

REAL LIFE

The JOURNEY from ISOLATION to OPENNESS & FREEDOM

Chapter One Preview

FROM CONSTRICTION TO EXPANSION

When I was nine my mother died, so during a chunk of my chaotic childhood, I lived with my paternal grandparents—immigrants from Poland, observant Jews. Most of the practices of the household, like not turning on the lights on Saturday, the Sabbath, I simply followed with little interest or curiosity about any possible deeper meaning. Following along suited my general sense of numbness anyway. The Passover Seder, however, was a big exception.

I didn't have a tremendous understanding of the layers of the Seder's symbolism or values—but I *felt* a lot. I felt a stirring of joy at the coming together of family (even if my family didn't look like the conventional picture I had in my head from TV), the tribal recognition of collective suffering (which painted a picture of a life I could actually feel I belonged within), the idea that life could be different, could be better, and that no matter how hard things were, you could imagine you were on your way to that better life.

I'd like to consider the Seder apart from religious identity, apart from leaning into the geopolitical realities of Israel, the Palestinian people, or Egyptians. I didn't know any of that as a frightened child, and even as an adult, if I am marking the Passover Seder in some way, it's my own way, with a consideration of all beings everywhere who are suffering, who seek a better life. The liturgical text, the Haggadah, that I've used for years is a Jewish Buddhist Haggadah, where quotations from Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet, and from the Buddha himself are laced throughout the depictions of the essential journey from bondage to liberation.

In Hebrew, the word conventionally translated as Egypt in the Haggadah is called *mitzrayim*. The name is derived from *m'tzarim*, meaning “narrow straits” (*mi*, “from”; *tzar*, “narrow” or “tight”): a place of constriction, tightness, limitation, or narrow-mindedness. Each of us lives, at least at times, in our own *mitzrayim*, the narrow straits of seeing few options, or being defined by someone else who has more power than we do in a situation, or feeling so unseen that we absorb someone's projection so thoroughly we come perilously close to forgetting who we are.

Perhaps we've been engulfed by a personal tragedy or health crisis, so that taking that first tentative step out of overwhelm toward an uncertain but beckoning future seems untenable. Or our actions are so determined by what we have been taught to believe in contrast to what we can newly discover that our ability to know wonder or awe seems completely beside the point.

Our personal Exodus is journeying out from an opaque world—where it's difficult to breathe, where change, the ever-present rhythm of life, is all too muffled, where the tight bindings around our hearts keep them from generously nourishing our bodies, our feelings, our entire existence—to a wholly different kind of world.

We journey from fixity to freedom.

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CONTRACTION

Contraction or constriction isn't the same as focusing, being one-pointed, being centered, or being contained. We can be specific, determined, intentional, without being constricted.

Think of the last time you were lost in fear. The last time you were harshly unforgiving of yourself. The last time you felt trapped. The last time a craving was so strong that all reason and common sense fled (remember, for example, those old infatuations). The last time any sense of potential change collapsed and you fell into hopelessness. Those are times we experience limited options, the blunting of our creativity, a feeling of disconnection, the dimming of our vision of what is possible.

Judson Brewer, author of *Unwinding Anxiety*, once said to me, “My personal practice comes together with my lab’s research in exploring the experience of contraction versus expansion and how that manifests in the world in so many ways.”

Jud—who is a psychiatrist, neuroscientist, and director of research and innovation at the Mindfulness Center at Brown University—began by telling me about a dynamic web of interconnection in the brain called the *default mode network*. The posterior

cingulate cortex (PCC)—the hub of self-referential habits—is a key part of this network. In his research, he found that “when people were feeling guilty, they activated the PCC. When they were craving a bunch of different substances, they activated it. When they were ruminating, they activated it. When they were anxious, they activated it.”

What Jud and his team found was that the PCC correlated with a feeling of contraction: “The experience of anxiety, of guilt, of craving, of rumination—all of these—share literally an experiential component of contraction. We contract, and we close down.”

None of this is to say that contraction is bad or wrong to feel. But if it becomes chronic, we begin living more and more in a world of tunnel vision, of auditory exclusion, of distorted perception, of narrowed interests, of joy that is right here in front of us that we miss simply because we don't see it. Our perception of options, of possibility, of aliveness, fades.

We suffer.

