wiser. As I recall the event, my body no longer gets stuck on the trauma-object but processes the recalled event to completion. It becomes a practiced response which eases the memories.

After the resolution, the significance of the event may well be reduced. Instead of starting at the brutal beginning -



, I naturally flow through a story of my own creation -



ACCUMULATION RISKS TRAUMA

“How great was the big red dragon?” My son asked his girlfriend over the phone.

They had discussed *Avatar* for the past ten minutes. I imagined my son was relieved to have a topic for conversation.

“I liked how the Na’Vi looked,” she said. “They were naked, you know.”

“Umm...” My son started to pace with deliberate steps.

“We should see the movie together.”

“OK.” He crouched as if listening to a whisper.

“How about Friday?” She asked.

“OK...” He pumped his fist. If he was near a friend, he might have even tried a high-five. “... but I need to talk to my dad first.”

My son's phone call is over, a distinct event no doubt, filled with the lurking terror of rejection from a girlfriend he hasn't yet dated.

My son still needs my acquiescence - my money, my time and willingness to drive. He will also need to answer my unnerving questions. *What is her name? How long has she been your girlfriend? How can you have a girlfriend if you haven't gone on a date?*

He will hate answering. And because I'll feel better, I'll give advice. He will hate that too.

For my son, planning his first date is a daunting task even with a helpful girlfriend and an easy-going father. He will have to overcome some combination of shame, fear of my judgment, nosy questions, and lame advice. I will ask him to behave responsibly. He'll probably get more chores too.

What if instead, he believed I would disapprove for no particular reason?

"Dad..." My son said. I had just sat down after a long day, looking forward to a glass of wine, a moment of quiet and a chance to ignore the chaos.

"You need to take me to the movies on Friday," he said.

"Need to?" I said. "Are you telling me what to do?"

"No. I didn't mean it that way."

I drank my wine.

"What I wanted to know," my son said. "Was, could you take me to the movies?"

"I just sat," I said. "I'm going to drink my wine. We'll talk later."

"You'll just say no."

“I said later.”

“You always say no!”

In this scenario, I wasn't a saint, to be sure. My son reacted to my responsiveness with the belief, “You always say no.”

His banal Faerie Tale would be, “Dad is such an asshole!” His Fury would be the caricature of me as his tormentor. His rage would fuel this Fury.

My son's defensiveness also made his suffering worse. He tried to tell me what to do. He then preempted my delayed response by declaring, “You always say no.”

First he tried to control the interaction then he defended his belief. His defensive behaviors practically assured the final answer would be “no.”

SILLY IDEAS

Sometimes trauma is the consequence of one event - Dicken's death. Other times, trauma is the accumulation of indigestible remnants. As these collections grow, our defenses become more elaborate, such as my son's belief, “You always say no.”

Consider some other banal Faerie Tales:

Belief: Men are assholes.

Outcome: You will always date an asshole.

You will be anxious and scan for character deficits - *He looks at the bar TV during a date. He looks at other women!* After enough proof - poof! - you are dating an asshole. You created a tautology, then made it worse. You produced an outcome which reinforces the belief.

Belief: Girlfriends break hearts.

Outcome: You love the growing relationship, but start to create some emotional distance to protect yourself. Your girlfriend decides you have become distant, no longer interested in the relationship. She leaves you, breaking your heart again.

It's as if Furies pervert defenses. When our defenses break down, we break down. All of the cumulative distress hidden away become one overwhelming trauma. Only then might we seek to heal our pain.

Belief: "But I'm OK..."

Outcome: ???

Ownership

THE LESSON OF DOG POOP

The truth is that cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me.

- Lance Armstrong

When we struggle with adversity, we develop our strengths, particularly in three areas:²³

1. The development of personal capabilities, capacities and strengths [material resources],
2. The renewal and development of valued relationships [social resources], and
3. The shift in personal philosophy towards the present and towards other people, and enriched by a deeper sense of insight [informational resources].

When I reviewed these areas of growth, I looked for them to highlight three qualities of ▲▼▲ - perspective, ownership and agency. It's easy to find perspective ("shift in personal philosophy," and "enriched by a deeper sense of insight"), and agency (the development of capabilities and relationships), but where is *ownership*?

Damasio identifies perspective, ownership and agency as the gifts of the mind. His concept of *ownership* is different from the colloquial "own it," or "I own it," which means "take responsibility," or "I take responsibility." "Own it" is about behavior during the events of our lives. In this context, ownership is about blame. It assigns roles such as aggressor and victim.

Damasio wrote four sentences on ‘ownership’ in a four-hundred page book.²⁴ If his concept of ‘ownership’ is underdeveloped, mine then is impoverished. At least until my dogs came along...

