

Standing at the Edge of the Abyss: Risk Taking, Transcendence and the Art of Letting Go

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Abstract

What follows is a consideration of the concept of transcendence, the phenomenon of the “abyss,” risk taking and the process of “letting go.” The traditional concept of transcendence is seen as an orienting or movement towards spirit or the heavens. This article considers an alternative to this more traditional view—that is, transcendence as a movement toward the earth and into emotional pain or vulnerability as a path to transcending our earthly limitations that hinder our spiritual evolution. The phenomenon of the “abyss” is also considered through the Internal Family Systemssm theoretical lens as a container for exiled parts constructed by our protective managerial parts. Finally, risk taking and the process of “letting go” are discussed as necessary actions to engage in so that physical and emotional well being can be enhanced, thus limiting the potential emotional, physical and psychological impact of traumatic experiences.

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Embarking on the spiritual journey is like getting into a very small boat and setting out on the ocean to search for unknown lands. With wholehearted practice comes inspiration, but sooner or later we will also encounter fear. For all we know, when we get to the horizon, we are going to drop off the edge of the world. Like all explorers, we are drawn to discover what’s waiting out there without knowing yet if we have the courage to face it...

Pema Chodron

It is 6:45 a.m. There is crispness in the air on this mid-September morning. The sky is already well on its way to deep blue. In my mind, and this sky that seems like my mind, there are no clouds, no haze. I can see for miles. I sense the sun just around the upper reaches of

the Valley. It’s here now and I feel the warmth on my face. The goose bumps on my skin begin to fade as my body moves into that warmth. My eyes are closed and I look through them at the sun and see subdued red. My breathing is absolutely perfect: rhythmic and harmonious. I feel connected to all that surrounds me; light emanates from me. I feel more at peace in this moment than I have ever felt in my entire life and I am standing on a ten-foot-long, three-foot-wide granite rock ledge 1000 feet above the floor of Yosemite Valley in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Above me is 2000 more feet of sheer, vertical granite fading away into that blueness. To my left and to my right for a quarter mile is more vertical rock.

If I toss the bagel in my hand (my breakfast) a mere few feet away from where I stand, it will plummet 1000 feet unobstructed to the base of this wall. Standing here I have no fear. I love it. I swim in it. I drink it. It is life for me at 24 years old. I say to myself, “This is God.” “I feel love.” It or she is here. Here in my closed eyes, here in my mind and in my heart. Here in the rock behind me, in the trees below that look like toothpicks, in the climbers standing at the base who look like ants. Here in the air I breathe. “Are you there?” I ask. “Are you real?” “Where are you?” Parts of me begin to doubt. But I sense something in what my closed eyes drink in and what my heart is open to. My mind goes to flying. I think about rising above all that limits, above all that constrains, my body, my consciousness. Delicious. Suddenly my mind goes to falling. I could unclip from this carabineer that keeps me safe and tied into the rock and step off this ledge into the great chasm that spreads before me and fall like the bagel unobstructed to my obvious death. I fear. My heart begins to pound. My palms get sweaty. My respiration rate begins to escalate. I hear inside, “Life is precious. There is much to live for.” Someone else says, “But what if we fly?” “We can move beyond this earth bound existence.” But what would I gain by flying and how could I fly? Or would I die? Maybe I would be set free. I could “let go,” un-clip from my constraints and float down into the bliss of this great abyss.

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A clear still voice says, “There is much more climbing to do.”

It was 1989 and in that exact moment, standing on that ledge, I felt more powerful, more connected to spirit and my true or authentic self than I ever had to that point in my young life. I was an adventurer and an Outward Bound mountain guide working five to six months out of each year guiding groups of people in the mountains and witnessing their transformative growth experiences in this unique therapeutic setting. The remainder of the year was spent on my own climbing trips, various hitch-hiking adventures, and road trips seeking whatever the mountains, life, and the road had to offer.

Two months prior to standing on that ledge, however, a woman that I worked with in the mountains broke my heart. We had met working for Outward Bound and her love of life and vibrancy had caused my heart to open wide to her energy and soul. Although standing on that ledge, the emptiness and loneliness triggered from that breakup was still pretty raw and very much alive within me, I somehow felt connected to something much larger than my self that at the time I did not have awareness or understanding to describe.

Recently, I became intrigued by the interplay of the different parts of my ego structure that were in operation during that time of my life and began to ask some questions. Why was I so willing to risk my life in such extreme ways? In what way was my risk taking and adventuring essentially the same process as it is for any other person taking any other risk? Why were there parts of me so intrigued by the abyss and falling towards the earth, and paradoxically why were there other parts of me so interested in climbing and flying away from the earth? Was God or love really there with me and in what ways did my risk taking both detract and facilitate transcendence of my pain?

Some might say there was a sensation-seeker running the show, an adrenaline junky addicted to the high of this higher place, numbing my body through the exiling of fear, attempting to transcend some smoldering fire (a result of the broken heart, loneliness or some other shadowy, buried pain) contained within a foggy, hazy, depressive state. Or possibly, I was looking to simply feel alive, hoping to help long asleep parts of me to wake up from their slumber. Or maybe, I was just pushing to the edges of my potential as a human being, rising to the challenge of the limits of my physical, spiritual and emotional selves.

In the words that follow, with the help of the Internal Family Systems theoretical lens and clinical examples, I will attempt to make sense of what was at work for me on that ledge. I will discuss the parts of me and others that engage in risk taking, their motivations, the desire that all of us have to transcend pain or earthly constraints, the processes involved in transcendence and the places or containers where our exiled parts are held as well as the hidden treasures that can be found within these containers when we risk trips into these abysses.

