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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Illness by itself is no gift or golden opportunity. But on close examination we find that hidden treasures can be revealed in even the most trying of circumstances. Though they are often indirect, intangible, and immeasurable, they nonetheless serve to enrich our lives and help us bear the challenges that come our way. As Jack Kornfield says, "The value of our harshest difficulties is how honestly they cause us to question, how they intensify our courage and bring alive our deepest inner purpose, how they awaken our soul's task on earth."

Illness can strengthen our appreciation of the preciousness of life. As Joni Mitchell sings, "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." Experiencing vulnerability brings us into a direct encounter with the fact of impermanence. As we question the reliability of things we are attached to, we are challenged to reexamine our values and life choices, and to search for more unconditional sources of fulfillment.

This chapter reveals some of the treasures that have been discovered along the Unchosen Path.



The Unchosen Path

In each of us there is a need to live our own story, not someone else's expectations or assumptions of who we are. Often, life-threatening illnesses provide the impetus to find a lost thread of meaning, which is our personal myth and our soul's reason to be here. What did we come to do? What did we come to learn? Who did we come to love? What did we come to heal?

To be brought "close to the bone" through the adversity of illness, the closeness of death, and the knowledge that we're not in control of the situation, is to come close to the essence of who we are, both as unique individuals and as human beings. Like X-ray films on which the bones are the most distinct, because they are the strongest and most indestructible elements of the body, so it is that adversity reveals the eternal, and thus indestructible, qualities of the soul.

~JEAN SHINODA BOLEN

Close to the Bone



A wise man should consider that health is the greatest of human blessings, and learn how by his own thought to derive benefit from his illnesses.

~HIPPOCRATES

Regimen in Health



Perhaps my life circumstances have pushed me, more consistently than most, to consider how a flawed life can still be a full one, how broken dreams can bring us more fully awake.

~PHILIP SIMMONS

Learning to Fall



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Within every human experience there is a doorway to the sacred.

~MICKEY HABIS



I felt that the stroke was healing me from my cultural tendency to get bogged down in materialism, fame, and so forth. Stroke. And bump. Here I am, naked. It's like a lightning bolt. Somebody will come up to me and say, "I lost my daughter," or "I lost my business." And I see right there that that person is open to God. It is a fierce teaching but it opens you up. The spiritual levels are using your ego-dramas for something. And when we are able to get away from the ego plane, to our souls, where we can see things as God sees them, we experience our lives as grace. We're looking at it from a different perspective. From that perspective the only thing that is real on this plane is faith of the heart. Not belief. Faith.

~RAM DASS

Interview in Parabola Magazine



Suffering seems to belong to man's transcendence. It is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense "destined" to go beyond himself.

~POPE JOHN PAUL

"Salvifici Doloris"



Being ill for so many years sometimes seems like I am "failing" to heal. But who is to say that this "failing"—whether for an instant or for a lifetime—isn't the necessary catalyst to prepare me for receiving the grace that awakens me? How can I know that this tired body is a not the perfect vehicle for attaining liberation? If I

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could be sure that it was, would I trade it for a strong and healthy one? LH



Spirituality that is never tested by bitterness, that never has to face the dilemmas of contradictory experiences, can never be strong, true, or honest.

~DENG MING-DAO
The Wandering Taoist



We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement.

~VICTOR FRANKL
Man's Search for Meaning



Only when hollowed out will you be full.

~LAO-TZU
Tao Te Ching



Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved. Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.

~HELEN KELLER



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What I have now is a real call to be responsible to tune into my body and my thought processes. It is a practice of just listening. Listening to all these different parts of me and honoring them and giving them a voice. When I give my body a voice, I have a lot more happiness. Rather than getting upset with my mental fogginess or my inability to find the right words, (something that used to come easily), I have a little more allowance for being foggy. Pain makes me be much more real and alive. I feel like I have grown up and matured a lot faster through this illness and have a more simple wisdom. Illness gives me a daily incentive to get real.