Learning to be aware of these narrow straits and changing how we respond to them is crucial. “If we read the news and read something that pisses us off, it is that reaction of contraction that feels bad,” Jud explained. “So we may have this urge to make ourselves feel better by firing off a tweet, writing an email, eating a cupcake. This perpetuates the entire process. If we're not aware of our habitual responses, we not only may make things worse for ourselves, but also for society.”

What we are working to evolve is an inner environment where we can surround that state of constriction, of holding back from the flow of life, with spaciousness, ease of heart, and kindness. Cultivating that radically changed relationship is the essence of the journey to being free.

ASSUMPTIONS

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The quality of our lives can be limited by the thought patterns that produce much of our constriction, such as unexamined assumptions. Sometimes—perhaps most of the time—we don’t even notice the ideas we hold about ourselves, our experiences, our friends, family, and so on. We tend to accept our preconceptions, judgments, hasty conclusions, and anxieties about the world as truth: ultimate, unyielding, inflexible. Our world shrinks, becoming ever smaller and smaller.

My friend Friedrike Merck is a sculptor. One year, she told me that she had a piece in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., so on a visit to the capital, I went to see it. I walked up and down and up and down the vast corridors of the museum. I checked every room, looked at each display case and pedestal—and I just couldn’t find it! My mind went everywhere, all the way to, *Just my luck. I have to be the one to break the news to her that they decided not to put it up after all. It must be in a basement somewhere.* Having given up in disappointment, as I headed for the exit, I casually glanced up at a wall—and there was her beautiful piece. It was a bas-relief, not the freestanding piece I’d expected: my assumptions had contoured my vision, and determined what I was expecting to see, and what I was simply *not* seeing.

Several of the traditions found in India use a well-known parable: Someone walks along a path. They casually look ahead and see a poisonous snake barring their way and turn and run in the opposite direction. As they return along the same path in the morning, they see that same shape but look more carefully and find a coiled rope on the ground. There never was a snake. Or as *Star Wars* Jedi knight Obi-Wan Kenobi said, “Your eyes can deceive you . . .”

Because of many factors, including previous traumatic experience, we might be easily activated by the ropes littered throughout our lives, mistaking each for a source of the highest danger. When that’s the case, we rarely feel safe. It’s exhausting, so the times when we really do see a snake and mistake it for a harmless piece of rope (which actually happened to me once in Burma, only for me to be saved by a group of Burmese women who shooed me away from an outdoor staircase where a highly poisonous green snake was taking a nap, masquerading as a piece of yarn), we might not be able to summon the acuity we need to protect ourselves.

One day not long ago, I was on a Zoom call with friends and (perhaps inelegantly) drinking seltzer straight from a can. At one point, one of my friends said, “Why are you drinking beer at 10:00 a.m.?” I held up the can next to the camera and protested, “It’s not beer; it’s seltzer.” Afterward, I reflected how glad I was that she’d asked. In another context, not with friends, I might have started sensing innuendoes in snatches of conversations, fielding offers of help, and been puzzled about why people started acting strangely around me.

Questioning our assumptions doesn’t leave us full of doubt and uncertainty, floundering, unable to take a step in any direction. It leaves us in a more spacious place, released from the grip of perhaps having once, long ago, felt a certain way, or from projecting our fears into a seemingly unchanging future, or from making choices based on something like a long-ago determination that we don’t deserve to be happy. Questioning leaves us free to examine, explore, and experiment.

What do you think the messages you’ve received are—about who you are, how you’re designated, about where you belong, who you’re capable of becoming?

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Zainab Salbi—an Iraqi American women’s rights activist, humanitarian, author, founder of Women for Women International, and co-founder of Daughters for Earth—articulates beautifully the limitations of relying on the external assumptions we so easily grasp at, and what it meant for her to break free of that. Zainab had been building Women for Women International since her early twenties. By the time she reached her forties, it had grown from a small operation (with her husband and a handful of volunteers working out of her in-laws’ basement) into an award-winning humanitarian organization with seven hundred staff and offices in ten countries, helping hundreds of thousands of women survivors of wars and distributing millions of dollars in aid.

However, even with all she had achieved, she writes in her book

Freedom Is an Inside Job: Owning Our Darkness and Our Light to Heal Ourselves and the World, “Inside I felt like a failure.” In particular, she was deeply dismayed by the fact that would-be donors “seemed to prefer seeing their destitution, torn clothes, devastated faces, blood and dirt. Pity raised money . . . but it did not get women’s voices heard, dignity seen, or strength witnessed.”