Falling into the Abyss

Sitting in my office recently with Ann, a female client of mine, attempting to help her make sense of why she was not able to “let go” of pursuing her partner who was a serial intimacy avoider, she became aware of a pit in her stomach that she often felt in reaction to this pursue/withdraw pattern they played out between them like a needle stuck on an old turntable in the groove of an LP. I asked her to move her awareness to that place in her body where she experienced the sensation that appeared when her partner moved away from her. As she did that she became aware of something that she referred to as an abyss and almost instantly I witnessed her body begin to get rigid. With her eyes closed, she explained that she was seeing an image of a big dark hole that seemed to go on and on into the dark recesses of her being. Her core body temperature began to rise; her respiration was increasing, as was her heart rate. She appeared to be moving into the initial stages of a panic attack. Gently, quietly, I said to her, “Ann, don’t forget to breathe.” I quickly scanned my body for escalations as well. I asked her to stay focused on the edges of the abyss, to not move too quickly and to be careful to not be drawn into the center of it. John Welwood (1990) stated, “In facing intense pain, it is often helpful at first to spend some time making a space for it, allowing it just to be there, ‘sitting on the edge of it,’ and inquiring into it.” Still at the edge, we checked with, negotiated, reassured and got permission to continue from the parts of her that were triggered by our initial focusing on the pit in her stomach. They said they feared her getting overwhelmed and lost forever inside this abyss. Her body began to slow down and she was able to “let go” a little more. Her body was less tense and stiff. I then asked her if she could move a little closer to the abyss and maybe even move into it. She described an experience of falling or floating as she moved deeper into her abyss. As she did that some of my own experiences of falling came flooding back into my awareness.

At times while climbing, my physical resources would give out. My forearms would weaken, my fingers or edges of my climbing shoes would begin to slide off the edges or cracks they were purchased on, and I would fear falling. The split seconds before a potential fall were always the same, an initial surge of adrenaline, a panicky, gripped feeling and a message from a protective part of me telling me to hold on tighter, to not let myself go. It was the beginning stages of an ever-escalating fight or flight response. My palms would get sweaty; my mind would get hazy and panicky as would my body. One leg at times would begin to move spasmodically up and down like I was using an old manual sewing machine. My breathing would increase, as would my heart rate. My first instinct at these times would be to hold on tighter. Although it seemed intuitive, the paradox was this, if I stayed anxious and held on tighter it actually would increase the likelihood that I would fall and more likely that I would get hurt if I held on tighter as my body wouldn't be supple or flexible if the fall did happen.

When I have fallen, when there was absolutely no choice but to let go, if I pushed away from the rock with full awareness, although it could be terrifying at times, the results were always the same. During the split second (approximately 1.4 seconds for a 30 foot fall, Stark 2002) that it takes to hit the end of the rope, I would move from extreme fear to extreme terror to extreme peace all in the blinking of an eye. As my body was increasing its speed towards terminal velocity, the wind would be rushing by my ears, all I would hear was whoosh; I would only vaguely be aware of my body rushing past the rock. The panic that moved through my body would be quickly replaced by something that I can only describe as peacefulness. It's a degree of peaceful feeling that I have never experienced anywhere before except in doing my own internally focused experiential psychotherapy or at times with meditation. The best way I have of describing this experience is to say that at the very end of the fall, as the rope stretched tight, it felt like I was being held by the hand of God.

Falling and the Autonomic Nervous System

Fear and arousal are regulated by the limbic system, the part of the brain that is in charge of regulating instinctual survival reactions and emotional expression. The three instinctive reactions the body manifests when this system is activated are fight, flight, or freeze. The limbic brain regulates the autonomic nervous system, which is made up of two major components, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). When the SNS

system is activated and prepares for fight or flight, the significant changes in the body that can be experienced are: increased respiration and heart rate, increased blood pressure, sweating, increased or decreased temperature and rapid thought patterns (Rothschild, 2003). The PNS system is engaged when we are experiencing feelings of calmness or peacefulness. As we go about our days, from moment to moment, the PNS and SNS, like a balloon rising and falling on currents of hot and cold air, are engaging and disengaging depending on the external and internal stimulus. There is a constant cycling of these arousal states in response to perceived and actual threats from our environment and in response to the messages coming from the parts of ourselves (managers) designed to protect the vulnerable parts (exiles) of our internal system.

In the example of climbing described above, I would experience a complete arousal cycle when I would fall or fear falling. The arousal cycle worked in this way: 1) My strength began to wane; 2) I would perceive danger; 3) my SNS would get activated as my mind and body prepared for the challenge; 4) the arousal would peak at about the same time the fall would happen or I pulled my self to safety; 5) the arousal would begin to decrease as the PNS re-engaged; and 6) I would be left feeling peaceful and satisfied and even a bit euphoric at the end of the fall or the top of the climb. This cycle of arousal is a normal process and although the climbing example above is extreme, most of us enjoy the euphoric feeling experienced at the end of an arousal cycle.

For someone who has been frozen in fear as a result of trauma, the above cycle is different. Protective parts often prevent or avoid completion of the cycle as he/she has had good reason to distrust the cycle. According to Peter Levine, author of *Waking the Tiger* (1997), "This is because to the trauma survivor arousal has been coupled with the overwhelming experience of being immobilized by fear." He/she has essentially been frozen by fear as a result of past trauma and has consistently and habitually avoided experiences that recreate this cycle. Most likely as a result of attachment trauma and other developmental wounds, my client Ann avoided "letting go" of her partner at all cost for fear of losing whatever little experience she was getting of love and connection. To "let-go" meant to her protective parts a long slow descent into some empty, lonely, scary place inside of her which, if even just thought about or imaged for a fleeting moment, would often trigger the beginning of the arousal cycle which was terrifying for her. Peter Levine further states that in order for the trauma survivor to heal the trauma he or she must learn to "let go" and trust the nervous system and the arousal

cycle and be able to flow with its normal and natural up and down process. Although Ann's process was more about avoiding her abyss triggered by the relational process with her partner, her experience was very similar to my climbing example from above as our body experiences were much the same.