I stride up and down the packed-dirt nature path, trying to keep up with my two black labs, Cheese and Eli. We race from leaf pile to leaf pile. My dogs lust for the musky smells of the morning-dew damp park. They wag their broad tails with their full bodies as if method actors then pull me to the next stop.

Whenever something rustles the underbrush, the labs try to charge off. I have to hold back 160 pounds of brawny dog. I am flush and sweaty and cold from the morning air - a balmy chill unique to fall.

My phone rings. As I walk and talk, I tighten the leashes so the dogs explore less and strain more. I learn I need to hurry back. As I yammer on the phone, the dogs strain harder. I give some slack. They hunch down and poop.

“Holy hell!” I say and drop the phone.

“What?” My phone yells from the ground.

“The dogs are dropping a load,” I say. “But I’m OK. Got to go.”

They take their time. Eli likes to walk as he poops, scattering his morning constitutional along the path. I’m anxious to get back and don’t have a dog-baggie. I look around, look again and walk away. The minute I walk off, I make myself the victim. I cannot change the circumstances if I’m far away.

AFTER PERSPECTIVE, OWNERSHIP

This minor, momentary challenge highlights the three gifts of mind. I can have *perspective* if I stand over the poop. I'm disgusted but still helpless. Well, maybe I could kick it and make the problem worse.

If I hold the poop, I own it. Here is *ownership*. With a squishy handful of poop, I can stride to the nearest garbage can and throw it out. My disgust (*perspective*) is gone (*ownership* then *agency*).

I can act only on what I own, nothing else. Most of our actions are mental, either as rehearsal for upcoming actions or as reliving old events to practice different behavior.

Because I left the smelly load behind, I will relive the abandoned poop each time I walk past. And each time I abandon more poop, my fret grows. If I leave the mess, I create a Fury to hold the bag.

Picking up my dogs' poop or sitting with the Fury of some minor trauma-object demonstrates *ownership*. These moments are not, however, transformative experiences like Lance Armstrong's cancer.

A powerful, deadly disease confronts you if you have cancer. There is a pervasive sense of the horror of possible annihilation. Horror is like awe in a sense: Imagine the terror of a Divine burning bush commanding submissiveness, for example. Horror and awe compel accommodation: With cancer, your whole life has to change and you have to prostrate yourself before the painful ordeal of treatment. Even if you survive, the cancer has the undeniable power to transform your life.

Where does transformation come from? Posttraumatic growth comes from our halting, hard-fought struggle with our Furies. Because the pain of the trauma is intense, it is hard to have perspective. For moments though, we can observe ▲, ▼ and ▲▼▲. We see we **own** all the parts of ▲▼▲ - the body, the object, the emotion, the experience of the event and the system of experience itself. We know a particular trauma experience - one filled with terror and awe - causes great pain to the body. We can see the very specific duality: me, on the one hand, and my pain, on the other.

Because we can learn to regulate the system of experience, we can manage the integration of the traumatic event. We develop accommodations for the trauma's violations of our primal beliefs. In a way, we use the emotions of terror and awe to compel transformation.

Every morning, I let Cheese and Eli out of their crate. My big dogs jump straight up. They really want to jump on me but don't want a hard knee to the gut. The labs leap in the air, head and shoulders rising above my 6-foot-tall body.

They leap. They leap. They wag their whole body, push me with their noses, and try to sit. They are desperate to sit like gentledogs, but have no footing on wood floor. Eli's otter tail wags so hard, he falls over, wriggles around, gets up and pushes me with his cold nose.

They stare into my eyes. Then I know, I pick up their poop because every morning they show me awe.

PERSPECTIVE, OWNERSHIP *THEN* AGENCY

...Lucky for us Pennebaker is a psychologist. His studies identify the value of sitting with our Furies, and they link this process with

significant improvements in emotional and physical health. He directed four groups of volunteers to write for 15 minutes over four consecutive days. Each group had different instructions:

1. Just vent emotions [about a deeply-personal, emotionally-upsetting experience, a Fury],
2. Just write about the facts of the experience,
3. Vent emotions and write about facts,
4. Write about superficial or irrelevant topics (the control group).

The group who vented emotions and wrote facts (Group #3) demonstrated significant improvement in health - 50% fewer visits to the university clinic over the subsequent six months. This group, in interviews and questionnaires, reported improved moods, more positive outlooks and greater physical health. No other group showed any noteworthy improvement.

Such an amazing study! Transform an upsetting past experience - a Fury - into an integrated autobiographical narrative. Write then heal. Can it be so simple? The activity is simple, but the work is hard, as meditation is easy yet developing attunement is difficult.