FN



I think of chronic illness as a prolonged journey into the underworld, but not necessarily a permanent one. The journey out of the underworld can be obtained by developing consciousness, independent of the body's status. When you are captive in the underworld, you don't know if you ever will ever get out. Dante's inscription on the gateway to hell says "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Rather than this being a call to resign yourself to damnation, I think of it as a prescription: Surrender your idea that things should be different than they are, that you should not be in hell, and instead learn to accept and even embrace what is occurring. When your heart can openly accommodate such an existence, a tremendous transformation occurs. When the underworld is no longer a place you wish to remove yourself from and all resistance to it is dissolved, heaven and hell appear as equal. This is what the sages mean when they talk about transcending duality. It happens when the light of awareness illuminates the underworld and transforms it.

LH



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So-called impediments and so-called vehicles are one and the same.

~GANGAJI



When you can realize that our dilemmas are in service of our soul's depth, then the kindness you can have towards the process is different.

~ DAVID LA CHAPELLE



Pain nourishes courage. You can't be brave if you only have wonderful things happen to you.

~MARY TYLER MOORE



We all have to give up our bodies someday. The sick among us get in practice.

~DARLENE COHEN

*Finding a Joyful Life in the Heart
of Pain*



Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

~KAHLIL GIBRAN

The Prophet



It is suggested that whatever serves as your oppressor can be what brings you to enlightenment—your *sat guru*. If that is the case, then my body is my *sat guru*. Instead of hating it, I should bow to it. AN



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This moment is not preparation for the future. It is the culmination of each moment of our lives until now. It contains all things, therefore satisfaction can also be found here.

~MICKEY HABIS



It seemed I was being deprived of life itself. I resented my deprivations, and the resentment was eating me alive. Albert Camus talks about resentment as autointoxication—self-poisoning. This is indeed what I was doing, poisoning myself by focusing my attention on all of the things I could not do. “I can't ... I can't . . . I can't . . .” was my familiar refrain. . . . I literally could not continue in the pursuit of every thought of what was wrong with my life. As trite and Pollyannaish as it might sound, I had to come to some insight about what was valuable in this. I had to come to see the blessedness of this event in my life. I *had* to. Not because of some syrupy “should” but because it was necessary for my survival, for my well-being. So for the sake of my spiritual, emotional, and physical survival, I began to look for the blessing in the curse. From this grew a sense of gratitude. Gratitude got me through the resentment.

~ELIZABETH ANN BARTLETT
Journey of the Heart



When I awoke this morning I decided to rename my pain and call it God. In that case, when I beg and demand the pain to leave, it is the same as demanding and begging God to leave. Why would I ever want to do that?

LH



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Truly accepting pain is not at all like passive resignation. Rather, it is active engagement with life in its most intimate sense. It is meeting, dancing with, raging at, running toward. To accept your pain on this level, you must cultivate particular skills. After you have developed some proficiency, dealing with pain feels much more like an embrace, or the bond that forms between sparring partners, than like resignation.

~DARLENE COHEN

*Finding a Joyful Life in the Heart
of Pain*



Affliction inspires wakefulness, which in return removes ignorance, which is the ultimate cause of suffering.

~STEPHEN T. BUTTERFIELD



Me, sick? What arrogance is being tempered!

FN



We have all heard poems, songs, and prayers that exhort us to see God in a blade of grass, a drop of dew, a child's eyes, or the petals of a flower. Now when I hear such things I say that's too *easy*. Our greater challenge is to see God not only in the eyes of the suffering child but in the suffering itself. To thank God for the sunset pink clouds . . . but also for the mosquitoes I must fan from my face while watching the clouds. To thank God for broken bones and broken hearts, for everything that opens us to the mystery of our humanness. The challenge is to stand at the sink with your hands in the dishwater, fuming over a quarrel with your spouse, children at your back clamoring for attention, the radio blasting the bad news from Bosnia, and to say "God is here,

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now, in this room, here in the dishwater, in this dirty spoon.” Don’t talk to me about flowers and sunshine and waterfalls: this is the ground, here, now, in all that is ordinary and imperfect, this is the ground in which life sows the seeds of our fulfillment.