She became ashamed of her feelings of frustration and failure and did not want to admit them to anyone, even her therapist. Her mind raced. She was restless, and “perhaps to avoid a deeper encounter with my own heart,” she booked herself with more and more work and social activity, until she reached the point where “even distracting myself became irritating. It was time to explore my feelings further. To do that, I needed the safety of silence.”

Even though she knew nothing about Zen meditation, she booked herself into a four-day retreat. She felt that a stately house in the woods would provide a safe place for her to ruminate. On the first day, she writes:

I experienced a torrent of painful feelings, all of which I wanted to avoid. I had meditated at home before, following tips from friends or yoga classes or videos I had seen online, but just for ten minutes at a time. As I sat for hours on the small, round cushions on the floor that first day, every part of my body ached. My mind rebelled. I fixated on other participants’ every movement to try to distract myself from going inward. When someone sighed or sneezed or shifted their body, I noticed. It was easier to pay attention to the details of the pattern in the carpet or the sound of the copper bell that marked the time than to ask myself the questions I came to ask.

Over the course of the four days, though, the silence began to take over, and she began to see her shame in a clearer light:

It was the shame of missing my mark, of doing more talking than accomplishing; the shame of not being as successful as my successful friends; the worry that people might feel bad for me or look down on me or that I might have to give up on my big dreams and just be content with what I had accomplished so far.

By day two, seeing all the thoughts from every angle was illuminating but also “like going through a storage room full of clutter.” She investigated the arising thoughts in a fresh way in the silent space: “If worry came, I checked out why I was worried. What was the story behind the worry? Where did it come from? Was it real or not real? I stayed with the feeling until I had processed and digested it, and then I let it go.”

Gradually, she worked through her restlessness and “desire to accomplish more than I was currently able to do.” What emerged from the retreat was insight about what really held her in its grip:

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Our attachments to whom we think we're supposed to be are like chains around our necks. Our identities get wrapped up in the external roles, titles, and accomplishments that we put value on . . . A wealthy businessman values how much he's worth financially. A research scientist values the cure she is working on. A writer values the books he writes and publishes. In my case, I valued how much social change I could create through my advocacy for women's rights and my humanitarian work.

At first, it might seem that one pursuit or identity is more valuable than another. Surely, the cure for a disease is more important than how many books an author sells. Surely, creating social change that improves thousands—if not millions—of lives is more important than increasing the wealth of one individual. At a fundamental level, though, no matter what our vocation is, our accomplishments are where we find our core self-value and feel affirmed.

Attachments are attachments, I realized, no matter who we are or what we identify with. When we value ourselves because of what we accomplish and how much we accomplish, our souls are forever held hostage to these attachments. No matter how much we do, how many dollars we accumulate, cures we discover, books we sell, or people we help, it is never going to be enough to permanently fulfill us. . . .

I was completely identified with my work, and in my own mind, I could never be successful enough at it. That was a very big chain around my soul, a huge weight on my being. Realizing this was like cutting the umbilical cord to my shame. . . .

One short silent retreat couldn't instantly change the shape of my life—or my mind. It had just given me a taste of what freedom from attachments could be like. It was like tasting chocolate for the first time: we can't describe how good it tastes until we've actually tasted it, and then we can't ever forget that taste. Now that I had seen the source of my pain and the route to my freedom, I had a clear path to follow.

As Zainab's story so powerfully illustrates, we can learn to recognize assumptions for the thoughts that they are, rather than cleaving to them as an ultimate defining reality we're bound to. We get to choose, "Do I want to take this to heart or let it go?"

EXPANSION

One time when my colleague Joseph Goldstein and I were visiting a friend in Houston, we all went out to a restaurant to order takeout. As we were waiting for the food to be prepared, Joseph struck up a conversation with the young man working behind the counter. After a few minutes, he told Joseph that he'd never left Houston and went on to describe, somewhat passionately, how his dream was to one day go to Wyoming. When Joseph asked him what he thought he would find there, he responded, "Open, expansive space, a feeling of being unconfined, with peacefulness and freedom and room to move."

Joseph responded, "There's an inner Wyoming, too, you know."