Fear Stories from the Edge

During the arousal cycle as fear is increasing, it's not just sensations in the body that are experienced, there are also stories being played out in the mind by the protective parts of ourselves that help perpetuate the increase of fear in the body. These stories can be as simple as a small doubting voice telling us to be careful or a part projecting onto the movie screen of our mind abysmal failure and carnage in relation to the perceived risky situation.

During original distressing and upsetting experiences from childhood, if we are left to contend with making meaning from these events in isolation prior to the maturing of our neurological systems and without a conscious, aware adult to help us make more coherent sense of these overwhelming experiences, parts of us will begin to develop incoherent fear stories that we will access later in life during challenging risky times. For many of us, how fear was storied or not storied by our original caregivers during original disturbing moments in our youth has a lot to do with how we relate to fear and the arousal cycle today. Through these generational transmissions of fear stories, we have been taught to distrust that feeling of fear that arises in risky situations. Whenever a degree of the arousal cycle is experienced we may back away from it, told by one of the protective parts of ourselves (replaying the childhood and family messages) that we should fear our fear, thus not allowing for completion of the cycle and movement through the fear into the potential for more peaceful feelings.

To be fully human means to feel fear and trembling at least some of the day (Becker 1973), yet we live in a fear negating culture that encourages us to exile our fear. In referring to the cultural stories about fear, Miriam Greenspan stated it this way, "The basic lessons of a fear negating culture: Fear is a "negative emotion" that gets in the way of everything good. Feeling and exhibiting fear bring shame. Only wimps and cowards are afraid." Due to our original painful childhood experiences, and due to the family and cultural stories handed down to us, when we begin to feel fear, we often relate to it in a variety of ways that are problematic and lead to even greater issues. Our protective parts want to

control us and our environment so badly, that they can shame, numb, exile, act out in relation to our fear, or become a warrior to or a victim of our fear (Greenspan 2004). Often the fear is not the problem, it is the ways in which we contract away from it and relate to it that creates even more challenges when what may be called for is a "letting go" and/or developing ways to befriend and feel the fear. "The first step in taming the lion of emotions, in transmuting their fierce energy into illumination is to befriend it by letting it be, without judging it as good or bad" Welwood (1983).

When confronted with challenging, threatening situations, one of the most difficult things to do is to let go and feel what we feel. Yet at times that is what is called for when there is absolutely no choice: as when our spouse announces that they are leaving us, or our beloved child goes away to college, or our doctor just announces that you have cancer, or maybe something as simple as a look of disapproval on someone's face emerges as we state our opinion. What do you do then? As in climbing, if you hold on tighter, trying to control the situation in some way, often it is more likely that you will fall or that your fall will be more painful or longer lasting.

As Ann was moving into her abyss, trusting her nervous system, and having the experience of falling, she began to experience a peaceful, calm feeling in her body. Joseph Campbell (1991) wrote, "At the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light." I checked in with her to see how she was doing and she expressed that she was feeling ok, although still feeling some of the effects of the vertigo. She opened her eyes for a few moments to re-orient or ground her self before focusing back inside. Once she was focused back inside, the image of a desert landscape began to emerge as did the image of what she described as a little girl in tattered, ripped, dingy clothing, with dirty matted hair. She described the little girl as looking like her; about the time her father began to spend more time away from home and away from the toxic energy of her mother. She began to cry a mixture of sadness and compassion as the images of the little girl that she once was came flooding back into her awareness.

To Ann the desert represented the experience of being alone without nourishment, knowing that she had no connection in the desert; she was all by herself. She had often talked of an immense sense of loneliness in referencing the experience of her life, especially in relation to her partner. Eventually, as she began to

connect with the girl, a number of stories emerged. Some of these stories were, “I don’t deserve love,” “there is something wrong with me,” “I must do something more or less to get love and connection.” She described the little girl as if she were a refugee without a home, like a lost dog wandering the streets for years without anyone to love or care for it. Whenever she began to sense her partner pulling away from her, that sick feeling in her stomach would emerge. It would also come when she anticipated connection. There was a hope that would come for connection from her partner and when it didn’t happen, disappointment would set in and she (the part) would be cast back into the abyss and out into the desert without hope for nurturance or nourishment. Although not overwhelmed in this current moment sitting in the office, the tears continued to flow as she befriended, fully felt and witnessed long lost or exiled emotions, stories and sensations. Ann had just moved into and through one of her biggest abysses and we were both witnessing its transformation. Henry Nouwen (1975) stated, “As hard as it is to believe that the dry desolate desert can yield endless varieties of flowers, it is equally hard to imagine that our loneliness is hiding unknown beauty.” Moving into her abyss and being present to her sorrow, allowed Ann’s compassion to flow. This process also allowed for the digesting of her previously undigested grief.

Abyss as Container

Abysses take many forms. I have heard the abyss referred to by my clients as a void, a nothingness, an emptiness, a black hole, a vacuum. Most of us have many abysses. There are abysses that contain parts of us that carry the traumatic experiences of the past and all their memories, sensations and feelings of isolation, chaos, rejection, abandonment, shame, grief, sadness, and emptiness. There are also abysses that carry fear of annihilation or the experience of nothingness as well as the ultimate fear, death. Sam Keen stated it this way: “Beneath our fear of high places and things that go bump in the night there is a primal fear of what the existentialists call ontological anxiety—the fear of extinction, of the void, of nothingness, of death—that is an abiding climate in the bottom of the psyche.” In my experience, when clients have gotten connected to their abysses, when we have made space for the abyss and actually moved into the abyss what they find there is often quite surprising. Keen again stated, “Gradually, a voice, almost a whisper, emerged from the black hole. ‘I am small, alone, sad, and helpless. Death is lurking. My only hope is to curl up, be very still, and wait. I am abandoned. Please rescue me.’”