The imperfect is our paradise.

Let us pray, then, that we do not shun the struggle. May we attend with mindfulness, generosity, and compassion to all that is broken in our lives. May we live fully in each flawed and human moment, and thereby gain the victory.

~PHILIP SIMMONS

Learning to Fall



In this scene from the movie *Out of Africa*, the rains have come, and Karen and the workers are struggling valiantly to keep intact the dam they had built to irrigate the crops. They piled sandbags upon sandbags, but the force of a river is too strong. It keeps breaking through the sandbags until finally Karen says, “Let it go. Let it go. This water belongs in Mombasa.” That image of letting the water go—letting it burst the dam, letting it flow—had, over the years, helped me through countless times when I had wanted to hang on—to old loves, old hurts, past pains, and broken promises. Whenever I caught myself hanging on, I would bring this image to mind. It always helped me to release my grasp. “Let it go. Let it go. This water belongs in Mombasa.”

~ELIZABETH ANN BARTLETT

Journey of the Heart



A healer asked me the fundamental question, “Do you want to be here?” My conscious mind said yes, but really answering the question required sleuthing into my subconscious, all the way back to conception when I can imagine thinking, “oops—I didn’t

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mean it—can't I go back?" I've had to find all the different ways in which I resist being incarnate. I think that to become whole means getting all the different parts of myself to commit to being here.

AN



I'm always amazed that it can be a really cloudy or rainy day but if you fly in an airplane through the clouds, the sky is blue and the sun is always shining. That image is a great metaphor. It's like there's a realm beyond the clouds of darkness where bliss, peace, and the experience of Oneness reside. Sometimes I glimpse it in a moment of grace, but more often it's my job to part the clouds. LH



Choosing the world means choosing all of it: the tall maple and the severed stump. In my case it means choosing a world that includes both black raspberry ice cream cones and my weakening arms, which will soon be unable to raise the ice cream to my lips. In choosing the world, we choose both pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, health and illness, rapture and rue.

~PHILIP SIMMONS

Learning to Fall



After my fourth time in the hospital and getting sicker with conventional medicine, I went out in the desert for three or four months and lived outside. I dealt with how I felt being alive. I felt huge grief about being in a human form and seeing in myself and others what cruelty humans are capable of. I saw that this time in my life was necessary to show me that evolution of consciousness is possible in the midst of the pain of being human. Something shifted as I realized that I am alive, I am human, and I can use the opportunity that is unique to being human. That was a turning

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point for me and it continues. My prayer or intention that came from that time is to remember who I really am. RW



I was once asked by someone to find out how illness might serve me (though hopefully I don't necessarily *need* illness to do this for me) and this is what I came up with:

- To motivate me to find balance.
- To grow in humility and equality with others.
- To develop my fortitude and equanimity.
- To stretch the capacity of my self-acceptance.
- To help me surrender my attachment to my body.
- To discover for myself the truth of our interdependence.
- To find out if I can be loved anyways. LH



After having chronic fatigue for a few years, I got to the point where I could recognize when I was going to have a big flare up. I was driving down the street on a day when I was cranky and critical and judgmental. I knew that this is what happens before I get sick. Sure enough, within an hour I had a fever. I had moved into that cognitive state where depression would completely change my view of the world. It is so related. It is part and parcel with a flare up of chronic fatigue. Realizing it helped me see: "Oh, this is just physiological—don't believe these thoughts. The world has not shifted into a hell realm. My internal world has, but out there is still neutral. So don't make any big decisions." Recognizing that the cause was physiological neutralized the negative thoughts so that I could simply take care of myself. It is so helpful to finally be able to witness this process and not go through the depths of depression. Seeing the physiological part minimizes the self-blame. There is a huge correlation between

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biochemistry and thoughts and emotions. All I need to know is that I am sick and I need to take care of myself. Maybe I need to go to bed. RW



We tend to think that the purpose of prayer is to terminate sickness, but we forget that the purpose of sickness may be to initiate prayer, or, more generally, a consciousness of the infinite.