At that point, the young man fixed a stare at Joseph and said, "That's freaky," as he sidled away. But there *is* an inner Wyoming, a potential for openness, spaciousness, clarity, and freedom that exists within each of us. We just need confidence in it, to make the journey to that place, to discover it, nurture it, and hold the memory that it's there, waiting for us to visit anytime.

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In moving from contraction to spaciousness, it's as if we're sitting in a narrow, low-ceilinged, dark room—so accustomed to it that we don't even realize we're confined—and then the door swings open, revealing light, room to move, and possibilities that suddenly await. We don't know just what is out there, but it's certainly more vast and spacious than that tiny room.

My favorite way of imagining that expansive state—as someone with asthma—is “being able to breathe again.” More than just pleasure, different from indulgence, it is mostly a sensation of huge relief. It is peace.

Theologian Howard Thurman recommended that we “look at the world with quiet eyes.” It's an intriguing phrase. It seems like with the way we so often look at the world, we resemble cartoon characters whose eyes are popping out on springs: “I see something I want! Give it to me!” Our heads rapidly turn to the object of our desire in a fixed gaze, so as not to lose sight of it. Our bodies lean forward in anticipation. Our arms extend, reaching out to acquire it. Our fingers flex, ready to grab on to what we want, to try to keep it from changing, from eluding our grasp. Our shoulders strain to hold on even tighter.

That's grasping, contraction.

It happens in a moment, or an hour, or a day, a month, a lifetime—and it brings a lot of pain.

So, look at the world with quiet eyes whenever you can, and let go of grasping. The world will come to fill you without your straining for it. In that relaxation, you will find peace. Peace isn't a fabricated state, repressing all woes and challenges. It is tuning into our fundamental nature.

Willa Maile Qimeng Cuthrell-Tuttleman, when she was seven years old and a student at Friends Academy in Manhattan, wrote a poem that beautifully expresses what I understand as peace.

Peace Is Friendship

Peace looks like nature
Peace smells like fresh air
Peace sounds like wind blowing through the trees
Peace tastes like bubble gum
Peace feels like a soft pillow

I have a friend who describes himself as pretty obsessive when nursing a grudge, another contracted state. He can go over and over and over the words of the misunderstanding, or his resentment at not being included, or someone's reckless behavior. Over and over and over. After one such interlude, he reflected on the obsessive quality, declaring: “*I let him live rent-free in my brain for too long.*”

Now imagine yourself going home to that blessedly quiet apartment of your mind. What a relief. You can play music. You can cuddle with your dog. You can reach out to a struggling friend. You can cook a meal, or write a poem, or maybe finally get some sleep.

Expansiveness doesn't lead us to a vacuous place—cavernous, muted, disconnected. Expansiveness isn't being spaced out, floating above it all. In the sense that I'm using the word, expansiveness is energized, confident, creative, brimming with love. The subtle balances in life—of rest and action, of passion and letting go, of the power of intention and of patience—all can take place in this expansive space.

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Expansiveness helps broaden our perspective, so we can think more flexibly and with a more open mind. We become better able to focus on the big picture and not feel so discouraged by the constant array of ups and downs we experience every day. When faced with adversity, we can generate more solutions. Expansiveness invites experimentation and imagination. We're more willing to pour ourselves fully into life's pursuits. It is the freedom of letting down the burden we have been carrying. It leaves room for our fundamentally loving hearts to uncoil, and lead us onward.

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Reflecting on the contrast between contraction and expansion, a friend of mine, Linda Stone, whom we will learn more about in chapter 6, related it to the difference between knowledge and feeling. She said:

I've put so much focus on accumulating knowledge in my life . . . and, sometimes, when it comes through playful curiosity, it can be expansive. But so much more often, it's been reductionist, mentally centered, and it can be contracting, and actually block feeling. Holding on to bits of knowledge sometimes seems like the enemy of possibility. Direct experience/feeling seems more expansive. I've also been thinking about how the habit of accomplishing and accumulating relates to self-worth. In part because of the COVID lockdown, I stepped back into more of a "retired" state than I have ever been in: more being, less doing. That's been accompanied by the need to reformulate the externally based calculations of worth: credentials, goals, affiliations. The mind can be a badgering, contracting bully. And no amount of "knowledge," as I've tried to amass it, ever seems to really shift this. Moment-to-moment presence—which usually offers wonder, awe, appreciation—feels like an expansive antidote.