IFSsm calls these parts contained in the abyss exiled parts, vulnerable child-like parts of people that hold burdens or extreme emotions or beliefs that are a result of traumas experienced often from childhood (Schwartz, 95). Many possibilities exist to explain what the perceptual experience of the abyss itself might be for people. Viewed through the IFS lens, one possible theory is that the abyss is a construction of our protective managerial parts (managers), something that’s not innately built into the human psyche, but constructed and projected into our visual and felt sense awareness to keep us away from material they believe is too much for our character structure to handle. Viewed in this way, the abyss can be treated as a projection of an image by a managerial part, designed to scare us and keep us away from the vulnerable exiled part’s traumatic material. Or you can treat the abyss as a “place” in the internal system, created by a manager where the exile is held, essentially a container for pain. In my work with the abyss, I choose to think of the abyss as a “place” in the internal system and help my clients with conscious awareness to move or descend into it. There are times, when after a safe therapeutic container has been established, sensitive traumatic memories or histories are uncovered which require several cautious, thoughtful trips into the abyss. Yet the experience for most of my clients is that it is never as scary as they thought, when with conscious awareness they begin to descend or move into the abyss. When they begin to descend or move into the abyss and witness and connect with the exiled emotions, sensations, memories and beliefs from a calm, clear, aware place, the symbolic representation of the abyss transforms. What was once an abyss, dark cave, or black hole is no longer. Ann’s abyss went from a big black hole, to a desert, and eventually when the memories came and sensations and emotions were re-experienced from the consciousness of her current adult self, both the desert and the abyss disappeared from her consciousness and awareness.

Origins of the Abyss

I was a skinny, scared little kid who didn’t get enough guidance, attention or love from anyone, often witnessing the physical abuse of my mother and compelled into being her protector from the violence. Much of my early experience in life was that of loneliness and emptiness. I recall trying to get attention and love and being ignored or rebuked and often the only way I had of getting any possibility of love or attention was to be pleasing and caretaking towards my mother. I look back at pictures from that era and I feel so much sadness and compassion for that little guy. My

mother was too occupied in her attempts to save herself from a very real potential death at the hands of her abusive second husband or from saving him from his own alcoholic oblivion to give me what I needed. She was under the control of this abusive man who forced her into submitting to his psychological, emotional, and sexual will.

Because a lot of the original experiences of trauma and all the sensations, emotions, beliefs that accompanied those experiences were too much for my little boy consciousness and neurology to handle and because there wasn't a conscious, aware enough adult to help me make sense of the experiences in a coherent way that could be integrated into a developmentally appropriate "little boy" narrative, I developed stories or narratives about the experience that were incoherent (Daniel Siegel 2003). As a result, parts of me were essentially compelled into developing a safe place for the sensations, memories, beliefs and emotions to be stored. "Whenever we turn away from some aspect of our experience, emotional black holes form in the psyche. Real healing can begin only when we finally learn to be present in the places where we have been absent" Welwood (2003). It wasn't until I started investigating these experiences through expeditions into these abysses, often physically experienced as troubling sensations in the pit of my stomach, tightness in my chest, and visually experienced as a "big black hole," that I began to unpack some of the pain stored in my abysses that were created by the protective parts of myself. I was then eventually able to "see" and "witness" more clearly from a more conscious, aware place (IFS calls this place the "Self") as did my client Ann, that the narratives written from childhood didn't make coherent sense. The narratives that were written during those original points of trauma for that little boy in me were: "I'm not worthy enough to have love," "there is something wrong or flawed about me," "to have love, I must be pleasing and rescuing," "it is my job or lot in life to sacrifice my needs for another in order to get love." These were the stories mixed with the painful emotions and sensations that were re-triggered by the breakup with the Outward Bound woman prior to the climb on El Capitan and although quelled by the bliss of that place and the climbing, were still very active within me standing on that ledge.

Perceived Risk and the Abyss

When we get close to these abysses, as when confronted with a challenging, potentially risky situation, our core defensive mechanisms (in IFS, the managers and fire-fighters) can trigger our ANS, since it is the best way

they have of convincing us we could die if we go any further. The problem is, the body sensations triggered by our protective parts in risky situations are exactly the same whether it be risking a fall while rock climbing, risking a fall within an intimate relationship, speaking an unpopular opinion, asking someone new on a date, smiling at a stranger on the street or investigating a troubling sensation or emotion in our bodies. Our nervous systems are designed in such a way that our protective parts use it (benevolently) to trick us into feeling life and death sensations even when there is absolutely no risk of dying. Our protective parts and their connections to our bodies coupled with the story line we are hearing from them can make things so cloudy that it is hard to tell the difference between what is actual and what is just a parts projection of perceived risk.

There are many parts in most of us that constrain us from taking risks in relationships, taking risks professionally, risking being ourselves or risking a journey into the abyss. Most of my life, although I have risked my life many times while climbing in many places around the world, I have avoided risking being wrong, risking being shamed for not being smart enough, attractive enough or competent enough. The list goes on and on, all so very peculiar for a guy who is willing to climb un-roped for hundreds of feet, but not able to traverse the intricate ledges and precipices of an intimate relationship without fearing a fall into my "little abyss of death." This "little abyss of death" for me has always been about the fear that comes from not actualizing my self or the terror of non-being, not daring enough to be myself. The fear might be speaking my authentic experience to someone a part of me perceives as more powerful than me as the potential exists that they may be judging or angry with me or hurt by my words. If they are angry or hurt then they may reject or abandon me. If they reject or abandon me then the possibility exists that I am thrown into my terrifying abyss of loneliness, or shame or emptiness. This reminds me of a quote that I used to read to my Outward Bound students I believe to be apropos here:

You risked your life, but what else have you risked? Have you ever risked disapproval? Have you ever risked a belief? I see nothing particularly courageous in risking one's life. So you lose it, you go to your hero's heaven and everything is milk and honey 'til the end of time, right? You get your reward and suffer no earthly consequences. That's not courage. Real courage is risking something that you have to keep on living with, real courage is risking something that might force you to rethink your thoughts and suffer change

and stretch consciousness. Real courage is risking one's clichés.