~BRAD LEMLEY

*in Meaning and Medicine by
Larry Dossey*



Ordinarily I don't like to do affirmations because they seem like rote sentences that I feel pressured to repeat. But one day I was noticing how often my mind was internally complaining about various unpleasant symptoms and as an exercise I listened to see if an affirmation would spontaneously appear. If I got quiet enough and listened deeply enough, I would hear an affirmation that was just right for that particular moment. I'd try to keep repeating it, but after a while it would no longer have any life left in it. Then I'd listen for a new one. It became an enjoyable game to see what affirmation would appear next. For me, positive thinking does not come naturally when I don't feel well. A positive thought is like a small flame that I have to tend to and feed with intention or it blows out. LH



If I could speak to who I was at the onset of my illness over thirty years ago, I would say: "You will survive this. You will have a life. In fact, this will inform and make your life into something special. At the very least it will teach you to love and have compassion for other people in ways you would never have

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suspected.” Ultimately, (I say ultimately because it often sucks) this illness is a gift and an opportunity. JW



I have been way too concerned with the sensations and functions of this body, forgetting that a source of Light is always there, ever present, no matter how crumpled and exhausted my body gets. Even in illness, even in dying, the strength of this eternal light is not diminished. I can dwell on the imperfections that give birth to pain, or I can keep my focus on the light that shines beyond all form. It is my choice—always. LH



There's a difference between knowing your limits and limiting yourself.

~KELLY HUEGEL
*Young People and Chronic
Illness*



Walking anywhere with friends, especially uphill, is an occasion for silence; I cannot walk, talk and breathe at the same time. Every gram of oxygen must be used for locomotion; there is nothing left over. Superfluity must go. This becomes an amazing metaphor: in my life, in my mind, what is superfluous? Anger that freezes into resentment; jealousy; greed; gossip; ego-clinging; pretense; embarrassment; any form of fixation; running after pleasure; the discursive thought that maintains the story line of me. These things are very costly, in terms of the life energy that it takes to keep them going. They are what conversation is mostly about. I cannot take in enough oxygen to support them anymore, except by holding completely still and doing nothing else. When the

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oxygen is diminished below a certain point, you must choose, absolutely, between feeding all your mental bloodsuckers and taking care of your true business. You cannot afford to keep them around as pets. What an opening, what a discovery, follows from that simple realization: Could I *ever* afford it? Can anyone? What made me think that I could not let go of this expensive baggage before now?

~STEPHEN T. BUTTERFIELD
"On Being Unable to Breathe"



When I start feeling bad about not contributing more in the outer world, I remember that every wheel needs a steady hub, a still center around which to spin. If, in my forced retreat, I can align and focus my consciousness on the center point, it may be of great unseen benefit to the world. LH



When I was healthy I thought that if I ever got sick I'd lack the courage to handle it. I always thought that courage was an inborn strength and never realized that it grows out of being challenged. Illness has led me on a path to my deepest self, and it is in this connection to my stable core and its connection to a divine source that I find strength and courage. AN



There are some days when I cannot simply face the symptoms I feel for what they are today. Instead, each thought is prefaced with "for the past twenty-five years. . . ." Depression renders me unable to separate the weight of the historic bulk of my misery from my experience today. The effect is like multiplying today's

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pain exponentially. This can't be good for me. How to stop? I remind myself of advice a friend gave me addressing what to do when I am attached to an emotion, an experience, a perception, an identity. She said, "throw it in the river." That became a visual as well as visceral image for me. I can see myself standing by a swiftly moving river and tossing in what is weighing me down and watching it rush on by, out of sight. It is not a one-time job. It is something I have opportunity to practice with each thought, each feeling. Again, again, again. Those twenty-five years, where are they? They had gone down the river long ago. Only my mind drags them back out and only my mind can throw them in again.

LH



We're all standing at the cliff edge of life and death all the time; it's just that, with chronic illness, you can never forget you're there.