When the astronaut Mae Jemison talks about literal "space," I hear a beautiful evocation of expansiveness: "Once I got into space, I was feeling very comfortable in the universe. I felt like I had the right to be anywhere in this universe, that I belonged here as much as any speck of stardust, any comet, any planet."

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Many years ago, I attended a stress-reduction program led by Jon Kabat-Zinn, longtime meditation teacher and founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. In one exercise, he stepped up to the blackboard, and in the center, he drew a square made up of nine dots, arranged in three parallel lines with three dots in each line. He then challenged everyone in the class to take the piece of chalk and see if we could connect all the dots using only four straight lines, without removing the chalk from the blackboard, and without retracing a line. One by one, all thirty of us went up to the blackboard. We tried beginning from the left, from the right, from the top, from the bottom, and returned to our seats frustrated, unable to do what he'd asked. The room was vibrating with stress.

Then Jon picked up the chalk and, with great sweeping strokes that extended well beyond the perimeter of the small square, did exactly what he had challenged us to do. Every one of us had presumed that to succeed we had to stay within the circumscribed area formed by the nine dots. Jon had never said that we were limited to that little space, but all of us had concluded that was the only area we could move within, the only place to find options. Not one of us could see beyond our limited sense of how much room we had to work in.

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HOW MUCH ROOM DO WE HAVE?

When the Buddha taught 2,600 years ago, the social structure in India was built on a rigid philosophical system. According to their prevailing view of the world, everything and every being belonged to a predetermined category or class, and each of these had its own essential nature and its corresponding duty in life or role to play. For example, it is the nature of fire to be hot and to warm and burn things, of rocks to be hard and to support, of grass to grow and provide sustenance to animals, of cows to eat grass and produce milk. The responsibility of every being was to grow into its own nature and to conform to an ideal disposition specific to them. These natures and duties were considered immutable truths. That's one meaning of the word *dharma*: that predetermined, pre-ordained nature.

Socially, this concept was translated into the rigidities of the caste system. People were born destined to fulfill a certain nature. It was the duty of certain classes or castes of people to rule, for Brahmins to mediate with divine forces, and for certain other people to be engaged in producing food and material goods. Within this worldview, actions conceived of as moral and appropriate for one caste or gender were considered completely immoral for another. It was proper and beneficial for the Brahmin male to read and study the scriptures, while this was absolutely forbidden and considered abhorrent for someone in the “untouchable” caste, an outcast.

Into this constricting social context, the Buddha introduced his revolutionary teachings. What he taught in terms of ethics was radical then, and it is radical now. He asserted that what determines whether an action is moral or immoral is the volition of the person performing it. The moral quality of an action is held within the intention that gives rise to the action. “Not by birth is one a Brahmin, or an outcast,” the Buddha said, “but by deeds.” This teaching, in effect, declared the entire social structure of India, considered sacrosanct by many, to be of no spiritual significance at all.

The Buddha was declaring that the only status that truly matters is the status of personal goodness, and personal goodness is attained through personal effort, not by birth. It did not matter if you were a man or a woman, wealthy or poor, a Brahmin or an outcast—an action based on greed would have a certain kind of result, and an action based on love would have a certain kind of result. “A true Brahmin is one who is gentle, who is wise and caring,” he said, thus completely negating the importance of caste, skin color, class, and gender in any consideration of morality.

It is fascinating and poignant to see how much each of these elements can be a factor in assessing our own or someone else's worth today, all these years later and throughout the world. In this one teaching, the Buddha burst the bubble of social class, of deflecting responsibility, of mindless deference to religious authority, and of defining potential according to external criteria. In this one teaching, he returned the potential for freedom back to each one of us.

WE HAVE A LOT OF ROOM

That's another meaning of the word *dharma*: actualizing that potential for freedom we all have, shedding the stories others have told about us to discover who we genuinely are, understanding what we care about most deeply, what makes for a better life. Dharma is not something we are fated to, or stoic about, but the very set of practices that can lift us out of our conditioning, out of an assumed set of limits and away from what is often a pervasive resignation. We can see for ourselves the elements of life that sustain us, bring

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us closer and closer to the truth of how things are. Rather than the fixed assignment we are given at birth, dharma reflects a breathtaking capacity of any one of us to take a journey away from constriction and resignation to a vital, creative, free life. None of this is determined in the external conditions of who we are; it is all held in the universal potential of who we might become.