—Tom Robbins

I know that the same exact body experience I get when frightened while climbing happens when I get scared in relationships. When I am able, with awareness, to tune into the story the same fluttery, out-of-balance feeling in my stomach and tightness in my chest, or lump in my throat says, “Don’t go there”, “You will die”, “You will cease to exist.” Many of my protective parts were and continue to be there attempting to keep me safe, attempting to keep me from taking that step into the abysses they fear, or just walking to the edge of the abyss to have a look. When I allow the fear and anxiety stories and sensations of these protective parts to control my life, then I am not even getting close to my edge, and not living life fully. Yet if I can focus inside and work to gain an awareness of what these fears are, spend time hearing what their fears might have to tell me and reassure them from a more conscious aware place, then the risk is somewhat easier to accept. Although difficult but not impossible on our own, if we have a trusted partner or guide on our journeys into the abyss who can offer hope, light and love than our descent into the dark scary place is made just a little easier.

Transcendence and the Abyss

Some years ago as an Outward Bound instructor, sitting on the ground in the desert, in Joshua Tree National Park in California, I was helping a group to prepare for one of the big challenges of the course, which was to hike up one side of a steep desert rock formation in the dark, sleep the night, then rappel down the other side, a 150’ vertical rock face, the next morning. One of the participants on this professional development program, an upper level executive and a well-known songwriter musician from the 60’s, was so overwhelmed by his fear of sleeping in a high place and rappelling that he refused to cooperate or even entertain the possibility of joining in on the activity. As it turned out, he’d had a recurring nightmare of falling every night of his life for as long as he could remember. It had so profoundly impacted his life that he would literally “freeze” when driving over a bridge or riding the executive elevator with windows on the outside of his company’s building. He had been to therapy for years to try to fix the problem, which he stated eventually led to the demise of his marriage. I thought to myself, “did you know you were signing up for the “climbing” Outward Bound course?”

Through much processing and support from the group he was eventually able to reluctantly agree to hike to the top of the mountain but because he was so afraid of getting too close to the edge of the cliff, which was 60 feet away, he had to sleep (a sleepless night) in a small, cramped, claustrophobic, crevice wedged between two rocks and a large Yucca plant. The next morning, although I had my doubts, after much emotional support from me and from the group who helped him by hearing from all his fears, he agreed to walk to the edge of his biggest abyss. But walking is not really what happened. He struggled to the edge with the most rigid tense body I think I had ever seen. He literally had to override his body, as it would not freely cooperate. The group was one large collective of compassion and love as they witnessed this overwhelming display of courage and spoke words of loving encouragement and support, giving him what was not possible for him to give himself in this terrifying but pivotal moment. Vibrating, he eventually arrived at the edge with fear dripping from every pore. Once in his harness and clipped into the rope with no chance to fall, facing the group, he backed the few remaining feet to the biggest fear in his life. What happened next stands out in my mind as one of the biggest displays of courage I have ever witnessed. With the hopeful wide-eyed faces of his group and me watching, he “let go.” Although still trembling, he lowered himself backwards over the edge of the cliff into his biggest fear. He was walking his feet backwards, toes pointed up with his body in the shape of an L, dangling 150 feet above the ground.

Within a few split seconds, his experience went from fear to terror to what appeared to be bliss and elation written all over his face. As he moved down the rope towards the ground pushing and bounding away from the rock, he erupted spontaneously into hoots and hollers and exclamations of glee and excitement. His group, at first shocked at what they witnessed, erupted into simultaneous shouts of joy and tears of compassion and love. Not one person had a dry eye. Once on the ground his own tears began to flow and didn’t stop for some time as the grief of many years was finally fully experienced. He had walked to the edge with terror and descended into the abyss with ecstatic joy.

Andrew had purposefully taken the climbing course with full knowledge of what he was getting into. He had wanted to descend into his biggest physical fear in life as a way to transcend. He was a person that lived life close to his edges but this was one that had daunted him much of his life and even though his protective parts had almost completely taken over his body, he was able to, with our help, calm them just enough, push

through their fears and come out the other side having done something with great courage.

Although very close, if not dipping into ANS freeze, Andrew moved through fear and into terror, and back out again fully conscious of what was happening in his body, fully conscious of the consequences. The courage that manifested itself at the moment he chose to take the OB course, the moment he chose to hike up the mountain, and the moment he backed over that edge into that abyss was not about bravado or deficit, he had nothing to prove to anyone, it was about a conscious choice to live life more fully with less fear. If Andrew, supported by the love of the group, had not spent time listening to and reassuring his fears, and the group had not encouraged him to stay with his fear and yet not be controlled by it, he might still be riding the service elevator, planning his day around avoiding bridges and other high places, and not living his life more fully.

The following day, Lynn, my co-instructor from the course could not find Andrew where she had left him the night before in his solo campsite. After searching for a few moments around the area she had left him the night before, she eventually heard giggling and looked up to find Andrew all smiles, very full of himself, sitting with his feet dangling over the side of a fifteen foot high boulder he had climbed just prior to her arrival. Some time, after this expedition had begun to fade from my memory, I received a letter in the mail. Andrew had sent me a short note with two poems he had written about his experience. His fear of high places had essentially been eliminated and many other emotional and relational areas of his life had also been impacted in very positive ways. He had also begun song writing again, which he had not done for many years.