Confronting a Fury is emotional and painful. There is risk the Fury can re-traumatize and make the wound worse. We might choose to live with our Fury's Nightmare and to inhibit the pain in our body. We could focus on the wrong thing, avoiding the menacing experience.

Chris Brewin²⁵ catalogs the benefits of this work:

- Restoration of safety (reduced fear),
- Abandonment of unattainable goals (reduced sadness),
- Absolution of others from responsibility for the trauma (reduced anger),
- Absolution of self from responsibility (reduced guilt), and
- The integration of new information into preexisting expectations.

He also describes how triggered re-experience transforms into function autobiography:

We use the term *emotional processing* broadly to denote a largely conscious process in which representations of past and future events and awareness of associated bodily states, repeatedly enter into and are actively manipulated within working memory. We suggest this process... has at least two elements. One element involves the activation of highly specific situationally-accessible knowledge, whose function is to aid the process of cognitive readjustment by supplying detailed sensory and physiological information concerning the event. The second element... is the conscious attempt to accommodate the conflicting information supplied by the trauma by searching for meaning and making judgments of cause and blame. The end point of this process is to reduce negative affect by restoring a sense of safety and control and by making appropriate adjustments to expectations about the self and the world.

When Pennebaker's Group #3 was asked to vent emotions and write facts about 'a deeply-personal, emotionally-upsetting experience,' they were asked to write on something traumatic. Pennebaker wrote about his despair for his marriage. He wanted his volunteers to consider traumas comparably severe.

Each person evoked a Fury which then triggered reexperience of the original event. They opened up and confessed.

Confession, whether by writing or talking, can neutralize many of the problems of inhibition. Furthermore, writing or talking about upsetting things can influence our basic values, or daily thinking patterns, and feelings about ourselves. In short, there appears to be something akin to an urge to confess. Not disclosing our thoughts and feelings can be unhealthy. Divulging them can be healthy.

- James Pennebaker ²⁶

[Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions](#), p2.

To contemplate a wound, confess a Fury. Write about it in a journal. When Pennebaker contemplated the details of his Fury, he found “a sense of meaning and direction.”

Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt:²⁷

Given the stability of personality and values [the stability of the body as a presence in the system of experience]... awe-inducing events may be one of the fastest and most powerful methods of personal change and growth. The potential power of awe, combined with the mystery of its mechanisms, may itself be a source of awe, giving pleasure both to those who study it and to those who cultivate it in their lives.

What insight might you find? Furies, at the end, illuminate our ability, worthiness and wisdom - an internal awe with transformative powers.

About The Author

Cole Bitting distills life lessons from the science of our complex human nature.

Peer-reviewed articles about neuroscience and psychology are insightful but their conclusions are technical and shroud in jargon. Each study makes a small point with technical force.

Cole draws insight from the wide sweep of these individual studies. He writes essays and fables to demonstrate valuable life practices and enliven our intuitive sense of psychology. He focuses on the topics of personal development, recovery from emotional distress and nurturing well-being.

As infants we understand how objects move, bounce and break. The movie **Toy Story** details the physical life of familiar objects, and young kids joyously revel as each new movement confirms their intuitive sense of physics.

Later in life, we study the movement of physical objects, and by high school, the subject becomes the incomprehensible science of physics. It would be like studying the computer code for **Toy Story's** cartoon physics rather than watching the film.

Just as we have an innate sense of intuitive physics, we also have an innate sense of intuitive psychology. Kids love **Toy Story** because they understand each character and identify with the hidden essence which creates each character's personality.

Like physics, when we study the complexity of human nature we lose our intuitive reference and natural curiosity. The more technical the knowledge and the deeper it delves into human

nature, the less we understand. Psychologists and neuroscientists end up studying “human nature” computer code.

We try to make use of these lessons by turning the computer code into prescriptions - *Seven Easy Steps To*

- *Improve Your Self Esteem and Achieve Your Grandest Life Ambitions*
- *Save Your Marriage and Live Happily Ever After*
- *Understanding Cosmic Nature and Living In Rapture*

When we mechanically follow lists, we turn ourselves into automated machinery. We get angry when we don't do as we tell ourselves. We abandon our innate intuitive psychology, our natural abilities to heal and grow, and the joyous revelry of life.

We need to recognize the complexity of human nature and the equal complex quality of the related science. Cole distills this technical knowledge into intuitive lessons so it makes sense and so we can learn.

Footnotes

¹ “Knowledge” and “know” sound prosaic as a domain of living. The domain of knowledge is about sense-making on many different scales. At its largest scale, this domain is highly spiritual.

² Shweder, R. A., Much, N. C, Mahapatra, M., Park, L. (1997). The "Big Three" of morality (autonomy, community, divinity) and the "Big Three" explanations of suffering. In A. Brandt and P. Rozin (Eds.), *Morality and Health* (pp. 119-169). New York: Routledge.