To breathe life into dharma in this sense is the journey of liberation we make. Step by step, we move toward freedom and we manifest freedom all at the same time.

THERE ARE MANY MODELS OF JOURNEYING TO LIVE A FULL AND FREE LIFE, A REAL LIFE...

Some are faith-based; others are completely secular. They all provide a vision of a life that is not just lived mechanically, driven by habit—unfulfilled or disconnected. They all say, in effect, that we don't have to be so perpetually lonely, feel so boxed in, so circumscribed. In one way or another, these depictions of a journey to freedom evoke an ability to look at one's circumstances and not be bound by them, to begin to imagine a life other than the one dictated to us by the world. I've often said that I think we live in a time of commonly blunted aspiration, where we don't dare dream of much, but here greater aspiration awakens. We don't just *receive* the story of our lives, we *discover* a new sense of agency in the writing or rewriting of it—a telling that reflects both the universality of that story and its own unique distinctiveness. Psychologist Abraham Maslow said, "It would seem that every human being comes at birth into society not as a lump of clay to be molded by society, but rather as a structure which society may warp or suppress or build upon. We're here to make a rose into a good rose, not turn a rose into a lily."

So how do we live more fully as ourselves, with growing purpose and interest and joy? While Maslow's work is well known and has been widely shared, I find it helpful to revisit his model of growth viewed through a progressive fulfilling of a hierarchy of needs, as we consider contraction and expansion:

- 1. *Physiological***—These are biological requirements for human survival, such as air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, sleep.
- 2. *Safety***—Emotional security, financial security (for example, employment, social welfare), freedom from fear, social stability, health and well-being. The need for safety is the basis of all other needs. Safety means stability, a sense of having trust in our environment. This secure foundation allows us to take risks and go out and explore the world.
- 3. *Love and belonging***—Examples of belonging needs include friendship, intimacy, trust, acceptance, receiving and giving affection, and love. Feeling connection to others is a fundamental need. The quality of connection hinges on what psychologist Carl Rogers refers to as "unconditional positive regard," which occurs when a person feels seen, cared for, and safe expressing a whole range of feelings and experiences.
- 4. *Esteem***—Includes self-worth, accomplishment, and respect. This includes first esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and, second, the desire for reputation or respect from others (status and prestige, for example). It comes down to liking yourself !
- 5. *Self-actualization***—Refers to the realization of a person's potential for self-fulfillment, bringing personal growth and peak experiences, referring to experiences that bring an increase in wonder, joy,

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serenity, and a heightened sense of beauty while also creating a deeper connection with the world around us. We have these potentialities within us that we can feel deep inside and that could offer so much benefit to ourselves and to the world. Self-actualization is living with openness and curiosity, bringing those potential realities to as full expression as possible.

To journey well, instead of being driven by perpetual discontent, anxieties, and battling with reality because of a sense of deficiency, we are increasingly accepting and loving of ourselves and others. The journey becomes more about *What choices will lead me to greater integration and wholeness?* than about anything else.

NO JOURNEY IS EXCLUSIVELY LINEAR

In speaking about the hierarchy of needs later in his life, Maslow emphasized that order in the hierarchy “is not nearly as rigid” as he may have implied in his earlier work, that we needn’t first completely fulfill one level of need to move on to the next.

Cognitive psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman, whom we will meet again in chapter 5, took a new look at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in his book *Transcend* and made this point: “He was very clear that human development is a constant developmental process where we move two steps forward, and then we fall back a step. Life is not like a video game where you reach one level like connection and then some voice from above is like, *Congrats, you’ve unlocked esteem and then we never have to worry about that again.* He’s very clear life is not like that.”

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The Buddhist journey to freedom is described in what is called the Eightfold Path, covering our everyday behavior, our mindfulness, and how we see the world. (See appendix on page 175.) My colleague Sylvia Boorstein—who has been teaching meditation for many decades and has written several books, including *Pay Attention, for Goodness’ Sake: Practicing the Perfections of the Heart*—once referred to the Eightfold Path as “the Eightfold Dot,” to help us move away from being stuck in a highly linear sense of a path: “Oh, I did those first few steps a while ago. They are elementary. I’ve moved on, way beyond those now.”