Andrew had allowed himself, with the help of gravity, to be pulled down into one of his deepest darkest abysses only to find himself sitting happily, feet dangling and smiling into what use to be his living nightmare, having ascended to greater heights than he had imagined. Another example of this phenomenon can be found during white-water season on many rivers in the Northwest. In the springtime when the rivers in the Pacific Northwest are at their highest and most dangerous, many of our adventure community's white-water physical risk takers come out. When kayakers or rafters can't contain the momentum of their boats and are tossed into the torrent, at times they can be taken to the bottom of the river by what are called keeper currents. Keeper currents are the currents in the river that cycle on the vertical plane. They move from the top of the river to the bottom of the river in a constant

rotation. The first intuitive response when pulled into this type of current is to fight against it and attempt to swim to the surface, which is exactly opposite of the movement one should make to stay alive. These currents kill many rafters and kayakers each year. What is counter to their protective parts instincts would actually keep them alive here. If instead of struggling to the surface, they were actually able to "let go" and allow themselves to be taken into the abyss it is far more likely that they would survive the encounter with this current as they would be taken to the bottom and within a second or two end up back on the surface.

Like kayakers or rafters caught in keeper currents struggling to get to the surface, there are parts of us that tell us to move away from the abyss, that signal our bodies that there is danger. We attempt to control or transcend the pain, discomfort, or difficulty by ascending, moving away from, to the right or left of. The list of activities, spiritual practices, or substances that can be used as attempts at transcendence are limitless. Andrew had tried to control or transcend his fear through avoidance; for my client Ann it was through attempting to control her partner's withdrawal; for me it was managing and attempting to transcend pain through pleasing and caretaking behaviors in relationships and during my adventuring years, albeit short lived, one very successful way was through seeking blissful states of mind manifested while rock climbing.

As it can for many spiritual practices, this process of moving away from can feel at times like a spiritual awakening or transcendence as it did for me on that ledge in Yosemite and many other times while climbing. This process, sometimes referred to as spiritual bypass (Welwood 2003), is actually the opposite of where salvation or the potential for healing or transcendence exists. Although it can feel like transcendence and the pain does go away for a time, it eventually comes back. The pain of my exiled parts that were contained in my abysses and accompanied me on all my climbs during that time of my life felt like a weight that I could not let go of no matter how high or hard I climbed. Because unlike Andrew, I had mastered my fear of high places, climbing became a Zen-like, flowing, blissful spiritual practice that felt transcendent at times. Once back down on the earth though, the broken-hearted exile that was stored away in its dungeon would eventually resurface as a result of some internal interaction of parts or external interaction with another person. Real transcendence exists at the bottom of the river, or the cave at the base of the mountain, or in those dark abysses we spend much of our time

moving away from. Pema Chodron stated, “in the process of discovering bodhicchitta (awakened heart), this journey goes down not up. It’s as if the mountain pointed toward the center of the earth instead of reaching into the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt.” She further states, “At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhicchitta. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die.” So to fully rise above, and reach even greater heights we must, with awareness like my client Ann and student Andrew, go below.

The Passion and Joy of Life on the Edge

Looking back at the time that I did all the climbing and adventuring in my twenties, I now realize it is more complex than I originally thought. There were many parts flowing like ghosts in and out of the driver’s seat of my consciousness. Although there were times when certain compulsive, fire-fighting parts took over and made me take more risks while climbing than usual, there were always other parts of me there watching, reminding me to breathe, to stay acutely aware and focused, to be careful to make the right, smooth, fluid movements, to do things technically right, and to stay connected to the rock and not take any unnecessary risks. To me in this mind-set, living my life in this way, physical risk-taking was a way of life. It was a mind-set that was hard for others who knew me during that time to fully comprehend. It all felt like life-blood. While climbing, even when it was extreme and a hair-breadth away from annihilation, I wasn’t thinking that I wanted to die even when my firefighters were running the show. It was rather just the opposite, as I wanted to live life as fully as possible. There were no suicidal parts running the show that day on that ledge in Yosemite Valley. There was a passion that emanated from deep within my soul when living life this close to the edge. I needed the physical-risk taking life that extreme rock climbing provided and the degree of focused attention that it required to stay close to the edge. The flow state I would experience high up on a cliff or mountain somewhere helped me to feel vibrant and alive. The concentrated, focused, acutely aware flow state I experienced while climbing is described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* in the following way: “Flow helps to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration consciousness is unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings and all the senses are focused on the same goal. Experience is in harmony. And when the flow episode is over, one feels more

“together” than before, not only internally, but also with respect to other people and the world in general.” At the time, sedate modern life did not afford me the challenges I felt I needed to experience what I was after.

Risk Taking and the Enhancement of Self

Peter Levine writes about the human body’s innate ability to heal and handle trauma. He states that built into our bodies is something that has been there since the beginning; a primitive, reptilian ability to “respond powerfully and fully whenever our survival is threatened.” He further states that, “whenever we exercise this natural capacity, we feel exhilarated and alive, powerful, expanded, full of energy and ready to take on any challenge. Being threatened engages our deepest resources and allows us to experience our fullest potential as human beings. In turn, our emotional and physical well-being is enhanced.” On one level, when operating from a place of emotional pain, climbing represented a potential for transcendence of the pain through operating as close to the abyss as I could possibly get without falling in or falling off, but what it did for me was keep me feeling alive and exhilarated. The edge between living my life with passion and self destruction was like a razor’s edge. Freud in referring to the evolution of our species wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of.” I was walking or climbing about as close as one could get to that razor’s edge between life and death. Even though climbing didn’t heal my burdens, it did, as Peter Levine suggests, keep my emotional and physical well being enhanced.

In our modern, technologically advanced society, we are virtually eliminating challenge and the experiences that potentially enhance our physical and emotional beings. With the click of a computer mouse we can have books, stereos, groceries, and almost anything under the sun delivered to our doors without risking anything; a far cry from primordial human who had to risk life and limb to feed his or her family each day. In the process of making life more comfortable and convenient, we have begun to disconnect from our body’s built-in capacity to fully engage in life and feel alive. Peter Levine again, in referring to our innate ability to respond to challenge and threat: “Today our survival depends increasingly on developing our ability to think rather than being able to respond. Consequently, most of us have become separated from our natural, instinctual selves-in particular, the part of us that can

proudly, not disparagingly be called animal.” He further states, “it is no coincidence that people who are more in touch with their natural selves tend to fare better when it comes to trauma.” In other words, to more fully engage in life’s potentially traumatizing challenges, our bodies and minds need risk and challenge in order to stay vibrant and healthy.