~JOAN ITEN SUTHERLAND

*"Body of Radiant Knots: Healing
as Remembering"*



[From the Book of Job] "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" Job now knows that God is the God of good *and* of evil, of light *and* darkness, sweet *and* bitter, harmony *and* discord. . . . In the presence of the Creator of the universe, he can do nothing but fall silent and "repent in dust and ashes," surrendering all he thought most precious: his intelligence, his reputation, his righteousness, his rhymes and his reasons, his very self. In that wordless place, beyond all niggling over right and wrong, Job's surrender moves us toward a wholeness and connectedness in which all things, good and evil, are divine, all part of the sacred dance of creation. And in

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confronting Job's vision, in facing every day the failure of my own flesh, in facing every day the reality of suffering all around me, I have found my life's greatest spiritual challenge.

~PHILIP SIMMONS

Learning to Fall



In *Man's Search for Meaning* Victor Frankl describes how he survived the horrors of his concentration camp experience with continued optimism. He believes that "human beings can accept any condition if it has meaning."

In a moment when my experience of illness was feeling rather meaningless, I tried a little creative visualization exercise. I imagined that Jesus Christ materialized in my room and approached me. I let myself feel the enormity of what that might be like and naturally found myself dropping all my defenses and pretenses and I surrendered to his grace. This was an opportunity not to be missed! I heard him ask me if I would be willing to hold a piece of the world's pain for this lifetime. Every part of me felt totally willing to do this. Yes. Of course. Now ordinarily this is not the kind of thing I'd sign up for, but I was willing to accept it because in the presence of Christ my ego naturally dissolved. Being aware of Christ Consciousness and what it represents was a prerequisite to my being willing to take on suffering to benefit others. When this awareness is present, any suffering can have great meaning. So now when I find myself suffering or am in the presence of suffering, I try to evoke this loving Christ Consciousness within myself. The practice of embracing suffering lovingly gives life great meaning. If I am not able to do anything else in the world, I think this may be enough. LH



Challenges and Opportunities

In many different traditions there are meditations on impermanence, on death. In the Buddhist tradition you go to a cemetery where there are bloated corpses and stare at them for a while. Something happens to you. You start to realize that impermanence is not an abstraction and that time is something of immense value and preciousness. Our time on earth, our embodied time, is a wondrous exercise and we can use it or not use it. For example, if somebody was to give you a check for a million dollars in the morning and said, "I'm going to take back whatever you haven't spent at six o'clock," you would be busy! You'd be a fool not to shop until you drop. During that time you want to make use of that million dollars because if you don't, you know you're going to lose it. It is going to be gone. GS



In the Japanese samurai tradition it is taught that the source of true courage is the willingness to die. This willingness comes from the certitude that we are more than our temporary physical bodies. Samurai train in meditation techniques that practice the "little deaths" that come when we dissolve the ego and its attachments. Illness presents us with countless opportunities to practice "little deaths."

At the moment of death, what will be in our minds and hearts? Can we train ourselves to fearlessly open to love and dive into the unknown in all circumstances?

Every challenge illness has presented directs me to the same solution: let go! Not once, but a zillion times. Paradoxically, letting go opens up a space for something new to come in. I hope that when it's my time to die I will remember that every letting go brings something new. LH



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Whatever communion with the Divine I may have when this life is done will surely be prepared for by my seeking always to dwell in the Divine as I find it here, in this life, in this very moment. In each unfinished and imperfect day I struggle to find myself at home in this body, however flawed and failing, in this breath, however labored, in this speech, however halting.

~PHILIP SIMMONS

Learning to Fall



We say we are seeking oneness, but we hang on so tenaciously to duality. This doesn't make much sense unless you consider that only through duality do we experience the exquisite feast of the senses, the dynamic tension of Self and Other, and the bonding that occurs through sharing conditionality. Only inside the parameters of time can we experience the endless, unfolding drama of life, with its breath-catching mystery of the next unknown moment.

~MICKEY HABIS



Resurrection is only possible when you are capable of dying.

~BHAGAWAN RAJNEESH



Keeping company with death, we stretch our capacity to honor all the parts of life, and learn that even the unendurable can be endured.

~JOHN TARRANT

The Light inside the Dark