³ Comte-Sponville A. [A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life](#). Holt Paperbacks; 2002.

⁴ Brewin CR, Dalgleish T, Joseph S. A dual representation theory of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychological Review*. 1996;103(4): 670-686.

⁵ Keltner D, Haidt J. Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition*. 2003;17(2).

⁶ Ledoux J. [The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life](#). Simon and Schuster; 1998: p 20.

⁷ Beggs, KL and Davey, B (Producers). (2005). [Leonard Cohen I'm Your Man](#) [Motion picture]. USA: LionsGate.

⁸ Pennebaker JW. [Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions](#). The Guilford Press; 1997.

⁹ I have tried to align my definition of emotion with the neuroscientific definition. When I use the word emotion, I am thinking of specific body events.

Philosopher William James was one of the first to propose the theory that emotions are events in the body. (*Mind*, 9, 1884: 188-205).

One great book highly relevant to this book is Damasio, A. R. (2000). [The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness](#) (New Ed.). Vintage.

¹⁰ Damasio A. [Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain](#). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 2003.

¹¹ Darwin, C. (1782). *The Expression Of The Emotions In Man And Animals*.

¹² Ekman, P. (2004). [Emotions Revealed : Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life.](#) Owl Books.

¹³ Michael Pollan narrates the tale of four plants - the apple, the tulip, marijuana and the potato. Because these plants fulfilled aspects of our desires for sweetness, beauty, intoxication and control, they thrived by our efforts. The plants speak great stories about the nature of our yearnings.

The book is smart, clever, personal and intelligent. All of those qualities are needed for these four stories to succeed as Fables about our own condition. In his telling, we will find insight and the joy of self-recognition.

Pollan, M. (2002). [The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World.](#) Random House Trade Paperbacks.

¹⁴ Damasio, A. [The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness.](#) Harvest Books; 2000.

Damasio theorizes the concept of a second-order neural map (or more likely maps) as a means to give feedback to the body about its experience of an event. This feedback creates the audience for *the primal first story* [my term] composed of primal first sentences. Some quotes:

Beyond the many neural structures in which the causative object and the proto-self changes are separately represented, there is at least one other structure which re-represents both proto-self and about in their temporal relationship and can thus represent what is actually happening to the organism: proto-self at the inaugural instant; objective coming into sensory representation; changing of inaugural proto-self into proto-self modified by object [the primary first story].

p 177.

The first use for the imaged account of the organism-object relationship [the primal first sentence] is to inform the organism [body object] of what it is doing... What is the relation between images of things and this body? The feeling of knowing is the beginning of the answer. p 182.

¹⁵ Damasio AR (2000).

¹⁶ Pinker, S. [The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature](#). Penguin; 2002.

¹⁷ Haidt J, Morris JP. Finding the self in self-transcendent emotions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 2009;106(19):7687-8.

¹⁸ Immordino-Yang MH, McColl A, Damasio H, Damasio A. Neural correlates of admiration and compassion. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 2009;106(19):8021-6.

¹⁹ Pollan, M. (2002).

²⁰ Damasio AR. (2000)

²¹ I have used a loose definition of trauma to this point : trauma is an unresolved emotional wound. If ▲▼▲ represents an element of experience, what is elemental trauma?

²² Nightmare is a compound word of night and mare, or mara, an Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse word for a demon which sits on a sleeper's chest and causes nightmares. This original traumatic Mare is from Norse mythology:

A Norse prince married a Finnish woman and shortly after had to leave, swearing to return within three years. Ten years later, the bride had a witch cast a spell that would compel her husband's return or kill him. The prince's advisors stifled his sudden desire to travel to Finland, so the prince fell asleep and the Mare trod on him within his dream. Soon, he was dead.

The original Mare of the night was the consequence of a failed relationship. So fitting. Attachment trauma can cause great distress during a relationship crisis. The notion of a Night Mare is a fitting match to Faerie Tales.

Faeries are not necessarily so nice either. They are known to beguile to the point of witlessness, and then leave their victims in grave crisis. One good source: [nightmare](#).

²³ Tedeschi R, Calhoun L. Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*. 2004.

²⁴ Damasio AR. 2000: p183. His description of ownership:

Ownership is hidden, as it were, within the sense of perspective, ready to be made clear when the following inference can be made: if these images have the perspective of this body I now feel, then these images are in my body - they are mine.

²⁵ Brewin CR, Dalgleish T, Joseph S (1996).

²⁶ Pennebaker, JW. (1997).

²⁷ Keltner D, Haidt J. Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition*. 2003;17(2).