Yet our society has cushioned us from opportunities to experience risk, so we are drawn to create extreme experiences that will evoke that response in us. Our culture heavily weights the mind over instinct or intuition. We have disconnected from our intuitive bodies, don’t listen to what it has to tell us and consequently, set ourselves up for potentially more pain. We listen more attentively to the fear stories told by the protective parts of ourselves and do what they tell us to do or not do. They tell us to not be ourselves, to avoid loneliness, rejection, and pain at all cost. They fear the parts of us that will be triggered if we fail. Many of us allow the protective parts of ourselves to reason, think, and rationalize their way through our lives yet I think on one level, there is a subtle awareness in our collective cultural consciousness of what we need as evidenced by current vacation trends. In the past fifteen years, the adventure travel industry has exploded. You now see high-risk adventure sports and retreats advertised almost everywhere. Bungee jumping, rock climbing, white water kayaking or sea kayaking, river rafting, are all activities contrived, commodified and sold to those of us in need of a challenge and looking for “peak experiences” to enhance our beings.

The Leap of Faith

There were times while climbing when I had no idea whether or not I would be able to hold on long enough, whether my stamina would sustain me, or if the moves would be too hard for me. I would gaze up the rock as it faded away into that deep blue sky, knowing I had to commit to making a move or risk a fall and not knowing what lay ahead, wondering if this would be the place for the final “big fall.” This exact edge, this place of uncertainty, is the precise place that we all encounter every time we take a risk, no matter what the risk is. It is also the precise place from which the potential for vibrancy, vitality, and joy can emanate. This is the time and place where our internal systems fully engaged can help us to truly feel enhanced, alive, human, and where we can be truly tested.

However, risking the “big fall” and “letting go” takes a great leap of faith especially as it relates to the fear of grief, sadness, rejection, abandonment or aloneness, as

was evidenced by Ann’s immense fear of being cast back out into the desert of her loneliness. At these times what is called for is a leap of faith by our clients and

their parts, where risking a fall into the abyss won’t ultimately result in a long, slow, lonely death. We reassure them that we can keep them safe. But is it so? Can we always assure them that when they take that leap, or step down into the abyss, that they will be ok? Can I know that if I take the risk to move forward up the rock or down into my “little abyss” of despair or loneliness that I won’t fall, or that if I do fall that my trusted partner or guide is paying attention and will catch me and that I won’t die, and would it truly be a risk if there was a guarantee? Risking a fall into the abyss by walking to the edge, or like my Outward Bound student Andrew, backing into the abyss, requires a choice made by the Self of the individual. Sam Keen wrote, “There is no way to enjoy the comfort of faith or ecstasy of love without making a wholehearted, existential commitment of the self. Faith, love, and flying all depend on a relationship that can be created only by an act of trust that involves taking the risk of falling into the void. Before the fact, all risks are folly.” Like Andrew and Ann, the wisdom of the risk did not present itself until they backed over that edge into that abyss and safely returned to earth.

I am not suggesting that we all need to engage in life threatening death defying feats in order to stay vibrant and alive. What I am suggesting though, is that in order for us to live life more fully, and not be as acutely impacted or as susceptible to trauma by life’s challenges, perhaps we need to stay connected to the experiences and people that challenge us to feel more fully human. In referring to Abraham Maslow’s work, Earnest Becker (1973) stated, “Maslow talks very convincingly about “self actualization” and the ecstasy of “peak experiences” wherein the person comes to see the world in all its awe and splendor and senses his own free inner expansion and the miracle of his being.”

What challenges us is different for everyone. For me at that time it was as big as sleeping on a small ledge a few thousand feet up and as small as stating my opinion in a group. For you it might be driving a car, walking down the street, dancing, talking in a group, sharing yourself with another, feeling and expressing grief, sadness, anger, or smiling at someone you don’t know. Perhaps all that matters is that with a trusted guide or on your own you seek, learn, know your many edges (physical, relational, spiritual, professional), trust that the arousal cycle will end in a peaceful experience and risk a fall into the abyss that might present itself at that edge. As

in the mountains, there are experienced trustworthy guides who can accompany those of us who, all along the continuum of risky endeavors, are stuck in our arousal cycles and are frozen at the edge of our greatest fears.

Risk Taking and the Internal Family System

As a forty-year-old man writing these words, I feel so thankful for what I have learned over the past 20 years of my life. I know now what that sensation in the pit of my stomach is about and although I didn't heal that sensation and the wounds connected to it from climbing, that form of risk taking and spiritual practice had its place in my life. Through my own journeying into my abysses, although there are many more, I have reconnected with some of the lonely, shamed, scared little kids in me who for years were still wandering the desolate deserted streets of my psyche looking for answers, sometimes being nurtured by my reactive, compulsive fire-fighter parts attempts at extreme climbing.

Gazing with narrowed eyes past my computer just now I see the muted images of faces of thousands upon thousands of little kids from my generation, neglected and abused just like me, still wandering the streets or deserts of their adult psyches looking for love and transcendence in whatever activity or substance they can find. Some of them I know, my good friends, still climbing with the same intensity we had in the 1980's. And some of them, climbers I have met in different climbing areas, that were found at the base of a climb only somewhat recognizable, all most likely attempting to transcend their own abysses. These were the ones who, perhaps unable to journey into their abysses or unable to find that delicate line between seeking blissful climbing states and just living life fully on the edges of the abyss, were taken over by the extremes and risked just a little too much in their search for healing, transcendence, love. It fills me with compassion and understanding for all those little kids who have walked into my office looking and sounding like adults, using and needing whatever substance or activity that has come to them to keep those little kids inside of them from overwhelming them with their pain.