Instead, Sylvia was pointing to cycles, to returning, to renewal and venturing deeper each time we are back once again. I find that a useful reminder whenever I commit to a journey, or a project, or an endeavor, so that I can loosen the grip of inherited models of “success” and “failure.”

Instead of a linear model that evokes moving determinedly in just one direction, I’ve started to imagine the shape of the path to liberation as akin to a double helix, with strands that wrap around each other almost as a kind of twisted ladder. It’s a path that is more integrated and circular, with elements crossing over at multiple points, reciprocally and mutually.

In Southeast Asia, there is a common story about someone who goes into the forest to try to capture a bird. As the parable unfolds, the attempted capture is unsuccessful, *but it’s not fruitless*. It turns out that it’s fine if the person doesn’t actually capture the bird. The lesson is that because of all the wandering

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through the forest, the seeker of the bird has learned the ways of the forest. Just so, if we wander as consciously as we can, whether we “succeed” or “fail,” every moment counts. I’ve wanted to learn the ways of a meaningful life since I was eighteen years old. It hasn’t been a straight line, and yet I haven’t wavered about whether it was worth it.

PROVISIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

As Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the famous Ukrainian religious leader from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, counseled, when you are about to leave *mitzrayim*, you should not worry about how you will manage in a new “place.” Anyone who does or who stops to get everything in order prior to embarking on the journey will never pick himself or herself up.

A few years ago, I sat at the bedside of a friend a couple of weeks before she died. She was at home, and her hospital bed had been set up in the dining room. The door was open onto the garden, letting in a gentle breeze and the sound of birdsong as her life ebbed away. She was floating in and out of consciousness, and after a period of silence, she turned to me somewhat distraught and said, “I have to move all my things across the street.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s complicated!” she replied.

I didn’t know what she was talking about and didn’t know what to say. I told her how much people loved her, how much I loved her. An hour passed, and it finally struck me what “across the street” probably meant. At that point, I said, “Remember when you told me you had to move all your things across the street and that it was complicated? Actually, you don’t have to move all your things. You can go across the street without them. It will be okay.”

“Really?” she asked.

“I’m sure,” I told her.

She died peacefully not so long after. I’ve thought about her comment many times since, in a variety of circumstances, as an inspiration to help me let go.

Our tendency to cling to the stuff of this world pushes us to drag our things—physical possessions, emotional baggage, old assumptions, and habitual reactions—through every transition. It is hard to contemplate letting go, let alone letting go of absolutely everything, as we cross the street of mortality. No wonder we think of change as the enemy!

Letting go—even of what we don’t need—in order to journey on can be an intricate process. If we harshly demand it of ourselves, it can easily morph into feigned disinterest, or withdrawal and the refusal to feel. But letting go is not about refusing to feel, or not caring, or turning away from those we love. It is not about disconnecting or disassociating from our own experience, whatever that looks like. Letting go is profoundly honest, grounded firmly in the truth of what is. That’s why it is such a release. By the time we reach this stage, we are beyond the need or desire for an agenda. We have no time or use for manipulating.

REAL LIFE

The JOURNEY from ISOLATION to OPENNESS & FREEDOM

SATURDAY NIGHT SEDER

In the Spring of 2020, with COVID raging (and my having asthma), I pretty much just sheltered in place in Barre, Massachusetts, seeing very few (and only masked) people, sitting at a distance. As Passover approached, it was clear I wasn't going to be gathering with anyone. Amazingly, there was a show on YouTube called *Saturday Night Seder*, created as a benefit for the CDC Foundation, a non-profit that supports the work of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It was an incredible time to be watching the story of a journey taken by people with very few options from confinement to expansive liberation!

It was one of the very early productions to make use of a Zoom writing room, with people recording offerings on personal smart-phones and tablets. I loved it. It featured world-class singers; amusing sidenotes to the ritual (as if you were in a home with friends); rabbis reminding us of the primary question “What can you do for people who are suffering, since you once suffered?”; historical references (people looking at the era when “Over the Rainbow” was composed have suggested parallels between the lyrics and the experience of Jews during Kristallnacht and the rise of Nazism). It brought me to laughter and to tears.

And it instilled in me a conviction that this journey—from confinement to freedom, from constraint to openness, from isolation to community—is our fundamental, essential journey, the one that we bring to life over and over again. To once again quote Rabbi Nachman:

The Exodus from Egypt occurs in every human being, in every era, in every year, and in every day.