As it relates to purpose or motivation, the interplay between Self and parts is so organic and so fluid, like a tide constantly ebbing and flowing, taking many shapes and forms, that it takes an acutely-tuned self awareness to notice the sometimes imperceptible shifts between parts and between parts and Self. There is a fine, often ambiguous line in the interplay between Self, managers,

exiles, and firefighters. Our parts are like amorphous ghosts who come and go, sometimes quickly with lightning speed, and sometimes slowly in and out of our consciousness control room, pushing and turning all the different dials and buttons of our different physiological, neurological, cognitive, and emotional systems. What is called for is a fine-tuned nose, eye, ear, and felt sense for the subtle shifts and differences in motivation for the activity or use of substance. To see the interplay and notice the separation in ourselves or in others, I believe we must spend time getting to know our own motivations, when our fire fighting parts do what they do and why. To make this possible, perhaps with a conscious awareness we also need to push the edges and take some risks to learn about our fearful parts, the stories they have about fear, how they impact our bodies and the reactive fire fighters connected to this system of parts. Most importantly, no matter how extreme the activity or behavior is in us, we must always remember that there is at least some Self present, whether it lurks just out of sight, underneath a few layers of character armor, or is buried deep, barely perceptible to the naked eye.

Although it was the protective or parental parts of me that found and pushed me into climbing and the little kid parts that felt momentarily powerful and complete as a result, it was the extreme risk-taking parts that were content and pleased when they were able to use risk-taking to transcend the flames of shame or powerlessness. But one thing was for certain: "I" (Self) was always present. Standing at the edge of Dolt Tower on El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, I know "I" (Self) was there, feeling the sun on my face, fully present in the moment, imaging flying, transcending time and space and form. "I" was there with wisdom, fully aware of the all the dangers, me, my authentic Self, my true Self. Although parts of me would sometimes take over and run the show in an attempt to transcend pain, my Self was always in the background humming and whistling while climbing, watching, waiting, comforting, patiently taking opportunities to gently remind me to breathe, to feel peaceful in my body, to feel the sun on my face, to remind me of how alive I really was, to rejoice and relish in the exquisite, delicious flow state I would experience while climbing.

Love and Adventure

What was at work in the opening scene of this story is a very complex interplay between many systems, parts and Self. I needed the adventurous life and still do. Although I still love climbing, mountaineering and more recently sailing and other forms of risk taking, the

adventurous life now is just a little different. With the birth of my son, the edges now are less about risking my life on some extreme climb high on a rock wall somewhere. They are more about professional risk taking, personal relationship risks, like risking speaking my authentic true voice in the face of adversity or risking feeling things in my body that had been previously buried within me, or allowing myself to surrender within an intimate relationship. The flow state I experienced while climbing helps me access my true or authentic Self today. Climbing taught me the importance of daily spiritual practice in accessing the degree of mindful awareness needed for unconditional presence with my self and others.

At the time, before I had done much of my emotional, spiritual, and psychological explorations, I needed the extreme sensations of risk-taking to quell the intensity of that empty feeling in my body that would surface at stressful times in my life. Above all else, what I was in need of during the times when my pain would surface was love. We need to befriend the emptiness deep inside instead of running from it so that we may reclaim our deepest longing for love (Gerald May). My Self enjoyed and loved climbing and still does, and also loved the parts of me that loved climbing, like a loving, conscious, aware parent who gains satisfaction from watching their child's joy and vibrancy emerge spontaneously. Chris Hedges, in his book, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* (2002) stated it this way, "Love alone can fight the impulses that lure us toward self-destruction and allows us to cherish life." I always knew that I was searching for something. Searching for answers. Searching for the source, the earth mother I never had. Searching for her love to keep me safe. But what I didn't know, before I had traveled into my own abysses and befriended my emptiness and loneliness, was that I carried that love in my body and in my soul, built in and anchored to my consciousness ready to keep me safe like the climbing rope tied to my harness. Although often covered up within me, by my warrior like protective parts, the love, God, Rigpa or authentic self that I felt briefly connected to while on that ledge that September morning in Yosemite Valley was omnipresent in every step, every hitch hiking adventure, every commercial fishing boat, every road trip, every mountain, and every move on the miles and miles of rock face I have climbed; even when 1000 feet up roped in, even 600 feet up un-roped, was there. She/He reminded me to breathe, to feel the sun, to experience life in whatever form my parts would pull or push me into, patiently doing his/her best to keep me alive and safe, allowing me to live and to truly be me.

Sometime later in my treatment of Ann, the little girl experienced from Ann what she had always wanted to experience from her partner and other people. She looked into the eyes of the little girl and the little girl looked into her eyes, and they resonated in that intimate place like a parent and child or two lovers gazing into each other's eyes with complete adoration and genuine acceptance. Ann later described the experience as the same experience she'd had with a lover in her early twenties. She had also found her earth mother, and it was inside of her. After several more adventures into her abysses, Ann eventually found the courage to stop the pursuit of her partner. The resultant shifts in her internal system and concurrent behavioral shifts led to far reaching positive changes in multiple areas of her life.

I also eventually discovered through help from trusted partners on my internal and external adventures, reading, journaling, mentoring, experiential therapies including IFS and my spiritual practices that all I need do to find the love that heals, like my client Ann, is to move into my abysses and find the source that abides deep down there. But finding the wounded vulnerable parts of my self and re-connecting with them still doesn't take away the need I have for adventure. I don't think any degree of witnessing or re-connecting with these parts of my self will ever take this away. I will always be a climber, a sailor, an adventurer, a seeker, a spiritual practitioner of fear, an investigator of the fine line between perceived and actual risk, between life and self destruction, and an explorer of the abyss. Perhaps we all need adventure and risk-taking so that we may live life more fully, that we may continue to grow, that we may reach our greatest potential as human beings, and be prepared with less fear to seek the hidden treasures of love that exist deep down in all the abysses we fear.

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